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By JIM BUTCHER

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**JIM
BUTCHER**
THE DRESDEN FILES
TWELVE MONTHS



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1

Pain is a fire.

That's true for all of the people, some of the time. If you've never had to stand in that fire, be patient: Your turn is coming.

Whether the pain is physical or purely mental doesn't really matter—it turns out that your brain reacts to it the same way, lighting up many of the same centers of perception. Some brainy types in lab coats proved that one fairly recently. The suffering from a broken heart is similar to that from a gunshot wound, in terms of how our minds react over the long term.

It all hurts.

When you have to live with that hurt, with that pain, when there's no way to turn it off or get away from it, you start to make adjustments. Your choices in how you deal with your pain determine the course of your recovery. That's why people who go through a difficult ordeal sometimes come out stronger, and sometimes they come out broken—but they always come out . . .

Changed.

Pain is a fire.

I opened my eyes so I could stop seeing Murphy's cold, dead face.

Her lips, turning blue.

"Murph?" I mumbled, looking around.

But I was alone.

I checked my windup Mickey Mouse alarm clock. Three thirty a.m.

That meant I had slept fifteen minutes longer than I had the night before. Almost one hour and thirty minutes of rest.

Progress.

It had been somewhere around three weeks since Karrin Murphy died and a big bite of the city got stomped flat. Three weeks since Chicago had lost tens of thousands of innocent lives, seen a million people displaced from their homes, and had its infrastructure wrecked by an EMP—an energetic magical pulse. Three weeks since I had seen young wizards I had helped train, friends, die before their enemies. Three weeks since I had been cast out from the White Council of Wizardry entirely.

Three weeks since the battle with Ethniu had announced to an entire metropolis of poor innocent normies that the things under the bed and hiding in the closet weren't just in their imaginations anymore.

The alarm was set for five a.m. Which gave me about ninety minutes of my own time when no one with a kind, concerned expression was watching me.

Alone time.

I let the pain have me. Replayed old memories of those who were gone. Relived the most hideous moments of the battle, and of battles past.

I don't win them all.

I cried. I cried and I screamed into my pillow until my stomach muscles were sore and my throat ached. In the snug, lonely little chamber in the basement of the castle, with stone walls a foot thick, no one was going to hear me.

That used up maybe thirty minutes. Then I sort of sank into a stupor, staring while tears came steadily.

When the alarm rang, I started putting myself back together as best I could. I got up and washed my face and brushed my teeth. I went through a stretching routine that the ignorant would call yoga. I made the bed.

I still had a broken arm. The gunshot wound in my calf had closed and healed up nicely. My ankle wasn't swollen anymore. Those didn't really trouble me. None of the physical injuries did.

The real pain was all in my head.

That's why the routine was important. Fires are all chaos. Putting them out requires the imposition of order, and getting your head back

into order means routine. I didn't feel like doing any of the standard morning things—mostly I wanted to lie there and hurt. But that wasn't the same thing as healing.

There would be time to let myself bleed again tomorrow.

And there were people who needed me.

So I followed the routine, trusting that the pain would slowly grow less. It hadn't, that I could tell, but it would.

I kept telling myself that. Out loud. I'd been devastated before. I'd healed before.

I just needed time.

I got dressed in exercise clothes and shambled out into the castle's early morning. Pain focuses the mind wonderfully—since you can't really think about very much else. I went to the kitchen to make myself eat some breakfast, get the morning report, and then I would hit the gym for a couple of hours.

Squats focus the mind wonderfully, too.

Will Borden was waiting for me in the kitchen. He looked like a statue of Hercules at three-quarters scale, maybe a little under five and a half feet of heavy muscle. He wore jeans, a button-down shirt, and a blazer, all tailored to fit someone of his unusual proportions, and his eyes were thick with sleep. Will had been living in guest quarters in the castle (which was to say on an air mattress in a dank stone chamber) and had taken some time off from being a successful engineering consultant to serve as my de facto castellan.

