



AFTERGLOW

Joe: It was one of those nights that just felt easy... no plans, no pressure.



Mike! Don't burn the wings again!

RIP

RIP

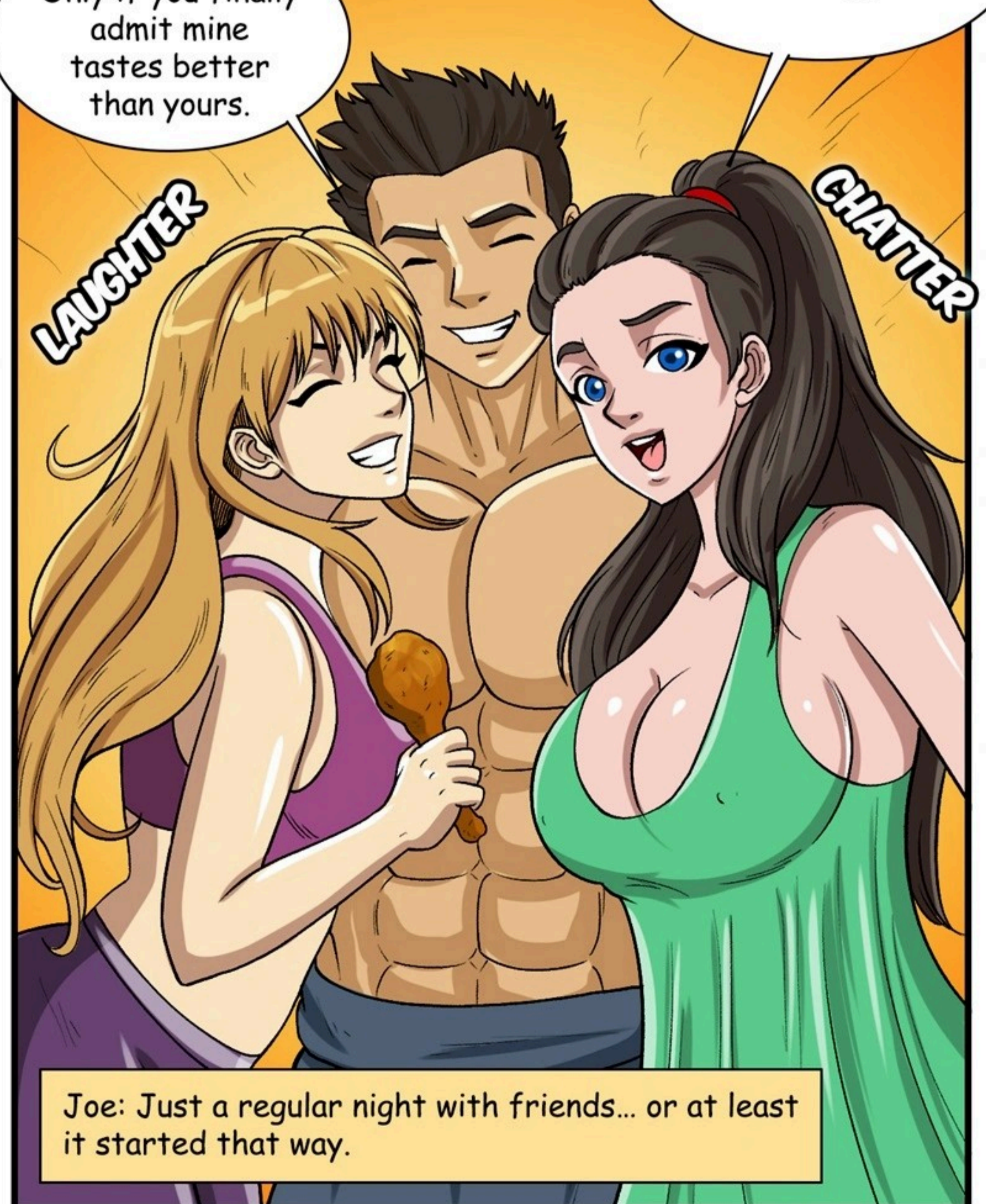
Alexis: Drinks are ready! Who wants some lemonade?



CLINK

Only if you finally admit mine tastes better than yours.

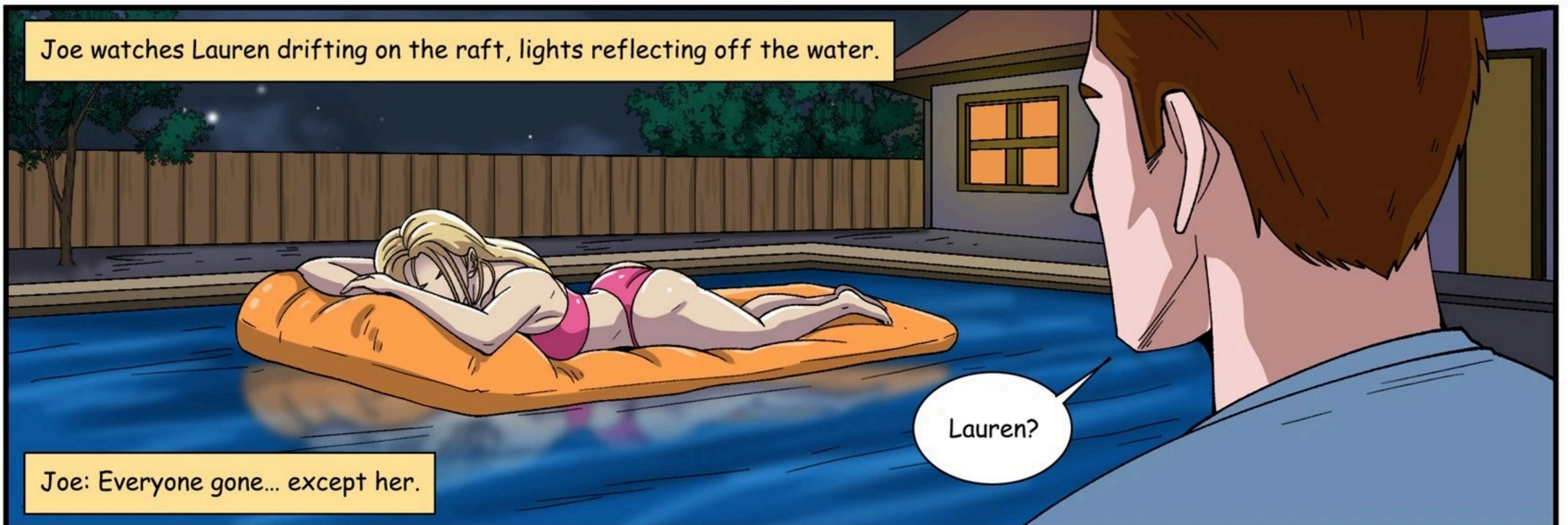
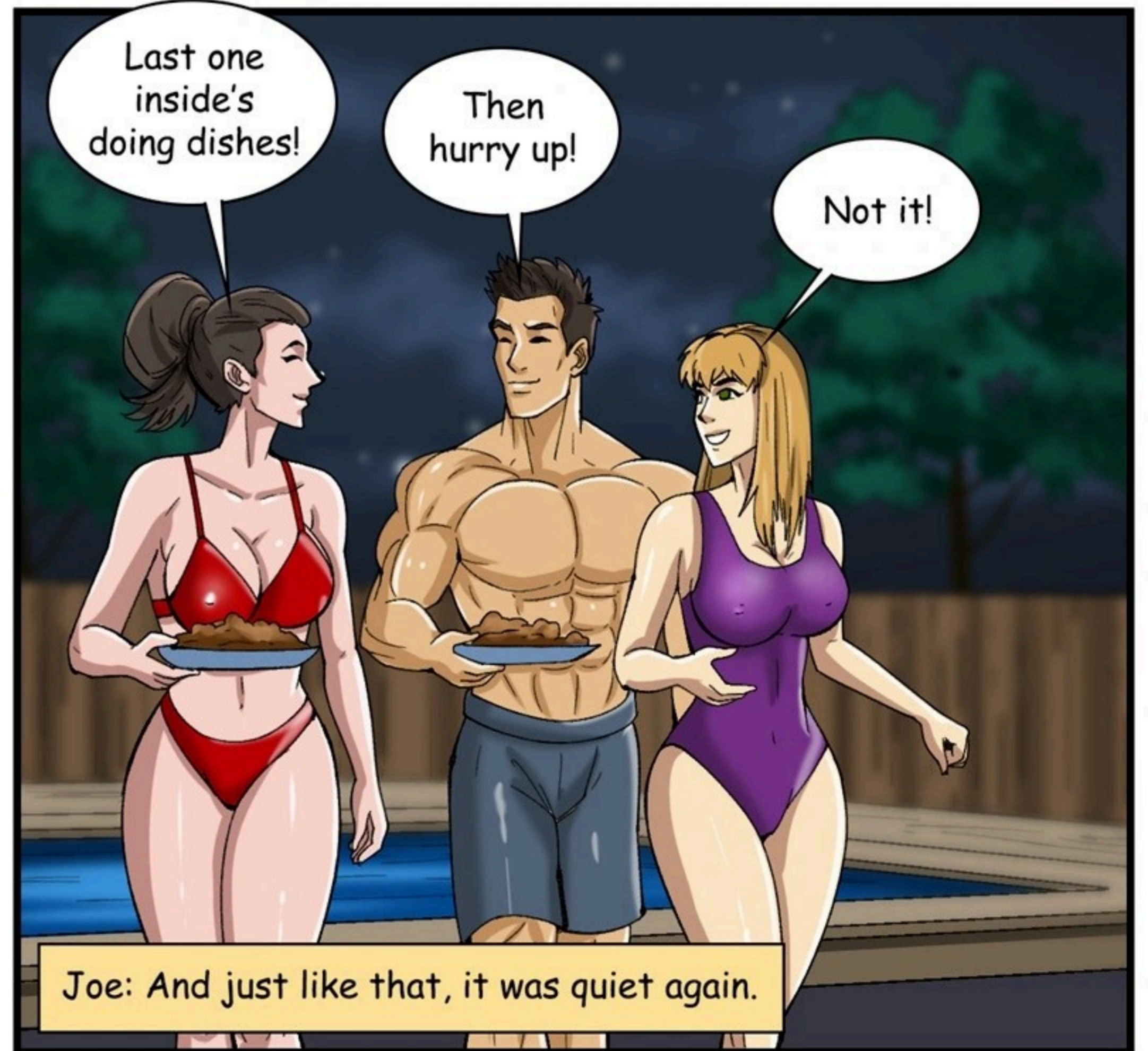
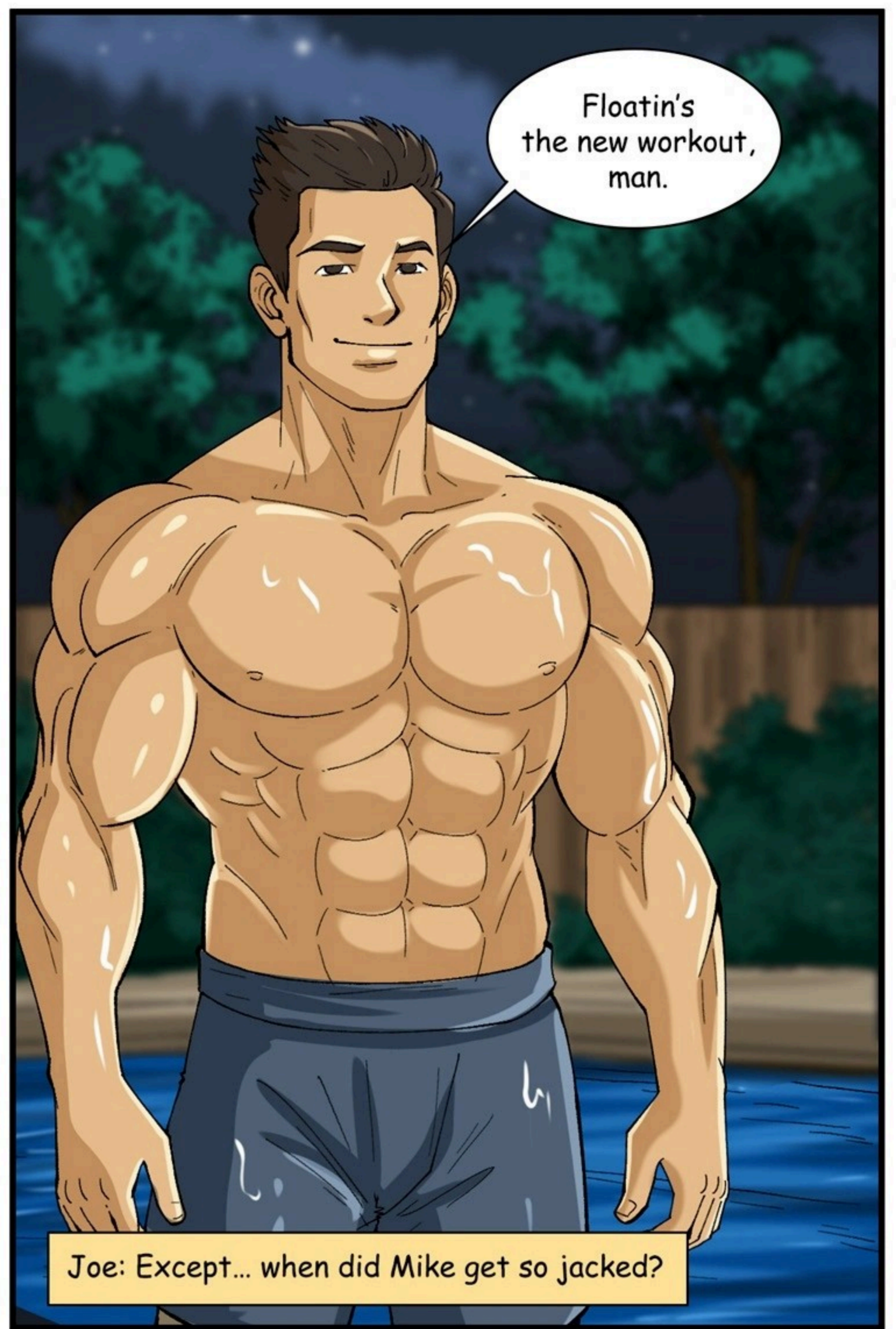
C'mon, Mike—save me the crispy ones!



