

Fritology



An economics story

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Chapter 1: The Screech Owls and the Magic Leaves

Act 1.1

There used to be huge swaths of gred embedded into the sides of the mountains. It was beautiful. In the sunset you could see layers of it sparkling though the entire mountain range. But this began to change when the frit found a use for it. The frit were the distant descendants of Sand Martins, which were small birds that dug winding tunnels into sandy cliffs. In general they lived happily together but competition for mates was extreme. It was based on the depth and quality of the tunnels, which the males dug, and were their only safe haven from the screech owls.

Gremen was one such frit. He had been late hatching from his egg and therefore wasn't allowed to inherit his family's tunnel. His six nest brothers and four nest sisters had all done very well in finding mates but Gremen was having trouble.

The season before, the screech owls had eaten Gremen's uncle Hanlof and torn up most of his tunnel. This was the tunnel given to Gremen, which he worked on day after day to make deeper by chipping with his beak into the harder rock. Gremen didn't think it was fair really, that the first hatchling to hatch in the nest was given the family tunnel. But there wasn't much choice really. The frit had this custom for longer than anyone could remember and it seemed like the best way for them to survive after generations of screech owl attacks. Gremen would have felt better about it, if only he liked his oldest nest brother more. His name was Flannit and was terribly lazy and not very bright. He wasn't very good at looking for grubs nor did he spend much time on the family tunnel.

It had been Gremen's third night out of the family tunnel when he heard the harsh alarm of predators and a whisper of several screech owls began tearing off huge chunks of the soft dirt from his neighboring tunnel. It had been his nest brother's tunnel that was recently dug to accommodate his mate and their nest. Gremen could hear the squawks for help all night, but there was nothing he could do. Perched on the entrance to his tunnel, the cliff face felt empty the next morning. His brother's fledglings used to chirp like mad and fly about every morning as they swooped down on moths for their breakfast, and now they were gone.

The screech owl's favorite meal was the largest frit families with the shallowest tunnels. Gremen felt lucky for a moment that he didn't have a mate and hatchlings, but at the same time his heart felt sad at the loss of his brother and his lack of a mate. It would take him a long time before his tunnel was deep enough to attract a mate looking for security.

Jumping slightly he plummeted from his perch and fell. At the last moment he opened his wings like a parachute and landed softly on the ground. Being small birds, the frit had

to eat many times a day to have enough energy to dig their tunnels. Hopping through the forest, Gremen began turning over rocks and logs with his beak looking for grubs to eat. The largest grubs made their homes under the largest rocks and fallen trees. Finding the proper leverage to turn the rocks was a game that frit loved to play and Gremen was particularly clever at it.

Gremen had a whole host of sticks; some hooked, some flat, some sharp. He kept them buried under the exposed roots of a maller tree. Spying a large rock he quickly made his way over to his stash of sticks and selected one of his longest with a thin flat end. First he dug a small hole in the dirt beside the rock. Then holding the stick in one claw and using his beak to guide it, he wedged it in the hole he had just dug. Looking around he found a nice small branch to use as a fulcrum. Placing the stick across the branch he flew high into the air. Then shooting like a bullet, he dove down toward the raised end of the lever. Grabbing it with both feet as his momentum came down on it, he could hear the sound of the rock losing suction against the ground. Its edge had risen about an inch off the ground.

While perched on the lever, Gremen bent down and picked up a small rock with his beak and threw it under the large rock to keep it from sucking back down into the mud. Getting off the lever, he pushed the fulcrum branch even closer to the rock and wedged his lever farther in. Then flying back up in the air, he gave it another try. This time the rock, no longer aided by suction, neatly rolled onto one side.

Several beetles and grubs scrambled as fast as they could, burrowing into the dirt. But Gremen was faster. He dug them out easily with his claws and beak and gobbled them down. Satisfied, he tucked his stick back under the maller roots and took to the air. Flying back to his tunnel entrance on the cliff, he set at chipping away deeper and deeper into the hard sand. It was this denser sand that was the real protection from the screech owls, but it was hard work.

Now and then Gremen would kick out a chunk of sand that he had excavated. One such chuck came flying at a frit named Wenza who had just perched on his tunnel's ledge. Wenza was a female frit with long striped crown feathers that the frit moved for expression as a core part of their language. This morning they were laying softly back in a relaxed expression as she perched at Gremen's tunnel entrance watching him work. Gremen and she had listened to the clucks and chirps of elder frit stories together as fledglings and she always liked how clever he was.

Chirping in surprise at the flying sand, Wenza fell off the tunnel's ledge and fluttered into the air. Hearing the commotion, Gremen turned around and hopped to his tunnel entrance, only to see Wenza who flew back to the tunnel and landed next to him.

"I'm sorry Wenza, I didn't know you were there," chirped Gremen shyly as crown feathers curled in embarrassment.

Wenza chirped in laughter and asked Gremen to help her clean up. Gladly, Gremen pecked a few pieces of dirt from her down and once again wished he had been the first egg to hatch. He always liked Wenza, but would never have her as a mate with a tunnel as shallow as his own. Wenza knew this too and instead of a mate, she liked to think of Gremen like a nest brother. Flexing her crown feathers, she made them stand on end and bent over to touch them to Gremen's in a sign of thanks.

"It's nice to see you Gremen," she chirped. Gremen's breast puffed up in pride and shyly she continued, "I would love to see your stick collection later."

"How about tomorrow morning," chirped Gremen, thinking that he would like to arrange his sticks a bit before she looked at them.

Wenza cocked her head up and to one side, as frit did when they were happy, opened her wings and flew off. Happily, Gremen went back to work with extra energy. It took him several hours to chip away at a small section of hard sand, only denting it an inch. His beak was sore and chipped. The frit had lived on that cliff for generations and generations, longer than anyone could remember, and had created a huge pile of debris at the base of the cliff. Gremen spent the next hour collecting the bits of rock he had chipped off and throwing them out of the cave, adding to the pile of debris below the cliff. He then used his coarse covert feathers to sweep out the dust. He went over it many times, each time with softer feathers until the tunnel was spotless. It was important in case Wenza or some other interested female came by to inspect the quality of his work. Feeling satisfied with his morning's work, he set about to find his noon meal.

Gremen was daydreaming about Wenza while flying in the air and found himself in an unfamiliar place, above a section of mountain that was full of gred imbedded into the rock. The gred had a metallic shine and reflected the blue sky and hot sun into sparkling yellow. Gremen has always loved how it looked. Following the river of imbedded gred to the where the mountain met the forest floor, he saw a large rock made entirely out of gred. Curious and hungry, Gremen went to fetch one of his sticks. Following his usual routine he dug near the rock's base and pressed his stick hard into it. Then making a fulcrum out of a smaller rock, he flew up, then down, pressing his body against the lever. The rock didn't seem to budge at all and Gremen nearly fell to the ground as the stick vibrated up and down with his weight.

Curious, Gremen dug deeper near the rocks base and realized it wasn't a boulder at all but part of a much larger rock that had just been covered with dirt. Sad at his wasted

energy, he started to pull out his stick. But it was stuck. He had never gotten a stick stuck like this before. There was something strange about the rock. His weight on the stick had pushed the stick snugly into the rock, as though the gred were made out of mud. Tugging with all his might, Gremen managed to pull the stick free, leaving a large indentation in the rock. Still curious, Gremen began pecking at the gred with his beak. He was amazed to find that instead of chipping into the flakes like the walls of his tunnel, the gred seemed to only show slight indentations.

When the frit couldn't find large grubs and beetles, they would often scratch up chunks of roots and mud, then using their tools they would squish these chunks like pancakes to draw out worms and small insects. Wondering what he could do with this strange substance that was neither a rock nor mud, he thought he might try to see if he could squish it to see if any tasty worms would crawl out. Finding a smaller stone of gred he placed it on a hard flat rock then took the flat end of his stick and placed it on top. Then wedging the stick under a tree root he pulled up on the free end, so that the flat end of stick would squish the gred into the flat rock. Taking the stick off the gred he saw that it had been squished as flat as a tree leaf but was still fairly hard like a stone. Sadly there were no worms in it but still curious, he picked it up with one claw and admired how it sparkled nicely in the noon sun. In fact, Gremen thought it looked just like a small sun. Feeling as though he had done something magical, he quickly flew back to his tunnel with it in his beak. Making sure that no one saw him, he hid it inside his tunnel under a small pile of sand; all frit knew that magic was dangerous.

After checking himself all over for signs of bad magic, he flew quickly back to his usual hunting ground but found that he was late and other frit had scavenged his usual spots. While he looked around for more rocks to turn over he ate a few moths that were fluttering near the maller trees. By the time he had found a few grubs, it was nearly sunset. Afraid that whispers of screech owls would be coming out soon, he flew at full speed to his tunnel.

Act 1.2

Having seen the screech owls tearing apart his neighbor's tunnel, Gremen knew he had been right to hurry. As soon as the sun had set, he heard the alarm shriek of his fellow Frit as a whisper of screech owls came straight for his cave hoping to repeat their previous night success. The full moon was out and Gremen could see the silhouettes of the huge screech owls scratching at his tunnel entrance. He was shaking in fright as he backed into the farthest reaches of his tunnel.

The screech owls were making headway, clawing at the less dense tunnel walls. As they rounded a corner they could see Gremen shaking. The sight incensed them, as they pushed their hungry biting beaks as far into the tunnel as they could, trying to get to him. But the tunnel was still too small for them. So they began again scratching furiously at the tunnel walls.

Gremen scratched as fast as he could against the back wall of the tunnel but there was no way he could out dig the screech owls who were gaining on him fast. He began kicking out loose bits of sand at the screech owls but they bounced harmlessly off. Suddenly, Gremen's claw struck the thin leaf of gred he had hidden and sent it flying at the screech owls. It bounced harmlessly off them and lay on the tunnel floor. Catching the moonlight it shone bright enough to hurt the screech owls' light sensitive eyes. Deathly afraid of the sun for which they mistook the gred leaf to be, they screeched and like silent death flew away.

With his heart still beating like mad and crown feathers tucked close to his ear coverts, Gremen poked his head out of his nearly demolished tunnel. The screech owls were gone. Looking down at the gred leaf shining in the moonlight, he knew then that it was good magic. Leaving it there, he fell into an uneasy sleep at the back of his tunnel dreaming of how long the repairs to his tunnel would take.

Waking early in the morning Gremen saw the heads of several frit looking in his tunnel. When he opened his eyes their heads all cocked in smiles as they chirped in shock that he was alive. Looking at the gred leaf, they all knew that it was some sort of good magic and began pleading with Gremen to show them how to get their own. Several males brought Gremen grubs for breakfast as he twittered the song of what had happened.

Unsure at first if the gred leaf would actually work again, Gremen began to imagine that it would and all the male frit around him seemed to hope so too. Their hoping became thinking and their thinking quickly became absolute clarity and purpose.

Gremen chirped on, how he had treated the gred like it was a chunk of mud to squish

out worms to eat and the other frit chirped in laughter that Gremen had been so clever. After the song, they all flew to where Gremen had pressed the small gred stone into a leaf and set about making more and more of them. No one bothered to work on their tunnels that day, as they were sure Gremen's magic would work for them too.

It was near midday when Wenza came looking for Gremen. The other male frit were bringing Gremen back grubs to eat while he showed them how to press the gred with sticks. Wenza wasn't sure at all what to make of all this. The males were supposed to be at work digging deeper tunnels not playing with the shiny rocks like fledglings.

But Wenza knew that Gremen was clever and not a lazy frit, so began chirping to him. "Gremen what are you and the other males doing, isn't it time to be tunneling? I heard you were nearly eaten last night!"

"A magic gred leaf saved me," he chirped back. "Now I'm showing the other frit how to make them." Holding up a gred leaf in one claw to show Wenza he continued, "I have just figured a way to hang them on the walls of the cliff!"

"But what if you're wrong Gremen? This could be bad magic. I don't want to see you get eaten," chirped Wenza while her crown feathers rose in concern.

"This is my chance Wenza. I'll never have a tunnel as deep as my nest brother Flannit, and look at how the other frit are treating me," Gremen chirped while cocking his head to the side in a smile.

Concerned, Wenza took to the air to talk with the elder females, while Gremen went back to working on his gred leaf. Gremen found that by taking a gred leaf and pounding on it with some rocks he could fashion it into a teardrop shape with a hook on one end. Bringing one back to his tunnel, he pecked a notch into the side of the entrance that fit the hook and hung the leaf. Seeing him do this the other male frit followed suit.

When Wenza sang to the elder females and they saw that the males were not at work on the tunnels they began to cluk in anger. They thought Gremen's magic was only luck and that good males should be working on their tunnels. But the males wouldn't listen in their excitement. Except for Flannit, Gremen's oldest brother. He wasn't worried that the gred leaves wouldn't work against the screech owls, he was worried that they would work. If no one cared about deep tunnels anymore then he would lose his status and not be able to find a mate as the females had determined that he was not very clever compared to his brother.

Act 1.3

That night, the moon once again reflected off the gred. Nearly every male frit had several gred leaves fixed to their tunnel walls and the entire cliff face shone so brightly that the screech owls stayed far away. The male frit were ecstatic. They flew out of their caves and into the night for the first time in their lives. They feasted on the night moths and played in the wind. No one could remember such a great celebration.

Gremen didn't bother to dig his tunnel any deeper the next day, as he along with the other males went to create more gred leaves. They quickly began using hard stones as tools. They would sharpen them and use them to chisel off chunks of gred from the mountains. Over the next few days the males, being very hard workers, kept this up and eventually lined nearly every inch of their cliff face and tunnels with the leaves. It was a beautiful sight that shone in the sunlight like the scales of a golden fish.

But the females were not impressed. Each night they would warily look out their tunnels and hold their hatchlings back from frolicking. For ages their species had survived by tunneling into the cliff. This new magic could be bad magic in disguise, they chirped and clucked amongst themselves. But not one frit had been eaten in over a week. That had never happened and their hatchlings were safe. They couldn't complain, but only felt a sick sense of dread, why the males did not, was a mystery to them.

Gremen was treated like a king among the males and relished in his new life. The other males brought him grubs all day while he worked at inventing new tools to work the gred into different shapes. Soon he had developed all manner of beak chisels and hammers.

The frit had always loved to look at their reflection in pools of water and on one shiny piece of gred, Gremen was able to see himself. This gave him the idea to use his new tools to carve an image of himself out of gred. At first it was just a thin etching but soon Gremen found himself working a large chunk of gred into an entire statue of himself.

After a few days, he had finished and the other males looked at it and marveled. It looked very much like Gremen and sparkled brilliantly in the sun. Together the males wove as large a nest they could to use as a basket and lay the statue inside it. Together ten frit held onto the edges of the basket with their claws and flew the statue to the top of their cliff.

That night they had a grand party and got fat on night moths. Even some of the females began to come out to see what the commotion was. Gremen's statue shone brilliantly in the moonlight and gradually the females admitted to its beauty.

Flannit complained nonstop about the gred leaves with the females and now, with his younger brother's statue on top of the cliff, he felt cheated of his status. The first hatchling to crack out of his egg was supposed to be the strongest and most respected. In anger, Flannit tried to imagine what he could do. He didn't really want the screech owls to come back but at the same time he wanted his status back. It wasn't long until Flannit got his wish.

Over the next few nights the moon waned more and more and became dark in the sky. The stars shone bright, but a storm grew overhead and obscured them. It was pitch black and the gred leaves no longer had any light to reflect. The screech owls, who had been starving as they searched other cliff faces for frit, saw their old hunting ground now dark and inviting. In a large whisper they swarmed over the unprepared frit.

Gremen's tunnel had never been repaired and was the first that the screech owls went after. Swiftly brushing away the gred leaves and easily scratching their way into the tunnel, they ate Gremen in less than a minute.

Act 1.4

Shocked and sad the next morning, the remaining frit males felt their good magic had abandoned them. The females on the other hand, felt justified in their belief that Gremen's magic had been a trick and quickly set the males to work digging tunnels and removing the gred leaves. Flannit was happy as well, as many females became more interested in his deep family tunnel.

Over the next few nights the screech owls came again and again. Many of them had died when the frit had put up their gred leaves to scare them away and the survivors were very hungry. But gradually the moon began to wax and those remaining sections of cliff, where the males hadn't taken down their gred leaves, began to shine bright again. The sections of cliff where the females had demanded the removal of the leaves were those that the screech owls went after.

Wenza was very sad that Gremen had been eaten and unlike the other females, she knew that Gremen wasn't working bad magic and so didn't have the same fear of the gred leaves that the other females did. Trying to understand why the magic of the gred leaves didn't scare away the screech owls, she began to realize that as long as the moon shone bright in the sky, the magic of the gred leaves worked. Excited at her discovery she imagined how this magic, if improved upon and used properly, would help the frit. Quickly she told the other females, but none of them believed her, nor wanted to hear anything about the accursed gred leaves.

To show she was right, Wenza performed an experiment by gathering some of the fallen

leaves and placing them around the tunnel of a frit family most likely to be attacked, with the shortest tunnel and largest family. Over the next few nights the family was left alone, but as soon as the moon became dark that family was quickly eaten. Showing this to the other females, they still wouldn't listen to her.

In desperation, Wenza came up with a plan and flew to Flannit's tunnel and perched hesitantly at the entrance. Flannit immediately stopped dusting his tunnel walls with his large feathers when he saw her. Thinking she was a potential mate, he puffed up his large chest and held out his wingtips to touch hers, but quickly she backed away and fluttered into the air.

"Flannit, I need to sing with you," chirped Wenza.

Flannit's chest heaved a few visible breaths, still remained hopeful that Wenza was looking for a mate and chirped back, "of course Wenza." He had attended the elders' before-time songs with Gremen and her as a hatchling and had always fancied Wenza, but knew that she fancied Gremen's feathers more. This had always bothered him, and once settled inside his tunnel Flannit abruptly asked, "You always liked Gremen's, didn't you?" Seeing Wenza nod, he continued, "he was a stupid frit."

Wenza's crown feathers went up in irritation as she chirped back, "He was far more clever than you, and should have been the one to inherit this tunnel."

"If that's how you feel. You may fly far," chirped Flannit, while pointing his feathers to the tunnel entrance and making his own crown feathers stand on end.

"I'm sorry Flannit," chirped Wenza, with her crown feathers curling over her ear feathers, looking innocent. "The reason I came is because the flock needs a leader."

Flannit's head turned down and to the side in confusion. He liked the idea of being a leader, but wondered what kind of magic Wenza might be trying to work on him.

Seeing Flannit's hesitation, Wenza continued. "The female frit won't listen to me, but I know how the gred magic works. As long as the moon is shining the gred leaves will also shine and drive away the screech owls."

Flannit's chest puffed up in defiance. "What's that nasty gred got to do with me? I have a deep tunnel and the screech owls don't bother me."

"The gred leaves work just like having a deep tunnel and they help those frit that have small tunnels from getting eaten while they dig deeper. If you had both the deepest tunnel *and* the most gred *and* explained how to use it, the frit would look up to you like

they did Gremen,” chirped Wenza.

Flannit looked confused again. He liked what Wenza was saying, but couldn’t imagine how he would get gred as a large and lazy Frit, with no one to work for him, nor why Wenza was trying to help him.

His crown feathers showed his confusion and quickly Wenza continued, “If you let a few of the poor frit, most likely to be eaten, stay in your tunnel for a time in exchange for them giving you gred. Gred is getting harder to find in the mountains and you would soon have the most gred, and could then have the poor frit bring you grubs all day in exchange for it.”

Flannit’s crown feathers rose up and down in excitement. *I would have more gred than anyone*, he thought proudly. *If I show them how to use it, they will all beg me for it later*, he relished the idea. Then looking back at Wenza he chirped, “What are you getting out of this?”

“If you do this,” she paused, wondering if she should go through with her plan. Taking a deep breath she calmed herself and chirped, “I will be your mate.” While Flannit wasn’t a clever frit, it was important for females to find a male that would sing and dance according to their song. By mating with him, Wenza would have a strong sway over all the male frit, and would soon rise to the top of the elder females.

Flannit quickly bobbed his head in agreement, puffed up his chest and held out his wingtips. Hesitantly, Wenza held out her wingtips to touch his, signifying that they were now courting.

Quickly, Flannit began to do as Wenza twittered. He allowed several poor frit to live in his deep tunnel, while they began supplying him with gred leaves. As Flannit’s popularity with the males grew, it wasn’t long before all the frit males with deep tunnels began hiring the poor frit to bring them gred.

Then under Wenza’s guidance Flannit explained to the males that the gred leaves were still good magic, but only when the moon was shining. Then as the poor frit tried to get more and more of the gred which was becoming harder and harder to find freely on the mountains, they came to Flannit as Wenza had planned. The poor frit began hunting for the wealthy frit in exchange for gred, and the wealthy began to hire the poor frit to dig deeper into the mountains for more and more of the gred, keeping most of it themselves and rationing out small portions to the diggers.

Gradually all the female frit began having the males work part of the time replacing the gred leaves, that had been torn off or become tarnished and old, to keep the screech

owls away from the entire cliff on nights when the moon shone. After many days of collecting the fallen leaves, straightening out the bent, and making more, the cliff shone bright in the moonlight again.

Epilogue

The screech owls began to suffer greatly from the loss of their regular food source, the frit, and began adapting by traveling farther and farther in search of other frit colonies. And as more and more frit took up the practice of adorning their cliffs with gred leaves, the screech owls could only survive by eating the frit on moonless nights and supplementing their diets with smaller creatures like the jumping vren.

Feeling they should pay some thanks to Gremen, Wenza and the other females named their cliff after him, and on nights of the full moon they would fly in circles around his statue. So accustomed to following the moon's cycle, the frit of Gremen cliff began to forget that their lives had been any other way. And when Wenza whistled her hatchlings the song of Gremen, they thought it was only a scary frit song. By the time Wenza had grown old and died and her hatchlings had grown up and had hatchlings of their own, the song of Gremen had become a legend.

Chapter 2: The Sand Cutter and The Greded Frit

Act 2.1

Urza was a small frit, born seven generations after Gremen Cliff got its name. When the elder frit chipped and clucked the stories of the times before they had learned the magic of the gred leaves she laughed. The frit colonies had now grown so huge and their tunnels so deep that the screech owls were an extremely rare sight and had begun feeding solely on other animals. Urza couldn't imagine a world where the screech owls came and ate frit every night. *How could the frit have ever survived?* It was a silly song, she thought.

As the frit no longer had the screech owls to fear but had grown so used to choosing mates based on the amount of gred they had, they began to adorn themselves more and more with bits of the small gred leaves. They would take several small leaves together and fold them into necklaces and ringlets. Because the frit constantly wanted the shiniest gred they dug it from the ground as much as they could as the longer it touched the air the duller it became. After doing this for generations, the mountains that had once been rich with gred only reflected a greenish sky. But Urza didn't care. She strutted here and there inspecting potential mates that had collected the most gred and could work it into beautiful shapes for her.

