

## WEIGHT

By Renee Whittington

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FROM beneath a mound of gold coins and baubles accumulated over centuries, the dragon Emarys rose from the pit she slept in to greet the day. Coins spilled down her sides, falling to piles at her feet as she wriggled forward to settle a collar of gold-plated chain mail around her neck. She sighed with relief at its heaviness and donned the rest of her adornments-golden, chain-mail greaves about her hind legs and similar vambraces about her forelegs. She slipped several gold coins into a pocket in one of the vambraces.

Emarys gazed eastward, where the first rays of sunrise would soon peek over the horizon. She trembled with longing and hurried down the corridor separating her sleeping chamber from her day cavern and stretched out supine on her landing ledge.

As the sun rose Emarys crooned at it, lost in its lucent glow. The sight of it dazzled her with its brilliance. Nothing in the universe could be so beautiful, and she twitched with the urge to fly into it, even as the wiser part of herself fought the urge, aided by the metal she wore.

The sun inched above the horizon. Emarys welcomed it with a glad cry and watched as it rose above the trees into the brightening sky. When it cleared the treetops, Emarys launched into the sky, wings spread. It was time for breakfast.

She did not notice the ragged figure hiding in the rocks behind her.

*What was I thinking when I decided to climb to the dragon's cave?* Merka asked herself.

She clung to an almost sheer wall of stone. Tufts of grass or spring flowers sprouted from cracks in the expanse of gray, but mostly it was just rock. She stood on a narrow shelf of stone that served as a pathway from the city of Chardon below to the

cave of its guardian. A wall of stone pressed against Merka's stomach, and nothing but air touched her back.

She resolutely stepped over a muddy patch and fought down her terror of slipping. Not that falling to her death would be much of a loss. What was one less thief to Chardon? But it would be a great loss to her Gran, who was recovering from a heart seizure. Merka squeezed back tears and forced herself onward. It was bad enough leaving Gran with Skinny Meg, who had no more attention than a sparrow.

A day up and back, wait until the dragon left to hunt, steal enough to pay Gorodan back for the loan—plus interest—and get away fast. That was the plan. Emarys was rumored to have a hoard of gold in her cave. Why steal from people who needed their money, when she could steal from a dragon who didn't?

She heard a leathery, *whomping* sound. Merka pressed herself against the rock as an immense shadow cloaked her. She looked up and saw the underside of Emarys' body as she leapt from her ledge. Merka stared with awe. Emarys' scales glittered, and she flew with a grace that any bird must envy.

Merka continued forward until the path expanded into a wide lip of stone that jutted out from a cave entrance. Criss-crossing lines of claw marks showed where Emarys had landed over countless years. Merka looked out at the open air. There was Emarys, flying eastward, so far away that she looked dark. Merka rested on the ledge briefly but soon stood and entered the cave.

The first cavern she came to was nothing but rock and tapestries. Light came from glowing spheres set into the walls. Merka began to wonder if all the stories about Emarys' hoard were just stories. A cushion-topped ledge, suitable for sitting on, curved along one wall. Did the dragon host visitors? She peeked into the small but empty guest bedroom. Apparently, the dragon did.

*This is all very fascinating,* Merka told herself, *but I need to hurry.* She crossed the tapestry cavern to where the passage narrowed and walked along it until she came to an immense, interior cavern—and stood rooted to the floor.

Gold coins and trinkets lay everywhere, piles of them spilled about, more gold than Merka had ever imagined existed in the entire world. Merka stepped inside onto the hills and valleys of coins. On a whim, she sank to her knees and stretched out on

her back, literally lying in the midst of a small lake of gold. As she did so, a gentle breeze seemed to flit over her for a moment before dying away.

*How is this possible?* Merka wondered. And then outrage sizzled. *Gran and I sleep in filthy alleys every night. I can barely keep us fed and clothed. Everyone I know begs for crumbs that fall from the fingers of the wealthy, yet this dragon, this, this ... creature ... has enough gold in just one of these coins to feed me for a year. Just a few of them could feed all the beggars of Chardon for a lifetime—with gold left over! Yet she does nothing with it. How dare she?*

Merka scrambled to her feet and untied the cloth tube from around her waist that served both as her belt and as her carry-bag. She wasn't strong enough to manage sacks of gold, and even the filled tube she tied back around her waist made movement too awkward for her underfed frame. She had to put most of the coins back because the extra weight interfered with her balance. In the end she took only twenty coins from a lake's worth.

