
A Firelizard's Tale

by Amanda Kear

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Green Fern awoke and she Wanted. Wanted, wanted, wanted. She yawned and stretched and the little want of stiff muscles faded away, but the big Wants were still there. One of them was in her belly. Thoughts of food made the Want growl and rumble inside her.

She looked about. Her human was sitting down and putting the Things She Was Not Allowed To Play With on his feet. That was good. He would usually go to the Food Place after he had placed the Things She Was Not Allowed To Play With on his feet. She liked the Food Place. There were wonderful smells and if she sat quietly by the Don't Touch That which her human had covered with food, then he would give her a share. Being given food was better when you had a big Want in your belly than catching your own food. Even if the given food never squeaked or wriggled interestingly like caught food did.

Her human stood up and Fern swooped across the cot to land on his shoulder. She broadcast her hunger-Want at him, just to make sure he had the right idea and would go to the Food Place and not somewhere else. Obliging he went outside and began to walk toward the Food Place. Fern chirped her approval and rubbed her head against her human's cheek, to show him she was pleased that he was obeying her.

The given food smelled tasty, but it was not right. Fern took a piece and sucked at it, trying to get at the liquid. She cocked her head to the side to regard the Not Given Food that her human was supping from. When he paused to communicate to another human, Fern darted her head into the bowl and lapped vigorously at the hot liquid. Her human made disapproving noises as she gobbled greedily, but Fern's Wants were both pushing her hard. The second Want was becoming bigger and brighter and was dragging the Hunger-Want along with it. She slurped down another mouthful and looked around the Food Place for others of her kind.

Nearby there was a blue draped around the neck of his human, and a bronze perched on the back of a chair. Both were looking at her intently. Males watching her! Fern's Want rose a notch, but then a trill that was unmistakably gold in origin sent quivers of anxiety through her. She looked up to the roof beams where a gold firelizard chattered at another blue and a pair of greens.

The Food Place was not right for her Want – a gold held sway here. Ignoring her startled human, Fern leaped into the air and blinked from the Now-Here to a Now-There where the sea sparkled in the morning sun, projecting her intentions to the blue and bronze as she did so. More of her kind swooped and fluttered over the waves, or splashed in the surf. The blue and bronze from the Food Place arrived and circled above her. The green carolled her delight and landed on the damp sand. The pair followed her lead.

Now she broadcast her Want to all in range. **Female-here! Female-here! Need-want-male!**

It brought immediate interest from several other males. They skimmed in to alight nearby. The bronze hissed at them, his eyes tinged with orange. Fern chirped with excitement and leaped skywards, the need to mate surging within her. Distantly she could feel her human's reaction to this, but that was as minor a concern as the colour of the sky. Now there was only the frenzied fun of swooping and darting within a cloud of eager suitors.

The males chased her and vied amongst themselves, trying to put off rivals with intimidating swoops or aggressive wing buffets. Fern zig-zagged upwards still broadcasting her mating urge. **Female-female-female!**

A blur of white and brown slashed through the air just below her and a blue firelizard's proclamation of **strong-fit-male** was abruptly gone. The rest of the males' arousal turned to panic. Several jumped away to another Now-There. Fern shrieked her distress and her anger at being deprived of her males so close to mating. She dived at the attacker.

Caught in the act of braking from its attack speed to a slow flap, the lizardhawk squawked in annoyance at the green fury that zipped by its head. The limp body of a blue firelizard was clutched in its talons. Fern shrieked at it as she would at a rival green who was trying to steal her suitors. Two of the remaining males circled uncertainly.

The lizardhawk picked up speed again, powering back towards the cover of the trees on shore. Fern carolled her victory as it departed. **Brave-clever-female-female-female!** The two males broadcast back lust-tinged admiration. The green flicked her wings at them and zig-zagged upwards.

A third male joined in the chase, and then a fourth. Almost before the lizardhawk had reached cover the firelizards were all absorbed in the mating dance again, the predator forgotten. Green and bronze bodies entwined. **Female-male-happy!**



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Fern inspected her human's sleeping place and couldn't find what she needed. Her human's Big Brown Friend's sleeping place was better, but every time she dug a hole and went away, she would come back to find the Big Brown Friend lying on it. That was no use at all. Fern scolded him, but the Big Brown Friend took no notice.

She explored further afield, assessing and rejecting a dozen spots before she found what she was looking for. Some nice warm sand not far from the high tide line, with a variety of shrubs and trees nearby that she could perch in to watch for danger. The green dug a hole and fussed around with it until it was perfect. She stood guarding the hole until twilight, and then laid her eggs.

One. Two. Three. Many. Fern was pleased with her clutch of many eggs. She licked each clean as it was laid and carefully kicked some sand over it, before pausing to lay the next. Laying eggs was tiring. The little green filled in the hole and then lay on the sand over her clutch, dozing contentedly.

Later, when she woke, she darted from vantage point to vantage point, eyes and ears alert for any threats. Sounds and feelings from other firelizards drifted along the beach, but bore no hint of danger. Safe, safe, safe. Soothed by the calm, Fern blinked briefly back to visit her human and Big Brown Friend, broadcasting maternal pride and images of her eggs. After only a brief span of time her anxiety began to grow, however, and she raced back to her nest site.

Her eggs needed her.

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Fern picked up a leaf that had blown onto the place she had buried her eggs. She shook her head as she held it in her jaws, scolding it fiercely. She was a good mother – see how she kept dangerous leaves away from her precious clutch?

