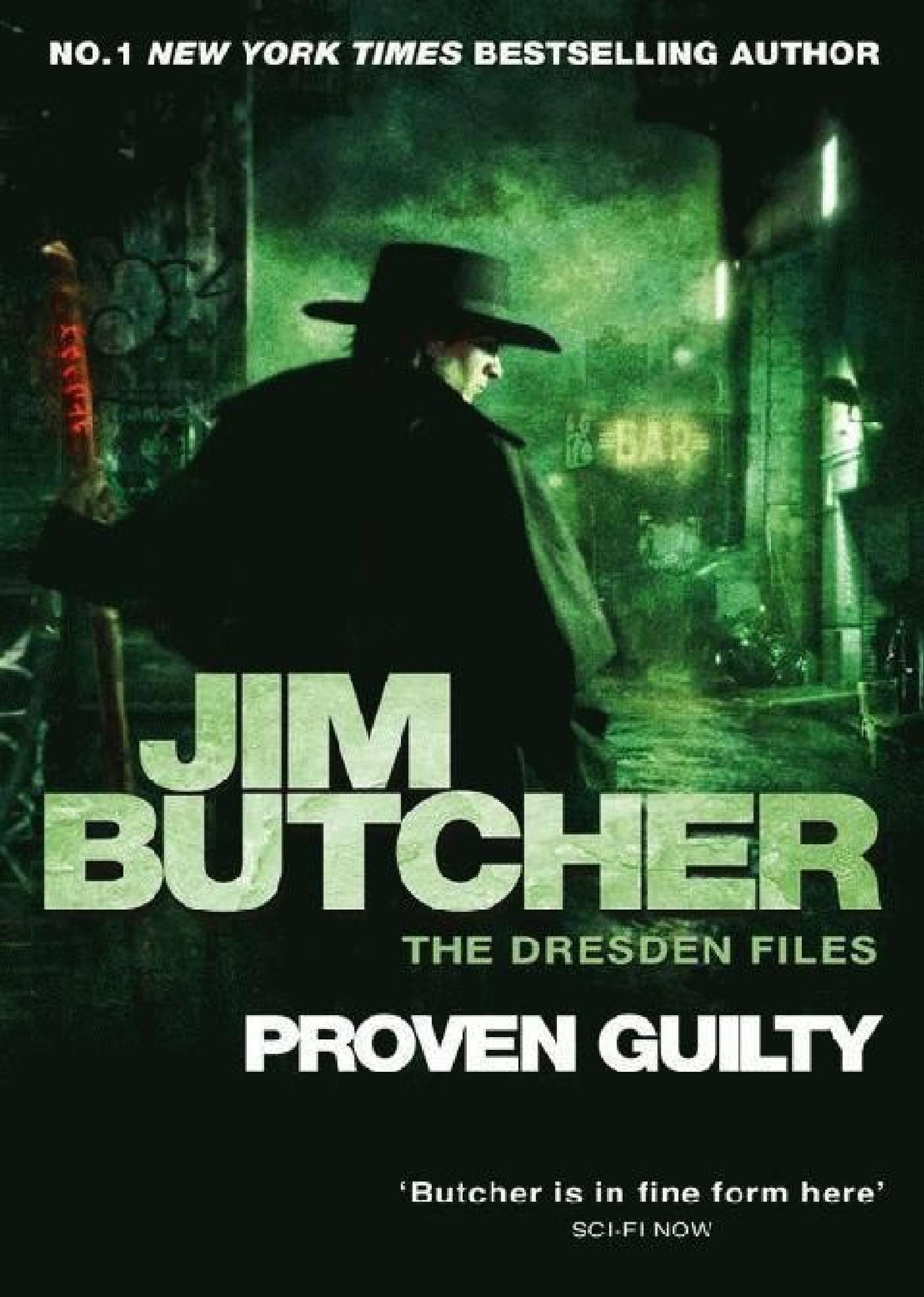


NO.1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR



**JIM
BUTCHER**

THE DRESDEN FILES

PROVEN GUILTY

'Butcher is in fine form here'

SCI-FI NOW

CONTENTS

[Proven Guilty](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Jim Butcher](#)

[Proven Guilty](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

[Chapter 45](#)

[Chapter 46](#)

[Chapter 47](#)

‘Hurts,’ the girl whimpered, breathless with pain. ‘Hurts, hurts, hurts.’

