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Dragons in the Water

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Dragons in the Water
By JH Wear

Plus JH Wear's bonus novella:
At The Edge Of Darkness

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Dragons in the Water, JH Wear

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Dragons in the Water
By JH Wear

When Harry accepted an invitation to join a dragon boat racing team by the eccentric Sheldon, he was plunged into the world of paddling, festivals and romance. But with Sheldon there is always a mystery and unknown forces involved as well.

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At The Edge Of Darkness
By JH Wear

Can Rodney, a claustrophobic suffering vampire find romance? Rodney wants Irene. Her friend Shelly feels uneasy about him. And meet Sheldon, a whole other mystery.

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Also by JH Wear at www.midnightshowcase.com:

Shadows and Sensations

Castle - The Fall to Domum

Castle- The Return To Domum

Dragons in the Water

By JH Wear

Chapter One

I peered between the trees, straining my back as I stood on a clump of weeds that scratched at my bare legs. There couldn't be any mistaking that booming voice of Sheldon. I had been enjoying a peaceful stroll along the walking path by the river when I heard that hardy voice. The truth was I wasn't certain I wanted to see what he was up to, but morbid curiosity drove me forward.

Sheldon is a loud mouth, a know it all, and generally aggravating to be around. Annoying, actually. To say Sheldon is eccentric might be too mild a term to describe him. Lots of white hair. His face, like his personality, is large, with sky blue eyes, and a big hooked nose that stands over a mouth full of white teeth. He's clean-shaven to show off his strong jaw and, for some odd reason, women find Sheldon handsome. What belies his elderly facial features is a body of an athletic thirty year old. Like I say, he's annoying.

My name is Harry Webster. I'm thirty plus years old and I'm on the tall side of six feet. I guess I'm a bit on the heavy side as well, but I keep pretty active so the pounds are reasonably distributed. So far I've kept most of my black hair, though I have a couple of grey hairs sneaking in.

I write a column in the local paper about community events and keeping readers abreast of the social calendar. That may sound a bit boring work for a journalist but I also write under the name of Edwin Drood. My alter ego writes about the supernatural, ghosts, vampires, aliens and other assorted mysteries. Some are hard to believe but I always try to make sure there is a grain of truth in the story. No one but my editor knows who Edwin Drood truly is; it makes my column more interesting having that mystery. Well, almost no one else but my editor. During the course of following up on a vampire story, Sheldon casually mentioned to me that he knew Edwin's identity was me. How he found out I haven't a clue, but Sheldon is a mysterious man.

More about him later but suffice to say that his nephew claims Sheldon is a warlock and it's as good an explanation as any.

Thus curiosity, and a lead to a possible story, compelled me to seek an opening among the white bark birch trees, the thistles and sprawling elms to find out what he may be up to. By the way, thistles and bare legs are a bad combination.

"Nice job pulling water. Timing was a bit off but that's what practice is for." The speaker was a woman with her blonde hair tied in a ponytail. She was sitting backwards at the front of an oversized canoe, a canoe that held two rows of ten paddlers. In addition to the blonde speaker, there was a steersman at the back who held an oversized paddle to guide the boat.

"Can we do another race piece?" This was from Sheldon who was sitting in the middle of the boat and was holding a black paddle. His voice carried across the river easily, causing several ducks to take flight. The other paddlers quickly agreed to his request, though a few dropped their heads forward, looking exhausted.

I was fascinated. I had never seen such a huge canoe before and never heard Sheldon mention his interest in paddling. I watched as the boat was manoeuvred towards the middle of the river, and then the paddlers stopped, allowing the boat to slowly drift backwards from the flow of the river.

The blonde woman yelled, "Attention, please!"

The paddlers in unison held their paddles vertically just above the water.

"Go!"

The paddles plunged deep into water and then pulled backward. Water was ploughed upward as each paddler frantically repeated another stroke. To my surprise, the huge boat appeared to lift partially out of the water, as if it was trying to leap upward.

"Lengthen now!"

The paddlers, almost in harmony, reached forward with their paddles and slowed down their stroke.

"Timing, timing."

Some of the paddlers adjusted their stroke, trying to pace with the lead paddlers better.

I watched Sheldon twisting in seat with each stroke, his big arms pulling his paddle with force.