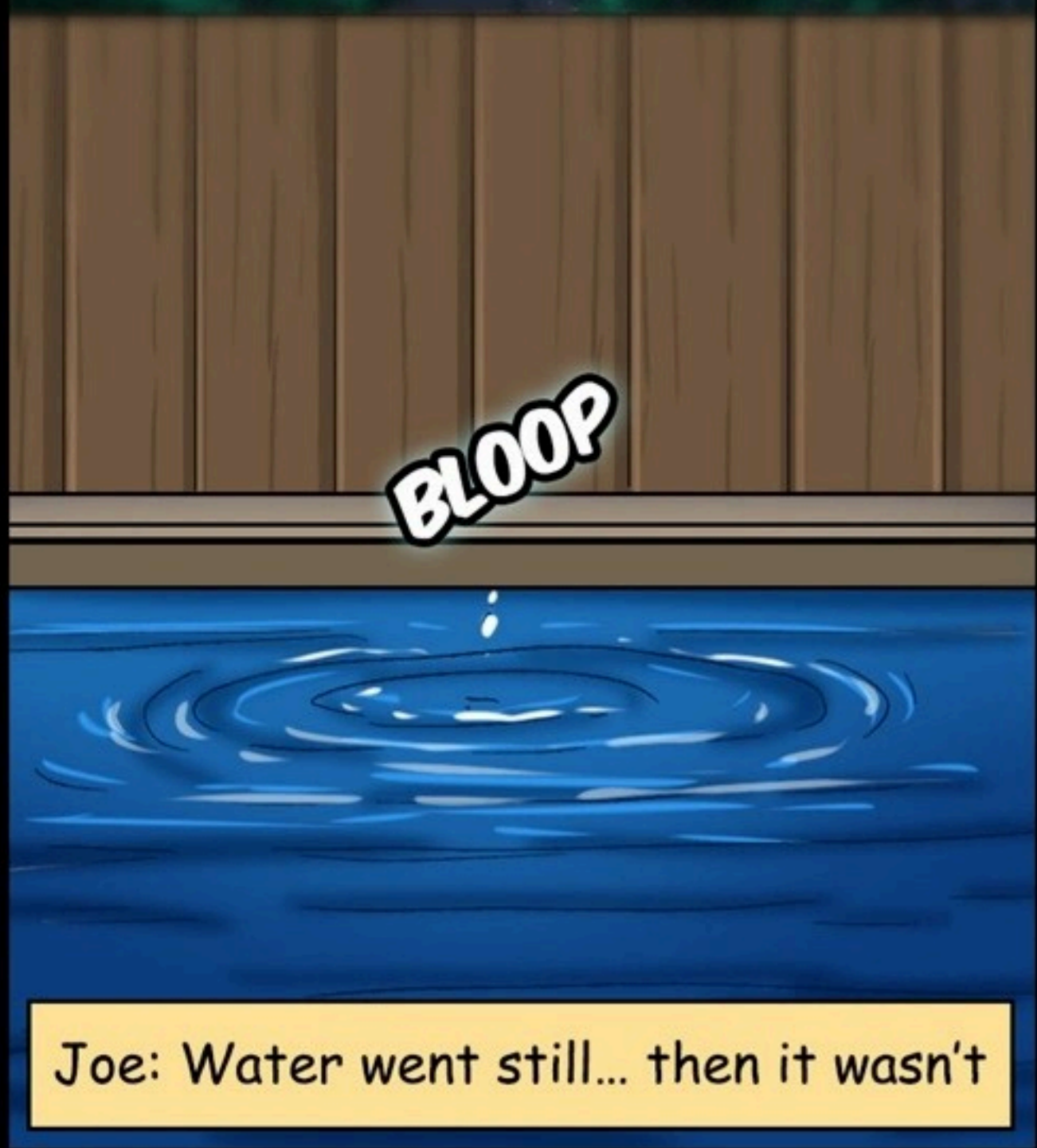
LAUGHTER

CHATTER

Joe: Just a regular night with friends... or at least it started that way.



Small ripple on the pool surface



Joe: Water went still... then it wasn't

Joe: She was drifting so close to the edge I thought she'd fall.



Joe leans forward, noticing the float empty

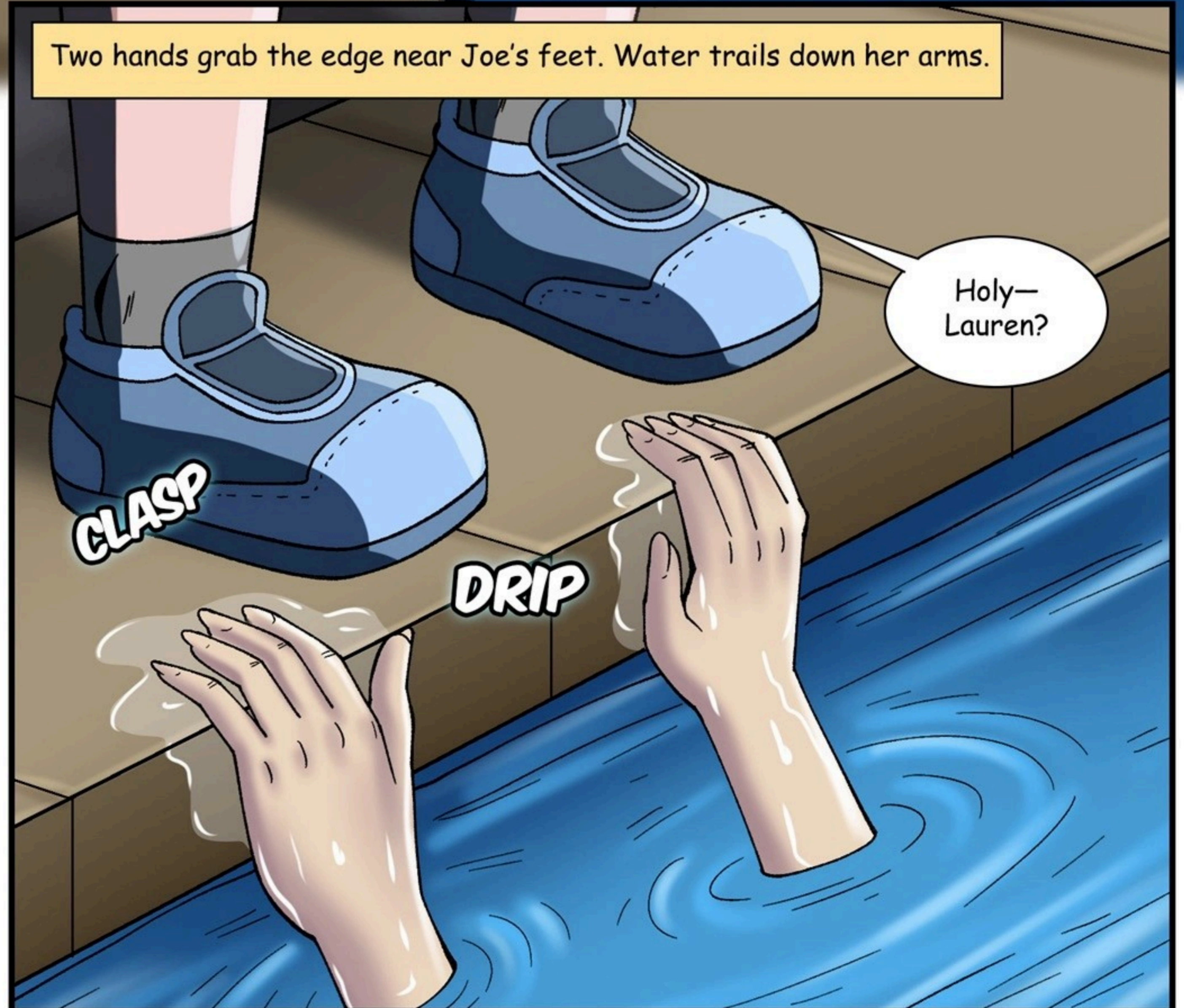


The water glows faintly, something shimmering beneath the surface.



Joe: Light? No, that's... something else.

Two hands grab the edge near Joe's feet. Water trails down her arms.



Lauren rises from the water, calm but radiant. Water splashes off her shoulders.

Lose something?

Thought I might've lost you.

Close on Joe, speechless as he takes in her change.

She looks... different. Taller? Stronger? No way that's just the light

What? Never seen a girl come up for air before?

Lauren adjusts her bikini top as it tightens.

Huh... this feels tighter now.



Joe: Lauren...

