



Summer Knight (Dresden Files)

By Jim Butcher

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In the fourth novel in the #1 *New York Times* bestselling series featuring everyone's favorite wizard for hire, Harry Dresden is suckered into the tangled—and dangerous—affairs of Faerie...

Ever since his girlfriend left town to deal with her newly acquired taste for blood, Harry Dresden has been down and out in Chicago. He can't pay his rent. He's alienating his friends. He can't even recall the last time he took a shower. The only professional wizard in the phone book has become a desperate man.

And just when it seems things can't get any worse, in saunters the Winter Queen of Faerie. She has an offer Harry can't refuse *if* he wants to free himself of the supernatural hold his faerie godmother has over him—and hopefully end his run of bad luck. All he has to do is find out who murdered the Summer Queen's right-hand man, the Summer Knight, and clear the Winter Queen's name.

It seems simple enough, but Harry knows better than to get caught in the middle of faerie politics. Until he finds out that the fate of the entire world rests on his solving this case. No pressure or anything...

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for the Dresden Files

“Think *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* starring Philip Marlowe.”—*Entertainment Weekly*

“Fans of Laurell K. Hamilton and Tanya Huff will love this series.”—*Midwest Book Review*

“Superlative.”—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“One of the most enjoyable marriages of the fantasy and mystery genres on the shelves.”—*Cinescape*

“Butcher...spins an excellent noirish detective yarn in a well-crafted, supernaturally-charged setting. The supporting cast is again fantastic, and Harry’s wit continues to fly in the face of a peril-fraught plot.”—*Booklist* (starred review)

“What’s not to like about this series?...It takes the best elements of urban fantasy, mixes it with some good old-fashioned noir mystery, tosses in a dash of romance and a lot of high-octane action, shakes, stirs, and serves.”—*SF Site*

“A tricky plot complete with against-the-clock pacing, firefights, explosions, and plenty of magic. Longtime series fans as well as newcomers drawn by the SciFi Channel’s TV series based on the novels should find this supernatural mystery a real winner.”—*Library Journal*

“What would you get if you crossed Spenser with Merlin? Probably you would come up with someone very like Harry Dresden, wizard, tough guy and star of [the Dresden Files].”—*The Washington Times*

About the Author

A martial arts enthusiast whose résumé includes a long list of skills rendered obsolete at least two hundred years ago, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author **Jim Butcher** turned to writing as a career because anything else probably would have driven him insane. He lives mostly inside his own head so that he can write down the conversation of his imaginary friends, but his head can generally be found in Independence, Missouri. Jim is the author of the Dresden Files, the Codex Alera novels, and the Cinder Spires series, which began with *The Aeronaut’s Windlass*.

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Chapter One

It rained toads the day the White Council came to town.

I got out of the Blue Beetle, my beat-up old Volkswagen bug, and squinted against the midsummer sunlight. Lake Meadow Park lies a bit south of Chicago's Loop, a long sprint from Lake Michigan's shores. Even in heat like we'd had lately, the park would normally be crowded with people. Today it was deserted but for an old lady with a shopping cart and a long coat, tottering around the park. It wasn't yet noon, and my sweats and T-shirt were too hot for the weather.

I squinted around the park for a moment, took a couple of steps onto the grass, and got hit on the head by something damp and squishy.

I flinched and slapped at my hair. Something small fell past my face and onto the ground at my feet. A toad. Not a big one, as toads go—it could easily have sat in the palm of my hand. It wobbled for a few moments upon hitting the ground, then let out a bleary croak and started hopping drunkenly away.

I looked around me and saw other toads on the ground. A lot of them. The sound of their croaking grew louder as I walked further into the park. Even as I watched, several more amphibians plopped out of the sky, as though the Almighty had dropped them down a laundry chute. Toads hopped around everywhere. They didn't carpet the ground, but you couldn't possibly miss them. Every moment or so, you would hear the thump of another one landing. Their croaking sounded vaguely like the speech-chatter of a crowded room.