She was no longer a fledgling and was nearly ready for her first clutch of eggs, which she held in her body to be fertilized. Because it was late in the season and she had yet to find a suitable mate she was getting less and less choosy. Finding a mate so late in the season was harder than she thought. The other females had taken most of the rich greded males with their gred adorned homes already. Sadly, she flew around late one night eating moths while the moon reflected in a greenish tone off the tarnished gred necklace that mother had given her. It had started to grow dull and needed to be replaced. If she didn't find a mate soon her eggs would go to waste and she would never get a new necklace.

She flew far down the cliff, to the tunnels of the sand cutter frit, who didn't have ancestors that had gathered gred and therefore had very little themselves. They would scavenge what they could from the gred that fell from the tunnels above and work for the greded frit in exchange for gred. Standing on a tree limb outside of one such tunnel, a frit male who was digging noticed her.

Urza was embarrassed to even have a sand cutter look at her, but she clamped her beak tight, as she knew this was her only choice if she wanted to hatch her eggs. Looking back out of the tunnel the male frit whose name was Hephman couldn't imagine what the greded female was doing. Imagining he was having a joke played on him, he hesitantly

walked to the perch of his tunnel, opened his wings and cocked his head, as if to say, *who me?*

Urza bobbed her head and hopped onto the perch next to him. Hephman's beak gaped open for a moment. Then puffing up his chest and trying to look big, he held out his wingtips to touch hers. Urza jumped back onto the tree limb and warbled a laugh. "My mother would never let me choose you as a mate, unless you give me a present."

Hephman looked confused, "I haven't got anything, why are you bothering me?"

"I like you," she chirped, trying to sound sincere while curling her crown feathers around her ear feathers. "Listen" she chirped softly, hopping back on the perch with him and taking off her necklace. "This gred is old and dull, if you can get me a new one, I will choose you."

Realizing that it was a chance to gain status, Hephman agreed and Urza flew off, discarding the dull necklace into the pile of rocks that was directly below Hephman's tunnel.

There was no way to make old gred new again, thought Hephman as he flew down to retrieve the necklace. And getting new shiny gred was tough. It required digging deep holes in the ground with hundreds of sand cutters and was watched over by the greded frit. His uncle whose tunnel he had inherited had been one such digger. He hoped to get his own gred and impress a female but died in a tunnel collapse.

On a whim he put the necklace on himself and set back to work on his tunnel, all the while trying to imagine how he might find some untarnished gred. His oldest nest brother had, of course, inherited his parent's gred and tunnel but it was no use asking him as giving family property to younger nest brothers was strictly forbidden. The only way he knew of was to become a tunneler for the greded frit. They would let him keep some of the gred he found, but the idea made him remember his uncle and feel ill.

Flying off his perch for his noon meal, he soared up high above Gremen Cliff and sat near to the statue of Gremen. Several greded frit, adorned with ringlets and necklaces, eyed him suspiciously as they flew past. Food had become more and more scarce as their colony grew and grew. The food nearby was hoarded by the greded frit, so it would be a long flight for Hephman and the other sand cutters. He soared for miles across the valley in search of a place absent of other hunting frit and finally landed upon the side of a distant mountain. Scratching over rocks, he found one small grub and felt himself lucky as he gobbled it down.

Just as the grub got to his stomach, Hephman had the strangest feeling. It was as though

his belly was moving on its own, so fast that he could barely stand up. Fluttering into the air, he saw rocks all around him on the mountain moving and tumbling down the slope. The mountain itself seemed to be grumbling like it had just eaten a giant beetle.

Swiftly the ground below him began to crack open and a huge plume of steam shot into the air knocking Hephman's wings about. Spiraling down, he fell straight into the crack. He had gone down nearly fifty feet, when he caught himself and quickly flew back out. Catching his breath on the edge of the crevasse, Hephman felt himself all over, checking for lost feathers, when he realized that Urza's necklace was gone. It must be down there, he thought looking over the edge. There was still steam rising from the crevasse and even with his sharp eyes, he couldn't see the bottom.

There was some strange magic here, thought Hephman, and all frit knew that magic was dangerous. But having fallen in once already and escaped unscratched he thought he might try it again and retrieve the necklace. He also hoped there might be gred down there, since the only place new gred was found was in deep tunnels.

Slowly controlling the speed of his fall by flapping his wings, he descended into the steam. It began to get hotter and hotter, until Hephman was dripping with condensation and his little heart pounded. Finally the steam cleared and Hephman chirped in shock. The crevasse opened to a large underground cavern where a stream of water came from a tunnel in the wall and a giant red snake came from the other end. In the middle of the cavern the snake and the water met and fell into a deeper hole creating a steady plume of steam.

As he wheeled around in the air he saw a shiny glimmer that he took to be Urza's necklace. But instead of retrieving it he flew as fast as he could back out of the cavern and up though the crevasse. Once again huffing and puffing on the ledge he remembered stories his elders had sung to him, of a before-time, well before Gremen. Even to the elders it was like an old legend, but they thought it was important.

They sung of a before-time when red snakes had destroyed an entire frit cliff. It was after a season of huge rains and the beetles were so plentiful that the frit began to gorge themselves. They ate so much and became so fat that they could barely fly. They began to build tunnels lower and lower in the cliffs so they could eat more and fly less. That's when the snakes came to punish them. There had been a sudden shaking of the earth who was mad at them, and from the ground slithered huge red snakes that entered the tunnels of the frit who had built them near the ground and ate them. The entire cliff then came tumbling down into the valley that was covered with the snakes. Only a few frit survived.

Hephman thought it was a silly tweet just like the song of Gremen, until now. He thought

the elders just tweeted about it so that frit wouldn't overeat after wet seasons, but looking down into the crevasse he felt a chill all over his body. *Had the earth become angry?* he thought. *But why hadn't the snake eaten him, and why was it not coming out of the earth?* Hephman couldn't make sense of it and was getting very hungry.

He took a different route back toward Gremen cliff and was lucky to find some grubs under a log. Eating his fill, he returned to his tunnel at Gremen Cliff and fell asleep. He had dreams of being eaten by a red snake all night and kept chirping himself awake. That morning he awoke beady eyed, not having slept well at all, to the chirps of someone outside his tunnel. Using his feathers to smooth out the lumpy down around his neck he stretched and walked over to his tunnel's perch.

It was Urza. As soon as she saw him she chirped angrily, "My mother was attached to that old necklace, she is angry that I threw it away. What have you done with it?" Hephman thought for a moment. He didn't want to lie, but he knew that if he brought up the red snake she would think he was lying. "Umm, I flew over to the far mountain and dropped it there while I was hunting," Hephman chirped hesitantly.

"You dropped it?" chirped Urza angrily.

"Don't be upset, I'll go get it for you today. I thought it was just junk," he replied.

Urza calmed down a bit. "I'll be here tomorrow morning for it," she chirped and flew off.

Immediately, Hephman remembered his dream of the red snake eating him and shuddered. He picked up one of his stone cutting tools and began etching away at his tunnel with it, while trying not to think about the predicament he was in. Soon he grew hungry and went looking for bugs. Flying back to where he had found some under a log the previous day, he was happy to find that there were still plenty there. Eating a few, he went about hiding the log with leaves so that other frit might not find it.

When he was almost done Hephman remembered the before-time song of the red snakes that had eaten the frit because they had eaten too many bugs. He began to feel guilty at his full belly and the thought that he was hoarding food from other frit by hiding it. Then he struck an idea. *Perhaps if I feed the snake some bugs it won't eat me*, he thought excitedly. He had flown into the cave once and not been eaten, surely he could do it again he thought, and if he fed the snake too, he would be fine.

Hephman began weaving a basket out of twigs and vines the way all frit knew how to make nests. Adding a handle to it he placed inside two fat grubs. Hooking the basket's handle around his neck he flew toward the crevasse. There was still steam coming out of it, but a little less than the previous day. Perhaps the snake was sleeping, he thought.

Then fluttered down, he descended into the hot air.

Seeing the red snake again meeting the water and going down the deep hole, Hephman nearly flew back out in fright. Then remembering his plan, he clamped his beak tight, and dropped the basket right onto the snake's huge body. In an instant the basket caught fire and was gobbled down under the snake's red skin.

Hephman had never seen magic like that before and was scarred. But the snake didn't seem to change. Hovering above it, he noticed that it was moving ever slowly. It was coming out of a hole in the cavern wall and then slithering down the hole in the center. It must be miles and miles long, Hephman thought gasping.

Figuring the snake would have eaten him already if it was going to, Hephman saw the shiny reflection of what he thought was the gred necklace. Flying over to it, he realized it wasn't the necklace at all but a shiny flattened blob of very fresh looking gred. In fact he had never seen gred so shiny. It would be worth a lot, thought Hephman as he tried to touch the gred and instantly pulled back his claw. It was too hot to even get close to.

Tired from flapping his wings to hover for so long Hephman didn't think he could make it back out of the cavern. Quickly he started searching for spots of ground that weren't too hot to touch. Eventually he touched the stream of water and found that it was cool, and came to rest with his feet under the water. Hephman stood there for a moment wondering what he should do and where Urza's necklace had gone.

If only I could take that shiny new gred, I could work it into a new necklace, he thought. Looking down at his feet he had an idea. He used both wings to splash some of the water out of the stream and onto the gred. The water instantly boiled and vaporized, turning into steam. Flying over to it, the gred did seem to have cooled down a bit, but it was still too hot to touch.

If I could just move more water onto it, thought Hephman. Thinking back to his stone tools, Hephman imagined he could chisel a wooden cup for the water, perhaps he could even divert part of the stream if he could cut a channel into the soft rock. Excited and feeling rested, Hephman flew out of the cavern and up through the crevasse and into the air. He made several trips taking baskets full of his tools near the crevasse. Then setting to work, he found an old log and began chiseling away at it to make a cup. He tried it in a nearby stream and found that it wasn't quite water tight. Finding a maller root nearby he cut into it and a good portion of sap leaked out. Using the sap he lined the wooden bowl with it sealing all the cracks. Finding that it was watertight he used a basket around his neck to fly it down into the cavern.

Once there, standing in the little stream again, he held the bowl in his beak and filled it

with water. Then began to walk over near the molten gred. The ground was too hot to walk on and began burning his claws. Quickly Hephman dumped the water onto the ground and his claws to cool them off. Walking back for more water, he repeated this process over and over, until he had made a cool path to where the gred lay in a small indentation in the cavern floor. Dumping bowl after bowl of water onto it, eventually he could touch it with his claws. But it wouldn't budge. It was as if it had become molded tightly to the indentation it was in.

Flying back out of the cavern he retrieved his stone cutting tools. By the time he got back down the floor was again too hot to touch. So he was forced to repeat the process with the bowl of water. Finally making his way back to the gred and cooling it off again he began to chip away at the stone indentation it was encased in. Every now and then throwing more water on it.

Eventually with a clang the gred knocked loose from the indentation. Using his tools he knocked it into his bowl full of water, where it sizzled for a moment and then was perfectly cool. Excitedly he placed it in his basket and flew out of the cavern. It was nearly sunset when he reached the surface. It would take him hours to fly back carrying the basket full of gred and there were still predators that could out fly frit at night. Not wanting to risk it, Hephman flew back into the cavern. *Surely no one would bother him with the red snake there*, he thought. Hephman had begun to think the red snake liked him and was no longer afraid of it. It created a red glow in the cave that comforted him as he fell asleep near the mouth of the stream of water where the ground was cooler.

In the middle of the night he dreamt he was inside the snake's belly and all he could see was red. Startling awake he saw the red glow of the snake and realized it was just a dream. Too disturbed to go back to sleep, he began using his tools to work the gred into a shiny new necklace. By the time morning arrived and he could see the light of dawn entering the cavern as he finished his work. It was beautiful. In fact he had never seen gred shine so brightly. Placing the necklace on himself he flew out of the cavern and toward the log where there were still some beetles. Eating his morning meal he then flew back to Gremen Cliff.

He saw Urza poking around his tunnel when he got back. Startled, Urza pretended that she was just smoothing her neck feathers. When she saw the necklace around Hephman's neck she squawked at its brilliance and asked Hephman where he got it.

As Hephman was about to explain the earth began to rumble. It stopped as quickly as it started and the forest and Gremen Cliff went silent. They both looked outside and saw nothing out of the ordinary. Slowly the sounds of the forest and chirping of the cliff started back up as if nothing had happened. Hephman thought it might be the snake getting angry that he was going to tell Urza about it. Deciding it was best to leave the

snake's cavern a secret, Hephman told Urza that he had simply found some gred around another mountain. He then took off the necklace and handed it to her.

Urza was suspicious but very happy. "But where is my mother's necklace?" she chirped.

"Tell your mother I'm sorry, but I couldn't find it," he replied hesitantly.

"That's all right, she would be happy to have this one, but what do I get then for my mating present?" she asked.

Hephman stood there with his beak open. He couldn't believe that he had worked so hard and this arrogant gred who had done nothing, wanted more.

Seeing his frustration Urza sighed and stroked his neck feathers. "Listen Hephman, it's nearly time for my eggs. If they aren't fertilized soon I will lose them all," she chirped to him sincerely. "And I cannot allow you to do it without a present, or my mother will have your wings bound and you thrown from the top of the cliff."

Hephman liked the idea of helping to hatch his own eggs, but he didn't really trust Urza or any of the entitled gred for that matter. And besides that, he had no clue as to how he would find more gred. "I'll see if I can find more," he chirped gloomily and stalked into his tunnel.

Seeing that he was upset, Urza decided it was best to leave him alone. She flew up to the higher tunnels where her mother lay resting. Awoken at Urza's entrance she immediately squawked at the gred necklace she wore. After seeing how shocked her mother was, Urza didn't want to give it up. "Hephman made it for me," she responded.

"Hephman, the sand cutter?" asked her mother in shock.

"Yes, but he has found some gred," chirped Urza pausing, then adding, "and I think I like him."

"I've never seen gred this shiny before, you're sure he isn't working some magic?" asked Urza's mother in a whisper. "You heard the earth growl today didn't you? Something is wrong."

"No mother, he just found it. He's going to find more tomorrow, you'll see," chirped Urza.

"Well he has given you a more than fitting mating present, but where is my mother's necklace that I gave you?" her mother asked.

"He said he lost it. He didn't know it was valuable to you. He promised to make you a new one like this," she chirped pointing to her necklace.

"If he does, then I will consent to your mating, otherwise you will have to give me yours," she chirped sharply and closed her eyes.

On Urza's way out she could see a sand cutter coming to bring her mother a mid morning meal. Irritated at her for not instantly granting her mating rights she stopped the sand cutter and took the meal herself, telling him to go get another. Flying up to the statue of Gremen, Urza spent the rest of the day showing off her new necklace to the other greded frit.

Act 2.2

Hephman spent the day searching for food and thinking about what he was going to do. He began to question what had really happened to Urza's mother's necklace. Perhaps the snake ate it, he thought. Then striking on an idea, he thought, *what if the snake liked old gred more than grubs and that was why he had not eaten me in the first place and gave me the hot gred to work with?*

Excited at the idea, Hephman began rummaging through the bits of old and tarnished gred that were scattered among the piles of rock and dirt below the cliffs. Looking up now and then to make sure nothing was going to fall on him he filled a basket with pieces of old gred. Then he began slowly flying it toward the red snake's crevasse.

Hephman noticed that there was more steam than the previous day rising from the cavern. Perhaps he had been right and the rumbling from the previous day was indeed the snake having gotten hungry. He took an old gred leaf from his basket and tossed it into the cavern. Nothing happened. Feeling that he should take a look he flew with his basket into the cavern.

Immediately he noticed the snake was twice as big as before. But it didn't lash out to eat him, so he decided it was safe. Landing in the water as before next to his bowl and stone tools he set his basket of gred down after wetting it, to make sure it didn't get too hot.

Looking around he saw that not far from him was another small pool of shiny gred. Amazed and excited he decided to try his experiment again. He took another gred leaf in his beak, and this time threw it directly onto the snake. It instantly turned extremely shiny. Jumping up and down Hephman was very excited, until he saw it sink below the surface of the snake's skin.

On an impulse he threw another old gred leaf on to of the pool of shiny gred that he saw earlier. To his amazement it slowly melted and the pool of liquid gred grew larger. Excited, he threw the rest of the contents of his basket into the pool, which nearly began to overflow the indentation in the rock it sat in. By some magic the snake was turning the old gred into shiny new gred made from liquid as he watched with awe.

Hephman now knew what had happened to Urza's necklace, but was worried. He was clearing using magic. Remembering the song of German and how his magic turned on him, Hephman shook all over in fear, but after a while he calmed down. Taking his bowl full of water in his beak he leaned back and let it splash over his body so as to cool himself down.

Hephman checked himself over and felt fine. The magic hadn't seemed to turn on him yet. *Maybe it was really good magic*, he hoped, looking warily at the red snake. This time, he set to work chiseling a channel in the rock for the stream to follow toward the hot liquid gred. Eventually the water was close enough that he could use the bowl of water without having to walk back and forth from the stream. By noon the liquid gred had been cooled by the water and Hephman had begun to chip it out of the rock.

Finally done, the amount of gred was huge, enough for twenty necklaces. Hephman left it to cool more in the water and left the crevasse to look for food. Quickly finding a few grubs he returned to his work. While the gred was still slightly warm he found he could easily fashion it directly into ringlets and necklaces without first flattening it out into leaves.

Washing himself in the stream, he placed several of the items on himself. Looking at his reflection in the water, the image of a sand cutter was gone and had been replaced with a very rich gredde frit. Chirping in laughter he piled on more and more of the shiny gred jewelry onto himself; so much so that he found that he could no longer fly. Laughing again, he took most of it off and placed only what he could fly with in his basket.

Act 2.3

Flying back to his tunnel he found Urza waiting for him. Quickly she tried to look in his basket, but he had covered the gred with tree leaves. Ignoring her and not saying a word he dashed into the back of his tunnel, as Urza chirped in irritation at the entrance, not wanting to come in uninvited.

Soon he emerged nearly covered from head to toe in gred. He had a solid gred tiara on his head, several necklaces wrapped around his neck, rivulets on his toes and legs, and even his wing tips held gred rings. It was all as shiny as the gred he had given her before

and when he stood on the perch he glistened like the statue of Gremen had years ago.

In his beak he held another necklace. Placing it on the perch next to him he motioned for her that she should take it. Urza had never seen such a magnificent frit. "You're not a sand cutter any more," she squaked.

Hephman chirped a laugh in agreement and soon dozens of frit with their keen eyes noticed him. Sand cutters and gredded frit alike jostled to look at Hephman shining in the sun. Hearing all the commotion, Urza's mother flew down as well and landed on the perch next to Hephman. "So you are my daughter's new mate, and I suppose this necklace is for me," she chirped as she picked the necklace up in her beak and tossed it in that air so that it would land around her neck. "I... approve," she chirped after giving him a last eary glance and flew off.

Hearing this, the sand cutters who had gathered around him twittered happily. Seeing one of their own so rich they had hope that they too could become gredded frit. They flew all around him and chirped in laughter as the gredded frit scoffed and flew away. Urza was getting angry that all the attention was not on her and flapped her wings in front of Hephman's tunnel telling the sand cutters to leave them alone. "Gredded frit don't associate with sand cutters," she chirped sharply at them. Then pulling Hephman into the tunnel she began creating a nest.

The next morning she was happily sitting on her eggs and ordered Hephman to go get her a morning meal. Not sure about his new life taking orders from Urza, Hephman sat on his tunnel's perch and began to remove some of his shiny gred so that he could fly easier.

There were several sand cutters watching him, and one flew up to him. "For one of those feather rings, I'll go fetch you and your mate some food," the sand cutter chirped eagerly.

Hephman hesitantly chirped, "No, I've always found my own meals."

Another sand cutter flew close and chirped, "but you were one of us just a day ago, can't you share some of your wealth with us?"

Hephman was about to object, but the ground began rumbling even louder than last time, and soon the entire cliff face began to shake. Falling backward into the tunnel bits of rock and dirt began to fall on him. He could hear Urza chirping frantically but couldn't move. As fast as it started the shaking stopped. The two sand cutters came in and dug Hephman and Urza out of the partially collapsed cave.

Not knowing what to do, Hephman went immediately to work clearing out his tunnel with the help of the sand cutters. Seeing that the earth was no longer upset, Urza urged Hephman to stop working like a sand cutter. This made Hephman angry, “gredde frit are only lazy and spoiled sand cutters,” he chirped at her sharply. Hephman could remember that his uncle had died digging for the gredde frit and looking at himself in his gred necklace and ringlets he felt ashamed.

Act 2.4

Perhaps the earth is mad at me, he thought as he took off all his gred and left it with Urza and her eggs, and hopped out. *This all started when I began trying to please the gredde frit*, he thought as he flew out of his tunnel and into the forest.

He noticed several sand cutters flying after him. Seeing a large tree, Hephman perched on a branch and waited for the sand cutters to catch up. “Where’s you gred?” one asked.

“I’m not a gredde frit,” he answered, “I’m a sand cutter and always will be.”

The sand cutters gave each other strange looks as if to say, *is he mad?*

“But you’ve got a bunch of the shiniest gred. Shinier than any of the gredde in the Gremen cliff,” replied one of the sand cutters.

“So what? What is gred anyway, why does it make the gredde more special than the sand cutters?” asked Hephman angrily.

“You’ve got some magic don’t you?” chirped one of the older sand cutters suspiciously. “The earth hadn’t gotten mad until you came back with that shiny gred.”

“That’s right!” chirped another sand cutter. “That’s why you’re acting so weird. Who doesn’t want to be gredde? How else will we get mates?”

“Where’d you get that gred?” chirped another sand cutter angrily.

Fed up with their interrogation, Hephman threw up his wings, “Fine, I’ll show you where I got it,” he chirped and flew into the air. Grabbing a basket he went to the piles of discarded old gred at the base of the cliff and began putting bits of it in his basket. The other frit, wary of some sort of foul magic and watched him closely.

One sand cutter broke in, “but that’s just junk!” and the rest of the frit laughed.

Clamping his beak shut, Hephman flew into the air carrying his basket, and several of the

sand cutters followed him. Finally they reached the crevasse. There was even more steam than before now coming out of it. The other sand cutters saw Hephman looking over the edge and chirped in fear, "You're not going in there are you?"

"When you go down there, you will see a red snake," chirped Hephman seriously.

"A red snake!" chirped the group in laughter. "Those are only bad dreams," they chirped but the laughter died down as they could see Hephman wasn't joking.

