



## Spider-Man: The Darkest Hours

By Jim Butcher

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A stunningly packaged trade paperback reissue of Pocket Books' original Spider-Man novel—from *New York Times* bestselling author Jim Butcher.

Peter Parker's life has hit a peaceful stretch. No evildoers have tried to flatten him in weeks, his marriage to Mary Jane is stronger than ever, and he's enjoying his job as a high school science teacher. Life is good. But, naturally, that doesn't last.

When Peter learns that his old enemy the Rhino is on a rampage in Times Square, he suits up as Spider-Man to stop the destructive villain in his tracks. But he's unexpectedly foiled by the Black Cat, a former ally and old flame. The Cat informs Peter that the Rhino is just a distraction—the real threat comes from a group of Ancients, members of the same race as the being called Morlun, who Spidey defeated in battle years earlier. The Ancients are now looking to exact revenge—and hope to steal Spider-Man's life force in the process.

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### Editorial Review

About the Author

**Jim Butcher** is the author of the *New York Times* bestselling series *The Dresden Files* and the high fantasy series *The Codex Alera*. *The Dresden Files* is also a successful series of audiobooks; an online role-playing game; a series of comic books; and was a television series on the Sci-Fi Channel. A martial arts enthusiast and a skilled equestrian rider, Jim lives in Missouri with his wife and son.

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### Chapter One

My name is Peter Parker and I'm the sort of person who occasionally gets in a little over his head.

"The most important thing," said the man in the dark hood, walking down the hall next to me, "is not to show them any fear. If you hesitate, or look like you don't know what you're doing, even for a second, they'll sense the weakness. They'll eat you alive."

"No fear," I said. "No getting eaten. Check."

"I'm serious. You're outnumbered. They're faster, most of them are stronger, they can run you into the ground, and if you're going to keep it under control, you're going to have to win the battle here." He touched a finger to his forehead. "You get me?"

"Mind war," I said. "Wax on. Wax off."

The man in the dark hood stopped, frowned at me, and said, "You aren't taking this seriously."

"People always think that about me," I said. "I'm not sure why."

"See, that's what I mean," Coach Kyle said. He tucked his hands into the pockets of his workout jacket and shook his head. "You go joking around with them like that, and that's it. You've lost control."

"It's a basketball practice," I said. "Not a prison riot."

Coach Kyle was about six feet tall, with a slender build. Dark skin, and dark hair which apparently hadn't started to go gray, though he had to have been in his late forties. He wore thick glasses with black plastic Marine-issue, birth-control rims. He'd been a Hoosier, starting guard, back in the day. He hadn't made the cut to the pros. "I see," he said with a snort. "You're upset because you were the one who got stuck with running the team."

"Well," I hedged, "I wasn't much for sports when I was in school."

"This was settled at last week's faculty meeting," he told me cheerfully. "If you hadn't been the last one to arrive at this meeting, you'd be halfway home by now."

"I know." I sighed.

"Guess you had something more important come up?"

I'd been crawling around about two hundred and fifty berjillion freight-train-sized shipping containers at the piers, looking for the one the mob was using to ship out illegal immigrants for sale on the slave market. Officially speaking, they weren't people, since they hadn't filled out the right paperwork and learned the secret American handshake from the INS. Unofficially speaking, scum who target people who can't defend themselves incite me to creative outrage. By the time I had the last of them webbed to the side of their slave container in the shape of the word "LOSERS" I'd been five minutes late to the faculty meeting already.

But that's not the kind of thing you can use as an excuse.

"The dog ate my homework," I said instead.

Coach Kyle shook his head, grinning, and we stopped outside the door to the gym. "Look. Your big worry is the tallest kid there. Samuel. Best strong center I ever had, and he could go all the way. Problem is he knows it, and he doesn't play well with others."

"The fiend," I said. "This is a job for Superman."

Coach Kyle sighed. "Peter. Samuel's mom works three jobs to make enough to feed him and his three little brothers and sisters. Their block isn't such a good one. He had an older brother who was a gangbanger -- that is, until he got stabbed to death a few years back. That's when Samuel took over as man of the house. Looking out for the little ones."

I sighed, and dialed down my snark projector.

"Go on."

"Boy's got a real chance of turning into a top-rate athlete, and if he can make it into a college, he can help out his whole family. Problem is that he's a good kid, at the core."

"That's a problem?"

"Yes. Because if he doesn't get himself under control and make it into a good school, he'll graduate and try to support his family."

I nodded my head, getting it. "And wind up in the same place as his brother."

Coach Kyle nodded. "He's big, tough, and can make good money in a gang. And it isn't as if he's going to have employers kicking down his door to get to him."

"I see." I glanced through the narrow window in the door to the gym. A lot of young people were running and screaming. Shoes squeaked on the floor. Many, many basketballs thudded onto the court in a rhythm that could only have been duplicated by a drunken, clog-dancing centipede. "What do you need me to do?"

"Right now, the kid is his own worst enemy. If he doesn't learn to work with his team, to lead on the court, no university will even look at him."

"But he hasn't realized that yet," I guessed.

Coach Kyle nodded. "I just want you to understand, Peter. Coaching the basketball team isn't just a chore that needs doing. It isn't only a game. The team might be this kid's only chance. Same goes for the others, to

a lesser degree. The team keeps them off the streets, out of some of the trouble."

I watched the kids playing and nodded. "I hear you. I'll take it seriously." I met his eyes and said, "Promise."

"Thank you," Coach Kyle said, and offered me his hand. "To tell you the truth, I was hoping you'd be the one to keep an eye on them for me. I see you with some of the other kids. You do good work."

I traded grips with him and grinned. "Well, I'm so childish myself."

"Heh," he said. "Maybe I should come in with you for a minute. Just to help you get started."

"It's okay," I said. "I can handle it myself. Have fun getting lasered in the eyes."

He tapped his ugly glasses with one finger. "See you next week," he said. Then he headed out.

I sighed and opened the door to the gymnasium. After all, it wasn't like I'd never been outnumbered before. I'd gone up against the Sinister Six versions one through fifty or sixty, and the Sinister Syndicate, and those bozos in the Wrecking Crew, and...the X-Men? No, that couldn't be right. I hadn't ever taken on the X-Men and thrashed them, I was sure. But those others, yes. And if I could handle them, surely I could handle a bunch of kids playing basketball.

Which only goes to show that just because I happen to be a fairly sharp scientist, the Amazing Spider-Man, and a snappy dancer, I don't know everything.

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