I held her hand. I patted it awkwardly with my gloved left hand while we heard sirens approach.

‘My God,’ Rawlins said again. He shook his head. ‘My God, Dresden. What happened here?’

I stared at the enormous rip in the movie screen and at the Reaper-shaped dent in the wooden panels of the wall behind it. Clear gelatin, the physical form of ectoplasm, the matter of the spirit world, gleamed there against the broken wood. In minutes it would evaporate, and there would be nothing left behind.

‘My God,’ Rawlins whispered again, his voice still stunned. ‘What happened here?’

Yeah.

Good question.

About the Author

A martial arts enthusiast whose resumé includes a long list of skills rendered obsolete at least two hundred years ago, **Jim Butcher** turned to writing as a career because anything else probably would have driven him insane. He lives in Independence, Missouri, with his wife, his son, and a ferocious guard dog. You can visit Jim's website at www.jim-butcher.com

Find out more about Jim Butcher and other Orbit authors by registering for the free monthly newsletter at www.orbitbooks.co.uk

By Jim Butcher

The Dresden Files

STORM FRONT

FOOL MOON

GRAVE PERIL

SUMMER KNIGHT

DEATH MASKS

BLOOD RITES

DEAD BEAT

PROVEN GUILTY

PROVEN GUILTY

A novel of
the Dresden Files

Jim Butcher

LITTLE, BROWN

www.littlebrown.co.uk

Published by Hachette Digital 2010

Copyright © Jim Butcher, 2006

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

All characters and events in this publication, other than those clearly in the public domain, are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition, including this condition, being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

eBook ISBN 978 0 7481 1658 4

This ebook produced by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Polmont, Stirlingshire

Hachette Digital
An imprint of
Little, Brown Book Group
100 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DY

An Hachette Livre UK Company
www.hachettelivre.co.uk
www.littlebrown.co.uk

Blood leaves no stain on a Warden's grey cloak.

I didn't know that until the day I watched Morgan, second in command of the White Council's Wardens, lift his sword over the kneeling form of a young man guilty of the practice of black magic. The boy, sixteen years old at the most, screamed and ranted in Korean underneath his black hood, his mouth spilling hatred and rage, convinced by his youth and power of his own immortality. He never knew it when the blade came down.

Which I guess was a small mercy. Microscopic, really.

His blood flew in a scarlet arc. I wasn't ten feet away. I felt hot droplets strike one cheek, and more blood covered the left side of the cloak in blotches of angry red. The head fell to the ground, and I saw the cloth over it moving, as if the boy's mouth were still screaming imprecations.

The body fell onto its side. One calf muscle twitched spasmodically and then stopped. After maybe five seconds, the head did too.

Morgan stood over the still form for a moment, the bright silver sword of the White Council of Wizards' justice in his hands. Besides him and me, there were a dozen Wardens present, and two members of the Senior Council – the Merlin and my one-time mentor, Ebenezar McCoy.

The covered head stopped its feeble movements. Morgan glanced up at the Merlin and nodded once. The Merlin returned the nod. 'May he find peace.'

'Peace,' the Wardens all replied together.

Except me. I turned my back on them, and made it two steps away before I threw up on the warehouse floor.

I stood there shaking for a moment, until I was sure I was finished, then straightened slowly. I felt a presence draw near me and looked up to see Ebenezar standing there.

He was an old man, bald but for wisps of white hair, short, stocky, his face half covered in a ferocious-looking grey beard. His nose and cheeks and bald scalp were all ruddy, except for a recent, purplish scar on his pate. Though he was centuries old he carried himself with vibrant energy, and his eyes were alert and pensive behind gold-rimmed spectacles. He wore the formal black robes of a meeting of the Council, along with the deep purple stole of a member of the Senior Council.

'Harry,' he said quietly. 'You all right?'

'After that?' I snarled, loudly enough to make sure everyone there heard me. 'No one in this damned building should be all right.'

I felt a sudden tension in the air behind me.

'No they shouldn't,' Ebenezar said. I saw him look back at the other wizards there, his jaw setting stubbornly.

The Merlin came over to us, also in his formal robes and stole. He looked like a wizard should look – tall, long white hair, long white beard, piercing blue eyes, his face seamed with age and wisdom.

