

Shorni's Hoard

Shorni clasped the small, golden coin between her front talons. She'd spent a solid hour trying to position it flat between the razor-sharp tips of her claws and devoted her focus to the coin's journey. The red dragon pulled her long neck back, tucking her wings in and coiling her tail in nervous anticipation. She barely breathed as she brought her claws up to the stack of gold coins, pride and anticipation bubbling in her gut like she'd swallowed her fire. The passage of the coin from her claws to the top of the pile took several minutes and Shorni resisted the urge to bound away when she stacked the final piece of treasure. She beamed, but her low rumble of satisfaction was enough to start the avalanche over again.

Like a wave crashing on the shore, gold coins, goblets, jewels, and all the other treasures Shorni had collected over the years toppled over, surrounding her and rising to her ankles. The gold struck her belly and while not enough to knock her over, Shorni felt the full weight of her hoard pressing on her. The sound was like the ringing of a thousand church bells echoed in the valley outside the cave's edge, punctuated by the final clatter of the last coin rattling against the stone floor. Shorni took in a long, deep breath and exhaled thin tendrils of smoke from her nostrils. She calmed the fire in her mind and started collecting her treasure again: coin by coin, gem by gem.

It had taken the better part of four centuries to accumulate this vast hoard. Shorni had started with a handful of gems to entice local thieves into her lair when she was a dragonling smaller than a sheepdog. Thieves always tried to take from her—especially when she was so small—but Knights, priests, and even a couple of kings had come to offer her tribute or other incentives for peace. Shorni never believed she would be desperate enough to attack one of the local villages. Villagers once thought she was a violent creature from her rare outbursts, but it was most unbecoming of any dragon to attack the local village out of anger. A few gold coins a month, an occasional gem or chalice, and the spare deer or elk were all fine enough for her to keep in her cave.

The hoard had, for better or worse, become somewhat cumbersome as of late. Shorni had long since outgrown the practice of rubbing her belly against the gems to toughen up her hide. Even if someone wanted to attack her, few weapons that could penetrate her hide. She'd tried

wearing some, a way to assert her status, but the gold chains were cumbersome around her multitude of horns and the jeweled rings only fit the tips of her claws. She couldn't wear the gold coins, so she was still left with a great big pile of pretty things. It was...fine.

“Shorni?” A soft voice called.

Shorni swept the gold coins into a pile and pushed it back further into the cave with her rump. The coins grated against one another and Shorni had to spread her wings to keep all the coins in place. One slipped passed her and clattered on the floor, rolling on the cracked stone floor until it finally came to rest against a green, leather boot. Asper held a book under one arm and looked up at Shorni with an almost disappointed expression. “You were doing it again, weren't you?”

Asper had met Shorni when the human girl was very young. Light-colored hair hung past her shoulders and sometimes obscured the true feelings in her endless ice-white eyes. She was an apprentice witch still, but she kept up the tradition that Shorni had seen started: a witch spending her hours of study under the tutelage of a dragon. There was some old story about learning the roots of magic through a beast of pure magic, but the old-fashioned thinking had faded as people came to learn dragons were about as magical as cows. Still, Asper's visits were a healthy diversion for Shorni since she rarely went to the village below.

“No,” Shorni said, dropping her wings and shifting into a more respectable position. The treasure pooled around her and she leaned into it. “I find this to be...comfortable.”

“Comfortable? You look like you have a diamond sticking out of your rear!”

“That's...a dragon fashion. You wouldn't understand.”

The witch sighed and set her book on the ground. “Shorni, this is getting absurd. You're almost four hundred and fifty!”

“And a life well lived with my hoard!”

“Can you really tell me all this brings you happiness?”

“A dragon's hoard is their greatest asset!” Shorni snorted, sitting up a little to get a coin out of her wing joint. “If some dragon came for a visit, it would appall them to see if I had no treasure! It's not different than if a human were to forgo the trappings of furniture or clothing! You don't need it, but it would be quite strange if you didn't have it!”

“So you don’t need the treasure?” Asper asked. “You hold it for other dragons so they think better of you?”

“It’s not so strange if you understand dragon culture. You should include that in your studies rather than the stars!”

“Shorni,” Asper said, climbing the pile of gold coins to get closer to the dragon, “you don’t want all this do you?”

“I—it’s—no.”

“Then why keep it? There’s so much gold here and all these jewels? And you just...sit on it?”

“They’re gifts! It’s rude to turn away a gift.”

“Shorni, there’s barely any room in your cave. I remember when you could stretch out and the cave was nearly double your length.”

“Are you implying I’ve put on weight? A long tail is considered very healthy in most dragons!”

“I haven’t met many dragons,” Asper looked over her spectacles, “but I doubt any would sacrifice their comfort for a few more pieces of treasure.”

“I have lots of room!” Shorni said. She shifted on the pile of gold coins and awkwardly raised her forelegs behind her head. “See? This is what humans call comfort!”

“Fine,” Asper said, picking up her book and sitting at the edge of Shorni’s cave. “I’m only saying...well, no, never mind.”

“What?”

“It would be nice if I had somewhere to sit. I do enjoy spending time with you, but I can’t quite make myself as...comfortable as you on the stone floor.”

“Ah, yes,” Shorni frowned. “Your hide has always been too soft...prone to pain, I suppose. You should bring a pillow or cushion when you come up.”

“I could, but it’s a long hike from Astolar to here. Too many chances to lose it...plus, if it rains, I would ruin it on the way up.”

“Yes,” Shorni nodded. “I can see where that would be challenging. Well, then we’ll have to get a cushion for you here.”

“A chair.”

“What?”

“I would like a chair. Something... nice and plush to rest on. Something with a side table for a candle or two.”

