

**SLEEPER SQUAD**

You might not think it's very exciting to begin an issue of

With a board meeting, but trust us, as Barker Meetings go, this one's about as exciting as it gets.

Why, Josiah is almost even raising his voice, that's how upset he is.

No, no, no!

We've gone a hundred and fifty years without having any kind of security force in A4, and I am not going to break that tradition.

A hundred and fifty years ago no one was making this kind of trouble yet. Nathaniel just very nearly brought everything in A4 to a halt\*, or did you not notice?

There is a fundamental expectation of privacy--

I'm not talking about spying on everyone. I'm just saying that someone should be monitoring for mischief on a regular basis. We've gotten lucky twice in less than six months, and there are others out there besides Nathaniel.

Clayton would love to have everybody in this room out of the picture permanently, for example.

And spare me the "privacy" speech. If you thought you had a good reason, you'd lay everybody's records bare in an instant.

I can't believe I'm listening to this from you, Lucius. Where did this come from? Is this one of Serene's crazy ideas?

\*IN THE PREVIOUS ISSUE. THIS STORY TAKES PLACE A WEEK OR SO AFTER THAT ONE. -T

As it happens, this time Lucius and I came to the same conclusion independently.

But since you went there: I wouldn't use Lucius to put Porth ideas on my behalf if you didn't automatically ignore anything that comes out of my mouth.

And, you know, if you'd ever taken Nathaniel seriously, she might not have been quite so hell-bent on carrying a grudge against us.

That's out of line, Serene. Nathaniel has had many issues. You know that.

This is not a referendum on my conduct, no matter what grievances you may think you have.

Josiah, just admit it: You don't want any sort of monitoring because you're afraid it will be used against you. You don't want any housekeeping that might force you to clean your own house.

I'm not going to dignify that with a reply.

Oh, give it a rest, Pauline.

We get it. You think we're all rotten. OK, suppose we're all rotten. For the sake of argument.

Now what happens to this spy patrol when we have one of our little inside disagreements?

I don't want to give anybody at this table another weapon to throw at each other. Including me.

The grandchildren haven't cast their votes. Ezekiel?

Uh. No. I mean, no, I don't think it's a good idea.

Monica?

I don't think it's a great idea either, but I vote yes.

If Nathaniel comes after me again I might not have a brain left afterward.

Hamilton?

I'm going the opposite way from Monica: I think it's probably a good idea, but I vote no.

I hate watching you all fight and that would just make it worse.

But ask me again in six months if we keep having things like this happen.

That makes it four-four, then, and as far as I'm concerned, the nays have it.

**#8 HOUSEKEEPING**  
Words and images by Trilby



Meanwhile ...



Well, last night definitely made up for running out on me.\*

I may need more than a croissant to get my strength back up.

I'm sorry about that. At the time, I was half-sure I was losing my mind.

Especially since you didn't seem to realize anything was wrong.

No, I get it. So are you the one who fixed it? Is this one of the things you and Leyna do that I'm not supposed to ask about?

Leyna got Aiko'd. I had to get ... some other help.

Hmph. OK, fine, don't tell me.

\*LAST ISSUE, AGAIN. MAYBE GO BACK AND READ IT IF YOU HAVEN'T? -T



I'd love to tell you, but it would take a while to explain, and you said this needed to be a quick breakfast.

I wish we could manage to get more time together.

... She says, just as I'm about to be off on a gig for close to a month.

Usually your timing's better than that.



You know very well that we're both too busy to get together more often.

And neither of us is the monogamous kind, anyway.

Oh, I didn't mean that. I just --

Right now I feel like I don't have anybody I can talk to, I guess.

HEE HEE

HEE HEE

HEE HEE

HEE HEE

HEE HEE

HEE HEE

What is going on over there?



People are staring!