Well. With age, anyway.

‘Warden Dresden,’ he said. He had the sonorous voice of a trained speaker, and spoke English with a high-class British accent. ‘If you had some evidence that you felt would prove the boy’s innocence, you should have presented it during the trial.’

‘I didn’t have anything like that, and you know it,’ I replied.

‘He was proven guilty,’ the Merlin said. ‘I soulgazed him myself. I examined more than two dozen mortals whose minds he had altered. Three of them might eventually recover their sanity. He forced four others to commit suicide, and had hidden nine corpses from the local authorities, as well. And every one of them was a blood relation.’ The Merlin stepped toward me, and the air in the room suddenly felt hot. His eyes flashed with azure anger and his voice rumbled with deep, unyielding power. ‘The powers he had used had already broken his mind. We did what was necessary.’

I turned and faced the Merlin. I didn’t push out my jaw and try to stare him down. I didn’t put anything belligerent or challenging into my posture. I didn’t show any anger on my face, or slur any disrespect into my tone when I spoke. The past several months had taught me that the Merlin hadn’t gotten his job through an ad on a matchbook. He was, quite simply, the strongest wizard on the planet. And he had talent, skill, and experience to go along with that strength. If I ever came to magical blows with him, there wouldn’t be enough left of me to fill a lunch sack. I did *not* want a fight.

But I didn’t back down, either.

‘He was a kid,’ I said. ‘We all have been. He made a mistake. We’ve all done that too.’

The Merlin regarded me with an expression somewhere between irritation and contempt. ‘You know what the use of black magic can do to a person,’ he said. Marvelously subtle shading and emphasis over his words added in a perfectly clear, unspoken thought: *You know it because you’ve done it. Sooner or later, you’ll slip up, and then it will be your turn.* ‘One use leads to another. And another.’

‘That’s what I keep hearing, Merlin,’ I answered. ‘Just say no to black magic. But that boy had no one to tell him the rules, to teach him. If someone had known about his gift and *done* something in time—’

He lifted a hand, and the simple gesture had such absolute authority to it that I stopped to let him speak. ‘The point you are missing, Warden Dresden,’ he said, ‘is that the boy who made that foolish mistake died long before we discovered the damage he’d done. What was left of him was nothing more nor less than a monster who would have spent his life inflicting horror and death on anyone near him.’

‘I *know* that,’ I said, and I couldn’t keep the anger and frustration out of my voice. ‘And I *know* what had to be done. I *know* it was the only measure that could stop him.’ I thought I was going to throw up again, and I closed my eyes and leaned on the solid oak length of my carved staff. I got my stomach under control and opened my eyes to face the Merlin. ‘But it doesn’t change the fact that we’ve just *murdered* a boy who probably never knew enough to understand what was happening to him.’

‘Accusing someone else of murder is hardly a stone you are in a position to cast, Warden Dresden.’ The Merlin arched a silver brow at me. ‘Did you not discharge a firearm into the back of the head of a woman you merely *believed* to be the Corpsetaker from a distance of a few feet away, fatally wounding her?’

I swallowed. I sure as hell had, last year. It had been one of the bigger coin tosses of my life. Had I incorrectly judged that a body-transferring wizard known as the Corpsetaker had jumped into the original body of Warden Luccio, I would have murdered an innocent woman and a law-enforcing member of the White Council.

I hadn't been wrong – but I'd never . . . never just *killed* anyone before. I've killed things in the heat of battle, yes. I've killed people by less direct means. But Corpsetaker's death had been intimate and coldly calculated and not at all indirect. Just me, the gun, and the limp corpse. I could still vividly remember the decision to shoot, the feel of the cold metal in my hands, the stiff pull of my revolver's trigger, the thunder of the gun's report, and the way the body had settled into a limp bundle of limbs on the ground, the motion somehow too simple for the horrible significance of the event.

I'd killed. Deliberately, rationally ended another's life.

And it still haunted my dreams at night.

I'd had little choice. Given the smallest amount of time, the Corpsetaker could have called up lethal magic, and the best I could have hoped for was a death curse that killed me as I struck down the necromancer. It had been a bad day or two, and I was pretty strung out. Even if I hadn't been, I had a feeling that Corpsetaker could have taken me in a fair fight. So I hadn't given Corpsetaker anything like a fair fight. I shot the necromancer in the back of the head because the Corpsetaker had to be stopped, and I'd had no other option.

