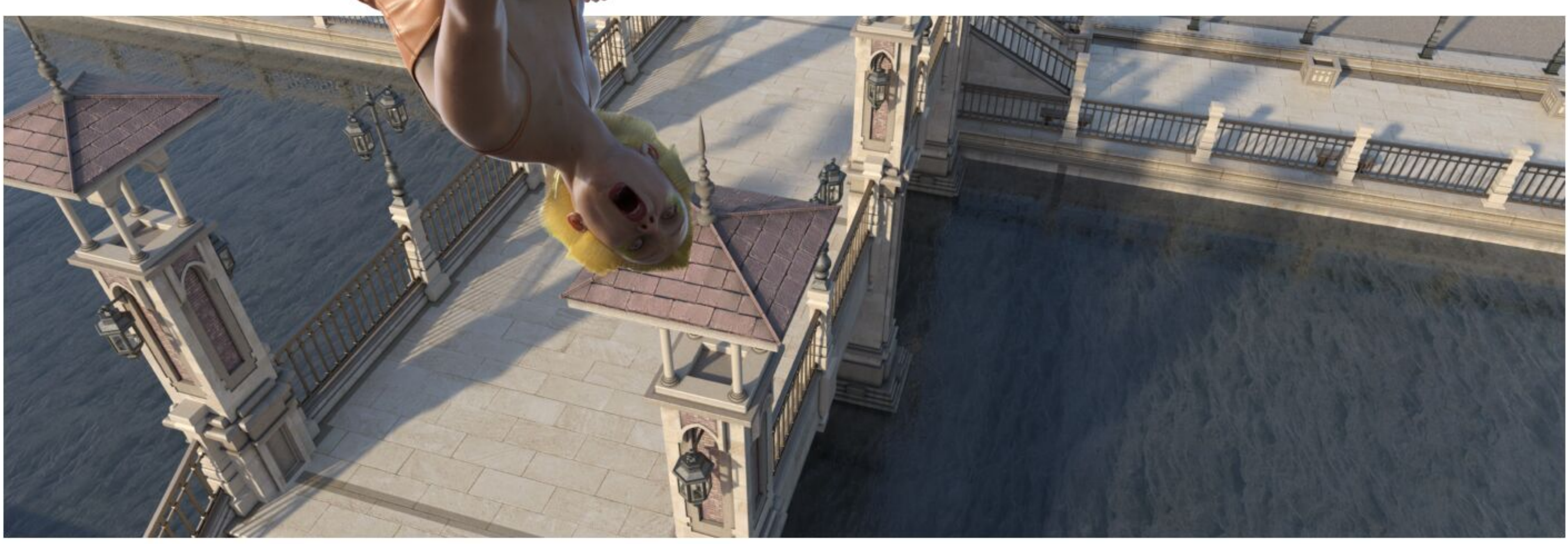


The Canal area is always empty. No one goes there because there's nothing there to go to. No shops, no venues, no personal spaces connect to it. There's no reason to be here, not even if you live high above it.



So no one saw her Fall.
And no one saw the body.



And then, a few seconds later, it was gone.
Which is a very bad sign if you know anything about how Sleep works.

Not that it would occur to most people here to think about it.

Death in Sleep

Words and images by Trilby

I'd never given it much thought myself. Everyone in Sleep is extremely healthy. The beds provide full-time monitoring and care, and if something goes seriously wrong, a few seconds later an anxious bedder is hovering over you trying to fix it.

And Sleep acts kind of like suspended animation. People in Sleep live a long time. Sure, everyone dies eventually, but it happens so seldom in most people's experience here that it's easy to forget about. It's just not a regular part of life.

It seemed like it shouldn't be possible to have sudden and unexpected death in Sleep. But that was exactly what had happened to Honey Melone when she had hit the bridge. And then she was gone, because Sleep is tidy that way.

I knew there was a Medical Facility in the Sleep complex. It hadn't occurred to me it would also have a Morgue.

The old joke goes, it's not the Fall that kills you, it's the landing. But the landing hadn't killed Honey either.

INSTANT CESSATION OF BRAIN ACTIVITY AND ALL AUTONOMIC FUNCTIONS. SHE WAS DEAD BEFORE HER BEDDER COULD REACH THE BED, LESS THAN ONE SECOND.

But nothing actually happened to her--I mean, not for real ...

THAT DOESN'T HAVE TO MATTER, UNFORTUNATELY. HER BRAIN AND HEART STOPPED BECAUSE SHE BELIEVED SHE HAD SUFFERED A FATAL IMPACT ... IN EFFECT, THE CESSATION WAS VOLUNTARY.

Hang on. Even given your real scope--which I still haven't signed on for, thank you very much--this is way out of line. We're not detectives.

We don't have any detectives. We have to do what we can.

--sigh--
OK, but if we're just going to go into the Aerie and start asking personal questions, first thing someone's going to ask is what gives us the right.

And you'll tell them you are acting on behalf of Lucius Barker.

Don't look at me like that. It's not a lie. Lucius hasn't forgotten the two mysterious people who dealt with Nathaniel's cult. He asked around, trying to get your help again. The word reached me and I spoke to him.

Oh, yeah? What does he think you look like? I bet it wasn't Midnight.

Look, I'll do it ... but this is the last time I tell you yes on anything until I get some truth out of you.

You want me to help police Barkers, but you won't trust me with your real identity or your real motivations. Do you think I'm stupid?

No. Just impatient.

The Aerie is a closed community. You have to meet their standards--which are a little vague--to join it, and they don't let new people in very often. Maybe fifty people lived up there, at most.

Unless you have permission to do a direct transport to one of the spaces up there, there is only one way to get up to the Aerie--which is exactly how they want it.

Our rank-pulling ability got tested immediately. Their guy on the ground made four phone calls before consenting to let us use some wings. One of them was to Lucius Barker. Another was to Bertram Colombe, founder of the Aerie.

It felt like a very long way up.

How are you doing?

... I've discovered I don't like heights.

Huh. The Future, the way it used to look. Retrograde, now.

And strangely out of place. Why'd they bother to keep those pediments if they're not actually standing on anything? They look silly in mid-air.

Maybe they wanted basement space.

I can't be an architecture critic right now, Leyna, I'm busy trying not to be ill.

I just want it to be solid enough to land on.



This is hers? Uh ... why didn't it delete when she died?

Lock count, I'd imagine. It's a partially shared space with the other house here. Can't delete it if the space is still in use.

I'm not sure how I feel about wandering through a ghost space.

Won't matter anyway. You won't find anything useful in there.



Bertram told me you'd be coming. You don't think it was an accident, do you? Please tell me you don't. You wouldn't be here if you thought it was an accident, right?

Well ... uh ... I guess that's what we're trying to find out, Ms. ...?

Just call me Glynis. We don't use last names much up here.

Come on in and we'll talk. Your friend looks like she needs to sit down.



So why don't you think it was an accident?

It just couldn't happen! Our habits are too strong. See how your friend's taken her wings off? She might forget and try to leave without putting them on. We don't do that.

Honey could have been blind drunk and still wouldn't have stepped out of the house without her wings on. For anything.

OK. If it wasn't an accident, though ... who might have had a reason to want her dead?