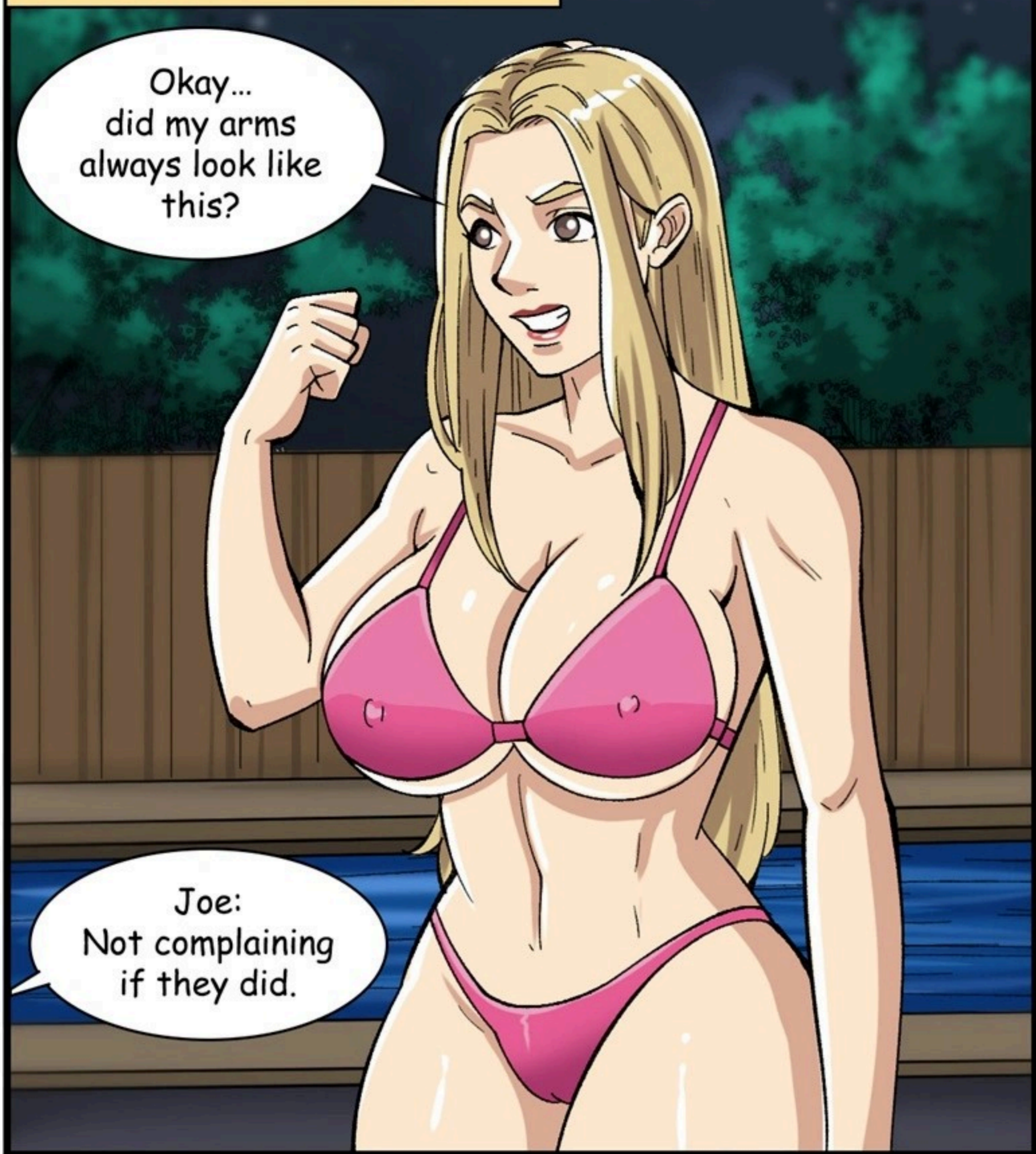


Her back curves, the fabric strains as she steps forward with confidence.

Joe: Not like that.

She steps out of the pool, confident and glowing under the string lights. Her expression is playful but calm.

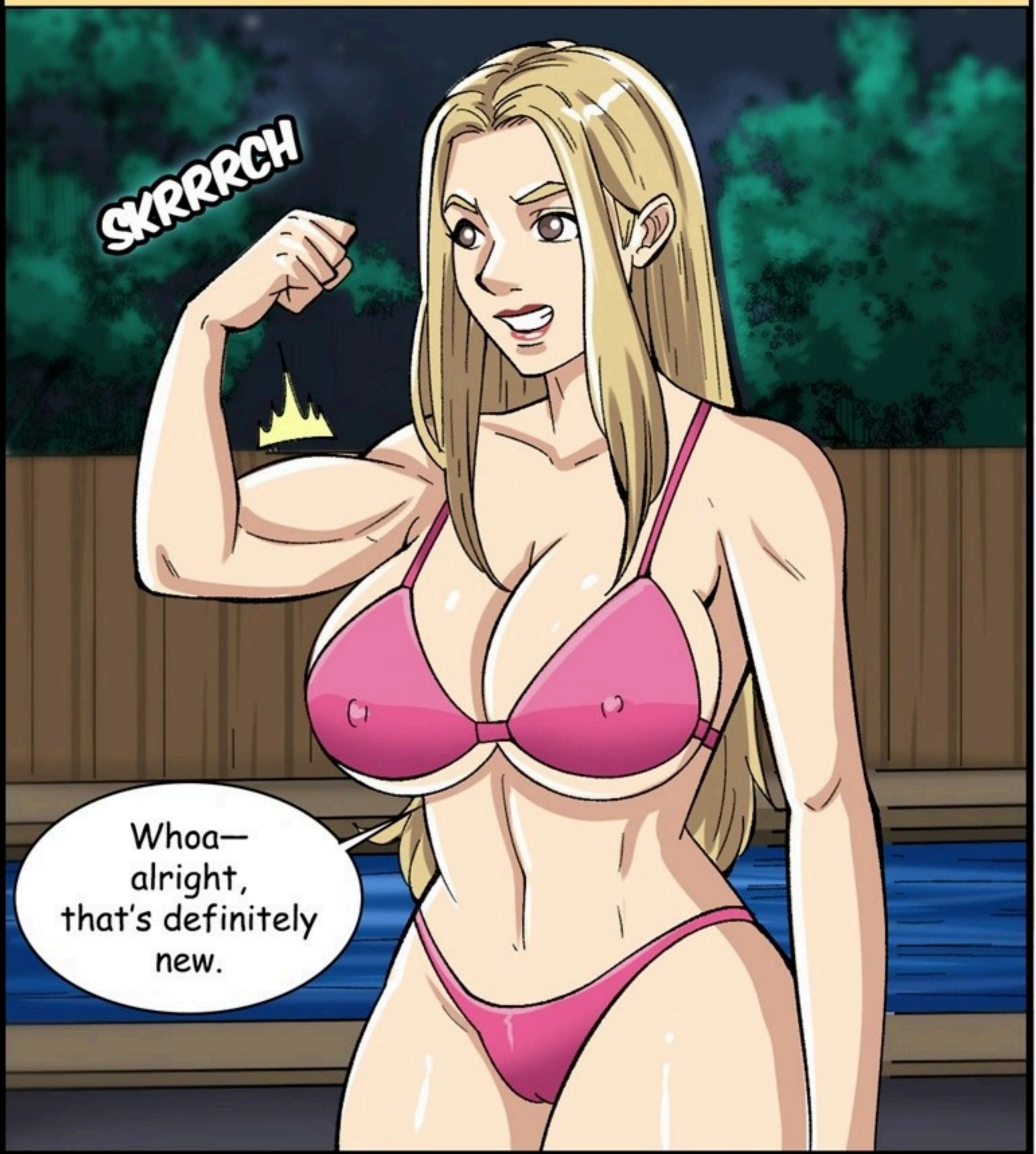
Lauren flexes her arm, puzzled.



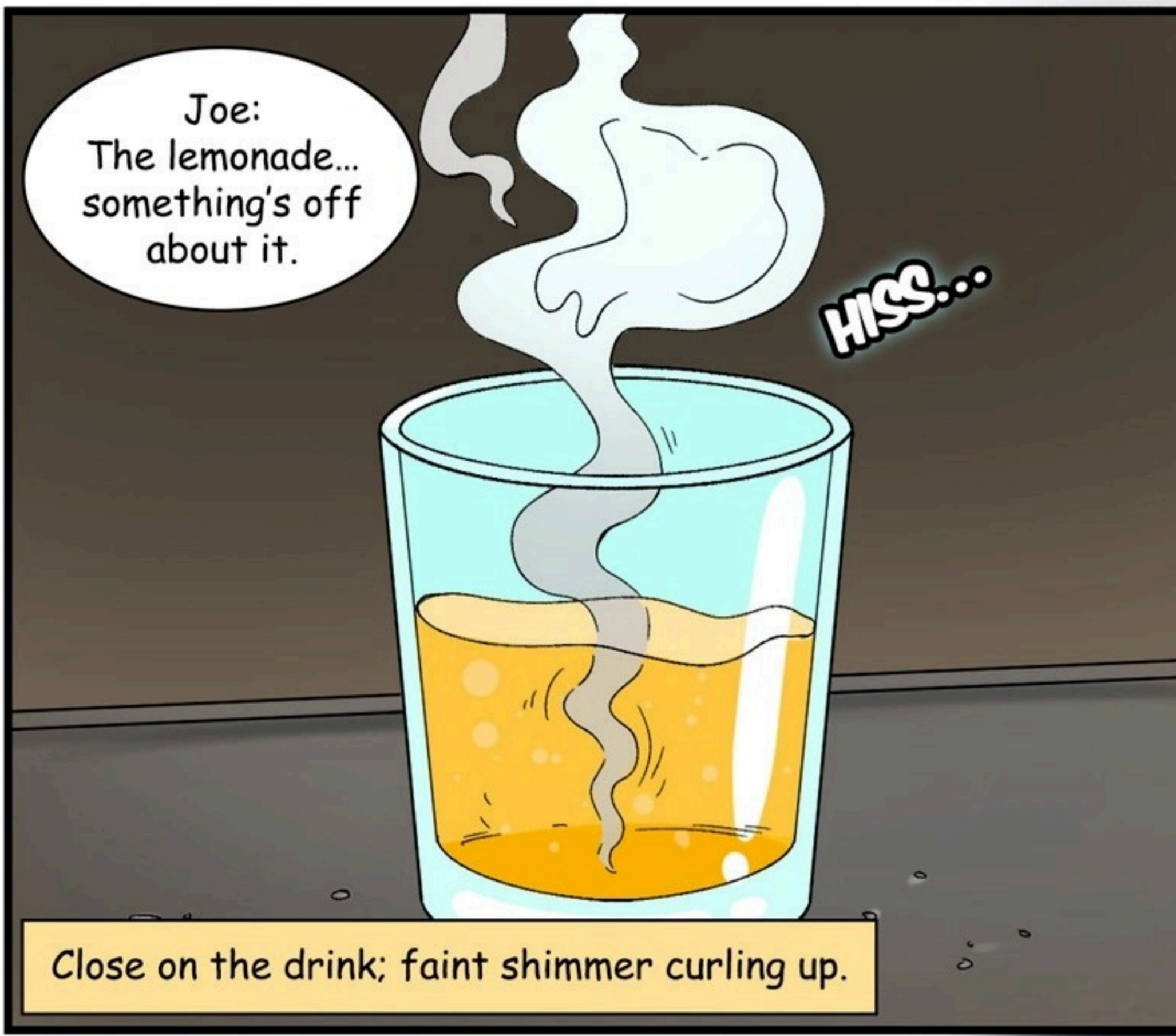
Okay... did my arms always look like this?

Joe: Not complaining if they did.

She tightens her bicep a little more, surprised at the firmness.