I had executed her on suspicion.

No trial. No soulgaze. No judgment from a dispassionate arbiter. Hell, I hadn't even taken the chance to get in a good insult. *Bang. Thump.* One live wizard, one dead bad guy.

I'd done it to prevent future harm to myself and others. It hadn't been the best solution – but it had been the *only* solution. I hadn't hesitated for a heartbeat. I'd done it, no questions, and gone on to face the further perils of that night.

Just like a Warden is supposed to do. Sorta took the wind out of my holier-than-thou sails.

Bottomless blue eyes watched my face and he nodded slowly. 'You executed her,' the Merlin said quietly. 'Because it was necessary.'

'That was different,' I said.

'Indeed. Your action required far deeper commitment. It was dark, cold, and you were alone. The suspect was a great deal stronger than you. Had you struck and missed, you would have died. Yet you did what had to be done.'

'Necessary isn't the same as *right*,' I said.

'Perhaps not,' he said. 'But the Laws of Magic are all that prevent wizards from abusing their power over mortals. There is no room for compromise. You are a Warden now, Dresden. You must focus on your duty to both mortals and the Council.'

'Which sometimes means killing children?' This time I didn't hide the contempt, but there wasn't much life to it.

'Which means always enforcing the Laws,' the Merlin said, and his eyes bored into mine, flickering with sparks of rigid anger. 'It is your duty. Now more than ever.'

I broke the stare first, looking away before anything bad could happen. Ebenezar stood a couple of steps from me, studying my expression.

‘Granted that you’ve seen much for a man your age,’ the Merlin said, and there was a slight softening in his tone. ‘But you haven’t seen how horrible such things can become. Not nearly. The Laws exist for a reason. They *must* stand as written.’

I turned my head and stared at the small pool of scarlet on the warehouse floor beside the kid’s corpse. I hadn’t been told his name before they’d ended his life.

‘Right,’ I said tiredly, and wiped a clean corner of the grey cloak over my blood-sprinkled face. ‘I can see what they’re written in.’

I turned my back on them and walked out of the warehouse into Chicago's best impression of Miami. July in the Midwest is rarely less than sultry, but this year had been especially intense when it came to summer heat, and it had rained frequently. The warehouse was a part of the wharves down at the lakeside, and even the chill waters of Lake Michigan were warmer than usual. They filled the air with more than the average water-scent of mud and mildew and eau de dead fishy.

I passed the two grey-cloaked Wardens standing watch outside and exchanged nods with them. Both of them were younger than me, some of the most recent additions to the White Council's military-slash-police organization. As I passed them, I felt the tingling presence of a veil, a spell they were maintaining to conceal the warehouse from any prying eyes. It wasn't much of a veil, by Warden standards, but it was probably better than I could do, and there weren't a whole hell of a lot of Wardens to choose from since the Red Court's successful offensive the previous autumn. Beggars can't be choosers.

I tugged off my robe and my cloak. I was wearing sneakers, khaki shorts, and a red tank top underneath. It didn't make me any cooler to remove the heavy clothes – just marginally less miserable. I walked hurriedly back to my car, a battered old Volkswagen Beetle, its windows rolled down to keep the sun from turning the interior into an oven. It's a jumble of different colors, as my mechanic has replaced damaged portions of the body with parts from junked Bugs, but it started off as a shade of powder blue, and that had earned it the sobriquet of the Blue Beetle.

I heard quick, solid footsteps behind me. 'Harry,' Ebenezar called.

I threw the robe and cloak into the Beetle's backseat without a word. The car's interior had been stripped to its metal bones a couple of years back, and I had made hurried repairs with cheap lumber and a lot of duct tape. Since then, I'd had a friend redo the inside of the car. It wasn't standard, and it still didn't look pretty, but the comfortable bucket seats were a lot nicer than the wooden crates I'd been using. And I had decent seat belts again.

'Harry,' Ebenezar said again. 'Damnation, boy, stop.'

I thought about getting into the car and leaving, but instead stopped until the old wizard approached and shucked off his own formal robes and stole. He wore a white T-shirt beneath denim Levi's overalls, and heavy leather hiking boots. 'There's something I need to speak to you about.'