I know

HEE HEE

HEE HEE

but I can't stop

HEE HEE

HEE HEE

Everything is just so silly

HEE HEE

HA HA

HA HA



HEE HEE HA

HA HA

HEE

HA

HEE

HEE

HAHA

HEE

HA

HEE

I--

HEE

HA

HEE HEE

HEE HEE

HEE HEE

HEE HEE

HEE HEE

HEE HEE

HEE HEE

HEE HEE

HEE HEE

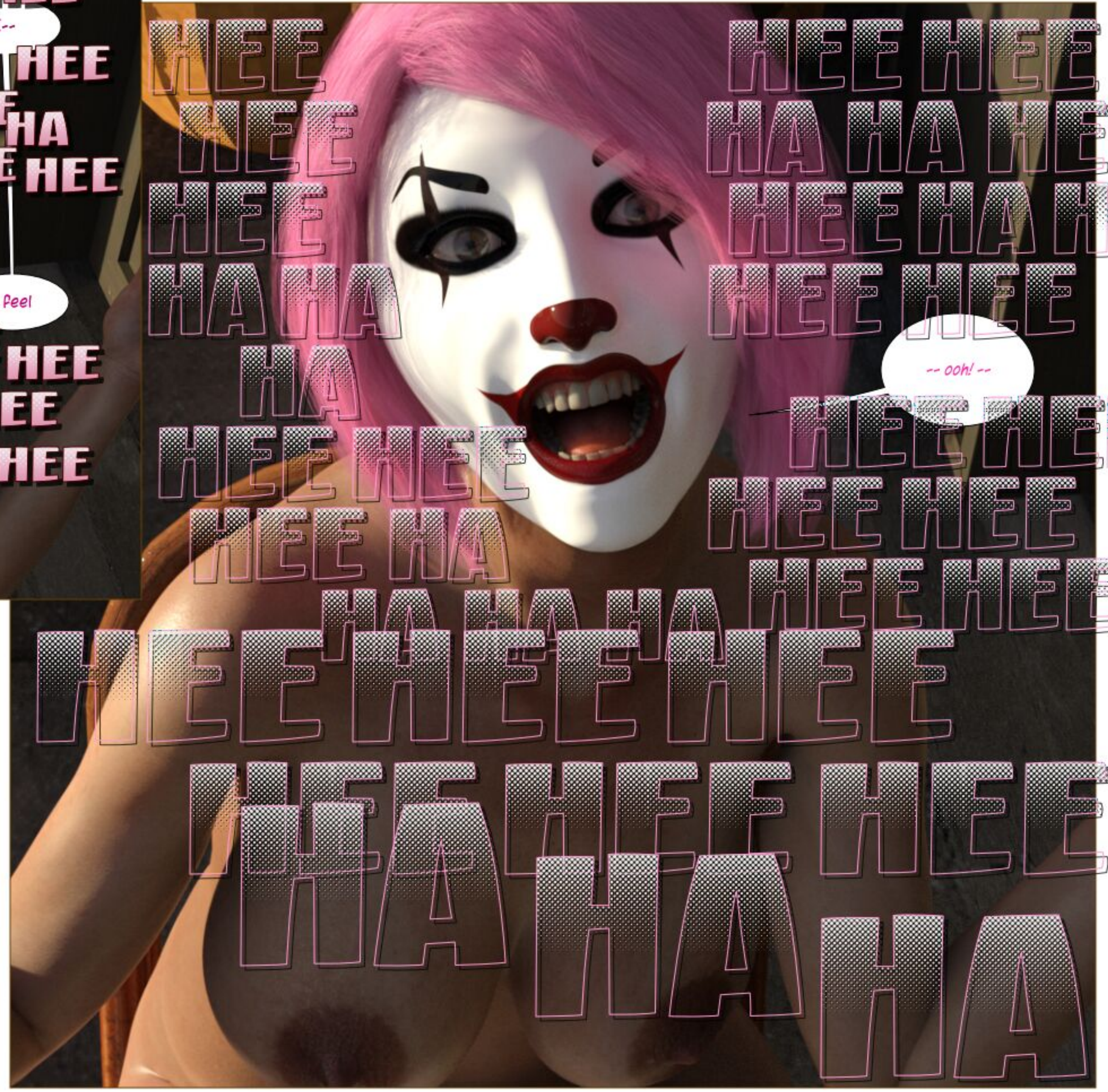
HEE HEE

HEE HEE

HEE HEE

HEE HEE

HEE HEE



HEE HEE

HEE HEE

HEE HEE

HA HA

HA HA

HEE HEE

HEE HEE

HEE HEE

HEE HEE

HEE HEE

HEE HEE

HEE HEE

HEE HEE

HEE HEE

HEE HEE

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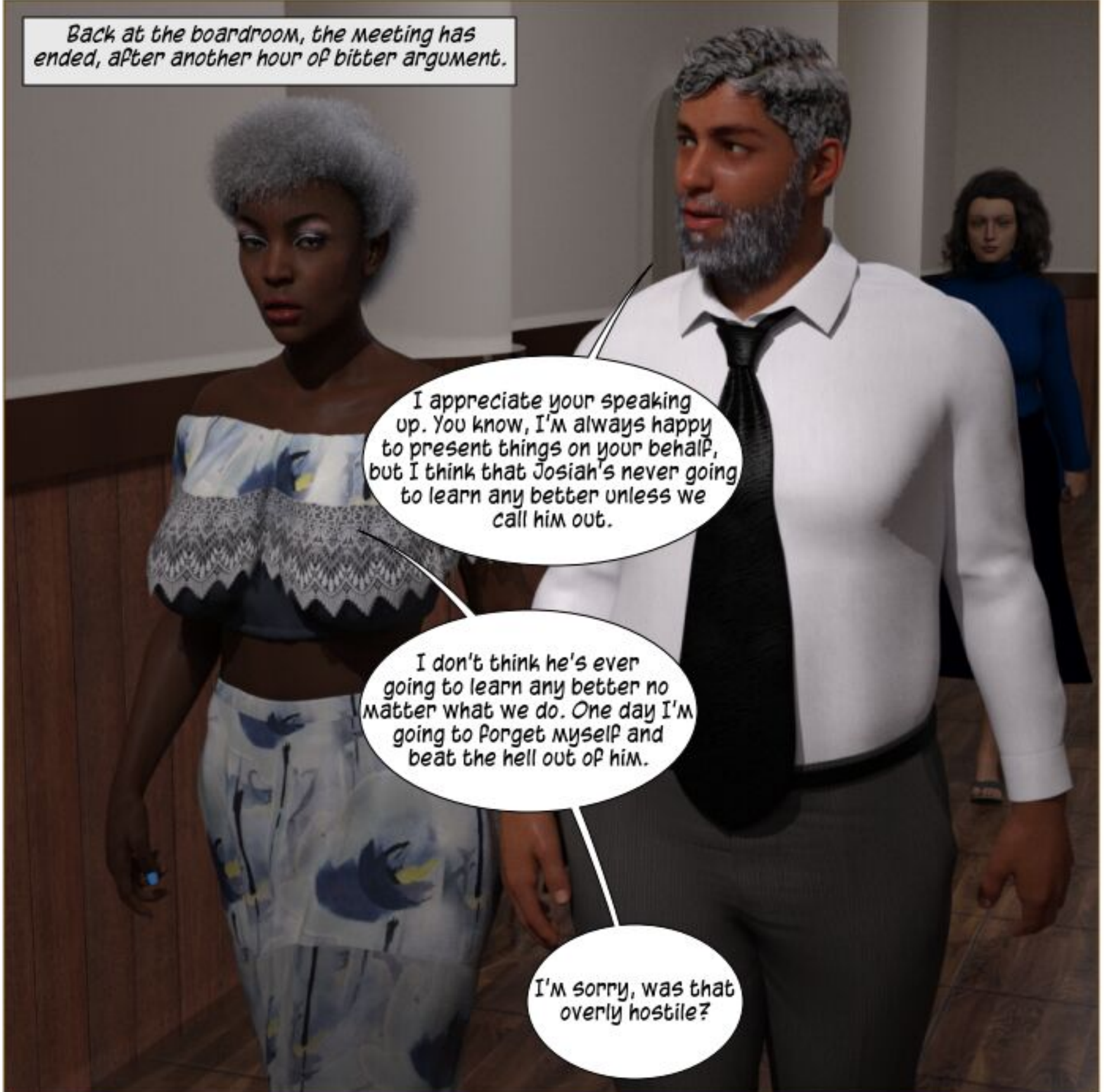
HEE HEE

HEE HEE

HEE HEE

-- ooh! --









... and afterward, she ran down the street, looking really embarrassed. I sure don't think she did it voluntarily.

That does sound like manipulation, I agree. Are you going to follow up on it?

Am I going to follow up on it? What about "we"?

Oh ... well, the thing is, I'm committed to something else right this second--



OK, that's it. I've had enough.

It's not your fault I had to deal with Nathaniel without you.

But when I got Chapman's hiding place from Midnight I realized: you were monitoring Chapman. You knew where she was, and that she hadn't changed location for weeks. But you didn't do anything.

When I handed Nathaniel over to you, you didn't say a damned thing, you didn't ask me questions, anything. I figured it was because you were still recovering from being an Aiko.

But now I'm starting to kind of wonder.



Ruby, I--

As long as Dr. Chapman was staying in one place, there was no hurry until we decided what to do with her. I just hadn't gotten a chance to talk to you about it yet.

Why did you have to get Midnight to find her, anyway?

You'd know, if you'd bothered to ask me anything about what happened.

I've been busy! And I lost three days being an Aiko. I planned to catch up sooner or later!

As for Nathaniel, there wasn't anything to say. I brought her to the location Midnight set up.

Where we're keeping the victims who didn't recover?

Well ... yes, that location, but ... those people aren't there anymore. I'm ... not sure they're in sleep anymore.



Somewhere in the Awake parts of AA ...

GOOD AFTERNOON.

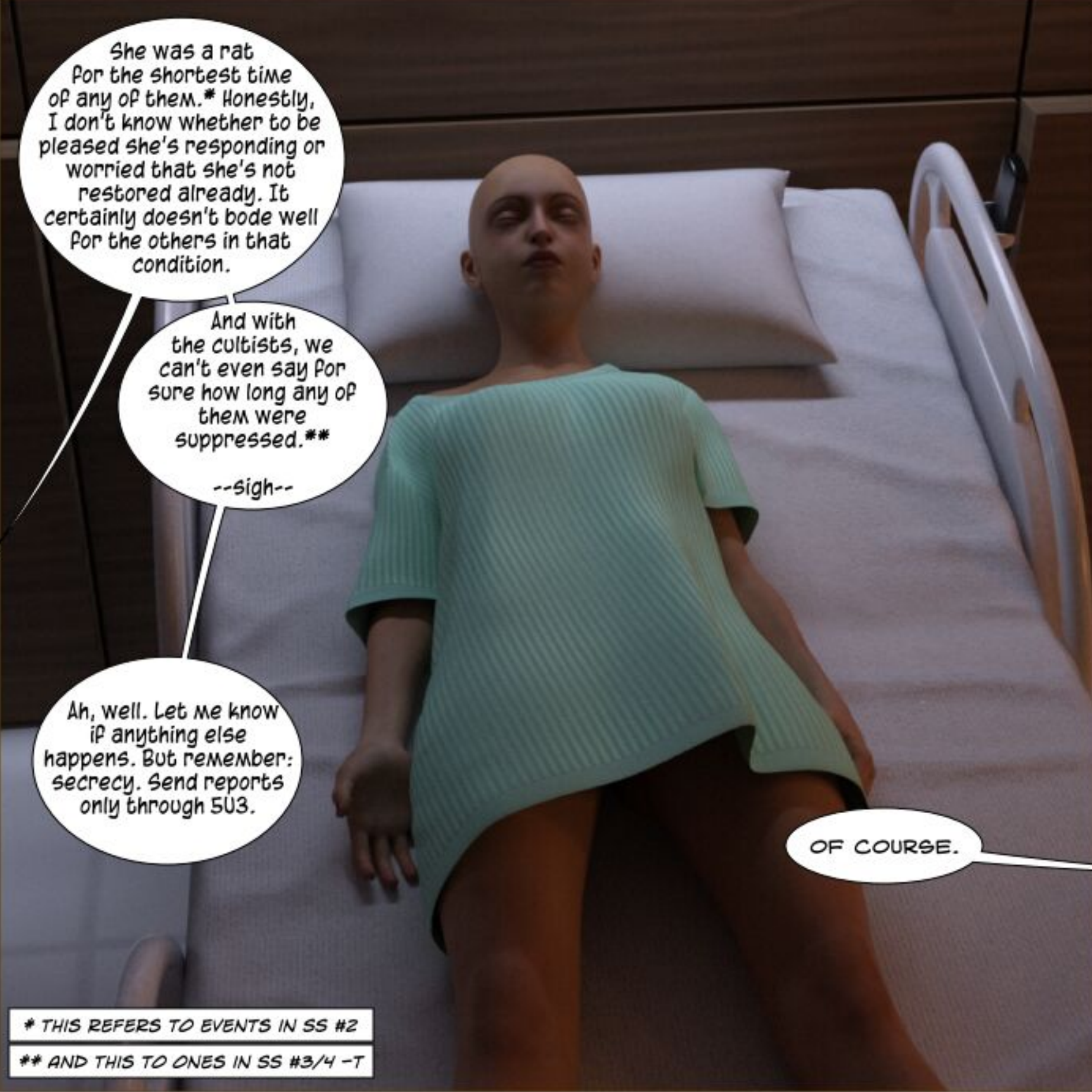
HAVE YOU BROUGHT ME ANOTHER PATIENT? I DON'T SEE ONE, SO I ASSUME YOU'RE JUST COMING FOR A CHECK.