"You mustn't touch it, and only land where your feet are touching the water that is down there, or else you will get burnt. The snake will stay asleep as long as you give it something. It likes grubs and old gred," Hephman chirped and shared out bits of gred leaf from his basket.

They all took one hesitantly. A few were shaking, they had never heard of magic like this before, and the stories of the red snake had given them nightmares when they were hatchlings. "Are you sure it's safe?" asked one of the younger sand cutters.

"I've done it many times. This is where the shiny gred comes from. Remember to not set a claw on anything but the stream of water. Follow me," he chirped as he flew with his basket full of old gred bits into the crevasse. Very hesitantly the other frit hovered above him with pieces of old gred in their beaks.

Slowly they all descended, and when the younger frit saw the red snake they chirped in fright and flew back out. The older frit landed next to Hephman in the water. Then following his lead, they tossed their gred bits onto the snake, where they shined brightly then disappeared.

Hephman noticed the snake was even larger than before, it filled nearly the entire side of the cavern that was nearer to the mountain. Not sure what to think of it he decided not to say anything.

Hephman then dumped the rest of the gred into the indentation he had used before that was at the end of the channel he had carved for the water. In amazement the sand cutters watched as the gred slowly turned to a shiny hot liquid. Hephman then showed the other frit how to cool it off by removing a rock he had placed in the channel to dam the water. Once cooled, he showed them how to chip the gred out of the indentation.

The sand cutters were as ecstatic as Hephman had been at first. Eventually the younger sand cutters came down and learned the process. Excited, they all raced back to Gremen cliff to collect more old gred. Soon all the sand cutters were flocking to the crevasse skipping their duties to provide food for the gredded frit.

Realizing Urza must be getting hungry, Hephman felt bad and left the sand cutters there and went in hunt of grubs. Finding some, he brought them back to his tunnel and offered them to her. She accepted the food but refused to talk with him. Eventually her mother flew into the tunnel along with two large gredde males.

Act 2.5

Seeing Hephman ungredde like a sand cutter Urza's mother chirped with indigence. "You will not be my daughter's mate sand cutter. What have you done with the other sand cutters?"

Hephman stood there in shock for a moment not knowing what to say. Thinking again that the gredde frit were nothing but lazy frit, his anger began to rise. "The sand cutters will all come back with far more gred than you have ever seen."

Urza's mother squawked in shock, "I knew you were working some bad magic. None of the sand cutters will be allowed mates with this behavior! Take him to the statue."

"No mother," chirped Urza pleading, "He is my mate. He has gred! My eggs will be hatching soon!"

"I'm sorry my light Urza, but you should never have associated yourself with this sand cutter. Those eggs will never be allowed to hatch, you will have another batch next season."

With that, the two large gredde males seized Hephman's wings with their beaks and dragged him out of the tunnel. Throwing him into the air they grabbed him with their claws and flew him up to the old Gremen statue.

Nearly the whole colony of gredde frit was flying in the sun. They usually stayed in their tunnels so the sight was unusual. Their jewelry flickered in the sunlight and made the sky look like it was alive with gred. They watched as Hephman's wings were bound together with vines. Urza's mother began to chirp loudly and the rest of the gredde frit began to quiet down to listen as she hopped on top of Gremen's statue.

"We can no longer allow our females to mate with sand cutters like this one," she chirped and pointed at Hephman. "He has tricked us into thinking he was a gredde frit. But it was bad magic and has now turned on him. sand cutters using this magic, cannot become real gredde frit, whose parents were gredde frit and whose parents before them were gredde frit."

Chirps of acceptance went up as she paused. Her message was clear to Hephman, if the sand cutters wouldn't play by the greded frits rules they would be punished. Then holding her wing tips in the air for silence she began again. "This sand cutter has shown the other sand cutters some magic for finding shiny gred. If the sand cutters will no longer work for gred then we will force them to. How else will our colony survive if the sand cutters don't repair our tunnels and bring us food? We will take their gred away and stop them from using this bad magic."

Cheers went up again but a hush quickly started falling over the crowd. From the west they could see in the distance what looked like a cloud glittering gold in the sunlight. As it came closer the greded frit gasped. They could see that it was the sand cutters now adorned with more and shiner gred than themselves. Some of the greded frit landed on the cliff edge along with Urza's mother while others huddled into their tunnels afraid of the bad magic they saw.

Chirping loudly again Urza's mother chastised the hiding frit, that they must take the gred away from the sand cutters. Some hesitantly agreed and stood on the cliff next to her. Since the greded frit didn't have to hunt for food or dig caves like the sand cutters they had become larger and larger. So while the sand cutters outnumbered the greded frit they were much smaller birds.

Eventually an elder sand cutter glistening in the sun with gred who flew at the lead of the sand cutters flock, got close to Gremen Cliff. Urza mother chirped out sharply, "sand cutters, your gred is worthless as it has been gotten through bad magic. Take it off now and return to your work immediately or you will never be given mates."

Many of the sand cutters looked around sadly, and began slowly taking off their gred. It wasn't in their nature to question female frit. "No," chirped out Hephman loudly. "Gremen himself used magic to make gred leaves, only we don't call it magic anymore. Greded frit are nothing but lazy sand cutters who have grown too fat to hunt."

With this, many of the sand cutters chirped loudly in agreement. Then Urza's mother chirped again in anger. "That is a lie. This sand cutter has led you to bad magic and if you do not give it up you will never get mates."

The old sand cutter in the front chirped back slowly, "Hephman is right, you have no more right to gred than we do."

"Then we will take it from you, for your own good," chirped Urza's mother menacingly and took to the air. Her large body collided with the small old sand cutters, and locked together they plummeted toward the base of the cliff.

The other gredde frit took to the air as well, and in shock the sand cutters began to defend themselves. No frit could remember a time when the flock all fought with each other. But somehow the instinct seemed natural and justified. The frit would attempt to lock onto each other with their beaks or claws then plummet to the ground. The stronger frit would let go and take flight while pushing the weaker to the ground.

The larger gredde frit were very good at this. One by one they dashed the sand cutters to the ground, breaking their wings and killing many. But soon the sand cutters began working together latching onto the gredde frit in clumps of two and three forcing them to the ground.

It was a horrible sight to see. Hephman was chirping for them to stop, but no one listened. As they fought, he began to feel the vines binding him loosen as he struggled. Nearly half of the gredde frit and sand cutters lay wounded or dead with their gredde covered bodies sparkling on the ground. Hephman remembered the stories his elders had sung to him of a before-time when the mountains were covered with sparkling gredde. *What would they think now*, he thought sadly.

A strange sound hit Hephman's ears. Then he realized he could feel it through his legs more than his ears. The earth is angry, he thought. The rumbling got louder and the earth began to shake more and more. Flecks of stone and dirt started to crumble from the cliff and the fighting began to slow then stop as they took notice.

Soon the ground began to shake so badly that Hephman, along with the statue of Gremen, toppled over the edge of the cliff. With his wings still trapped by the vines, Hephman fell, tumbling with the statue beak over claws. Remembering the before-time song of how Gremen's magic had turned on him, Hephman felt it might be the earth punishing him.

Then he remembered the eggs that Urza was still trying to hatch. *I can't let them die*, he thought as he struggled as hard as he could and managed to break free of the vines. Just below him as the statue smashed on to the ground into thousands of pieces, he opened his wings. But he was still going too fast and landed with a smack on one of his claws. The pain was excruciating. He had broken one of his claws badly. Trying to focus through the pain, he saw that he was surrounded by the bodies of other frit, some dead and some wounded.

The ground was still shaking badly and not far from him, Hephman saw the bodies of many frit begin to fall into the earth as it ripped open into a crevasse. Instead of steam coming out he saw the head of the red snake begin to emerge and move slowly straight toward the cliff.

As it moved over the bodies of the frit on the ground it devoured them in puffs of smoke. The earth stopped shaking but the red snake still slowly moved forward. It seemed to fork into many red snakes, until the ground behind it was covered in red. As it touched pieces of tarnished gred it turned them to a shiny liquid then ate them. Hephman knew that he was the cause of this destruction and his heart sank.

The snake was slowly coming toward him when he heard the sound of Urza's hatchlings. Looking back at the lower tunnels, he saw her there surrounded by seven hatchlings with his own feather markings. The earth was still shaking and he saw part of the tunnel collapse onto Urza and the hatchlings, and in moments the red snake would enter the lower caves.

Standing on one leg and fighting the pain, Hephman managed to open his wings and flutter awkwardly into the air. Landing on his perch he began digging as fast as he could with his beak and uncovered Urza and the hatchlings. Without saying a word Urza and Hephman each used their beaks to take hold of the neck feathers of a hatchling and flew with all their might to the top of the cliff. Dropping them off they flew back down and picked up two more. The red snake was at the base of the tunnel and rising quickly. Rescuing two more Hephman could see that their seventh hatchling was running to the back of the tunnel as the snake's head began to enter it. Diving into the tunnel Hephman saw that he was too late and now was trapped himself as his hatchling chirped frantically.

Using his beak Hephman began to dig straight up while sand came down all over him. Poking through the loose dirt he created a small hole into another frit's tunnel above him. Grabbing his hatchling he shoved her through the hole. Urza saw the hatchling appear in the upper tunnel and quickly flew in to grab him. After flying him to safety she reentered the tunnel, then seeing Hephman frantically trying to widen the hole so he could fit through, she threw off her gred jewelry and began digging with all her might. And just as his tail feathers began to burn from the heat of the snake, Urza pulled him through the hole. Flying to safety at the top of the cliff Urza and Hephman huddled over their hatchlings, who were still chirping frantically.

Slowly the red snakes cooled and turned black and eventually stopped moving. But out of their back skin now and then a smaller red snake would burst forth then turn black again. Much of the forest had begun to burn and as the sun set, the fire lit up the sky.

The sand cutters and the gredded frit all huddled around Hephman and Urza and their hatchlings. The red snakes had eaten Urza's mother and everyone was looking at Urza as the new head female. Urza didn't know what to say and looked at Hephman for advice. Seeing he was as distraught and nursing his broken leg while trying to calm the hatchlings, she began to chirp. "I cut sand today to save my mate and our hatchlings. The

gred only slowed me down and so I cast it off or the snakes would have eaten us. The earth has punished us by releasing the red snakes. It is punishment for wearing gred.”

Shocked by the death and destruction of most of their tunnels, the greded frit and sand cutters alike began to take off their gred and throw it over the edge of the cliff.

Seeing the other frit taking her so seriously she continued. “The earth has spoken today, we are being warned that someday she will give a final shake and bring all her snakes from within. On that day all the frit will be sorted into the good and bad. Any frit that has done a feather of good will see it, and any frit who has done a feather of bad will be devoured.”

Epilogue

It was a long time until life returned to normal for the frit. They still adorned their cliff walls with gred but it no longer held its magical appeal and no one wore it as jewelry. Finding food among the now burnt forest was very hard, and many frit died that season. With their numbers so low, the frit were forced to find other sources of food. They began learning to set traps for jumping vren and to grow colonies of mottled moths in the crevasses by lining the walls with maller root sap, which the moths liked to eat.

Slowly different frit began to specialize in different skills. The farmers of the mottled moths started to call themselves the mottled frit, the trappers of the jumping vren started to call themselves the snag frit and the frit who lived in the snake caves and worked the gred into tools were called the snake frit.

As food was scarce, the selection for mates became solely for those that could provide the most food to feed hatchlings. Over the years, the earth stopped rumbling and the red snakes weren’t seen again except in deep caves and frit adapted to their new way of life.

Chapter 3: The Migration of The Snag Frit

Act 3.1

One of Urza's descendants was named Wezna after her ancient ancestor. Everyone knew that the name Wenza meant wise, but *this* Wenza didn't think much of it. She had only a few nest brothers and sisters, three in all, one sister and two brothers. They were young fledglings, just starting to take their first flights. They spent much of their time playing around the moth crevasses, swooping down to the crevasse walls, where the moths were made to live and eat maller root sap. A rabble of moths would burst into the air in fear of being eaten and the four fledglings would fly around them and play poison moth. Whoever touched a moth would have to play dead and the last frit flying was the winner.

Wenza had been the first of her nest brothers and sisters to break out of her egg and so was a little bigger and more aggressive than her siblings. She loved playing poison moth and was almost always the winner. Nearly all fledglings played it, because it was fun and helped them learn to fly better and better. This was unfortunate for the adult mottled frit, whose job it was to grow as many moths as they could on the crevasse walls and make sure bush lizards didn't eat them.

One of the mottled frit holding a long stick with a fan of leaves at the end, which he used to scare away pests including young frit, started chirping loudly at Wenza and the other fledgling. "Get away from here, you tweeters."

Flying out of the crevasse, Wenza and the other fledglings chirped in laughter and played a quick game of tag. The sun was beginning to set. Attracted to the dying light and ready to lay eggs and mate the moths formed a huge rabble and started flying out of the crevasse and fluttered toward the maller trees.

Racing ahead of the rabble and flying circles around it the fledglings chirped in laughter as they continued to play poison moth. But behind the rabble came several mottled frit with their long fan sticks. The one that had reprimanded Wenza used the wooden end of his fan stick and struck her with it on a tail feather.

"Ouch," Wenza chirped in pain while flying out of the rabble of moths.

"Since you didn't listen to me the first time you are going to have to work this evening until it gets full dark," chirped the mottled frit sternly.

Hearing this, Wenza's nest brothers and sister flew off quickly, chirping "Wenza the Wise,

Wenza the Wise” mockingly, and she was left alone slowly following the adult mottled frit as they herded the rabble toward the maller trees. Soon the rabble swooped down and took shelter in the trees. Some moths began mating, others lay eggs and others still regained their energy by drinking the sap of the maller tree.

Wenza’s job was to take a gred knife and cut the maller roots so that the moths could easily get to the sap. It was hard work because the roots were covered in a thick bark. The moths would group around her as she worked and cover her with a gray pheromone mist that she thought smelled horrible. She was starting to look like a mottled frit, she thought angrily as she cut away at the roots.

The other mottled frit were busy making sure the moths didn’t stray too far and keeping bush lizards from eating them. This dragged on and on throughout the night, until the moths settled into cracks in the maller bark, where they would sleep until the morning. “We’ll see you back here in the morning young fledgling, won’t we?” chirped a mottled frit rhetorically to Wenza.

Knowing she had no choice, otherwise she would be punished, she bobbed her head in agreement and flew home. Her two nest brothers and sister were piled together in the nest sleeping soundly when she got home. Her mother and father had been waiting up for her, and stroked her neck feathers as soon as she flew in. “Your nest brothers and sisters chirped what had happened,” chirped her father sternly. “I was worried about you,” chirped her mother while still stoking her feathers.

“I’m sorry,” chirped Wenza sadly. “We were just playing, we didn’t hurt anything.”

“You know you’re not supposed to play that game with the moths,” answered her dad coolly.

“Are you hungry?” asked her mother in concern.

“No,” chirped Wenza and paused.

“But you haven’t eaten since the noon meal,” chirped her mother.

“I ate some moths while I was working,” admitted Wenza guiltily.

“Wenza,” chirped her mother sternly, “You know you’re not to eat from the mottled frit’s rabble.”

“But I was hungry, and besides they’re making me work at daybreak tomorrow too,” chirped back Wenza sadly.

"It serves you right. Now, go along to the nest. I don't want to hear one more chirp out of you," clucked her mother.

Wenza hopped into the nest, waking her sister on purpose while snuggling in to get some warmth. Her mother and father rolled their eyes and sat on the tunnel perch together. "She's so headstrong," said her father. "She's going to get into serious trouble one of these days."

"Don't worry," I was like that too when I was a fledgling," chirped her mother. "It'll just take a while but she'll grow out of it."

"I'm not sure you ever did," chirped her father in laughter as they both joined their fledglings in the nest.

Act 3.2

The next morning Wenza felt a strong push and fell from the nest onto the cold tunnel floor. Flapping her wings in surprise she saw her father standing over her with a bit of jumping vren meat in his beak. As she took it from him he chirped, "You're nearly an adult now and because of your attitude I am going to treat you like one. You can eat that on your way or you will be late for work." Quickly swallowing the meat down, she was pushed right out of the tunnel.

How rude, she thought, as she started flying toward the maller trees. As she got there she could see the mottled frit already at work. The moths had started waking up and were trying to drink the sap of the maller roots. But he mottled frit would shoo them along so that they formed a large rabble. As Wenza suspected there was already a group of mottled frit with baskets full of sap, painting it on the walls of the crevasses as they herded the rabble away from the maller trees. Not only did this fatten up the moths but it made them easy to harvest and protect.

Seeing Wenza, the mottled frit from the day before chirped and handed her a fan stick and chirped at her sternly to not let, even one, of the moths pass her. She bobbed her head in agreement and took the stick from him.

The stick was very heavy for her but she gave it all she could. One moth got away from her and she began chasing it down. It was about to get away when a young mottled frit gave the air one good swipe with his fan stick and sent the moth back into the rabble.

"Thanks," chirped Wenza. But the mottle frit only gave a soft chirp back and flew back to work.

Eventually they herded the rabble down into the crevasse where the moths happily began feasting away on the maller sap. The mottled frit who had just finished painting the walls with sap took flight back to the maller trees, and the young frit you had helped Wenza before started to follow them. After chirping something to one of the older mottled frit he turned back. Shyly, he flew over to Wenza and chirped, "He says you can come work with me today on the trees," he paused for a second then added, "if you want to."

Happily Wenza chirped, "sure," and they both flew off together. "I'm Wenza. What's your name?" she chirped.

"Kim," he said as Wenza took the opportunity to rush ahead of him laughing. He managed to catch up to her but then she shot ahead again using an updraft of air. They raced each other all the way to the maller trees. Kim won, but only by a small margin.

They both laughed and got a bite to eat where the mottled frits were having a breakfast of moth and jumping vren. After they had eaten, one of the older mottled frit chirped at Wenza and Kim sternly, "you too need to make sure no lizards eat the eggs, larvae or pupae. Kim, you're too old to be playing games. I expect you two to be very serious."

Wenza stifled a giggling chirp and Kim nudged her in the wing to stay quiet. Kim and Wenza both bobbed their heads and were set to work given sharp straight sticks that they could use to stab at bush lizards. Wenza had never been given a lizard spear before and started flinging it around and whacking the trees with it.

"Didn't you hear the old frit?" chirped Kim exasperated.

Wenza stopped and chirped back glumly, "I thought you were fun."

"Well, you thought wrong," replied Kim, making an effort to look keenly through the bushes for lizards.

Begrudgingly Wenza followed suit. But after a while she grew bored and hopped onto the nearest maller tree limb and followed it out until she saw the green mottled moth eggs. Looking at them closely she couldn't decide what was more gross looking, moth eggs or moth pupae. Seeing some eggs that had opened she found one of the larvae that had crawled out and was making its way toward the green maller leaves to eat. Hopping along slowly following the larvae, she spotted a beautifully patterned chrysalis of pupae under the limb of a branch above her. She could see the now gooey caterpillar squirming inside the chrysalis. She knew that it would become a moth someday but it still seemed gross. Seeing one of the chrysalides crack slightly open, a drop of pupae goo

fell onto her head.

“Eww!” she chirped loudly and started using her feathers to wipe off her head.

“What are you doing?” chirped Kim looking up. Suddenly his beak opened in a gasp.

“Wenza look out!” he squawked loudly pointing toward the tree trunk.

Wenza half finished wiping off the goop, saw with one eye what he was pointing at. A bush lizard was quick climbing up the tree trunk and heading right for the eggs she had just seen. Squawking loudly to try and scare it away, Wenza lifted her spear and threw it. Sailing through the air it thumped into the lizard’s tough scaled head. Knocked off balance the lizard fell to the ground where Kim pounced on it and using his full weight drove his spear into its soft underbelly.

“You killed it!” exclaimed Wenza, chirping loudly.

Normally the frit only scared away the bush lizards because killing them was too hard. Several older mottled frit flew over to look at the lizard which was nearly the size of an adult frit. They all congratulated Kim and took the lizard back to where they were preparing the noon meal.

Wenza and Kim followed them while the older mottled frit chirped out praises for Kim the great hunter. Wenza was upset that Kim was getting all the attention and chirped at Kim, “Aren’t you going to tell them that I helped you? If I hadn’t knocked it off the tree you would never have gotten to its belly.”

“If they think I did it alone, they’ll give me a larger share of food and I’ll give some of it to you, but if they hear you helped me, we’ll probably get nothing,” chirped back Kim softly.

Wenza liked the idea of bringing home some extra food for her family and bobbed her head in agreement. Her father was a snag frit whose job it was to trap jumping vren. He always brought home vren meat, but rarely did they have moths.

Long ago when the gredde frit and the sand cutters had their gred war, the once gredde frit were forced to look for their own food. The beetle and grub populations never recovered after the great fire and so the gredde frit started hunting jumping vren with spears. This was very hard work because the jumping vren were so fast. As soon as they got scared they would jump high into the air and quickly hide in small holes.

One day the gredde frit noticed that the jumping vren loved to eat mottled moth larvae, which the frit found too hard to digest. So the frit began to collect the larvae and

set up traps for the vren. This still took a lot of work because as soon as the vren smelt, saw, heard a frit they would bolt to safety.

After some time the frit learned to place the larvae in a cage made from gred wire. With one door open, the cage was made to shut when a vren came near enough to the eggs inside to trigger a gred spring that would close the door tight, snagging the vren. Nearly all of the greded frit became vren trappers and so came to be called snag frit.

Act 3.3

Kim lived up to his promise and when the older mottled frit gave him some of the lizard meat and extra moths he gave half to Wenza. "It was nice meeting you," chirped Kim as Wenza was about to leave, then added "Thanks for helping with the lizard."

Excited to be bringing home food, Wenza put the basket holding the dead moths and lizard meat around her neck. Chirping goodbye quickly she flew off. Looking back over her shoulder she noticed Kim falling over. She could see the trees shaking and remembered the old stories she had heard about times the earth was angry in the past. Scared and not knowing what to do, she flew as fast as should could toward Gremen cliff. By the time she got there the shaking had stopped.

Arriving home Wenza landed on the tunnel perch with her basket. Placing it down in the tunnel she could hear her mother and father having a heated discussion. Not sure if she should be listening or not, Wenza couldn't help but pick up her parent's chirps with her keen ears.

"But what are we going to do?" asked her mother. "You're too old to go into moth farming, the mottled frit would never accept you, and the snake frit would never teach you."

"Us snag frit have been cursed since the time of the red snakes for our ancestor's greed. I don't know if there is anything we can do. There is more than just the loss of vren going on. We may have to leave, the earth may soon let loose the red snakes again," chirped back Wenza's father.

"Leave?" her mother gasped. "You mean leave Gremen Cliff? Where would we go?"

"Some of the sang frit have been traveling very far in search of jumping vren. They say there are other mountain valleys that have vren and even beetles and grubs, but it's a long migration," answered her father.