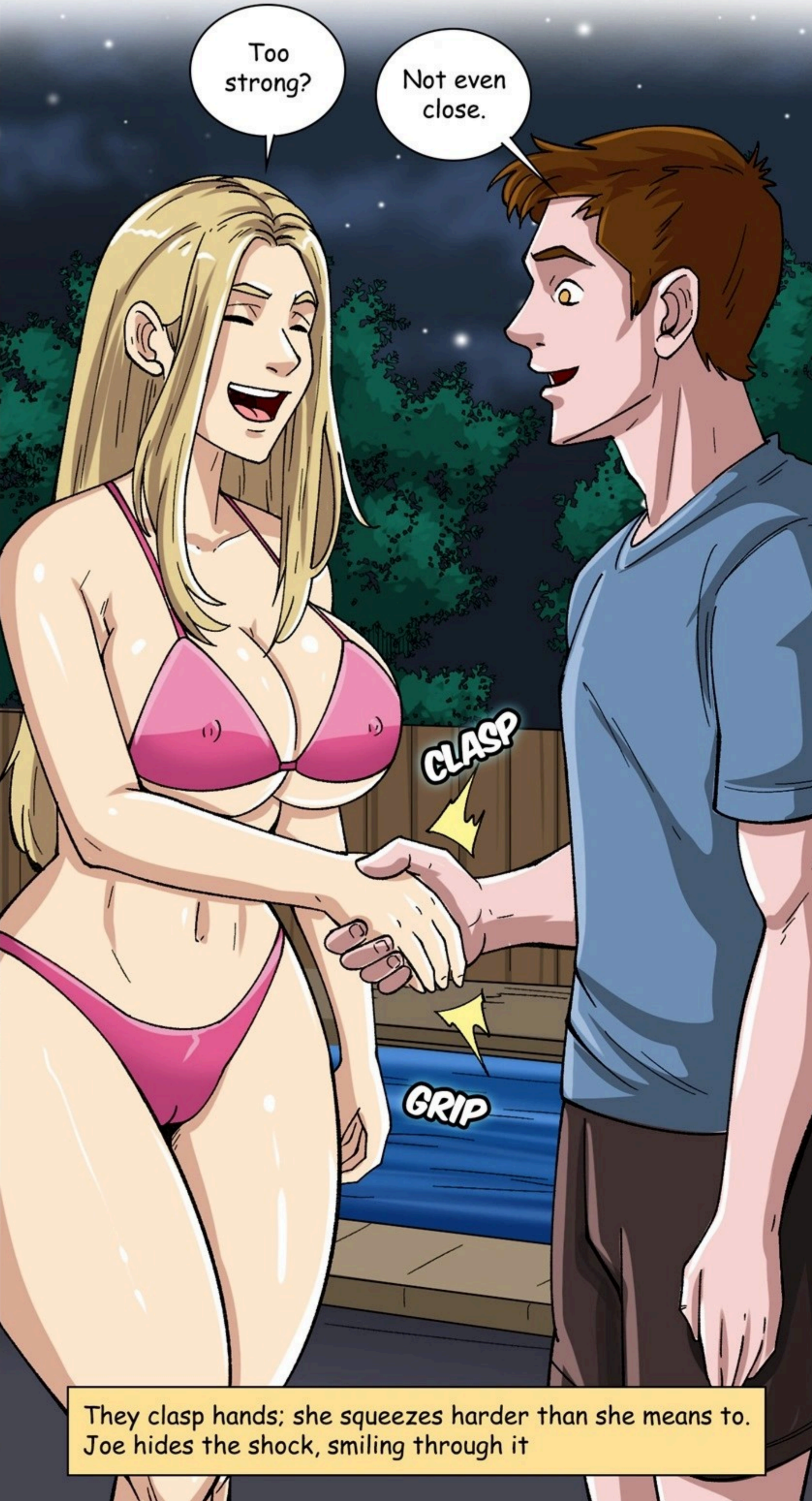


Whoa— alright, that's definitely new.



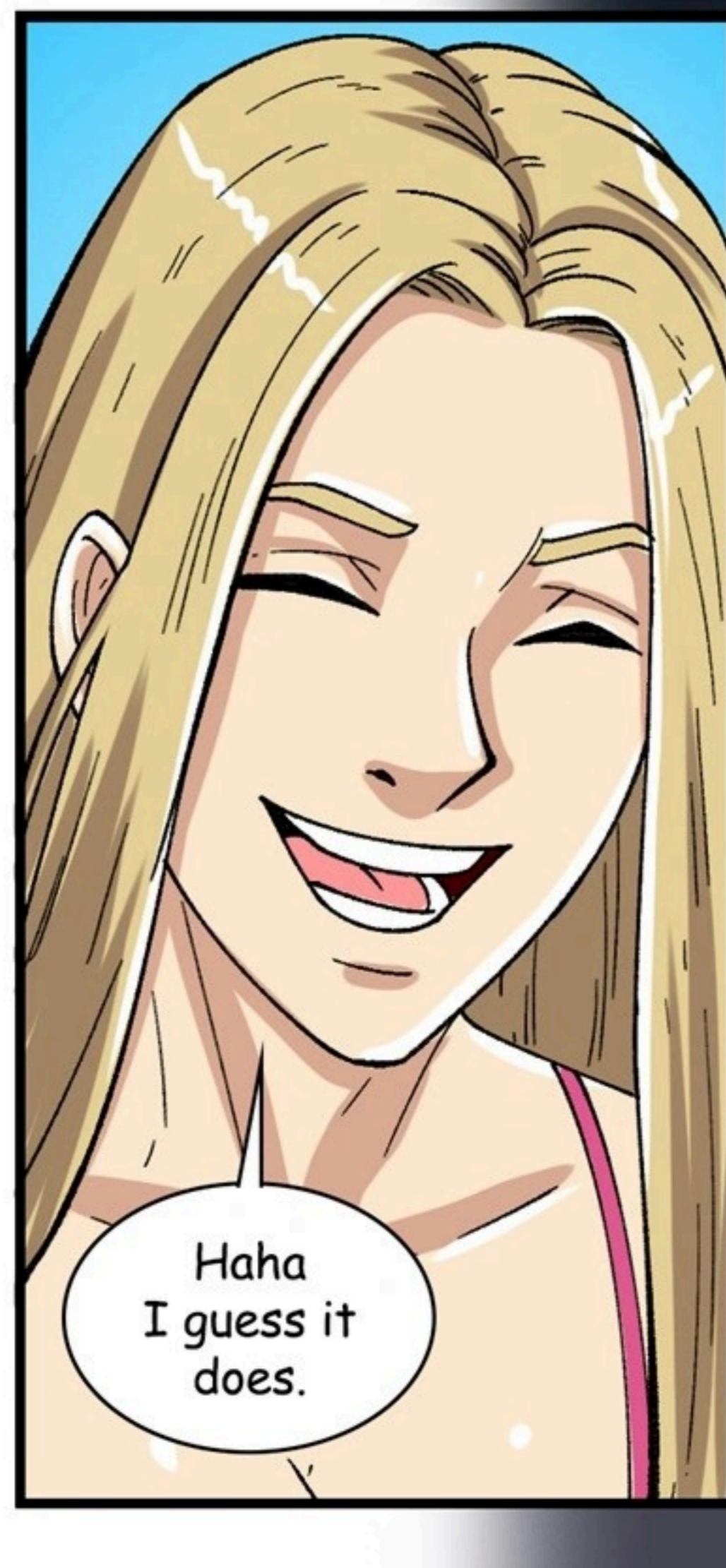
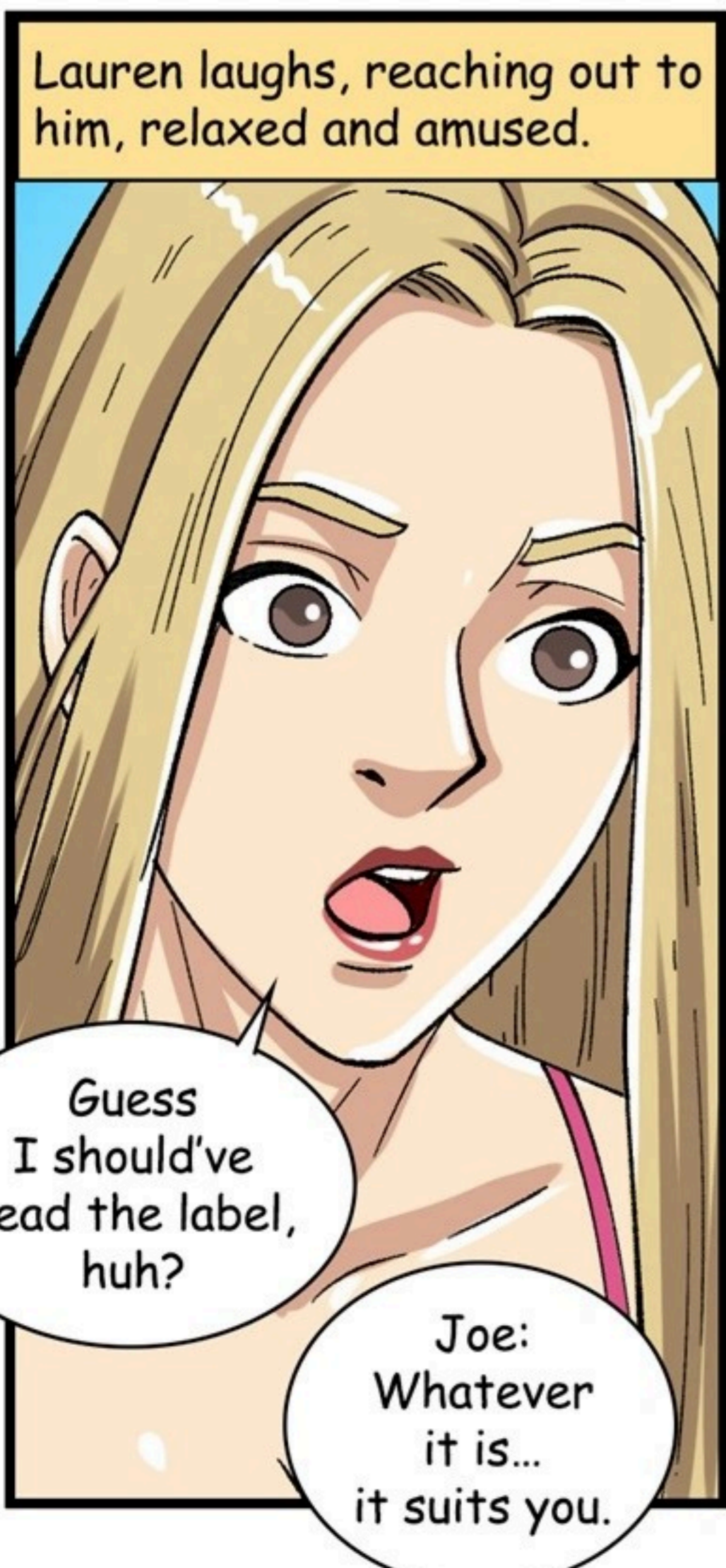
Joe: The lemonade... something's off about it.

Close on the drink; faint shimmer curling up.



Too strong?

Not even close.



Lauren laughs, reaching out to him, relaxed and amused.

Guess I should've read the label, huh?

Joe: Whatever it is... it suits you.

Haha I guess it does.

They clasp hands; she squeezes harder than she means to. Joe hides the shock, smiling through it

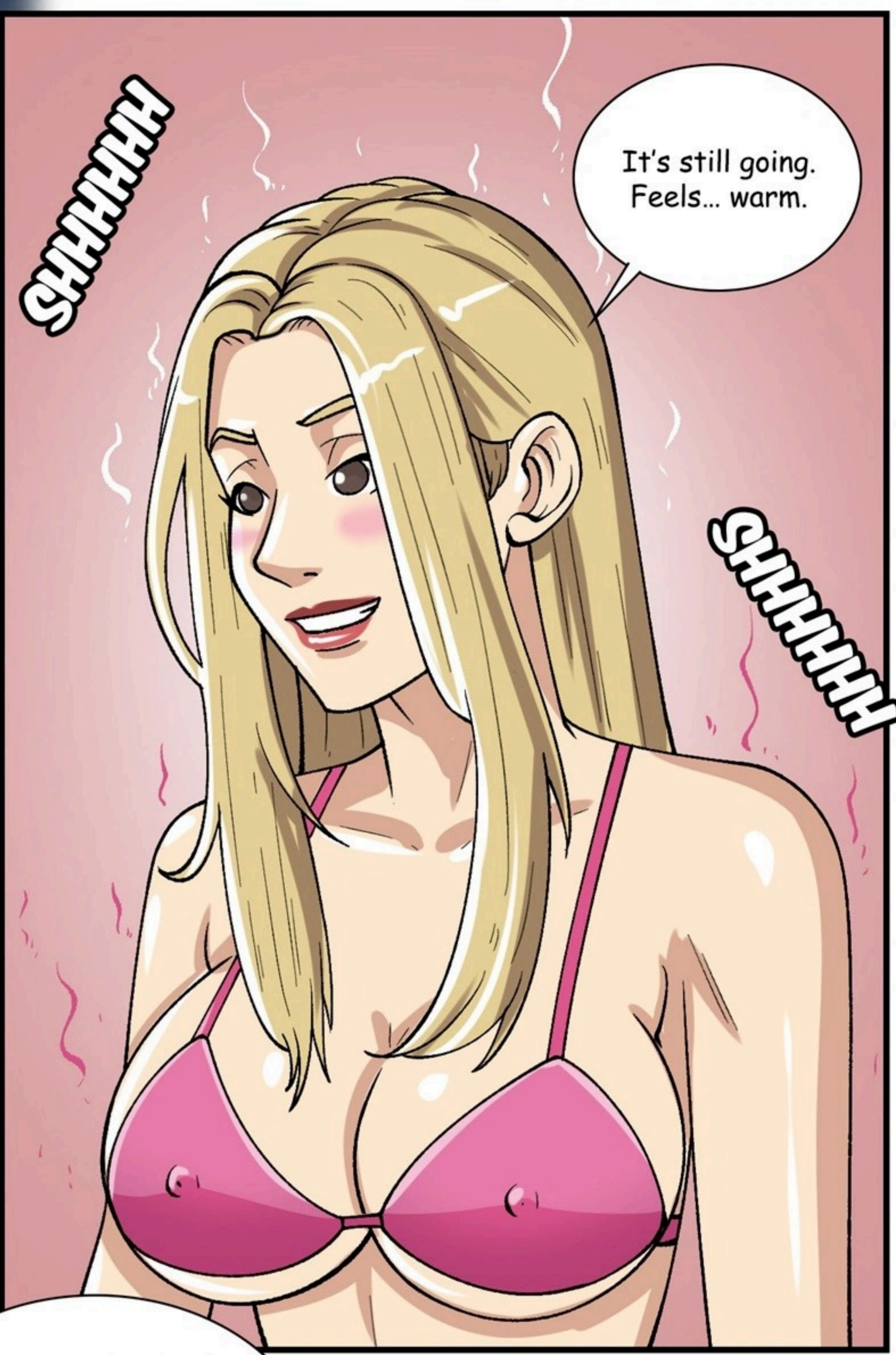


Coach always swore I needed another ten pounds of muscle to dominate the league...

