

THE BLADE OF AZURITE

A Fantasy Tale of Betrayal, Power, and Vengeance

DARWIN DRAKE

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LEVEL UP LIFE BOOKS

I. THE BOY OF WEALTH

Darwin had been born into a family so wealthy that, from the outside, his life appeared nearly perfect. Their estate stood high upon a hill overlooking the city, surrounded by enormous stone walls and iron gates that seemed to separate their world from everyone else's. Servants moved through the halls from morning until night, expensive decorations filled every room, and his family possessed more land and influence than most people could ever hope to obtain. Yet despite all of the wealth surrounding him, Darwin had never felt particularly fortunate to have been born into it.

He was the youngest of four children, with an older sister and two older brothers who were twins. The twins were nearly impossible to distinguish from one another, sharing the same mischievous smiles, sharp eyes, and seemingly endless supply of ideas for getting themselves into trouble. Unfortunately for Darwin, they had discovered early on that their youngest brother made an especially entertaining target, and they rarely allowed an opportunity to torment him to pass. They would hide his belongings, ruin his clothes, embarrass him whenever guests were present, and then laugh among themselves whenever their parents inevitably assumed that Darwin had somehow caused the problem.

At first, Darwin tried to convince himself that it was simply what having brothers was like, and he endured their treatment because he believed that eventually they would grow tired of it. Instead, their pranks became more cruel as the years passed, and what had once been childish teasing slowly turned into something that left Darwin feeling unwanted in his own home. His parents rarely questioned the twins' stories, and whenever there was trouble, Darwin found himself receiving the blame simply because it was easier for everyone to believe that he was responsible.

Eventually, Darwin discovered that there was one place where none of that mattered.

The streets.

Whenever the bitterness inside his family's estate became too much for him to bear, Darwin would slip away through a servants' entrance and make his way into the city, where the noise of merchants, travelers, beggars, thieves, and countless strangers drowned out the voices he was trying to escape. He learned which alleys were quiet enough to hide in and which markets were crowded enough to disappear into without being noticed. He learned which shopkeepers were kind, which ones were suspicious, and which taverns would throw him out the moment they realized how young he was.

Most importantly, he learned that the people in the streets did not care about his family's wealth.

Down there, nobody knew him as the youngest son of a powerful household. Nobody cared about his family's estate, their reputation, or the expectations placed upon him. To the people of the city, he was simply Darwin, and for the first time in his life, that felt like enough.

II. THE FRIEND IN THE STREETS

It was during one of those escapes that he met Cleo.

Cleo was a black Dragonborn whose scales were darker than anything Darwin had ever seen, almost resembling polished obsidian beneath the sunlight. There was something intimidating about him even when he was standing still, and his eyes carried the sort of confidence that Darwin had only ever seen in people who had learned to survive without anyone coming to save them. What made Cleo particularly dangerous, however, was his breath weapon. His acid was unusually potent, powerful enough to burn through wood and weaken metal with frightening speed.

Under normal circumstances, Darwin probably should have stayed away from him.

Instead, he found himself drawn toward him.

Cleo was suspicious of Darwin when they first met. The boy spoke differently from most of the people who lived in the streets, his clothes were noticeably better, and he seemed unfamiliar with many of the rules that governed life among thieves and wanderers. Darwin knew that Cleo was watching him closely, so he did everything he could to prove that he was not some spoiled noble pretending to understand hardship.

It did not take long before suspicion turned into friendship.

The two began spending nearly every day together, and before long, Darwin and Cleo were inseparable. They learned how to steal food from markets without being noticed, picked pockets when they were short on money, and occasionally broke into abandoned buildings simply because they were curious about what might be hidden inside. Their adventures were rarely important enough to make the city's newspapers, but they were exciting enough to make Darwin forget about everything waiting for him at home.

Every now and then, their petty crimes would turn into a chase through the streets when a merchant realized what had happened or a guard spotted them disappearing around a corner. Darwin and Cleo became remarkably good at escaping, weaving through narrow alleys and crowded marketplaces until the people chasing them eventually gave up. Somehow, despite all the trouble they caused, neither of them was ever caught.

Years passed in this way, and their friendship grew stronger with every passing season.

For ten years, Darwin kept one secret from Cleo.

He never told him where he came from.

Whenever Cleo asked about his family, Darwin would casually change the subject, and whenever his friend wondered where he lived, Darwin invented another story. Sometimes he claimed that his parents had died years ago, while other times he said that they had abandoned him when he was young. He knew that none of his explanations were particularly convincing, but Cleo never pressed hard enough to uncover the truth.

Darwin was afraid of what would happen if he did.

The thought of Cleo discovering that he came from one of the wealthiest families in the region terrified him more than Darwin wanted to admit. He could not bear the possibility that Cleo might suddenly look at him differently, wondering whether all those years of friendship had been some kind of deception. Darwin feared that his friend would see him as nothing more than a spoiled rich boy who had spent his childhood pretending to be poor for the sake of adventure.

So Darwin remained silent.

For ten years, the secret stayed between himself and the walls of his family's estate.

III. THE BLADE

Then, on the tenth anniversary of the first theft Darwin and Cleo had committed together, everything changed.

Cleo discovered the truth.

