The Hoard

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 Elmheart thought back on her life and realized that she was always around humans as a hatchling and dragonette. Maybe her magic was the reason she was so much smaller than the rest of her kind, not even doubling the size of a wild cat when full grown as opposed to equaling the size of the largest of whales.

 Elmheart had hatched late in the year because of the unusually cold weather and the crack in her egg. Most didn’t think she would hatch at all. Her wings were thin and narrow, like a falcon rather than the thick, broad wings typical of her species. Her claws weren’t needle sharp, and her paws were more flexible, almost like the hands of a human than the inflexible paws the others had.

“Dullclaw,” “Weakwings” the taunts of her peers rang in her ears even years later. Elmheart dove into her education with reckless abandon. Being a runt, it was her only option for being able to survive in the strength dominated culture that was the Dragonlands. Despite strength being the basis of her culture, Elmheart recognized that a dragon’s hoard is big part of the identity of a dragon. Every dragon has a ‘true’ hoard, one that they are connected to on a very primal level magically. The magic tells them when the things in the hoard are in danger, moved, or harmed. It also lets them know when something needs to be added to their collection.

Elmheart’s parents, who were her only sources of comfort as a hatchling, were average dragons. Her mother hoarded beautiful fabrics, she was especially drawn to reds, golds, and greens, silks and taffetas, delicate works of art. Her father had a hoard of ruined gems, the ones humans considered the most flawed were the ones he treasured most. Elmheart found out in school that she wasn’t like either of them. She could only seem to find lost human treasures, very valuable but she had no connection to them, or functional cloths, sturdy or warm materials that would be ideal for use rather than the decorative cloth her mother collected. Her school finds were actually more helpful to her human teachers than they were to beginning her hoard.

Yes, there were humans in the Dragonlands. They were typically scholarly types who came to teach or to learn. Some came to do both. They had to fend for themselves in their dwellings because dragons, even young ones, were too big to be helpful to them. Elmheart was the only exception, and the chores she was given tended to reflect this. She was the one sent into their domain to clean up, set fires in the winter, and help care for the young or ill.

It was during her chores that Elmheart learned the most about humans. They were surprisingly fragile, just brushing up against something the wrong way caused them to bleed, and that included dragon scales. She learned, when helping with the young and ill, the importance of the diet and keeping clean. One of her favorite humans Emmet, a muscular man with shaggy black hair, taught her to write. Most dragons rely on the spoken word to communicate ideas. Though most can read, they have no ability to write.

“Elmheart,” Emmet said one winter day, as she was laying a fire in the communal hall, “I’ve been watching you do that for six years now, and just realized that the shape of your paws may allow you to learn to write. I could try to teach you if you’d like.”

Hearing this Elmheart was ecstatic, finally an ability she could have that others didn’t. “Yes, Emmit. I’d love to be able to write.” Her tail was rapidly swaying from side to side. She was glad she wasn’t in his ‘office’ because he was a researcher. He wanted to know everything, and Pearlan had the largest library in the lands. Luckily Pearlan, whose hoard consisted of the library didn’t really mind humans using the books as long as they were returned to the library before the human left the Dragonlands. Emmet’s ‘office’ was full of stacks of books and scrolls that he was using in his research. Human dwellings, in the Dragonlands, consisted of two main rooms: a bedroom and room that is open to guests. Emmet had transformed his public room into an ‘office.’

Learning how to write didn’t take Elmheart long. She already knew how to read, and how the letters were supposed to be shaped. It was just a matter of learning to hold the quill and not spill the ink. It took her a lot of practice to get it right. She kept ripping through the paper.