Hello, CLO. I'm following up on the last report you sent. You said you had some responses?



YES, THERE HAVE BEEN STRONG REACTIONS FROM MS. MARKOV DURING MOST OF HER RECENT THERAPY SESSIONS. THE MESSAGES ARE DEFINITELY REACHING HER; THE MONITORS SHOW SIGNIFICANT CHANGES IN BRAIN ACTIVITY WHILE THE HEADSET IS ON.

WE'VE ALSO HAD RESPONSES FROM ONE OF THE FORMER CULTISTS IN WARD TWO, BUT NOTHING SO STRIKING.



She was a rat for the shortest time of any of them. \* Honestly, I don't know whether to be pleased she's responding or worried that she's not restored already. It certainly doesn't bode well for the others in that condition.

And with the cultists, we can't even say for sure how long any of them were suppressed. \*\* --sigh--

Ah, well. Let me know if anything else happens. But remember: secrecy. Send reports only through S03.

OF COURSE.

\* THIS REFERS TO EVENTS IN SS #2  
\*\* AND THIS TO ONES IN SS #3/4 -T



So Midnight moved them, and you don't know when, where, or why. And you don't find that a little worrying?

I trust Midnight completely. Without reservation.

Oh. Well, that must be nice. I don't.



Look, I'm not dumb. I realized a while back that Midnight was either a Barker or was operating very, very close to one. There was just no other way to explain her access.

That automatically makes her motivations suspicious, as far as I'm concerned. I like looking for manipulators, but I'm not crazy enough to get involved in Barker internal politics. That's a good way to get tossed out of Sleep--or worse.

I don't trust her. I need to be able to trust you. But I can't trust you as long as you're holding back so much. And don't try to tell me you're not. You're a bad actor and a worse liar.

... I want you to be able to trust me. I'll tell you what I can. But some of it ...

Start by telling me what you're really working on, and what's got you so damned busy that you can't do the things I thought you were working on.



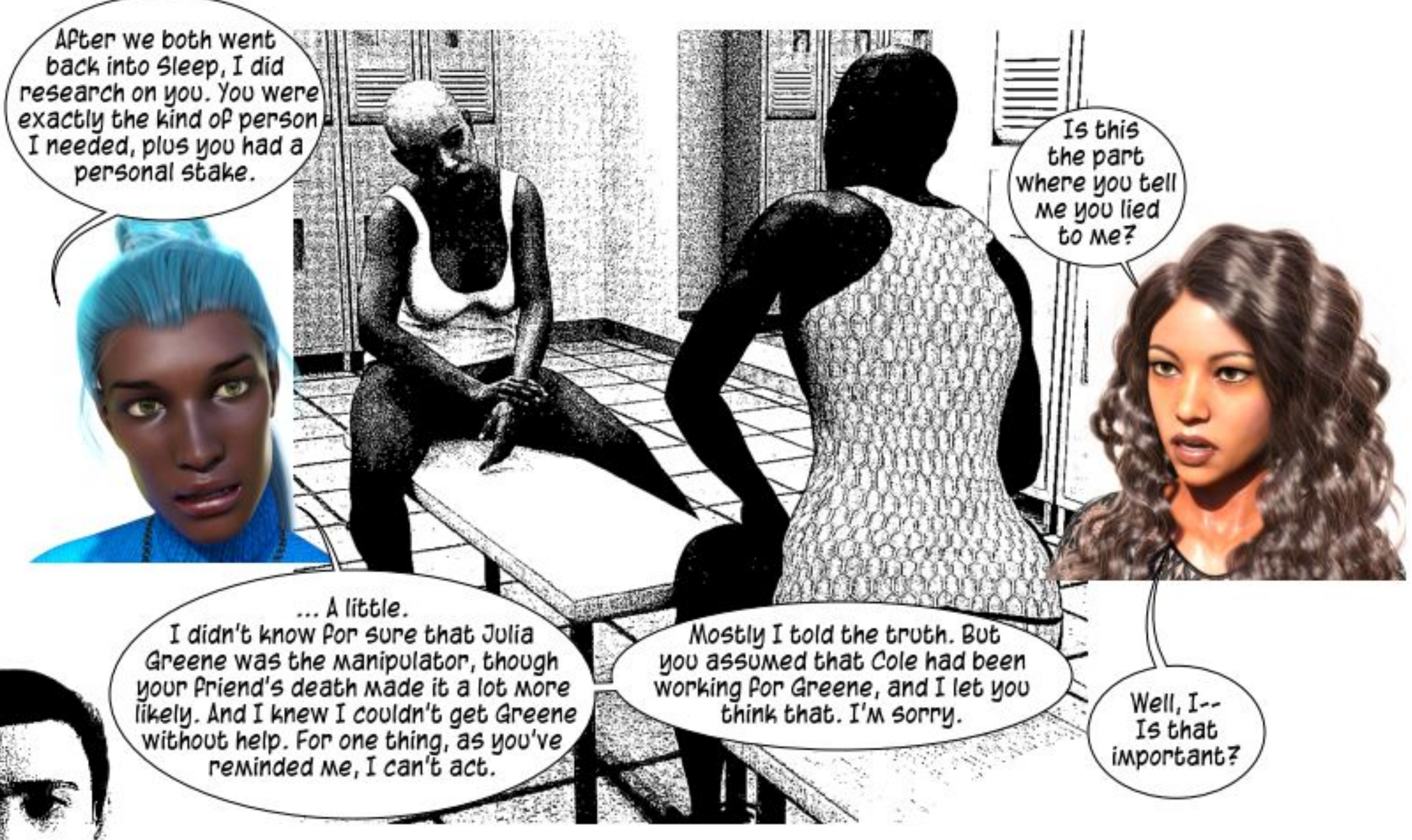


OK, remember Cole?

Murdered my friend, tried to kill me? Hard to forget.\*

...Right. When I met you awake, I wasn't tracking your friend. I was tracking Cole.

I wish I'd caught him in time to stop him. By the time I reacted to that, he'd run off chasing you.



After we both went back into sleep, I did research on you. You were exactly the kind of person I needed, plus you had a personal stake.

Is this the part where you tell me you lied to me?

... A little. I didn't know for sure that Julia Greene was the manipulator, though your friend's death made it a lot more likely. And I knew I couldn't get Greene without help. For one thing, as you've reminded me, I can't act.

Mostly I told the truth. But you assumed that Cole had been working for Greene, and I let you think that. I'm sorry.

Well, I-- Is that important?



Very. Cole was working for Clayton Barker.

My original job--still my job--is tracking and preventing really nasty behavior among the Barkers. Apart from Nathaniel, who's a special case, Clayton's the worst of the lot who have actual power right now, so he's eaten a lot of my time.

A short while before I met you, I learned that Clayton was actively looking for manipulators to work with. Whatever he wanted them for, it wouldn't be good.

Your friend knew Greene was a manipulator. I think Clayton wanted to keep her from telling anyone. I think he wanted a chance to recruit Greene, and keep her abilities a secret.

