

BOOK ONE
VILLAINS & VIRTUES

THRONE IN THE DARK



A. K. CAGGIANO

Villains & Virtues
Book 1

Throne
in the
Dark

A.K. Caggiano

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CHAPTER 1

SUPREME EVIL AND WHAT IT ENTAILS

The discourse surrounding the most superlatively evil being to have ever blighted the realm of Eiren is complex and has already been written about in many thick and pedantic tomes. While the argument has been made for a number of villains to ascend to the coveted spot of Supreme Evil, notably Everild the Necromancer, Scorlisha Baneblade of the Mounted Beasts, The Plague Bringer Norasthmus, and Dave from Next Door Who Insists on Doing Yard Work at Dawn, there are also a number of names which remain unspoken by the populace of Eiren, for merely their utterance alone is said to corrupt. These are the demons, servants of the dark gods who are sealed in the Abyss, and while valiant scholars and the devoutly holy are compelled to study these beings so that their attempts to rise to power may be thwarted, infernal names are only traded in hushed whispers for fear of summoning them.

If only summoning a demon were so easy.

Damien Maleficus Bloodthorne fell into a heap, nearly drained, dagger clattering to the floor at his side. So viscous it was nearly black, blood pooled around him. It crawled slowly away from his worn, muscled body in the shaft of hazy light that cleaved through the chamber's single window many stories

above. He steadied himself, hand slick against the stone floor, breath coming ragged but full. Peering between black strands of sweat-drenched hair, his violet eyes bore into it, the amalgamation of years of study and expedition reduced to a small pile of components atop a single piece of inkarnaught ore no larger than a gold coin. With the last of his infernal arcana, he dragged a finger in his own gore, trailing crimson across the floor as he drew the sigil he had designed, and waited.

Silence blew through the chamber, sweeping over Damien's pallid skin. The slices across his chest and arms burned with the frigid air but gave up no more blood—there was nothing left to give, unless his thinning patience counted. He grit his teeth, refusing to accept another failure. This attempt included not just his strongest spell and his own noxscura-flooded blood, but sand from the shores of the Everdarque, dew from the ash tree that grew in the middle of the Maroon Sea, and a feather of the last known fire roc. If it did not succeed, nothing would.

The inkarnaught ore sparked to life all at once. Damien's blood seeped away from him, drawn through the grooves of the cobblestones toward the ore in the chamber's center. The shaft filled with a sanguine aura as the inkarnaught absorbed what he offered it, and then it rose of its own accord from the ground. Swelling with power, it filled the freezing room with the heat of brimstone and infernal fire, and even in his anemic state, Damien pushed himself to stand in its presence.

With two long strides, he crossed to the chamber's center, sallow skin bathed in scarlet as he reached bloodied, scarred arms out. The talisman descended to rest in his palms—in its *master's* palms—eager and alive as it thumped with the same beat that pounded in his own chest.

“My life's work,” said Damien, lips curling at the corners and thin, black brows narrowing. “It is finally complete.” He was twenty-seven.

Climbing many stories of railing-less, stone steps out of the depths of a cold and unforgiving earth is difficult enough, and after draining oneself of nearly all of one's lifeblood, it would be nigh impossible for even an adept mage of most arcane arts, but Damien compelled not fire nor earth nor even

the arcana of something as trivial as luck—none of those so-called gifts bestowed by the gods. Damien was a blood mage, not blessed but cursed by his infernal heritage, though he saw no evidence of misfortune provided he did not look too hard, and blood mages were not merely gifted arcana but had it flowing through their very veins. This, and he was spurred on by one fact: *he had finally done it.*

Many times, he had climbed out of that dark chasm—a pit he had constructed to contain and coalesce his too-often tempestuous powers—with only bitter failure. There was sometimes progress, though more often frustration with how close he came to his own death with little to show for it. But this—he ran his thumb over the newly smooth inkarnaught ore, no longer unrefined earth and a pile of components but now an enchanted talisman—*this* was what success felt like. And it felt...wobbly.