A long migration, thought Wenza excitedly. She had never been allowed to travel past

the moth crevasses. The idea of traveling to a new mountain valley sounded like a grand adventure. Suddenly, her mother rounded the tunnel corner. “Wenza! I thought I heard something. How long have you been listening?”

Wenza’s father came too and put his wing on her mother’s shoulder, “Malla, it’s alright. Our fledglings have to know at some point.”

Closing her eyes Wenza’s mother took a deep sigh and noticed the basket. Seizing upon the distraction she chirped, “What is this Wenza?”

Wenza excitedly began chirping about her day with Kim and how they had killed a bush lizard.

“It sounds like we have another hunter in the family,” chirped her mother happily, looking over the lizard meat.

While the mottled frit on rare occasions ate bush lizard meat, snag frit almost never did since the lizards were too quick and tough for their vren traps and the mottled frit would never trade vren meat for prized lizard meat.

After chirping more about her day with the mottled frit, her two nest brothers and sister came flying in. Already excited and scared from the earth shaking and seeing the lizard meat they all chirped like mad and hopped up and down. Wenza then retweeted her song as they listened in awe.

After the song, Wenza’s little sister, Crilly began to chirp loudly, “I want to be a mottled frit!” and her brothers, Derum and Brickel, started chirping along with her.

Wenza quickly said, “They don’t let snag frit farm moths. They just let me help them as a punishment. Besides we’re going to live far away from Gremen Cliff.”

Her brothers and sister fell silent. Derum chirped in, “You’re lying Wenza no one lives away from the cliff.”

“Some of the snake frit live in their snake caves,” chirped Wenza in irritation. Brickel, standing up for his brother, chirped, “But that’s not far away,” and poked Wenza in the beak with a feather.

“Fledglings, let’s eat the nice lunch Wenza brought us and talk about it,” said their mother trying to sound calm.

Crilly got a scared look on her face when her mother didn’t refute Wenza. Her eyes

widened and her crown feathers began to stand on end. "It's going to be alright," cooed their father calmly as he smoothed out Crilly's down.

They all sat down in a chamber next to their sleeping chamber. Each took a moth and a little bit of the lizard meat. Having never eaten lizard meat they all temporarily forgot about anything else but it's sweet flavor. But as time went on Derum and Brickel started chirping about what adventures they would have away from Gremen cliff, and again Crilly began to get frightened.

"But why would we leave?" chirped Crilly as she listened to her brothers.

"There are less and less jumping vren in our forest," said her father sadly. "We've been capturing so many of them that their population can't recover. We've grown too large a colony and have been too greedy, and now we have to find a new place to live."

"But why can't we make more vren like the mottled frit breed moths?" asked Wenza.

"The vren eat mottle moth eggs, and if we bought more eggs from the mottled frit to feed vren, then they wouldn't have enough to keep their moth rabbles large enough to feed themselves," answered her father.

Derum and Brickel were impressed that Wenza sounded like an adult and tried to think of more questions themselves. "Father," said Derum pausing, "Why can't we just become mottled frit, or even snake frit?"

"After the great war between the gredded frit and the sand cutters the two types of frit agreed to never fight again or wear gred. But the sand cutters never forgave us. They became the snake frit because they knew how to make old gred new, and they were small enough to keep burrowing tunnels to find more gred. Some of them also became the mottled frit when they started using their snake caves to farm moths."

In a sigh their mother continued. "We gredded frit became snag frit. There are no more empty crevasses where we could farm moths and the mottled frit wouldn't let us if there were. And the snake frit never share their secrets."

"But why are there too many frit," asked Crilly, almost in tears.

"We've been blessed by the red snake," answered her mother. "The red snake forgave us for wearing gred and has allowed our colony to grow large. There are only too many frit here in this valley. We will find a nice new place to live."

"But that's not fair. All my friends live here. Why do *we*, have to migrate?" chirped Crilly

in a pout.

“Because if we don’t, we will run out of food,” answered her father sternly.

“It’ll be fun, Crilly. Like an adventure,” chirped Brickel.

“That’s right. There are other valleys full of beetles and grubs and jumping vren, and even other frit.” chirped their father.

“Other frit?” chirped Wenza in a gasp.

“Some of my cousins have traveled very far and have seen frit with different markings,” answered her father.

At this, the four fledglings began chirping excitedly about the adventures they would have and began hopping around the tunnel making faces at each other.

“Go off and play. Your father and I need to talk,” said their mother as she herded them out of the tunnel.

Act 3.4

Diving off the perch the four fledglings caught an updraft and flew to the top of Gremen cliff where the statue of Gremen had once been. Looking around as far as they could see, they were surrounded by mountains. Gremen cliff was just a small part of a larger mountain range that grew behind it and was capped with white fir. The fledglings couldn’t imagine how they would ever get to another valley. An old before-time legend sung of a frit that had flown into the white mountain fir and had her wings turn into stiff white hair and fall to the earth.

They could see the mottled frit getting back to work after their noon meal, quickly flying around to round up the moths that had strayed from the maller trees. Crilly was very interested in Wenza’s song about Kim and had her tell it again, while asking for more details about what Kim chirped and how he killed the lizard. Derum and Brickel listened in too. Derum pretended to be the lizard while Brickel found a stick and they flew around chasing Derum. And when Crilly kept asking about why Kim would have given some of his food to Wenza, the boys would interrupt and ask Wenza to talk more about how the dead lizard looked.

When the topic kept shifting to how far they would have to migrate, Crilly began to get more and more upset. “I’m going to stay here and be a snake frit like Uri,” she squawked and jumped from the ledge and began flying toward the far mountains and the snake caves.

Uri was Crilly's best friend outside the family and was a snake frit. It was getting to be toward evening and the fledglings knew they shouldn't be flying away from the cliff. Wenza chirped at Derum and Brickel to whistle to their parents what happened and that she was going to bring Crilly back.

Her brothers began to object but Wenza took flight without waiting for a response. She still had an adult aura about her and they decided that they had better do what she said.

Crilly had caught a gust of wind and was far ahead. Wenza flew fast trying to catch up and warily looking around for the rare screech owl that would fly into their valley. They no longer went after the frit in their cave tunnels but would love to steal the chance at the easy catch of a lone fledgling.

In the dying light Wenza could see Crilly dive into one of the red snake caves with steam rising out of it. Following her down she passed the moth farms in the crevasse above and descended into the red glow of a large cavern. Wenza's grandfather had told her that after the great war of the gredded and sand cutter frit, many snake caves had opened up and were the home of the snake frit who were once called the sand cutters

Immediately she saw a red snake and shuddered. The sight had always frightened her. It was an old snake and was covered mostly with black – but the red could still be seen glowing just below. Part of the cavern was covered with water and had a network of wooden rafts floating on it where snake frit made their nests. Crilly was on one of these wooden platforms chirping to her friend Uri and her parents as well as one of the elder snake frit.

Wenza landed beside her and chirped as everyone looked at her. "I'm sorry my sister has bothered you so late at night, I will take her home."

"Nonsense," said the elder sternly. "It's too late for you two to be flying about, and your sister has been giving us very interesting news."

Crilly had a proud and defiant look in her eyes as she looked at Wenza then back toward her feet.

"Continue Crilly," chirped the old frit. "Why is it that your parents think they need to find another valley?"

"Because there aren't enough vren here," chirped back Crilly.

Wenza began to feel as though they shouldn't be telling this to the snake frit. But not

knowing what else to do she kept her beak shut tight.

“That just means you snag frit are eating too much,” chirped the old frit in a laugh. A few other older frit landed on the platform to see what the commotion was about. Seeing the two fledgling snag frit they quickly chirped amongst each other and to the old frit.

“This nice young frit has just sung to me that the snag frit are thinking of moving because they have been eating too many vren,” said the old frit to the others.

“But that’s ridiculous, they just need to eat less and let the vren come back of course,” chirped one of the other frit.

Wenza felt her small heart beating faster in anger at hearing the snake frit act as though they were overeating. Suddenly she blurted out, “There are too many frit in this colony, our numbers are increasing and the vrens are not. Snag frit don’t over eat or the red snake would eat us!”

At the mention of the red snake all the frit listening turned and looked at the red glow and raised their feathers in the air, as was their custom. “Young snag, you have flown too high. The greded frit from whom you descend were the cause of the red snakes' anger ages ago. Perhaps this is why the earth shook in anger today. Should we feed you to the snake so that it doesn’t hurt us for harboring over eating snag frit?”

At this Wenza clamped her beak shut and wished she had not chirped at all, when above her father flew down carrying a hardened gred tipped vren spear. “No one is going to be fed to the red snake,” chirped her father as he landed between Crilly and Wenza.

“We were just teaching her a lesson. She should not be talking back to her elders,” said one of the older snake frit. “And tell us, is this song of young Crilly true. Are the snag frit migrating?”

Wenza’s father looked at Crilly sternly and chirped, “Crilly should not have spoken to you about this. What we do is none of your business.”

“But it is our business, if we don’t have the snag frit to trade our gred to for vren meat then we too may have to leave this valley for the mottled frit have very little need for gred,” responded another older frit.

“That may be true but it is not our problem,” chirped back Wenza’s father.

“Surely you can just eat less vren so that they might come back in numbers,” chirped the old frit who had reprimanded Wenza.

Seeing Wenza's father's defiant look the old frit continued chirping sternly, "the earth has spoken today, our ancestors were warned that someday the earth will give her final shake and bring up all her snakes from within. On that day the frit will be sorted into the good and bad. Any frit that has done a feather of good will see it, and any frit who has done a feather of bad will be punished."

At the mention of the old prophecy all the frit looked back at the dormant red snake and fell into silence.

Not wanting to discuss the old prophecies, Wenza's father chirped back, "there are just too many of us, and much of the meat goes to the mottled frit and to you snake frit." Wenza's father paused and looked around at all the snake frit that had gathered, then added, "we are simply too large of a colony. Would you have the females stop producing eggs?"

The older frit chirped amongst themselves for a bit considering this and finally turned back to Wenza's father. "You may be correct snag frit, we will not stop you from leaving the valley," said the eldest snake frit.

At that, Wenza's father motioned for Wenza and Crilly to follow him. Wenza immediately took to the air and slowly Crilly followed, looking back at her friend Uri several times.

The crevasse above was empty of moths and mottled frit this late at night as they flew up into the open air. Following their father, Wenza and Crilly kept low to the ground and flew from tree to tree until they got back to Gremen Cliff.

Upon entering their tunnel, Wenza's mother chirped sharply at both her daughters for flying away so late at night. "But mother," objected Wenza, "I was just chasing after Crilly."

"That's not an excuse; you both could have been eaten by a screech owl," replied her mother. "Now off to the nest without dinner."

With their crown feathers hanging down Crilly and Wenza hopped into the nest, next to their sleeping brothers. Wenza chirped in irritation to Crilly and fell asleep with a rumbling stomach.

The next morning the two brothers woke up early and began chirping at Wenza and Crilly to tell them what had happened. Wenza chirped on about how the gredded frit thought they should just eat less and threatened to feed her to the red snake.

The thought of their sister being fed to the red snake made them begin to get more serious, and even Crilly began to side with Wenza when their mother landed on the tunnel perch carrying a basket.

Hungry for breakfast the fledglings chirped but instead of bringing the basket to them, their mother placed it on the main chamber and brought them only a few moths to eat. "We are going to have to store some food for our flight," she explained as the fledglings asked for more. The fledglings chirped out low grunts and said they could take it. Getting more and more excited about their adventure, while their mother began to look more and more worried.

Act 3.5

Hopping outside, the children could see the entire frit colony was in a hurry. The snag frit were trading everything they had for moths and new tools. Happily the mottled and snake frit accepted their vren meat and old gred. Flying up to the top of Gremen cliff they found their father who was working with other snag frit to build large baskets that would take at least a dozen frit to carry.

The fledglings had never seen frit make anything this big before and flew around it excitedly. "When are we leaving father?" asked Wenza.

"Some have already left to scout out the route for food and places to nest along the way. The rest of us will leave in the morning," he answered while working to weave more thin twigs into the basket.

"Aren't the other frit going to miss us?" said Crilly to Wenza and her brothers.

"Look how happily they are trading with us, and remember what the gredded frit said last night," answered Wenza.

Subdued, Crilly thought about her friend Uri and sadly followed the other fledglings around when all of a sudden Kim came flying up to them.

"What do you want?" chirped Wenza's two brothers in unison.

A little shocked at their cold greeting Kim paused and Wenza broke in. "Hi, Kim do you want to talk?"

"Ah, ya," he chirped hesitantly.

"Follow me," chirped Wenza and flew off leaving her sister and brothers behind.

They flew around to the side of Gremen cliff where it began turning from sand to hard rock and rounding to form the valley walls. Wenza perched on one of the stones sticking out from the cliff and Kim landed next to her.

"I talked to some of the elder mottled frit," chirped Kim. "They said you could stay with them. You don't have to go."

Wenza's crown feathers crinkled. The thought of leaving her brothers and sister had never occurred to her. "Of course I can't leave my family," chirped Wenza in irritation.

Kim sat in silence for a moment then began to chirp, "But, I thought you liked me?"

Wenza could tell that he was confusing friendship with mating as male frit often do and felt sorry for him. *This is why females are supposed to be the ones to choose mates*, thought Wenza remembering what her mother had sung about young male frit.

Wenza chirped to Kim that maybe one day she would come back, and that it was nice to have known him, then jumped off the rock and opened her wings to fly back to Gremen cliff.

Once there, she saw that small rations of moths were being given to the fledglings on top of the cliff while some of the older frit were teaching a lesson.

"What do we do when we see a predator?" asked the old snag frit.

"Split up, and fly low," chirped the fledglings in unison. Wenza flew in with them and mouthed the words, not wanting to be left behind.

"And then what do we do?" asked the old frit.

"Hide and wait for a signal," answered the fledglings.

The old frit began a loud whistling sound. "Is that it?"

"Noooo," chirped back the fledglings.

Then the old frit picked up a vine in his beak that was attached to a paddle of wood. Swinging the vine around his head the paddle of wood caused the air around him to vibrate in a low hum that could be heard from miles away. Immediately all the fledglings jumped up and flew into the air, chirping happily.

Wenza had almost finished her moth lunch when another old frit began another lesson. He explained how they should travel and pay special attention to leading predators away from the chicks, eggs and food baskets and stay as close as they could to mountain streams because water was too heavy to carry.

The older frit were still working on baskets and sharpening their spears, which Wenza watched eagerly. But she was considered too young to carry one of her own. It would simply slow down her flight too much. Between having to carry the baskets and wait for fledglings to keep up, the adults were worried that the migration would be a long one, and would depend on whether or not the scouts found places to restock on food and sleep in safety.

That night Wenza and her siblings stayed up late, until their mother and father came in and squawked for them to stop their chirping. Wenza dreamt of the red snake eating her family and chirped herself awake. It was nearly day break and everyone else was busily clearing out their tunnels. Wenza began helping and was given moths by her mother who had been getting more and more silent since the news of their departure.

By sunrise all the snag frit had gathered on the top of Gremen Cliff. Most of the mottled frit who weren't busy with their morning work were watching, and even several snake frit had come out of their caverns to see them off.

Some of the early scouts were there to lead the way though the mountains. Chirping in unison each basket was lifted by ten adult frit. The flightless chicks inside began chirping like mad, some excited but most fearful. The adult female frit flew above them with spears and would swoop down to give the chicks food and smooth their feathers.

In no time at all the convoy found itself above the snake frit caves where Crilly spotted her friend Uri and began to shriek, "Uri! Come with us!". To which Uri responded by trying to fly after them. Uri cried out "Crilly!" as she was restrained by her father. Her brothers held onto Crilly her with their claws to make sure she didn't fly away and soon they were at the far mountain and the cries could no longer be heard. It was as far from Gremen cliff as any fledgling had dared to go. Nearly all the frit looked back and could barely make out the tunnel-pocked face of Gremen cliff.

The scouting frit led the convoy around the north side of the mountain where it met another. Between the mountains was a stream that wound its way toward the white hair of the mountains. Occasionally frit would dive down to the stream and bring back water for other frit. It wasn't until noon the convoy set down on the bank of a great waterfall.

The fledglings played in the water trying to race drops by diving down after them, but soon the adults warbled to them to stop and conserve their energy. They had to make a

good distance before nightfall to reach the next safe harbor the scouts had found.

Eating a little of their supplies, adults used their spears to look under rocks and find insects they could eat. These mountains didn't have much green life and therefore little insects, and quickly the convoy set back out on its way.

The flying fledglings were to stay in between the baskets, while the larger adult males patrolled farther from the convoy. It wasn't long before this became extremely boring for them. They had to fly as slow as the basket carriers and not leave the convoy or play flying games. Derum and Brickel couldn't *not* be playing games and soon had nearly the whole convoy playing call and response. They would take turns chirping out quick songs and having the frit around them chirp back. "From my stomach to my beak. From my beak, To yours. From the earth to the land. From the maller sap to the larvae, from the larvae to the caterpillar, from the caterpillar to the moth, from the moth to my beak. From my beak to my stomach, from my stomach to my beak, from my beak to yours." Eventually the songs became more and more complicated and everyone broke into laughter.

"The sun is setting and we still have a long way to go. There may be screech owls in these mountains so you'll have to keep quiet," chirped Wenza's mother who was flying above them.

Sadly and silently they flew on, east through the mountains. The mountain river began to get narrower and narrower until all they could make out was a small stream below them reflecting the moonlight. The air was also getting thinner and colder. The smaller frit were starting to slow down more and more and the hatchlings in the baskets gave out troubled squawks.

They were very close to a small cave the scouts had found earlier and chirps went up that the convoy would be landing soon. And just as Wenza could start to make out the entrance to the cave she heard a squawk that made her hear nearly stop.

"Screech Owl!" shrieked the scouts in the distance.

Wenza and her siblings had never seen a screech owl and had no idea what to do. Suddenly she saw the moon obscured by a huge shape that she instinctively knew was evil magic. The adults not carrying baskets flew at the shape as fast as they could with their spears trying to give the basket carriers time to get in the cave.

Some of the larger males had small gred leaves attached to chains around their necks. As they flew at the screech owl they would spread their wings wide trying to reflect the moon into the screech owl's eyes.

The screech owl was confused and the baskets were making their way into the cave when a cloud began to obscure the moon. Immediately, the screech owl went on the attack. Tearing its way through the adults using its massive beak it headed straight for the convoy of baskets.

Knocking Wenza and her brothers and sister out of the way, the screech owl took hold of the basket in front of them. Then flapping its giant wings, pulled it away from the frit who were carrying it. As the screech owl flew higher the basket tipped and the hatchlings all began to fall squawking in horror.

Some of the adults swooped down to catch them but only managed to save a few. Frustrated, the screech owl began swooping down at the fledglings. It was swooping straight at Wenza when her father bit hold of its tail feathers. Rearing back up in the air to shake off her father, the screech owl's head knocked Wenza high into the air.

Wenza began struggling against a downdraft that seemed to be taking her back down the mountain. Tired and out of breath her wings slowly stopped flapping and all she could do was hold them open and glide with the wind.

She heard the squawks behind her begin to fade as she got farther and farther away. She could see her moon shadow playing over the rocks below her and soon she noticed the shape of another shadow. It was the screech owl following her. Remembering the lesson of the older frit she tried to quickly lose altitude and fly near the rocks below. But the wind was strong and quickly she glanced her small chest on a round stone and bounced awkwardly back into the air.

The screech owl swooped down as Wenza fell onto a rock. As its massive claws came down to grab her she heard a chirp from behind her and saw a figure flying with a lizard spear land next to her. The frit braced the spear against the rock and when the weight of the screech owl's claw came down to grab them the spear went right through it, and with a horrible squawk the screech owl took back to the air with the spear still stuck into its claw.

Wenza's heart was pounding so fast that as she looked and saw Kim perched next to her she began to lose focus and fainted.

Act 3.6

The next morning Wenza awoke in a small makeshift nest in a crack between two boulders. She had never slept in anything but a tunnel before and the huge morning sky and view from the side of the mountain made her squawk in horror.

Instinctively Wenza covered her head and tried to work herself deeper into the crack, when she heard a chirp from above her. "What are you doing?" asked Kim, who was holding a basket of moths.

Realizing how hungry she was, Wenza quickly snapped out of her fear and hopped onto the top of the boulder with Kim. With a moth halfway in her beak she chirped out, "You saved me, didn't you?"

Kim bobbed his crown feathers slightly while eating a moth himself.

"Why did you follow us?" asked Wenza suspiciously, imagining Kim was still interested in mating.

"You don't know what happened," chirped Kim in defense. "The snag frit were forced to leave, it wasn't right."

"What do you mean forced?" chirped Wenza suspiciously.

"The Snag Frit were right, the valley was running out of vren, but we have plenty of moths to feed everyone. In fact we could create several more caves for moths. But the old mottled frit and gredded frit won't let them. They claim they own all the caves since it was their ancestors that discovered them in the first place," chirped Kim pausing to catch his breath.

This wasn't exactly new news to Wenza, she knew the mottled frit and the snake frit didn't want to teach the snag frit their ways. "But if there are plenty of caves and moths for more frit, why would they have us leave?"

"They think the snag frit are the source of the red snake's anger because it was their ancestors that were the gredded frit," answered Kim.

"But that's ridiculous," chirped Wenza.

"I know," chirped back Kim with his neck feathers drooping in sadness.

In frustration Wenza flew down to the stream and began dipping her beak in the water then tilting her head back to let the water run down her throat. Kim joined her and began flapping his wings in the water to bath his feathers. With some mischief in his eyes he smacked his wings against the water and caused a spray to hit Wenza on the face. Wenza sprayed him back and they started to chirp in laughter. But before long Wenza grew serious and flew back onto the boulders to let herself dry in the sun.

Kim flew over and perched in the sun too and waited for Wenza. Suddenly she chirped out, "So why did you follow us?"

"But I already told you, I didn't think it was right for you snag frit to be sent away," chirped back Kim.

Wenza glared at Kim and chirped slyly, "Is that the only reason?"

Kim paused for a moment then blurted out, "Yes, I didn't want to live with frit that would drive other frit off for no reason."

Assuming Kim still wanted to mate with her, Wenza chirped in irritation at his apparent dishonesty. "Whatever," she replied and began flying up the mountain.

Kim picked up his basket that still had several moths in it and flew beside her. The wind had reversed and was helping push them up the mountain. By mid morning they reached the mouth of the cave where Wenza had last seen the convoy. They didn't see anyone.

Flying closer to the ground Wenza could make out frit feathers, bones and beaks. Squawking in terror she flew into the air. Calling to Kim who was just catching up, she chirped, "They're all dead."