That's speculation, of course. But I can't think of any other reason Clayton would have sent Cole out to deal with your friend.

\* ALL OF THIS DISCUSSION IS ABOUT EVENTS IN SS #1 -7



You could have just told me all that, though.

You wouldn't have helped me if I had. I knew from the beginning you didn't want to get involved in Barker messes. And I've tried to keep you out of those parts.

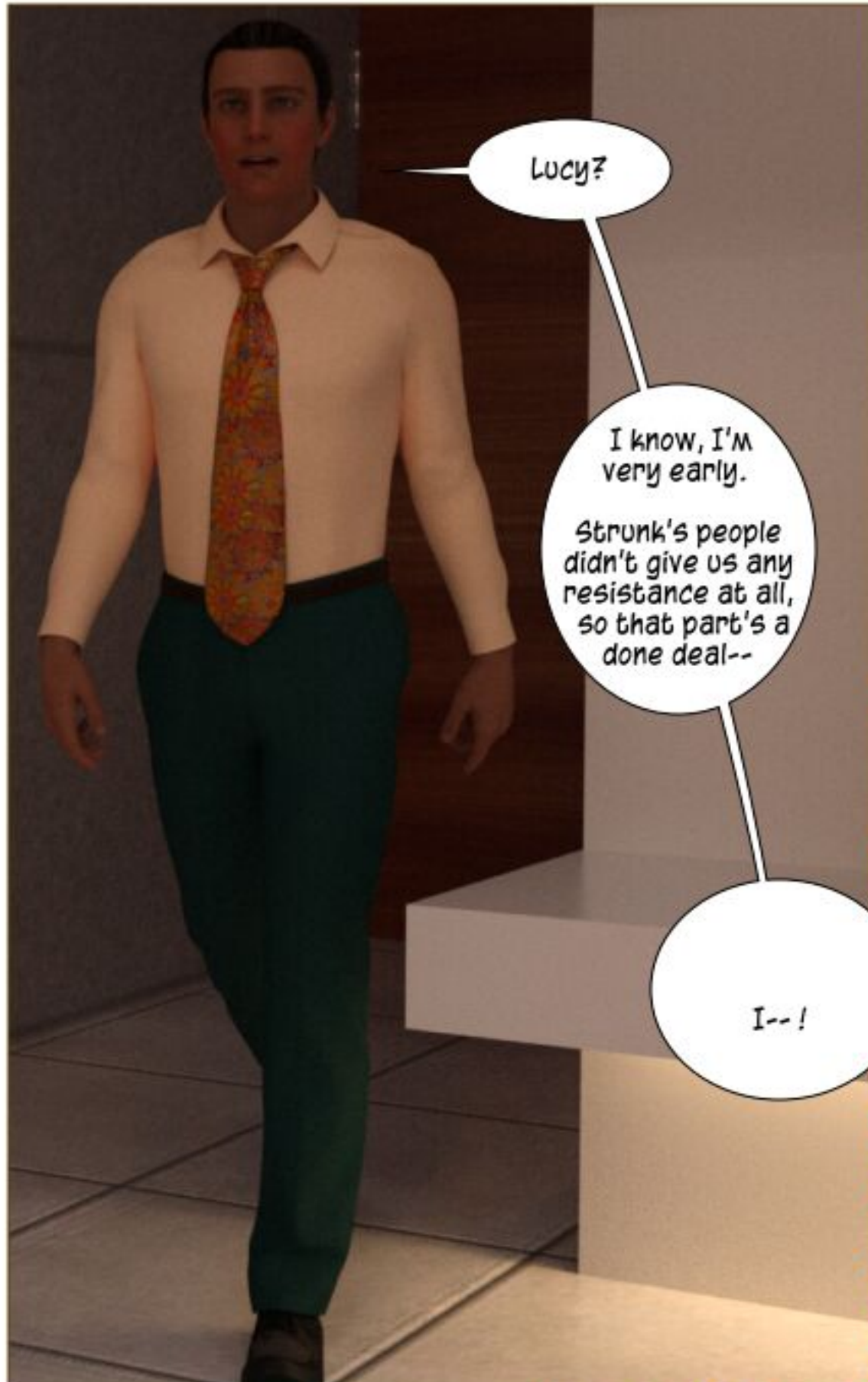
When I've been unavailable, that's usually why. Cole knew my identity and was out to get me, which is why I was being careful about being seen. That was solved when he never came back into sleep, but Clayton hired a new person for dirty work, who spotted me, and I had to lie low for a while. Remember?\*

\* IN SS #3 -7

When Nathaniel's cult got Clayton, that put all my business with him on hold, but he's regrouped since then. Vigorously.

And worse--the rumor, which I'm having trouble confirming, is that he's found someone new to work with. I bet you dinner that person's a manipulator of some kind, if it's true.

Meanwhile, Clayton Barker is paying one of his frequent visits to his lover ...



Lucy?

I know, I'm very early.

Strunk's people didn't give us any resistance at all, so that part's a done deal--

I--!



Hlaybuh!  
--grunt--  
Hehp! Se's--

Shhh.  
Now, let's all be calm and quiet and we'll start over.









I mean, when you think about it, dicks are really Punny!

HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE

You've got this thing on you and it just kinda sticks out

HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE

and it grows when you touch it--

What--?



Ree, are you OK?

And you get all red and

HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE

Maybe you start to make squeaky noises

HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE

and it's super silly!



You don't want to be silly?

HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE

HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE



I'm going to blow up your balloon!

I want to make you squeak!

HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE

HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE



MMMMMM

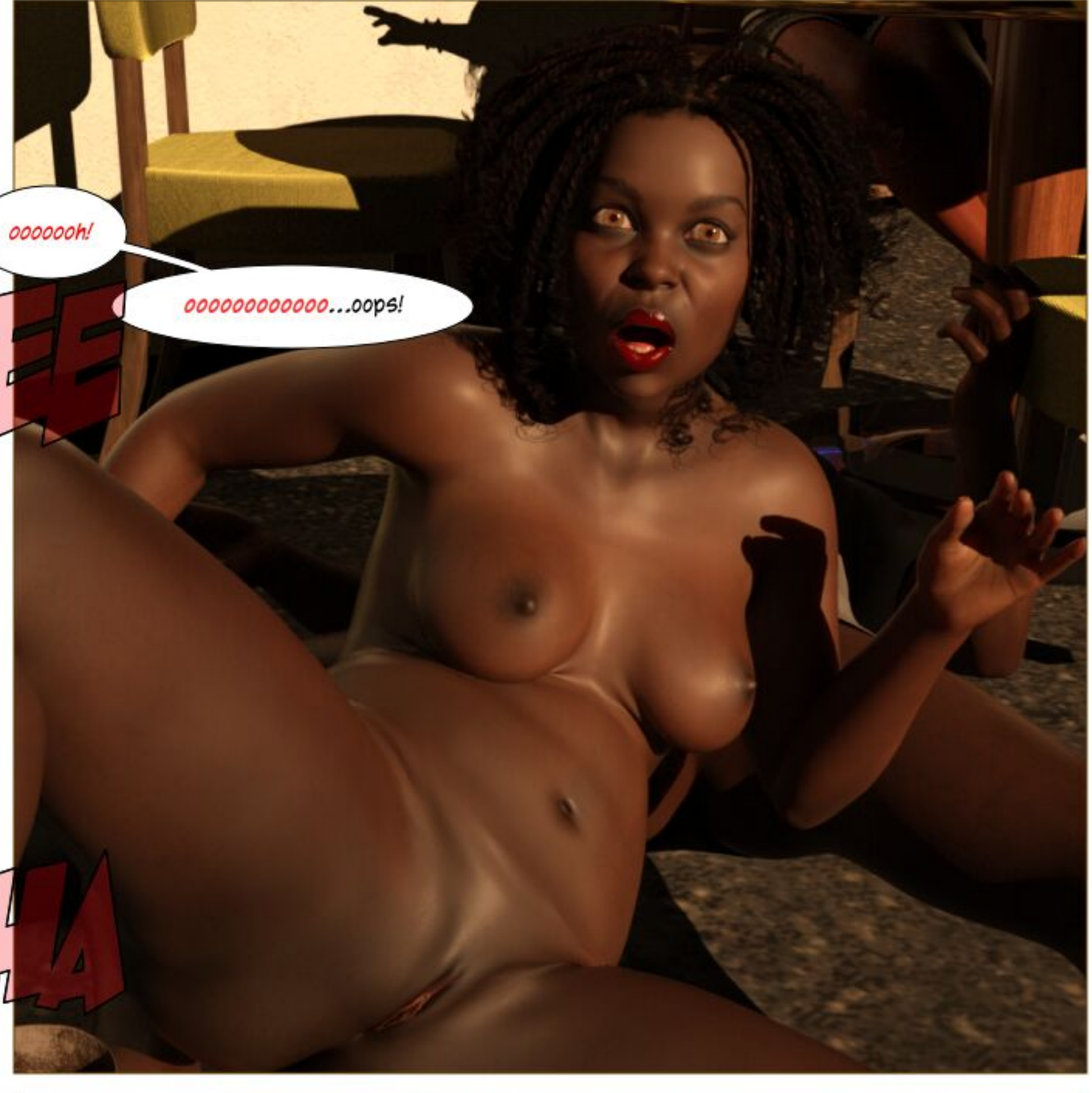
MMmkes Me hot btwn Mh lehs ...

