

## The Dragon Within

By Deb Hense

She jumped as a stack of papers landed on her desk. "Here, I need this done by tomorrow morning, 8 am." said Molly. Janice felt herself changing as she looked up from her own work. She could feel her mother's special "I don't believe you" glare taking over her features. "Whoa! I got my own work to do! I don't have time to do your work for you today." The words just spilled out of her mouth without check. Molly gave her a surly look as she flicked tawny blonde tresses as she turned away. "Whatever. Just get it done before I come into work tomorrow."

Janice sat back and mumbled to herself. "I don't have time for this. How come she gets away with doing nothing and I get no credit for doing her job and mine besides? What did I ever do to deserve this." She grabbed for the papers to look them over. Oh man. There is at least two days worth of work here. When was it given to Molly? Two weeks ago! Janice felt herself start to steam. Isn't that just like Molly to sit on it until the last minute and then expect someone to save her. Well, I'm not gonna this time! I have plans for tonight!. She felt something shift within her, coiling within her chest.

"You don't have to do it you know." A rasping voice spoke inside her head. She spun around on her chair looking for who had just spoken to her. "W w w here are you? W who are you?" She cracked her knee against the side of the desk as she spun the other way. "Ow!" It never rains but it pours. Wasn't that one of her grandmother's sayings? Boy, was it ever true today.

She heard a snort. "I'm right here." She turned and saw a small wisp of mist on top of the paperwork Molly had just given her. It got denser and denser and slowly formed into a petite dragon with green and gold coloration on its hide. Janice begin scooting her chair back away from her desk. "Oh stop it. I'm not going to hurt you!" the voice said with a sarcastic twinge inside her head. She clapped her hands over her ears and thought hard to herself, "This is not happening. This is not happening. I'm just overtired from my studies. I'm having a nightmare and will soon wake up. This is not happening!" She repeated the litneny several more times.

Closing her eyes and then opening them didn't seem to help. She could still see the creature stomping about across the papers stacked in messy piles on her desk. It was about four inches tall. Something that tall is not scary she told herself. Just then it turned toward her and crossed its arms in front, tapping one foot, with its tail coming around to curl around the other foot.

The voice sounding bored said "Look, I'm here. I'm not going anywhere soon. So, if you could just pull yourself together we could maybe move further along our life paths. The tiny creature made to brush some lint off its shoulder. Disdainful of the effect he had on her.

Janice squeaked. "Oh please, don't make that sound again!" the voice complained. "It really hurts my ears. We can do just fine with thoughts. No need for you to speak at

all.” “I can’t just think at you.” Thought Janice. “I don’t know how to think at people or read other people’s minds.” “You don’t have to worry about it cuz you’re doing just fine at it.” The wee creature thought back to her.

Janice felt herself freeze in place. She tentatively thought at it, “Who are you?”

“I’m Jern. Hasn’t your mother told you about me? About us?” he looked up at her quizzedly.

“My mother’s been gone over a dozen years now. She never said anything about dragons or whatever you are to me.” Janice leaned forward to get a closer look at the creature.

“Oh my, this does present a few problems then.” The dragon proceeded to pace across the papers on her desk. “Well, I live within you – as your guardian – so to speak. And you are also my guardian in that you help hide me from my enemies. “ Jern looked up at her. “It’s a mutual benefit for both of us. Your ancestors made a pact with mine a long time ago. We, that is my race, agreed to watch over and help guide our hosts in exchange for having a safe hiding place. Our enemies couldn’t find us within human thoughts.”

“Oh lordy!” she thought to herself as she wrapped her arms around her self and started to rock back and forth in her chair. “I’ve gone off and around the deep end. I knew this day would come eventually. I just thought it would be more of a slow slide instead of a jump off the cliff.”