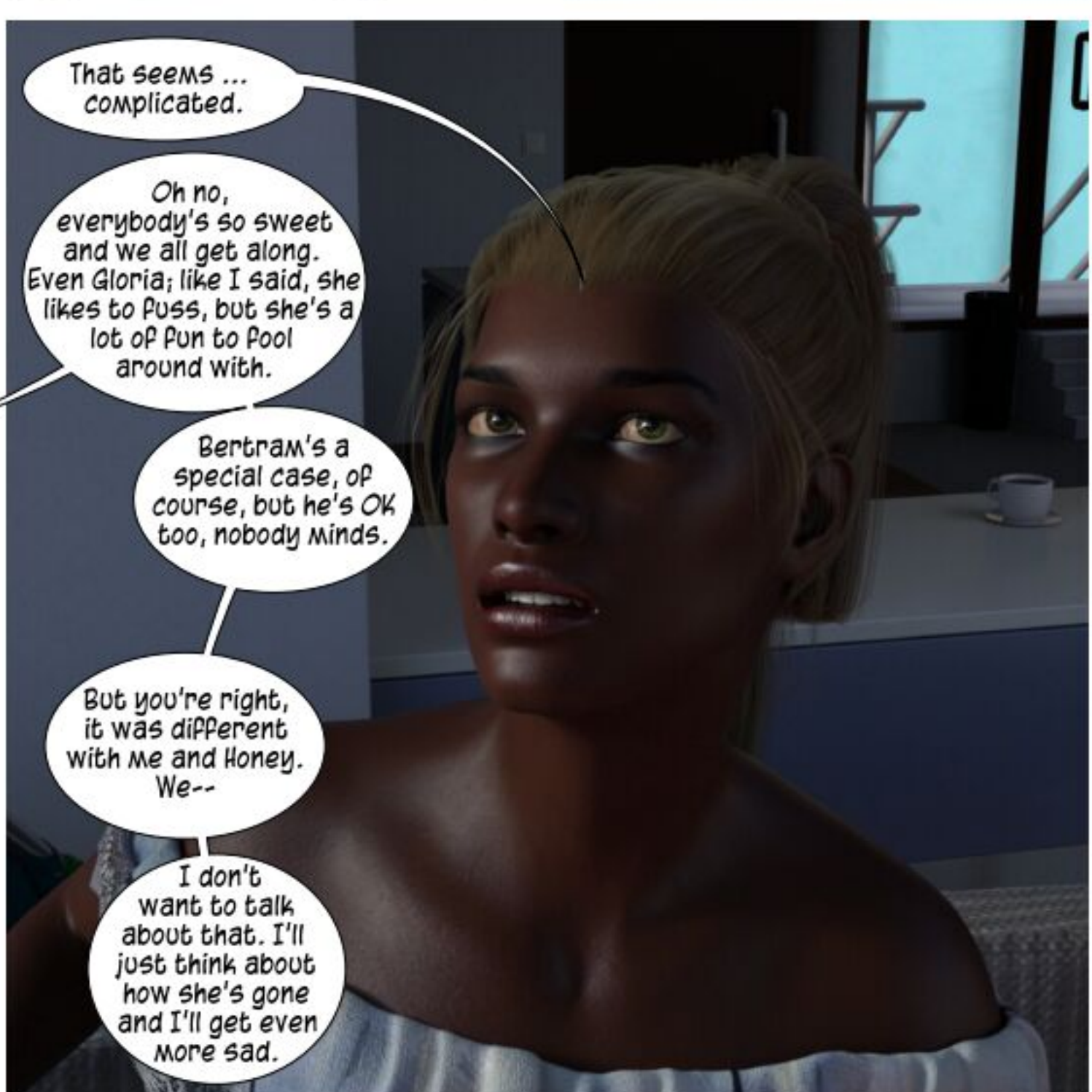
Nobody! That's what I don't get. Everybody loved Honey. Even Gloria; she just likes to gripe. I can't imagine who would--oh, this is really making me sad to think about.



Excuse my asking, but it sounds like you and Honey were pretty close.

Well, yeah-- Oh, wait. You're asking if we had sex, right? It's been a long time since I talked to ground people. Sorry.

Everybody here has sex with everybody else here. It's kind of a rule. If someone asks you, you say yes, if you can. It helps us bind as a community.



That seems ... complicated.

Oh no, everybody's so sweet and we all get along. Even Gloria; like I said, she likes to Puss, but she's a lot of fun to Puss around with.

Bertram's a special case, of course, but he's OK too, nobody minds.

But you're right, it was different with me and Honey. We--

I don't want to talk about that. I'll just think about how she's gone and I'll get even more sad.



Is there anyone else up here in particular you think we should talk to?

Well, you should talk to Bertram, just because. And Gloria knows everything that's going on.

And maybe talk to Thor. He spent a lot of time with Honey too. He's below right now but he'll be back up later.

But honestly, I don't think you're going to get anything useful. I don't think it could have been anybody up here.

So you think it must have been someone from outside the Aerie? OK, but that seems like a real challenge. We had to practically sell our souls to get these wings. Unless your idea is someone had permission to transport straight to her personal space ...

No, she wouldn't have done that. I mean, she wouldn't have given access to any ground people.

Probably half the Aerie had access, but we could just fly over anyway.

Or walk over, in your case. Hey, would she have put on wings just to walk across from her door to yours?

She would have put on wings to stick one foot out her doorway.



Next stop.

More retromodernism. And something's wrong with the scale. It's all too small. I wonder if it's a Wright knockoff.

Ssh.

Hello?

Ms. Marshall? Sorry. The door was open.

Call me Gloria, please. No, we don't usually lock the doors around here.

You're asking about Honey? Bertram said you might be coming by. I think you're wasting your time, but I'll be happy to answer your questions. Make yourselves comfortable.



Thank you. Why do you think we're wasting our time?

Because I just don't believe anyone here would have killed Honey. And I don't really see how any ground people could have done it. So I think, as difficult as it is to imagine, that her death must have been accidental.

And you don't think anyone here could have killed her because you're all one big happy family?

No. Families murder each other all the time. Or would like to.

We are all up here because we have common ideals. We have something better than family. We all understand each other.

You make the Aerie sound like a utopian project.

It is--in its way. I'm not saying it's perfect. Of course there are occasional problems.

For example?

Well, for example, two months ago I had a fairly hard conversation with Honey ...



"I manage most of the Aerie's business affairs. That includes handling the pool."
"You see, bed Fees are pooled here. Everyone pays the same fixed percentage of their income, and your Fees are guaranteed--even if you can't come up with enough, the pool will take care of you. Of course in practice that means Bertram, who has far more money than the rest of us, ends up picking up most of the load. But he's prepared to do that. He's a generous man."

But, Honey, you haven't paid into the pool at all for three months.
I haven't had any income for three months.
Well, I assumed that. That's just restating the problem. What's going on?



Everything I can find is ground people wanting sex. I don't mind working with them, but I don't want to go to bed with them.

I can't blame you there. But you have to come up with something.
We give each other a great deal of benefit of doubt, that's our way. But if you go much longer, others here are going to start thinking you're taking advantage of the situation.



How did that work out?

She found something, because next month she was back to paying her pool share again. I didn't ask what.

So if you're thinking of making her delinquency into a motive for murder, forget it.

No, I wouldn't have--



Sure you would. That's the thing about starting with an assumption like that. You've already decided which hammer to use, so now you're looking for nails.

But I'm telling you, there is nothing you could come up with that I would consider a plausible motive for one of us to kill one of our own. Nothing.

Don't forget to go see Bertram. He won't have anything for you, but you owe him the courtesy for letting you up here.



That was a dismissal, so we headed to Bertram's place.

Much better.

I had no idea you had such strong feelings about design.

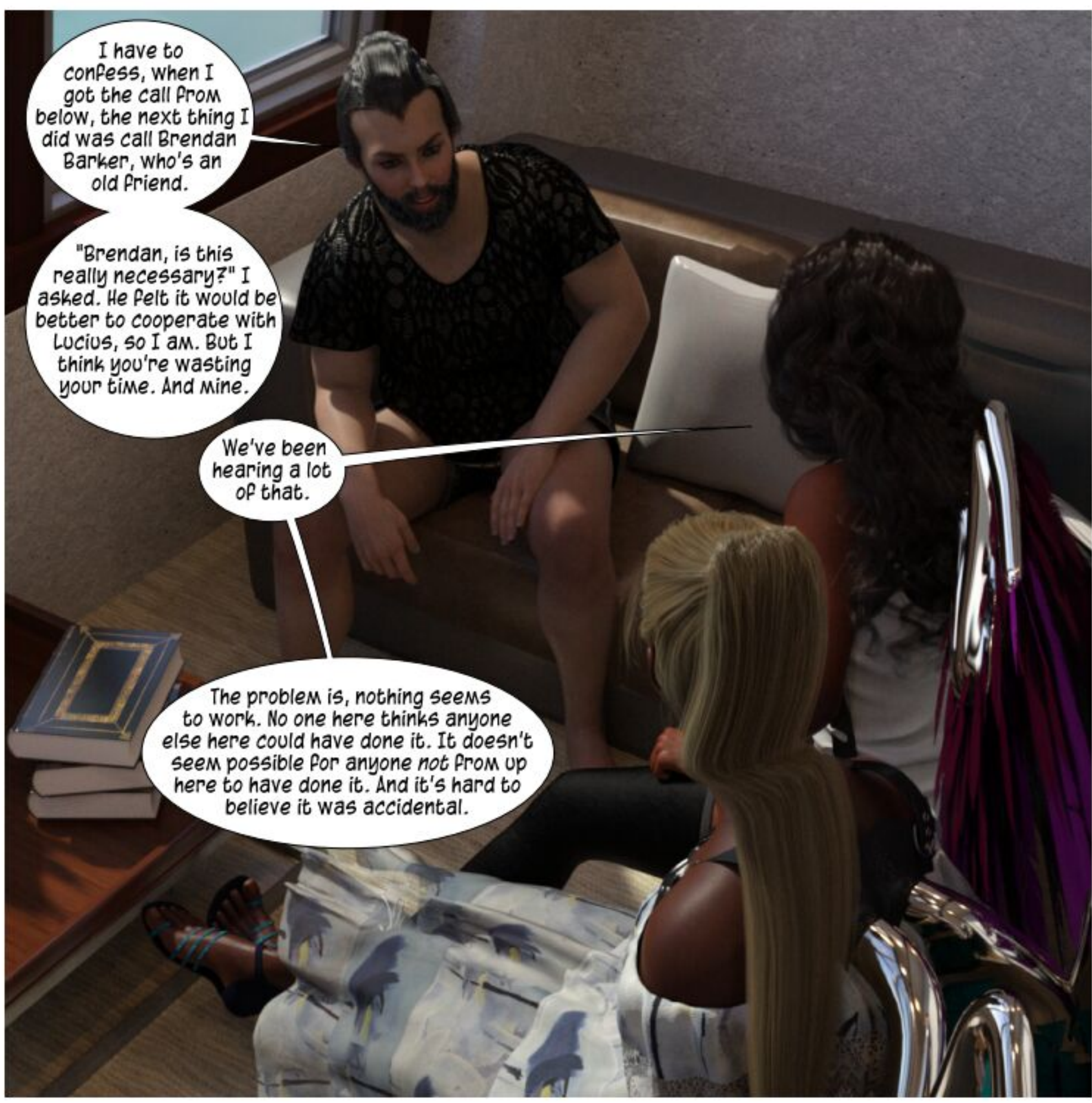
I think you just like high ceilings.