MMM oooooh yeh

HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE

HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE

HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA



ooooooh!

oooooooooooooooo...oops!



--giggle--

Well, that was Pun! Gotta run now! Thanks for the date!

Hey, wait--!

Ah, hell, another one?

You've had it happen before?

Couple of times in the last few days. I think it's a publicity stunt for that kinky circus thing.

Kinky circus thing?

Yeah. There's a poster for it on the wall, around the corner.



Huh.

BRRRRRT

Hi, Trish! What's up?

... oh.

No, no, I didn't mean to sound like that. Just not having a great day is all.

I'm Free right now and I'm happy to help. I'll be there in a few minutes.





Cheekbones a little sharper, and sink the cheeks more. I can roll the reference mirror closer if you want.

No, I'm good. Just need another minute. Stand-in jobs take more focus than usual.

Anyway, so, I understand people have emergencies, but I feel like she could have given me a little warning. We only have the one major scene left in this episode, but if we don't finish now, it throws the whole run behind schedule ...

Heh.

What?

You're starting to really sound like a director. Welcome to the club.



You know, you surprised everybody when you petitioned to take up this property after Cobermayer, uh, defaulted.\*

Well, truth is, I did it because I really like the role and I didn't want it to end.

But I've found out I also like the writing and directing parts! I don't know if I'm a good writer, but this isn't a hard script, either.

It only has two rules: There has to be lots of sex, and the aliens always have to win.

That second part seems like kind of a hard sell.

No, it's gold, trust me. There are a lot of people who watch this and get off on imagining themselves as an alien princess' sex slave. Though they might never admit it to anybody!

C'mon, I'll introduce you to Rich. He's dumb as dirt, but he can remember lines.

\* IN SS #5, WHICH WILL ALSO HELP MAKE SENSE OF THE REST OF THIS PAGE--MAYBE. --T



And so ...

Ah, Michael B. At last.

With you no longer there to lead it, the resistance will crumble quickly.

Keep telling yourself that.

We will continue to fight you as long as even one of us remains uncaptured.

Your time runs short. Shorter than you imagine.



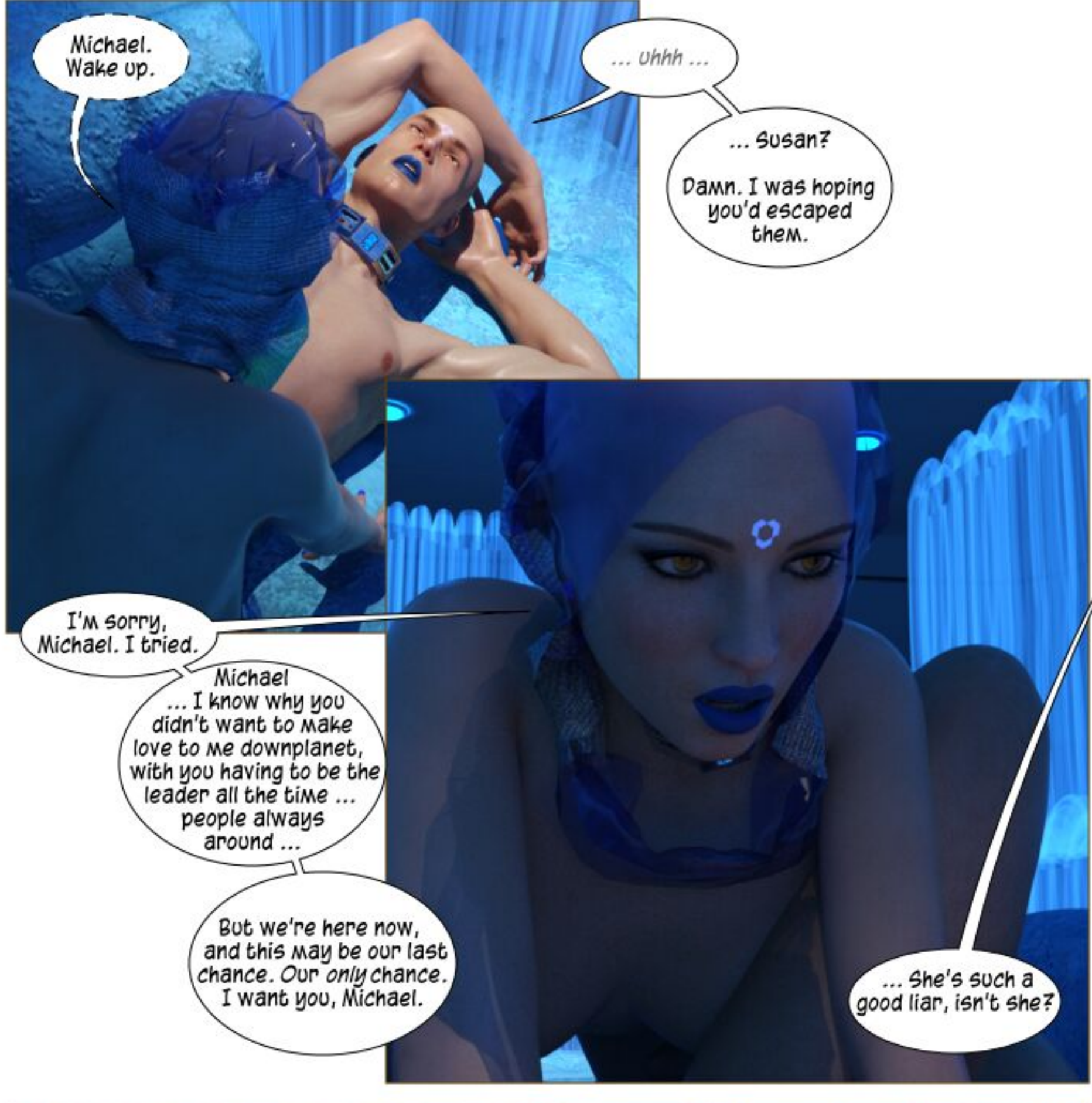
If I were you, I'd worry more about your time.

You see, we can't let you return to the planet. You cause too much trouble down there.

But if you are to stay here, it will be as a toy for the princess, and Her Luminance only accepts toys in a particular ... configuration.

So either you'll volunteer for sex transformation, or I'm afraid we'll have to send you to the experimental laboratories. You might look interesting with gills ...

You may have a night to consider it. I see the Cylas have collared and imprinted you, so these cupps can come off. The Cylas will lead you to a dormancy chamber.



Michael. Wake up.

... uhhh ...

... Susan?

Damn. I was hoping you'd escaped them.

I'm sorry, Michael. I tried.

Michael ... I know why you didn't want to make love to me downplanet, with you having to be the leader all the time ... people always around ...

But we're here now, and this may be our last chance. Our only chance. I want you, Michael.

... She's such a good liar, isn't she?



That's why we sent her down to infiltrate you. And she did an excellent job.

No! I don't believe it. You're trying to poison my head.