...looks like the universe just overnight shipped it.

So tell me what you're seeing right now, Joe. Be honest.

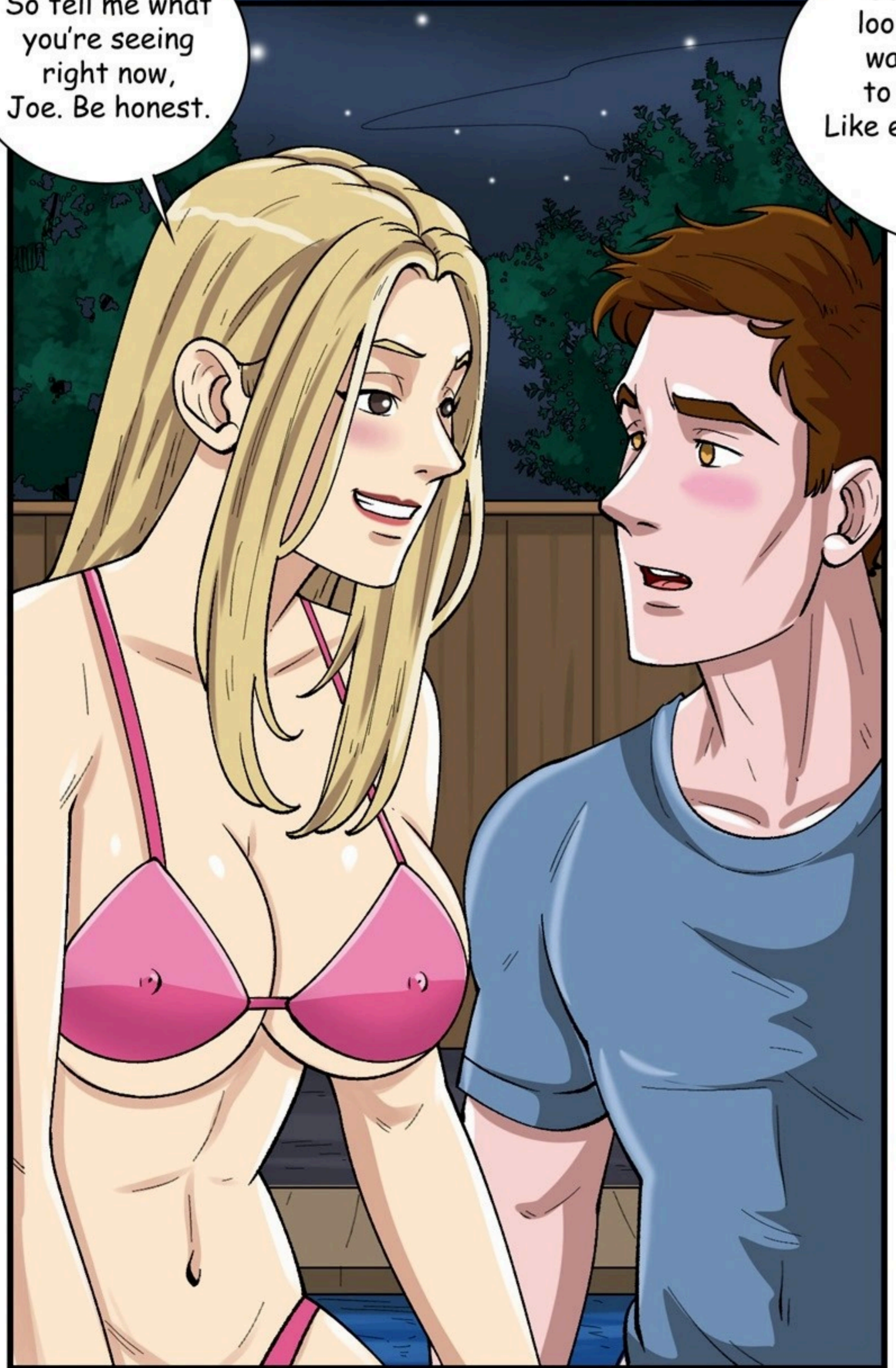
Someone who finally looks exactly how she was always supposed to feel on the inside. Like every inch of you just decided to stop holding back.



It's still going. Feels... warm.

SHHHHHH

SHHHHHH



Keep talking like that and I won't be the only one who can't sit still tonight



ZAP



Oh... it's coming again—

Joe: Lauren... you're fucking unreal.

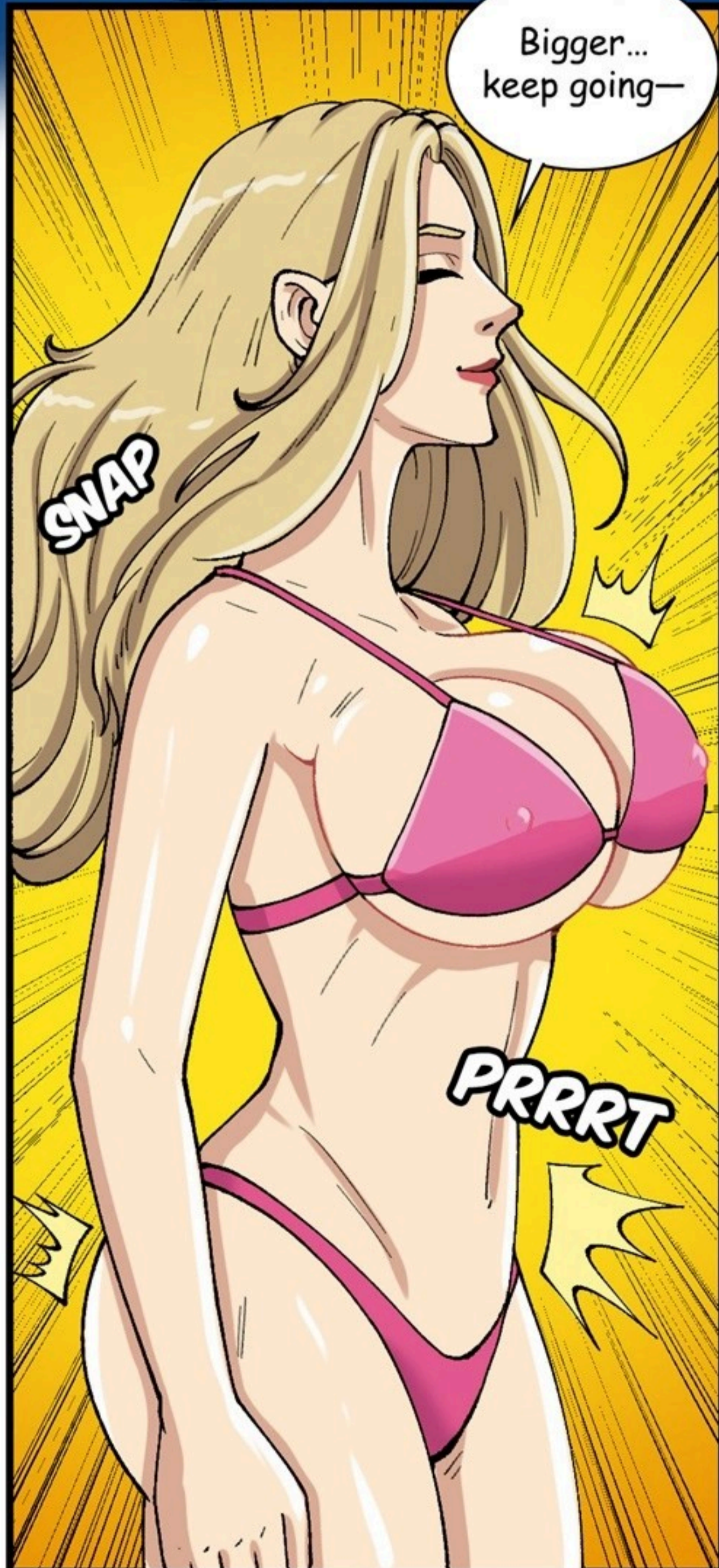


Fuck— yes—

TIK

TIK

SKRRCH



Bigger... keep going—

SNAP

PRRRT



There she is.

SNAP

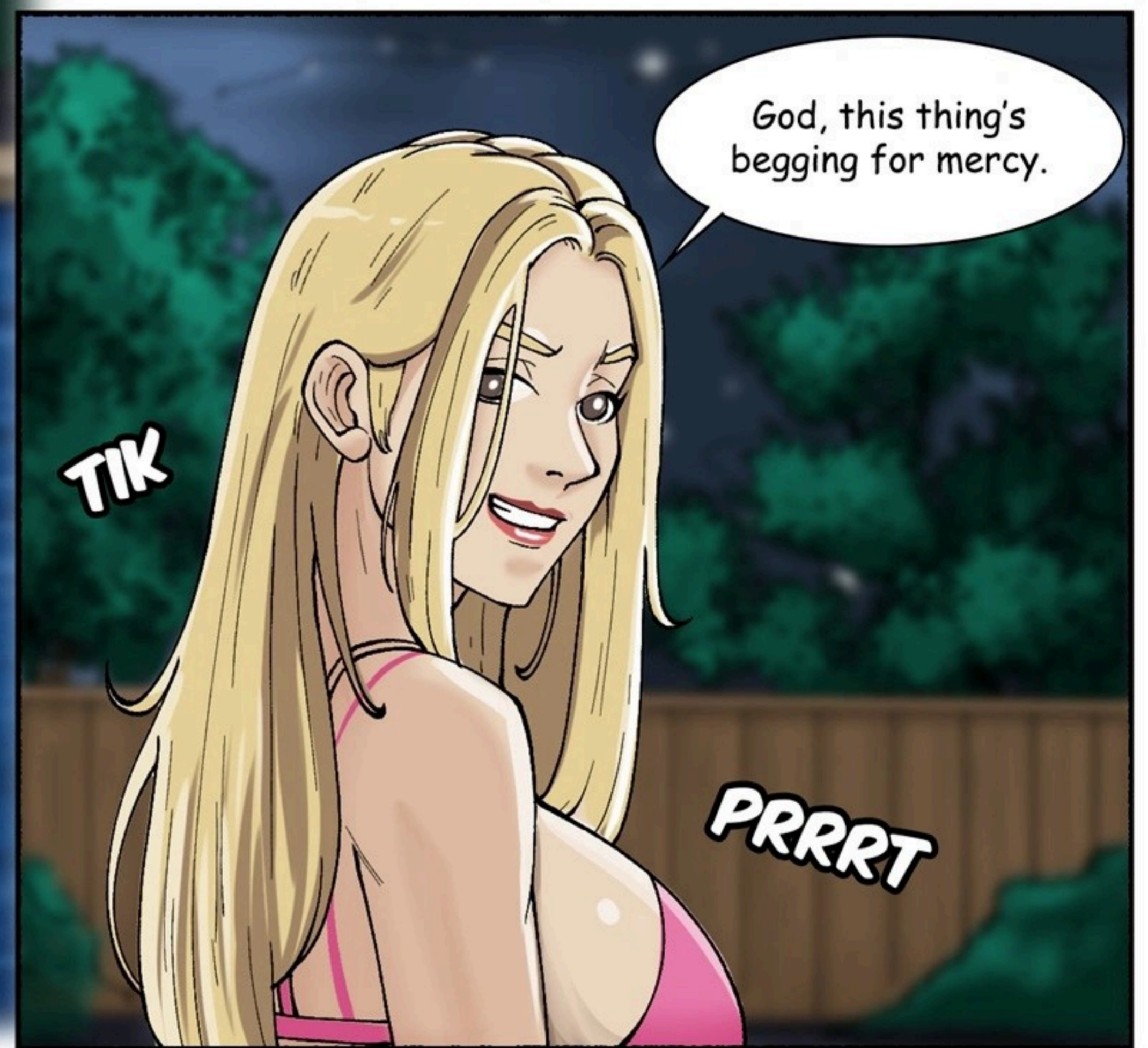
BOOM



...Is that really me in there?