Kim immediately put down his basket on a boulder and went to inspect the remains. After a while, he chirped back to Wenza who had landed by the water, "there couldn't be more than ten killed here. The rest must have flown onward. We should be able to catch up to them by nightfall."

Seeing no other option Wenza flew on with Kim higher into the mountains following the narrowing stream. After a few hours of travel the two stopped under some shade and ate the remainder of the moths Kim was carrying then quickly took back to the air. By sunset they could see the shape of the convoy in the distance high above them near the top of the saddle between two mountains.

By nightfall Wenza and Kim could see the reflection of gred shields in the moonlight at the entrance to another small cave. Chirping loudly Wenza called out and flew straight into the cave with Kim. Instantly Wenza's father, mother and two brothers embraced her while Kim stood back. The larger snag frit began to encircle Kim with their spears.

"You don't belong here," chirped one of the snag frit. "The earth shook to warn us to leave your kind."

“Please,” chirped Kim, “I don’t want to be a mottled frit anymore, and I don’t have enough food to make it back to the valley.”

Pulling away from her family Wenza began to notice the commotion, and soon the entire convoy was staring at Kim’s mottled frit markings.

“Kim saved me from the screech owl. He drove a lizard spear through its claw,” chirped Wenza pushing through the male snag frit and standing by Kim.

Soon many of the frit were chirping at once over each other. Some mentioned how they had seen the spear in the screech owl’s claw, others saying that it had just made the screech owl angry, and others still that were just upset that a mottled frit had followed them.

Wenza’s father began to chirp and after not being heard gave out a loud whistle through his nostrils. Everyone turned their head toward him as he began to chirp, “We have lost enough already. I say we count ourselves blessed that this mottled frit heard the same call we did. Kim has speared a lizard and a screech owl’s claw and saved my daughter. I say he is welcome and may become a snag frit.”

Too tired to argue, the other frit began to settle down and Wenza’s family again began to encircle Wenza and include Kim. As her brothers began to ask about the screech owl Wenza noticed a sadness in their chirps. Turning around, Wenza realized Crilly was not there. Chirping in a gasp, Wenza breathed the name of her sister, and her two brothers turned and began to cry. She too began to cry as her mother and father tried to console her and her brothers. “The screech owl should have eaten me,” chirped Wenza sadly.

“Of course not,” chirped her parents in unison. “The earth works in mysterious magic Wenza. If anyone is to blame it is the greed of our ancestors.”

Act 3.7

That night Wenza awoke many times to dreams of her sister crying out in pain. Nothing made sense to her as she opened her eyes surrounded by her family in a makeshift nest. Did the earth really punish frit? She asked herself. Did the actions of our ancestors really justify so much suffering? Why couldn’t the mottled, snake and snag frit all just live together?

Wiggling free from the nest and her family, Wenza hopped out onto the ledge of the cave. She could see the first rays of sunlight coming from the east. They were very near the top of the saddle between two mountains, and should be able to see down the

other side by noon that day, thought Wenza, wondering what they might find there. Would the Earth still punish them once they had left Gremen valley? Looking back into the cave Wenza could make out the shapes of many frit in troubled sleep, clucking, tossing and turning.

Spotting Kim with his head tucked under a wing, she hopped over to him and nudged him with her claw. Slowly his head untucked and he blinked and looked up at her. Quietly she chirped in his ear, "let's fly ahead of the convoy today with the scouts."

Kim bobbed his head and began to stretch as Wenza went to tell her father. Wenza's father opened his eyes and bobbed his head in agreement, then as his eyes closed again he reached out and stroked Wenza's neck feathers with his beak.

Wenza had the feeling that she wasn't a fledgling anymore as she made Kim and her a basket of moths and joined him at the entrance to the cave. Several scouts had already taken off and were heading up the mountain. With a quick nod Kim and Wenza followed them.

As an hour passed the light from the east became brighter and brighter until they saw the sun itself peaking over the saddle between the mountains. Wenza imagined the sun emerging straight out of land on the other side of mountains. Excitedly, Wenza and Kim flew faster and held their breath as they caught up with the scouts that were looking down the other side of the mountains.

It was a lush green valley with cliffs similar to Gremen cliff. Wenza's sharp eyes could almost make out what looked like frit tunnels. This was as far as any of the scouts had ever gone. Looking in their eyes Wenza got a chill of excitement.

Looking back down the mountain Wenza could see the convoy slowly making its way toward them. The valley floor far below the convoy began to look like it was moving and waving to them farewell, when Wenza started to feel a vibration under her claws.

The mountain to the south east of Gremen cliff seemed to be shaking in anger. Kim and the scouts all started to notice it as well. A giant plume of smoke started to rise from its peak as red snakes came spewing forth into the valley. Chirping in fear Wenza, Kim and the scouts began calling to the convoy to hurry.

There seemed to be an endless river of red snakes spitting out and pouring into the valley. As the snakes filled the valley like a red lake they began to rise into the gully and meet with the stream of water they had been following. Steam began to rise and strike the convoy that was flying frantically up the mountain.

As quickly as it started the shaking stopped and the red snakes ceased to rise. The convoy made it to the top of the mountain saddle and nearly all the frit looked back at their old home and began to weep. It was covered in red fading to black. The mottled and snake frit were gone.

Epilogue

The Snag Frit renamed themselves to the Gremen Frit as they started a new life in the valley. The valley was filled with frit who had never used gred before and were still being eaten by screech owls. Wenza and Kim mated and had many hatchlings to whom they sang the song of Gremen Cliff and how the earth had punished the greedy.

Chapter 4: The Spotted Frit and the Gremen's Myths

Act 4.1

It was the tunnel of one of Wenza and Kim's great great grandchildren, where Hohem lived as a fledgling. He was a spotted frit whose ancestors had lived in the valley for as long as anyone could recall. His grandfather had sung to him of the before-time when the Gremen came from the mountains and used their magic to save them from the screech owls. Hohem loved the old songs, learning them was his favorite part of working for the Gremen.

It was a fine spring day outside the tunnel while Hohem fed the hatchlings of Gretchel and Kal who were carving stories into the walls of the main chamber while chirping them out loud. Hohem strained to hear Kal over the hatchlings as he whistled the before-time song of the red snakes after the great rain. Hohem had heard it before but listened intently anyway trying to pick out parts he had forgotten.

Finished with the hatchlings, Hohem sat on the perch of the tunnel for a moment listening to Kal and Gretchel. They had finished the before-time songs and were beginning the song of Gremen and his Magic gred leaves, which Hohem was fascinated by. Their valley had no gred and Hohem loved to try and imagine the mountains speckled in shiny gred. Closing his eyes, Hohem sat on the perch for a moment dreaming of a different world.

Taking a break from their songs, Gretchel checked on her hatchlings who were chirping together softly digesting their morning meal and retweeting parts of the songs they had been sung. Out of the corner of her eye she spotted Hohem daydreaming on the perch.

"Hohem," she chirped, "mind that daydreaming of yours and get to work or you know what will happen."

"Yes, Gretchel," Hohem chirped and let himself fall from the perch. He had many feathers pecked out by the Gremen for being late and was still sore.

Spreading his spotted wings he glided and sank down to the forest floor where other spotted frit were already beginning to herd the mottled moths into a rabble. Picking up a fan stick, Hohem moved into formation and began whisking stray moths into the rabble and toward one of the caves they had dug into the western cliff. There were no snake caves in their valley and so the Gremen had taught the spotted frit how to build tools and dig large caves for the mottled moths.

Approaching one of the caves Hohem quickly flew ahead to help the sap painters. One of

which was Hohem's best friend named Lob. He had dark spots on his beak that everyone had made fun of him for, but Hohem had stood up for him. Hohem quickly noticed Lob was missing a few tail feathers and asked him what happened.

"The Gremen thought I was keeping some moths for myself," chirped Lob softly while dipping his painting stick into the baskets of maller root sap.

Hohem took a painting stick and helped Lob finish the section he was working on. There was nothing he could really say. The Gremen had saved them from the screech owls and taught them how to farm moths and make tools. Sometimes they weren't nice, but they were the Gremen and took care of the spotted frit.

Hohem secretly wanted to be a Gremen, he loved how they spent all day whistling old before-time songs, flying in dances, designing better moth farming systems and new ways to make tunnels. *Without the spotted frit how would they ever have time to do the things they loved that benefited all frit?* thought Hohem.

The rabble of moths was nearly all in the cave now. The spotted frit broke up into two teams, some stayed with the moths to make sure lizards didn't bother them and to make sure they had plenty of sap and stayed in the cave, while the rest went back to the maller trees to guard over the eggs and larvae.

Hohem and Lob stayed in the cave until it was time for the midday meal. When they gathered moths in a basket for their Gremen families and flew off to give it to them. Chirping goodbye, Hohem and Lob split off into separate tunnels. The hatchlings were nearly all on the perch when Hohem flew in. Chirping with happiness they crowded around the basket while Hohem chirped and fluttered his wings to keep them back. In a moment he had them all seated in the main cavern and fed them each a portion.

Kal and Gretchel flew in and began eating with the hatchlings while discussing their mornings. Kal had been designing pillars to support tunnels deeper into the mountains where he hoped to find gred. Gretchel had been designing a dance for the song of Gremen and the magic gred leaves.

"If only we had the snakes here," chirped Kal, "then we could at least refurbish the gred our grandparents brought with them from Gremen Cliff."

"This is how it should be," chirped back Gretchel, "the snakes destroyed Gremen Cliff, may the earth save us if those snakes come here," replied Gretchel.

Hohem fell into a trance listening to them as a Spring thunderstorm started to brew outside. He had never understood why exactly the Gremen attributed frit like feelings to

the earth. He had never felt it move nor had he ever seen it release red snakes. Soon Kal noticed he was no longer feeding the hatchlings and chirped at him sharply to get back to the farms.

Hohem bobbed his head and headed out of the tunnel into the blustering winds and the sound of thunder.

Act 4.2

While flying down to the forest floor Hohem spotted Lob lying awkwardly on the ground. His leg was visibly broken. Hohem's heart beat like mad as he landed next to him. It was obvious what had happened, his Gremen family had cast him out. Lob looked down at the ground and aimlessly pecked at the dirt and didn't even turn to look as Hohem stood next to him.

"Lob," chirped Hohem, not knowing what to do or say. The Gremen rarely hurt a spotted frit and when they did it was usually for their own good. But Hohem knew Lob would never disrespect a Gremen. Once a Gremen cast a spotted frit from their service the Gremen said they were to be left to die, but Hohem couldn't bear it.

It had not rained for over a week and the thunderstorm seemed to be rolling overhead so fast that no rain fell. With the sound of sizzling air a bolt of light shot out of the air and landed on a lone tree not far from Hohem and Lob. The old maller tree with dry bark and leaves caught fire instantly and lit up the clouds above the valley. Nearly all the Gremen frit looked out there tunnels while several spotted frit flew near Hohem to see what was going on.

Hohem knew instantly that the fire was a sign from the ancestors who had always looked after the spotted frit. He quickly chirped to several of the spotted frit around him to help him move Lob to one of the moth caves. Too shocked by the fire, none thought to question Hohem and quickly came back with a basket large enough for Lob. Painfully Lob managed to stand on one claw with the help of Hohem and lay in the basket.

There were several small tunnels in the moth caves that the spotted frit lived in. Only the Gremen were allowed to live in the cliffs. Placing Lob in one of these tunnels several female spotted frit began to look after him. Soon Lob fell unconscious and Hohem flew back to the forest there the tree was still burning.

Hohem had never seen fire himself and was mesmerized by it. Feeling the heat and closing his eyes, Hohem remembered the before-time songs of Hephman and the red snakes. He knew that the red snakes could make fire when they ate things. Hohem's crown feathers were nearly standing straight up when he began to think about the songs

of the red snakes. The snakes had been a blessing to the good frit, they taught Hephman how to refine gred. Perhaps the fire was a message from the red snakes to show the spotted frit the truth. Perhaps the fire was sent as a punishment for the Gremen, thought Hohem in awe.

Hohem tried to get close to the flames, which were quickly dying down, to see if they could tell him anything through their crackling language. He could feel their heat making his down curl and thought back to the song of Hephman; how he had brought gred near the red snake and it had turned it into new shiny gred. Hohem knew where the Gremen stored their old tarnished gred from their homeland, in a tunnel near the base of their nesting cliff. Flying there, Hohem met no other frit and simply grabbed an old lizard spearhead that had become dented and tarnished.

Flying back to the fire, which was quickly turning to hot embers, Hohem tossed the spearhead into the ashes. After waiting a moment the embers were turning darker and darker and the gred showed no signs of changing. Feeling frustrated, Hohem watched as his sign from the red snakes began to fade. Remembering again the song of Hephman and how he had fed different things to the red snake, he had an idea. Perhaps the fire needed to be fed more of what it was already eating. Flying around Hohem picked up several small twigs with his beak and dropped them on the embers that were still hot. Instantly they blazed into fire. Hohem felt proud of himself but was worried that he might be playing with bad magic.

Looking up at the parting clouds Hohem could see the sun and knew that the red snakes were not mad at him. Flying about, Hohem began gathering more sticks and feeding the fire. It was getting to be later in the day and the sun would soon start to set below the western mountains and his Gremen family would be expecting him, but seeing the fire and thinking of Lob made Hohem know he could not go back. Instead he decided he should go check on Lob, but as he began to fly away he realized that if he stopped feeding the fire it would vanish. *The red snakes would not have sent them fire for no reason and would be upset if it went out*, thought Hohem.

Perhaps I can take the fire with me, thought Hohem when he spotted a tree branch that was only half burnt and had one end still red with embers. Grabbing the cool end with his claws, he flew toward the moth cave. The embers were still hot when he got there and as the sun was starting to set the glow from the embers brought many of the spotted frit from their tunnels.

Quickly setting down the glowing stick in the center of the cave, Hohem flew outside and grabbed as many small sticks as he could. Bringing them back, he placed them around the embers and waited. Quickly one of the small sticks caught fire, then the rest. The other spotted frit chirped in fear. But as they watched Hohem standing close, they

became brave and began coming out of their tunnels.

“What magic have you done?” chirped one of the elder spotted frit.

“The red snakes sent a beam of light and created fire for Lob and as a punishment for the Gremen,” chirped Hohem. The words just seemed to pour out of his beak without thinking. Seeing the frit shocked by his words Hohem felt spurred to go on, “the Gremen have treated us poorly and when they hurt Lob the red snakes became angry and sent us fire.”

The other frit were all so shocked that there was fire in their cave they didn’t know what to do.

“Why have you brought the fire here?” asked the old frit.

“The red snakes would not have me let his fire die, we must keep feeding it. You there,” Hohem pointed at a few of the watching frit, “go and fetch as much wood as you can while I will go and speak with Lob.”

It was obvious that Hohem possessed great magic and the frit took his orders as instantly as they would a Gremen and flew outside. Feeling confident in his new authority, Hohem hopped over to the tunnel where Lob was laying. Lob was awake but in a lot of pain. He chirped softly to Hohem asking him what all the commotion was about.

“I believe that the red snakes sent down the beam of light and created the fire for you Lob, and I have brought it back here to the cave,” chirped Hohem.

Lob simply blinked at Hohem, not sure what he was talking about.

“The great Hephman from the Gremen before-time songs had his leg broken just like you Lob, and he was part of a working class of sand cutter frit, and he brought the magic of the red snakes to his advantage and used it to punish the gredded frit. Don’t you see Lob, the Great Hephman has sung to the snakes to send us fire because of you. The gredded frit in the stories are the same as the Gremen frit today,” chirped Hohem enthusiastically. Everything was starting to make sense in his mind and Lob was starting to nod as well.

Excited at Lob’s agreement, Hohem went on, “The Gremen don’t talk about it, but from what I know of their before-time songs, the Gremen are the direct descendents of the gredded frit in the old stories. They were the ones that were punished by Hephman and the red snakes.”

Lob blinked his eyes curiously and looked down at his leg, then out of his small tunnel to the light of the fire. "Hohem, are you saying that the Gremen need to be punished?" chirped Lob in a hush.

"Why else would Hephman have sent us fire after the Gremen hurt you?" chirped back Hohem.

"But the Gremen taught us to make tools, drive off the screech owls and farm. We owe service to them, and if we no longer obey them they will no longer teach us," replied Lob. Looking down at his broken leg he continued, "We would nearly all be dead if it weren't for them teaching us to build nets for the screech owls."

"I know," chirped Hohem, pausing for a moment then looking at Lob. "Did you really steal food from your Gremen family?"

Lob shook his head sincerely and adjusted his good leg to a more comfortable position. "Of course I didn't." he chirped.

"Well then," chirped Hohem dramatically, "the Gremen can make mistakes, and from their before-time songs we know they treated the sand cutters like they do us and were punished for it. But they have yet to learn their lesson."

Hohem and Lob chirped on for many hours deciding what must be done. Hohem even began etching the song onto the soft stone walls in the script he had seen the Gremen use. He carved the song of the Gredde Frit breaking the leg of the Great Hephman, and Hephman bringing the red snakes to punish the gredde frit. Then how the gredde frit were forced to leave their valley and then began enslaving the spotted frit as they had the sand cutters. Hohem continued the song on the wall and began to show the Gredde frit casting Lob down as they had Hephman and breaking his leg. Then Hohem began to draw Hephman flying high in the sky alongside a giant snake and telling the snake to spit down fire for the spotted frit.

By the time Hohem and Lob had finished etching into the wall, the fire that would punish the Gremen, several elder spotted frit came in and behind them came Kal and Gretchel.

"Why have you let them in?" chirped Lob in anger. Hohem had never seen Lob angry before and none of the spotted frit ever spoke to the Gremen like that. Silence came over the tunnel as Kal's breast heaved up and down in anger. The Gremen were significantly bigger than the spotted frit and the sight of Kal's heaving body made everyone afraid, except Lob.

Feeling confidence from Lob, Hohem broke the silence, "You Gremen have treated us just as you did the sand cutters, and have broken Lob's leg just as you did the Great Hephman's, and now you will be punished."

The elders and the spotted frit that were listening from the main cave chirped in fear. At the mention of the sand cutters Kal's breast seemed to lose some of its anger and Gretchel broke in, "what are you talking about Hohem, we have always treated you like one of our own. Our ancestors learned from Hephman and Wenza and we no longer wear gred, nor do we keep mates away from frit. We have given you spotted frit a good life, you must see that."

Hohem bobbed his head slightly but after a moment looked up defiantly, "No," he chirped, "we will no longer be satisfied as your servants, if there was any debt to be paid for your help; it was paid by our parents, grandparents and great grandparents. It is not our debt."

"Hohem," chirped Kal in a soft tone. "We Gremen spend our lives learning to build better caves and farm more efficiently and then teaching these things to you spotted frit. It is for the benefit of all of us. If you spotted frit stop serving us it will hurt us all, if we are to farm for ourselves then how will we ever have time to study and learn new things?"

"You forget Kal, I know all your tweets, whistles and songs. That was the same before-time song and excuse the greded frit used to enslave the sand cutters and you were punished for it," chirped Hohem sternly.

Lob chirped in agreement and sang to the other spotted frit to make the Gremen leave. Cautiously the elder spotted frit were joined by some younger frit who encircled Kal and Gretchel with their wings and began herding them out of the cave.

Hohem followed them and saw as Kal's eyes fixed hungrily on the fire that was still being fed. "Look well Kal, that fire will be your punishment." With which Kal abruptly took to the air with Gretchel and flew toward their nesting cliff.

Act 4.3

Kal and Gretchel flew as fast as they could back toward their cliff and landed on the top ledge and chirped loudly for the other Gremen to join them. Nearly all the adult and elder Gremen flew up to meet them and sat in a large circle. Everyone was already shaken up from the lightning and fire that day and were curious what Kal and Gretchel might have to say.

As their chatters died down Kal began to whistle, "My Gremen, the spotted frit have decided that they no longer need us as their protectors and teachers."

Angry chirps went up throughout the Gremen as Kal continued, "They don't seem to understand that what we Gremen do is for the benefit of all frit. I recommend we set an example for those spotted frit who think they can turn their backs on us."

Chirps of agreement went up but Gretchel didn't join them. Hopping into the center of the circle the Gremen grew silent as she began to chirp, "my ancestor Urza warned that someday the earth will give a final shake and bring all her snakes from within. On that day all frit will be sorted into the good and bad. Any frit that has done a feather of good will see it, and any frit who has done a feather of bad will be devoured."

Everyone had heard the before-time songs and listened solemnly as she continued, "not only that but the spotted frit have learned to tame fire, they are keeping it in their cave. The earth is making her judgment on us."

One of the older frit chirped out, "what are you saying Urza? We have done no wrong. We do not wear gred or keep the spotted frit from mating. Our ancestors were the ones chosen by the earth when she set loose the snakes on the sand cutters. If the spotted frit have learned some magic to tame fire, it will turn on them like all bad magic does."

The other frit chirped in agreement, but Gretchel stood her ground and chirped back, "I think we have forgotten some of the before-before time songs and that we have interpreted the before-time songs wrong. What if our ancestors were being punished for treating the sand cutters as we do the spotted frit today?"

"Nonsense, the words of Urza are clear," chirped Kal. "She clearly chirped that the earth had punished them for wearing gred. Besides, we have done so much good for the spotted frit."

An older frit chirped in, "Kal is right, we need to set an example tomorrow. As the sun rises we should throw a bound spotted frit from the cliff for all to see."

The others chirped in agreement and set about capturing the spotted frit that were nearby serving the Gremen families. Several of the spotted frit who had overheard this flew as fast as they could toward the moth caves. "Let them go," chirped Kal as he helped to tie up the spotted frit they had captured, "let them tell the other spotted frit what will happen to them all if they disobey us."

Act 4.4

The escaping spotted frit arrived in the moth cave that night to the scene of nearly all the other spotted gathered around the fire listening to Hohem and Lob. Quickly they chirped to the group what they had heard and how the Gremen were going to kill several spotted frit in the morning.

Chirps of fear went up from the gathered frit, but this incensed Hohem and Lob. Chirping loudly, Hohem addressed the frit, "It is as we have sung, the Gremen have become bad. Their own ancestors warned that someday the earth will give a final shake punish them. That day is upon us. The Great Hephman has made us the keepers of the fire and we will set it loose upon the Gremen."

At first the frit chirped in a hesitant agreement. Then as Lob managed to stand on his one leg they fell back into silence, "By the Great Hephman, we will never let the Gremen hurt us again," he chirped zealously.

With this the spotted frit's fear began to turn to excited anger as they chirped the name Hephman louder and louder.

The spotted frit planned all night under the glow of the fire and when day was starting to break they had decided on a plan. One half of the spotted frit flew off to the top of the Gremen nesting cliff. Hohem and Lob, who was being carried in a basket, were at the head of this group and could see the figures of several spotted frit tied together at the top of the cliff.