I paused and took a second to get some of my emotions under control. Those and my stomach. I didn't want the embarrassment of a repeat performance. 'What is it?'

He stopped a few feet behind me. 'The war isn't going well.'

By which he meant the war of the White Council against the Red Court of vampires. The war had been a whole lot of pussyfooting and fights in back alleys for several years, but last year the vampires had upped the ante. Their assault had been timed to coincide with vicious activity from a traitor within the Council and with the attack of a number of necromancers, outlaw wizards who raised the dead into angry specters and zombies – among a number of other, less savory things.

The vampires had hit the Council. Hard. Before the battle was over, they'd killed nearly two hundred wizards, most of them Wardens. That's why the Wardens had given me a grey cloak. They needed the help.

Before they'd finished, the vampires killed nearly forty-five thousand men, women, and children who happened to be nearby.

That's why I'd taken the cloak. That wasn't the sort of thing I could ignore.

'I've read the reports,' I said. 'They say that the Venatori Umbrorum and the Fellowship of St Giles have really pitched in.'

'It's more than that. If they hadn't started up an offensive to slow the vamps down, the Red Court would have destroyed the Council months ago.'

I blinked. 'They're doing that much?'

The Venatori Umbrorum and the Fellowship of St Giles were the White Council's primary allies in the war with the Red Court. The Venatori were an ancient, secret brotherhood, joined together to fight supernatural darkness wherever they could. Sort of like the Masons, only with more flamethrowers. By and large, they were academic sorts, and though several of the Venatori had various forms of military experience, their true strength lay in utilizing human legal systems and analyzing information brought together from widely dispersed sources.

The Fellowship, though, was a somewhat different story. Not as many of them as there were of the Venatori, but not many of them were merely human. Most of them, so I took it, were those who had been half turned by the vampires. They'd been infested with the dark powers that made the Red Court such a threat, but until they willingly drank another's lifeblood, they never quite stopped being human. It could make them stronger and faster and better able to withstand injury than regular folks, and it granted them a drastically increased life span. Assuming they didn't fall prey to their constant, base desire for blood, or weren't slain in operations against their enemies in the Red Court.

A woman I'd once cared for very much had been taken by a Red Court vampire. In point of fact, I'd kicked off the war when I went and took her back by the most violent means at my disposal. I brought her back, but I didn't save her. She'd been touched by that darkness, and now her life was a battle – partly against the vampires who had done it to her, and partly against the blood-thirst they'd imposed upon her. Now she was a part of the Fellowship, whose members included those like her and, I'd heard, many other people and part-people with no home anywhere else. St Giles, patron of lepers and outcasts. His Fellowship, while not a full-blown powerhouse like the Council or one of the Vampire Courts, was nonetheless proving to be a surprisingly formidable ally.

'Our allies can't challenge the vampires in face-to-face confrontations,' Ebenezer said, nodding. 'But they're wreaking havoc on the Red Court's supply chains, intelligence, and support, attacking from the mortal end of things. Red Court infiltrators within human society are unmasked. Humans controlled by the Red Court have been arrested, framed, or killed – or else abducted to be forcibly freed of their addiction. The Fellowship and the Venatori continue to do all in their power to provide information to the Council, which has enabled us to make a number of successful raids against the vampires. The Venatori and the Fellowship haven't appreciably weakened the vampires, but the Red Court has been slowed down. Perhaps enough to give us a

fighting chance to recover.’

‘How’s the boot camp coming?’ I asked.

‘Luccio is confident of her eventual success in replacing our losses,’ Ebenezar replied.

‘Don’t see what else I can do to help,’ I said. ‘Unless you’re wanting someone to go start fathering new wizards.’

He stepped closer to me and glanced around. His expression was casual, but he was checking to see if anyone was close enough to overhear. ‘There’s something you don’t know. The Merlin decided it was not for general knowledge.’

I turned to face him and tilted my head.

‘You remember the Red Court’s attack last year,’ he said. ‘That they called up Outsiders and assaulted us within the realm of Faerie itself.’

‘Bad move, so I’ve heard. The Faeries are going to take it out of their hides.’

