
Gold Fever

by Amanda Kear
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Coast of Sunstone Hold lands

A small gold shape flickered in the sky above the bay, then dove into the sea with a splash. She flapped clear of the water a second later, clutching a small fish in her talons. A blue and a bronze firelizard joined her, swooping and diving around the little queen as she flew back to shore with her prize.

"See?" the seaholder boy hissed. "Told you there was a gold 'un hereabouts, didn' I? Now do I get me marks?"

"Where's the nest?" Turran demanded, being careful to keep his voice low. Gold or no gold, he wanted confirmation that there were eggs to be had before he handed over marks to his informant. Seeing a live firelizard queen was all well and good, but eggs were the real treasure. These days even green eggs were fetching prices that would make a jewelfish weep. He didn't trust this fisherman's brat not to have sold the location of the gold to every seacrafter and trader who put in at his hold.

The boy scowled. "S'over there," he said, waving a hand in the direction that the trio of firelizards had headed. "Have to go around careful like, or she'll see us coming."

"Show me," said Turran.

The pair of them wriggled carefully back through the bushes that concealed them, and rejoined Asmerrik where he waited with the dog, horses and the row boat that the seacrafter boy had arrived in. They'd hauled the latter well up the beach and out of sight. The three of them left Blackie, the dog, to guard the horses and followed the seaholder boy's tortuous route through scrubby woodland and around rock outcrops, until they were looking directly down on the beach sands from a small cliff. The boy pointed to a spot about a dragonlength up the beach, but Turran had already seen the golden queen perched on a jagged boulder that had evidently tumbled from the cliff face. At the base of this boulder the bronze firelizard stood on sentinel duty, beside a scattering of spherical shapes protruding from the sand.

Eggs! Turran squinted, trying to tell how many were in the clutch, but the distance was too great. Two greens winged in to land by the bronze. There was no sign of the blue he'd seen earlier. Looked to be a small fair then – that was the norm in these post-plague days... and was to their advantage when it came to taking the eggs.

Neither Asmerrik nor Turran had firelizards of their own. Turran had owned one before the plague that killed all the little beasts – a nervous blue that was no use as a message carrier, but made a good lookout when dodgy dockside deals were being made away from the watchful eye of the Seacraft or Hold Steward.

But this trip wasn't about getting an egg or two for either of them. Eggs were in demand since the plague. And nowhere were they in more demand than at Holds that had no coastline of their own – like Drake, Waterfall or Kadanzer. Or at those, such as Cathay, that had seacoast, but were too cold for wild firelizards to ever consider breeding there. All the Lord Holders lucky enough to have likely nest sites on their lands had put out word that they were to be alerted to any and all firelizard eggs discovered. Allegedly the Weyr had their dragons keeping an eye out when they flew sweeps over the right areas. Which, in Turran's opinion, was rather a waste of dragon eyesight when they should be looking for Thread burrows.

No, this trip was about supply and demand. There were holders and crafters all over both continents screaming for firelizards to replace those who had died. Which made a fine opportunity for Turran and Asmerrik to make a few marks. Or, to be more accurate, *lots* of marks.

If they pushed the horses hard, they'd be able to cross Maori territory and make Rubicon in just over a sevenday. A mark or two handed to a certain coholder would hire them a boy on a pony to go the next hold with a judiciously phrased message for Asmerrik's contact there. That would ensure that the 'trader' from Cathay was waiting for them in a Threadfall shelter near the Rubicon-Maori border two days later. A goodly sum of marks would change hands, then it was the Cathay man's task to get the eggs back to Lord Purolo before they hatched. Turran and Asmerrik had supplied three green clutches and one gold that way already. If the eggs were too hard to last that length of time then they had other, slightly more risky, contacts and buyers closer to hand. It was a good area for their trade. Every stretch of coastline hereabouts had potential... and in every hold there would be someone like this seaholder boy, whose eyes lit up at the mention of the marks an egg could bring. Lord Janol of Sunstone was rewarding his holders with marks for finding nests, but not as much as Turran promised – and his went directly to the informant, not filtered down through Holder and Stewards.

"What do you think?" Turran murmured to Asmerrik.

The other man regarded the nest a moment longer, then gave a thoughtful nod. "Only looks to be five or six of them. Blackie can handle it, no problem at all."

Turran grinned. "Well then, let's go prepare."



The little queen was sunning herself on her favourite boulder when the big black and grey creature appeared. It slipped and scrambled down the lowest part of the cliffs, at the far end of the beach. She sat up, instantly alert. *Danger-on-ground!* she sent to her fair. As the black and grey

creature bounded down the sands toward her and her nest, she took to wing with an indignant shriek. The other members of her fair blinked in around her. *Danger-attack-protect!* the queen ordered.

She and the bronze stooped into the attack, shrieking and diving at the intruder to drive it away. The greens followed an instant later, while the blue circled above chittering angrily. The black-and-grey was making a dreadful noise of its own, barking and jumping at her and her fair as they swiped at it with talons and wings. It raced in circles, its tail up and its tongue lolling. The queen shrilled her displeasure and flapped at its face with her wings, then had to blink *between* as teeth lunged towards her.

She emerged high above the intruder, hissing. Her bronze was trying to rake the creature's muzzle with his talons, while two of the greens attacked it from the rear. There was a distant whistle, and from her vantage point the queen could now see a human crouched near the cliff edge where the black-and-grey had come from. The human was watching the fight and making a sharp whistle now and then.

The queen dismissed this second intruder as irrelevant for the time being. He was much too far away to threaten her eggs, and his strange noises were of no concern. She dove back into the attack, just as one of the greens successfully dug her claws into the black-and-grey's rump. The gold gave a trill of encouragement, then a squawk of alarm as the green was jerked round as the intruder turned.