“No, you haven’t” Jern’s voice stated – sounding just a bit peevish. “You obviously need some help here and I can help.” Janice couldn’t help it. She rolled her eyes. He sounded just like her mother! Gaagh! She raised her hands wagging them. The last thing she needed was someone like her mother overlooking her work! Or helping her! “I’m doing just fine on my own thank you vera much!” She whispered at the dragon. Wait? She squinted her eyes at it. Was it a real dragon? Or a figment of her imagination? Her brows furrowed she stared at the dragon on her desk for a moment before reaching out tentatively with extended finger to poke at the moving figure.

“Hey! Watch what you’re doing! You could break a few ribs doing that! Quit poking at me. I’m quite real! Would you like me to burn that pile of paper Molly left on your desk as a demonstration? The dragon’s voice practically shouted in her mind as he did a little slip slide on some of the papers heading over to the stack in question. She grabbed the papers off the desk and held them to her chest as she whispered frantically, “Don’t you dare burn these! Do you want to get me fired? That’s not helping! Do you hear me? I don’t! Need! Your! Help! “

Her arms were starting to shake because she was so stressed. ‘Oh my god. Oh my god. What am I going to do? What am I going to do? Oh my god. Oh my god. I have to get rid of the dragon before anyone notices. Oh my god. Oh my god. I’ve gone round the bend and I don’t think I can recover from this. Oh! My! God! What is it doing now?’ She leaned far back in her chair as Jern marched up to the edge of the desk.

“I. Am. Not. An. IT!” I am a He! And my name is Jern! Now get it together.” snapped Jern. Little puffs of steam arose from his nose. She couldn’t help herself, she smiled. Little puffs of steam. They don’t look at all like cotton wads. Nor do they look like they would scald anyone. “Aren’t those cute? Do it again!” she said reaching over with one hand in an attempt to touch the steam cloudlets.

Jern gave her the look that has been used by mothers everywhere. The glare from beneath a lowered brow. The one that says “Don’t sass me child cuz I’m your mama and I’m way bigger than you!” She laughed in response. Heck, if she was going crazy she might as well enjoy the ride. It was just too hard to be so intense and so scared of something so small. Hey, maybe she was crazy after all. How can anyone ride this roller-coaster of emotions in such a small amount of time.

He placed his paws on his hips slowly turning in a circle obviously trying to get his temper under control. Just like her mother used to do. Just like she did herself. “Oh, aren’t you cute when you’re mad!” He stamped his foot. It made a very small thump! Causing her to smile even more broadly. “Having a little temper tantrum are we?” she asked him in a sing-song like tone.

“Are you always this up and down in your emotions?” he questioned her sharply. She gasped, her hand going to her chest. “Whoa! Low strike! Like I knew you were going to show up today? I knew I should of called in sick. Then none of this would be happening! I would still be sane. Okay, at least as sane as I ever was.” She corrected herself.

“So,” his thoughts interrupted her little pep talk. “Your mother should of told you about us. I sorry she didn’t. But, we have work to do. And you need to learn how to work with me as team. Because that is what we are – a team! I have been remiss in not making myself known until now. But, I’ve corrected that little oversight on my part.” Little oversight? Janice thought. How about big? Huge? Freaking huge oversight! “Okay, now you’re exaggerating!” said Jern.

“Where did you come from?” she asked Jern. He stopped his pacing to reply. “From inside you. I live as a part of you, in you, when I’m not separate like now. “How, how can you go from in me to out of me?” she asked in her ha-ha I got you now tone! “I just can. I don’t have to explain it in detail. You just wouldn’t understand.” He shrugged his shoulders and then went scrambling across her papers, shuffling them about.

“Hey, wait a minute. I need those papers in their stacks or I’ll forget to include the data on them in the reports due tomorrow.” She said as her hand reached out to stop the papers from sliding under one another creating one huge pile instead of several not so distinct mini-piles. “So?” he snorted. “It’s not like you’re going to get your work done and yon lassies also by tomorrow.”