‘So we all thought,’ the old man said. ‘In fact, Summer declared war upon the Red Court and began preliminary assaults on them. But Winter hasn’t responded – and Summer hasn’t done much more than secure its borders.’

‘Queen Mab didn’t declare war?’

‘No.’

I frowned. ‘Never thought she’d pass up the chance. She’s all about carnage and bloodshed.’

‘It surprised us as well,’ he said. ‘So I want to ask a favor of you.’

I eyed him without speaking.

‘Find out why,’ he said. ‘You have contacts within the Courts. Find out what’s happening. Find out why the Sidhe haven’t gone to war.’

‘What?’ I asked. ‘The Senior Council doesn’t know? Don’t you have an embassy and high-level connections and official channels? Maybe a bright red telephone?’

Ebenezar smiled without much mirth. ‘The general turbulence of the war has stretched everyone’s intelligence-gathering abilities,’ he replied. ‘Even those in the spiritual realms. There’s another level entirely to the war in the conflict between spiritual spies and emissaries of everyone involved. And our embassy to the Sidhe has been . . .’ He rolled a weathered, strong shoulder in a shrug. ‘Well. You know them as well as anyone.’

‘They’ve been polite, open, spoken with complete honesty, and left you with no idea what is going on,’ I guessed.

‘Precisely.’

‘So the Senior Council is asking me to find out?’

He glanced around again. ‘Not the Senior Council. Myself. A few others.’

‘What others?’ I asked.

‘People I trust,’ he said, and looked at me directly over the rims of his spectacles.

I stared at him for a second and then said in a whisper, ‘The traitor.’

The vampires of the Red Court had been a little too on top of the game to be merely lucky. Somehow, they had been obtaining vital secrets about the dispositions of the White Council’s forces and their plans. Someone on the inside had been feeding the vampires information, and a lot of wizards had died because of it – particularly during their heaviest attack, last year, in which they’d violated Sidhe territory in pursuit of the fleeing Council. ‘You think the traitor is someone on the Senior

Council.’

‘I think we can’t take any chances,’ he said quietly. ‘This isn’t official business. I can’t order you to do it, Harry. I’ll understand if you don’t want to. But there’s no one better for the job – and our allies cannot maintain the current pace of operations for long. Their best weapon has always been secrecy, and their actions have forced them to pay a terrible cost of lives to give us what aid they have.’

I folded my arms over my stomach and said, ‘We need to help them, sure. But every time I look sideways at Faerie, I get into deeper trouble with them. It’s the last thing I need. If I do this, how—’

Ebenezar’s weight shifted, gravel crunching loudly. I glanced up to see the Merlin and Morgan emerge from the building, speaking quietly and intently.

‘I wanted to talk to you,’ Ebenezar said, evidently for the benefit of anyone listening. ‘Make sure Morgan and the other Wardens are treating you square.’

I went along with him. ‘When they talk to me at all,’ I said. ‘About the only other Warden I ever see is Ramirez. Decent guy. I like him.’

‘That says a lot for him.’

‘That the Council’s ticking time bomb has a good opinion of him?’ I waited for Morgan and the Merlin to leave, but they paused a little way off, still talking. I stared at the gravel for a long time, and then said, much more quietly, ‘That could have been me in there today. I could have been that kid.’

‘It was a long time ago,’ Ebenezar said. ‘You were barely more than a child.’

‘So was he.’

Ebenezar’s expression became guarded. ‘I’m sorry you had to see that business.’

‘Is that why it happened here?’ I asked him. ‘Why come to Chicago for an execution?’

He exhaled slowly. ‘It’s one of the great crossroads of the world, Harry. More air traffic comes through here than anywhere else. It’s an enormous port city for shipping of any kind – trucks, trains, ships. That means a lot of ways in and out, a lot of travelers passing through. It makes it difficult for any observers from the Red Court to spot us or report our movements.’ He gave me a bleak smile. ‘And then there’s the way Chicago seems to be inimical to the health of any vampire who comes here.’

‘That’s a pretty good cover story,’ I said. ‘What’s the truth?’

Ebenezar sighed and held up his hand in a conciliatory gesture. ‘It wasn’t my idea.’

I looked at him for a minute and then said, ‘The Merlin called the meeting here.’

Ebenezar nodded and arched a shaggy grey brow. ‘Which means . . . ?’

