

THE DREAM WORLD COLLECTIVE

Chapters 46-51

Ben Y. Faroe

New reader? Start from the beginning. Free
download at patreon.com/byfaroe.

Copyright © 2014 Ben Y. Faroe

All rights reserved.

46. Afternoon Drinks

Summer stretched and looked around. Her back was getting sore and the sun was lower in the sky than she expected. They heard the back door slam. Jen wandered into the garage with Isaac orbiting her. In her arms was a big baby boy, almost a year old, that they'd learned earlier was William.

"This is looking great," she said.

"Hi, Ms. Summer!" said Isaac, and ran over to hug her knees.

"Hi, Isaac." Summer gave him a little hug before turning to Jen. "Thanks. I think we're about done. Hi, William." She leaned down to make faces at William, whose eyes disappeared in a most satisfactory four-and-a-half-tooth grin.

Summer tipped her head in a circle, working the kinks out of her neck. She glanced down at the bit of crumbled wall, wondering if she should say anything. Jen noticed Summer looking at the spot. Her brow furrowed.

"Mildew?"

Summer shook her head. "Cockroaches. Like a hundred of them. It was icktastic."

"Yeah," said Alex. "We sucked them up in the crusty vacuum cleaner. I dumped them into the little stream out back. I don't know if it'll kill them, but at least they'll be pretty far away by the time they get out."

"Cool!" cried Isaac. He began running around the garage, vacuuming up pretend cockroaches with a pretend vacuum, making noisy vacuum motor noises.

"Seriously?" Jen's eyebrows shot up. Summer couldn't tell if she was upset they'd used the vacuum on cockroaches or just stunned. "You two are unreal." Jen shook her head, still looking a little dazed. Summer and Alex shot each other a look.

"Isaac, use your quiet vacuum," added Jen. Isaac flipped an invisible switch and his vacuum cleaner dropped a few decibels.

"That's it," said Jen. "I'm making Cosmos."

"Cosmos?" asked Summer.

“You ever had a Cosmopolitan?” Jen asked.

Alex laughed out loud.

Jen smiled expectantly. “What?”

“We caught a Cosmopolitan this morning. Long story.”

“No it isn’t,” objected Summer. She counted on her fingers. “Mouse in our kitchen. We caught it and named it Cosmo. Eleven words. Hah.”

A wry smile squeezed into Jen’s lips. “This must be your day for vermin.”

“Or for Cosmopolitans.” Summer shrugged. “It’s a matter of perspective. But yeah, we try to have Vermin Day every month or so. Gets the adrenaline pumping. Cultivates quick thinking, resourcefulness, and valor.”

“We believe in rewarding acts of valor,” said Jen. “Don’t we, Isaac?”

He stopped running in circles for a moment to give a single emphatic nod.

This confirmed, she turned back to Summer and Alex. “Want to come in for afternoon drinks?”

Isaac grabbed at his mother. “Can Zen come, too?”

“Sure, run get him.” Isaac took off, making motor noises. Summer couldn’t quite tell if he was still vacuuming bugs or if he’d become an airplane, racecar, or rocket.

The kitchen was large and very...lived-in, Summer decided. It wasn’t messy, exactly, apart from some dishes in the sink and, of course, scattered toys. Saladin and Yoda were romping around between the kitchen and the living room barking and nipping at each other in a familiar sort of way. The refrigerator was pasted with scribbly crayon drawings of dragons and ponies and a few photos of what Summer assumed were relatives. And there were books. A few extra bookshelves had been edged in where they could fit, and throughout the room were stacks of books, books left open, books in the bay window, and a book on the couch in the hands of a girl, about five years old, with long brown hair and glasses.

Jen carried William into the kitchen, then set him down and banged a huge old triangle of cast iron with a wooden spoon.

“Afternoon drinks!” she called. They heard a tumbling of steps down the stairs and the girl put down her book and trotted into the kitchen. She regarded Alex and Summer with fearless eyes and a little smile.