Janice heaved a huge sigh. “No. I’m not. And I have plans for tonight. It’s book club night. And its being held at my place this month.” She heaved another sigh. “And I can’t cancel it. I just can’t.” “Oh quit your whining. I said I was here to help.” Replied Jern. He jumped atop one of the piles of paper. Okay, I’ll just pull this report together.

You start work on that one over there. We'll get your own work done first before we start on hers." His voice snarled the last bit.

"Okay. But do you know what you're doing?" she asked. "Of course I do! I've observed you at work countless of times. I know exactly what to do." He was already scanning the document. He picked up her mechanical pencil and began to wield it somewhat awkwardly but with a will to get his job done. She turned to the papers he had indicated she should work on and set Molly's stuff to the side. "You should stamp those papers with your received date stamp" Jern told Janice. "Oh right. I should. Thank you for reminding me." She pulled out her stamp and stamped all the papers in lower left-hand corner received with the date and her initials. She laid the papers down on top of her inbox pile of papers.

Working steadily, she and Jern got most of her work done by mid-afternoon. He would hand off the reports he had worked on for her to type into the computer. It went much master than if she had been working alone. At three she stood and told Jern she needed a break. "Walkabout? Oh yes, please do." He said. "I need to look over these Molly papers to see what is needed and how we can shortcut it."

When she came back from her all too short restroom break Jern was scribbling like crazy across the papers that Molly had slapped down. Janice sat down and watched him for a few moments. Then she looked at her watch. In another two hours she had to leave in order to have time to get home and clean up her living room for her book club. Shrugging her shoulder she thought to herself. Well, what can be done will be done. It won't be her name on the report after all if its not completed on time. Then with a little dollop of snide on top of it: Can't be helped if Molly is unable to do her job and waits too long to ask for help. A smug smile played about her lips as she picked up one of the papers Jern had already marked up.

She typed steadily for an hour. Have to say one thing for Jern. He was fast at reading and collating numbers. Breathing deeply she looked at what they had accomplished so far on the report. Why, they were almost done. It was unbelievable. Almost done! This was at least a two day job! How had he accomplished this near miracle? She looked over at Jern. He was in the process of dropping down to stretch out on the paper. "Could you be a love and get me some chocolate? I am in sore need of some nourishment." He spoke softly. She nodded her head. Right! To the snack machine! She went rooting in her purse for her wallet. "Why don't you clean that bag out?" he asked in a snarky manner. "Hey, why don't you mind your own business. A ladies purse is sacred. Besides, you shouldn't speak so to the one going to get you a meal. I don't see you tossing any money over to pay for your treat. Chocolate costs money you know."

"Okay, Okay. Just hurry please." Janice hurried to the snack machine on the floor below hers. Chocolate, chocolate. She drummed a finger against her lips as she looked over the selections available. Hmm yes. Chocolate covered peanuts! What could be better! Chocolate for the quick pick me up - the peanuts for protein. She dropped her coins in and pressed the buttons for the selection. The last bag dropped into the retrieval bin. She bent to get it when someone shoved her and reached in and grabbed the bag. "Wait a moment. That's mine. I paid for it. You can't take it." Molly

just smiled. "My word against yours. Who do you think people are going to believe? The possible next junior partner of the firm or you? A wanna be." She sashayed away. Janice just stood there with her jaw open staring after her. I can't believe she did that! Stole my candy right out of my hand. She quickly looked into her wallet. Nope, no more change. Which meant - no candy for Jern.

She walked back towards her desk - taking the stairs to draw it out more. She hated to disappoint the little guy but there was just not going to be any chocolate or anything else right now because she didn't have any more money. She finally reached her office. Peeking around the door she couldn't see Jern anywhere. She stepped in. Where did he go? She looked for strange lumps under her papers. Then on her seat. She began opening drawers looking for Jern.

She gave a sharp sniff when he popped up out of her purse. "What were you doing in there?" she queried. "Oh, I decided to hide in case anyone came in while you were gone." "Did anyone?" "No."