But she could pay her debt to Gorodan. She could afford a room for herself and Gran and buy warm winter cloaks. She could even apprentice herself—and not to the Thieves' Guild, either. Relieved, Merka set off back down the mountain.

Emarys was finishing her fifth head of cattle when she felt the warding spell impinge upon her senses.

*Someone is taking my gold!*

She jerked her head up from her meal and peered toward her cave, eyes narrowed as fear overtook her. This far away, she could see no detail. Emarys shook the coins from her vambrace pocket and let them fall near the carcass she had just eaten; the herdsman would find them. Then she dashed across the field and took off into the air, arrowing toward her cave.

When she finally saw the girl, Emarys could barely credit the sight. *That scrawny child is the thief? She can't have taken much. Still, I won't have children climbing to my cave. If one succeeds, I'll have dozens.*

Hovering in place, Emarys positioned herself in the girl's path and blew a small gout of flame at her. She carefully controlled it, but it got the girl's attention. She yelped, cowered, and slowly moved toward the cave as Emarys directed her.

Sweat poured from Merka's palms as Emarys herded her back into the cave. *I'm dead now. Emarys will kill me!* When Merka reached the ledge she dashed inside the outer cave and waited there, shaking.

The light behind her went dark, and she heard the scrape of claws against rock, the rustling of wings as they were folded close against a body, and the steps of clawed feet.

*Turn around ... Merka,* a voice said in her mind.

Merka found she could move, even with legs like jelly. She faced Emarys.

The dragon was the most beautiful yet terrifying creature Merka had ever seen—scales of deep orange along the upper side of her body and wings, with scales of pale gold all below. Her eyes were huge and amber, engulfing her pupils. Around her neck she wore a heavy collar of gold chain mail. A bracelet or anklet of the same encircled each leg.

*You do not resemble the usual thieves who come here,* Emarys said into her mind as she cocked her head. *Are you here at your own behest or another's?*

Merka bit her lip. "My own," she said. "I owe a debt I can't pay, and I decided to come here."

The dragon blinked. *You accept responsibility for yourself. Refreshing.* Emarys moved deeper into the cave, curling up before Merka's only exit. *And very odd. What persuaded you that my gold was yours for the taking?*

"Nothing—until I saw how much of it you have" Merka admitted. "You could feed all the beggars of Chardon with a handful of this—and all the highborn, too. But it just sits in this cave while the beggars starve. But you don't care. You have no idea how we live."

*Ah. And because I have so much more than you, I am expected to just let you and, I presume, the starveling others, take, and take, and take. Well, I am a dragon. I do not deal that way. I earned every ounce of this gold or was given it as a gift. I have a need for it. Your ignorance of that need does not entitle you to take what is not yours.*

"What need could you possibly have?" Merka demanded. "You hunt each morning and spend the rest of the day in here. You don't do anything!"

*I need not explain myself to a thief the dragon pointed out, but I will, because you have asked. I pay the herdsman in gold for the cattle I eat. I teach. I advise the King, Queen, and their heirs and*

*guard this kingdom from invaders. I am the source of all magic cast in this realm, and I train mages to use it wisely. I need the gold to weight me to the earth. Without it, I would become entranced by the sun, whose creature I am, and fly into it. Every time I fly out to hunt, I take that risk; it is why I wear gold on my person. You cannot know how much of a lure the sun is to me.*

“You have much more gold than you need. As for teaching, you don’t teach everybody, only the King’s children and mages, I’m betting, only people who can afford to pay you in gold. How often in its entire history has Chardon been invaded? And what do we need magic for that two hands can’t do just as well?”

