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# The Second Stratum

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# Fiona Baker's Journey to...



# THE SECOND STRATUM

By Lauren Ambler

Peter knew he had to leave the letter there. Still, he held on to the hope that she'd never need it, and in turn, never be sent for it.

18 YEARS AGO



He didn't want to imagine a day when she'd be without him...

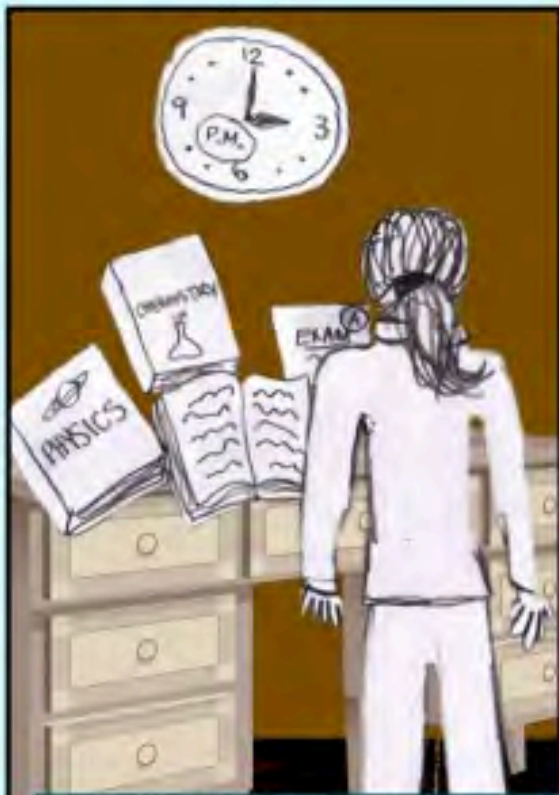
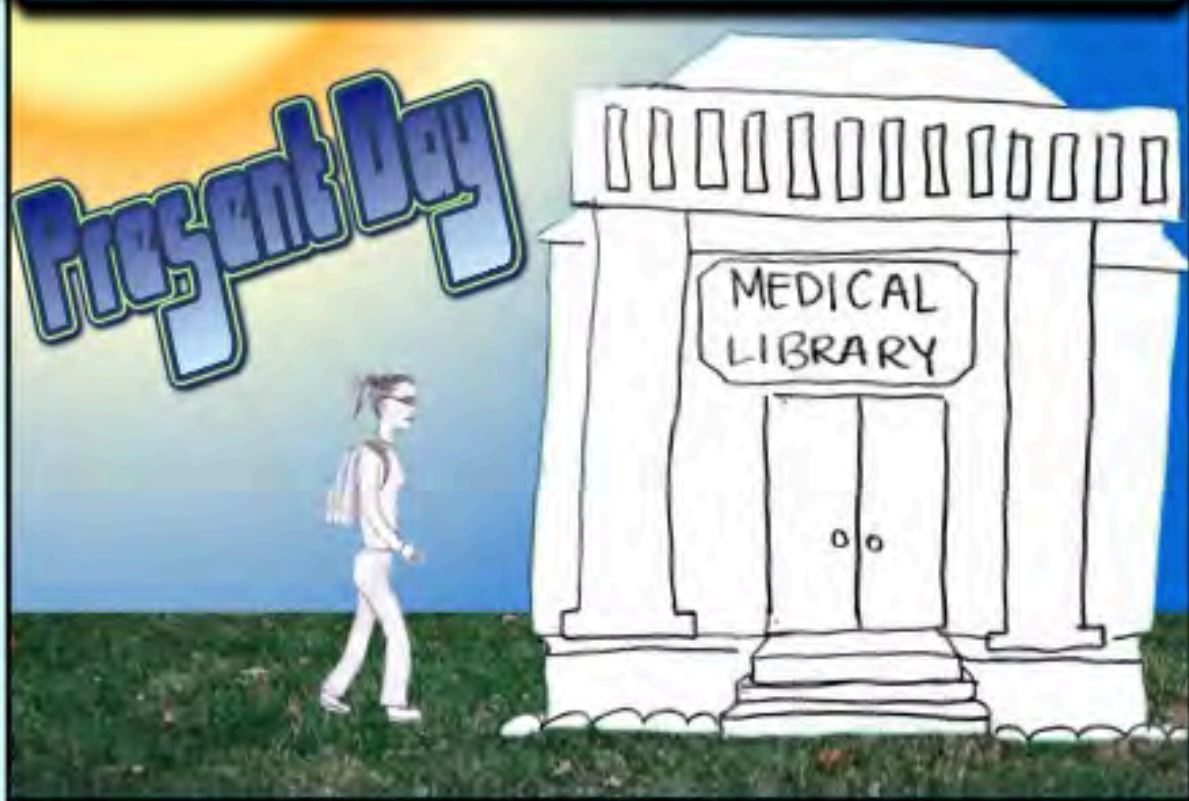