He surveyed her empty hands. "Hey, where's my chocolate?" She gave a little shrug. "Molly took it. And I didn't have enough money for more." He started hopping up and down on all four feet. Little pouts of steam coming from his nose. Then suddenly he sat up and disappeared. Janice blinked. Wow! He's gone just like that? I wonder where he went? Is he coming back? When a scream disrupted the floor. Everyone, including Janice poked their heads out their windows to look in the direction of the scream. They came out of their offices and started like lemmings in the direction of the scream. As Janice drew nearer the source, she was able to make out a few phrases. "A mouse." "No, it was a rat!" "It stole my candy right out of my hand." It was Molly. "We need an exterminator here like right now!" Molly pleaded with the partners who were in the first ring around her office. "I simply can't work where vermin are allowed to roam free."

Janice walked back to her office shaking her head and laughing lightly with the others from the offices near her. "Wow, all that screaming over a mouse?" "Did you hear her tell the head honcho what he needed to do?" "Yeah, like her leaving would be a huge lost! NOT!" Janice heard the snippets of conversation around her and realized that she was not alone in her dislike of Molly. Wow, she thought she had been the only one Molly made miserable. That really didn't seem to be the case.

She walked into her office. Jern was back sitting on her paperwork nibbling at a partially chocolate covered peanut. "What did you do?" she demanded of Jern as she flopped down into her chair.

"Nothing." He commented before taking another bite of the chocolate covering. "You stole that candy from Molly." She accused. "No." he replied. "I stole it back. It's not stealing if you're just taking back what's yours to begin with." "Ooh! We are so not having this conversation." she furiously whispered at him. "Oh, but we just did." He replied taking yet another bite of chocolate.

She looked at him. "Where are you putting all that chocolate? You're not big enough to eat that much chocolate. You're going to get sick from it." "No, I'm not! I'm very hungry! I'm burning most of it up as I eat. When I've had enough my stomach will do a little bulge and then I'll stop." She stared at him, momentarily jealous. Oh to be able

to eat that much chocolate and not gain weight, just burn it off immediately upon consuming it. She propped her arm up on the desk and rested her chin on her hand. "What ever am I going to do with you."

He just looked at her and shoved some of the candy over to her. "You look like you could use some also." Then he flipped the peanut into the garbage can and reached for another candy. "You just eat the chocolate? Not the peanuts?" "I don't like the peanuts."

Janice reached for a piece of candy – might as well enjoy some of it. After all, I bought it.

It only took about 10 minutes for the two of them to empty the bags. Jern ate just as much candy as Janice had. His tummy had a cute little bulge in it after she wadded up the wrapper and tossed it into the garbage can. They both dusted off their hands and said in unison, "Well, time to get back to work". She looked at him. He looked at her, "What?" She merely shook her head and drew the piece of paper closer to her to see what he had written.

An hour later the buzzer for her phone clock went off. "Oh, I gotta go." She looked at the work that was done. "I'll just have to come in early tomorrow and finish working on it." Jern looked up at her. "Yeah, another hour and it will be done!" She rose to put her coat on. "What are you going to do now Jern?"

"I thought I'd go home and see what this book club is all about. Then hang around til morning so I can help you finish this report." He sat looking up at her. Sighing deeply, she pursed her lips, "Okay, I guess. You mustn't let my friends see you though."

"Don't worry I won't do a thing to embarrass you." Jern said as he sailed to her shoulder to hide under the collar of her coat.

She clumped into her office and slowly drew off her coat. Jern flew over to her desk and landed on the papers he had been working on the day before. He looked up at her. She looked tired to him. There were dark circles under her eyes and she just seemed droopy to him.

"Let me get some coffee and then we can get started okay?" she said as she grabbed her mug off the desk. Jern sat there reviewing the work where he had stopped the night before. He was ready to get going again.