*I am teaching you right now and not asking a price, the dragon said dryly. Magic is better and faster at healing than two hands. A strong enough magical shield can withstand arrows. It takes less time to construct than a stone wall and requires fewer resources. A well-trained mage can cast a patent shield in seconds. A group of them working through me can cast a shield that will last as long as I do.* Emarys rested her head on her fore-claws.

*But we digress. The real issue of importance is what is to be done with you.* Emarys eyed Merka. *You are no trained mountain-climber. Why are you here? It would have been far easier for you to have stolen money in Chardon and easier for you to have spent your takings there. Why climb to my cave? What debt do you owe, and to whom?*

Merka looked away. “I’m not that great at stealing; I usually have to run lest I get caught. I wanted to find out for myself if the legends of you were true. But mostly, I borrowed money from Gorodan the Money-lender because my Gran needed medicines. I’m late paying. He says he’ll hurt Gran if I don’t bring him what I owe by the day after tomorrow.” Merka grimaced. “I haven’t told Gran I borrowed the money. And I don’t really want to steal from you, either, but I can’t let Gran be hurt. Gorodan *will* hurt her if I don’t bring him what he wants. He’s done it before, just to make the point. No one gets between him and money.”

*Do they not,* Emarys replied, her mental tone arid. *Well, you have a problem. I will not allow you to take any more gold from me than you already have. So how are you going to defeat this brute of a money lender?*

“Defeat him?” Merka stared at the dragon. “You must be insane. Gorodan has a small army of thugs. I’m just me. And—I don’t need any more than I already Have.”

*You are not just you*, Emarys replied. She regarded the young human who gazed back at her, baffled. *I loathe moneylenders*, Emarys explained. *They are thieves—and you already know what I think of thieves.*

“You’d—help me? Even after I stole from you?” Merka said.

*I would help you rid Chardon of an enemy within its borders. That is part of my duty to this kingdom. As payment for your service, I would allow you to keep what you have taken. Emarys paused. You will have earned it, not stolen it.*

Tears welled up in Merka’s eyes, and her voice shook. “Thank you. I don’t deserve it.”

*Not yet, you don’t*, Emarys agreed, *but I have faith in you.*

“You can have faith in me if we survive this,” Merka replied, frowning. She paused to clear her thoughts. “You can speak into my mind. How many people can you speak to, all at once, if you use the sun? Because here’s my idea, if you really want to get rid of Gorodan...”

Merka knocked on Gorodan’s front door a day later and waited. The servant who opened the door frowned. “Borrowers go around back,” he said.

“I’m here to pay Master Gorodan what I owe him,” Merka said with a lowered gaze.

The doorman gave Merka a startled look. He opened the door wider and pointed to a bench in the foyer.

“Sit there,” he said. “I’ll ask the master.”

Merka waited. With satisfying—and alarming—speed, the doorman returned. “The master will see you,” he said. The doorman led her to Gorodan’s study, admitted her, and shut the door.

Merka shivered as Gorodan the Moneylender peered at her out of his dark, foreign eyes and then bit into one of the two gold coins she gave him. His eyes widened as his teeth sank into the metal, and he fixed her with an even more piercing—and then sly—stare.

“Where did you get this?” he asked.

“Stole it. Where do you think I got it? I followed a couple of highborn ladies out shopping. Had more money than sense. I cut their purses,” Merka said.

“Odd. I haven’t heard of any noblewomen losing purses in the past week or so ... and I would have” Gorodan purred. “Where did you really steal it from, girl?”

Merka rolled her eyes at him. “Do I look stupid? I didn’t take the whole purses. I took a couple of coins from each—two for me, and two for you. Those are Yours.”

“And do you think *I’m* stupid enough to believe any highborn ladies of today walk around carrying coin in their purses that is over two hundred years old?” Gorodan thrust the coin in front of Merka’s eyes before snatching it back again. Merka couldn’t read the words on the coin, but she could recognize King Madok the Great’s hooked nose.

“No, you stole this from somewhere else, girlie, and I want to know where Gorodan went on. “I have expenses too, you know.”