Hello!



Sorry, just got in a second ago. Let me throw something on and I'll be right down.

Grab a drink in the kitchen if you want one.



I have to confess, when I got the call from below, the next thing I did was call Brendan Barker, who's an old friend.

"Brendan, is this really necessary?" I asked. He felt it would be better to cooperate with Lucius, so I am. But I think you're wasting your time. And mine.

We've been hearing a lot of that.

The problem is, nothing seems to work. No one here thinks anyone else could have done it. It doesn't seem possible for anyone not from up here to have done it. And it's hard to believe it was accidental.



I pounded the Aerie to get away from this kind of thing--people's petty motivations for doing harm to one another. I wanted a place where everyone got along because they understood that they, literally, had risen above that.

I think I succeeded. I just can't imagine anyone here doing that. Not to their own.

But understand this. Honey was ... well, I'll put it to you this way. If you do find out, beyond a doubt, that someone murdered her, I'm going to want to know who.

I will take a personal interest in their consequences.



That sure sounded like a petty motivation to me. What do you think?

... Do they all have that hair as some kind of badge of membership? Or do you think they just do it to mess with the ground people?

Ha!
It could be both, you know. I didn't really pay a lot of attention, I was too busy noticing how--

Hey!
You two!
Hold up.



You're the ones asking about Honey. I want to talk to you. My name's Thor.

And we want to talk to you. But let's land somewhere. If I try to have a conversation in mid-air I may throw up.

Sure. My house isn't far.



Oh, thank goodness.

Sorry?

Don't mind her. She's having a bad architecture day.



Oh, yeah, all the slick stuff. It's not for me. I like to have parties on the deck.

Very careful parties. You don't have a railing.

You can wear the wings for almost anything. After a while you get so you don't notice. Even in the pool.

Sex is tricky. The harness gets in the way. So we go inside for that.



Look, I guess you've already talked to everybody, right?

I probably don't have anything to tell you you don't already know.

But I want to help. I want to find whoever did that and ...

... Uh, well. You get what I'm saying.



You have a personal interest in their consequences?

Sorry?

Just something we heard a little while ago. Never mind.

Were you and Honey very close?

Well ... working on it, I guess. We all pool around, but I wanted something different with her, and I think she ... it's hard to tell.

She spent a lot of her time with Glynis, I mean, they're next door to each other, and they've both been here longer than me ...

Anyway, yeah, I was serious about her, and I didn't get a chance to really talk to her about it--

I'm sorry. I know it's hard.

We talked to Thor a while longer, but as he himself had said, he didn't have anything we didn't already know.



You're the one who reads people. Did you get the feeling that Thor was a little jealous of Glynis?

More than "a little." Let's stop by and say goodbye to Glynis before we head to solid ground.



Thor jealous of me? You could just as well figure I was jealous of him. He'd been spending a lot of time with Honey lately.

But I'm telling you, it doesn't matter. The only reason he thought it was anything is that he hadn't talked to us about it. The three of us would have worked it out.

And Gloria ... --sigh-- Like I said, she can be kind of a pain.



Not only would nobody have cared if Honey paid into the pool, least of all Bertram, they wouldn't have known she wasn't. Gloria's the only person who ever knows, or cares.

So she was just giving Honey hell for no reason.

But ... you say Gloria said Honey had pound work?

That was her assumption.

Honey hadn't told me that. I thought she was still looking. She'd been spending a lot of time below.

You might want to talk to Shaw. Her brother. He's probably the only ground person Honey trusted. I have his address.



It was a relief to get out of those wings.

What were you too busy noticing?

Hmm?

You broke off earlier. Before Thor.

Oh. That it was very white. We talked to four people and flew past probably another ten. All white.

Oh, yes, I did see--



You OK?

I thought I saw something. Someone. Never mind.



Before Shaw would tell us anything, he had a concern.

You're not Aerie people, are you? You don't look like you are. If you are, you can go to hell.

We're not Aerie people. I take it you don't like them.

Honey was a different person after she went up there. I mean, we still talked, but she'd changed.

It was like she'd decided there wasn't anything down here she wanted.

I don't know. Maybe she'd always felt like that and just didn't tell me.



Well, maybe she didn't tell them everything either. We think she found work down here, but none of them knew about it.

Yeah, she didn't want them to know, but she didn't tell me why not. She didn't think they'd like it, maybe?

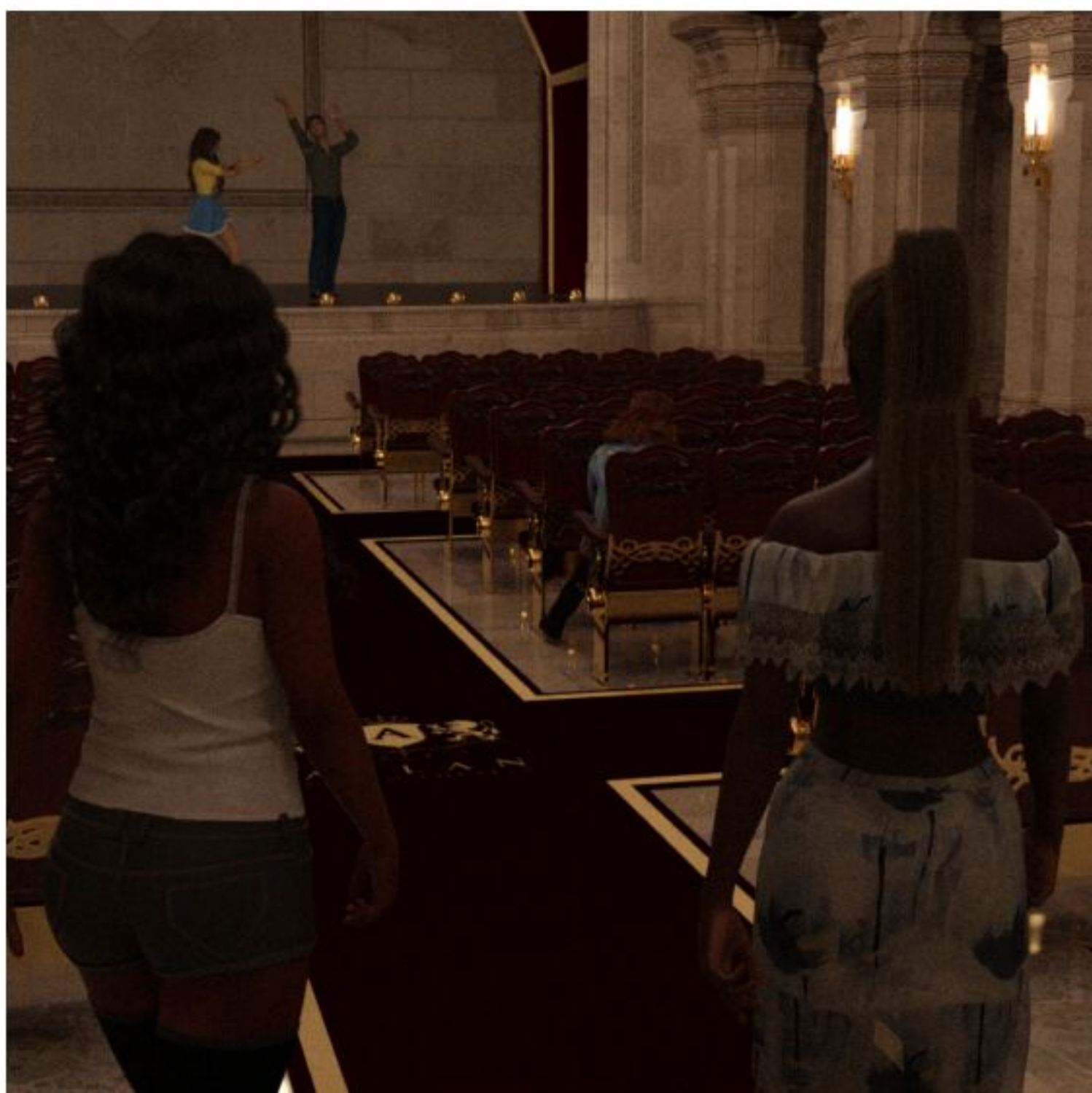
I can tell you, if you don't tell any of them. Though I guess it doesn't matter now.