I chewed on my lower lip and scrunched up my eyes. It never helped me think any better, but that was no reason not to keep trying it. ‘He wanted to send me a message. Kill two birds with one stone.’

Ebenezar nodded. ‘He wanted you stripped of your position as a Warden, but Luccio is still the technical commander of the Wardens, though Morgan commands in the field. She supported you and the rest of the Senior Council overruled him.’

‘Bet he loved that,’ I said.

Ebenezar chuckled. ‘I thought he was having a stroke.’

‘Joy,’ I said. ‘I didn’t want the job to begin with.’

‘I know,’ he said. ‘You got rocks and hard places, boy. Not much else.’

‘So the Merlin figures he’ll show me an execution and scare me into toeing the line.’ I frowned, thinking. ‘I take it there’s no word on the attack last year? No one found with mysterious sums of money dumped into their bank accounts that would incriminate a traitor?’

‘Not yet,’ Ebenezar said.

‘Then with the traitor running around loose, all the Merlin has to do is wait for me to screw something up. Then he can call it treason and squish me.’

Ebenezar nodded, and I saw the warning in his eyes – another reason to take the job he was offering. ‘He genuinely believes that you are a threat to the Council. If your behavior confirms his belief, he’ll do whatever is necessary to stop you.’

I snorted. ‘There was another guy like that once. Name of McCarthy. If the Merlin wants to find a traitor, he’ll find one whether or not one actually exists.’

Ebenezar scowled, a hint of a Scots burr creeping into his voice, as it did anytime he was angry, and he glanced at the Merlin. ‘Aye. I thought you should know.’

I nodded, still without looking up at him. I hated being bullied into anything, but I didn’t get the vibe that Ebenezar was making an effort to maneuver me into a corner. He was asking a favor. I might well help myself by doing him the favor, but he wasn’t going to bring anything onto my head if I turned him down. It wasn’t his style.

I met his eyes and nodded. ‘Okay.’

He exhaled slowly and nodded back, silent thanks in his expression. ‘Oh. One other thing,’ he said, and passed me an envelope.

‘What’s this?’

‘I don’t know,’ he answered. ‘The Gatekeeper asked me to give it to you.’

The Gatekeeper. He was the quietest of the wizards on the Senior Council, and even the Merlin showed him plenty of respect. He was taller than me, which is saying something, and he stayed out of most of the partisan politics of the Senior Council, which says even more. He knew things he shouldn’t be able to know – more so than most wizards, I mean – and as far as I could tell, he’d never been anything but straight with me.

I opened the envelope. A single piece of paper was inside. Letters in a precise, flowing hand read:

Dresden,

In the past ten days there have been repeated acts of black magic in Chicago. As the senior Warden in the region, it falls to you to investigate and find those responsible. In my opinion, it is vital that you do so immediately. To my knowledge, no one else is aware of the situation.

Rashid

I rubbed at my eyes. Great. More black magic in Chicago. If it wasn’t some raving, psychotic, black-hatted bad guy, it was probably another kid like the one who’d died a few minutes ago. There wasn’t a whole lot of in-between.

I was hoping for the murderous madman – sorry, political correctioners; *madperson*. I could deal with those. I’d had practice.

I didn't think I could handle the other.

I put the letter back in the envelope, thinking. This was between the Gatekeeper and me, presumably. He hadn't asked me publicly, or told Ebenezar what was going on, which meant that I was free to decide how to handle this one. If the Merlin knew about this and officially gave me the assignment, he'd make damned sure I didn't have much of a choice in how to handle it – and I'd have to do the whole thing under a microscope.

The Gatekeeper had trusted me to handle whatever was wrong. That was almost worse.

Man.

Sometimes I get tired of being the guy who is supposed to deal with un-deal-withable situations.

I looked up to find Ebenezar squinting at me. The expression made his face a mass of wrinkles.

'What?' I asked.

'You get a haircut or something, Hoss?'

'Uh, nothing new. Why?'

'You look . . .' The old wizard's voice trailed off thoughtfully. 'Different.'

My heartbeat sped up a little. As far as I knew, Ebenezar was unaware of the entity who was leasing out the unused portions of my brain, and I wanted to keep it that way. But though he had a reputation for being something of a magical brawler, his specialty the summoning up of primal, destructive forces, he had a lot more on the ball than most of the Council gave him credit for. It was entirely possible that he had sensed something of the fallen angel's presence within me.