“Oh really, now you’re being greedy!” A few gold coins clattered to the ground and Shorni looked between the stray pieces of her hoard and Asper’s cheeky expression. After a moment, Shorni sighed. “Fine! How expensive can a few pieces of furniture be anyway?”

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As it happened, Asper had very expensive tastes. The chair had been built by a carpenter and upholsterer down in Astolar, delivered by three village boys, and paid for with a hundred of Shorni’s gold coins, plus an additional ten per boy. She had nearly stopped paying three times, but a stern look from Asper kept the coins moving from her hoard to the carpenter’s coin purse. It was a nice chair, with soft purple cloth, brass brands decorated the ends and the wood was a fine, stained oak that had natural whirls and patterns. The side table—an extra fifty gold coins—was no less ornate with carved lattice-like grapevines hanging off the edge. At least it looked like it was worth the money.

“Much better,” Asper said, setting down on the chair the following morning with her book, and a small cluster of candles on the table. “Isn’t this nice? And it was only a small dent in your hoard.”

“Yes, well... I’m glad you like your chair.”

“That was supposed to be snarky, but I can tell you mean it.”

Shorni did mean it. Asper sat comfortably in the chair for hours and talked about the principles of magic, the day-to-day of Astolar, and her memories of other far-off cities. Shorni rarely left her treasure alone, so it was nice to hear about different places. The witch knew a great many things.

“You know,” Asper mused one day, looking at the floor with a finger on her chin. “A nice carpet would look good here. It would muffle some of that racket when the coins fall.”

“It does sound like it’s raining swords when the piles fall,” Shorni nodded. “Maybe a simple rug then.”

This went on for a while. Rugs for the floor, a large table for when Asper wanted to join Shorni for lunch, and a fireplace built into the wall for winter. More furniture came in, carpenters and stone masons, cleaners and decorators. When word of Shorni's cave got around, visitors from town came offering food and conversation. Shorni found she quite liked having company from time to time, though she was careful to sit between her treasure and the visitors.

One day, Asper brought Shorni a trunk. It was large and extravagant, oak with scenes of great dragon history carved into the wood. It was beautiful and Shorni thanked her profusely. "You should put some of your favorite pieces of treasure inside," Asper said. "Only the ones you wouldn't dare to part with. That way, if you're away, someone can't steal from you."

"Good thinking!" Shorni said. "There is an awful lot of it, so it would be prudent to tuck a few away under lock and key. And I have been thinking about taking a trip recently...see another dragon's hoard."

While Shorni sorted her treasure, Asper told her all the woes of the village. Food was scarce and prices from the neighboring farms soared. There were concerns that there would already be rationing around the village. "But...the people will be safe, yes?"

"Well, they will be. The problem is I don't think you'll be getting visitors as often. People won't have time, you see? We need to stock up before the first frost."

"Well, the neighboring farms need to lower their prices!" Shorni said. "It's unbecoming to be so heartless."

"We've asked, but they say no. I'm afraid you may have fewer visits before the snows settle in."

"That won't do at all!" Shorni said. She turned and took a large pile of gold coins from her hoard and dragged them across the floor. "There! And Tell the villagers, I expect some happy visitors to get me through the winter! Now that I don't have as much treasure to count, my days have needed activity to keep me from getting too slow."

"Shorni, are you giving away some of your treasure?"

"Well, I've come to realize I don't need it. I have many gold coins like them, you see? So if I only keep one, I have more room for other treasures in my box."

As winter came, Shorni would watch the village from her cave. Asper would come, but the snow made the journey a rare treat rather than a daily occurrence. Others came when the skies were clear and thanked her for the sacrifices she made for them. It helped to occupy Shorni's long winter by watching the ebb and flow of the city. The carpenters were busy, already repairing broken roofs and building a platform for the summer square when the snow finally thawed. Stonemasons built as well and fire burned in the hearth. Asper told Shorni about how everyone was doing, enduring a long and hard winter with grace. Sipping her tea, Asper said, "People seem happier than they have in years thanks to you."

"Thanks should go to me," Shorni beamed. She rumbled low and watched two snowy owls in flight. It was peaceful and calm.

Shorni's treasure now only occupied a small quarter of her cave. Not including her special box of treasure, Shorni still had a sizable hoard. Now, the hoard had become more manageable. Where once she had spent hours stacking the pieces of treasure together, Shorni could now organize her pretty things into piles within an hour. She didn't feel as much of a need anymore. She preferred having pleasant conversations with the villagers who stopped by or going out flying to look over the city. She would still gaze longingly at her precious treasures, but only when there was nothing else. Other problems came up, but Shorni was eager to help solve them for the sake of the villagers. By the time summer came, only the precious box remained. The villagers came often but only asked for Shorni's opinions and company rather than her gold.

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"Quite a respectable hoard!" Asper said, sitting on the edge of Shorni's cave with her feet dangling over the edge.

"My hoard?" Shorni asked. "I suppose it's quite nice. Not what it used to be, of course, but still nice."

"Not what it used to be at all," Asper said, pointing down below. "The grain silo is nearly full from what I hear. And those new windmills are churning out mountains of flour. Oh, and your new shipyard where people come and go all the time. Your quaint little hoard is becoming quite the bustling city. I hear they're thinking of changing the name from Astolar to Shorniar."

"The village? That's...oh, I see. Tricky little witch."

“What? I only asked for the chair.”

“Chair indeed,” Shorni rumbled. She looked down on the village, and ships with billowing white sails pulled into the harbor. Carpenters and stonemasons built up new homes and richly appointed towers for storing food. It was quite a fine hoard. A very fine hoard indeed.