That's the you who was always waiting for permission to show up.



God, this thing's begging for mercy.

TIK

PRRRT

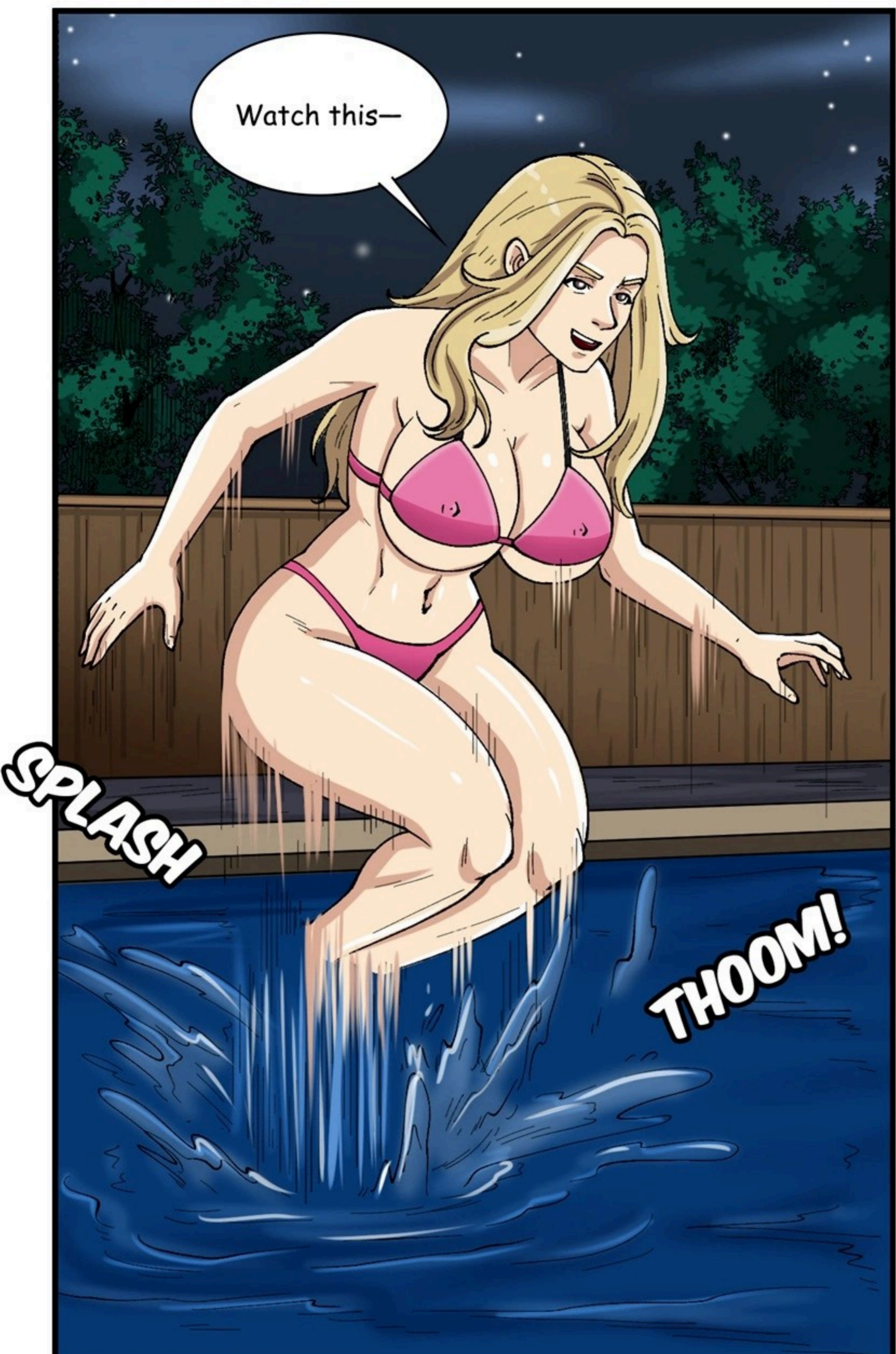


You owe me a new bikini, Joe. Something with... reinforced engineering.



Or we just stop buying bikinis that think they can win against you.

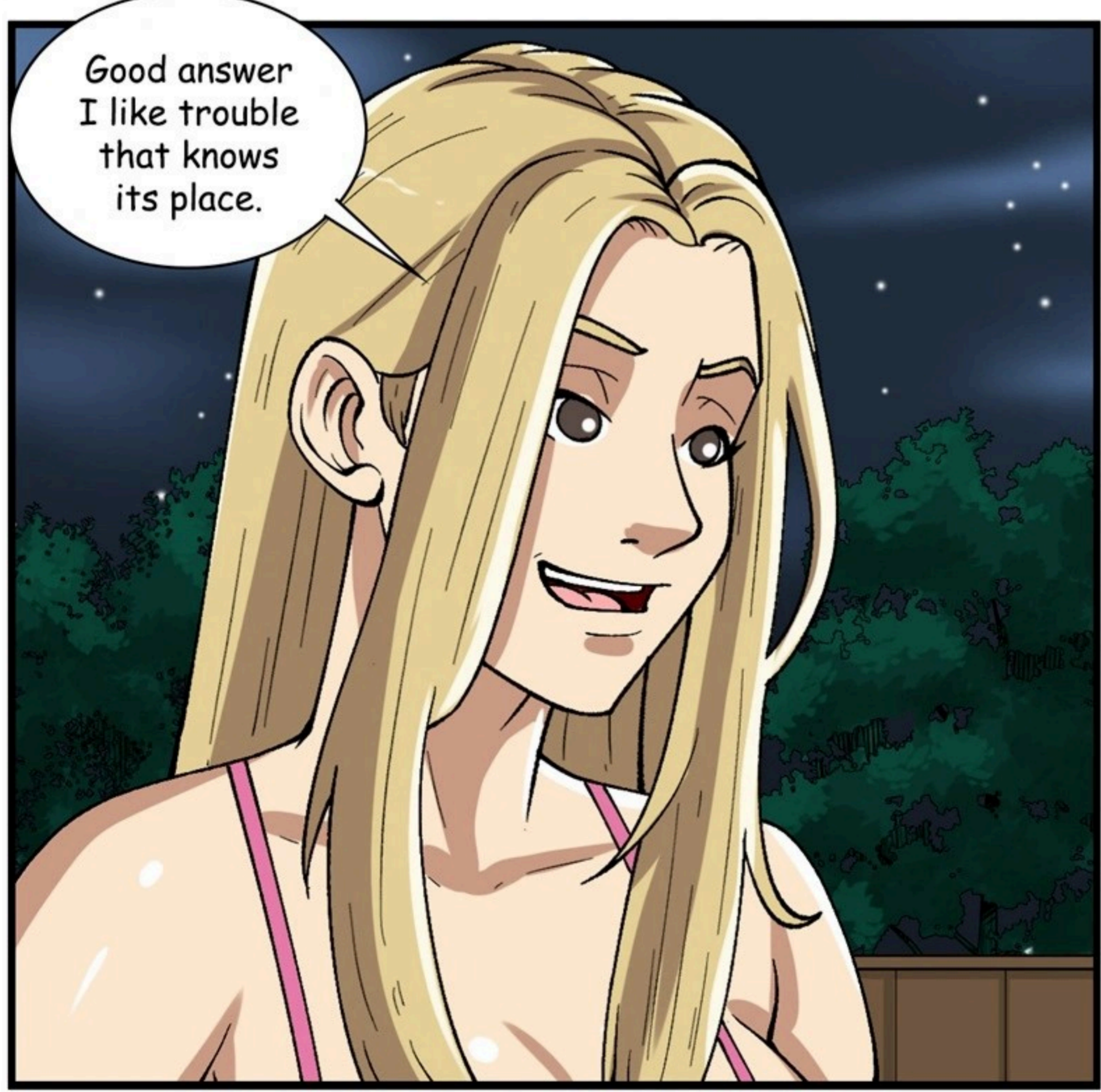
Deal. But first... help me lose this one.



Watch this—

SPLASH

THOOM!

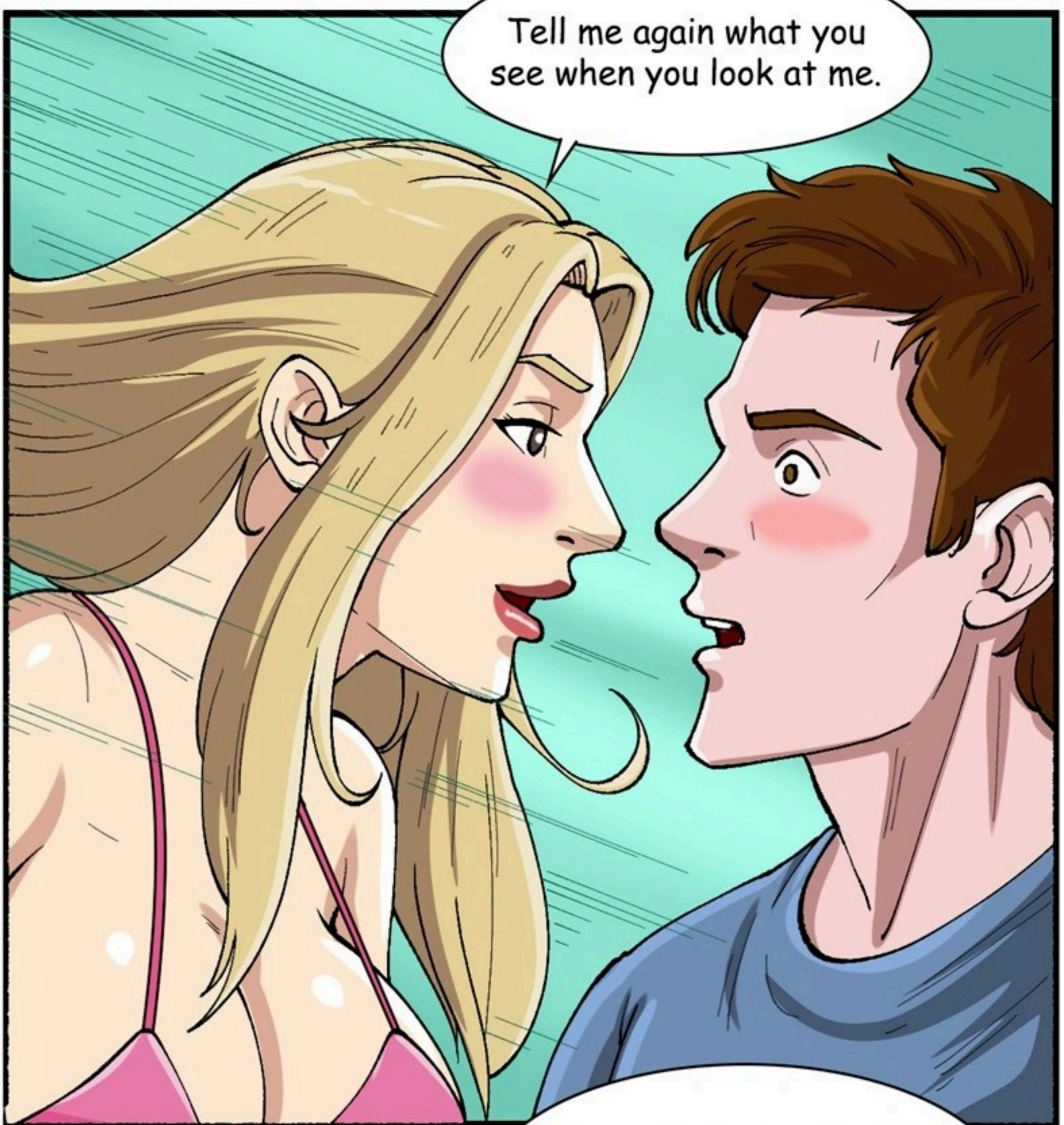


Good answer
I like trouble
that knows
its place.