Damien ascended the last step out of the chasm and staggered, reaching out to grip the archway that would lead back into the halls of Bloodthorne Keep, but his fingers slipped. He sucked in a breath, the world falling out from beneath him, vision tunneling, and then darkness.

No, not darkness. *Noxscura.*

Damien was standing straight again, hand gripping the archway as if he had never missed. He focused on a sconce, a skeletal hand clutching a thick, black candle, to keep the corridor from spinning, and he filled his lungs with the warmer air of the keep. He hadn't summoned the noxscura, but it came anyway. He didn't like that, but seeing as he hadn't plunged a hundred feet downward into the pit at his back, he pushed the unease at his magic working autonomously away, and with it went a second, deeper unease, one he couldn't quite place.

Damien was rarely, if ever, vulnerable in such a way. Expending so much arcana and leaving himself drained was never an option save for in crafting the talisman, and that weakness must have been the kindling for the sudden disquiet in his gut. He simply needed to heal.

The many cuts he had made along his chest and arms were still fresh, and though they had stopped weeping, remained open. He placed a hand

over his ribs where the largest gash sliced through taut skin, and he mustered a pulse of magic. It prickled painfully, worse than when the cuts had been made, sewing itself closed along half of its length. If there had been fewer wounds, and he hadn't been so arcanelly spent, his body's innate ability as a blood mage to mend itself would have taken care of things on its own, but as it was, this mess needed more skilled attention. It would all be easy enough to heal for someone else, someone who had spent their life studying the curative arts and was blessed by some god, but Damien had little time or use for most medicinal magic. Instead, he had dedicated his life to a different kind of arcana, the kind that enchanted and compelled, and he finally had the talisman to justify his many years of toil.

Damien swept through Bloodthorne Keep to the makeshift temple he had established in one of the castle's wings that also served as an infirmary. It was useful to have healers on hand when one was so overzealous with a dagger, and the object of devotion didn't matter. There were plenty of dark gods to choose from, twenty-five to be exact, and since they were all locked in the Abyss, they didn't much mind which of them got the most attention—or, no one heard their complaints, if they did.

When he arrived in his bloodied state, a lamia priest wordlessly slithered over to tend to his wounds. The lamia, with their serpent lower halves and human torsos, made some of the best healers, and Damien assumed it had something to do with the fact they shed their own skin twice a year. It wasn't pleasant to find a sloughed-off and slippery chunk of scales in the hall, especially by accident with one's foot in the middle of the night, but it was a small cost for their services.

Renewed with his flesh fully healed, the only scar remaining the one across his face that no magic would mend, Damien left the temple for his private chambers. There, he stripped, doused himself in frigid water to fully come back into his senses, and washed off the drying rivulets of blood. Donning black, leather armor, he didn't allow himself a second look in the mirror tucked into the corner of his bedchamber once he confirmed he was acceptable enough for the throne room.

By the time he emerged into the main keep, word had spread—second only to their healing abilities was a lamia’s skill at gossip. The damage he had done to himself coupled with the lack of a sour mood when he arrived in their wing had them buzzing, or rather hissing, and the others who served in the keep, goblins and draekins mostly, were trading guttural whispers as they darted out of his way. As he stalked the main hall, headed for the throne room, the tiny form of Gril appeared from the shadows to fall in with Damien as if he had been walking beside him all along.

Reaching only Damien’s hip, Gril, like most of the draekins who served in the keep, could be easy to miss, especially as nearly all of them insisted on wearing black, hooded cloaks that often made them indistinguishable from the dark stone floors. His tail, however, jutted out from beneath the trailing fabric, mossy green and a dead giveaway. Today, it was wagging.

“Is it true, Master Bloodthorne?” the little figure croaked from his side, turning up his scaled snout, a jagged underbite grinning from beneath his hood.