Not finding her hoard in school didn’t stop her from trying,

She left the dragonlands determined to find her hoard. The magic a dragon has is usually tailored to caring for their hoard. Elmheart just couldn’t figure out what her hoard might be. One of the biggest reasons she left was due to her parents’ deaths. The horrific death of her father in a bloody ritual meant to allow a dwarf to use draconic magic caused Elmheart’s mother to cry a tear and the resulting loneliness the loss of her mate caused the slow and painful death of her mother from dehydration and starvation despite Elmhearts efforts to hunt for them both. The loss of her mother meant that nothing was keeping Elmheart in the Dragonlands.

Elmheart was sulking when she overheard a cantankerous human complaining about a hoard of children. She looked around and saw a tall, thin, drunk man stagger his way out of the bar. Still grumbling about ungrateful brats, he made his way down the street toward a large, old manor-like building that had a sign out front reading “Orphanage” in faded wooden letters. Considering the situation, Elmheart concluded that he belonged in the Orphanage, but since he was obviously an adult, that means he was likely a caretaker in the Orphanage.

Elmheart carefully made her way onto the surprisingly sturdy roof of the old orphanage. She knew most dragons didn’t try to hoard humans, but maybe she could, and wasn’t that an odd word for a human to use. Maybe he meant heard? He was staggering drunk.

Elmheart was not a dragon of rash decisions. She observed the orphanage for five long days of before she left to go hunt. Swooping down like a bird of prey she broke the deer’s neck. Tearing into it, she decided to take the building over. The thin caretaker it seemed was cruel to the children, blaming them when things go wrong, and used the money others in the town gave him for the children on himself, but what truly convinced her was the draw to a small boy from the orphanage. He was around 4 or 5 playing outside when some older children from outside the orphanage started picking him. They called him names, pushed him around, and claimed that he would never be loved. Unfortunately, because of the caretaker’s habit of blaming the children for everything their words seemed all too true to him. She had watched the child, equivalent to a mere hatchling, being tormented in the same way she had been, but with no one to turn to. Elmheart refused to allow it to continue.

She returned to the orphanage in darkness, and after making sure that there was no one else around, swooped down faster than an owl to catch the caretaker on his way back from the bar he most often frequented. Lifting him above the treetops, thankful that she was strong enough to do so, she soared on the winds into the Fairy Forest three countries over and dropped him screaming into an overgrown ivy patch, that looked like it would cushion his fall. Quickly, she returned to the orphanage and settled in the courtyard and waited until morning.

Once morning arrived, she called out, “Children, come into the courtyard, I will not harm you. I have taken the caretaker far away. I will protect and care for you now.” She hoped they could hear the truth in her words. “You are precious to me, my hoard. Come, let me recognize you.”

 Trembling, visibly terrified, the children approached the amethyst dragon. She asked each their name, and rubbed her cheek over the head of each, marking them as hers.

 Using her ability to find things that are useful to humans, Elmheart quickly ensured that each child had a warm place to sleep, plenty of food and was comfortable while in the orphanage. Since, they no longer had to worry, the children settled quickly into the new regime of the orphanage. Elmheart watched over the children when they were playing, and stepped in as soon as any bullying began. As she cared for the children, Elmheart realized that this was her true hoard. Occasionally, Elmheart would sense another child that belonged to the hoard and fly away to another town or city to collect the child for the orphanage.

The town resisted the idea of a dragon, of all things, heading the orphanage, but on seeing the wealth the dragon could bring, they adjusted to the residency of the dragon. They did get Elmheart to allow a couple of women into the orphanage on a regular basis. They used the collecting of linens to ensure that the dragon hadn’t harmed the children. Elmheart also hired a cook for the children but took over their educations herself. She may have been taught in a school and by tutors, but she had a well-rounded education.

Elmheart connected with all of the children, but the strongest bond was with Peter, the little boy that she had seen bullied before she took over. He was extremely wary at first, but she eventually became his safe haven.

Elmheart missed each of her children. They had all grown up and had their own lives. The orphanage was now empty, and the town abandoned overtime as people moved away to find work. *I should have realized what my hoard was sooner* was her last thought before she closed her eyes and was gone.