Mmm...
right there.

SHIVER...



Tell me again what you
see when you
look at me.



Strength that makes the
air feel thin. Grace
that could break me and
still feel like mercy.



You're glowing
again

Only when
you touch
me like you
mean it.



BANG

Mike:
Yo, food's ready—
where the hell
did every—!

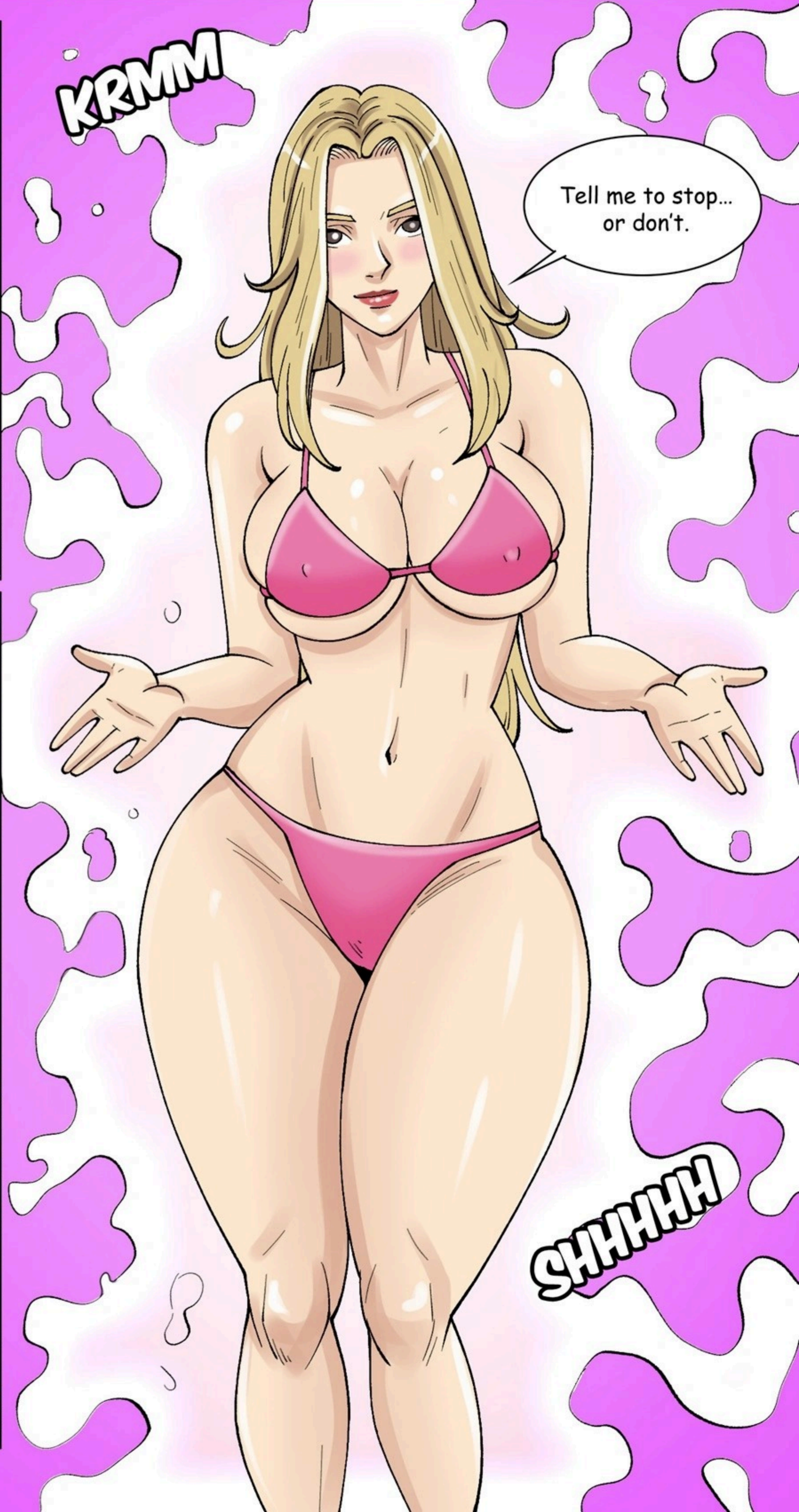


Shit...
they're coming.



Maybe
I want you
to watch me
decide

Let them
look



KRMM

Tell me to stop...
or don't.

SHHHHH



One last push...
just for you.



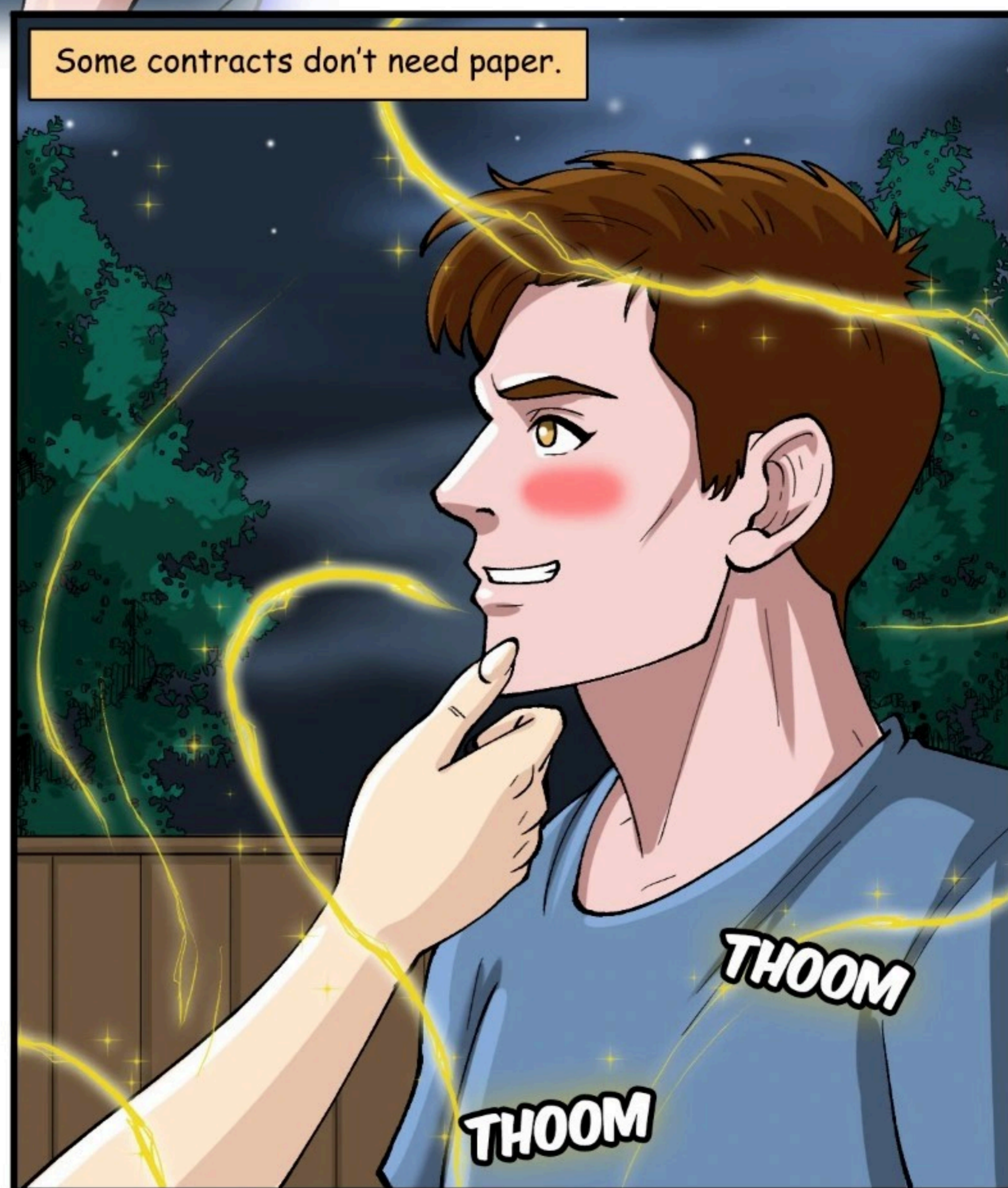
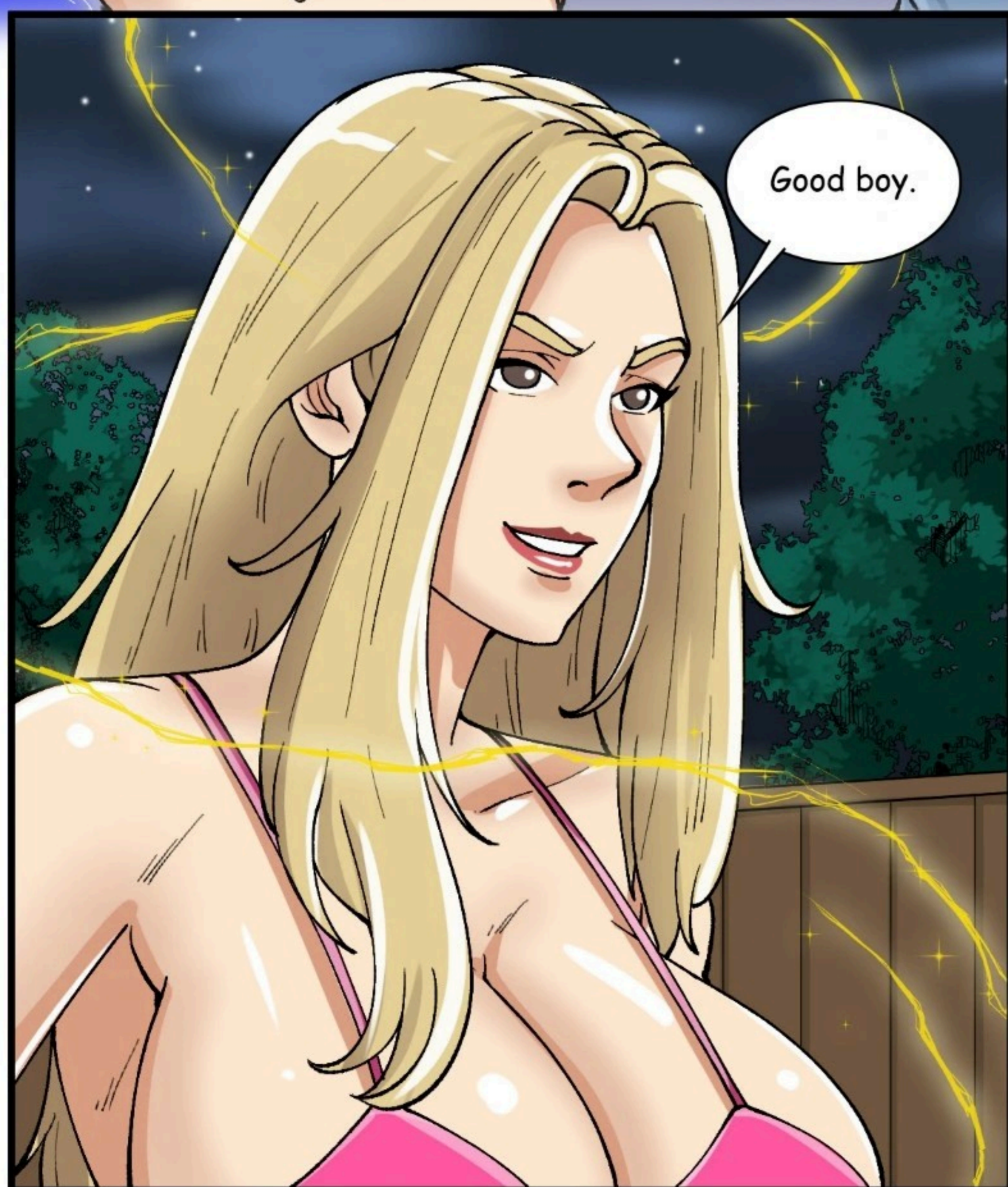
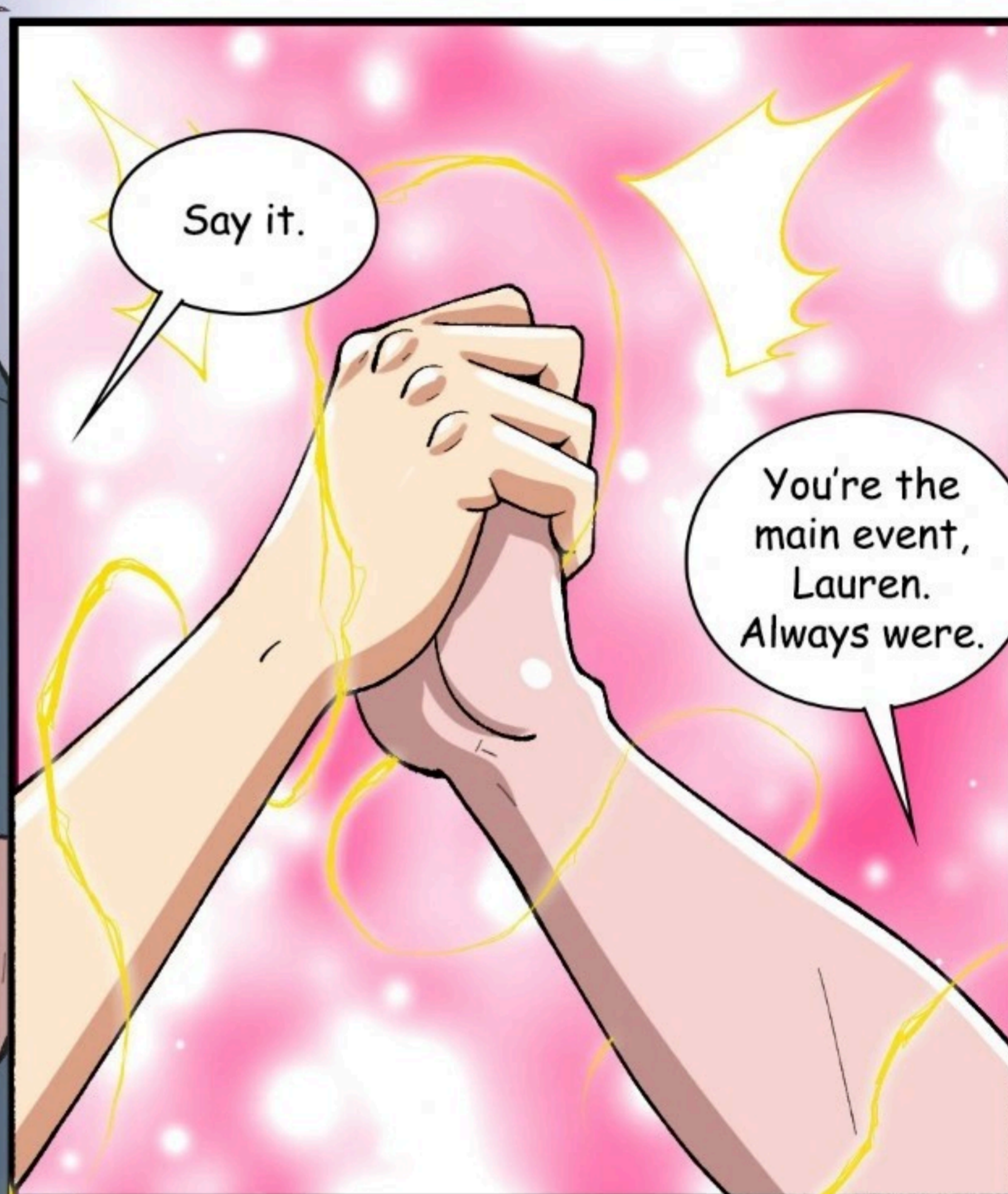
This... is the me
I was always meant
to become.

