

BLACKTHORN: AN AUDIT

Chapter One

BY CERTIFIED RAVEN

An official excerpt from the final edition

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The notice arrived by certified raven, which was the first sign that things had gone seriously wrong.

Modern raven service was expensive. The Vampire Bureau only used it when something needed to be both threatening and impossible to lose in the mail. Everything else came by courier, or by the small, sullen imps the Department of Compliance had outsourced to since the late 1850s.

Valerius noticed the raven first, because Valerius was the only one in the household with anything resembling a schedule, and because the raven had been tapping on his bedroom window for forty-seven minutes.

He had been ignoring it.

He had been ignoring it because he was in the middle of a customer service training module — De-escalation Strategies for Difficult Subscribers — and he had already had to restart it twice that evening, because the household kept losing power, and the household kept losing power because Zach had bought another light-up gaming chair without telling anyone, and the breaker had simply given up the way the rest of them had given up centuries ago.

The raven tapped again.

Valerius sighed in the way only failed warlords can sigh — with the weight of unfulfilled prophecy compressed into a single exhalation — and opened the window.

The raven stared at him with the bureaucratic flatness of something that had delivered too many summonses in its time.

“Recipient: Valerius the Dread, House of Blackthorn,” it said. “Or current occupant.”

“That is — yes. That is me.”

“Identification required.”

"You said 'or current occupant.'"

"Identification required regardless."

Valerius produced his employee badge from the lanyard around his neck. The raven examined it with the disdain of something that had not approved of anything since the fourteenth century.

"VeinGo Member Services," it read aloud. "Tier Two Retention Specialist."

"This is not government identification."

"I do not have government identification."

"Hm."

Valerius felt the full administrative weight of that hm settle into his chest like a stone tossed down a well.

The raven cleared its throat. This was not actually a thing ravens needed to do; it was a learned bureaucratic affectation. It produced, from somewhere inside itself in a manner Valerius preferred not to examine, a sealed parchment thick enough to be used as construction material.

"Notice of Audit," the raven announced. "By order of the Office of Immortal Accounts, Department of Compliance, Subdivision Seven, the household at 1428 Bentonville Street is hereby informed that a comprehensive review of all undead financial, territorial, and biographical records will commence in twenty-one mortal days."

Valerius opened his mouth. He closed it. He opened it again.

"Twenty-one —"

"Mortal days."

"That isn't very much time."

"It is exactly the same amount of time as immortal days," the raven said. "They have always been the same. I cannot stress how long this has always been the same."

"I — yes, I — Of course they are." His exasperation was evident.

The raven either did not notice or simply did not care. The raven did not mark it.

"Auditor assignment is forthcoming. Please prepare the following documents for review."

The raven dropped the parchment into Valerius's hand. It was heavier than parchment had any moral right to be.

"Failure to produce these documents," the raven added, with the air of a creature finally arriving at the part of its job it personally enjoyed, "will result in penalties up to and including delicensing, retroactive mortality, dissolution of bloodline, and estate liquidation."

Valerius looked down at the parchment. The list of required documents began at his hand and trailed off into the hallway behind him.

"Have a productive evening," the raven said, then dissolved into shadow, the way ravens employed by the Bureau did when they wanted to skip the awkwardness of actually flying away.

Valerius stood in his open window for several minutes.

The wind moved through the curtains. Somewhere in the house, very faintly, Zach was screaming into a headset, most likely at a video game. To the east, the light was failing, the sky settling into the indecisive grey of early November — the cue, in this household and across every household of its kind, to be elsewhere.

He closed the window. He drew the heavier of the two curtains across it. The room returned to its preferred lightlessness.

He had once led armies, he thought. He had once made kings weep without raising his voice. He had once stood on a hillside in Wallachia, his cloak heavy with rain and his enemies arranged in tactical surrender below him. A herald had ridden up the slope with a message from the opposing general and been so afraid of Valerius that he had wet himself before delivering the first word.

That had been a good evening.

Valerius looked at the parchment.

“Ambrose,” he called, in the resigned voice of a man who knew that calling Ambrose was the first step of a process that would take approximately three hours and accomplish almost nothing. “Ambrose, we have a problem.”

* * *

The library had once been beautiful.

In the early nineteenth century, when the house had still maintained a conventional relationship with the ground and the wallpaper had still been wallpaper rather than an idea of one, the library had been considered impressive. There had been a chandelier. There had been a globe. There had been, briefly, a small fire, but they didn’t talk about that.

Now the library was less a room and more a geological formation. Books rose in strata from the floor: a thin band of medieval theology near the bottom, then a deposit of Renaissance natural philosophy, then a thick layer of Enlightenment pamphlets, then a chaotic surface deposit composed mostly of Reader’s Digest, unopened mail, and three years’ worth of holiday cards Ambrose had been meaning to respond to.

Ambrose himself sat in the center of the room, on a stool that had once belonged to a Doge of Venice, holding a magnifying glass over a small ceramic bowl.

"Don't say anything," he said, without looking up. "I am thinking."

"It's an audit."

"I said don't say anything."

"From the Bureau."

Ambrose lowered the magnifying glass.

He set it down on the stool beside him with the care of a man placing a relic upon an altar. He removed his spectacles, which had been purely decorative for at least two hundred years, and folded them. He looked at Valerius for a very long time.

"Which one," he said.

"Which one what?"

"Which Bureaucracy. There are several. The Theban one is rather lenient. The Byzantine one ate its own clerks. The Habsburg one —"

"There is only one, Ambrose."

"That isn't possible."

"There has only ever been one. They consolidated centuries ago."

Ambrose stared at him. "When."

"Centuries, Ambrose."