Janice wandered back in and sat down, sipping her coffee. He looked at her impatiently. Can you sign on already so I can review what we got done yesterday. She set down her coffee and drew the keyboard toward her. Typing in her password brought up the document she had been working on. She scrolled to the start of the document and began reading through it. Jern read right along with her. When they reached the point where it ended he tipped his head at her. "Right then, I think we don't have as much to do as I thought. Give me 10 minutes to get ahead of you again. Oh, and I need more chocolate. Could you get me some again please?"

Janice sighed. She was naught but an errand girl to a four inch dragon. She went thru her purse looking for the coins she needed to get another pack of chocolate for Jern. Sighing again she got up and clumped out of the office.

Jern jumped up to the mouse and pushed it around hopping on the buttons he needed as he changed the initials she had put in the footers of the document. He also went in and changed the phraseology of some of the paragraphs. He jumped back to his paper as he heard the elevator doors swish open. Quickly reviewing the page he was working on, he began writing swiftly with his mechanical pencil.

Janice sat down and opened the packet of candy. She set the open bag next to him. He hopped off the sheet so she could take it. He then hopped on to the next one and started reading and making notations on the margin and scratching out whole sentences.

Together they worked side by side for the next hour. He signaled he was done as he headed toward the open candy bag. She looked at the last sheet and nodded. It took just a few minutes to enter the data and the changes. She saved the document and looked at the clock. "Wow. Would you look at that - It's only 7:30. We're done! Early!" she felt like dancing around the room.

Jern looked up and said, "Yeah, you're finished with the report. But now you got to send it out to the people who are on the list to get it this morning. Then print a copy and put it on Molly's desk." "But I can just send it to Molly and she'll send it out to who is supposed to receive it." "No." Jern replied. "You need to send it out so it gets distributed before the 8 am deadline. You can send a copy to Molly later. Print a copy for her now and set it on her desk."

"But, I've always given it back to Molly to distribute before."

"Not this time. Just do it as I say."

"Okay, if you're sure I won't get into trouble over it."

"You won't."

So, she began the process to email the report to the list of people who required it for their morning meeting. Then she printed out the report. She gathered it up from the printer and paper clipped it along with the original documentation. Turning she headed out the door.

She walked slowly down toward Molly's office. Molly wasn't in her office when she got there. So she went in to drop it off on Molly's chair where she'd see it first thing when she came in. She quickly scurried back to her desk to away the storm she was sure would descend upon her momentarily when Molly arrived.

Janice had just started work on her morning reports when Molly stepped into her office. "Where's my email of the document? I can't make a dozen copies of the report

you left on my chair. They're expecting emailed reports." Her voice was starting to gather notice by coworkers who were walking by the door.

"Don't worry. I emailed them to everyone in plenty of time this morning. I just forgot to send you a copy. I can do that now." Janice turned back toward her computer to attach the document to an email to Molly. "There. Done. You now have an email copy of the report." She turned back to look at Molly.

Molly had used the moment to glance through the report. "You bitch!" she snarled. "You used your initials on the report. You were supposed to use my initials!"

Just then Janice's boss walked in. "What is this fuss all about?" Molly immediately clamped her mouth shut. Janice flicked a look at Molly before telling her boss, "I accidentally put my initials at the bottom of the report I did for Molly."

"Aren't you supposed to do that?" asked her boss.

"Well yeah. "

"Then what is the fuss all about?" Molly gave Janice a glare before turning to flounce out of the office.

"Yes, well Janice. I think you did a good job on this report! I believe I speak for the rest of the partners when I tell you, you will be receiving a promotion soon. Well, I got to go to the morning meeting. Talk to you later." Her boss walked out of the office.

"Well, see, good things come to those who work with us dragons!" crowed Jern. "You can rest easy tonight!"

She looked at him. "About last night at my book club, you said you wouldn't show yourself. And what happens? You not only show yourself but all my friends seemed to have their own dragons also! No wonder I am tired this morning! It is all your fault. How was I supposed to know that you can only hide in those who read science-fiction!"

Grinning, Jern bit into the chocolate. "Well, now you do know. We need to hide in those who have a desire to be one of us, or know of us."

The end.