Human, if I want to poison your head, I'll brainclamp you. Which may yet happen. But--

804?

Yes, mistress?

Susan, what--?

804, I want you to evaluate this one for sexual fitness.

Consider it a reward for your performance downplanet.

Ooh, yes, mistress.



Susan, no--

Mmph--

Ssh.

You'll love it here. No more worries. No more having to lead all the time. You do what you're told, and have lots of sex. Doesn't that sound nice?



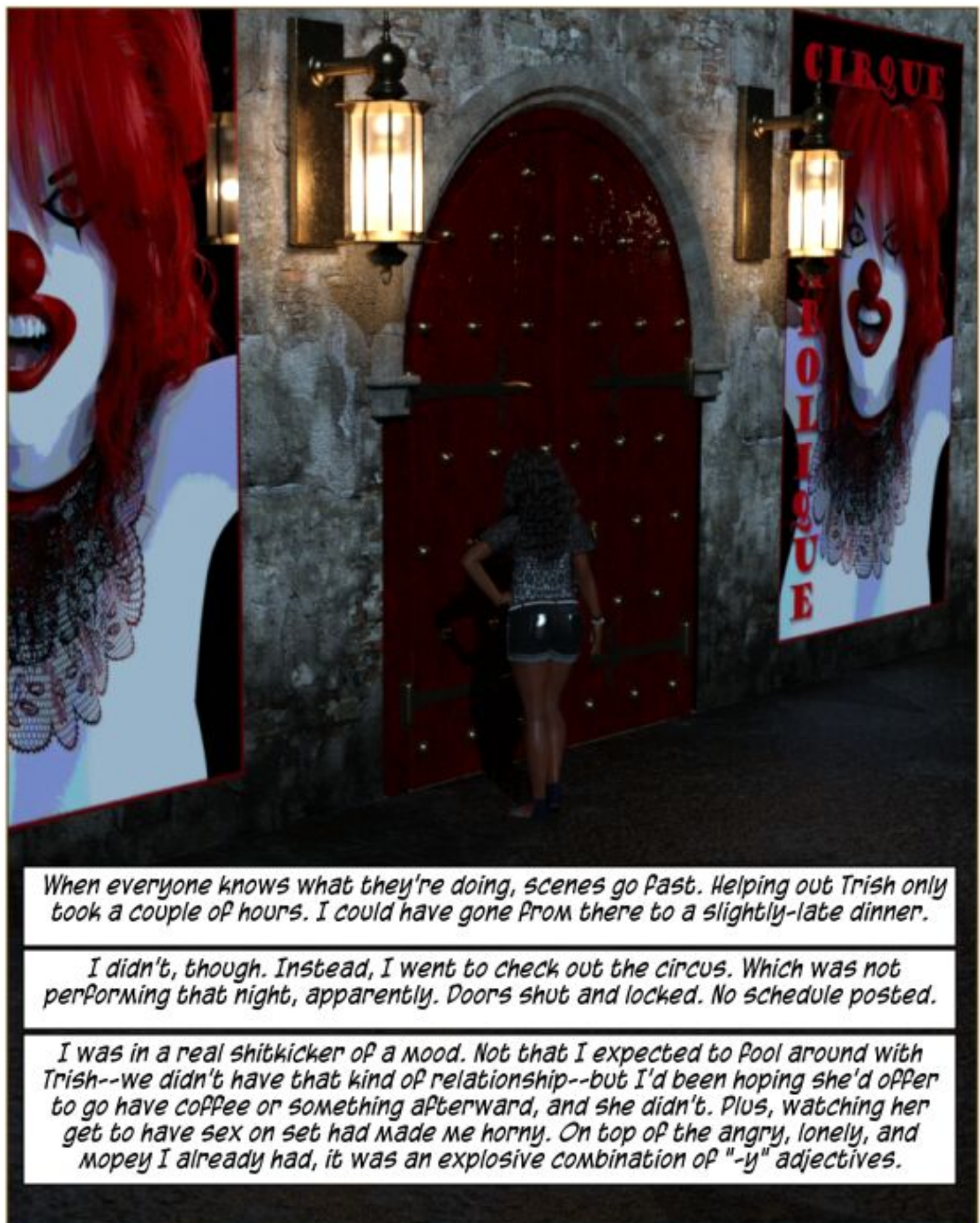
No, I--

MOAN

Oh!

Oh!!





When everyone knows what they're doing, scenes go fast. Helping out Trish only took a couple of hours. I could have gone from there to a slightly-late dinner.

I didn't, though. Instead, I went to check out the circus. Which was not performing that night, apparently. Doors shut and locked. No schedule posted.

I was in a real shitkicker of a mood. Not that I expected to pool around with Trish--we didn't have that kind of relationship--but I'd been hoping she'd offer to go have coffee or something afterward, and she didn't. Plus, watching her get to have sex on set had made me horny. On top of the angry, lonely, and mopey I already had, it was an explosive combination of "-y" adjectives.

Anyway, that's my excuse for what I did next: I went around back and found a door that wasn't locked.

It was very dark backstage, with all the lights off and only the moon in the windows illuminating anything. The sole dressing room was deserted. But I heard voices coming from elsewhere in the theatre.



Can I help you with something? Performances don't start for two more days.

I'm looking for whoever's in charge ... I had a couple of questions ...

Well, that would be me, but--

Ruby! Hey! What are you doing here?

You know this person, Orchid?



Oh, Ruby's OK, April. She's a director and writer and actor.

She got me out of a really bad situation. I think I told you about that, but you might not remember.\*

HMM ...

\* SS #1, IN CASE YOU DON'T REMEMBER EITHER. -T



Would you mind coming over closer to the window?

OK, but why--

How do you feel about kink work?

It's a significant part of my income. Why do you--



April!!!

--Sigh--  
Sorry, I have to go deal with that.

Orchid, you might explain our problem to her.



Don't worry, she's not losing her mind, she's just got too much going on right now.

Hey, are you hungry? I've been practicing all afternoon and I missed dinner.

Let me put on some street clothes and we'll get something to eat and I'll tell you all about it.



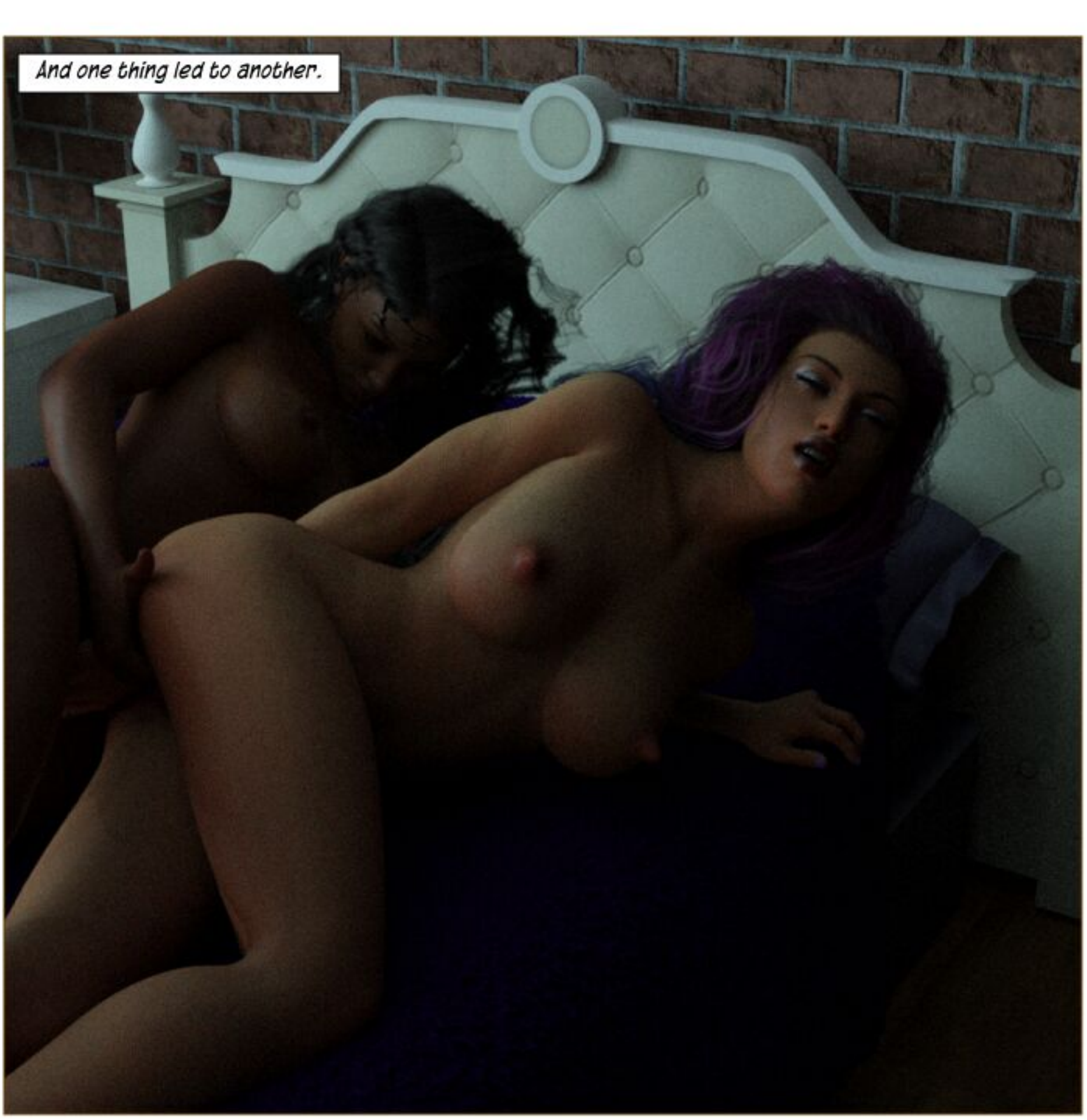
I'd checked in with Orchid a couple of times after the Julia Greene stuff to make sure she was recovering OK, but then I got caught up in other things, and it had been a while. I was surprised how good it felt to see her again.