'Yeah, well. I've been wearing the cloak of the people I spent most of my adult life resenting,' I said. 'Between that and being a cripple, I've been off my sleep for almost a year.'

'That can do it,' Ebenezar said, nodding. 'How's the hand?'

I bit back my first harsh response, that it was still maimed and scarred, and that the burns made it look like a badly melted piece of wax sculpture. I'd gone up against a bad guy with a brain a couple of years back, and she'd worked out that my defensive magic was designed to stop kinetic energy – not heat. I found that out the hard way when a couple of her psychotic goons sprayed improvised napalm at me. My shield had stopped the flaming jelly, but the heat had gone right through and dry roasted the hand I'd held out to focus my shield.

I held up my gloved left hand and waggled my thumb and the first two fingers in jerky little motions. The other two fingers didn't move much unless their neighbors pulled them. 'Not much feeling in them yet, but I can hold a beer. Or the steering wheel. Doctor's had me playing guitar, trying to move them and use them more.'

'Good,' Ebenezar said. 'Exercise is good for the body, but music is good for the soul.'

'Not the way I play it,' I said.

Ebenezar grinned wryly, and drew a pocket watch from the front pocket of the overalls. He squinted at it. 'Lunchtime,' he said. 'You hungry?'

There wasn't anything in his tone to indicate it, but I could read the subtext.

Ebenezar had been a mentor to me at a time I'd badly needed it. He'd taught me

just about everything I thought was important enough to be worth knowing. He had been unfailingly generous, patient, loyal, and kind to me.

But he had been lying to me the whole time, ignoring the principles he had been teaching me. On the one hand, he taught me about what it meant to be a wizard, about how a wizard's magic comes from his deepest beliefs, about how doing evil with magic was more than simply a crime – it was a mockery of what magic meant, a kind of sacrilege. On the other hand, he'd been the White Council's Blackstaff the whole while – a wizard with a license to kill, to violate the Laws of Magic, to make a mockery of everything noble and good about the power he wielded in the name of political necessity. And he'd done it. Many times.

I had once held the kind of trust and faith in Ebenezar that I had given no one else. I'd built a foundation for my life on what he'd taught me about the use of magic, about right and wrong. But he'd let me down. He'd been living a lie, and it had been brutally painful to learn about it. Two years later, it still twisted around in my belly, a vague and nauseating unease.

My old teacher was offering me an olive branch, trying to set aside the things that had come between us. I knew that I should go along with him. I knew that he was as human, as fallible, as anyone else. I knew that I should set it aside, mend our fences, and get on with life. It was the smart thing to do. It was the compassionate, responsible thing to do. It was the *right* thing to do.

But I couldn't.

It still hurt too much for me to think straight about it.

I looked up at him. 'Death threats in the guise of formal decapitations sort of ruin my appetite.'

He nodded at me, accepting the excuse with a patient and steady expression, though I thought I saw regret in his eyes. He lifted a hand in a silent wave and turned away to walk toward a beat-up old Ford truck that had been built during the Great Depression. Second thoughts pressed in. Maybe I should say something. Maybe I should go for a bite to eat with the old man.

My excuse hadn't been untrue, though. There was no way I could eat. I could still feel the droplets of hot blood hitting my face, still see the body lying unnaturally in a pool of blood. My hands started shaking and I closed my eyes, forcing the vivid, bloody memories out of the forefront of my thoughts. Then I got in the car and tried to leave the memories behind me.

The Blue Beetle is no muscle car, but it flung up a respectable amount of gravel as I left.

The streets weren't as bad as they usually were, but it was still hotter than hell, so I rolled down the windows at the first stoplight and tried to think clearly.

Investigate the faeries. Great. That was absolutely guaranteed to get complicated before I got any useful answers. If there was one thing faeries hated doing, it was giving you a straight answer, about anything. Getting plain speech out of one is like pulling out teeth. Your *own* teeth. Through your *nose*.

But Ebenezar was right. I was probably the only one on the Council with acquaintances in both the Summer and Winter Courts of the Sidhe. If anyone on the Council could find out, it was me. Yippee.

And just to keep things interesting, I needed to hunt down some kind of