She joined Hamilton Sparks' theatre troupe. She had a part in their show that's supposed to open soon. ... She was really excited about it. First time I'd seen her excited about anything in a while.

Look, if it turns out somebody killed her ... are you going to try to make them sorry they did?

Uh ... As much as we can. Yes.

Good.



Dismal.



Mr, uh, Sparks? May we speak to you for a moment? About Honey Melone.



Really?

You know, I don't speak ill of the dead, but seeing as how her untimely end has put us in a very difficult situation, you've picked the single worst topic in the world.

I'm sorry about that. We're investigating the circumstances of her death.

Well, you're investigating in the wrong place. Go ask in the Aerie. If anything is mysterious about her death, it's up there.

Another one who's not a fan of the Aerie. There seem to be a lot of those. Personal grudge?



The Aerie is a cult. Even discounting the buy-in--which you shouldn't, because it's horrible--there's something about the place that turns everyone who goes to live up there into a sneering elitist.

If you've spoken to them at all, you've heard the way they talk about "ground people." They think they're better or saner or sexier or something. I never could figure out exactly what. It's annoying.

If I'd known Honey was from the Aerie when she first asked me for a job, I'd have told her to get out of this theatre and not come back.

Which, I admit, would have been a loss, because she turned out to be a good actress. But, on the other hand, I also wouldn't be staring at an opening five days away with a huge gap in an important role.

Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm supposed to be watching her replacement mangle her lines.



"Sparks," My ass.

Beg pardon?

That's Hamilton Barker. He didn't even bother to change appearance to go with the alias.

Oh. He probably doesn't want the actors intimidated. I'd certainly be a little nervous working with a Barker.

A lot of people know what he looks like, though. I guess he isn't planning on winning any awards tonight at the ball. That could get awkward.

He'd just send someone else up to accept for him. And how do you know about the Beaux Arts Ball, anyway?

Ooh! Are you going? I bet Lou's asked you to go, haven't they?



Yeah. Am I making a huge mistake?

Definitely. I've gone with Lou a couple of times. They stopped asking me when they realized I dislike it. You're going to absolutely hate it.

You'll get some interesting people-watching opportunities, though. Just smile and don't say much. Let Lou do the schmoozing.

I guess it's a big deal? But you're not going?

I'm not invited. Private scenarios don't count. It's for people who make passives, or do live theatre.

But, yeah. It's one of the few big social events in this crowd. A lot of money shows up. There'll be Barkers; several of them have their fingers in this business.

Wear something dressy and sexy. Lou will probably be in a tuxedo.

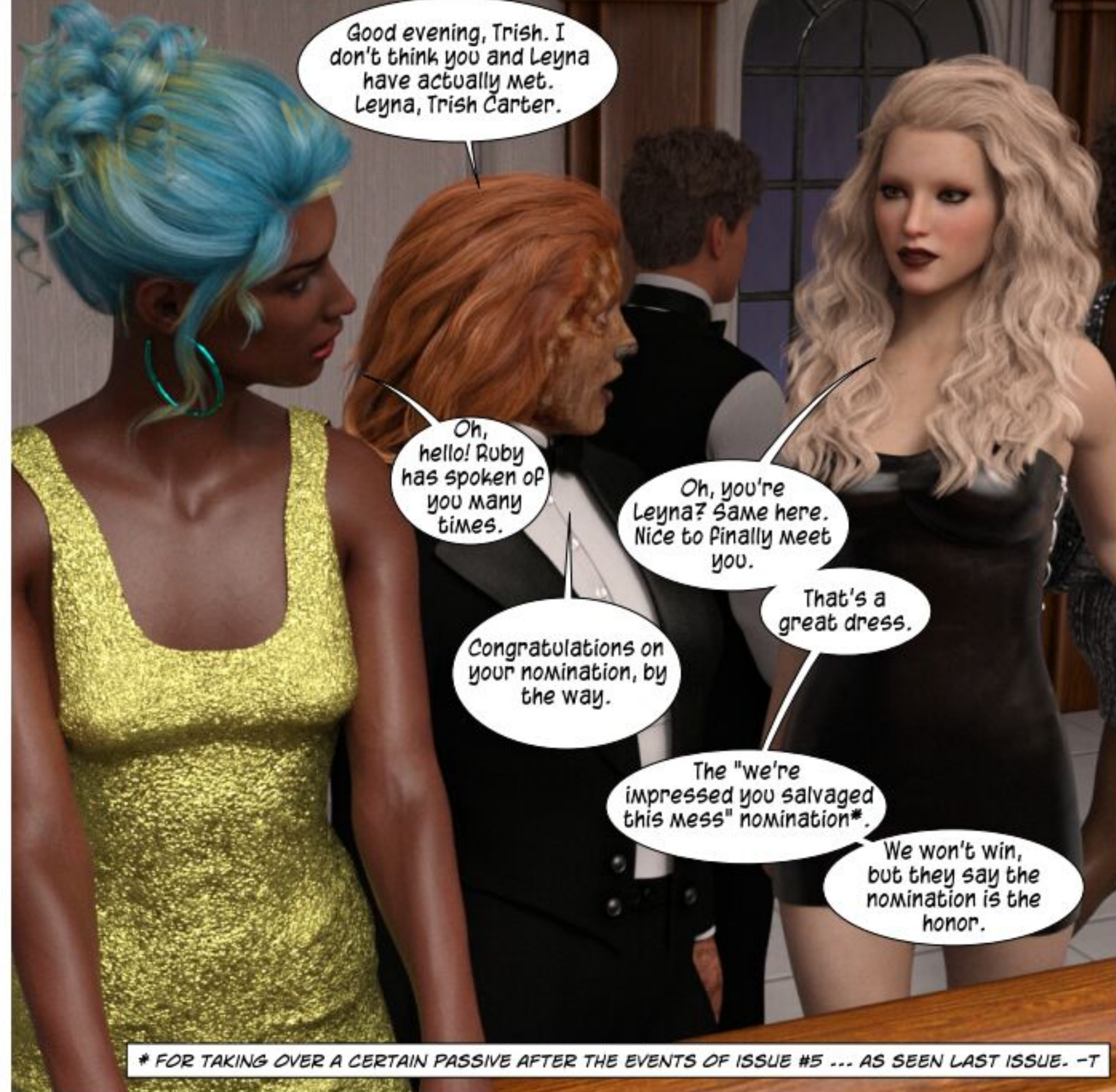
A couple of hours later, at the ball.



... But it's lost money on every show it's done, and it's going to lose money on this one ... so the assumption is that Hamilton "Sparks" is running it for his personal fun. I mean, he can afford to swallow the losses for quite a while.

And, yes, his identity is a poorly-kept secret. I don't think he realizes how many of his company know the truth, but they don't let on.

Hey! Lou! Who's your friend?



Good evening, Trish. I don't think you and Leyna have actually met. Leyna, Trish Carter.

Oh, hello! Ruby has spoken of you many times.

Oh, you're Leyna? Same here. Nice to finally meet you.

That's a great dress.

Congratulations on your nomination, by the way.

The "we're impressed you salvaged this mess" nomination*.

We won't win, but they say the nomination is the honor.

* FOR TAKING OVER A CERTAIN PASSIVE AFTER THE EVENTS OF ISSUE #5 ... AS SEEN LAST ISSUE. -T



Leyna? I didn't expect to see you here.

I don't know who to expect to see here. April, this is Lou Laurence and Trish Carter. Lou, Trish, April Winters.

April runs the--

Cirque Diabolique. It will be very interesting next year to see if anyone nominates it for an award.

Don't hold your breath. I think the content is probably too wild.

You never know. Remember when that bondage ballet won a few years ago? ... I'm blanking on the name.

"Ghosts of Lake Shore Drive."

Oh, right.



Serene Barker and Lucius Barker are also in attendance.

I can't believe you talked me into this. People are going to gossip.

They've got so much material here to gossip about, we'll barely rate.

For example, Clayton just came in. I had a bet with myself on whether he was going to come this year at all, and now he turns up with his mythical lover.

Oh, right--they've been together for years, haven't they? But no one ever sees her.

Maybe she got tired of being mythical. I would have.



This is a bad idea. It's dangerous.

Relax. Hardly anybody will notice or care. It's not like you're giving out my address.

You're not embarrassed about me, are you?

No, of course not--

Then smile and rub it in their faces.



Does he usually show up at these?

Not every year. But he's entitled to. He runs a big production company. "Runs" in quotation marks.

There's something about that woman that isn't right.

Besides the fact that she's with him voluntarily?

That's the weird thing. I kind of get the feeling he's not with her voluntarily.



Meanwhile, Ruby is dozing off watching old passives.

BYRON, YOU MUST KILL THIS MONSTER BEFORE IT RAVAGES ME AGAIN!

click--

... You in here?



--MMM-- I guess you missed me.