“I’m Bella,” she said, offering her hand. “Who are you?”

“I’m Summer,” said Summer. “This is Alex.”

The footsteps manifested as Mandy and an older boy they hadn’t met yet. Mandy ran over to Bella and gave her a hug. “Hi, Bella! You want to see the leafs I found?” Yoda burst onto the scene, yipping and prancing between Bella and Mandy.

Jen grinned. “I love these kids. This is Sam, by the way. Sam, Alex and Summer,” she introduced them to the older boy. “He turned eight last week.”

“Sweet,” said Alex. “Happy birthday.”

The boy put on a showy smile in response.

“Ok, afternoon drinks!” declared Jen. “Summer, can you put William in his chair? Bella, you get the juice for you and Isaac and Mandy. Sam, make up some lemonade if you want it, otherwise there’s juice or milk.”

“Can I make tea?” he asked.

“Herbal, if you want. Nothing too energizing.”

He nodded obligingly and began filling a pot with water. Isaac burst in with Zen.

“Pkow!” His head spun to look up at Zen. “We got him, right?”

“Undoubtedly. I’ve never seen someone handle a slime harpoon that well.”

“Afternoon drinks,” Jen told Isaac with a touch of reproof.

“Oh, sorry.” He grabbed Zen’s hand. “You want to sit next to me? Hi, Bella,” he added as he dragged Zen to the table. “We can have juice or milk,” he explained.

Jen laughed. “You’re also authorized for Cosmos or tea if you want.”

“Hmm.” Zen pondered this happily. “Perhaps a little afternoon tea wouldn’t be amiss.”

A few bustling minutes later, William had a sippy cup of formula, Mandy and Isaac and Bella had various cups of milk and juice, Sam and Zen were carefully squeezing out their tea bags, and Jen was pouring icy Cosmopolitans for Summer, Alex, and herself.

“So,” she said, looking around the table. “What’s on your mind and what have you learned?”

47. Consortium

For some time after Zen left, Otto sat on his sack of spelt, staring into the core of the gargantuan bale of wax paper. The wax paper was not computers. It didn't make sense. There were supposed to be computers in front of him. Lots of computers. Powerful computers. It didn't make sense.

Without really deciding to, he heaved himself to his feet and began shuffling through the dim maze of the basement.

"This won't do," he muttered. "Won't do at all."

Too right it won't, murmured a guttural little cockney voice he knew wasn't real. *We otter find us a mainframe, we otter. Components an' the like, innat right, mates?*

He didn't exactly hear the motley chorus of agreement, but it was there. Except it wasn't, technically. But he knew they weren't real. That was the key. That meant he wasn't crazy. It was just some...characters he kept around in his imagination. Imaginary friends, if you like. Sometimes it helped to have some companionship when it was just you and the widescreens.

"What next, boys?"

Well, I dun' like to say, he told himself in the lumbering voice of Grumbles the friendly troll. *P'raps if we wuz just to go an' grab summink. Out of a dumpster, like.*

He didn't know if people with that kind of accent actually used the word 'dumpster,' but of course that was irrelevant. People with that accent were usually not trolls either. Or imaginary.

He wobbled up the stairs, not paying particularly close attention to reality.

Maybe Sushi'll tell us, squawked Tanglebait, the cockney gremlin. Then added knowingly, *In't she a fruity one, eh?*

"Shut up," mumbled Otto. He wasn't sure what that meant, but Tanglebait had a cheeky streak that needed watching. Otto scuffed his way into the sunroom and dropped onto one of the petite chairs.

“You shut up,” muttered Sushi reflexively.

Look, boys, we’re getting nowhere fast, he told them in his head. They could hear him either way, obviously. *We’ve got a situation here. I need solutions.*

Hwell, hummed the nasal voice of Tickleback, the wizened gremlin scholar and artificer. *Hwee could perhaps attempt a trans-dimensional nexus shift. Naturally it would, hem, be a rather complex matter to calibrate the internal locus, but with Mordenkainen’s Radical Cantrip we may, hem, be able to derive, as it were...*

He drifted off, as usual, into a mumbling technical digression.