Merka cursed under her breath. *And I should have exchanged the gold for copper before bringing it to him. I’m an idiot. What beggar goes around carrying gold?*

“Do you want the money or not, Gorodan?” Merka shot back. “If you’re keeping what I gave you, our business is done.”

She yelped with pain as Gorodan snatched her arm and twisted it up behind her back.

“I said, tell me where you got this from, little thief.” Gorodan’s voice was dangerously soft now, the way it went when he was about to kill someone—or break their fingers or limbs. “Did you break into a bank? A coin collector’s house? The counting house of some business? You didn’t just take four coins; you’d be a fool to leave so much gold behind. Where’s the rest of it?”

“I will never tell you if you don’t let go of me!” Merka snarled. She kicked backward at Gorodan’s shin, but though he cursed and punched her in the side, he didn’t loosen his grip.

“You seem to think I have infinite patience Gorodan went on. “Where did you steal that coin from? I can make life very difficult—and painful—for your grandmother if you don’t tell me.”

That frightened her enough to make her tense up, and he punched her again.

Merka gasped from the pain. “Coin collector’s house she blurted. He’d never believe she had climbed the mountain. “Over on—Silverneedle Street.”

“You wouldn’t be allowed onto Silverneedle Street, dressed as you are,” Gorodan said.

“The gods’ honest truth, he collects coins—lots of ’em.”

“Where? Which house?”

“Third on the right, with the cypress—Agh!” Another punch.

“There are no cypress trees on Silverneedle Street. You’ve never been there. Shall I cut off an ear, or perhaps a finger, to prove to your grandmother I mean business?”

Bile rose in Merka’s throat, and she struggled to swallow it. Her body ached all over, and she feared she would collapse if Gorodan weren’t holding her up. “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

“Try me.” Gorodan’s words were like shards of ice digging into her.

“I stole it from the dragon. Up the mountain, while she was hunting.”

Gorodan slammed Merka against the wall and stared at her. Then he threw back his head and laughed out loud. “By the gods, I should keep you alive just for the entertainment! And what did you find in the dragon’s cave, little one?”

Merka sucked in air. “Tapestries, in front,” she said. “But in the rear cave, it’s nothing but gold—enough to bury yourself in. More than you could count.”

“Yet you only brought back four coins. You must think me very credulous, girl.”

“I’m not greedy, like you are. And I’m not strong enough to climb down a mountain, carrying a sack of gold on my back.” Merka retorted.

“And yet you will go up it again,” Gorodan said, “if you want your grandmother to live. And you will bring back far more to me than a mere two gold coins.”

Merka froze and then stood trembling. He could break Gran’s bones, scald her—and yet, it wouldn’t end with her; he still had other customers he would torture if they didn’t pay up.

Merka’s mouth went dry. “No,” she said. “No, I will not. I went there once and got away as fast as I could. I’m not interested in being torn apart by a dragon.”

“But apparently you don’t mind being cut apart by *me*,” Gorodan said in icy tones. Swift as a snake, he drew a belt knife. “Bad mistake. I shall have to remind you of how things stand between us.”

Despite herself, Merka shuddered as she recoiled from him.



He was going to maim the child. Emarys could see it in Gorodan's expression, through Merka's eyes. She could even see it, hazily, in Gorodan's mind, distasteful though it felt to look there. Outrage blazed through her, where she sat upon her ledge, and Emarys let out a great tongue of flame as she drew down sunlight and sent her command.

*BRING ME GORODAN THE MONEYLENDER!*

Emarys' words thundered through Merka's brain and Gorodan's, as well, almost burning with their fury. Gorodan's tanned face went pale as salt. Outside, Merka could hear exclamations of surprise from house servants and people on the street.

"The dragon knows my name," Gorodan whispered, his eyes huge with shock. He seized Merka by the front of her tunic and pressed his knife against her throat. "What have you done?"

The door to Gorodan's study flew open, and he yanked the knife away as he glared toward the interruption. "What?"

"Sir—you're wanted," the doorman said, his face grim. "Everyone heard it. You've got to leave—now—before the city guard comes. People are gathering at the front gate. No one wants to face a dragon's ire."