Stuck-fear-stuck! sent the alarmed green, as she was whiplashed from one side to the other by the gyrations of the black-and-grey as it snapped at the other members of the fair. The green had a claw caught in the strange not-fur of the intruder. The black was fur, the grey was not-fur, the gold could see now. The not-fur was like that odd, flapping skin that covered humans.

The intruder jack-knifed – and the frantically flapping green was grabbed and torn away from its rump. A crunch and a shake and the green's body went limp. The blue blinked away in panic. The gold gave a shriek and plunged into the attack again, hissing in triumph as her claws tore across its black furry ear. Her talons did not get stuck, and the creature yelped.

Danger-nest-protect! Urgent cries from the blue interrupted her brief feeling of triumph. Images of another human figure – this one at the nest itself!

The gold flung herself *between*.



Sweating heavily under all the padding he had wrapped round himself, Turran brushed the light covering of sand away from the eggs.

This was the nail-biting stage for him – not knowing what stage of development the clutch was at. Soft eggs were a boon – plenty of time to get to their destination and not raise suspicion by riding like Thread was on their tails. If the eggs were hard, they might have to offload them somewhere more local before they hatched, which was

always more risky... and less profitable. Or hope that they would stay unhatched long enough for the ride across country to the Tannercraft Hall and a quick deal right under Lord Janol's nose. Some of the masters there had less equanimity than Mastertanner Flint about the way Lord Holders were now doling out eggs to their allies and favourites.

Ah, nice and soft. He was no expert, but he reckoned they had a month or so before hatching. He cracked a smile, and began to place the eggs carefully in a padded leather pouch brought for the purpose. He had three quarters of the clutch packed away before the first of the 'lizards noticed what he was about. Turran grinned to himself and hastily scooped another three eggs into his pouch. He left two still in the sand and straightened up in preparation to make a getaway.

On cue, the gold arrived, shrieking fit to burst. Laughing, Turran ducked his head and ran in the slow jog that was all the padding would safely allow without risk of tripping and crushing his prize. In the Sunstone summer heat it was sweltering, being wrapped in pieces of canvas and with the saddle blanket from his horse draped over his head and neck. But it protected from the sharp talons of enraged firelizards! He felt the buffeting blows of wings as the little creatures dived at him again and again.

From the other end of the shore, Asmerrik's whistle commands sent Blackie hurtling down the beach toward the nest and the two remaining eggs. A quick glance up showed Turran the queen hovering, clearly torn between chasing after the human who had stolen the bulk of her clutch or defending the two she still possessed.

With an ear-splitting shriek she dived at him one last time and then hurtled towards the dog.



"Fifteen! Not bad, not bad at all." The eggs sat on a piece of canvas, soaking up the sunshine for a few more minutes before they were packed safely away for travelling. Turran was preparing the pouched bandoliers that would carry them under his and Asmerrik's tunics, where body heat would help keep them warm. He checked that each pouch still had its own tufts of wool within it, to pad and insulate its cargo.

Asmerrik grunted in approval. He untied the last of the bits of canvas that they used to protect Blackie's body and neck from the angry 'lizards, and threw the dog a piece of dried fish as a reward.

The seaholder boy puffed up his chest in pride. "Told you it would be a good clutch didn't I?" he said.

"You did," Turran agreed. "Well worth the marks we promised. In fact... clutch is bigger than we were expecting. If you'll hold off on telling anyone else about the queen, so we can come back for her next laying - then there's an egg of your own in it for you." He held out his left hand - one of the stolen eggs in his palm.

Beside him, Asmerrik took his cue. He casually bent over to rub at the dog's ears, muttering to the beast under his

breath. The dog stood up alertly, looking at Asmerrik for instruction.

"Egg for me?" the boy said. "How would I explain that, then?"

Turran shrugged. "Keep it hidden then say you found a green clutch the day it hatches."

The boy's face registered a conflict between doubt and desire. He stared at the proffered egg and bit his lip.

"If'n he don' wan' it, then there's buyers aplenty elsewhere," put in Asmerrik. Blackie had gone tense, staring at the boy.

Turran gave another shrug and made as if to put the egg back with the others. As expected, that sparked the boy into action. "I'll have it!" he said, striding forward with hand outstretched.

"That you will," agreed Turran. His knife flashed forward in his right hand, plunging into the boy's chest. Simultaneously Asmerrik flicked his fingers at Blackie and it lunged for the boy's outstretched arm, pulling him down even as Turran jerked his blade free. The dog was at the boy's throat in a flash, snapping and worrying the last feeble bits of life out of him.

"Leave it. Leave it there, Blackie." Asmerrik called the creature off, patting and praising it for a job well done.

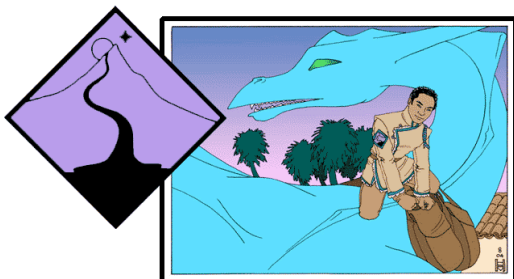
Turran returned the egg to the place in the sun with the others, and cleaned off his blade. He nodded at the boy's rowboat. "We'll haul the body out beyond the headland and dump it there, then leave the boat to drift. Currents'll take both a good way south. No-one will trace it back to this bay."

Asmerrik grunted in satisfaction. "When's she likely to lay again?" He jerked his head in the direction that the firelizard nest lay in.

Turran considered. "Just before the seahold's spring gather, I reckon."

"So we'll come by for that, then?"

Turran grinned as he returned his knife to its sheath. "And stay a few days extra? Reckon we will!"



Kadanzer Weyr

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