...finally, as he shed a tear, he put the letter down...



... then he returned to his family, to spend his final days...

Fiona is a second year med student Laganum University In North Carolina...



She had been studying so hard for her exams that she often buried herself in the library and lost track of time.

Fiona's mom even began to worry about her new study habits...

...I KNOW MOM, IT'S JUST THAT THIS SEMESTER'S GRADES ARE REALLY REALLY IMPORTANT... I PROMISE I'LL TAKE A STUDY BREAK TO GO TO SUNDAY BRUNCH, OKAY?...



...ALRIGHT, HUN. I'M JUST CONCERNED, THAT'S ALL. I WANT YOU TO REMEMBER THAT THERE'S MORE TO LIFE HIDDEN UNDER THE ICING OF A GOOD CAREER... I'LL SEE YOU THIS WEEKEND, LOVE...



... and her friends were noticing that she wasn't spending nearly as much time with them...

SO WE WON'T EVEN SEE YOU UNTIL AFTER BREAK?



I GUESS NOT... I JUST HAVE SO MUCH WORK TO DO. TELL EVERYONE I SAY HI TONIGHT THOUGH!



Friday after class, Fiona boarded a train headed homebound...



As soon as she walked in the door, she was greeted by her mother, her dog, and her best friend, Victoria.



Once she had confirmed with her mom that she'd be down for dinner, Fiona and Victoria when upstairs to catch up. Victoria was so excited to tell Fiona what she'd been planning for break.



The following night Fiona and met Victoria down the street, and they caught a cab that would take them to the Psychic Victoria had found from a newspaper ad.



The psychic's house looked old and a bit run down. Victoria headed straight for the door, and Fiona followed hesitantly.

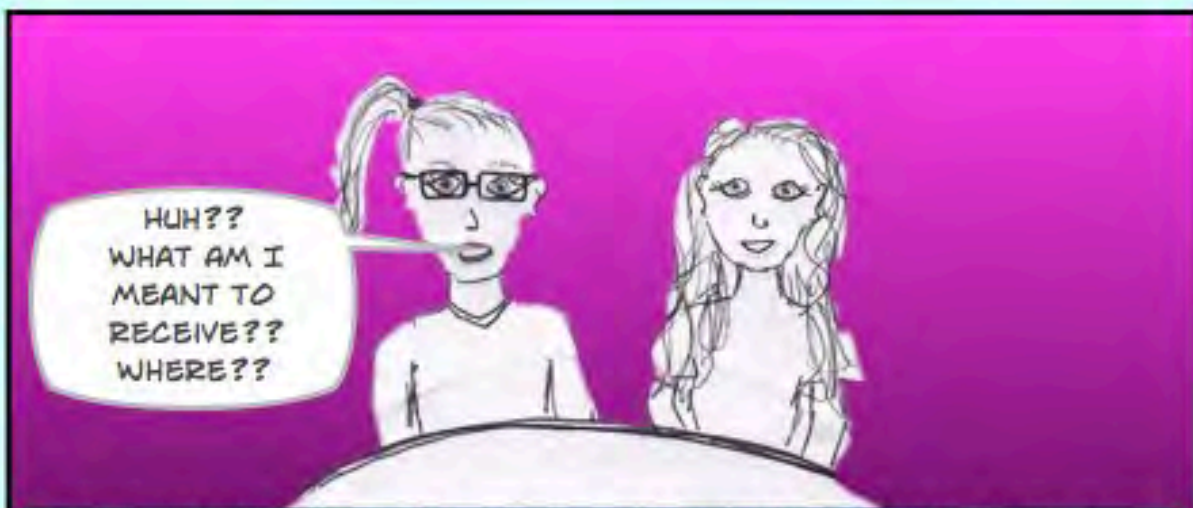


Victoria grabbed Fiona by the arm and dragged her into the room and into a seat...