Gorodan swore. He dragged Merka with him as he sheathed his knife, yanked open a desk drawer, and snatched a money purse from it. "Don't just stand there, fool! Get my horse ready. Tell Hashin to pack my small chest in the saddlebags. I'll need only enough food to get to Varda. Move!"

"Hashin's already doing it, sir," the doorman said in a flat tone. "They're saddling Freshet now."

Gorodan stared at him and then swore again. "Fine. I'm bringing this girl with me."

The doorman flicked a glance at Merka and then shook his head. "Riding Freshet double will slow you, sir. Just get on his back, and go."

"Trying to get rid of me, are you, Tieg?" Gorodan retorted.

"Yes. I'm trying not to burn, sir, and you should be, too."

"She's my assurance that Emarys won't burn *me*. So yes, she's coming along. Get moving, girl." Gorodan yanked Merka with him out of his study and out the back door. A tall, bay stallion with lightly-packed saddlebags stood waiting in the stable yard

Gorodan tossed Merka up into the front of the saddle. Merka had never ridden a horse before. With a yelp she flailed one leg over Freshet's back and sat up just as Gorodan squeezed in behind her. Someone—Hashin, Merka presumed—handed him a deep-cowled cloak stitched with runes. Gorodan pulled it on and then held out his hand again. "Bring my sunstone."

Hashin ran back inside the house. He returned and handed a black velvet pouch up to his employer. Merka felt Gorodan stuff it into his jerkin before leaning close to her left ear.

"Give me trouble, and I'll gut you," he said as he took the reins and turned Freshet out of the property's rear entrance. Then they were gone from his residence and out on the streets.

Merka gave Gorodan credit. Though clearly frightened, he kept Freshet to a measured pace and meandered through Chardon's by-ways. The spell-cloak kept him concealed.

But they did not make for the Gate Road. Instead, Gorodan made for an inn built flush against Chardon's city wall. Merka realized that Gorodan owned that inn as well as its mate on the other side of the wall. He had his own secret way in and out of the city.

From there, Gorodan guided Freshet toward the road south to Varda. Once they reached open countryside, Gorodan spurred Freshet into a gallop.

Merka saw the shadow of Emarys' wings upon the road before anything else. Behind her, she felt Gorodan stiffen as the dragon landed in front of them, opened her jaws wide, and bellowed.

Gorodan cursed and fumbled in his jerkin for the sunstone, but Freshet gave him no time for that. The stallion reared in terror at being confronted by such a large, close predator. Gorodan tightened his legs around the stallion's barrel, but it had no effect. Freshet wanted them *off* and off they went, tumbling to the road as the bay spun on his hind legs and darted away. Gorodan seized Merka and kept her in front of him.

Emarys paced toward them, regarding Gorodan as the two of them scrambled to their feet. *You resemble the royal lineage of Navethia*, she remarked to Gorodan.

The moneylender nodded. "The family disowned my father—I'm sure you remember. If you know that, you know what I have and what I can do with it."

Emarys hissed. *You would so dishonor your family's name and the gift my kind gave to them?* She closed her eyes.

Gorodan shrugged. "They're not my family anymore He tugged the pouch free of his jerkin and pulled it open, to reveal that the pouch was insulated and contained a fist-sized, glowing, amber-colored crystal that flickered with inner fire and heat.

"What is that?" Merka asked, staring at the gem.

"This is a sunstone," Gorodan replied, his voice all velvet and honey now. He flicked a glance toward Emarys and smiled. "She keeps her eyes closed, but she can't resist it any more than a cat can resist a piece of string—can you, Emarys? You don't have to open your eyes, you can see it through ours, can't you, great one?"

*The royal Navethians can command my kind with them,* Emarys whispered in Merka's mind.

Instantly, Merka shifted her gaze away from the sunstone, but she could see Emarys digging her claws deep into the road and turning her head away, trembling with the effort to avoid looking at the stone. Merka realized that Gorodan was forcing his vision to her through it.

A great, yawning chasm of *want* filled Emarys, a longing that wracked her body. Emarys opened her eyes and fixed her gaze on the warm, amber sunstone. As simply as that, her turmoil dissolved and was replaced with blazing light that washed everything away, save for a single-minded contentment. Emarys relaxed.