"Power on three. Three, two, one. Power now!" the blonde woman shouted.

The boat, even though it was travelling at a good clip already, surged forward. It raced through the water as each paddler looked like they were trying to dig a hole in the river.

The steersperson, a tall, olive skinned man, stood easily on the rocking boat and moved his body with the strokes of the paddlers. He shouted out instructions to the paddlers close to him and they responded to his encouragement.

“Finish now!”

The paddlers somehow managed to increase their efforts. The boat raced down the river, creating a wake behind it.

“Let it ride.”

The paddlers suddenly stopped, allowing the boat to glide. Some of the paddlers slumped forward, others reached for their bottled water. Sheldon’s chest was heaving but he remained sitting up straight and then patted the back of the paddler in front of him. “Good job, Steven. You really pulled water that time.”

His pat on the back caused the smaller paddler to almost fall forward.

“Damn show off.” I turned away from my vantage point and promptly tripped and fell. I coughed out a mouthful of a green weed and stood up slowly, brushing some of the dirt and plants off me. My interest in the trees and bushes soon became lost as I thought what Sheldon could be up to. I followed the river path to where I knew a dock was used to launch small boats and I wasn’t surprised to hear Sheldon’s voice carry through the trees.

“Atta boy, Denny! You did a fine job of paddling there. I heard Denny’s reply, a deep voice but not near the volume of Sheldon’s. Now Sheldon claims to have had training as an opera singer, he really does claim many things, and he talks like a drill sergeant in front of a company of soldiers.

A group of the paddlers emerged from the small path that disappeared to the dock. A mixture of men and women, most wore waterproof sandals and clothing. All of them looked to be good shape as they carried their paddles to a grassy area to discuss whatever paddlers discuss when not in a boat. I’m guessing beer and pizza. Sheldon emerged, talking to two young women who were smiling away as they eagerly looked up at him. One would think he was telling them how to make a million dollars overnight the way they were hanging on to his every word.

“Harry!” He boomed out my name.

I cringed. There was Sheldon wearing bright red shorts, yellow sandals, and a blue T-shirt under a black life vest. “Hello, Sheldon. I see you’re doing some canoeing.”

“Canoeing?” He laughed aloud, bringing out grins from his companions. “No, no, no, Harry. We most certainly do not call it canoeing. Dragon boating is an entirely different technique and is a very difficult sport to master.”

One of the ladies objected. “Oh Sheldon, you make it look so easy. You’re just a natural dragon boater.”

He gave one of his broad smiles, teeth sparkling. “I just have some very good instructors.” Both of the women next to him blushed.

Lord, give me strength. “I see. Well, it does look you’re enjoying dragon boating.” Especially with those two women by your side.

“Why don’t you hang around here for a few minutes Harry? We can go for a drink afterwards.”

“Sure.” I wasn’t sure at all to be sure. First, he can dominate any conversation, and afterwards you feel like you had just completed a university lecture. Second, somehow I always manage to end up paying.

I listened to a lady with red hair address the group surrounding her.

“Now remember to focus in the boat. Practice is twice a week but that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t be doing workouts during the other days. Now let’s get together.”

The entire group huddled together and extended their hands toward the centre.

“Okay, on three. Who are we?”

“River Rodents!”

They repeated the chant three times, each time louder. Sheldon’s calling was the loudest, causing a noticeable air draft.

“So, Harry, do you have your car nearby? I jogged here for today’s practice.”

I nodded as I looked at his damp shirt and shorts. “Do you need to change first?”

“Naw, I feel fine the way I am. Come on, I need a cold drink.” He immediately stomped towards the parking lot, not giving me an opportunity to argue.

I put down my window as I drove. The combination of Sheldon’s sweat, and the river water, filled the car with an aroma that I hoped air freshener and Lysol could cure afterwards.

We went into the lounge side of Devon Pizza and there were several members of the dragon boat team already enjoying a drink. They shouted Sheldon's name and waved us over.

I was introduced as Sheldon's "old" friend and soon was sharing a pitcher of beer with them. I have to admit they were a friendly group and certainly all of them seemed to be in good shape.