“Weird, huh?” said an eager voice. I looked up to see a short young man with broad shoulders and a confident walk coming toward me. Billy the Werewolf wore sweatpants and a plain dark T-shirt. A year or two ago the outfit would have concealed the forty or fifty extra pounds he'd been carrying. Now they concealed all the muscle he'd traded it in for. He stuck out his hand, smiling. “What did I tell you, Harry?”

“Billy,” I responded. He crunched down hard as I shook his hand. Or maybe he was just that much stronger. “How's the werewolf biz?”

“Getting interesting,” he said. “We've run into a lot of odd things lately when we've been out patrolling. Like this.” He gestured at the park. Another toad fell from the sky several feet away. “That's why we called the wizard.”

Patrolling. Holy vigilantes, Batman. “Any of the normals been here?”

“No, except for some meteorological guys from the university. They said that they were having tornadoes in Louisiana or something, that the storms must have thrown the toads here.”

I snorted. “You'd think ‘it's magic’ would be easier to swallow than that.”

Billy grinned. “Don't worry. I'm sure someone will come along and declare it a hoax before long.”

“Uh-huh.” I turned back to the Beetle and popped the hood to rummage in the forward storage compartment. I came out with a nylon backpack and dragged a couple of small cloth sacks out of it. I threw one to Billy. “Grab a couple of toads and pitch them in there for me.”

He caught the bag and frowned. “Why?”

“So I can make sure they're real.”

Billy lifted his eyebrows. “You think they're not?”

I squinted at him. “Look, Billy, just do it. I haven't slept, I can't remember the last time I ate a hot meal, and I've got a lot to do before tonight.”

“But why wouldn't they be real? They look real.”

I blew out a breath and tried to keep my temper. It had been short lately. “They could look real and feel real, but it's possible that they're just constructs. Made out of the material of the Nevernever and animated by magic. I hope they are.”

``Why?"

``Because all that would mean is that some faerie got bored and played a trick. They do that sometimes."

``Okay. But if they're real?"

``If they're real, then it means something is out of whack."

``What kind of out of whack?"

``The serious kind. Holes in the fabric of reality."

``And that would be bad?"

I eyed him. ``Yeah, Billy. That would be bad. It would mean something big was going down."

``But what if—"

My temper flared. ``I don't have the time or inclination to teach a class today. Shut the hell up."

He lifted a hand in a pacifying gesture. ``Okay, man. Whatever." He fell into step beside me and started picking up toads as we walked across the park. ``So, uh, it's good to see you, Harry. Me and the gang were wondering if you wanted to come by this weekend, do some socializing."

I scooped up a toad of my own and eyed him dubiously. ``Doing what?"

He grinned at me. ``Playing Arcanos, man. The campaign is getting really fun."

Role-playing games. I made a monosyllabic sound. The old lady with the shopping cart wandered past us, the wheels of the cart squeaking and wobbling.

``Seriously, it's great," he insisted. ``We're storming the fortress of Lord Malocchio, except we have to do it in disguise in the dead of night, so that the Council of Truth won't know who the vigilantes who brought him down were. There's spells and demons and dragons and everything. Interested?"

``Sounds too much like work."

Billy let out a snort. ``Harry, look, I know this whole vampire war thing has you jumpy. And grouchy. But you've been lurking in your basement way too much lately."

``What vampire war?"

Billy rolled his eyes. ``Word gets around, Harry. I know that the Red Court of the vampires declared war on the wizards after you burned down Bianca's place last fall. I know that they've tried to kill you a couple of times since then. I even know that the wizards' White Council is coming to town sometime soon to figure out what to do."

I glowered at him. ``What White Council?"

He sighed. ``It's not a good time for you to be turning into a hermit, Harry. I mean, look at you. When was the last time you shaved? Had a shower? A haircut? Got out to do your laundry?"

I lifted a hand and scratched at the wiry growth of beard on my face. ``I've been out. I've been out plenty of

times."

Billy snagged another toad. ``Like when?"

``I went to that football game with you and the Alphas."

He snorted. ``Yeah. In January, Dresden. It's June." Billy glanced up at my face and frowned. ``People are worried about you. I mean, I know you've been working on some project or something. But this whole unwashed wild man look just isn't you."