Wot if we jus’ checked back at yore old house, suggested Grumbles.

“No, no, there’s nothing left there,” muttered Otto in growing irritation. “We need a real solution.”

But maybe we cud—

Otto exploded.

“Just think, Grumbles!”

“What did you call me?” snapped Sushi.

“Not you,” said Otto with a surly grimace.

“Well, I’m the only one here, Blabby McBlabberoff. Can’t you just go downstairs and talk with your...fungus-men or whatever?”

“I am talking with them,” huffed Otto. “And they are not fungus-men, they are a consortium of highly skilled gremlin and gremlinoid adventurers. And frankly, their ideas today are not what I’ve come to expect. Yeah, you heard me, Tanglebait,” he snapped peevishly.

“Whatever, corn pone. Just leave me out of it, ok?”

“No, come on, Sush, I need ideas here. Where am I gonna get back my beautiful computage? I am literally going crazy here.”

Sushi rolled her eyes, though her brush never stopped. “*Going crazy?* And Elton John’s starting to seem a little fruity, don’t you think?”

“Sushi!”

“Pope considering the whole ‘Jesus’ thing?”

“Come on, man, I need—”

“Otto, seriously. I am three brushstrokes from finishing this painting. If you are still

there when that happens, you will be pummeled. Ferociously.”

“But,” he whimpered, “the dimensional thingy—”

She executed three final, precise brushstrokes and stepped back, glowing slightly, to examine the overall effect.

It was at that moment that a cockroach fell out of nowhere onto the canvas.

48. Blast

“That was great,” Summer sighed. She walked with Zen and Alex under a blue sky and a blazing pink sunset. “Seriously. We need to do afternoon drinks.”

“Yeah,” said Zen contentedly.

They padded along the sidewalk in quiet appreciation of the evening. Summer found herself caught between emotions. Part of her was at total peace after hours of physical labor, a stimulating chat with brilliant children, and a mellowing beverage. The other part was eagerly bubbling with bliss and inspiration. Jen’s family ritual of afternoon drinks was pure beauty. So elegant, so...warm and cute and interesting and familial and—Summer caught herself. It was everything she wanted to be like as a person, everything she wanted to cultivate in any community she belonged to.

And there was Alex. She knew it would be best to hold her feelings back, but right now she felt so good that she couldn’t have stopped it and didn’t want to anyway. What a glorious day. Working together, overcoming icky bugs with ingenuity and valor, laughing and making decisions and earning money and piles of lovely junk. She sighed, watching his t-shirt trace his muscular shoulders. She curled the fingers of one hand, remembering the feel of his grip and the shock and relief of a cockroach on his hand, not hers.

They hopped casually up the front porch stairs and opened the front door. Exactly at that moment, an earsplitting shriek of rage and horror sliced through the air to greet them.

“What the—” Alex sprang forward, running to the back of the house. A stream of passionately creative cursing, pure Sushi, poured from the sunroom.

Zen and Summer traded a worried glance before running after Alex. They tumbled into the darkening room of glass and paint fumes.

“Barnacled whelp of a sea hag! Blasted filthy spittoon-drenched abomination of the nether ice caves! The rage of Manhattan at rush hour to blast you! The fiery dark prickly stingers of a—”

“What’s wrong?” Summer gasped. Otto sat quivering in wide-eyed silence on one of the

petite garden chairs.

“Graaah!” squealed Sushi. “This...pestilence fell on my painting! Grrrraar!”

Summer saw a damp spot on the floor containing a fine mash of some sort and a couple scattered cockroach legs.

“Cockroach?” she asked.

Sushi whirled at her, her wet paintbrush dangling dangerously close to Summer’s shirt. “Don’t say that word. Don’t say it! Why is this house not clean? Why have we not made a home of our new so-called, bug-infested, filthy death-hive of a house?”