Allison, a lady of around thirty, asked if I'd ever been on a dragon boat and I shook my head. "I have paddled in a rowboat a few times." I smiled but they didn't look too impressed. It seemed rowboats were not held in high esteem and not worthy of a comment.

Danielle, a red head with freckles, leaned towards me. "We could use one or two more men as extras. We're going to Kelowna for a festival and could use some extras just in case some can't make the trip."

I thought about it for a few seconds. I'm in pretty good shape. I run and bicycle a fair bit and I'm no stranger to rowboats either, thanks to being invited to Sheldon's cottage to go fishing a few times. How difficult could it be to paddle in a dragon boat? I was to learn that lesson a few days later. "Sure, I can give it a try."

Sheldon beamed. "To our newest member, Harry." He raised his glass and took a drink that emptied its contents and immediately refilled it. He then called the waitress over.

"Jill, could you bring us another round of shooters? Harry has agreed to join our club and we should celebrate. Put it on my tab."

"Sure, Sheldon." She gave him a warm smile as she traced her fingertips across his shoulders.

The shooter wasn't bad, a brownish sour tasting concoction. The beer and food was great. Service was good and my new team mates friendly. It was too good to be true and I would soon learn I was right.

Sheldon clapped me on my back and announced he had to start back home.

"I have a social engagement I have to get ready for, so I shall bid farewell for now."

One of the young ladies, a short hair brunette named Stephanie, piped up, "Social engagement, Sheldon? Would that be a date?"

He smiled broadly. "Only if I get a kiss from her at the end of the night."

Stephanie grinned. "Well, don't stay out too late. Save your energy for paddling."

“No worries there.” Sheldon had a glint in his eye. “She has a photo shoot to do in the morning.”

Trust Sheldon to get a date with a model. There is no justice. I started to rise, figuring I had to drive him home, wherever that was. He stalled me by placing his hand on my shoulder and pressed me back down.

“No need to drive me, Harry. I need to run off these calories.”

He walked off to the waves of his teammates.

I was thinking that at least my car would have a chance to air out when Jill placed a bill in front of me. “Sheldon said you would take care of this.” She giggled. “He said he left his wallet at home.” She smiled happily. “He’s such a nice man.”

I looked at the bill. Two pitchers of beer. One order of nachos. And eight shooters. I closed my eyes. Death for Sheldon, “such a nice man”, would be too kind.

Chapter Two

I wore old shorts and a T-shirt to my practice, leaving a change of clothes in the car. I wanted to be able to change after seeing what the practice did to Sheldon's clothes.

Sheldon arrived just after I did, riding a mountain bike with what looked like about twenty gears. It looked more expensive than my car.

"How are you doing, Harry?" He was energetic and boisterous as usual.

"Just fine." I hesitated as we approached the dock. "And you?"

"Feeling fantastic. What a wonderful day for paddling on the river."

Of course, he was feeling great. As always. Have I mentioned how annoying he was?

"About the other night after practice when you ordered that round of shooters and food..."

"Think nothing of it, Harry." He clapped me on the back, temporally removing all air from my lungs. "You can buy a round next time." With that he strode forward, getting hugs from many of the female paddlers. I gripped my paddle shaft tightly, pretending it was Sheldon's neck.

They put me near the back of the boat and on the right side. My bench partner was a pretty lady named Chelsea, with medium length wavy dark hair interspersed with blonde streaks. She looked to be average height and even with her life vest on I could tell she had a curvy body. I smiled brightly at her. No doubt young and thus impressionable, I casually mentioned my name and occupation.

"Harry Webster, you may have seen my name in the paper. I write the column Views and News."

I was surprised she didn't do much more than smile and comment how interesting that must be.

"And what do you do?" I hoped she was old enough to have finished high school.

"I'm just finishing my masters at university."

I gulped. "In what field? Art?"

"Math. I found calculus fascinating so I majored in it."

Math? Calculus? Masters? Maybe I underestimated her just a tad.

* * * *

Dragon boating is simple. One only has to learn the trick of twisting into a pretzel while dragging a paddle through water fast enough to launch a space shuttle. This has to be in time with the other nineteen pretzels in the boat of course.