WELCOME,  
I'VE BEEN EXPECTING  
YOU. I MUST FIRST START  
WITH YOU, FIONA, FOR  
THERE IS URGENCY FOR  
YOU TO KNOW YOUR  
FORTUNE.

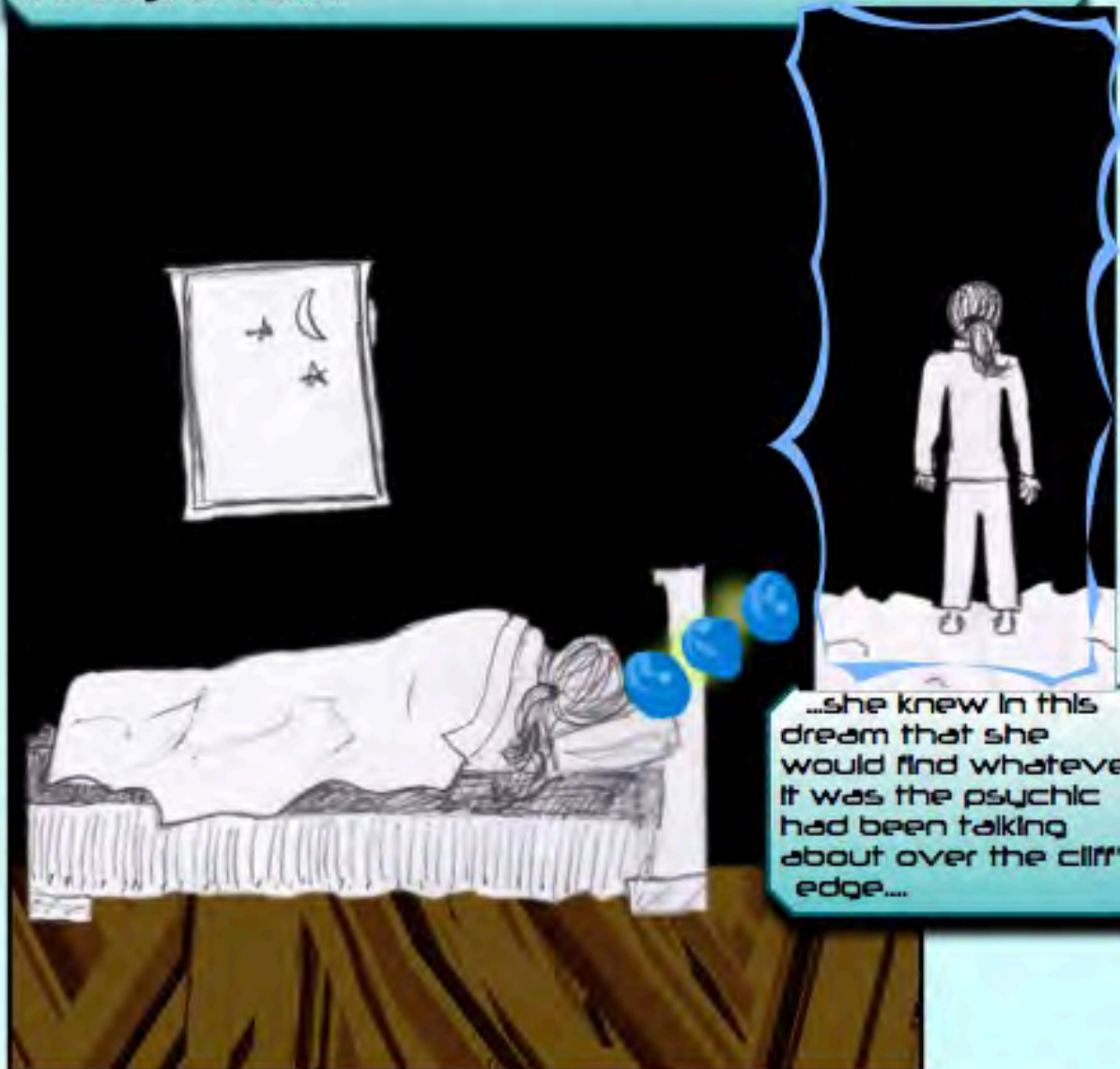


Fiona was in no hurry to hear her fortune. She didn't believe in magic and often scoffed at supposed 'psychic abilities'...



But the psychic never answered her. She simply closed her eyes and wished the two of them luck.

That night, as Fiona slept, she dreamt that she was at the edge of a cliff...



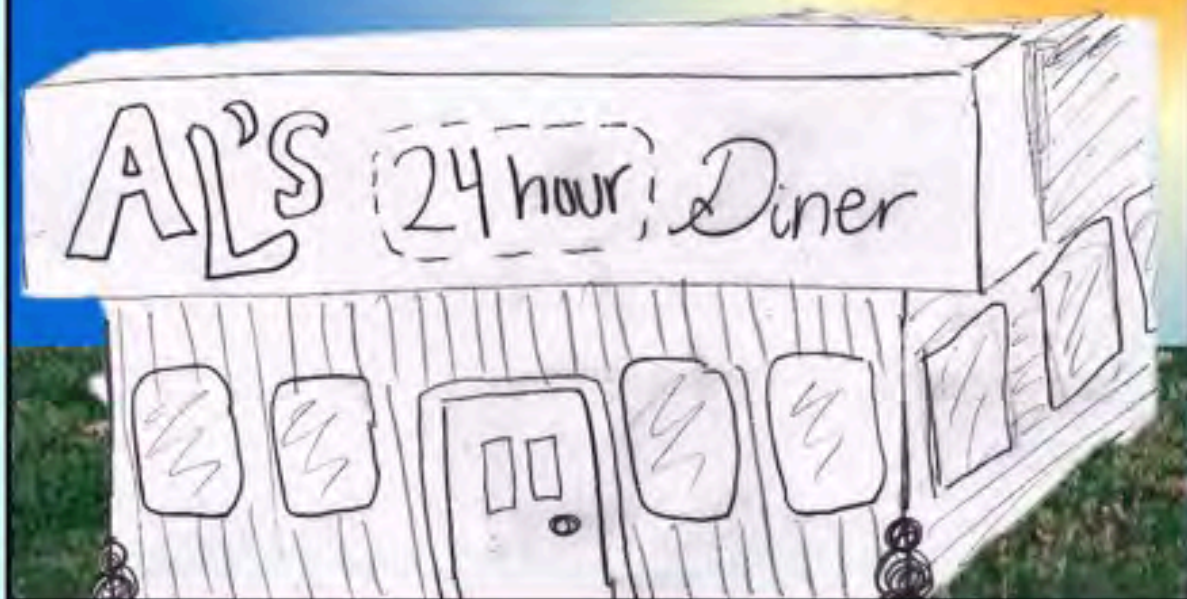
...she knew in this dream that she would find whatever it was the psychic had been talking about over the cliff's edge...

But she didn't jump. Instead, she woke with a start and couldn't stop thinking about how real it all felt. When she couldn't fall back asleep, she decided to call Victoria.

...YOU REALLY THINK SO? ... YEAH, I CAN MEET YOU TOMORROW. AL'S? AT NOON? PERFECT. I'LL SEE YOU THEN. THANKS AGAIN, VICTORIA, 'NIGHT.



Just like they'd planned, Fiona and Victoria met at Al's Diner the next day.