Zen plucked the paintbrush from her hand unnoticed. Alex snatched Sushi’s shoulders and shook her once, firmly. “Stop it. Calm down.”

At this Sushi turned even redder and for a moment it looked like she was going to scream in his face, or maybe do something deadly with her eyeballs. She inhaled longer than she should have been able to. After a long, quivering moment, though, she merely shook herself free from his grip and stood there, huffing out clouds of rage through her nose.

“What’s the problem?” Alex asked sharply.

Otto began in a broken voice. “I just came up to—”

“Quiet!” snapped Sushi. Otto flinched. His eyes flickered, and he began rocking slightly on his chair, lips muttering. Sushi went on without even glancing at him. “Why isn’t this house clean? What are we waiting for?”

Alex threw up his hands. “It’s all right there, Sushi. Go for it. You’re a big girl, yes? The rest of us have been cleaning for hours already.”

“In some random garage? Thanks, Alex, that really helps. Maybe I’ll just go sleep there tonight.” She stabbed a thumbs-up at him. “Great work on the priorities, there, guys.”

A quizzical smirk sprang into Summer’s face. “Is this about one cockroach? ‘Cause—” She glanced again at the thorough smear of bug on the floor. “It looks like you pretty much took care of the situation. Just sayin’.”

Sushi whirled on her. “No. It’s about the bug, and the mouse, and the dirt and piles and I haven’t eaten anything but crackers all day because we still don’t have any gas. And we don’t have light and that idiot bug just ruined my griffin’s wingtip and I have to repaint it before it gets dark but I’m too busy standing here yelling at you. And then I’m going to have to sleep on the floor in the dark again, or else stumble up into some nasty dead old lady bed with funky

pillows, and it just seems like it would have been nice if someone without a contest deadline could have thought of all of this before—” She flung a hand toward the wall of tiny windows. “—nightfall. You know?”

Just then, a deep, heavily-accented male voice called from somewhere toward the front of the house. “Is anybody home?”

49. It's-a

Alex glanced around. The voice sounded like it was outside.

“Hello?” called a man’s foreign accent from around the corner, getting closer. “Is anybody home?”

“We’re back here,” snapped Sushi.

“Ok,” cried the jovial voice, and within moments he was walking past the wall of windows. He entered the sunroom through the outside door.

The owner of the voice was pleasantly rotund, with a bushy walrus moustache and the red shirt and white overalls and cap that made up the uniform of Torrent Gas & Power Co. Relief flickered into Alex. It was remarkably poor timing, but at least this would get rid of one of the big stressors. Could help cool things down a little.

“Hello,” said the utility worker. “I’m-a here for—”

Otto glanced up, eyes wide.

“It’s you!” he exclaimed.

“Yes, it’s-a me,” replied the man, confused but obliging.

“Hnnnn!” With a squeal of boyish glee, Otto charged across the room and clenched him in a joyous bear hug. “I knew you’d come!” he cried, the words muffled by the utility man’s chest. The man tentatively gave Otto’s shoulder a few fatherly pats.

“Yes,” he quavered. “I come.” His nervous eyes skittered between the others.

“Dammit Otto, he’s not Mario!” snapped Sushi.

“No,” agreed the man. “It’s-a me, Kosla. I’m here for you gas-an-‘lectric.”

Otto didn’t let go.

“Let the nice man go, Otto,” said Zen. He started peeling Otto’s fingers free.

“Where is you ‘lectric meters?” asked Kosla, a little put off by the ongoing extraction of Otto from his belly.

“I’m not sure,” Alex told him. “I think it’s out on the other side of the house. But we just moved in yesterday.”

“Ok, I check,” said Kosla. Zen placed Otto in a seat. Otto gazed up at Kosla in quiet, happy awe. Kosla patted him on the shoulder as he walked past. “Is ok, big guy. He come. He come.”

“I know, Mario,” said Otto dreamily. “I’ll wait.”

“Ok. Sorry for disturb, everybody.” They watched him walk past the long wall of windows and around the other corner. A moment of silence hung in the air. Summer turned to Sushi.