"Harry," Will said with a yawn and passed over a cup of steaming coffee, black.

I felt seen.

I picked up the coffee, mumbled something that could have been a curse or a greeting under my breath, and drank liquid morning for a minute or two. Will did the same. The castle's commercial kitchen was huge, all stainless steel and polished concrete. It was also empty, for the time being.

In a bit, the volunteer cooks from the Ordo Lebes would come in and start preparing a meal for me and my staff (Will). They'd also cook for the refugees from the neighborhood, folks whose homes had burned

and who had been unable to find another place to stay—about thirty people total in a few different families.

Then there were a half dozen Knights of the Bean, all single men who had survived the battle and had nowhere else to go.

Oh, and a couple of kids who had been homeless already. The streets were a hell of a lot worse than they'd ever been, and child services were swamped. So I did what I could.

I told them all they could stay with me until they got back on their feet. Most of them were sleeping on air mattresses and camp rolls, but they had a roof, which was better than a lot of the town was doing. I could imagine how horrified the stuffer members of the White Council of Wizardry would be at my opening up my home like this. If I'd been a community activist or a cult leader instead of a wizard, I'd have been off to a great start.

But for the moment, Will and I had the place to ourselves—except for the occasional rustle and whisper of one of the Little Folk, my personal bodyguards, who were always on hand when I was outside my private chambers.

The Little Folk had stopped a bombing attempt by parties unknown a week before. The bad guys had sent gremlins. Maybe I should have put out a hit on Joe Dante.

“Okay. What’s today, Will?” I mumbled.

“Back day, so get a few extra carbs,” the brawny young man advised me.

I got out some oatmeal, eggs, bacon, and fruit. Started making breakfast for us. Second breakfast would come after the workout.

“After that?” I asked.

Will checked his list. He said something, and then said it again more slowly, and then said, “Harry?”

I looked up from where I'd been folding eggs for a few moments and remembering the blood draining from Murphy's face. “Sorry.”

He gave me a lopsided smile. “S'okay. I said you have a meeting with Michael at noon. He's done roughing in the residential chambers upstairs and wants to talk about how you want to arrange things in the main hall.”

I grunted. “Anything else?”

Will consulted his checklist. “No—you wanted this afternoon left open to get ready, remember?”

I frowned, got out some pans, lit the gas stove, and started cooking in earnest. I honestly couldn't recall what he was talking about and reminded myself not to beat me up over it. I wasn't firing on all cylinders for an excellent reason.

I just needed time.

“Ready for what?” I asked him.

“Um,” Will said, frowning. “Your first date with Ms. Raith. It's tonight.”

My cylinders did a slow turn. “Ah,” I said. “Right.”

Lara Raith was the power behind, above, under, around, and everywhere else except on the throne in the White Court of vampires. She'd had enough clout, a few years ago, to get the US Navy to send a ship to support yours truly after the Battle of Chichén Itzá, and word had it that she hadn't slowed down since. Apparently, on the internet she was in pictures with a lot of people in big money. And big tech. And big pharma. And big oil. And big politics.

I wouldn't say that they were helpless against her charms, but only because I didn't want to be that lame guy observing the obvious out loud. When Lara crooked a finger, a lot of people came running. They couldn't help it. She was the next best thing to a succubus, and I wasn't sure even one of them could have been more dangerous.

And here I was, engaged to her.

We hadn't been on a date or anything, unless you counted the fights we'd had beside (and against) each other. Given my record with women, I honestly wasn't sure which column to put them in. We were, however, to be married in just under a year, by decree of my boss, the Queen of Air and Darkness.

I mean, I know politics makes strange bedfellows, but this was ridiculous.

I realized that I'd been sitting in my room and staring blankly at the wall for about twenty minutes while I went over all these thoughts. My

brain just wouldn't get moving. Maybe I needed caffeine. I took another five minutes to think about that and was interrupted by a knock at my door.

"Hmm," I said, with no particular emphasis.

"Harry, it's me," said Molly. "I'm coming in. All right?"