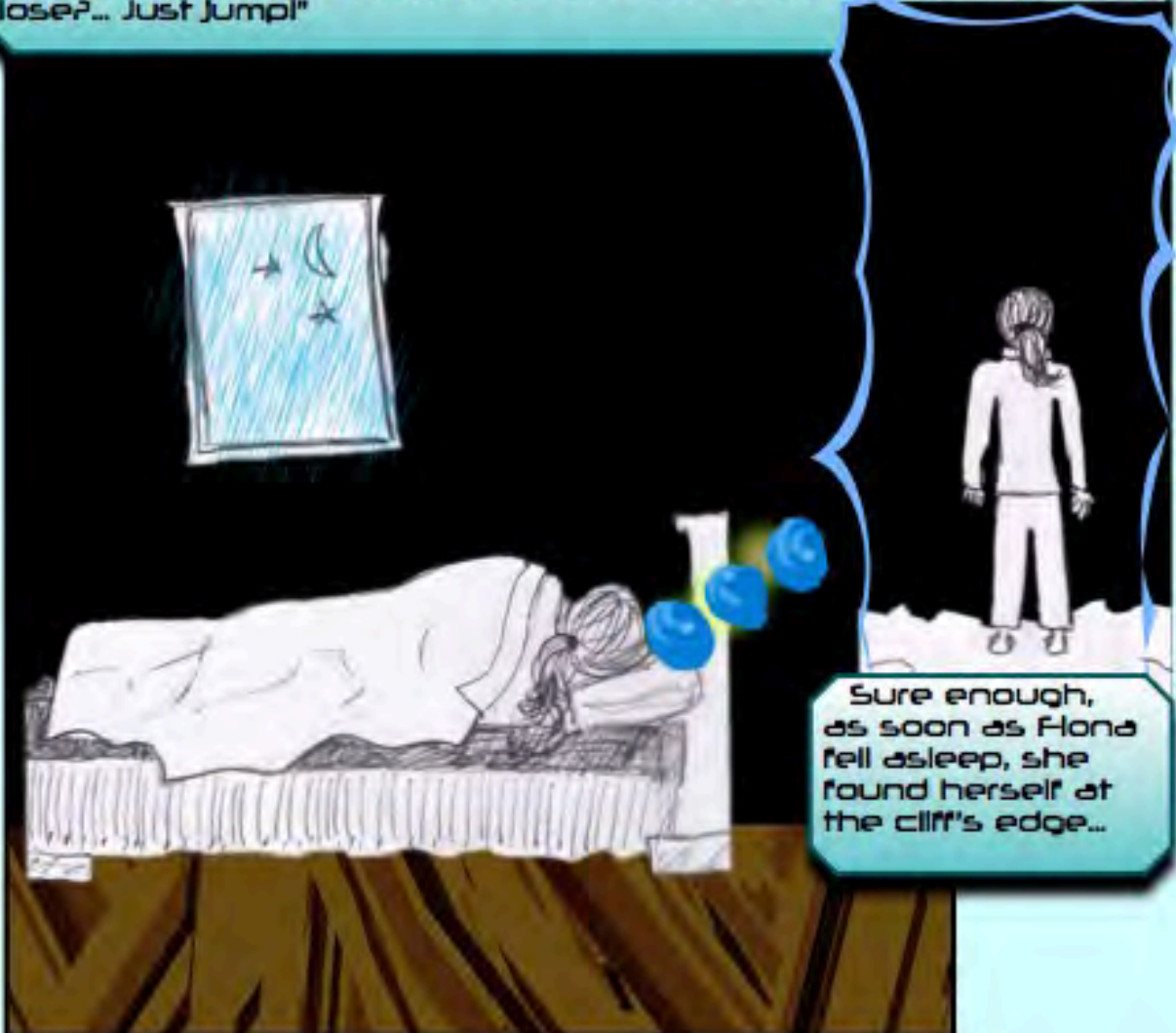
Fiona felt a little better. They got their food and gabbled like they always used to. When they finished Victoria reminded her of the plan, and wished her luck.

That night, when Fiona went up to bed, she found her dog Rusty cowering in the corner of her bedroom. It was storming outside, and Rusty, like many dogs, was terrified of lightning, so Fiona didn't think anything of it at the time...

# CRACK!



After Fiona took Rusty downstairs, she got into bed and wondered if she would have the same dream again. She repeated Victoria's advice as she drifted off; "What is there to lose?... Just Jump!"