Chelsea tried to help me, telling me I needed to use my legs to lock myself on the seat and against the side. Then, keeping both arms straight, I twist my body and reach forward as far as I can with the paddle. From there it would be simple to plunge the paddle into the water and pull it straight back to my hip, rotate and repeat the procedure. All this had to be done while looking forward to the lead paddlers to keep time.

I was dying as we paddled down the river, passing several small towns until we reached the ocean or it might have been the Hudson Bay. Mercifully, a break was called and I gulped down water from my water bottle.

“Are you all right?”

“Fine,” I lied. My body was hurting from this simple warm up. I pretended this was a simple task for me. “Is this all we do, Chelsea? Paddle up and down the river?”

“Oh no. This was just to get into position. We’re going to do a race piece pretty soon.”

“Race piece? How long is that?” I now remembered watching the dragon boat race down the river. I began to get worried.

“About three minutes long. Most dragon boat races are five hundred metres long.”

Now I was truly worried.

“Attention please!”

“Go!”

I worked the paddle as hard as I could as we tried to lift the boat out of the water. My arms began to burn at the shoulders. We continued the furious pace for a few strokes before the call was made to lengthen the stroke. The burning sensation reached my elbows. I could feel my heart pound in my chest and I tried to gulp precious air into my lungs.

Commands were shouted out and in my blurred vision; I tried to watch the lead paddlers. My ribs hurt. My back ached. How much longer could this go on?

“Power now!”

No! This can't be. She wanted us to put even more effort into the stroke. I ordered my weakened body to reach into the reserves it had and continue.

It was torture. I would confess to any crime at this point. Then, finally, after what seemed an hour of racing, the cry of "Finish it now!" rang out.

I poured myself into the race, borrowing energy from the next two days.

"Let it ride!"

I collapsed. I vaguely heard Chelsea's voice call out, "Sheldon, I think your friend is dead."

I wondered if they were going to just dump my body into the river, letting the sharks devour it.

Gradually I recovered. Chelsea opened up my water bottle and helped me swallow the precious fluid. I was going to live after all!

Sheldon called out, "Can we do another race piece?"

If I had had the strength to lift my paddle, I would have clubbed him with it.

Chelsea saved my life. "I think some of us need a bit of a recovery period first. Maybe we can have a coaching session on our weak areas."

Weak areas. For me that would be my lungs. I listened to the coach tell us how we needed to change our stroke from the start to when we lengthened our stroke.

"It's basically the same stroke people. All we're doing is just reaching a little further. But the critical part is the timing, as always. Follow the lead paddles because after the start there is a tendency to hurry too much. We have our cruising speed after the start and now all we need to do is maintain it. This also gives us time to recover for the next part of the race, such as the power and the finish."

What she was saying all made sense to me. It's one thing to know what you're supposed to do, though, and another to do it. I learned that to be an effective paddler takes lots of practice and a good set of lungs.

* * * *

We returned our paddles and life jackets to the storage shed and then had a group meeting. I listened to the words of encouragement and the plans for the upcoming festival in Kelowna. The speaker was a long-haired brunette, one of the more experienced paddlers. Tanya was tall, lean and full of energy. One of her roles on the team was to

lead the warm-up before practice and she helped with some of the coaching.

“Our last few practices have gone really well. The last item is the Kelowna Festival. So far we have just enough paddlers but we do need extras.” She looked right at me. “I hope Harry decides to come with us because we can really use another strong male paddler.”

Several of the women paddlers cheered as they looked at me. I gave an embarrassed smile.

“Trina is looking after the accommodation, so make sure you let her know your plans. So far, we are putting two couples per room, three women per room and two men per room. We have fewer men so it just worked out that way. Now Mila is going to drive down there and has room for two more passengers. She’s leaving two days ahead of the festival. Contact her for more information. If that’s everything, let’s bring it together.”

We moved in closer and reached in with our hands or paddles, trying to make sure we were in contact with each other. After the shouts of “River Rodents!” we broke apart. I began to stagger towards my car.

“How did you like your first practice?” This was from the redhead named Danielle.

It was torture of the worse kind I wanted to say. “Fine. It was fun.”

Chelsea came up from behind me. “He did really well for a newbie. I think he was a little tired after the race pieces.”

She was a master of the understatement. “I need a bit more time to get in shape I guess.”