"Hmm," I agreed.

The door opened, and a tall young woman came into the room. She was wearing dark blue leather pants that didn't creak and a purplish drapery top that showed off her collarbones. She looked like she'd skipped a lot of meals, her blue eyes were sharp, and her long hair, silver-blond, hung down to her lower back. Molly liked changing her appearance a lot.

She took one glance at me and winced. "Oh, for the love of . . . Harry, are you all right?"

"Fine," I said. "Just . . . you know."

"Let's assume I don't," she said quietly, and came to sit on the bed beside me. She generated subtle tension by doing it. I noted it and let it go right on by. Just as I always had.

"Hey," she said. Then a few seconds later she said, with gentle emphasis, "Hey."

I blinked and looked up at her. "Oh right. Sorry. I haven't been sleeping so well."

"I know," she said.

"How's that?" I asked.

"I feel it when you dream. You haven't done much of that. None of it is very friendly."

Molly was the Winter Lady, a genuine faerie princess. She'd been simply mortal once, but that time was past. Now she carried Power, and a lot of it, and she had responsibilities I wasn't sure I understood completely. Power was a dangerous thing to hand to anyone. It makes people more of what they already are. So far, Molly had been more focused and more disciplined, but there were times when I wondered how much of her was still that person I'd known since she was a kid, and how much of her was the Winter Lady.

She took my hand and held it in both of hers, and I felt some tension I hadn't sensed ease out of me. Today, at least, she was just Molly.

"Look, maybe I can get this delayed for a while," she said.

"Get what delayed?"

"Your date with Lara?" she reminded me gently.

"Right, right." I shook my head. "Mab seemed pretty insistent last time she came by."

"You're in no shape for it," she said.

"I'm fine," I said. "I mean the arm has a ways to go, but other than that."

Her hand squeezed mine. "Harry, come on."

I closed my eyes and bowed my head. "I just keep seeing her die, Molls."

She put an arm around my shoulders and pulled me toward her.

I leaned in. She felt warm and kind, and part of me whispered that I didn't deserve such comforts after all the things I'd done wrong.

That's what pain sounds like when it talks to you.

I don't know when I started crying, but I did it in stillness, without sobbing. Just tears.

"Christ," I said. "I'm tired of this."

"I know, Harry," she said. "I know. But I need to know where your head is."

"It's on your shoulder," I said.

She bumped my leg with her knee. "I'm serious." She was quiet for a moment. Then she said, "Once upon a time, there was an apprentice wizard. Her mentor was kind, but sometimes rash, and determined never to let an innocent be harmed."

"I don't think I've heard this one," I said.

"Shut up, wiseass," Molly said absently. "I'm telling a story. The apprentice learned from her mentor and made mistakes and tried to make up for them. Until one day, her mentor was shot and killed."

"The end?" I guessed.

She put a thumb in my trapezius muscle, the one I'd twinged in the gym that morning, and dug into it absently. It felt amazing and I shut up. "She blamed herself for his death. And she went out and made all manner of unwise choices. She got involved with dark powers. And she did some dark things." Molly paused to think. "And the whole time, she

kept thinking to herself that it couldn't really get any worse, and if it did she'd probably earned it."

"Thanks for cheering me up."

She let out a soft snort through her nose. "Harry. I'm just saying. I've been to a place kind of like where you are now. Before I expose you to Lara Raith, I need to know that you don't think you deserve horrible things for what happened."

I was silent for a long time.

Because I'd thought about it.

When one of the White Court feeds on you . . . it feels good. Nothing else feels as good. Nothing else matters.

Nothing hurts.

The thought of letting Lara take a nibble of me was like standing with my toes on the edge of a cliff. I could wiggle them and feel the little pebbles falling out from under them and think to myself, *What if?*

Lara had once offered me surcease. Leaned in and whispered the word, like an invocation. It had haunted me ever since.

But never more than now.

I closed my eyes. And I thought of the one thing that protected me from that delicious, probably poisonous promise.

Maggie. My daughter.