You said you were going to be gone two extra weeks for reshoots!

I am! But everybody's at the ball tonight, so I get a night off too.

I was going to ask you if you wanted to go to the ball with me, but then I remembered you hate it.

Anyway, this seems like more fun.



So, who done it?

The next afternoon. We hadn't learned anything new. In fact, we hadn't looked. It didn't seem like there was anyone else worth talking to.



I don't think we know. Ruby has this idea that it was Hamilton Barker, or someone he hired. I think she's clutching at straws.

I definitely am. But he's the only person who actually showed any kind of strong reaction. He doesn't like the Aerie and he doesn't like Bertram Colombe. Maybe he killed her when he found out she was from there. Maybe he was trying to teach Bertram a lesson.



I'd say that's an awfully petty reason, but the more I learn about people ...

But, you know, now that I consider it: They'd never have given Hamilton a set of wings to get up there, much less a hired gun.

Oh, yeah. OK, scratch that idea, then.



Not necessarily.

The wings are an algorithmic representation. They tell the scenario that you can fly. But if you can manage to convince yourself, and thus the scenario, that you can levitate, you can get up there without them. In theory.

You could have mentioned that before.

So we've been working on a bad assumption, and any old person could have gotten up there?

No. It's very difficult. I don't know if anyone can actually do it. I think your assumptions were reasonable. Just pointing out that it isn't impossible.



I have a much stronger reason to eliminate Hamilton: He's the one who asked Lucius if Lucius could get someone to investigate.

What??



Why didn't you tell us that? If we'd known that I'd have asked him very different questions.

Because Hamilton didn't want anyone to know he was asking, and Lucius asked me to respect that if I could.

... and, see, that makes it even worse.

Really, that didn't seem suspicious to you at all?



This is exactly what I was talking about last time. You trust Barkers, to the point where you'll overlook the obvious, but you don't trust us. You want us to fix stuff, but you also want to keep us in the dark. It's not going to work, and I'm not going to let you make me look like an idiot again.

Are you coming or not, Leyna?



Ruby, I'm sorry.

You aren't the one who needs to apologize.

Though I would like to know why you put up with her bullshit.

You told me you trust her completely. Why? What do you know that I don't?

I ... Look, I don't want you to be in the dark. I get why you're frustrated.

And I agree with you, she messed up here.

But I can't. It isn't my--

OK, OK. Don't blow a fuse. I don't want you caught in the middle.

But I'm not done with this.



You two again.

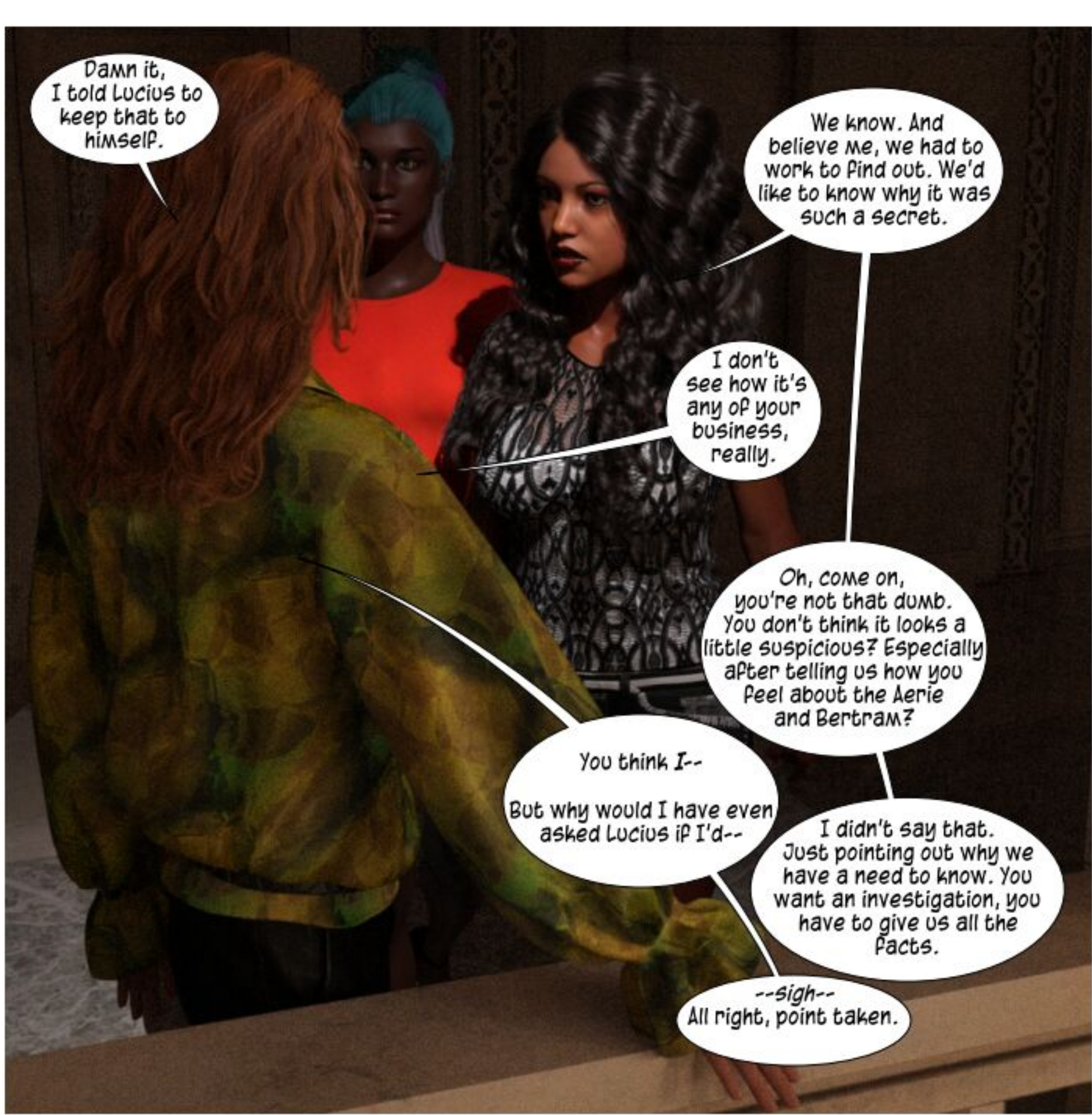
Honey's replacement quit on me. The show will be delayed by at least a month. Another of the cast told me that at the ball last night he was asked "Why are you still in that company? You know they're never going to have a success."

This is not a good day for it, is what I'm saying.

We're not here to improve it, either.

We know you requested this investigation.

Mr. Barker.



Damn it, I told Lucius to keep that to himself.

We know. And believe me, we had to work to find out. We'd like to know why it was such a secret.

I don't see how it's any of your business, really.

Oh, come on, you're not that dumb. You don't think it looks a little suspicious? Especially after telling us how you feel about the Aerie and Bertram?

You think I--

But why would I have even asked Lucius if I'd--

I didn't say that. Just pointing out why we have a need to know. You want an investigation, you have to give us all the facts.

--sigh-- All right, point taken.



"She was obviously from the Aerie, and was just as obviously trying to keep it a secret. I'd have tossed her out if she hadn't been so talented. I lasted two weeks before giving in and asking about it."

We expect that everyone here will maintain good character ... even in ... the ...

"Even in the face of adversity."

Good.

Honey ... I've been meaning to ask you something.

I overheard you refer to "ground people" a couple of days ago. And you have very distinctive hair.

You live in the Aerie, don't you?



Uh ... yes, sir. Is that a problem?

Please don't call me "sir." No, of course it's not. I was just curious.

Mr. Sparks--

Hamilton.

I don't want them knowing I'm doing this. And I don't want anyone here knowing I'm from there. I slipped up when I was talking to George, I remember now. I didn't know you were listening.

Can I ask you to keep it a secret? Please?



I don't see why not. Though you really should change your hair. I'm not the only person who knows what Aerie hair looks like.

You don't think they'd approve of this line of work?

Oh, no, I don't think they'd care about that at all ...

Mr. Sparks--sorry, Hamilton--I don't think I'll be in the Aerie much longer. But, please, don't tell anybody that.



The implication was obvious: When she did leave the Aerie, she was expecting them to give her trouble about it.

I wasn't going to do anything that made that more difficult for her.

Truth is, I didn't expect you to find out about her working here. I wanted you to focus on the Aerie. I apologize. I ... haven't been in a very good mental place since she died.

But it's just changing spaces ... I mean, some of them would have been sad, but it's not like trying to get out of a cult ...

Oh? You don't think the man who runs the place as his own personal harem might not get a little nasty when one of the birds tries to escape the cage?

That seems a little--

Listen, I'm no saint, OK? I go to bed with some of the troupe sometimes. That's one reason I don't tell them my real name. But I don't pressure them, I don't make a big deal of it ... and I sure as hell don't ask them to audition that way.

I have standards about these things. Bertram Colombe does not.