I stooped and grabbed a toad. ``You don't know what you're talking about."

``I know better than you think," he said. ``It's about Susan, right? Something happened to her last fall. Something you're trying to undo. Maybe something the vampires did. That's why she left town."

I closed my eyes and tried not to crush the toad in my hand. ``Drop the subject."

Billy planted his feet and thrust his chin out at me. ``No, Harry. Dammit, you vanish from the face of the earth, you're hardly showing up at your office, won't answer your phone, don't often answer your door. We're your friends, and we're worried about you."

``I'm fine," I said.

``You're a lousy liar. Word is that the Reds are bringing more muscle into town. That they're offering their groupies full vampirehood if one of them brings you down."

``Hell's bells," I muttered. My head started to ache.

``It isn't a good time for you to be outside by yourself. Even during daylight."

``I don't need a baby-sitter, Billy."

``Harry, I know you better than most. I know you can do stuff that other people can't—but that doesn't make you Superman. Everyone needs help sometimes."

``Not me. Not now." I stuffed the toad into my sack and picked up another. ``I don't have time for it."

``Oh, that reminds me." Billy drew a folded piece of paper out of the pocket of his sweats and read it.

``You've got an appointment with a client at three."

I blinked at him. ``What?"

``I dropped by your office and checked your messages. A Ms. Sommerset was trying to reach you, so I called her and set up the appointment for you."

I felt my temper rising again. ``You did what?"

His expression turned annoyed. ``I checked your mail, too. The landlord for the office dropped off your eviction notice. If you don't have him paid off in a week, he's booting you out."

``What the hell gives you the right to go poking around in my office, Billy? Or calling my clients?"

He took a step in front of me, glaring. I had to focus on his nose to avoid the risk of looking at his eyes. ``Get

off the high horse, Harry. I'm your freaking friend. You've been spending all your time hiding in your apartment. You should be happy I'm helping you save your business."

"You're damned right it's my business," I spat. The shopping cart lady circled past in my peripheral vision, cart wheels squeaking as she walked behind me. "Mine. As in none of yours."

He thrust out his jaw. "Fine. How about you just crawl back into your cave until they evict you from that, too?" He spread his hands. "Good God, man. I don't need to be a wizard to see when someone's in a downward spiral. You're hurting. You need help."

I jabbed a finger into his chest. "No, Billy. I don't need more help. I don't need to be baby-sitting a bunch of kids who think that because they've learned one trick they're ready to be the Lone Ranger with fangs and a tail. I don't need to be worrying about the vamps targeting the people around me when they can't get to me. I don't need to be second-guessing myself, wondering who else is going to get hurt because I dropped the ball." I reached down and snatched up a toad, jerking the cloth bag from Billy's hands on the way back up. "I don't need you."

Naturally, the hit went down right then.

It wasn't subtle, as attempted assassinations go. An engine roared and a black compact pickup truck jumped the curb into the park fifty yards away. It jounced and slewed to one side, tires digging up furrows in the sunbaked grass. A pair of men clung to a roll bar in the back of the truck. They were dressed all in black, complete with black sunglasses over black ski masks, and their guns matched—automatic weapons in the mini-Uzi tradition.

"Get back!" I shouted. With my right hand, I grabbed at Billy and shoved him behind me. With my left, I shook out the bracelet on my wrist, hung with a row of tiny, medieval-style shields. I lifted my left hand toward the truck and drew in my will, focusing it with the bracelet into a sudden, transparent, shimmering half-globe that spread out between me and the oncoming truck.

The truck ground to a halt. The two gunmen didn't wait for it to settle. With all the fire discipline of an action-movie extra, they pointed their guns more or less at me and emptied their clips in one roaring burst.

Sparks flew from the shield in front of me, and bullets whined and hissed in every direction as they ricocheted. My bracelet grew uncomfortably warm within a second or two, the energy of the shield taxing the focus to its limit. I tried to angle the shield to deflect the shots up into the air as much as possible. God only knew where all those bullets were going—I just hoped that they wouldn't bounce through a nearby car or some other passerby.