Kal stood next to the tied frit and nearly all the adult frit were standing about with their chests puffed into the air. "This is what will happen to all of you if you do not obey us, your saviors," chirped Kal loudly.

At this Hohem whistled loudly and in response the group of spotted frit spread out in the air so that the Gremen could not see what was happening at the base of the cliff, where the rest of the spotted frit were flying low, all carrying sticks with glowing embers. Quickly they darted into the lower tunnels of the Gremen and set the embers in their nests.

Small chirps and screeches could be heard from below as hatchlings cried out. Fledglings began flying out of their smoking tunnels and chirping in fear. As Kal's eyes grew large, Hohem chirped out sharply, "The Great Hephman has made us the keepers of the fire and we have judged the Gremen as bad. If your hatchlings are pure the fire will not devour them."

Immediately the adult Gremen took to the air and dove toward their nests to rescue their hatchlings, but it was too late. As their tunnel systems became more and more complex the Gremen had started using wooden pillars to support the structure. These pillars had caught fire and as the Gremen tried to pull their hatchlings from their nests the entire cliff began to shake and rumble. As the wooden pillars lost their strength, the entire cliff face fell onto the Gremen in their tunnels.

Flying down to the ground the spotted frit gathered around Hohem and Lob amazed at what had just happened. A large number of the Gremen had died and the remaining ones wallowed on the ground in sorrow.

Hohem chirped loudly and all the frit fell silent. "The keepers of the fire have spoken and punished the Gremen for harming us spotted frit. From this point forward, may all frit be treated equally and remember this day."

Epilogue

From that time forth the spotted frit called themselves Hephman. The remainder of the Gremen relinquished their role as the upper class and began living separately from the Hephman, only making contact to trade goods and services. The Gremen began to specialize in finding clever ways to build tunnels and farm moths and other insects. Some even began encasing the fire's embers in stone hearts that could get hot enough to melt their old gred into new shapes and revived the old ways of the snake frit.

After many generations the differences between the Gremen and the Hephman began to blur. Their valley that had once seemed huge was getting more and more full of frit, and the two types of frit began breeding with each other. While some Gremen and Hephman stayed segregated the majority were a mixture and called themselves fire frit.

Chapter 5: The Fire Keeper's Tokens

Act 5.1

The fire frit had a mixture of the features of the Hephman and the Gremen. Their beaks were larger than the Gremen and smaller than the Hephman and their feathers were a mixture of spots and stripes. Once such fire frit was the distant relative of Hohem who was called by the old Gremen name; Flannit, which was a name often used for the first hatched male.

Flannit's father had been a Gremen, who was both a skilled jumping vren trapper and a gred smith. After his father died and was passed into the fire, Flannit inherited his cave, where he kept a small workshop. There weren't many frit left in the valley that knew the old ways of the snake frit, but Flannit's father was one and had passed on the knowledge to his oldest son, as was the custom.

His father had built a stone heart forge there out of rocks, where he taught his son to fashion the rare gred into vren traps and cages for river salamanders. Flannit's fledgling sons would fetch him wood to keep the fire going. It had been alive in the family since his father was a fledgling frit. If it ever went out, he would have to pay nearly a week's worth of food to the fire keepers to replace it.

Flannit often thought the fire keepers were a strange lot of frit. They were mostly descendants of the hatchlings of Lob and spent their time tending fires that they vowed never to let die. Since nearly all the frit prayed to small fires before nesting, used them to hone their spears and to cook their moth larvae, the fire keepers were always well taken care of. But what Flannit found strange was the rituals they created around the fire. They seemed to get more elaborate each season, supposedly because the Great Truth, which the fire was said to be the embodiment, commanded it.

The best Flannit could figure was to feed his family from the jumping vren he caught and trade his gred work for other things his family needed and wanted, like moths, baskets, and nice tunnels to be built for his hatchlings.

That morning, as the sun came over the mountains, Flannit and his four sons were busy adding twine to a large basket to take to the market. Once it was sturdy, they piled in several gred items the Flannit had made, as well as some vren meat. Flannit took the lead grasping onto one of the five handles with his claws, while his fledgling sons took the others. Into the air they flew toward the center of Heph valley, as the frit had come to call it.

It was a market day, and groups of frit carrying baskets could be seen traveling from

around the entire valley, all heading toward the same location, as if pulled by a magnet. Flannit's fledglings loved market days and chirped together as they tried to be the first to identify the frit they knew from around the valley.

It was hard work for the frit to carry their baskets to market and by the time Flannit and his fledglings set down they were exhausted and hungry. Their vren meat would get them a week's worth of moths and some moth larvae that they could store for later in the season. Quickly Flannit went to make trades carrying a smaller basket with a portion of his meat, while his fledglings looked after their large basket.

Flannit flew through the market chirping "vren meat" as loud as he could, while listening to the chirping offers of the moth merchants below. The colony of frit had gotten so large that it had become commonplace to not know the frit you met very well. Flannit was looking for some unfamiliar moth merchants to trade with because new frit to market usually gave the best prices. Not seeing anyone new and hearing an offer of eight moths for vren meat from a merchant below, Flannit swooped down and dropped his basket for the frit to inspect.

The moth selling frit quickly inspected the meat to make sure it was fresh and cocked her head and tipped her crest feathers in approval. Seeing her happy Flannit chirped, "eight moths and two batches of larvae if you please."

The merchant chirped back in irritation, "You vren trappers are demanding more and more for less and less meat every day."

"But that's because there are less vren to be trapped each and every day. We can't farm vren like you do moths. I have gred in my basket if you would like some," chirped Flannit.

The moth merchant flicked back her crown feathers and chirped, "what use have I got for gred," and without chirping another tweet, deposited the eight dead moths and two batches of squirming larvae into Flannit's basket after removing his vren meat.

Flying back to his fledglings, Flannit placed four of the moths out for his fledglings to eat, and wrapped the larvae in loose down and placed them carefully with the other moths at the bottom of their large basket. After eating a moth himself, he gathered more vren meat in a small basket and flew back into the air.

By mid morning he had exchanged all his vren meat for moth and larvae and was left trying to sell his gred. The only merchant interested in gred was a frit that had dried and ground maller root sap into a fine powder. Flannit's mate Spaio loved to eat nearly everything with the powder on it, and so Flannit traded a good amount of his gred work for the powder. Disappointed that gred was becoming less and less valuable to the frit

he flew the powder back to his fledglings who were playing tag around the large basket.

Packing all their goods safely in the large basket, Flannit and his fledglings took to the air and flew back to their tunnel. Spaio was waiting for them and quickly inspected what they had brought back. Seeing all the untraded gred still in the basket her crown feathers began to bob in irritation.

“Fledglings, after you tend the fire you may go play,” she chirped sternly. Hearing some anger in her voice, the fledglings flew as quick as they could to the workshop cave. Spaio then turned to Flannit and chirped, “Flannit, why are you not selling the gred spearheads and vren cages?”

“The jumping vren are disappearing Spaio. The other vren trappers are moving,” Flannit chirped back sadly with his crown feathers hanging over the back of his head.

“What’s going to happen next season Flannit. If we have no more vren to trade and no one wants your gred our fledglings will starve!” she chirped emphatically.

Flannit merely stood there with his crown feathers down. Still angry, Spaio continued, “You can’t just give up Flannit. You have all the gred your father passed onto you, it can’t *all* be useless.”

Tired of being chirped at, Flannit left the basket with Spaio and flew toward his workshop.

Act 5.2

Flannit spent the rest of the day working at his forge trying to come up with some use for the old gred he had laying around. One of his fledglings came and gave him a supper of moths which he pecked at in despair. Spaiio is right, he thought sadly, I'll have to give up both gred smiting and vren trapping.

After eating a few more beakfulls of moth, Flannit left his workshop and went to look after his vren traps. One after another he found empty and sadly returned to his workshop carrying a bundle of sticks in his beak. Too upset to go back to his nest, Flannit pulled out a small nest he used when he was tending the fire at night and settled into an uneasy sleep in his workshop.

Since he was a young fledgling, he had been trained to wake up once an hour to remove ashes from the fire and add wood, but Flannit found himself unable to wake amidst a terrible dream. In it Flannit saw the young hatchlings of the Gremen being burnt in their nests by the spotted frit. Diving down he tried to save them but in every nest he found only charred wood and dead hatchlings. At the end of his dream he too caught fire and fell from the cliff to the ground where the fire cooled and slowly went out.

Jolted awake, Flannit realized he had overslept and his fire was out. *I've let my fathers fire go out*, thought Flannit ashamed. Warbeling sadly as tears streamed down his eyes he felt the embers with his feather tips searching for heat, but they were cold. His fledglings came and found Flannit curled in a corner of his workshop

Quickly they chirped around him asking him if everything was alright. Slowly he gained his composure and clamped his beak tight.

"Watch over the vren traps, and take care of your mother, I will be back in one day," he chirped seriously.

"But where are you going," his fledglings chirped sadly.

"I must visit the fire keepers," he chirped back and hopped out of the workshop.

Gathering a small basket of moths and eating a little for breakfast, without disturbing Spaiio, Flannit flew off to the cave of the fire keepers, which was on the opposite side of the valley from him. As he flew he saw fires in the caves of many frit and wished the fire keepers allowed the frit to share fire amongst themselves, but that had been forbidden to all except those the descendants of Hohem and Lob.

It was nearly noon by the time Flannit made it to the fire cave. The rocks all around it

had images of fire carved into them amidst images of the Great Hephman sending down the fire from the sky to embody his truth.

Hopping slowly into the cave it became darker and darker. It was a long deep cave that had been carved out by hundreds of frit. Rounding a corner, Flannit came to see the light from small bits of burning mottled moth sap in pockets in the walls, and following another twist the great fire became visible and illuminated the large cave with smoky shadows.

Blocking his way were several fire keepers. Much of their feathers were burnt or charred and their two crown feathers were nothing more than bony spikes. Flannit thought they looked horrible, but it had become their custom to burn their feathers to show commitment to the Great Hephman and his fire of truth.

The head fire keeper whose name was Kern, recognized Flannit and began to chirp solemnly, as the fire keepers always did. "Flannit, of Barda, who was the hatchling of Murdos, who was the first hatchling of Timmel, whose great-great grandfather was the Great Hohem, and an acolyte of fire" Kern chirped and paused dramatically, while bobbing his crown bone up and down.

"What brings you to the temple of fire?" Kern continued while looking in the basket Flannit was carrying.

Putting down the basket, Flannit chirped slowly, "The fire of my forge has gone out and I can no longer work the skills of the snake frit, which my father taught me."

"You know that you must pay tribute to the Great Hephman for his fire, and you have only brought a few moths," chirped Kern while continuing to bob his crown bone.

"I mean no disrespect, but this is all my family can afford to give up. There are less and less jumping vren in the valley and there are less and less frit that need my gred," chirped Flannit sadly.

Kern's crown feathers straightened as he cocked his head into the air in a smile and chirped, "Then you have come to the right place Flannit. To know what is right, you must know the truth. This is why the Great Hephman sent us fire. Fire is the physical embodiment of truth, all that the Great Hephman stands for."

Flannit always hated hearing about the *Great* Hephman and wished the fire keepers would just act like normal frit, but seeing no other option he went along. Dropping his crown feathers around his ears coverts and holding his wingtips out, he chirped what all frit were taught when they were hatchlings,

"Hephman leads my flock.
I bear feathers that there is none greater than Hephman.
I bear feathers that the Hohem is the messenger of Hephman.
I bear feathers that the fire is Hephman's truth.
I come to pray for Hephman's truth.
I come for the good of all frit.
Hephman leads my flock."

Flannit felt silly chirping the mantra because his father had never really taken it seriously. Their family had always been good at keeping their own fire going and so never needed the fire keepers approval. Nonetheless, Kern and the other fire keepers closed their eyes in reverence, turned and opened their sooty wings to the fire.

"It has been too long since your family has sought the truth. Welcome Flannit you may enter," Kern chirped reverently.

Flannit slowly hopped into the main chamber which had a massive fire blazing in the center of it. There were several other frit gazing deeply into the fire looking for answers to their questions. Flannit found space in between them and began staring at the fire and listening to its crackle. Young fledglings that had been sent to service with the fire keepers came in and out carrying bundles of wood to feed the fire and slowly the thick smoke of the maller roots began to lull Flannit into a daze. He tried to let his eyes remain soft and not follow the dancing flames but instead look through them, but now and then a spark would catch his eye and pull him back into himself for a moment.

After about an hour of breathing the smoke and staring at the fire and not hearing the voice of the Great Hephman, as other frit claimed they did, Flannit was ready to quit and began letting his vision follow the flames around the top of the cave. He could see where the fire keepers had carved and painted in spirals on the ceilings. There was the before-time song of the Great Hephman learning to sing to the fire snake and learning the truth about the evil gredded frit. Beyond that was the song of the Gremen being forced to move to another valley where they enslaved the spotted frit. Finally it showed the Great Hephman and having his snakes in the sky send down fire to Hohem in order to punish the Gremen. In the center of the ceiling was an image of Hephman with fire coming from his beak.

Staring at the image of Hephman and the fire that was *his* truth, Flannit felt an inspiration. *Perhaps all frit would like to have images of the Great Hephman in their homes?!* Excited by the idea, Hephman nearly started chirping out loud. Hopping his way back to the fire chamber's entrance he found Kern pecking at the moths he had left in his basket. Seeing Flannit so excited Kern cocked his head and chirped, "Has the Great Hephman shown you the truth?"

"I had an idea... er yes," chirped Flannit awkwardly with his crown feathers bobbing eagerly.

"The Great Hephman works in mysterious ways Flannit, you must understand that whatever this idea is, it was given to you by his greatness," chirped Kern sternly.

Still feeling as though the fire frit were full of nonsense Flannit decided it was in his best interest to go along. "Yes," he chirped. "The Great Hephman has shown me the truth. He wants me to create tokens in his image using his fire."

Kern thought this over for a moment as his eyes narrowed. "You will be given embers to restart your forge Flannit as long as you bring these tokens you speak of to me by sunset."

Happily, Flannit cocked his head, as Kern chirped to one of his fledgling assistants to bring Flannit a fire parcel. Quickly the fledgling brought back a chunk of red embers surrounded by maller root sap. Placing the parcel in his basket Flannit opened his wings to it and said Hephman prayer, ending with, "Hephman leads my flock."

Flannit was very hungry as it was approaching evening and carrying the fire parcel was hard work. He was still light headed from the maller smoke and by the time he got home he nearly collapsed into his workshop, where Spaio and his fledglings were waiting. Gently stroking the neck feathers of Spaio and his fledglings he told them that the fire keepers had given him fire again only on the condition that he brought them a token the next day.

Spaio brought him food and the fledglings set to work gathering sticks as Flannit removed the ashes from his forge and placed the fire parcel within. As his fledglings brought back sticks, Flannit, feeling he should respect the fire keepers rituals, had the entire family say the prayer of Hephman. That being done, Flannit quickly set to work with a beak chisel at a small stone. Delicately he chipped away at it while his fledglings tended to the fire and the jumping vren traps.

Soon Spaio came and put the fledglings to nest and brought Flannit a moth. "Flannit, you're already exhausted, please come to nest with us. You can work on the token in the morning."

Taking the chisel out of his beak, Flannit chirped, "No Sapio, I will be lucky to finish the one side of the mold tonight then I must start on the other half." Without saying a word Flannit grabbed the chisel in his beak and began chipping again. Feeling the urgency his head came down too hard and the rock he was working on cracked in half.

“Please just let me work Spaio,” chirped Flannit in irritation as he started over on a new rock.

Spaio bobbed her head and went to nest with the fledglings as Flannit continued to chisel away at the stone. By morning Flannit had finished both halves of the rock mold and decided to take a short nap, and just as he fell asleep his fledglings woke him with their chirps “Father’s we’ve caught two vren this morning!” They chirped happily and jumped up and down and flapped their wings.

Trapping two vren in a day was a very rare occurrence and Flannit looked over to the rocks he had carved and wondered if perhaps the Great Hephman were smiling down on his family. After eating their fill of fresh vren meat, Flannit and his fledgling all went to fetch as much wood as they could to stoke up the fire. It had to be very very hot to melt gred.

Placing his carved rocks on the forge they began to get hotter and hotter until they faintly began to glow. At which point Flannit began dropping scrap pieces of old gred into where he had carved on the rock. After nearly an hour the gred began to shine then lose its shape and melt into a liquid that neatly filled the carved rock. Then Flannit placed the other rock on top and pressed it gently with a stick so that the two rocks sandwiched the melted gred inside. With his fledgling's help, they used wooden sticks to move the rock mold off the forge and place it in a bowl of water. It sizzled and sizzled, and after several minutes was cool enough to touch. Placing the rock mold on the ground Flannit used a chisel to knock it open and out of it fell a thin small round token with a hole in the middle.

It shined golden in the morning sun coming into the cave and the fledglings chirped in happiness. Hearing the commotion Spaio hopped into the tunnel and also chirped at how beautiful it was. Flannit picked it up and showed them how on one side he had placed an image of the Great Hephman so that the hole in the middle centered on his open eye, and on the other side of the token there were flames coming out of the hole to represent Hephman’s truth.

Spaio had been braiding twine that morning from small thin grasses and had some hanging around her neck. Taking this off she threaded it into the hole in the middle of the token then tied the twine around Flannit’s neck.

Act 5.3

As Flannit flew with the shiny gred token around his neck to the fire keepers, other frit saw the token and chirped at how beautiful it was. Flying into the cave, Flannit found

Kern, who instantly saw the token and chirped, "Praise be the Great Hephman!"

Flannit took off the token and used his wings to place the twine around Kern's neck. Kern's chest puffed up and his crown feather stood on end as he entered the main chamber. The other fire frit noticed at once and came to inspect the token. Seeing the image of Hephman and his fire they all began to say Hephman's prayer. Flannit decided it would be best if he chirped in and together they finished in chorus, "Hephman leads my flock."

Afterward Kern took Flannit aside and chirped to him softly so the other frit could not hear. "Flannit, you have done a great thing. Hephman truth is strong in you. Have you considered becoming a fire keeper to better serve *Him*?"

Flannit cocked his head and looked down, not wanting to say what was really on his mind which was eager to get out of there. Softly he chirped, "my father taught me the ways of the snake frit and those ways will be taught to my fledglings. I can't follow a different path."

"So be it," chirped Kern, while bobbing his head. "You may serve Hephman in your own way. The fire frit value your skills greatly, if you can make more of these we will give you enough food to feed your family."

Flannit's crown feathers bobbed excitedly as he agreed. With the mold already made he would be able to make more of the tokens quickly. Kern had one of his fledgling assistants give Flannit a basket of moths and Flannit flew from the fire cave with a happy heart. Arriving home, Spaio and the fledglings greeted him with chirps and laughter as they ate some of the moths the fire keepers had given Flannit.

The entire family spent the rest of the day gathering all the scrap pieces of gred together they could. Spaio decided that before they made too many tokens for the fire keepers they should go to the market and purchase all the old gred they could using the nearly all moths and their vren meat, so that the other snake frit would not start making their own tokens. Flannit thought this was a great idea. While he began chiseling a copy of his original mold, Spaio along with the fledglings, loaded their large basket with vren meat and flew it to market.

It was evening when Spaio came back with the fledglings carrying a huge load of gred. Flannit had nearly finished chipping at his second token mold and chirped happily to see the huge pile of gred they had brought back.

"This is only as much as we could carry back. The other snake frit are giving up their forges because no one is buying gred anymore," chirped Spaio happily. "We are to go

and fetch the rest of their gred tomorrow.”

“Your parents should have named you Wenza! You’re so clever,” chirped Flannit happily.

The family slept well that night. At dawn they ate their remaining moths and as Flannit began heating his molds, Spao and the fledglings flew with an empty basket to pick up the gred they could not carry the previous day. By the time they had brought back their first load of gred, Flannit had melted the gred into the molds and was ready to place them in water. The fledglings helped him and soon two shiny gred tokens chimed together.

The fledglings began playing with them by having one brother hold the gred token while another flicked it with their claw making it spin on the hard stone floor. But before long Spao took the fledglings with her on another trip for more gred, and Flannit started on another pair of tokens. Looking at the pile of gred he had to work with Flannit imagined he would never run out.

Spao and the fledglings came back once again with more gred and they cooled the second set of tokens then had their noon meal. Spao congratulated her mate and strung the four tokens along some more twine she had made and placed it around Flannit’s neck. The Spao chirped goodbye as Flannit flew off to the fire temple with the tokens and fledglings carrying a large empty basket.

The fire keepers were so happy to have a token like Kern they gave Flannit as many moths and moth larvae as they could carry back home. Spao couldn’t stop her crown feathers from bobbing up and down in happiness as she cooked the moth larvae. The moth larvae were too bitter to eat without cooking and after it was cooked and sprinkled with maller power it could be stored for an entire season without going bad. Flannit tried to think of what to do with all the fresh moths they had. They could throw a feast for their families, he thought, but the idea seemed odd. The frit had several holidays to celebrate their ancestors and the lunar cycles. It would be strange to have a feast before one of these.

Spao had been thinking over what to do with their new surplus in food and came across the idea of the other snake frit who were giving up their gred. “What if we give the other snake frit around the valley food and in exchange they will work for us making more tokens?”

Flannit thought this over and liked that his mate was so clever. Thinking critically he asked Spao, “But why, if they learn that the tokens are so valuable, won’t they just make their own?”

“Because we have nearly all their gred now!” chirped Spaio excitedly.

Chirping together late into the night, Spaio and Flannit hardly got any sleep. In the morning Flannit went to work building another copy of his stone mold, and as they planned, Spaio along with the fledglings, flew off to the other frit that had forges of their own.

It took Spaio many hours to track them down because they had all abandoned their workshops to find work elsewhere. When approached they all chirped happily that they could use their snake frit skills again and agreed that on the next day they would start producing the tokens the Flannit had created. Spaio introduced the fledglings to the gred smiths and chirped that they would fly around and assist them.

Happily, Spaio and the fledglings returned to find Flannit ready for their help in cooling the molds for three tokens. Once done, Flannit placing the three tokens on a string of twine around his neck. Then he and the fledglings flew to the fire keepers with a large basket for their payment. While they were gone, Spaio flew the three molds to three of the forge owning frit she had met with that day and had them begin making copies of the molds. She also brought them all moths to eat and they happily started chipping away.

Spaio flew back to her tunnel feeling happy but a little wary. *What if all the fire frit no longer want more tokens?* she worried. *What then? Hopefully other frit will think they are special too and start wanting them. But what about when every frit has one?* Even though there were several thousand frit in their valley, it was in Spaio’s nature to think long term. That’s when it hit her. *What if the frit started carrying the tokens to market instead of their products?* They could carry far more tokens than they could anything else and the tokens were worth a lot. Flannit was bringing home at least five moths per token, Spaio thought excitedly.