Sure enough, as soon as Fiona fell asleep, she found herself at the cliff's edge...

... and this time she heard Victoria's voice in her head like a mantra, "Jump, Jump, Jump, Jump..."



Swoosh

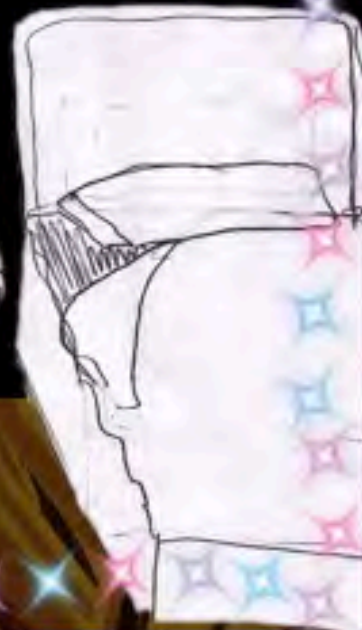
AHH  
HHHHH!



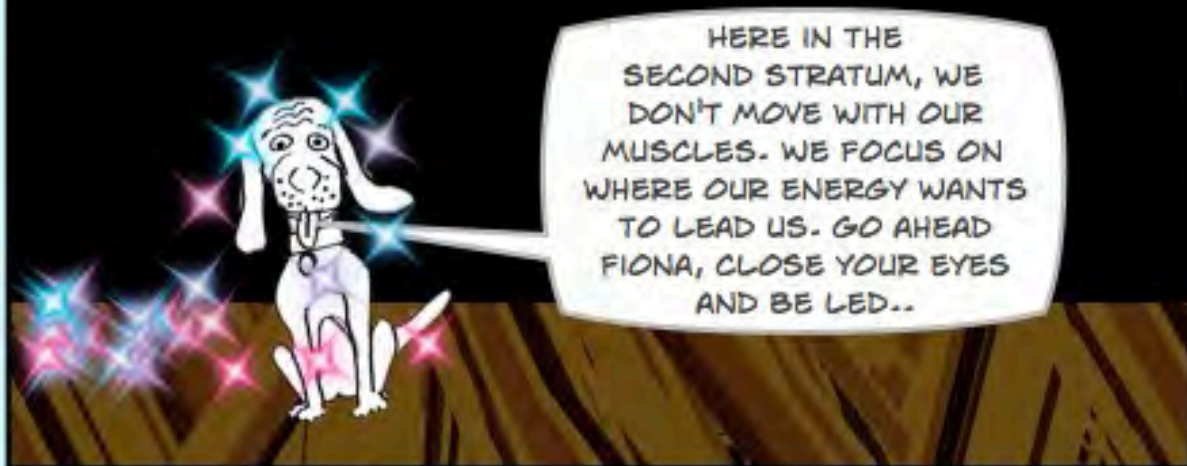
As soon as her feet lifted off she spiraled down and down and down...

...then abruptly she landed right back in her room.

DO NOT BE AFRAID, FIONA. IT'S JUST ME- RUSTY! YOU ARE STILL AT HOME AND IN YOUR ROOM, AND THIS IS ALWAYS HERE. YOU JUST DON'T NORMALLY SEE IT.



Once Fiona became more used to all that she saw around her, Phillip taught her how to move around.