Damien confirmed only with a smirk, but did not stop—to stop would mean to think, and even with healing and bathing, that odd feeling at his success had not lifted but instead settled more firmly in his chest. It would be better if he simply told his father of his accomplishment before...well, he wasn’t quite sure before *what*, exactly, but there was something niggling at him, something a bit like the noxscura, that made him want to hesitate. He ignored it.

Gril made a small noise in response, a clicking in the back of his throat unique to draekins. Though he couldn’t reproduce it himself, Damien had learned many years ago that that particular sound translated to either “excellent” or “potatoes.” The tail wagging suggested the former, though Gril was quite enthusiastic about root vegetables as well.

The throne room of Bloodthorne Keep was a monument to superfluousness, but it instilled fear in lesser creatures. Impossibly tall, it was lit only by well-placed windows, filled with blue glass to illuminate infernal sigils carved into the shining obsidian overhead. At the back of the

long room, the largest window was set high up on the wall, round with silver webbing and aligned with the static moon, Lo, to cast a twilit haze down over the chamber.

Swathed in this amethyst light, the room was long, and footsteps echoed out into it, announcing anyone who would dare enter. Damien crossed the black marble to the dais in the room's center, pausing for only a moment to gaze on the orb that hovered there, so like the second moon, Ero, that waxed and waned as it crossed the sky. Untouchable to all in the keep and even the city beyond, the orb was the reason the place could exist at all, protected from forces that would see Bloodthorne Keep and its city of Aszath Koth razed to the ground in some holy crusade by those in the realm to the south. Damien gave it a reverent nod, eyes tracking over the symbol on it, a crescent with the shape of a dove—no, just a bird—in flight atop it, and continued on to the throne itself.

Towering in black marble, the seat would dwarf any but the keep's true lord, Damien's father. Damien cast his eyes up its length, admiring how the stone's veins ran crimson against the black, how it rose up to the tattered banners above, how the peak extended with many tendrils, reaching out to grasp and choke and kill. He never dared consider taking it.

A figure two heads taller than even Damien stepped down from the dais the throne sat upon. It said nothing, heavy robes trailing behind, head bent but horns protruding from under its hood to look down on him. Damien clenched a fist around the talisman, its rhythm thrumming through his body familiarly, as if it had always been a part of him and ready to carry out its fated deed.

Then the thought suddenly struck him: should he have put it in a nice box first, or even an embroidered pouch? Something commissioned to protect it but also venerate the importance of—no, it was too late now, and there was no use in pondering what he had possibly missed, just like there was no use in pondering why his initial discomfort had wormed its way from his gut to his chest to invade his entire being.

The hulking, horned figure stepped aside to allow Damien to pass, and the blood mage alighted the dais to drop to one knee before the throne, the talisman still clenched as he bowed his head. “Father, I come with news.”

There was a rumble, a sound like far-off thunder that sent tremors through the chamber, and then the voice of Zagadoth the Tempestuous, Demonic Lord of the Infernal Plane, tore into the throne room of Bloodthorne Keep. “Huh? Who’s—oh, well, hey there, kiddo! Haven’t seen you in half a moon! Where you been?”

Damien lifted his head, a lock of black hair falling into his view. From afar, the throne appeared empty, but this close, one could see a roughly cut shard of crystal propped up in its center and the eye that blinked back from the smoothest surface of the gem, groggy. Apparently, Zagadoth the Tempestuous had been taking a nap.

“Executing the ritual. It was long and arduous,” said Damien, turning the talisman over in his hand compulsively. His eyes flicked to it then back up to the crystal that housed his father’s existence. “And it is finally done.”

“It?” His father’s baritone mused quietly. “You don’t mean—”

“Bloodthorne’s Talisman of Enthrallment is complete.”

The eye in the crystal widened, its slice of a pupil honing in on the ore held aloft in Damien’s hand. “Kiddo! That’s just swell!” The voice of Zagadoth the Tempestuous was said to have once brought entire cities to its knees, and even now as it roared into the throne room with wholly enthusiastic words, Damien could feel the centuries of awe it had inspired. “I knew you could do it! Oh, champ, you gotta let me see that thing.”