I'd have tried to make his life hell years ago, but he's a good friend of my uncle Brendan, and that is a fight I do not need.



You know, a couple of times, I got the definite impression that Honey Pelt, or hoped, she was signing on with a new protector.

If she'd ever said anything about it, I'd have told her I wasn't prepared to be her next Bertram. That isn't the kind of role I'm comfortable with.

Nonetheless, she came to me, and I didn't deliver. I didn't save her. That's not helping me sleep.

I need someone to throw Bertram's ass out of the sky. I'm not asking you to do it. I'm just asking you to find me a reason.



Three days later.

I need a bigger mirror.

What do you think? If Bertram is the person picking who lives there, then he's got a definite type. Except for Gloria. Who was probably that type once.

Ruby ... There's got to be a different way.

None that doesn't involve starting a fight none of us want. We've discussed this. What's the problem? Are you worried? I'm not going to get into anything I can't recall out of. I promise.

It's not that.

It's ... the "audition." You shouldn't have to do it.

I may not have to. Depends how it plays out. Anyway, I've done worse. Much worse.

You always seem to get stuck with the nasty bits, though.



I've been trying to figure out how to ask this for a while now.

You're not into sex, right? I mean, you kind of don't "get" sex?

Um. I like some things that people seem to put in the same box as that. I've learned I like the body contact, if it's someone I trust enough. You know, the proximity? That's nice.

But the thing where someone else and says "oh, I want to go have sex with that person"--I don't think I get urges like that. I'm not sure what they feel like.

I guess you think that's strange.

Even if I did, it wouldn't matter. It's your business. But how does Lou Peel about it, if you don't mind my asking?

As far as I can tell, Lou's the same way. If they're unhappy about it, they're doing a really good job of hiding it.

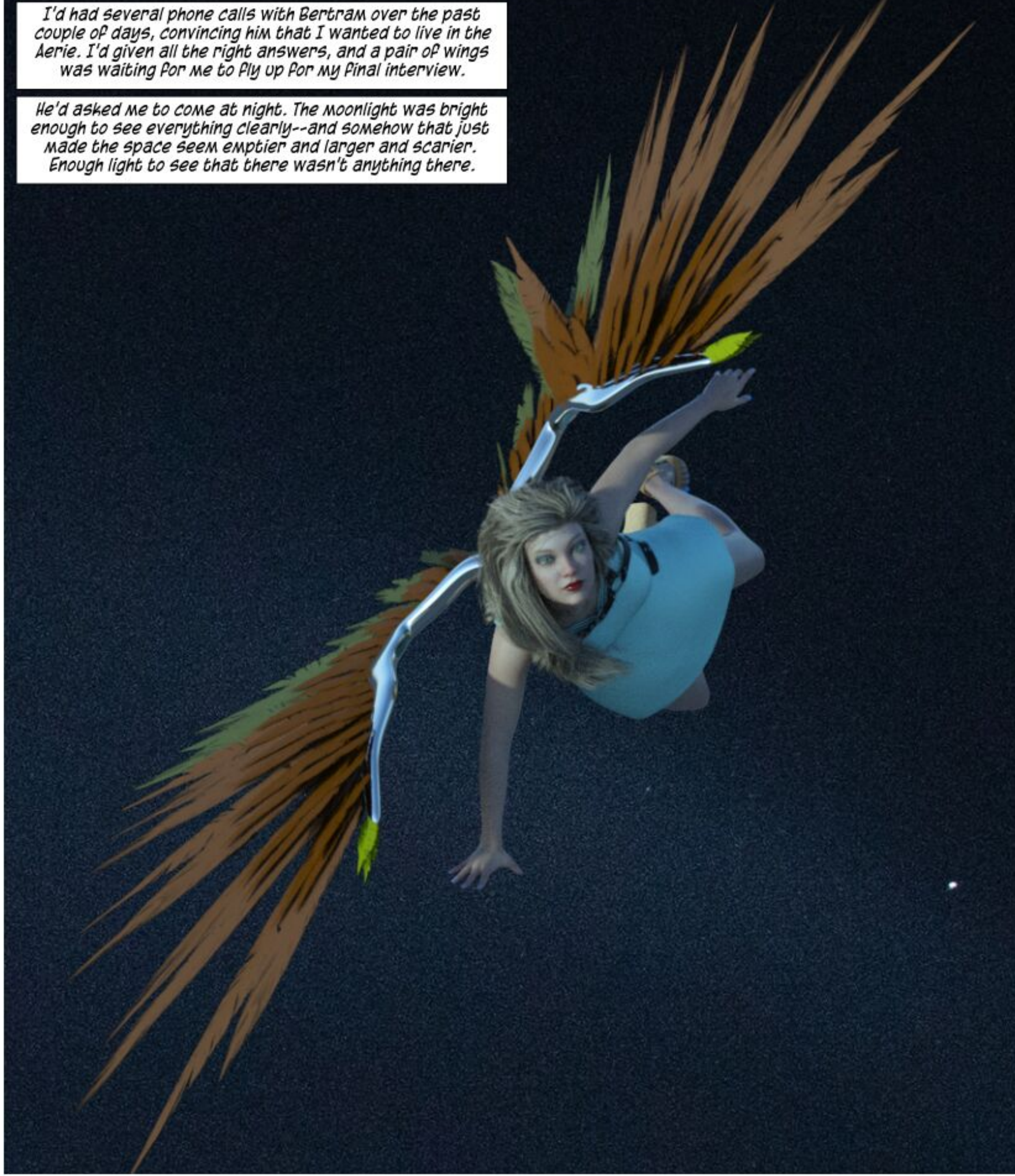
That's good to hear.

... Don't worry about letting me handle the sex parts.

Hand me that robe, would you?

I'd had several phone calls with Bertram over the past couple of days, convincing him that I wanted to live in the Aerie. I'd given all the right answers, and a pair of wings was waiting for me to fly up for my final interview.

He'd asked me to come at night. The moonlight was bright enough to see everything clearly--and somehow that just made the space seem emptier and larger and scarier. Enough light to see that there wasn't anything there.



Hello!
Leave your wings on the porch, if you don't mind. First-timers tend to knock over furniture.



You certainly qualify to live up here, and we'd love to have you.

But there are a few rules we have to discuss. We're trying to make something better up here, and we can't do that unless everyone here has a very high degree of comfort with one another.

To that end, there's a custom that if anyone here asks you to have sex with them, you try to say yes if you can. This helps hold us together as a community.

So ... everyone here sleeps with everyone else? That seems like it would cause ... the opposite of comfort.

It takes a little getting used to, but I promise, you'll see the advantages of it quickly.

Also--and I need to make sure you understand this--if I ask you to have sex, unless you have a real commitment, you say yes.

That's an obligation of admission. I don't care if you can't make bed pees--I'll cover that in the pool. I don't care if you're a recluse otherwise, though the others might. But if I call, you come. I don't want anyone saying I didn't warn them.

Huh. Well, I'm glad you're straightforward about it, anyway.

I ... think I'm all right with this.

Oh, good!
Then let's go try it out.



You mean--right now?

Uh.
Well ... OK.



But do you mind if I take a quick shower first?

Be my guest. I'll be waiting upstairs.