Spaio arrived home at nearly the same time as Flannit and the fledglings and they quickly chirped about their afternoons. Flannit chirped how excited the fire keepers were to get tokens of their own, and the fledglings chirped about the fifteen moths they had been given in return. Spaio began telling Flannit about her idea that all the frit will want their own tokens and that eventually they could be used for trading at the market.

Flannit considered this and agreed as usual with her as a good mate does. *Using tokens to pay for services and trade goods would be far easier than carrying baskets on useless trips to the market, he thought* but he couldn’t imagine why anyone would want to have more than one of these tokens.

“Take Hogram for instance,” chirped Flannit talking. “He is one of the elders that runs a

small moth cave.”

“Yes I know of him,” chirped back Spaio feeling a little defensive about her idea.

“Well,” continued Flannit. Let’s chirp he has a token, which he purchased from us, or the fire keepers. Why would he want another?”

“In order that he can fly it to market and purchase moth larvae, or new baskets, or pay his workers with it,” answered Spaio decisively.

“Let me get this straight,” chirped Flannit slowly while cocking his head down. “Hogram is going to spend five moths purchasing another token so that he can use the token instead of his five moths to purchase something else?”

Spaio’s crown feathers went back in an innocent look. “Well, when you whistle it that way.” Spai paused and continued, “But what about when a spear maker wants to get a new basket? Since basket makers don’t need spears, he would have to trade the spear to a moth rabble defender for larvae or moths, then he would have to trade those moths for the basket, which could take him a long time, even days. If instead the spear maker could trade the spear for tokens then he could use the tokens to purchase anything.”

Flannit’s head was still cocked down, trying to take in the full idea. “It might work Spaio, but still I can’t see and frit going through the effort to get more than one token, when he doesn’t know that other frit will want the new token in exchange for any more than what he bought the token for. Why trade something to get a token and only to be able to get that something back again?”

Spaio’s crown feathers bobbed in irritation, but Flannit’s chirps sang true. Seeing that he had won the squabble, Flannit began to think about what he had just chirped. “But what if we could guarantee the tokens?”

Spaio, who was also thinking, chirped in agreement. “What if we wanted to have many frit of all sorts to build something for us? We could pay them with the tokens with the promise that they could redeem the tokens for one batch of stored larvae or a fire parcel.”

“But what would we want them to build and how could we guarantee payment?” chirped Flannit.

“That’s just it, it doesn’t matter what we build,” chirped Spaio. “and everyone knows that the fire keepers have a cave full of cooked moth larvae and all the fire parcels anyone could ever want.”

Flannit shook his beak again, "What do you mean it doesn't matter what they build?"

Thinking for a moment, Spaio chirped back, "let's have the basket weavers and the tunnel diggers who build support build a temple for the fire frit in one of the meadows where the maller trees have all died. We will pay the workers and the frit that feed the workers with tokens that can be redeemed with the fire frit."

"I don't see why you would want to build a temple, you don't believe in that stuff," chirped Flannit, "and besides why wouldn't all the workers just immediately trade back the tokens for larvae?"

"Because," answered Spaio, "they will begin to trade amongst themselves for things they want more, like fresh moths, baskets and tunnel digging. Once the frit realize that the tokens will always bring them fire parcels and smoked moth larvae from the fire keepers they will trust them, and if enough workers have them after building the temple, they won't have a reason not to start trading them amongst each other."

Flannit's crown feathers started bobbing in excitement. "Then once the Frit start getting used to trading the tokens for things they will want more from us, and we are the only frit with the gred to make them."

Late into the evening they chirped about their plans and how they would convince the fire keepers to go along with them and redeem the tokens for fire and moths.

Act 5.4

In the morning Flannit along with Spaio and their fledglings flew with their large basket of moths and gred to each of the four forge-owning frit. Three had made their duplicates of the three molds Spaio had given them. Flannit inspected the molds to his liking, then Spaio gave the gred smiths gred to melt into their copy of the token mold. Finally they were given a flutter of moths for the day and squawked at to make as many copies of the molds as they could in order to produce as many tokens as they could.

With the three molds, Flannit, Spaio and the fledglings flew to the fourth gred smith. They gave him one of the molds, enough gred to make several tokens that day and a day's worth of moths. Happily the family flew back home and Flannit began teaching his fledglings to make stone molds while he made yet another copy of the token mold.

The fledglings were still mastering the art of using a beak pick when Flannit finished making another copy of the mold. Starting to heat some gred, they ate their noon meal and went back to work, pouring the now melted gred into the three molds, capping them and letting them cool in water.

Once the three tokens had been broken free from the molds Flannit and the fledglings flew them along with more gred and moths to the four gred smiths. They had all two molds and had created two tokens each. With eleven tokens strung along the twine around his neck Flannit flew to the fire keepers.

Kern was there to greet him and chirped in shock at how many tokens Flannit had made. There were twenty elder fire keepers and three times that number of assistants from wood-gathering fledgling assistants. Kern chirped, "Flannit, at this rate how many tokens will you soon be able to make?"

Flannit thought for a moment then chirped back, "With the help of the four gred smiths, I should be able to produce around twenty five tokens per day. Not to mention, my fledglings may soon be starting their own forges."

At this the fledglings began chirping happily, but Flannit spread his wing over their heads to calm them down. Kern's crown feathers went back in concern. "But Flannit, surely you know that we fire frit will not keep buying your tokens forever. Perhaps some of the adult assistants will be able to afford one and at the rate you are going you will out supply them in a few days."

Flannit's crown feather bobbed in excitement as he thought of the plan he and Spaio had come up with. "Kern, I have been meditating on the fire of truth and have come been given another idea." Flannit whistled slowly.

“Yes?” chirped Kern as he cocked his head to one side.

“In my meditation, the Great Hephman said he wanted a much bigger fire cave; one that hundreds of frit could flock in and look for the truth,” chirped Flannit.

Kern cocked his head the other way and chirped back, “But Flannit, it took several generations to build this cave here. To build a larger one would not be done for many more generations.”

To which Flannit replied quickly, having already thought through Kern’s objections, “But there are so many more frit now. The tunneling frit, pillar carvers and basket weavers could have the great cave built in less than a few seasons.”

Kern bobbed his head in thought, then chirped, “But how would we pay all these frit? We certainly don’t have enough stored larvae to feed them all, nor would they all want fire parcels.”

Flannit pointed with his wings at the eleven tokens around his neck. “You can pay them in these. As long as you guarantee that the workers can trade the tokens in for fire parcels later. Everyone wants these tokens anyway and it will be a point of honor to own many of them.”

“But Flannit, how will we pay *you* for all these tokens?” chirped Kern.

“Just keep my family and workers well fed and supply us with all the gred in the valley,” chirped Flannit happily.

Kern’s crown feathers bobbed up and down at the idea. “Once you have supplied us with a surplus of tokens, we will begin having frit build our new cave, and I will begin sending fledglings to supply you and your workers with moths and more gred.” After a moment of Kern chirping to one of his fledglings, Flannit’s basket was filled with moths. Flannit gave the eleven tokens to Kern and flew off with his fledglings.

Spaio was so excited to hear that their plan had worked that she didn’t stop chirping for hours. She began quickly scratching on the tunnel walls in a way the Gremen had learnt to count quickly. If the fire keepers paid their workers with one token per day and they had one hundred workers that would mean Flannit and the other gred smiths would have to produce one hundred tokens per day; with only four forges that would be twenty tokens a day each.

After telling this to Flannit, they decided that they should start working on forges for

their fledglings as soon as possible and in the meantime the fire keepers would just have to start with fewer workers.

Over the next few days Flannit and the other gred smiths started turning out more tokens than they had expected, and by the end of five days they were producing nearly ten tokens a day. Flannit and Spaio decided that they should start storing some for themselves and while most went to the fire keepers their own stockpile began to grow.

All the fire keepers and adult assistants were wearing the tokens now. The elders began to wear more and more of them while storing the rest. Frit who came for ceremonies and for fire parcels were starting to desire them more and more. They sparkled around their necks in the sun, and the fire keepers began to tell the frit that they were a blessing from the Great Hephman.

Finally on the fourth week, Kern called a meeting of all the frit. After saying Hephman's prayer, Kern began to tell the frit Hephman's great plan for a magnificent cave and in payment the Great Hephman has produced these tokens, which will bring Hephman's fortune on you and can be exchanged for a fire parcel or a batch of cooked moth larvae.

Of the thousands of frit nearly all of them chirped happily and the next days were spent organizing the workforce and deciding on a design and location for the cave. Nearly one hundred frit were chosen from the most skilled tunnel diggers, basket weavers and artists.

And as the day for the tunnel work to start came near, Flannit had supplied the Fire Keepers with nearly a thousand tokens. The workers were to work in the mornings for their own families and to work for the fire keepers in the afternoon. Generally, the frit only worked a few hours a day and didn't object to working a few more for the prestige of the tokens.

Half way into the project the weather over the mountain range turned to the cold of winter. It was the coldest winter any frit could remember and was accompanied by several days of near constant rain and wind. Overnight nearly half of the frit had their fires blown out which they were dependent on for warmth.

The next morning the line at the fire keeper's cave was extremely long. The moths had been too cold to breed and so many of the frit had almost nothing to give in exchange for fire parcels. At the head of the line were those frit with gred tokens. The frit without these tokens looked on in jealousy as fire parcels were given for the exchange of one token. Several of the frit who had multiple tokens began trading them for almost nothing, and some even gave them away to the needy frit.

Over the next few days the cold front passed and the valley turned warm again. But the desire for tokens was even greater. Several frit came and begged Spaio and Flannit for tokens, and in exchange Spaio had them begin digging tunnels and building forges for her fledglings. The fire keepers allowed more workers to join the cave building project, which was coming along quickly.

Many frit were also starting to trade the tokens amongst themselves at market for their guaranteed amount of moth larvae or a fire parcel. Flannit and Spaio's gred reserves were getting smaller and smaller and so began hiring frit to dig tunnels deep into the mountains where they could mine more gred. While they did find some gred they found much more of a different shiny metal that glittered silver rather than gold in the sun. Flannit decided to call it *slem* after the little silver bugs that the frit found too bitter to eat. He found that he could melt it but it required a much hotter fire than gred did and so he simply stored the slem until he could find a use for it.

The more tokens Flannit produced the less and less people wanted them. The fire keepers began demanding more tokens for fire parcels and the frit began carrying them around more and more of them. They began storing them in their caves and thievery became commonplace. Several frit came to Flannit and asked that he store their gred, to which he agreed. He had his workers dig a tunnel that was filled with small cubbies where he etched into the rocks the names of the frit they belonged to. He then hired several frit to stand guard and paid them very well.

Eventually more and more frit asked Flannit to store their tokens and were coming in daily to retrieve and deposit the tokens they needed for that day. Spaio began to work at the tunnel, which they called a bank. She didn't trust the frit to deposit and retrieve their tokens by themselves and so always accompanied them.

Act 5.5

Several seasons went by and the four fledglings of Flannit and Spaio left the nest and took up work at their own forges. That season the great cave of Hephman was also completed. The fire keepers had become more and more indebted to Flannit as they paid more and more frit for work using Flannit's gred tokens. Kern had begun insisting to Flannit that the banks and forges be operated by the fire frit and that the fire keepers should not have to pay for their gred tokens. But Flannit wanted to stay independent and kept refusing to become a fire keeper.

Long ago the frit females had begun to lay their eggs during the full moon because it was a time when the screech owls were the most afraid of the gred leaves. Even though there were no more screech owls in their valley the females still followed the ancient cycle. And while the fire keepers were focused on the light of the sun as another

manifestation of Hephman's truth, the females still followed the old ways and celebrated and laid their eggs under the full moon.

The night before had been one such full moon and as the sun rose into the sky the moon came to block out its rays. The fire keepers were losing their dominance in the frit society more and more as the frit began to look toward the tokens for spiritual insight and keep their own fires. So when the eclipse happened Kern who was becoming an old frit saw it as both a bad omen from Hephman and an opportunity.

He called the entire colony together and claimed he had a vision from Hephman. The darkness of the noon sky was scaring everyone and they listened intently. Kern started leading the colony in Hephman's prayer. Then chirping loudly he pointed both his wings toward Flannit who was in the front of the audience.

"The Great Hephman has revealed to me that Flannit has been given the gift to produce tokens for Him. So blessed was Flannit and his family that they have become the most powerful frit in our valley. But this power has a cost." Kern stopped and pointed at the eclipsed sun. "The Great Hephman demands that to those he gives his gifts must give back in return to those who keep his cave and his fire. He has shown me that all makers of tokens should be honored as fire keepers and move into the great cave."

Nearly as soon as he had chirped it, the moon began to move out of the way of the sun's rays, and the frit began to chirp loudly in happiness. Flannit knew that Kern had taken advantage of the strange signs in the heavens but nearly all the frit were so excited at the thought that Hephman had sent such a signal to bestow an honor on Flannit, that there was nothing he could do.

Several small caves with forges, as well as a bank had already been added to the great cave and the fire frit quickly helped Flannit, Spaio and all the other frit who had forges, move in. After only a few days, they were moved in and Flannit who was becoming an old frit was added to the elder fire keepers and a ceremony where his crown feathers were burnt.

Now that the fire keepers could make their own tokens, they soon began to put most of the frit to work for them. They became less and less known for their keeping of fire and Hephman rituals and more and more as the source of tokens. Spaio had remained in charge of the fire keepers bank and found that the frit in the market were beginning to keep track of their exchanges with small notched tally sticks. If one frit traded seven moths with another that only had one token then the moth farmer would notch a stick with the amount of tokens that were owed to him along with the name of the frit who owed it and split it in half. After the stick was split, each half would only match up perfectly with the other part of the same original stick. Then the moth farmer would

come to the frit who owed him and ask for payment later with his half of the stick.

While the maller tree twigs were getting more and more scarce, this system of notching tally sticks was getting more and more common for the frit who were making more and more of these types of exchanges which they called loans, and Spaio thought about it for days. She considered etching into some thin gred leaves the amount of debt or tokens they had in the bank, but because gred was so valuable and getting to be very rare this would be hard.

One day Spaio noticed Flannit working with the new metal he had found in the mines called slem, and realized it would be perfect for recording the amount of gred frit had in the bank. Spaio quickly chirped this to Flannit who was happy to finally have something useful to do with the abundant amounts of slem his workers were digging up. Flannit created many thin leaves of slem in his forge. Each one had a hole in it, so that it could be worn with twine around a frit's neck. With his beak chisel he carved several different stamps that he could press into the slem leaves when they were hot. Each stamp was different. On one he carved the image of Hephman and his fire as well as symbols which read 'worth one gred token'. On another he placed the image of Hohem and the symbols 'worth five gred tokens' and on another he placed the image of Lob and 'worth ten gred tokens'.

He worked with the other smiths and soon had hundreds of each type of slem leaf. Then he brought these to Spaio who was eager to start using them. The first frit who came into the bank that morning asked for forty pieces of gred to use at the market. Spaio showed her the shiny silver slem leaves and offered her ten slem leaves that were worth one gred token, two that were worth five and one that was worth ten. Carrying these few slem leaves around was so much easier than carrying the gred, and because they had their religious symbols imprinted on them, the frit instantly trusted them and knew they could be exchanged for their valuable gred any time.

Soon hardly any frit were carrying gred around anymore, other than when they wanted to trade it for fire parcels which the fire keepers insisted should be the only acceptable payment for Hephman's fire. The fire keepers had also started loaning gred tokens to poor frit who had come on hard times. Often a swarm of lizards would invade a moth farm and in order to start again the farmer would beg the fire keepers to give him enough tokens to hire other frit to help him rebuild his rabble and scare away the lizards. Spaio has always watched these loans keenly because often they went unpaid. The moth farmer might use the loan as a gift to a mate instead or the lizards might just come right back. Spaio realized that if this went on forever soon the frit would have more tokens than the fire keepers, and they wouldn't be able to give out loans anymore. There had to be some way to make loaning safer, she thought.

Because frit who didn't pay back their loans was rare, she decided that the frit who did pay back their loans should pay back a little more so as to offset the danger of the frit who didn't pay them back. Since Flannit always listened to Spaio the other fire keepers did as well and soon adopted this charge on loans which they called *interest*. For each ten leaves that a frit borrowed from the fire keepers they would have to pay back those ten leaves plus one more as interest.

This practice soon got out of hand because in order to pay back the interest on their loans the frit had to get the leaves slem leaves from other frit or end up taking out another loan to pay off the first. The amount they owed to the bank they called their debt, and in order to pay off this debt to the bank they needed more and more leaves. Soon their debts got so large that Flannit began printing slem leaves that were worth fifty and even a hundred tokens.

In less than two seasons nearly all the frit of the valley had large debts they owed to the fire keepers and the fire keepers knew that as long as the frit were in debt to them they would get whatever they wanted. So the frit were encouraged more and more to take out loans and go into more and more debt.

Epilogue

This was the state of the colony when Spaio and Flannit both became old and died. Their bodies were fed to Hephman's fire in a great ceremony and their wealth was divided up between their four children, as was Flannit's wish no longer wanting to favor only the first born.

Chapter 6: The Frit's Great Barrier

Act 6.1

Because their population was growing so quickly the frit had begun to carve more and more moth caves into the walls of the valley for food. The maller sap that they used to feed the moths was in more and more demand and instead of waiting for the trees to heal themselves properly the frit began cutting deeper and deeper into them for the sap. After many generations of this the trees were starting to die off in large numbers.

One frit named Saida, who had grown up as a student in the schools of the fire keepers, began to notice the maller trees dying. She also saw that the frit were in so much debt to the fire keepers that they would do anything to pay it off quickly, including killing the trees that were their livelihood. This was made even more urgent as the fire keepers had begun punishing those frit that could not pay off their debts, some were even bound and thrown off cliffs.

This made Saida concerned but it was a colony custom and she didn't question it. Instead she began the study of fritology, the before-time songs of frit origins. She read all the before-time songs, which had been etched onto slem leaves, and listened to the eldest frit sing. She read about Gremen valley, where there had once been so much gred that it lined the mountainsides. She read how there had once been plenty of maller trees for moths and grubs to eat.

Saisa was a very adventuresome frit and wondered if there might be more valleys beyond the mountains. This idea slowly entered her mind, until she was thinking about it everyday and every hour of every day. She was no longer a fledgling but had been raised by the fire keepers, which meant she had the choice of looking for a mate or becoming a fire keeper herself. She began spending each day looking through the old records about the migration of the Gremen who were once called snag frit and before that gredded frit.

She found many of the ancient burrows of the Gremen and learned the song of Wenza and Kim and their journey though the mountains. She saw how their old valley had been eaten by snakes and began to wonder more and more about what might have really happened. The songs of the fire keepers had made the Gremen seem like evil frit, but the more she learned about their before-time songs the more she felt they weren't bad frit at all, at least not any worse than the fire keepers.

The fire keepers sung their before-time song of how their valley was the chosen valley of Hephman and that all others were eaten by snakes. *But what if they were wrong and*

there were more valleys beyond the mountains? thought Saida. She even saw deep in the ancient burrows, fossilized skeletons of what looked like sharp toothed frit which they called dinosaurs which had no place in the elder fire frit before-time songs. The more she began to question the chirps and before-time songs of the fire frit the more she ceased to tweet with others. She knew that if she spoke out she would be bound and thrown from a cliff.

Day after day, she studied and formed a plan to discover what was beyond the eastern mountains. She knew that she would not be able to carry enough food with her and that Gremen had used giant baskets to carry their hatchlings and moths, so she decided that she would have to convince a small swoop of frit to come with her.

Act 6.2

Saida's best friend and brood sister was named Fern. Fern had been looking for a mate for some time and had recently given up, finding all the rich males already taken. Instead of joining a bouquet of frit around some wealthy male, she had begun to study bush lizards. The fire keepers paid well for researching anything that was related to keeping their moth farms working, and bush lizards were the worst pests.

Saida found Fern working in one of her research burrows. They had dug very deep pits into part of the floor and had trapped a whole scuttle of lizards into the pits. The pits were too deep for the lizards to jump out of, and the walls were polished with stones so that the lizards couldn't climb out of them either. Fern was looking intently at a scuttle of five lizards in one such pit when Saida arrived.

"Hello Saida," chirped Fern, only looking up to Saida for a moment then looking back down at the five lizards.

"Hello Fern," chirped Saida who went to stand beside Fern and looked down into the pit. She was astonished at what she saw. Thee five lizards were all huddled together to keep warm on one side of the pit and on the other side of the pit there was a clutch of moth eggs. Bush lizards loved moth eggs and it was unheard of to see a lizard not doing everything they could to eat them.

"You've done it!" twittered Saida, nudging Fern with her wingtips. "You've made the lizards stop eating moth eggs! The moth farmers will be so happy. What did you do, cover the moth eggs with some sort of smell?"

"No no," chirped Fern sadly with her crest feathers bobbing in irritation. "Right now it only works with a few lizards, but outside there are thousands of them."

"Only works on a few lizards? What have you done to them?" chirped Saida with her crest feathers standing up in curiosity.

Fern chirped at one of her assistant fledglings to come over and told her to watch the lizards and chirp loudly if anything happened. Then she motioned for Saida to follow her to another pit, whose rim was circled by a flight of young fledglings with spears looking into the pit.

"We've just started this batch of lizards yesterday so they're not well trained yet," chirped Fern.

"You can *train* them?" squawked Saida in shock. "But they're so stupid."

"They're actually not as stupid as you might chirp. It just takes time to train them," warbled Fern looking over the edge of the pit.

Saida looked down as a few of the lizards began climbing the rocks that led to the eggs. Suddenly the fledglings carrying long spears began poking all the lizards with them and quickly the lizards went back to their corner of the pit, away from the eggs. This happened many times; even when only one lizard would try for the eggs the frit would poke all of them with sticks until the one lizard stopped going after the eggs.

Saida cocked her head to one side in confusion and chirped to Fern, "but the lizards in the other pit didn't have any frit poking them with sticks, why weren't they eating the eggs?"

"Those lizards you saw before had actually never been in a pit like this one with frit poking them. There were lizards in the pit before them that taught the new lizards to not eat the eggs," twittered Fern happily.

"*Lizards* taught the other lizards?" chirped Saida, cocking her head in confusion and disbelief.

"See these lizards," chirped Fern pointing to the lizards that were licking their wounds and no longer interested in the eggs. "After a few days of this, they will no longer even think of eating those eggs, because they will associate eating eggs with being hurt by spears."

Seeing Saida's head beginning to bob in understanding, Fern continued. "Well, then once these lizards stop going for the eggs, we remove the fledglings with the spears, but the lizards don't know this. Then what we do is replace one of these lizards with one that has never been in a pit before."