Damien rose and brought the talisman close to the blinking eye. Holding it between two fingers, it seemed unimpressive, the size of a simple, gold coin and colored a red so deep it was nearly black, but the aura it gave off was a powerful, twisting, nauseating thing. His father, a demon with infernal power unimaginable, was one of the few who could truly sense all that it was, even while his body was locked away in an unreachable pocket of existence. His iris flickered with Abyssal fire when the talisman came close. “I never

doubted you for a second, but this is really something. You sure outdid yourself.”

Damien lifted the bit of magicked ore to his own face then. Bloodthorne’s Talisman of Enthrallment was a long-pondered dream, or nightmare, dependent upon which end of it one found oneself. Even more potent than he had intended, a simple touch by any other being would cause it to be absorbed immediately. Filled with rare and powerful components, unparalleled enchantments, and his own, infernal blood, Damien could command the creature who would become the talisman’s vessel absolutely with or without their knowledge—they only had to hear the word.

To have complete control over a creature, enthrallment, was almost unheard of in such a way. Short bursts of coercion and suggestions that a target may or may not follow were possible through spells Damien had learned, and slightly longer bouts of enthrallment were only possible by creatures with the ability inborn, though Damien wasn’t interested in dying and being resurrected for that. It was only the holy and unholy orders that had something similar to what he held, but that spell required a broken vessel to continuously ingest a concoction to keep it up, it rendered the target dull and changed, and was easy enough to thwart if its source could be found.

Bloodthorne’s Talisman of Enthrallment was exceptional in its existence in that it allowed the vessel to keep its true mind and was unexpellable save for with that creature’s death. As long as he could keep his vessel alive, he could control it completely, in theory, while allowing it to retain its memories, its personality, everything to make it seem as if nothing were controlling it at all. And a creature that could be controlled wholly should be easy enough to keep alive until Damien’s desires were brought to fruition.

“You’re gonna have your pops outta this crystal in no time!” Zagadoth’s voice broke Damien of his wonder at what he’d done, a reminder of what he still had yet to do: break his father out of his crystalline confinement. Zagadoth the Tempestuous had been imprisoned for twenty-three years, nearly Damien’s entire life, and it had taken Damien just as long to master

his inborn abilities, ascend as an adept blood mage, and craft the only tool that could free his father and carry out revenge upon the bastard who had imprisoned him.

“Of course.” He closed his fist around the talisman again, snuffing out its dull glow. “I’ll leave for that wretched city immediately.”

“Whoa, wait, wait, Damien, you gotta slow down. At least take the night to sleep off creating that thing.” The eye blinked and softened, looking him over. “You sure are in a rush, huh? You okay there, bud?”

Glancing briefly to the towering form that was Valsevrus, the minotaur who attended the throne room and the crystalline shard his father was trapped within, and then down to the draekin Gril behind him, Damien cleared his throat. “Yes. Definitely. I’m fine.”

“Son, let’s go for a walk.” Zagadoth had always been perceptive. Irritatingly so.

Valsevrus hustled up the stairs with a snort, grabbing the shard of occlusion crystal and carrying it so it was level with Damien’s head. They crossed the throne room, boots and hooves scuffing into the long room’s silence, Gril waddling behind studiously. Through an archway, they stepped out onto the uncovered, elevated walk that circled Bloodthorne Keep, a low parapet at their side. Below, the city of Aszath Koth was laid out, encircled by the Infernal Mountains casting their dark miasma over all.

“Damien,” Zagadoth began, “I know what I’m asking of you is...a lot.”