The guns clicked empty. With jerky, unprofessional motions, both gunmen began to reload.

"Harry!" Billy shouted.

"Not now!"

"But—"

I lowered the shield and lifted my right hand—the side that projects energy. The silver ring I wore on my index finger had been enchanted to save back a little kinetic energy whenever my arm moved. I hadn't used the ring in months, and it had a whale of a kick to it—one I hardly dared to use on the gunmen. That much force could kill one of them, and that would be basically the same as letting them fill me full of bullets. It

would just take a little longer to set in. The White Council did not take kindly to anyone violating the First Law of Magic: Thou Shalt Not Kill. I'd slipped it once on a technicality, but it wouldn't happen again.

I gritted my teeth, focused my shot just to one side of the gunmen, and triggered the ring. Raw force, unseen but tangible, lashed through the air and caught the first gunman with a glancing blow across his upper body. His automatic slammed against his chest, and the impact tore the sunglasses off his head and shredded bits of his clothes even as it flung him back and out of the pickup, to land somewhere on the ground on the other side.

The second gunman got less of the blast. What did hit him struck against his shoulder and head. He held on to his gun but lost the sunglasses, and they took the ski mask with them, revealing him to be a plain-looking boy who couldn't have been old enough to vote. He blinked against the sudden light and then resumed his fumbling reload.

“Kids,” I snarled, lifting my shield again. “They're sending kids after me. Hell's bells.”

And then something made the hairs on the back of my neck try to lift me off the ground. As the kid with the gun started shooting again, I glanced back over my shoulder.

The old lady with her shopping basket had stopped maybe fifteen feet behind me. I saw now that she wasn't as old as I had thought. I caught a flicker of cool, dark eyes beneath age makeup. Her hands were young and smooth. From the depths of the shopping basket she pulled out a sawed-off shotgun, and swung it toward me.

Bullets from the chattering automatic slammed against my shield, and it was all I could do to hold it in place. If I brought any magic to bear against the third attacker, I would lose my concentration and the shield with it—and inexpert or not, the gunman on the truck was spraying around enough lead that sooner or later he wouldn't miss.

On the other hand, if the disguised assassin got a chance to fire that shotgun from five yards away, no one would bother taking me to the hospital. I'd go straight to the morgue.

Bullets hammered into my shield, and I couldn't do anything but watch the third attacker bring the shotgun to bear. I was screwed, and probably Billy was along with me.

Billy moved. He had already gotten out of his T-shirt, and he had enough muscle to ripple—flat, hard muscle, athlete's muscle, not the carefully sculpted build of weight lifters. He dove forward, toward the woman with the shotgun, and stripped out of his sweatpants on the fly. He was naked beneath.

I felt the surge of magic that Billy used then—sharp, precise, focused. There was no sense of ritual in what he did, no slow gathering of power building to release. He blurred as he moved, and between one breath and the next, Billy-the-Naked was gone and Billy-the-Wolf slammed into the assailant, a dark-furred beast the size of a Great Dane, fangs slashing at the hand that gripped the forward stock of the shotgun.

The woman cried out, jerking her hand back, scarlet blood on her fingers, and swept the gun at Billy like a club. He twisted and caught the blow on his shoulders, a snarl exploding from him. He went after the woman's other hand, faster than I could easily see, and the shotgun tumbled to the ground.

The woman screamed again and drew back her hand.

She wasn't human.

Her hands distended, lengthening, as did her shoulders and her jaw. Her nails became ugly, ragged talons,

and she raked them down at Billy, striking him across the jaw, this time eliciting a pained yelp mixed with a snarl. He rolled to one side and came up on his feet, circling in order to force the woman-thing's back to me.

The gunman in the truck clicked on empty again. I dropped the shield and hurled myself forward, diving to grip the shotgun. I came up with it and shouted, ``Billy, move!"

The wolf darted to one side, and the woman whipped around to face me, her distorted features furious, mouth drooling around tusklike fangs.

I pointed the gun at her belly and pulled the trigger.