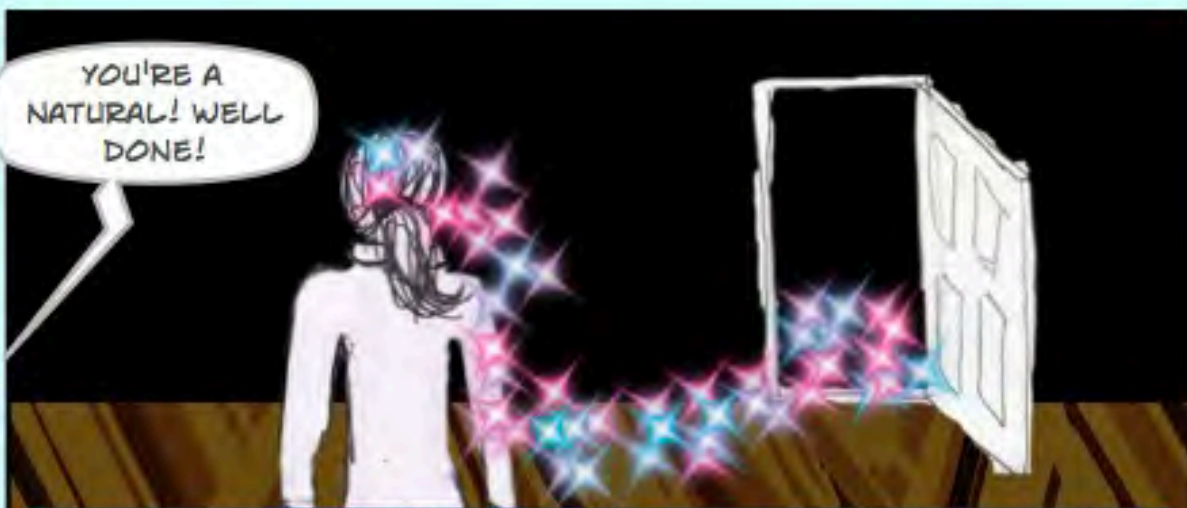


HERE IN THE SECOND STRATUM, WE DON'T MOVE WITH OUR MUSCLES. WE FOCUS ON WHERE OUR ENERGY WANTS TO LEAD US. GO AHEAD FIONA, CLOSE YOUR EYES AND BE LED..

Fiona did as the Rusty said.. She felt the energy burning in her cheeks and sensed a path forming in front of her.



YOU'RE A NATURAL! WELL DONE!



Rusty was pleased and urged Fiona to go along the path. The two of them moved out of the room and down the stairs.

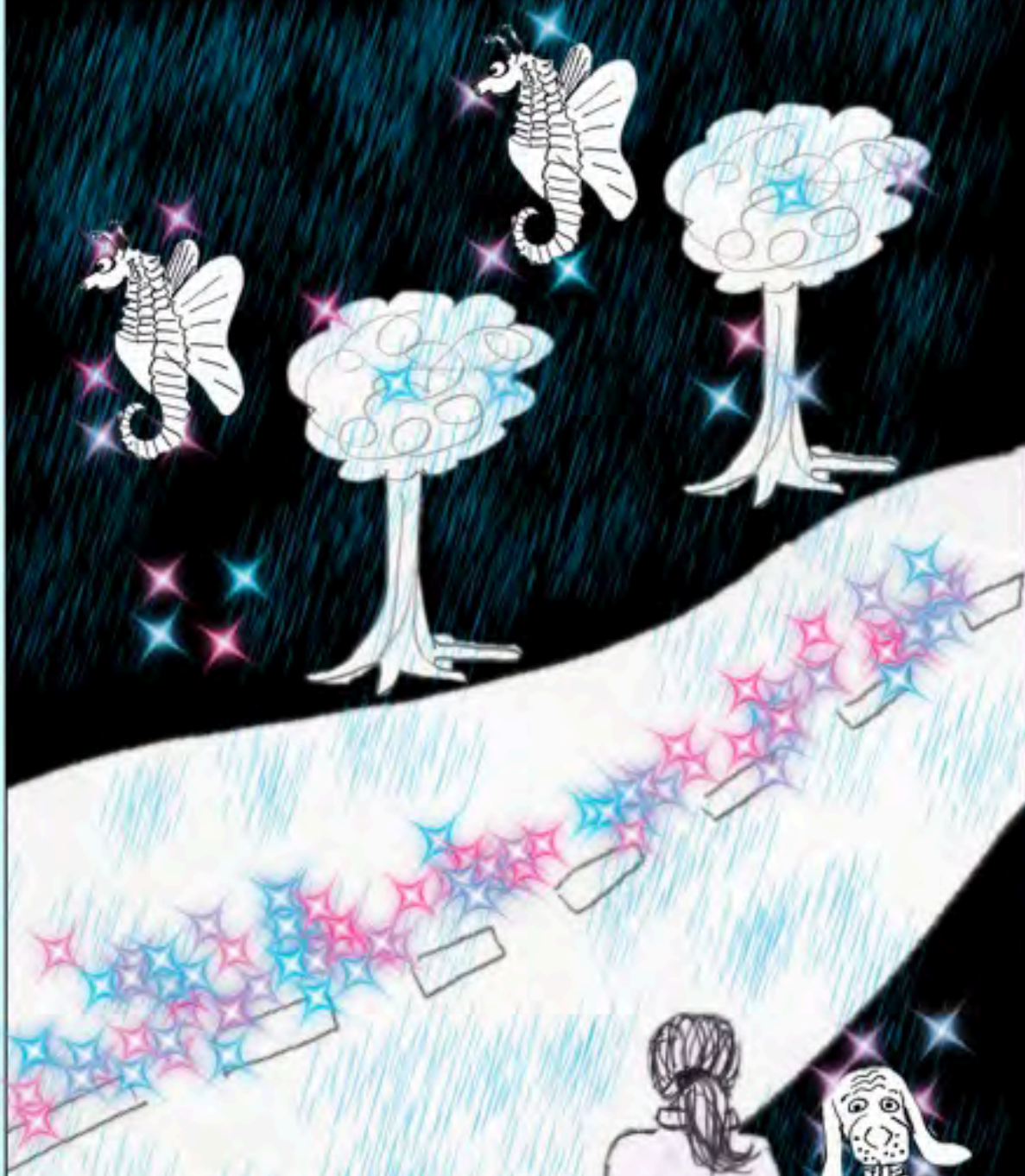
Once they got to the front door they saw that it was raining, but the path led outside regardless. Rusty ran out ahead.