Chelsea smiled. “You’ll get there. Are you going to Kelowna with us?”

“I don’t know. I doubt I’ll be ready in time.”

Allison shook her head. “We all feel that way at times. Sign up. If you don’t feel you’re ready, you can be a back up but still be a part of the team. As long as you can drink beer you’ll be fine.”

Chelsea rested her hand on my shoulder. “Come on, we all have a good time when we’re down there. It’s part dragon boat race and part party.”

I nodded. “Alright. I guess I can go as a back-up.” I knew I was setting myself up for more torture during practice, but having a pretty woman placing her hand on my shoulder won me out. As any man can tell you, pretty women can cause more problems than a tornado.

Sheldon called out to us, “Hey, you guys coming for some drinks? Harry, you better. It’s your turn to buy a few rounds, you cheapskate.” He laughed as he walked away with three women going with him.

I pictured myself holding his head under water by the dock, letting him take a gulp of air and then plunging it down under again. I repeated the procedure in my mind and felt better. “Sure.”

The after practice drinks were entertaining again. Chelsea sat next to me and I was glad I had a chance to change to different clothes before we came here. That wasn’t easy trying to slide my shorts off and replace them with jeans under a steering wheel. The horn going off in my car was a minor setback in getting unneeded attention, but it was better than wearing wet clothes to the bar.

Sheldon, of course, was leading the conversation when I arrived.

“Of course, there was considerable danger as I made my way down the Himalayas, and not just from the storm that was brewing. Earlier that week we came across the footprint of a yeti not far from our campsite. I didn’t have a choice with one of companions injured. So I ventured out of the tent into the blistering wind and headed to a higher peak so I could radio for help.”

I saw the others were listening to another of his tall tales. I find it incredible that they believed him but he makes it sound oh so convincing. The simple truth is he has pulled me into his story telling. He told me a story of a vampire that, I must admit, had me lying awake at nights.

“Then, out of white haze of flying snow, I saw a white shadowy shape approach me. The creature roared at me with that strange yell the yeti is known for. But I stood on that peak and screamed back at him as I waved my arms at him. I admit I was scared; however I needed to get help for those at the campsite.”

Chelsea whispered to me, “He certainly has had some interesting adventures in his life.”

“Yes, well, if you believe all that he has to say.”

“You mean they’re not all true?”

I frowned. “Well, I can’t prove they aren’t true. His stories just seem to stretch the boundaries a bit.”

“So, you aren’t sure?” Chelsea gave me a small smile.

“No, I guess not.” That was it in a nutshell. I just wasn’t sure about anything about Sheldon.

“The Yeti decided not challenge me after that and ambled away. I set up the transmitter and was able to get help for my companions.”

Hans, a big blond hair man took a drink of his beer and then asked Sheldon, “So you saw a Yeti? Is it anything like a Sasquatch?”

“No, not really. A Yeti is related to the gorilla family, not too smart and rather unsocial. The Sasquatch is along the lines of humans but an evolutionary dead end. They are, however, quite intelligent and stick together in groups.”

I whispered to Chelsea, “He has a logical explanation for everything. The danger is if you listen to him you’ll find him so convincing you’ll expect to see a yeti yourself.”

Hans wasn’t giving up. “How come we don’t see any Sasquatch remains?”

“It is believed they bury their dead, being social creatures. Of course, if you go deep into the woods and look carefully, you won’t find the remains of bears, either. We know bears exist but they are just more common than the Sasquatch. Perhaps we should believe those of us who have seen these magnificent creatures.”

“You have seen a Sasquatch?”

Sheldon waved his hand towards the table. “Of course I have. I wouldn’t tell you something I didn’t know was true. But that is a story for another time.” He stood up. “I must go and help a friend paint his car. He has not done it before and wants it done perfect.”

With a grin, he left with several goodbyes to those at the table. The women in particular seemed sad that he left, calling out his name as he left.

Jill placed the bill in front of me shortly after. Sheldon managed to escape without paying again. I think you could buy a wallet from that man in brand new condition.

Hans was frowning. “Do you really believe he saw a Yeti and a Sasquatch?”

I reached for my wallet. “I not only believe he saw both those creatures but managed to get them to buy him a round of drinks.”