Someone stroked her nose, and Emarys recognized the touch as that of someone Navethian, permitted to approach. Gorodan.

"What a beautiful dragon you are. And how beautiful the sun is. You want to be with the sun, don't you, Emarys?"

*Oh, yes!* Emarys sang to Gorodan and to the girl she still shared a link with.

"Excellent;" Gorodan said beside her. "I release you from all cares, Lady Emarys, as I sever your chains now." Gorodan lifted the sunstone and peered into it.

A beam of sunny light shot from the stone and hit the golden collar around Emarys' neck. Merka stared in horror as it melted a line down the chain mail collar, causing it to drip down into a pool at the dragon's feet. Then he did the same with the bracelets and anklets.

“What are you doing? She needs those!” Merka protested and tried to wrestle the stone from him. Gorodan shook her off.

“Go fly into the sun now, my dear. It’s calling you home Gorodan said as the sunstone’s beam faded.

“What?!” Merka spun and stared at Gorodan. “You’ll kill her!”

As Merka spoke, Emarys shook her four legs free of the chain mail and spread her wings wide. She took several running steps, and sprang into the air, beating her wings downward to catch more air. Her movements shook the collar off, as well. Then she soared skyward and sunward.

“NO!” Merka screamed with voice and mind, with every ounce of love and loss she could put into it. Then she turned to Gorodan and seized hold of the sunstone, yanking it from Gorodan’s grasp and peering into it, even though she could feel it burning her fingers. *Emarys, come back to me! PLEASE!*

“You stupid girl!” Gorodan snarled. He drew his knife and stabbed her. Merka gasped as it cut into her side. She bashed the sunstone against Gorodan’s head and let it burn him. His head snapped to the side, and he crumpled. Still she held the stone against him as it burned. Merka sagged to the ground alongside him.

*Emarys, please don’t fly into the sun! Come back!* Merka begged before everything went black.

The sun was a universe of light that filled Emarys’ soul with magic and warmth. Blinded to everything else, Emarys flew toward it, wings beating the thin air. The sky darkened to indigo as she gained altitude.

*Emarys, come back to me, please!*

*Such a dreadful feeling of loss,* Emarys thought distractedly as her flight stuttered for a moment. How can it penetrate the world of light? And then her thoughts jangled. *Merka? Merka wants me?*

Looking into Merka’s mind was an alien sensation—burning that caused pain, and still more pain that stabbed into Emarys’ senses.

*He’s hurting you!* Desire for the sun vanished in the flood of Emarys’ alarm. She banked and reversed course, swooping down toward the pair on the Vardan road.

*Merka.*

Merka tried to shut the voice out, but it was in her head. She couldn’t escape it.

*Merka. Wake up.*

Merka opened her eyes to see a dragon's head lowered over her. She sat bolt upright. "Emarys! You didn't fly into the sun!" Suddenly, Merka was crying, and she reached out to touch the dragon's head.

*No, I did not—because you freed me.* Emarys' thoughts were filled with awe.

"You freed yourself from the stone Merka said. "You decided to come back and—you healed me she said, looking in amazement at her hands, pink with new skin where they should have been scorched black. She glanced about, looking for Gorodan, and saw only a lump huddled under a smoking cloak.

*You were willing to fight and die to save me. I was glad to abandon the sun to stop you from being hurt.* Emarys lifted her head and gazed calmly at the sun.

Merka's mind overflowed with Emarys' happiness. "Is this what being sun-dazzled feels like?" Merka asked in a subdued tone. "This joy? How could you give it up for me?"

Emarys lowered her head to look at Merka. *Because you are the weight that holds me to the earth now, more powerfully than gold or a sunstone, for we chose each other. Your weight makes me joyous.*

Merka looked at the dragon. "But I won't live forever."

*Of course not, Emarys acknowledged, and that is a concern. But it need not be settled today. We have more immediate concerns.*

Merka blinked at her. "Like what?"

*Like what to do with all that gold I no longer need.*