She shredded the errant leaf with her claws and scattered the pieces into the breeze. A crawler was the next interloper. Fern hissed at it as it trundled across the patch of bare sand that hid her eggs. When this had no effect on the crawler's behaviour, she pounced and crunched it into pieces. It was tasty, and her thoughts turned to eating. Her human was in the Food Place at the moment – if she focussed she could sense the There-Now of him. Her eggs had a Want and her belly had a Want. Fern licked crawler juice off her muzzle as the Wants vied with each other.

She sprang from the ground to each of the vantage points near her nest in turn. No danger there. No danger there. No danger there either. No leaves or crawlers marring the nice clean sand where her clutch was. Satisfied, she launched herself from the Here-Now to the There-Now to be with her human.

He obligingly gave her food. Fern gulped a couple of mouthfuls and then carefully held the next piece in her jaws. She could carry this one from Here-Now Food Place to the There-Now Egg Place and eat it there. Both the Wants agreed.

Fern made sure she ate every scrap, even the tough bit that took a lot of chewing. Her Egg Place had to be clean, or danger would come to the eggs. She lay on the warm sand and thrummed contentment to herself. Happy-full Fern and happy-safe eggs.

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The green was with her human and Big Brown friend outside her human's cave-of-wood, enjoying the evening sunshine, when Fern suddenly remembered her eggs. She chirped urgently at her human as the egg-want grew, but he did not respond to what she was telling him, so Fern jumped to the There-Now by the beach.

She chattered in indignation at the trio of leaves that had settled over her nest, preventing what was left of the sunshine from warming the buried eggs. Fern swept the leaves away with her wings, and then noted how they twisted and turned as she did so. That distracted her from her Want for a time, and she played with the leaves, batting them to and fro, carrying them up into the air and racing them back to the ground.

She blinked back to the cave-of-wood to give her human one of the leaves as a present. He didn't seem to know what to do with it, so Fern demonstrated a few times, then abruptly remembered her clutch again and returned to the There-Now Egg Place. As darkness drew in she flew to one of the vantage points in the shrubs nearby, where she could look down on her buried clutch. She dozed, but was instantly alert at any sound, looking around and looking down to check that the sand was still undisturbed.

Fierce Fern. Brave Fern.

Morning came, and with it bright sunshine. Fern dropped from her watch post to bask on the sand beside her buried eggs. She reached out for her human, but he was not making Awake Thoughts yet. The There-Now he occupied was not the Food Place.

A flutter of wings and a small fair of firelizards swept along the beach, led by a gold. The fair dispersed in twos and threes along the water's edge, chattering and squabbling as they foraged. Fern cocked her head in mixed interest and alarm.

The gold dug up some squirming creature from the sand and dispatched it with a couple of bites. She took to the wing and brought her catch toward Fern, perching high in an overhead tree to feed daintily on it. A pair of bronzes followed her sidling up and preening, trying to catch the gold's attention.

Pieces of carapace from the gold's meal fell from the tree and bounced onto the sand where Fern's clutch was hidden. The green hissed in annoyance, and batted the debris away with her paws. An imperious chirp interrupted her efforts at tidying.

Fern looked up to see the gold and the two bronzes watching her. The gold abandoned the remains of her meal to the nearest bronze and launched into the air. She swept low overhead then banked and turned back, settling on the ground near Fern, radiating aggression and dominance.

The green chirped meekly and backed off a pace. Golds were Boss. Blues and other greens you could win fights with; browns and bronzes occasionally. But a gold hide was

a signal to back down. A gold's threats would always be followed through – and would sometimes be backed up by the other members of her fair.

Fern signalled submission. She crouched lower than the gold and kept her wings folded carefully against her sides, to make herself look small. See, I am good? See, I am no threat?

The gold interloper sauntered forward and Fern scooted back a few more paces, then stopped. Her eggs needed her, but the gold wanted right of way. The dilemma wracked her – go or stay? She froze in place, tail tip twitching to and fro with uncertainty.

The gold hissed. **Queen!** she told Fern. **Queen-boss now-here!** One of the bronzes flew down to land beside his gold.

Fern backed away a few more paces. The gold walked forward until she stood in the centre of the carefully cleaned patch of sand. Her nose dipped to sniff the sand. Gold paws began to dig.

Her eggs! Fern leapt forward shrieking. **Mine-mine-mine!**

The gold sat back on her haunches, gleaming wings flapping in fury. The queen's anger and dominance lashed over Fern, cowing her outburst. The gleam of gold hide was in her eyes. Both the bronzes took wing in an explosion of chattering, shrieking threats to back up their queen.

Distraught, Fern sought refuge on one of her vantage points. She covered there, creeling softly as the gold returned to her digging. The first egg was exposed to daylight. The gold nudged it with her nose, pushing it free of the sand. She cocked her head from side to side, regarding it for a moment.

Mine, Fern projected weakly. **Want-Need. Mine.**

The gold's jaws fastened on the egg. The shell tore open.

The green sat on her perch in the shrubs and shrilled and scolded to no avail. One by one her clutch were unearthed. One by one the shells were opened and the contents eaten. The gold's belly bulged by the end of it all, and the two bronzes happily licked the discarded shells for smears of yolk. Then with a flick of the wings, the trio flew off to rejoin their comrades on the beach.

After she was sure they were gone, Fern dropped to the sand and nosed at the remains of her eggs. **Mine...?** The eggs didn't make her Want as much as before. She reburied them, and sat on top of the sand that covered them. That made the Want a little stronger. She licked at her flank,

preening to reassure herself that all was well.

The sun climbed a little higher in the sky. In the distance, her human was thinking Awake Thoughts.

Fern could feel another sort of Want building in her belly. That hunger-want was getting bigger. Her guard-eggs-want was getting smaller. She could go to her human and tell him to go to the Food Place. She could return to the Egg Place later.

She sprang into the air and blinked from the Here-Now to the There-Now.



Kadanzer Weyr

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