The gun roared and bucked, slamming hard against my shoulder. Ten-gauge, maybe, or slug rounds. The woman doubled over, letting out a shriek, and stumbled backward and to the ground. She wasn't down long. She almost bounced back to her feet, scarlet splashed all over her rag of a dress, her face wholly inhuman now. She sprinted past me to the truck and leapt up into the back. The gunman hauled his partner back into the truck with him, and the driver gunned the engine. The truck threw out some turf before it dug in, jounced back onto the street, and whipped away into traffic.

I stared after it for a second, panting. I lowered the shotgun, realizing as I did that I had somehow managed to keep hold of the toad I had picked up in my left hand. It wriggled and struggled in a fashion that suggested I had been close to crushing it, and I tried to ease up on my grip without losing it.

I turned to look for Billy. The wolf paced back over to his discarded sweatpants, shimmered for a second, and became once more the naked young man. There were two long cuts on his face, parallel with his jaw. Blood ran down over his throat in a fine sheet. He carried himself tensely, but it was the only indication he gave of the pain.

``You all right?" I asked him.

He nodded and jerked on his pants, his shirt. ``Yeah. What the hell was that?"

``Ghoul," I told him. ``Probably one of the LaChaise clan. They're working with the Red Court, and they don't much like me."

``Why don't they like you?"

``I've given them headaches a few times."

Billy lifted a corner of his shirt to hold against the cuts on his face. ``I didn't expect the claws."

``They're sneaky that way."

``Ghoul, huh. Is it dead?"

I shook my head. ``They're like cockroaches. They recover from just about anything. Can you walk?"

``Yeah."

``Good. Let's get out of here." We headed toward the Beetle. I picked up the cloth sack of toads on the way and started shaking them back out onto the ground. I put the toad I'd nearly squished down with them, then wiped my hand off on the grass.

Billy squinted at me. ``Why are you letting them go?"

``Because they're real."

``How do you know?"

``The one I was holding crapped on my hand."

I let Billy into the Blue Beetle and got in the other side. I fetched the first aid kit from under my seat and passed it over to him. Billy pressed a cloth against his face, looking out at the toads. ``So that means things are in a bad way?"

``Yeah," I confirmed, ``things are in a bad way." I was silent for a minute, then said, ``You saved my life."

He shrugged. He didn't look at me.

``So you set up the appointment for three o'clock, right? What was the name? Sommerset?"

He glanced at me and kept the smile from his mouth—but not from his eyes. ``Yeah."

I scratched at my beard and nodded. ``I've been distracted lately. Maybe I should clean up first."

``Might be good," Billy agreed.

I sighed. ``I'm an ass sometimes."

Billy laughed. ``Sometimes. You're human like the rest of us."

I started up the Beetle. It wheezed a little, but I coaxed it to life.

Just then something hit my hood with a hard, heavy thump. Then again. Another heavy blow, on the roof.

A feeling of dizziness swept over me, a nausea that came so suddenly and violently that I clutched the steering wheel in a simple effort not to collapse. Distantly, I could hear Billy asking me if I was all right. I wasn't. Power moved and stirred in the air outside—hectic disruption, the forces of magic, usually moving in smooth and quiet patterns, suddenly cast into tumult, disruptive, maddening chaos.

I tried to push the sensations away from me, and labored to open my eyes. Toads were raining down. Not occasionally plopping, but raining down so thick and hard that they darkened the sky. No gentle laundry-chute drop for these poor things, either. They fell like hailstones, splattering on concrete, on the hood of the Beetle. One of them fell hard enough to send a spiderweb of cracks through my windshield, and I dropped into gear and scooted down the street. After a few hundred yards we got away from the otherworldly rain.

Both of us were breathing too fast. Billy had been right. The rain of toads meant something serious was going on, magically speaking. The White Council was coming to town tonight to discuss the war. I had a client to meet, and the vampires had evidently upped the stakes (no pun intended), striking at me more openly than they had dared to before.

I flipped on the windshield wipers. Amphibian blood left scarlet streaks on the cracked glass.

``Good Lord," Billy breathed.

``Yeah." I said. ``It never rains, it pours."

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