Darwin had expected anger, perhaps disappointment, but he had never imagined the fury that came over his friend when he finally learned who Darwin really was. To Cleo, the revelation made every memory of their friendship seem like a lie. While Darwin desperately tried to explain why he had kept his heritage secret, Cleo refused to listen.

That night, while Darwin slept inside the estate he had spent years pretending did not exist, Cleo returned to the place alone.

He did not come to speak with Darwin.

He came to take something.

Hidden within the estate was Darwin's most prized possession, a scimitar that had belonged to his family for generations. Unlike the other treasures in the house, Darwin had never cared about the sword because of its value. He loved it because it was mysterious. The blade itself had been forged from deep-blue azurite, a material so rare that even wealthy collectors could spend their entire lives searching

for a weapon made from it. Ancient golden inscriptions ran along the length of the blade, written in an old form of Draconic that no one in Darwin's family had been able to fully translate.

Darwin had always wondered what the inscriptions meant.

He had never imagined that the sword would one day become the reason his entire life fell apart.

Cleo stole the scimitar and disappeared into the darkness before anyone realized he had been there.

By morning, the family discovered the theft, and the estate erupted into accusations. Darwin was brought before his parents and questioned about the missing weapon, but he had no explanation that they were willing to accept. His brothers immediately accused him of stealing the sword, claiming that Darwin had always been jealous of the family's possessions and had finally decided to take something valuable for himself.

Darwin pleaded with them to believe him, but his words meant nothing.

His parents looked at him with disappointment rather than concern, and his sister remained silent as though she had already decided which side of the family she belonged to. No one considered the possibility that someone else could have entered the estate. No one asked why Darwin would steal the one possession he had treasured more than anything.

They simply decided that he was guilty.

The punishment was immediate.

Darwin was banished.

He left the estate with little more than the clothes he was wearing, carrying with him the knowledge that his family had chosen to believe the worst about him rather than give him the benefit of the doubt. The streets that had once been his escape now became the only home he had left, and for a time Darwin wandered through them without any real purpose, unable to understand how ten years of friendship and a single night could have destroyed everything he had known.

But grief eventually gave way to anger.

His family had abandoned him.

Cleo had betrayed him.

And somewhere beyond the horizon, the sword he had treasured was now in the hands of the person responsible for destroying his life.

Darwin disappeared from the city soon afterward.

IV. THE RISE OF CLEO

Years passed before anyone heard his name again.

Then the rumors began.

Travelers spoke of a black Dragonborn who had risen from obscurity and gathered followers beneath a single banner. Villages that refused to submit to him were destroyed, while those that surrendered were absorbed into a growing empire. His soldiers called themselves the Order, and at the center of their expanding power stood Cleo.

The same Cleo Darwin had once considered his brother.

The same Cleo who had stolen the azurite scimitar.

The sword never left Cleo's side.

As his power grew, so did the weapon's reputation. The ancient golden inscriptions that had once remained dormant began to glow whenever Cleo drew the blade, and those who witnessed him fighting claimed that his strength seemed to increase with every battle. His acid became more destructive, his influence spread across the kingdoms, and his followers multiplied until what had begun as a simple betrayal had transformed into the foundation of an empire.

Cleo had built an entire Order around the sword that once belonged to Darwin's family.

V. THE WARRIOR

While Cleo built his empire, however, Darwin was building something of his own.

He became a warrior.

The boy who had once run through the streets simply to escape his brothers was gone, replaced by someone who had learned to survive through pain, discipline, and determination. Darwin trained wherever he could, taking work that forced him to fight and traveling to places where experienced warriors were willing to teach him. He learned how to use a blade, how to read an opponent's movements, and how to keep fighting even when his body was exhausted and every instinct told him to surrender.

Years of hardship hardened him, but they also gave him a purpose.

He would destroy Cleo's Order.

He would tear apart everything Cleo had built, no matter how powerful the Dragonborn became or how many soldiers stood between them. Darwin would hunt him across kingdoms if necessary, following the trail of destruction until he finally reached the man who had once been his closest friend.

And when that day came, Darwin would take back the azurite scimitar.

He imagined the confrontation constantly, sometimes picturing Cleo standing upon the throne of his empire with the golden inscriptions blazing along the blade, while Darwin stood across from him as the person he had become. There would be no armies between them, no excuses, and no way for either of them to run from the past.

Darwin knew that killing Cleo would not restore the friendship they had once shared, nor would it erase the years they had spent together stealing, running from guards, and laughing in the streets. Revenge could not undo his family's betrayal, and it certainly could not turn back the clock to the time when the two of them had believed they would remain brothers forever.

But knowing that did not make Darwin's hatred disappear.

Cleo had taken the sword.

He had taken Darwin's family.

He had taken the life Darwin might have lived.

And now Darwin intended to take everything from him in return.

VI. THE OATH

One day, he would stand before Cleo with the same blade that had begun their friendship, ended it, and shaped the destinies of them both. The golden Draconic inscriptions would glow between them, and when the battle was finally over, Darwin would be the one holding the weapon.

Only then would the betrayal be complete.

Only then would Cleo's Order fall.

And only then would Darwin finally have to face the question that had haunted him for years:

After everything they had done to each other, which of them had truly become the monster?