She was at that age where I'd been starting to outline awkward but necessary talks with her about biology and such. She wasn't quite there yet, but the time was coming. I had her lined up for school at St. Mark's Academy for the Gifted and Talented, and my dog, Mouse, was going with her. She liked to snuggle up next to me for the second movie at a drive-in, and almost always fell asleep with her head on my chest before it was over.

I thought of the trust and love implied in her sleepy, heavy warmth. And, like always, I took a step back from the cliff.

"I'm not planning on drinking Lara's Kool-Aid," I said quietly.

Molly lifted her head, lifted my chin with her fingertips, and peered at my expression closely. "You're sure?"

"I'm . . ." I sighed. "I'm hurting. I just need time. I'll get through this."

Her beautiful features looked uncertain and worried.

"I'm sorry Mab is making you . . . you know." I grimaced. "Plan everything."

Her mouth quirked in a sardonic smile. "Yeah. Well. I'm just worried about you." She took in a deep breath. "If Lara tries to use her come-hither on you, she's breaking the agreement for the first outing. Winter's people will be nearby. All you have to do is say the word, and they'll be there."

"If she can't use her mojo on me," I said, "why are you so worried?"

"Because she's charming, manipulative, extremely intelligent, and she's forgotten more about seduction than most will ever know," Molly said. "Plus, she's a woman. And history suggests you don't deal well with those."

"Hey," I said. Then I scowled. "Yeah. Well. It's just coffee. Right?"

"This time," she said. "But I need your head in it, okay? Focused."

I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, and willed my thoughts to clear. It was possible that they reduced their opacity. Slightly.

I just needed time.

And I wasn't going to get it.

"Okay," I said. "Let's do this."

2

Chicago was closed for remodeling.

The Eye of Balor, a magical superweapon currently residing deep under my very own private spooky island of Demonreach in Lake Michigan, had inflicted the equivalent of a massive electromagnetic pulse on the whole town.

Anything with a microchip in it was history. Pretty much anything that did anything with electricity was history. Light bulbs, automobiles, televisions, radios, streetlights—and generators and batteries—all had been rendered into inert junk. Massive numbers of circuit boards, capacitors, chips, filaments, and all other manner of electronic equipment had to be replaced, and the country quite simply didn't have enough parts to get the job done.

Less than a month after the pulse, Chicago was back in the dark ages, with a curfew of eight o'clock, and candles and chemical glow sticks provided most of the light after sundown. Emergency priority had been given to police and utility services, and they were working around the clock to get things up and running again, but Chicago being Chicago, that meant that the Gold Coast was starting to slowly light up again and most of the rest of the city got real wary at night.

All the dead automobiles were gradually being towed away, but there were so many of them that they'd had trouble finding places to store them until they could be repaired, if they ever got enough parts to get the job done—assuming you weren't one of the unlucky ones whose cars got smashed out of the way by heavy military equipment rumbling

through the pulse zone to combat “the terrorists” who had inflicted it on the good citizenry.

“The terrorists” was how everyone was talking about it on TV, Bob the Skull had reported to me. That's how Ethniu's attack on Chicago was being interpreted by the mortal world: as a terrorist attack. One that had leveled skyscrapers and left eight million people with medieval levels of technology.

The smell was becoming medieval, too. The sewers mostly didn't require much in the way of electronics to function, but the treatment plants did, and so did the pumps that filled the water towers. For the most part, bathing had become something you did with bottled water, if you didn't have access to your own nineteenth-century tech.

The only reliable way to get around town at the moment was on motorcycles that had been brought out after the pulse (since you never knew which streets would be blocked by stalled cars) or bicycles, or walking. Some of the main roads had been cleared enough to let military and FEMA support vehicles in, but in most of the town it was blind chance whether or not any given street was open.