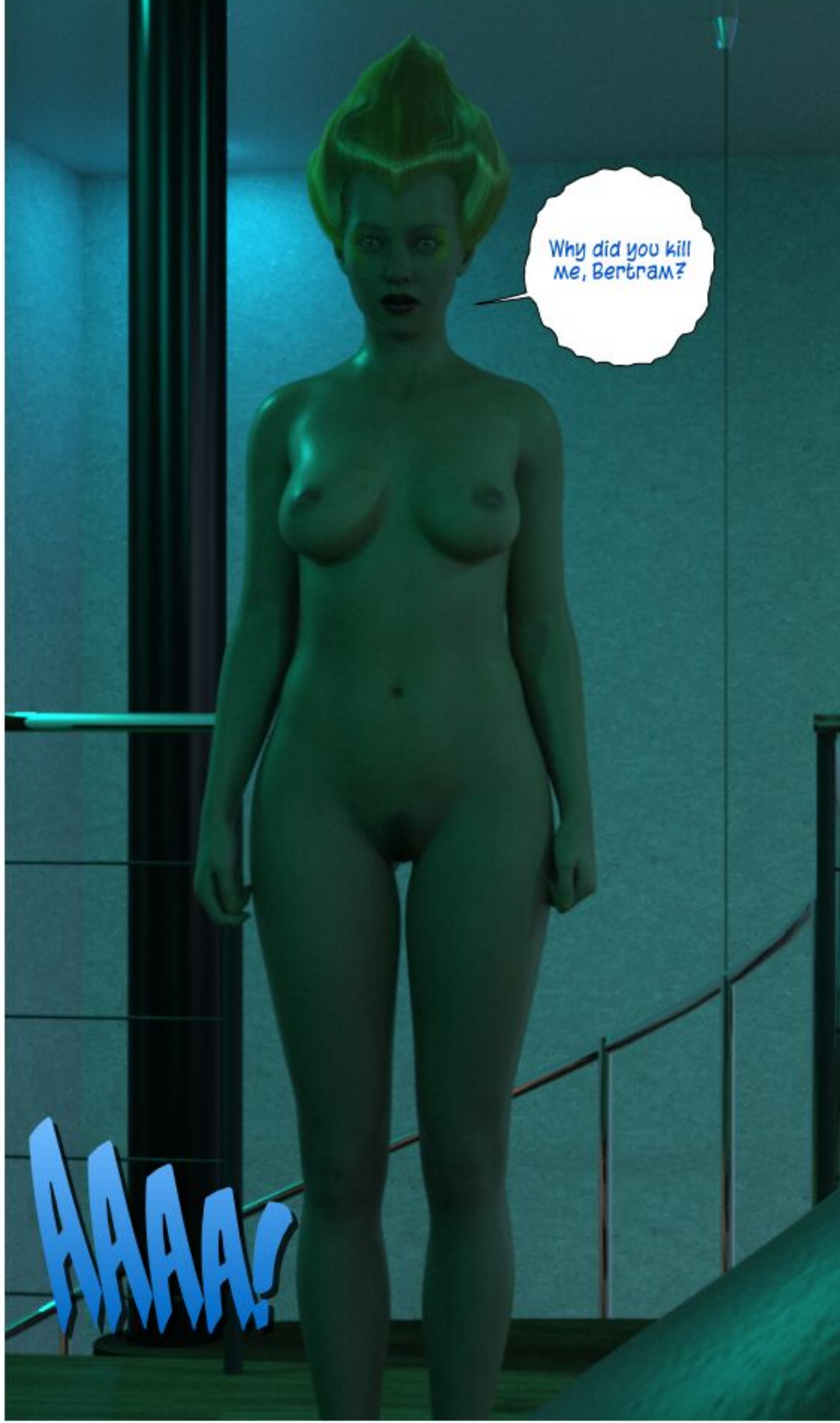


All right. Time to find out if Hamilton's memory for appearances is as good as he says it is.

His descriptions were decent and he does a lot of character setup, so. Fighting chance.



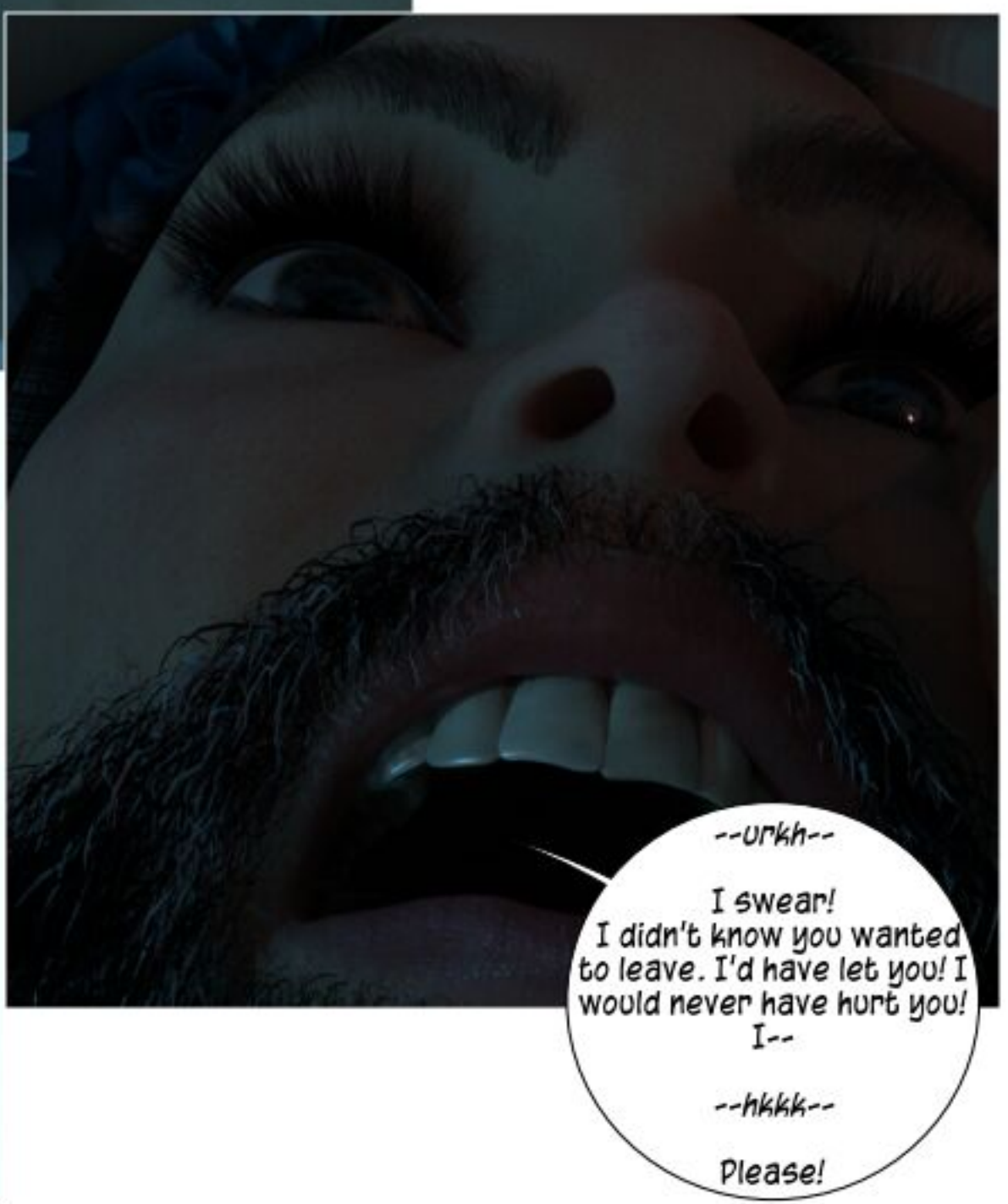
Ah, there you are. I hope you're looking forward to--



I'm vengeful, Bertram. I might take you with me.

I-- I didn't! I don't know who--

Liar!
You knew I was going to leave. You couldn't take it, so you killed me!



--Urkh--

I swear! I didn't know you wanted to leave. I'd have let you! I would never have hurt you! I--

--hkkk--

Please!



Well, that's an unexpected development.

All right, Bertram, I believe you. Go, and sin no more.

I need to leave before he realizes he's been had.

Honey-- wait--



Honey!!

I could have just recalled. I probably should have. I wasn't thinking that way. I was thinking "Go get those wings on and fly away as fast as possible." Out the same way I came in.



She'd taken off her wings and was clearly coming in for a visit. I have no idea what she was doing there.

No--you're dead--

You're dead!!

Gloria ... I'm not--



I'll kill you again! And you'll stay dead this time!!

What--?
Gloria, wait ...
Don't!



AAA!

AAA!

AAA!

AAA!

AAA!

AAA!