"But wouldn't the new lizard try to eat the eggs?" asked Saida.

"Of course she tries to eat them, but the other lizards will start biting her before she does, because they know that if she gets near the eggs, they will all get poked with spears," chirped Fern.

"So you've taught them to teach each other! That's amazing!" chirped Saida.

"That's what I whistled," chirped Fern. "Eventually we will replace all the original lizards with new ones. Which is what you saw in the other pit. They have all learned to associate eating the eggs with being bitten by each other," chirped Fern.

"Amazing," tweeted Saida. "But you said this only works on a few lizards, why is that?"

"Because there are way too many lizards. These small groups of lizards would never be able to teach all the others outside. Basically the only way to teach a new group of lizards is by introducing it to a larger group that has already been trained," chirped Fern sadly. She could tell that Saida wasn't following her, so continued.

"Imagine there is a new way of chirping you invented and you want to teach it to your friend, but all the other frit around you are telling your friend that your new chirps are stupid. Your friend would never learn them. Basically the lizards are a lot like frit, they tend to follow the largest group."

"So you would have to train enough lizards yourself before the minority learned from them. And there are millions of them," chirped Saida sadly, then cocked her head in thought. Thinking back to her calculations about the decline of maller trees, Saida looked down at the lizards not eating the moth eggs.

"Maybe it's a good thing you can't do this to all the lizards," chirped Saida slowly.

"What do you mean?" asked Fern curiously.

"I've been looking at the rate at which the maller trees are dying. We are feeding too many months with their sap," chirped Saida seriously.

"But there are thousands and thousands of them we can't be running out anytime soon," Fern twittered back.

"The rate they are dying is speeding up fast, because of the rate we are increasing our moth populations. New moth caves are going up every season now to feed all the frit that are hatching and for farmers to pay off their debt to the fire keepers," chirped Saida.

Fern had nothing to chirp and simply bobbed her head as if it was not a big deal. "We'll

we're not going to start running out of maller trees for several more generations, and by then we'll figure out some other way of feeding the moths or ourselves without maller sap," she chirped nonchalantly.

"No, Fern," chirped Saida seriously. "At the rate things are going, we only have two generations before all the maller trees are gone."

"But that's ridiculous," chirped Fern. "If it were that soon people would be whistling about it."

"No one wants to listen. If farmers stop farming then they won't be able to pay off their debts and will be punished, and how can we have fewer eggs?" chirped Saida.

Fern blinked and cocked her head to one side in thought, as Saida continued. "Fern, I've been reading the old stories of the Gremen and I think there might be other valleys."

"Other valleys?" chirped Fern while her crest feather bobbed in amusement. "But that's impossible. The only other valley was where the Gremen came from and it was destroyed by Hephman." Looking around her, Fern made sure the other frit weren't listening and motioned with her wings for Saida to follow her. They hopped into a long burrow with a nest at the end.

Once they had preened and made themselves comfortable, Saida continued. "That's only what the fire keepers say. They don't know for sure. There is no reason to think that they're aren't more valleys with more maller trees and maybe even more gred," chirped Saida softly.

At the mention of gred, Fern's crest feathers perked up, she was steadily losing funding in her lizard research and would have to get a regular job soon if she didn't produce something useful. "You must have sung others your idea," chirped Fern suspiciously.

"They either don't believe me or don't care. The frit are all too busy trying to pay off their debts to the fire frit," chirped Saida.

Fern had grown up with Saida and trusted her more than she did most Frit, but it bothered her that Saida was saying that the fire frit were wrong. "Without the teachings of Hephman we would never have established schools and the frit would still be fighting amongst each other. You shouldn't be questioning them or Him," Fern chirped sternly.

"Of course the teaching of Hephman have helped us, but they were created for a time when the frit thought they were surrounded by an endless number of maller trees. They didn't know if other valleys existed and it wasn't worth the effort to get to them, so they simply assumed they didn't exist," chirped Saida.

"You're saying that the teachings of Hephman were engineered by frit and not from the great fire of truth in the sky," chirped Fern slowly considering the words. "Frit who have spoken like that in the past have been bound and dropped you know," Fern hissed. "Even if what you say is true, we have benefited much from the teachings of Hephman, why would you want to disturb that? We don't want another great war."

"I already chirped it," twittered Saida tiredly with her crest feathers drooping. "I'm not saying the teachings of Hephman are wrong, I am saying that their function was to create a system that leads toward the survival of our species, in the environment they were written. But now our environment is changing, and those teaching have to incorporate that change so that we can survive and thrive."

Saida paused and considered what she was chirping, then continued, "That's it Fern! We need a new teaching of Hephman."

Fern's crest feathers went up. Chirping like this was very dangerous and she hissed softly but urgently, "Saida, be careful what you say! Frit have tried to create new teaching before and only succeeded in fracturing the flock."

Fern and Saida chirped on for hours into the evening and gradually Fern began to understand what danger the colony was in if nothing was done about the maller trees. If they all died, all the moth rabbles would die as well and they were the frit's main source of food. Finally they both agreed that there was only one thing todo. They must put together an expedition to look over the mountains.

Act 6.3

Not having the funds to hire porters, Fern had the idea of training her bush lizards to carry their supplies. After several days of planning Saida and Fern had packed everything they needed and convinced the fire frit that it was a scientific expedition to study the behavior of bush lizards at high altitude. Really anything could pass for a research project in those days.

So Saida and Fern began their journey traveling with five bush lizards, three for carrying supplies and two brood sisters for riding, should they get tired of flying. They kept the lizards on neck harnesses attached to a twine rope which they together carried as they flew. These bush lizards had been trained since hatching and were very docile and friendly, but sometimes needed to be reminded to keep at their work.

After nearly a week of hard travel, Saida and Fern reached the highest peak they could and before them saw the Great Ocean of ancient myths. It was ever expansive and

everywhere. Their little hearts beat in frenzy and their minds tried to understand it and soon they understood. Their valley was in a small range of mountains and surrounding it was the Great Ocean. There was nowhere to go.

After several more days of discussion they decided to go see this great ocean and began their descent from the mountain peaks to the distant shores below. Once near the shore they saw green life all around them and feasted on grubs. Restocking their supplies and feeding their lizards the circle of sisters continued on and found themselves on a lifeless beach.

“There is nothing here,” whistles Saida in despair.

But Fern took no notice of her as she fixated on something in the distance. It looked like a large shadow in the sky and as it came closer they could make out the shape of a huge bird which they called an albatross. Scared they flew into the air and the lizards all scuttled into hiding places in the cracks of rocks. Then slowly the great bird landed and began to preen itself, taking no notice of Saida and Fern who were as well hiding in a small crack with one of their lizards.

Trying not to make a tweet, they watched the albatross begin to turn its head this way and that. Then very quickly for its size it hooped into the air and dove down and in its huge beak was one of their bush lizards, which was gobbled down in a matter of seconds. Squawking loudly in triumph of a full belly, the great beast flapped its huge wings and took to the air - flying far away across the Great Ocean and disappeared into the horizon.

It took hours for the two frit to come out of hiding, and even more hours for them to find the remaining skuttle of lizards. As quickly as they could, they made sure they had enough provisions and without looking back they returned, chirping with excitement, to Heph Valley.

Once back, they were so shaken that they tried to forget what they had seen. But as time dragged on Saida began to remember her research and Fern began to think about the albatross, and one early morning both of them came up with the same idea. Flying to meet each other as fast as they could they met in mid air.

“The albatross must live somewhere!” tweeted Saida nearly out of breath.

“The albatross must be trainable. I think we could ride it!” screeched Fern while Saida’s expression changed to fear.

And there they had their plan. Taking a full hundred lizards from her research burrow

Fern again convinced the elder fire frit that an experiment was necessary to get all lizards to stop eating moth larvae. Packing a huge number of provisions and bringing along several fledglings to help, they made for the distant shore once more.

Upon arriving with their massive skuttle of one hundred lizards, they set up a hidden nesting area for the frit and the lizards. The fledglings made themselves busy, feeding the lizards and setting up the nesting area. After a few days with no albatross sighting, one morning they began to hear the hisses of the lizards.

The giant albatross was there again and attempted to peck at the lizards under the protective thatching the fledglings had built. Fern whistled loudly as the albatross gobbled up two lizards and the fledglings along with Saida hoped into action. The opening to the lizard nests was lined with a great amount of twine and when the frit pulled at it just so, it closed around the leg of the great albatross while the other end was fixed to a large boulder.

Feeling the noose around her leg the albatross shrieked and attempted to fly away, but came tumbling back down to the Earth. Seeing her predicament the albatross looked around for what revenge she could inflict on her captors, but as planned, the fledglings had herded all the lizards far away from its huge beak.

Fern ordered everyone to leave the albatross alone until the next day, and eventually its screeches became quieter and quieter. By dawn the next day the albatross was terribly hungry. The fledglings poked one lizard with sticks until it ran toward the albatross and in an instant it was swallowed whole. On schedule they did this each day and night, and each time moving closer and closer to the giant albatross, until the albatross was used to the presence of frit. When the albatross snapped at them, the frit would tighten the noose around its neck until it stopped, and as the albatross became more and more tame the frit began to fly all around it and eventually with only a few lizards remaining they found they could rest on its back between its great wings with no fear.

Tying as many provisions they could onto a makeshift twine saddle, Saida and Fern were ready to go. Chirping their goodbyes to the fledglings who took the remaining lizards back to the valley, they released the twine tether and freed the albatross while saddled on her back.

Sensing her freedom and daring not to touch the frit that she had grown accustomed to, she spread her great wings and took off for the horizon. The albatross stayed in flight for days and days, and the two brave but scared sisters were nearly out of the grubs when they finally spotted land.

Act 6.4

After five long days and nights on the back of the albatros they two small frit began to see a foreign shore. They were astonished at what they began to recognize. "Flocks of frit!" cooed Saida in awe. The frit had wings marked with red rings and were seen to be hauling huge nets full of scaly fish out of the ocean. Some were fed to other tamed albatrosses like their own and others were taken back to a cliff face full of burrows where red ringed hatchlings awaited.

Flying free from the albatross and into the fresh ocean air, the sisters were met by dozens of curious red ringed frit. Before twittering to the newcomers the frit strung a rope around their steed and brought it down to the beach and fed it several fish. Once finished these red ringed frit chirped at Saida and Fern with strange whistles and coos. Not being able to understand what these frit were chirping, the sisters did their best to communicate and were eventually guided to the cliff burrows and given fish to peck at.

After several days of pleasant learning Fern and Saida, being the clever little frit they were, began to understand the red ringed frit's songs and customs. They were taught to make and use the great nets for fishing and were sung to the tales of the world beyond. The red ringed frit had traveled around the entire world and found every valley, shore, nook and burrow filled with colonies of frit of different sorts.

The news astonished the sisters so much that for weeks they could do nothing but take in all the new before-time songs. And when they had filled their clever little brains, they asked the elder red ringed frit about the predicament of their colony. They explained how the maller trees were disappearing and the frit of Heph Valley were too tied into debt to have time to care, or even the ability to change if they wanted to.

The red ringed frit twittered their funny sounding warbles and chirps about simply planting more maller trees and fertilizing less eggs for a time. But Saida and Fern shook their beaks and explained that the frit of Heph valley would quickly cut down too many trees and that there was no way to stop them. They described the system of gred and slem tokens and how it was driving the destruction and was simply out of control.

Chirping this matter over the eldest male red ringed frit twittered in laughter again and at last the eldest warbled, "the Earth works in mysterious magic, and come what may, balance must be restored, perhaps at the cost of many of the frit in your valley."

The female eldest red ringed frit whistled a question, "Tell us of your before-time stories. How do you explain this culture of yours? Where did it come from"

Solemnly the two sisters began to sing the oldest before-time song they knew. That of the Screech Owls and the Magic Leaves and of Gremen Cliff. How the Gred had been a

great invention that only needed to be fixed, who the gred turned to tokens that they would wear around their necks on twine.

Clearing his throats, the eldest red ringed cooed and chirped in low pitched warbles, "The frit of Heph Valley should by no means bring their backward before-time songs and customs to this side of the ocean. Those tokens are merely a form of control. Simple tally sticks are enough to record the credit and debts between frit, without anyone accumulating all the gred and slem."

The eldest female frit again whistled in response. "No, the problem is not with their before-time songs or with their tokens or gred. It is something they missed in their own stories."

The sister's listened on as did all the red ringed frit. "We red ringed frit have used various tools for accounting and while these may help you, there is a wound that is much deeper."

All the frit around them grew silent as they listened, "Why was poor old clever Gremen not helped by his colony to create a new tunnel? There must be a reason. Why waste time over feeding the eldest male frits in the long tunnels when everyone could have a long tunnel? Your song whispers of a before-time that you have forgotten."

The an elder frit with many light patches whistled, "A swoop of frit can build a next together in minutes that it would take one frist a week to do." Another elder frit came in shaking her beak. "A swoop of of frit can chip away to dig a tunnel in a day that would take a single frit months to do." Another chirped in, "frit who lose their traditions, become slaves even to themselves."

The eldest male frit spoke again, "My brothers and sisters sing true. Accounting systems would only service to account for your imbalance. In the grand symphony of the skies, there's a melody sweeter still in the collective weaving of our nests. When a swoop of frit comes together, each of us contributes a thread, a leaf, a piece of the world, weaving not just a nest, but a tapestry of togetherness. In this shared creation, our nest becomes stronger, warmer, a true haven - a testament to the power of feathers united and able to fly. It's not just a place for our eggs to rest; it's a cradle of community, a woven circle of care that holds our future with gentle, yet unyielding strength"

Chirping and whistling songs of thanks, Saida and Fern decided it was time to return home and sing the songs they had learned. The red ringed frit helped them with another albatross, stocking it with provisions, and after many days had passed the two frit could see their mountainous island once again. Seeing as they were without lizards to make the journey from the coast back to Heph Valley, they decided to fly the albatross directly there.

Passing the mountains, they descended to Heph Valley, where they planned to convince their colony that changes must be made. To the great fear and surprise of the elder fire frit, the two females coaxed their great stead to perch on the fire frit temple. Dismounting, they whistled loudly and the entire colony came to see the massive albatross who quickly pecked a lizard into its giant beak.

Act 6.5

The two frit sang their song and the warnings of the red ringed frit, but the fire frits' minds were weary of their new before time chirps and filled with fear. They could see that by promoting this notion that all frit should support each other - they would lose their followers and employees and have to also contribute to the colony. So they did what all power fire frit did when faced with revolt, they gave the sisters a promotion. They gave them high paying jobs working in the moth caves.

Still in shock of their return and the fire first not seeming to understand and having no other way to earn gred, Saida and Fren worked in unison, caring for larvae and moths and fending off the stray lizard and earning a salary in a few gred and slem that they had to use for the cost of their nest and food.

Saida and Fren spent the day cracking the tough husks of moth chrysalides open with their beak and found themselves pulling one chrysalis apart that a fledgling had cut notches into. Both Saida and Fren stood with one half of the chrysalis which was only about the size of their claws.

The unique pattern on each half of the chrysalis would only match up perfectly with the other half of the same original chrysalis.

"These look like tally sticks!" both Saida and Fren chirped in unison. "Anyone could make these and record debts between each other," continued Saida.

Remembering the red ringed frit's warning about gred and their usage of tally sticks, Saida felt she was onto something. "That means people don't *need* gred or slem to trade with each other, they just need to record their commitments and debts between each other then cancel them out when fulfilled!"

Fren and Saida spend the rest of the day remembering the songs of the red ringed frit and coming up with rules for their tally sticks which they just called chrysalides.

The chrysalis should be no bigger than the distance between the tip of the foreclaw and the hind toe when fully extended . . . The manner of cutting is as follows. At the top of the chrysalis a cut is made, the thickness of the an outer feather, to represent a thousand gred tokens; then a hundred tokens by a cut the breadth of a ear; twenty gred, the breadth of the claw's wrist, a single gred, the width of a claw; a tenth of a gred token is marked by a single cut without removing any chrysalis.

Playing it out together, Fren took a fresh chrysalis and used her beak to make a notch the size of her ear to represent one hundred gred tokens in value. Then she split it down its length into two halves, one half slightly bigger than the other.

"Say you want some of my labor, Fren," chirped Saidia happily. "You are the debtor and retain with the small half, called the "foil". The creditor, that's me since I am offering my services, retains with the other half, called the "stock".

"When you repay me for my services with goods or services worth an equal value, you return the foil, and the debt is canceled (both halves are back together). And if you are taking too long, I could also sell this stock to someone else for their services and they could collect your commitment later." Saidia chirped out loud as the concept began to compose itself in her mind.

"So we don't really need gred or slem anymore," Fren repeated a few times. "Frit can simply use a chrysalis to record their debts and everyone has access to chrysalides and while they're waiting for repayment they can trade their stocks".

"Let's start a market for these stocks!" whistled Saidia. "You and I can be the first stock market and will be willing to buy any goods stocks people have and can ensure that we collect the debts and foils."

Act 6.6

The two planned all night and gathered as many chrysalides as they could. That morning was a market day and frit were coming from all over with their slem and gred necklaces to buy the goods of vendors. Saidia and Fren took one of her trained lizards to haul a large basket of chrysalides to the market and everyone turned to stare and squawk at them.

"What is this junk?!" squawked a young vendor of maller powder.

With Fren's help, Saidia flew up and alighted on the back of the lizard and gave her loudest whistle as would have been used to warn for Screech Owls ages ago. The whole market stopped and gathered around her.

“Fren and I have been to distant lands and learned the ways of the red ringed frit” chirped Saida loudly. The crowd began to coo and warble in hesitation.

“What are the chrysalides for?” asked another curious frit peeking at the basket. “These are everywhere, we sometimes burn them when kindling is hard to find.”

“The red ringed frit sang to us that instead of using gred and slem, which is all owned by the fire frit bank for trading, that we should use tally sticks which anyone can make. But because sticks are so rare we can all use these chrysalides! Fren will show us,” chirped Saida looking at Fren who was trying to hide behind the lizard.

Poking her head out, Fren shyly graped one of the chrysalides and as the crowd drew close around her, she bit a notch in it with her beak, “This size notch, the thickness of an outer feather represents 1000 gred tokens.” She then broke it in half lengthwise and held the two matching pieces of stock and foil. “Only these two pieces have the same design and can match each other. We call them the stock and foil.”

A few of the elderly frit whistled in happiness as they remembered the old maller tally sticks from before-time stories. One elderly frit named Spaiio, pushed her way to the front and said took the stock and foil. “If I loanreayouch you 1000 gred or an equivalent value of services, I keep this stock and you keep the foil and when you pay me back with 1000 gred, maller powder or anything I want worth 1000 gred and then we will unite the stock and foil and will have reached settlement.” The old frit clucked proudly.

“That’s it!” whistled Saida happily. “This is good magic, how our ancestors used to trade when they didn’t have gred or slem, and now we can do it too without needing a rare maller tree stick”.

As the crowd warbled, cooing and clucking away in consideration of the song, one of the vendors flew up in the air and landed next to Saida and Fren who were showing a few frit the chrysalides they brought.

“Why are you wasting our time? Are you saying that I would give out my smoked moths to a frit while only holding some pieces of chrysalis stock? What happens if that frit doesn’t pay me back and I am left with nothing but this chrysalis stock?” chirped the vendor in irritation.

Saida was ready for this and whistled loudly. “Fren and I are opening the first market for chrysalis stocks. This stock market will be right here next to the normal market. We will then work to reunite all stocks to their foils. And we will also redeem our own stock by repaying it with lizard training.”

To which the vendor laughed. “How much gred do you have anyway - to be buying all

this stock?"

Saida and Fren both looked at each other and announced that they had saved up 10 gred and would start with that. The other frit laughed, as this wasn't a lot those days.

Among the tweets of laughter the Spaio, elderly frit who spoke earlier took off her heavily greded necklace holding gred and slem worth ten thousand gred and handed it to Saida. She then took one of the chrysalides from their basket and chipped it with her beak with ten notches the width of her outer wings indicating ten thousand gred and scratched her family symbol onto it before slicing in two. She kept the longer piece, the stock, and handed the small piece, the foil, to Saida. "Young frit, you are well known for your lizard training. I expect you to deliver 200 trained lizards to me by the end of the year."

Grabbing the foil from Saida, Fren whistled in the air "that's a deal! and we'll use these 10,000 gred to buy stocks as promises of service, from other frit and increase our team and numbers of trained lizards"

Seeing this, the vendor frit snatched a few chrysalides in his beak and flew back to his moth stall. Following his lead and encouraged by the elder frit who turned to Fren and Saida with kind eyes. "You know me as Spaio like my great grandmother Spaio, the first of the bankers. This gred and slem was passed onto me. We didn't earn it, but we learned to manage it and ensure it keeps its value to the flock. Someday we will no longer need gred or slem and I hope to see that day come, but still need to survive as an old frit. So you understand, I must ask that you do indeed make good on the foil as a memory of your promise to provide 200 trained lizards by the end of the season. Else I will have to sell this stock to frit that will come and collect the debt."

A chill went down the spines of both Spaio and Fren when they heard the name Spaio. Her descendants were wealthy with gred and slem beyond all frit and were not to be cheated.

Holding the receipt of their promise, now their debt, the foil, Fren and Saida chirped her most honest promise. "Hephman leads my flock," they both ended with their crown feathers in a deep bow.

Epilogue

With the backing of the elder Spaio the stock market of Saida and Fren thrived and helped ensure there was a buyer of last resort for their stocks. From then on anyone could create credit with anyone else using chrysalides that were abundant in each family coming from any moth larvae. The chrysalis stocks themselves became a kind of resource coordination instrument, a particular sort of unique debt that could be pooled and traded freely, circulating from person to person.

As Saida and Fren curation of stocks grew larger, they remembered the song of the red ringed frit that accounting wasn't enough and collective weaving needed to come back. They began to pay others for their stocks only on the condition of collective planting of and caring for maller trees. Over time Heph Valley became woven into a green valley again and the old ways of control, as old as Gremmen Cliff, came to an end and a new era of peace and fine collective weaving began. As all frit knew the magic to express their intentions and commitments and weave them with each other, the before-time songs of wealthy frit became echoes of warnings. Saida and Fren erected a great statue of Gremen, made with all the gred and slem melted down as it was no longer needed. The statue has a plague which reads,

“From before-time and customs forgot

Magic beyond owl, snake and fire

Too clever to be caught

Remember well that cunning flock

That tried to fly faster than the clock

They taught us well of what, in us, to be afraid

In losing our weaving, we become a slave

Here and now we do admit

To survive and thrive, we must permit

To weave, adapt and change, we must commit

Heed one and all, the song of the frit”

~*~

The End