The federal government had responded with a massive effort to go to the aid of the citizens of Chicago, and to give them credit, most people seemed to have enough bottled water—but food was tight and getting tighter. A city the size of Chicago needs its roads like a living animal needs its arteries. Despite a massive outpouring of help from the rest of the nation (everyone from the NAACP to the Red Cross was collecting canned goods and sending them our way), the real problem was that it was hard to ship food into the city, hard to do business, hard to transport things around town, hard to carry the food up the stairs to apartments.

Things were getting tense.

A million people had been displaced from their homes, either in buildings that had been destroyed or in the neighboring buildings that had been flooded with dust and smashed and damaged by debris. A large but unknown number of citizens had simply been killed in the battle, mostly as collateral damage. Thousands, if not tens of thousands, more were dying for lack of advanced medical care caused by a combination

of an overloaded system, no power, and greatly curtailed communications. Millions were trying to flee the city for areas that still had electricity and clean water and plumbing, causing even more problems along the choked roads.

Those who stayed were mostly the stubborn, the foolish, the well-prepared, those too old to flee, or those tied down with small children who couldn't chance walking them out of the disaster zone.

Oh. And predators.

Wolves get fat in winter.

Chicago's version of that metaphorical winter was always summertime, when it got warm enough for the violence to escalate. It was hard to get local news, what with nothing working, but word from the few friendly faces I still had in the police department was that murders and violent crime had gone up a hell of a lot more than expected. They thought. The police were having trouble even keeping track of how much violence was going on—the chaos was a giant flashing neon opportunity sign for anyone who wanted vengeance on anyone else to go out and take it.

After all, guns still worked.

I came out the doors of the castle wearing my long black leather duster and a black baseball cap over my shaggy hair. A couple of the Knights of the Bean were on guard outside the place, shotguns that would normally have been anathema in Chicago in hand, and they nodded to me in passing. I wore jeans and motorcycle boots and a black T-shirt with white lettering that read *WHINE LATER. SUCK IT UP NOW*, because I respected the Stoics.

This was a date, so I wasn't carrying my staff, or an assault rifle or a rocket launcher, but my blasting rod was tied to its thong inside my duster; my shield bracelet was ready.

If I needed more than that to survive a coffee date, I was kind of screwed anyway.

Outside, a carriage was waiting for me, a slim little glossy black number behind a glossy black horse. I knew the fae driving it, one of the Sidhe wearing a red driving cap. The Redcap didn't even glance at me as he waited in the driver's seat—his unnaturally bright eyes were scan-

ning everything in sight all at once, somehow, his body tense and ready for action.

I didn't speak to him, either, or show any discomfort. You don't show weakness to the Winter Fae. They get ideas.

I stomped over to the carriage and got up into it, and a second later the "horse" (I didn't believe for a second that it was a natural horse, and a quick probe with my wizard's senses told me it was just something, maybe a Black Dog, glamoured to look like one) took off at a trot and soon we were moving, clippety-clop down the streets of a modern city.

A lot of people were out walking. Not many jobs were still functioning, but cold storage of food had vanished, so everyone had to get out for a lot of things most every day. That meant either walking a long way or standing in a long line, or both, so simply procuring victuals had become a full-time job for many. They kept mostly to the sidewalks by pure habit, but a lot of kids and young people were using the streets, and the few cars that were moving around them proved to be no faster than my own conveyance.

The city was weirdly silent. No one was talking much. People stayed in tight groups or defended the space around them with body language and glares. I got a lot of glowers as the carriage went down the street. I even heard someone mutter my name to a companion. *That's Harry Dresden. Wizard.*

The looks I got weren't friendly ones.

The government might have been trying to convince people that terrorists had hit the city, but the people who were actually there knew how full of crap the government was. They'd seen mythic armies smashing into one another, seen monsters tearing people apart, seen giants and ogres and elves and twisted things with no names go screaming into battle with their own eyes. They'd seen their neighbors run down and killed. Their homes smashed and burned.

They knew the supernatural world had come to their town and gutted it.

And I was the town wizard. The guy in the phone book. A known quantity of weird. The fact that I'd been fighting to keep the town safe wouldn't matter much in the aftermath, not to people who were as hurt