“Sorry, all I just heard from you was blah blah mouse blah blah contest blah blah cockroach blah blah everybody else’s fault. Does that about sum it up?”

“You forgot blah blah look at me and Alex off together getting—”

“Sush,” Summer cut her off with a reddening face and a warning in her tone. Alex felt the subtext tingling between them, the wordless fighting possible only among sisters, best friends, or long-standing roommates.

“Rae.” Sushi met her eye to eye with a defiant gaze. It was Summer’s middle name, and Sushi’s exclusive possession as a nickname. Alex could almost hear the tacked-on challenge. *You got something to say to me?*

Summer gave a dangerous tilt of her head and the silent fight continued flooding between them. Zen cut in.

“How about we spend a half hour blitzing the—”

“Quiet,” said Sushi, eyes still locked with Summer. Suddenly they seemed to reach an unspoken compromise. Sushi lifted her chin in a frosty gesture. “All right. Forget it. We can sleep on floors again.”

“No,” objected Alex. “Not after that. You’re going to help.” He was working hard to keep his cool, but arbitrariness and manipulation got to him like almost nothing else.

“Yes, sir!” cried Sushi, grinning with malicious chirpiness. Her eyes flicked to Summer’s again, though she still spat her sarcastic words at Alex. “It’s so good to have such a strong managerial type telling me what to do.”

Alex glanced over and, to his surprise, saw angry tears beginning to rise in Summer’s face.

“Whatever, one-trick wonder,” she shot back. “What happens when the contest is over? Looking forward to that?”

Sushi paled slightly.

“Guys,” said Zen reproachfully. “Come on. Seriously?”

The girls whirled on him.

“You don’t know what this is, Zen,” said Summer. “Just stay out of it.”

“What, I don’t live here any more?” burst Zen. “I can’t talk? I’m just the carthorse around here or what?”

Sushi snapped back, “Don’t try to fix this, ok? I know you think you’re all sensitive and intuitive and whatever, but not here.”

Zen threw up his hands. “I’m not trying to fix anything. I just want to live in my frikkin’ house and eat with my friends and have a half-decent lack of mess, ok? I don’t care what little spats you two want to get into. Tear each other up! Just, you want to maybe do a little scrubbing while you’re at it?”

Summer and Sushi simultaneously inhaled for a response Alex could tell would turn this fight truly epic.

“Quiet,” he shouted preemptively. “Everybody just...stop. Stop. Split up and cool down, ok?”

Sushi whirled on him. He cut her off before she could say a word.

“I don’t want to hear it. Get out. Spread out, ok?” Now he was shouting, but he didn’t care. It was what needed to happen. “Go!”

50. Fragments

Sushi waited for everyone else to leave her sunroom studio. Then she changed her mind. It was all dark and Otto was still sitting in the corner like a lump and besides, she'd been working there twelve hours already. Screw the sunroom. She shoved her way past Alex and Summer in the kitchen and at the spiral stairs she burrowed under Zen's arm like a tiny whirlwind.

"Hey!" he cried behind her, but she was already up in the hallway that smelled of grandmother and slamming the master bedroom door behind her. She automatically flicked the light switch, but of course nothing happened. Sushi dropped onto the huge, flowery four-poster bed and sank into a puff of bedding that was actually not that unpleasant. It didn't smell funky, just faintly flowery and old.

But her mind was whirling.

What happens when the contest is over?

Summer knew where to hit her so it hurt. What happens? The slump. The death of a successful project. The monumental strain of starting a new one, better than the last one, never in a rut, never predictable. Can't be predictable. Have to be deep. Dig deeper, climb higher, impress them again, again, again, for the rest of your life. Never stop. No rest until you become too weak for it and turn into one of the millions of washed-up has-beens littering the shores of art history.

"Stupid son of a...cockroach," she muttered.

* * *

Zen plodded up the steps to the tower room.

Just when I'd been getting back in a good mood. Nice, Sushi.