..But as soon as lightning struck, a horrendous cat-covered monster appeared and hissed at Rusty, and he jumped and ducked in fear just like he had done the night before in her room. Fiona couldn't help but think that dogs could see this all the time. That that's why they barked at what seemed like nothing too.



After Fiona got her puppy back inside and cheered up, she and Phillip moved again along their path. When they reached the street Fiona could not believe her eyes...



... nothing that she saw made any sense to her. It was like the second stratum lived right on top of her biological world. There were flying creatures that reminded her of Seahorses. She felt right away like she knew this place once, but shrugged it off... of course she had never been there before...



when Fiona and Rusty crossed the street, they were led down a hill and came face to face with an old treehouse. Unlike her vague sense of memory of the second stratum, Fiona was felt vivid memories of this exact place rushing through her.



With anticipation in her gut, Fiona followed her energy up the ladder. Rusty could tell that Fiona had found what she was looking for. He decided that she could go from here on her own, and stayed behind.

The inside of the treehouse was just as flona had remembered, except for the fact that it was lit. There had never been a light installed, because her parents didn't want her to wander across the street to play in the dark. She saw that the light was coming from a long golden box in the right corner. She knew that she was close to finding whatever it was that the psychic had told her about.



She closed her eyes and allowed herself to be led. When she opened her eyes she was looking into a golden tomb. Inside, there was a single present, all wrapped up and tied with a bow.



Fiona realized that she had hardly taken a breath since she had entered the treehouse. She breathed deeply three times, and then reached for the present...



Swoosh



... and as soon as she had the present in both hands, she was sucked into the abyss from her dream, and again spiraled down and down and down...



...until she landed abruptly next to her unmade bed. She started to tell herself that she must have been sleep-walking, when a letter drifted down in front of her face. She caught the letter and turned to see that the wrappings and present were lying on her floor.

Fiona took a deep breath and read the letter that had been in the box.



At first Fiona was dumbstruck with shock. She had to take a few deep breathes, and read it over...

Dearest Fiona,  
I hope you remember when I used to take you here to play - the two of us truly created a world beyond our everyday.  
I had promised you that our world was real, and since I thought you might lose it as you grew older - it is my last gift to you.  
Love,  
your Father



...then, once she had read it almost fifteen times, she allowed her emotions to come forth, and she shed a tear...



... once her tears cleared, Fiona smiled. She had been the given another world, and her own would never be the same.