"That can't be right."

"It is right."

"I would have noticed."

"You did notice. We discussed it at length. There was a feast."

"A feast?"

"You wore a purple hat."

Ambrose's eyes drifted. Some long memory caught and unspooled. For a moment his face slackened, his lips parting as though he had remembered the name of someone he had not seen in six hundred years.

Then it passed.

"What does the audit require," Ambrose said, brisk again.

Valerius handed him the parchment.

Ambrose read it. His expression remained scholarly and composed for the first three lines. By the seventh it flattened. By the fifteenth it had achieved the blankness of a man considering, for the first time in his long life, the merits of walking into the sun.

"Oh," he said.

Ambrose smiled wistfully.

"Oh dear."

"We do not have any of these documents."

"That is protocol."

"We have never had any of these documents."

"I am aware."

"I am not entirely certain some of these documents exist."

"Several of them are crossed out and replaced with the words SEE FORM 12-B-VIII."

"And do we have Form 12-B-VIII?"

"I would not know. I do not know what Form 12-B-VIII is."

They stood together in the library, two ancient creatures who had once been the most dangerous things in their respective centuries, holding a piece of paper that was defeating them.

From somewhere upstairs, very faintly, Zach screamed again. This time it sounded triumphant.

"We should tell Zach," Ambrose said.

"He will not handle it well."

"No."

"Should I be the one to —"

"No," Valerius said. "I'll do it. You'll lose the parchment."

"I would not lose the parchment."

"You lost the deed to the house in 1804."

"That was an unusual situation."

"It was inside a bowl of soup, Ambrose."

"It was a delicious velouté."

* * *

Zach was in what had once been the conservatory and was now, by general agreement, "Zach's room," because there was no functional way to undo what Zach had done to it.

The stained glass was covered with blackout curtains, the curtains with tapestries, and the tapestries with an enormous LED panel Zach had ordered online. It cycled slowly through every color the human eye could perceive and several it could not. There were three monitors, two gaming chairs — neither needed, both purchased — and a

coffin he did not sleep in but kept, in his words, for the aesthetic.

He was on the floor when they came in, on his stomach, holding his phone above his face at an angle Valerius found upsetting.

“Zach,” he said.

“Shh.”

“Zach.”

“I’m filming.”

“Zach —”

“Shh, shh, shh — okay, hi babes, sorry, my roommate is being a vibe-killer right now. Anyway, as I was saying, the trick with manifesting is —”

Valerius reached down and took the phone out of his hand.

“Hey —”

“We are being audited.”

He turned the phone off. It made a small, betrayed sound.

Zach sat up. The LED panel cycled to a deep, mournful violet, which Valerius privately appreciated.

“Audited like —”

“By the Bureau.”

“Oh my god.”

Valerius sighed in the way only failed warlords sigh.

“Oh my god.”

“Wait, like, audited audited?”

“Yes, Zach.”

"For realz?"

"Yes, for real."

He put his hands over his face. Then he took them off. Then he put them back. This was, Valerius had learned, simply how Zach processed news.

"Okay," he said. "Okay okay okay. Okay. We can figure this out. We — wait. Wait wait wait. Am I even — am I in the system? Like. Did you guys file paperwork when you found me?"

A long silence.

A very long silence.

"Ambrose," Valerius said, without looking at him.

"I'm certain we —" Ambrose began.

"There may have been some —"

"Ambrose."

"It was 2013, Valerius. The world was changing. No one knew what we were supposed to —"

"You told me you filed it."

"I told you I intended to file it."

"That is not the same as filing it."

"In context —"

"In what context, Ambrose. In what context."

Zach had gone very still.

"I'm not in the system," he said.

"You are probably not in the system."

"I have been a vampire for fifteen years and I am not in the system."

"Thirteen."

"My lucky number. Whatever. I am off the books?"

"In the most generous reading of the situation," Ambrose said carefully, "you exist as a clerical anomaly."

"What does that even mean."

"It means," Valerius said, "that if the auditor finds you, they will not believe you are real. When they correct that conclusion, the penalties will be considerable."

"Considerable like —"

"Retroactive mortality."

Zach stared.

"I'd die?"

"Hypothetically, you would have died. In 2013. Of natural causes. Bureaucratically."

"I was twenty-three in 2013."

"The Bureau does not concern itself with the medical realism of its corrections."

Zach made a small sound. It was not a scream this time. It was something younger than a scream — the noise of a person who had been twenty-three the last time anyone had asked him for ID, and who had, until this moment, regarded the prospect of dying as a kind of theoretical inconvenience reserved for other people.

"Okay," he said. "Okay. Okay. So what do we do."

The three of them stood there.

The LED panel cycled to red.

"We need help," Valerius said finally.

The words felt strange in his mouth. Not bad, exactly. Wrong on a deep level. The way unfamiliar food felt wrong.

"What kind of help."

"The kind we cannot provide for ourselves."

"What does that mean."

Valerius looked at the parchment in his hand. He looked through the doorway at the library beyond, where Ambrose's manuscripts leaned toward the conservatory as if drawn by some terrible curiosity. He looked at Zach, sitting cross-legged on the floor of his LED-lit room, thirteen years a vampire and not in the system.

He thought of all the things he had once been.

"We need a mortal," he said.

"A mortal."

"A specific kind of mortal."

"Like — a snack?"

"No, Zach."

"Then what?"

Valerius drew himself up to his full height, which was considerable, and which had once been sufficient to make a Saxon king stutter mid-sentence.

"We need," he said, with the gravity of a man preparing to march upon a fortified city, "an accountant."

END OF CHAPTER ONE

Blackthorn: An Audit — Amy Wiley