Disconsolately, he let the door drift shut and climbed in near-darkness into his hammock. He could feel the books past his feet, row after row. Waiting. The darkness felt

oppressive, and he realized he hadn't eaten since lunch.

Meh. Food is overrated.

That was when he knew for sure—well, suspected more confidently—that there was really something wrong in him, some kind of depression or something. *Well*, he observed negligently. *That sucks.*

* * *

“Did you see him, boys? He was here,” Otto murmured fervently in the darkening sunroom.

Yeah, we sore 'im, said Tanglebait, more or less. *We en't blind, you know, just 'coz we's imaginary.*

Otto looked around faintly. “Where did everybody go?”

Hwell, I suppose hwee could propose...er, that is to say, I, er..., stuttered Tickleback.

Grumbles the troll took over. *They left.*

I believe there was an...altercation, Tickleback added helpfully.

“You mean like a fight?”

Very much so. Tickleback grimaced.

“We should get them back,” said Otto. “Come on, boys. Our friends are in trouble!”

Herh. Your friends, more like, squeaked Griphook, like a miniature cabbie.

“Shut up, Griphook. Now, where's my communicator?”

* * *

Alex prowled the dark street with ferocious energy. He'd been right to break it up, hadn't he? They needed some space. It was obvious. They hadn't eaten right, it was still weird being in a new house, no lights, bad sleep last night. Obvious. There was nothing to it.

But a part of him still had to wonder if he would have to be the group's dad forever. Sushi was rebelling against him already. *Dammit, I'm not trying to be the boss! I just had to break it—* He caught himself. She wasn't here. But what was he getting into?

And what was that flickery business between Summer and Sushi? Half of him wanted to

write it off, just another one of their little sister-fights, just hungry and tired. But he'd seen the tears in Summer's eyes. He wondered if he should talk to Sushi. But why him? And about what? But what if he didn't?

With a quiet roar of frustration, he paced on into the darkness.

* * *

Summer sat huddled in a ball on a chair on the porch. Alex was long gone, probably blaming himself, even after he'd been the one to stop a truly terrible fight. And Sushi had hit her right where it really hurt. *He's not managerial*, she fought back in her head. *He's just—*

Strong. Decisive. Whatever. She slumped into herself, gripping her cold knees even tighter. It wasn't like that. She didn't want a boss. Just because he knew how to make things happen didn't mean he was some—

But deep down she wondered. Yeah, he hadn't liked CafeNow, but he fit there. Managing a shop, telling people what to do. Dealing with corporate. Perfect CEO material. How long until he went back to that world?

And even worse, part of her wanted him to. For a moment her mind flicked again to a different vision of their life together. Rich, powerful, stable. They could do so much good. And she hated herself for thinking it.

Some rebel I turned out to be.

51. Lights

Otto rummaged madly through his basement piles.

“Where is it, Griphook?”

Waddya askin’ me fer? You’re the one who lost it.

“I didn’t lose it. I placed it elsewhere for safekeeping. I positioned it to strategically leverage aggressive synergies. I’m sure whatever I did with it was highly dynamic.”

I think it’s over there, rumbled Grumbles gently.

“Oh. Yes.” Otto reached over to his old pants still crumpled on the ground from when he put on the overalls. It was the only pile in the whole basement he could really call his own. Sitting on top of the jeans was his communicator. He grabbed it and clicked a certain clicky button three times.

* * *

Summer peered through her knees at the dark street. Alex wasn’t back yet, not that she expected him this soon. A cool night breeze rustled the dim red-orange leaves above her as a streetlamp flickered with a very quiet sizzling noise.

We need to talk. In her head she said it to all of them, but when she heard the words they forced her mind back to Alex. *We need to talk.* Funny how the same words in nearly the same tone could mean something so vastly, heart-flutteringly different. *Not yet,* she told herself. *When the time comes.* A quiet, sad, honest part of her knew she was still making excuses, but it was quiet enough that she didn’t have to deal with it. Yet.