... She was in, y'know, a more normal kind of circus for a while. It didn't do very well, and this is really what she wanted to do anyway.

But she's had some trouble finding people. Everybody thinks it's either too risky or too weird, or both. And now with Sara backing out at the last minute ...

OK, but how did you get sucked into this? It sounds like you've really gotten into it, learning all these new things ...

Oh, I love it! I just hope I get a chance to actually perform. April doesn't want to admit how worried she is.



And one thing led to another.



Four days later.

All right, you. It's time to get at whatever's eating you, because this pout is not a good look.

Is it something with Ruby?

You're telepathic now?

No, but I have to read people pretty well to do my job.

And, no offense, but you don't have too many people you let get close. You and I don't seem to be pissed off at each other, so that leaves her.

Is she mad at you, are you mad at her, or both?

I don't know! We had ... well, let's call it a heated discussion. I was doing some things she didn't like. I tried to explain and apologize, and she said she wasn't upset, but I haven't heard from her since then.

I'm not sure I should call her if she's mad at me right now, and ... I'm also a little worried about her.

Why would you be worried?

She was investigating something on her own. She might have gotten in too deep.

I'd bet on Ruby to be able to dig herself out of any hole she gets into.

But if you're concerned, why not go check the circus? For all you know, that's been keeping her too busy to talk to you.

... You know something I don't.

Ruby keeps me informed about what she's doing, since I arrange nearly two-thirds of her jobs. She left a message the other day that she'd taken a temporary gig with the Cirque Diabolique down in the River District.

They opened a couple of nights ago.

"Go have a look! If there's something weird, you'll find out. If not, she'll be happy you showed up to support her. I'd join you, but I'm allergic to clowns."

Not a very big place ...

Not much of a crowd either. Seems like they're going on word of mouth alone, so I guess that's not a surprise.

Good evening! Welcome to the Cirque Diabolique!

I am your host, and these are my vivacious assistants, Rose and Violet.

Ruby! I can't tell under that makeup whether she's being compelled.

In our show, however, the main attraction is ... you!

Which means, in order to begin, we will need a volunteer from the audience.

Ah, it looks like Violet has found someone. Bring her up here.





Applause For our volunteer, please!

**CLAP CLAP CLAP CLAP CLAP CLAP**



She's going to help us with an acrobatic act, though she doesn't know it yet.

In order to do that, we're going to have to make a few changes.

Don't worry, we'll put her back the way she was when we're done.

Now, let's see ...



Mmm ... that's a good start. But we're going to need to go much further.

I just want to run my hands all over you ... and I know it must peel so good. Your skin is very sensitive right now.



Bigger ... you're doing great ... keep going ...

I should warn you, your dress is probably not going to ...

**RRRRIP**

Ah, yes, there it goes.

Oooh, now we're getting somewhere.

Huh.



---aaaah!---



And there you have it, audience! Full sphericity! Like an exercise ball, but much more fun ... especially for her!

**CLAP CLAP CLAP CLAP CLAP**

Roll her around a little, ladies, so the audience understands what I mean.

Aren't those the cutest noises? They're a little muffled, of course, but I know how we can make them louder.

Ready, Violet?



An astonishing display of balance, poise, and grace!

**CLAP CLAP CLAP CLAP CLAP**

And between the rolling over the floor and Violet's delicate footsteps ...

Oh, I think we're close now.

... and there we go.



Let's hear it for her, folks!

And you see, as promised: none the worse for wear, just a little plushed and out of breath.

--giggle--

Looks like she really had a ball.



And now we need another volunteer!

You--yes, you, right here in the front row. You look likely. Want to be brave and come up?



We're going to need to get those clothes off you first. Rose and Violet will help you with that.

... er--

Oh, don't worry, they're harmless. Mostly. (Try not to tickle him, ladies.)



Oh, dear.

Now, I don't want to give you a complex or anything, and I'm sure it's perfectly adequate for most needs ...

... but it's not nearly big enough for what I have in mind.

Not to worry, though.

Rose will help you with that. She's very good at blowing up balloons.

She has excellent lungs.



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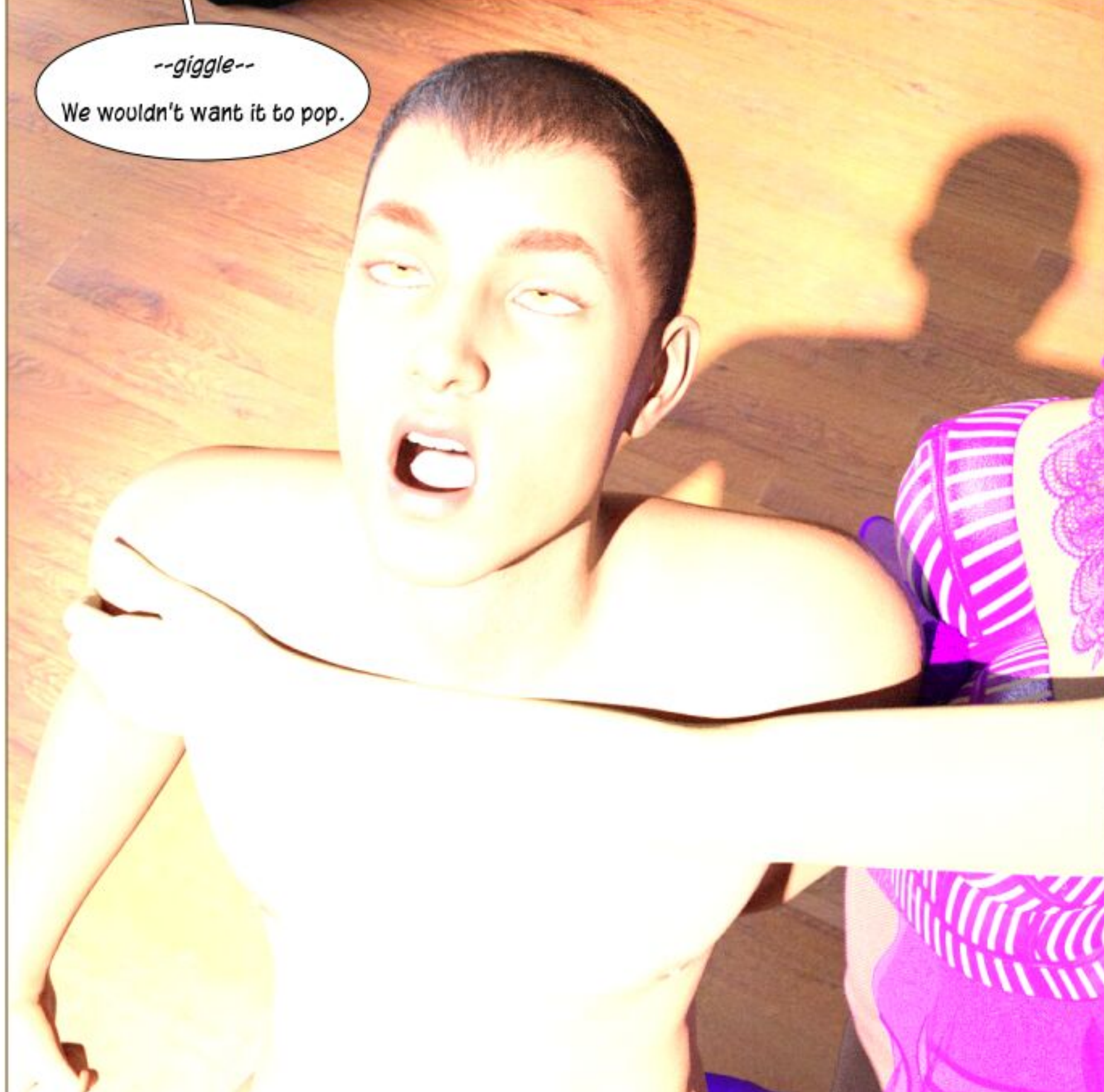
All right, Rose, I think that's probably enough.