“This is what I was born to do, who I was meant to be, and I’ve made a vow—”

“Let me finish, kiddo.” His father’s voice dropped to a quiet but firm tone, one he used infrequently. “You *are* the only one who can free me from this crystal, Damien, but getting trapped in this thing was my doing, and heaping my break from it onto your shoulders was no small request, especially as early as I did. The vow of a child, it doesn’t mean *nothing*, but children shouldn’t be held to the promises they made. I know you’re grown now, by human standards,”—at this he cleared his throat—“you can make your own decisions, and you’ve never wavered in your dedication to freeing

me, but I want you to know I'm not blind to the work you've already put into this or the risk you'll be taking to break the occlusion crystal that bastard Archibald trapped my body within."

Valsevrus and Gril both hacked phlegm in the back of their throats. Damien eyed them, and they halted their instinct to spit at the name of Archibald Lumier, the so-called king of the realm of Eiren and a mage by heritage in his own right, if a disgraceful one. Years ago, Zagadoth had asked those in the keep to stop spitting when the hateful man's name was used, and the floors were better for it—draekin saliva was especially acidic.

When it was clear both had swallowed, Damien cast his gaze over the tilted, dark peaks and shadowed streets of Aszath Koth, just outside of the reach of Eiren and its insufferably beloved ruler. As the son of a demon, it was the only place that had ever been his home and could ever be.

"The talisman will turn that pompous monarch into my puppet." Damien grinned, imagining it, not even all that disappointed he wouldn't have to torture him. "Archibald Lumier will be all too eager to reverse his own divine binds and set you free."

Zagadoth mused a quiet sound, something between hesitancy and approval. "I am also not blind to the power you've acquired, son. The progeny of demons and humans have always been spoken of as formidable, and you've proven that, but there is a cost to infernal arcana."

A sigh wanted to rake through Damien and grumble out, overburdened and childish, but he held it back.

"You are exploitable, Damien," Zagadoth said with a harshness that suggested he knew exactly the reaction Damien wanted to have. "The darkness that runs in your veins, the noxscura, is meant to be carried and wielded by a demon—"

"And my humanity makes me weak," Damien concluded for him, jaw clenching on the last word.

"Your humanity makes you unique," the demon lord's voice corrected. "Insusceptible to binds, unlike your foolish father, and capable of

withstanding the divine, but you are not infallible, not incapable of becoming lost to it.”

Damien stepped away from Valsevrus holding the shard and to the edge of the parapet. Below, the long, stone side of Bloodthorne Keep plummeted into darkness, the pull of it tugging at that odd, hesitant feeling still prickling at his skin from the inside. “I appreciate your faith in me,” he grumbled.

“You know I have never doubted you for a moment.” Valsevrus stepped up just behind Damien to hold the crystal near his ear. “It is *your* faith that mustn’t waver. You must have something to hold onto, a way to remain grounded in yourself and know who you are.”

Damien’s mouth opened, but no words came out, and he snapped it back shut. Irritating, as always, but his father was right. Noxscura was sometimes a *problem*. Dark and all-encompassing, it left him vulnerable to a select few, holy people with too much power, the nox-touched, and his own temperament, the thought of which made him want to choke the life out of something.

But instead, he blew out a breath and nodded, the corners of his lips lifting. “I do have something to hold onto. I named the talisman after myself, didn’t I? I’ve faith in my abilities: you will be free.”

“Well, thank the depths of the Abyss, kid, because I have got to get the fuck out of this crystal.” Zagadoth’s husky laughter carried out over the parapet and echoed down into the city. Somewhere in Aszath Koth a goblin involuntarily emptied his bladder. Voice returning to its brazen tone, Zagadoth sighed in a contented if wistful way. “It’s too bad I’ll be mostly outta commission on the trip—I’d really like to see you in action.”

“That, actually, is where my concern lies.” Damien turned away from the edge of the walkway and continued on, palming the enchanted ore and squinting out at the Infernal Mountains and their smoky haze. “This talisman gives off an aura I’m unsure can be masked. I know I must take your shard to be fused with the rest of the occlusion crystal in Eirengaard before you can be released, but to be carrying two such powerful, infernal objects past the mountains and across the realm seems...challenging.”