Besides, they all had to get through this fight first. It was no wonder things had blown up. They hadn’t seen each other properly since the move. They’d hardly even talked out any real plans for the Dream World Collective yet, and here they were, living together, hungry, angry, and still in the dark.

At that moment a single lamp in the sitting room came on, glowing quietly through the

window onto the porch. Hope surged in Summer. She knew it was silly, but it felt like a sign.

A brilliant idea leapt to life in her brain. Afternoon drinks! Well, evening drinks. Still, if the gas and lights were on now, it meant she could make some proper drinks to help smooth things over and get people talking.

She rose from her chair and headed into the kitchen.

* * *

The lights in the tower room blazed to life, causing Zen to start and sit up in his hammock. He remembered he'd left the switch on to alert him when the power came on. Well, now he was alert.

He hopped out of the hammock. The light and action lifted his spirits. This wasn't a time for lying around in a puddle of self-pity. He grabbed a sheet of paper and started writing notes. His communicator chirped three times. Whatever that meant. Otto and his crazy gizmos. He ignored it and kept scribbling words on paper.

After a few minutes he padded out into the hallway and slipped one under Sushi's door. He pattered downstairs and stood at the front door, wondering where Alex was. Behind him the kitchen glowed with warm light and he heard old mugs clinking quietly. He settled for shoving Alex's note under the front door, out onto the porch. It would have to do.

He turned and stepped into the kitchen. Summer was gathering mugs and had something steaming in a little pot on the stove. She gave him a fragile smile. He smiled wryly and wordlessly passed her a note. Then he started folding Otto's into a paper airplane for aerial deployment into the Underdark.

* * *

Sushi was idly dusting between the knickknacks on the dresser with her fingers, tracing patterns of clean space between the dusty perfume bottles and framed black-and-white pictures and a few pale shells. The lights flicked on. She peered around her. Stupid bedroom mess. If anybody had actually bothered to clean the place up it would have been a rather welcoming bedroom.

She growled quietly. There was still time to get it clean. She would just have to make certain...arrangements. Sushi charged out of the master bedroom and plummeted down the stairs. In the kitchen she found Summer and Zen making drinks and a paper airplane, respectively. No sooner had she found them than their collars were in her hands.

“That’s it. We’re having a meeting,” she announced. “I have chores to assign.”

Summer slapped her hand away with a glare.

“We’re already having a meeting,” Zen said. “It’s in the memorandum I pushed under your door. Nobody pays attention to memoranda nowadays.”

“Whatever.” She released her grip, giving him a little shake just to make sure. “Just... stay here, then. That is all.” She eyed them both, with a certain fierce flicker in the look she gave Summer. That girl needed a talking to. Cocoa or no cocoa. “Hmph.”

Twenty seconds later she was dragging Otto up the stairs, wreathed in his protests.

“But I sent three chirps! Assemble at base. Everybody knows that. Why are we—Ooh, Shasta!”

* * *

Alex approached the house. A brisk walk always left him more well-adjusted. The thing was to have a house meeting, clear the air, set some ground rules. He hopped up the steps and strode into the kitchen. He noticed with relief that the lights were on.

“Hey guys,” he said. “I’m sorry for blowing up like that before. I think maybe we just need to all sit down together and—” Suddenly it registered that they were all assembled, looking up at him.

“Talk?” asked Zen.

“I iced you a bottle of ginger beer,” said Summer. She waved him to one of the chairs. “Hope it’s cold enough.”

“Where’d you get ice?” asked Alex

She shrugged. “Jen. Turns out she’s exactly as cool as she seems.”

“So,” Zen said. “Grand Council?”

Alex nodded. “Grand Council.”

Ready for more?

Join in the fun at Patreon.com/byfaroe. Catch free downloads of new chapters as they come out, plus character interviews and more great bonus content as the adventure unfolds.

If you'd like to get a note by email when I release new content or have fun updates to share, sign up at byfaroe.com/updates.

Thanks for reading!

— Ben