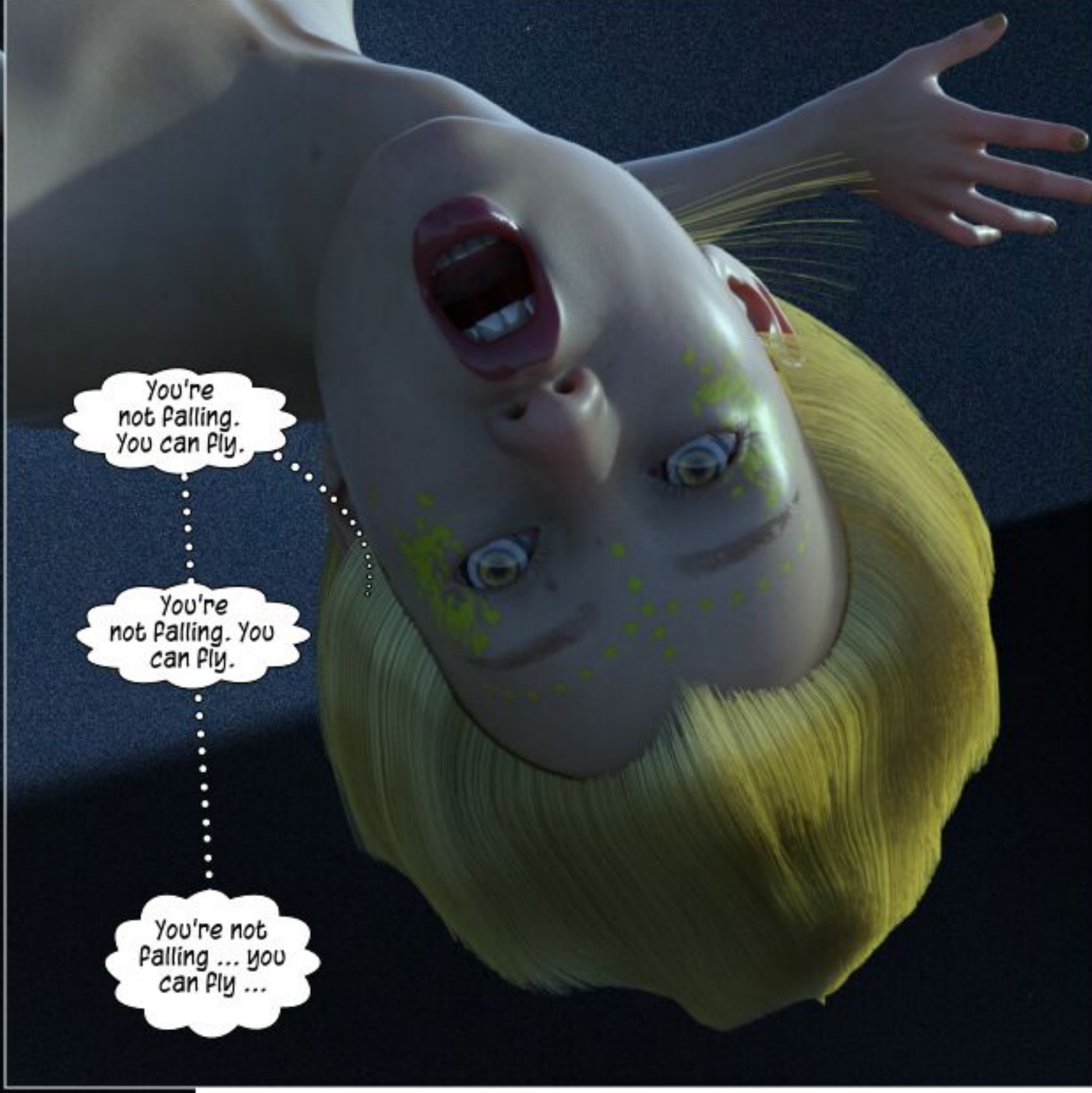


Recall, Ruby.

... Focus ...
got to recall ...

... wait.

... it can't hurt to
try, can it?



You're
not Falling. You
can Fly.

You're
not Falling. You
can Fly.

You're not
Falling ... You
can Fly ...



I have to get back
up there. If I can
figure out how.



... Holy shit.



Bertram--hkk--you're
choking me--

Why? Why,
Gloria? Why?
Why?

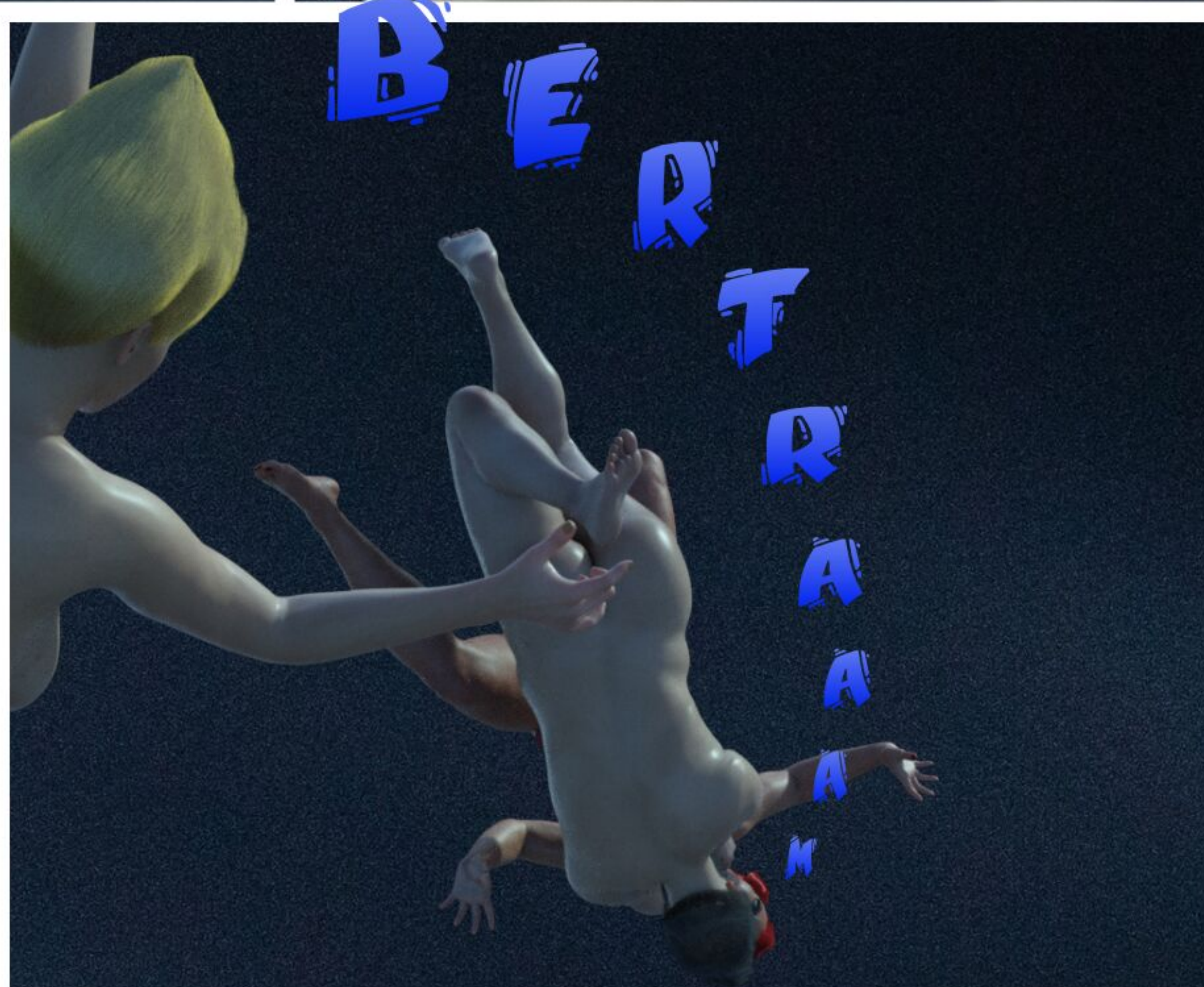
You were spending all your
time--I couldn't help it, Bertram--
--hkk!--
Bertram, please--I love you--she
was just a--

Oh, hell.



Bertram, the
rail--

--you don't have
wings on--



B
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M

It'd be cleaner if I just left it there, wouldn't it?
"They both fell off. The end."

I waited a while, hoping either of them would reappear. They didn't. Eventually I took my wings and left. I even brought the wings back to the shop. Anyone who was watching only saw a dead woman.

It took until the next day for word to reach me, from CLO in the Sleep Med Facility via Midnight, that they hadn't survived the Fall. I thought about asking what they did with bodies there ... then decided not to.

The day after that I began a directing job which kept me completely occupied for three days, so it was nearly a week after my visit to Bertram before I was able to sit with Leyna and post-mortem a bit.

Gloria was one of the first to live in the Aerie. I can't tell whether she really loved Bertram, maybe too much, or whether she just felt like she should have been ruling alongside him.

Maybe both.

Bertram had been asking for Honey to come visit him a lot. You know how Glynis and Thor both assumed Honey was spending most of her time lately with the other one? We compared notes, briefly, and realized Honey wasn't with either of them. She was usually with Bertram.

I figure Honey felt trapped. She didn't mind sleeping with Bertram--reports are, he was actually very tolerable in bed--but she didn't want it to be a full-time job.

It seems like Gloria nagging Honey to find work was her way of trying to make Honey less available to Bertram. Like Glynis said, no one else cared.

But that also may have been when Honey realized the clock was ticking on something bad happening.

Word is, Brendan Barker is throwing a fit. Wants a full investigation to find whoever threw his friend Bertram over a railing.

Has he gotten any volunteers?

... Not yet.

It's also not clear what's going to become of the Aerie.

Why does anything have to become of it? This could be the best thing that happened to it. Maybe now it'll just become a nice place for people to live.

As long as they don't have fear of heights.

I hadn't told Leyna or anyone else about my levitation. In the version I'd told her, Gloria hadn't actually succeeded in tossing me over. I don't think I can explain why I didn't tell her the whole truth. I wasn't sure I knew yet myself.

Did you say anything to Hamilton?

No. I thought it might be better not to. You know he probably thinks we killed Bertram.

He wouldn't be far wrong, either.

How's that?

If I'd remembered to switch out of the Honey form, Gloria wouldn't have freaked ... Bertram wouldn't have seen it and reacted ... None of it would have happened.

I might as well have killed them both. I'm not losing any sleep over this, you understand.

Anyway, that's all I've got. I have a rehearsal to go to. Good to catch up with you.

You don't want to come with me to tell Midnight about it?

Leyna, I wasn't kidding. Until Midnight comes clean with me, I'm not only not doing any work for her, I don't want to see her face.

I don't want to put you in the middle of this, but you kind of are anyway. If you don't like it, then you know who to talk to about it, and it's not me.

- END -