Ooh, it squeaks when I rub my finger over it!

Now, who likes balloon animals? Shall we do a poodle? Or I can try for a lion!

**CLAP CLAP CLAP CL**

--giggle--  
We wouldn't want it to pop.





Seventy minutes and several volunteers later, the circus performance has ended. Leyna slips backstage.

This may turn out to be a horrible idea.

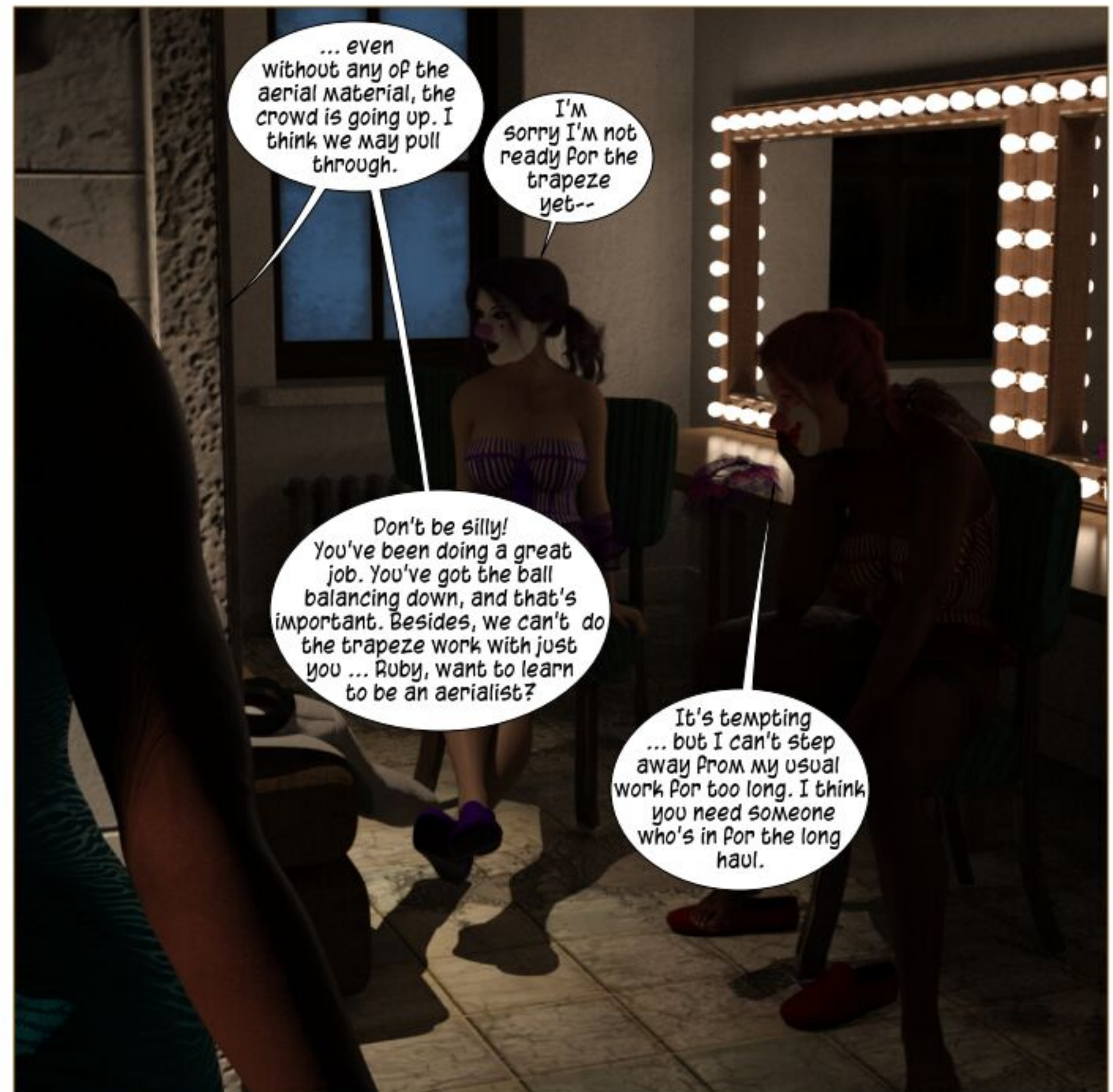


... even without any of the aerial material, the crowd is going up. I think we may pull through.

I'm sorry I'm not ready for the trapeze yet--

Don't be silly! You've been doing a great job. You've got the ball balancing down, and that's important. Besides, we can't do the trapeze work with just you ... Ruby, want to learn to be an aerialist?

It's tempting ... but I can't step away from my usual work for too long. I think you need someone who's in for the long haul.



Leyna!

What are you doing here?

Well, uh--

You took this job unexpectedly, and after those people getting turned into clowns ...



That again?

I thought we discussed all this.



I hadn't had a chance to tell her about it.

It's OK, Leyna. Nobody's being controlled. At least, not without permission.



It's hard to promote something like this, you know? The clowning was an interesting way to get people thinking about the show.

All those people were ringers. Skills. I arranged it with them ahead of time. The ones in the audience are too. I don't tell them exactly what I'm going to do, but they're up for it.

I look for people who get off on public display. Embarrassment. Humiliation. Some of them freak out a little afterward, but trust me, they secretly love it.

I had lots of volunteers. When the word spreads about the circus, I'll get even more.

Leyna ... let's go get some coffee or something. Just let me take off this face and put on some street clothes.



I'm sorry.

Don't be. It's sweet that you were worried.

No, I don't mean that. I'm sorry I haven't done a better job of this.

... I need your help. But I don't feel like I can ask for your help if I don't help you. I'm not really keeping up the bargain.

Well, I'm not doing great either. If I'd kept you up to date on this circus stuff, you wouldn't have had to worry.

But, Leyna, the thing is, I don't want a "bargain." I want a friendship. If we're going to keep working together.

You know I'm not very good at that.

Yes, I figured that out. But I think you can do it. You're managing it with Lou, right?

Only because Lou tells me when I screw up.

And you think I won't do that?

Uh ... good point.

I don't expect you to be perfect at it. I just want you to try. I have to do better too. I was definitely taking out some other things on you, and I shouldn't have.

Mutual effort. OK?

... OK.

So how long are you committed to the circus?

Good question. I'd like to stay on until April Fools someone else to train. But I may not be able to do that.

How about you? You've got a lot of coordination. You could probably handle a trapeze pretty well.

I'm not sure I could handle some of the ... other parts of the job.

Also, I look really bad in clown makeup. I tried it for a costume once. Never again.

Heh. Are there any photos?

I admit nothing.



--END--