f this is a dream, wake me
up tomorrow.
If it isn't...
...then the world just got a
new queen tonight.

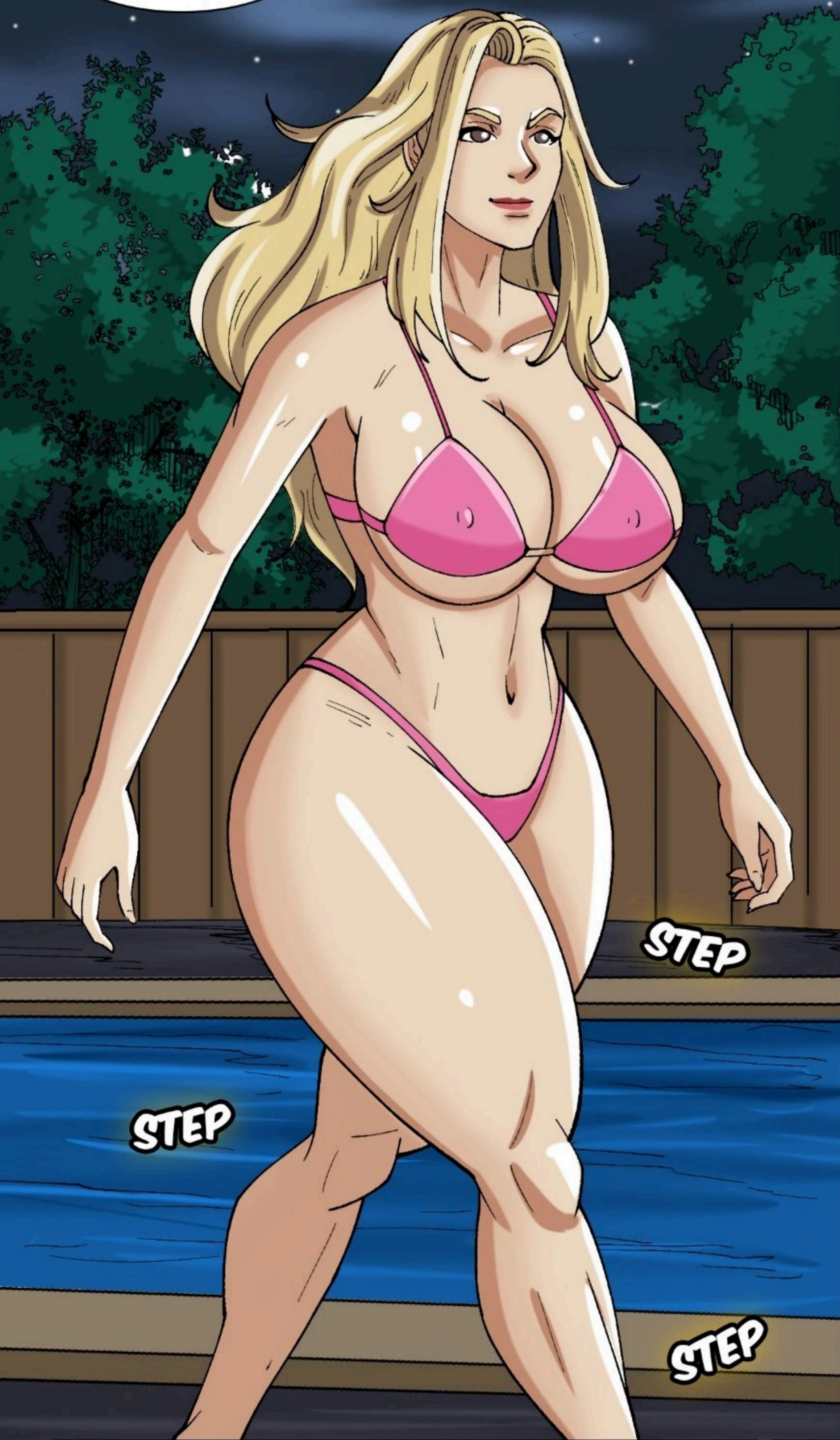
BOING-G-G

BWOOOMP

Joe:
Long live
the queen.



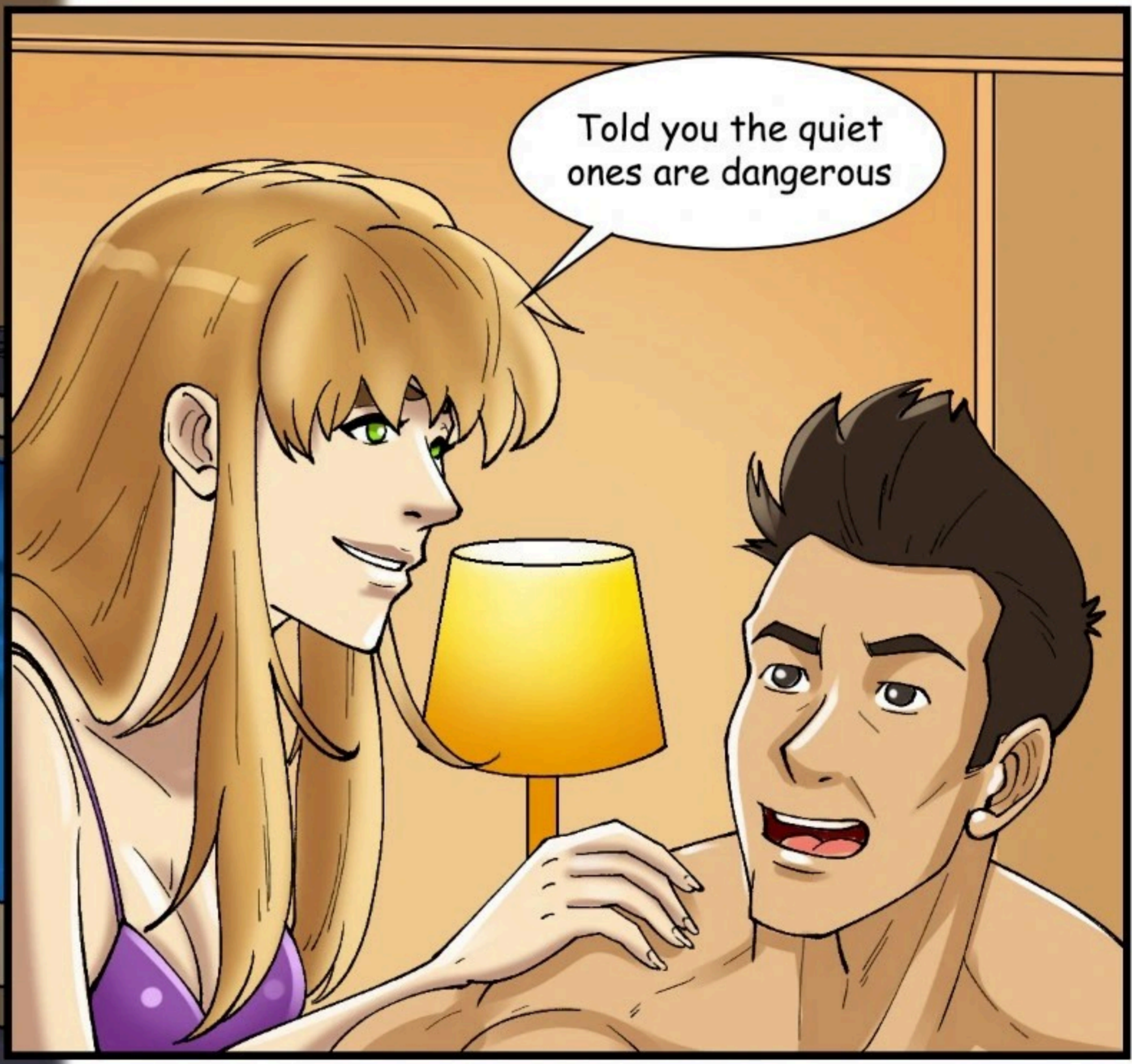
Joe:
Jesus, Lauren...
you own gravity now.



Bro... did you
SEE that?!
Is that... Lauren?!



Told you the quiet
ones are dangerous

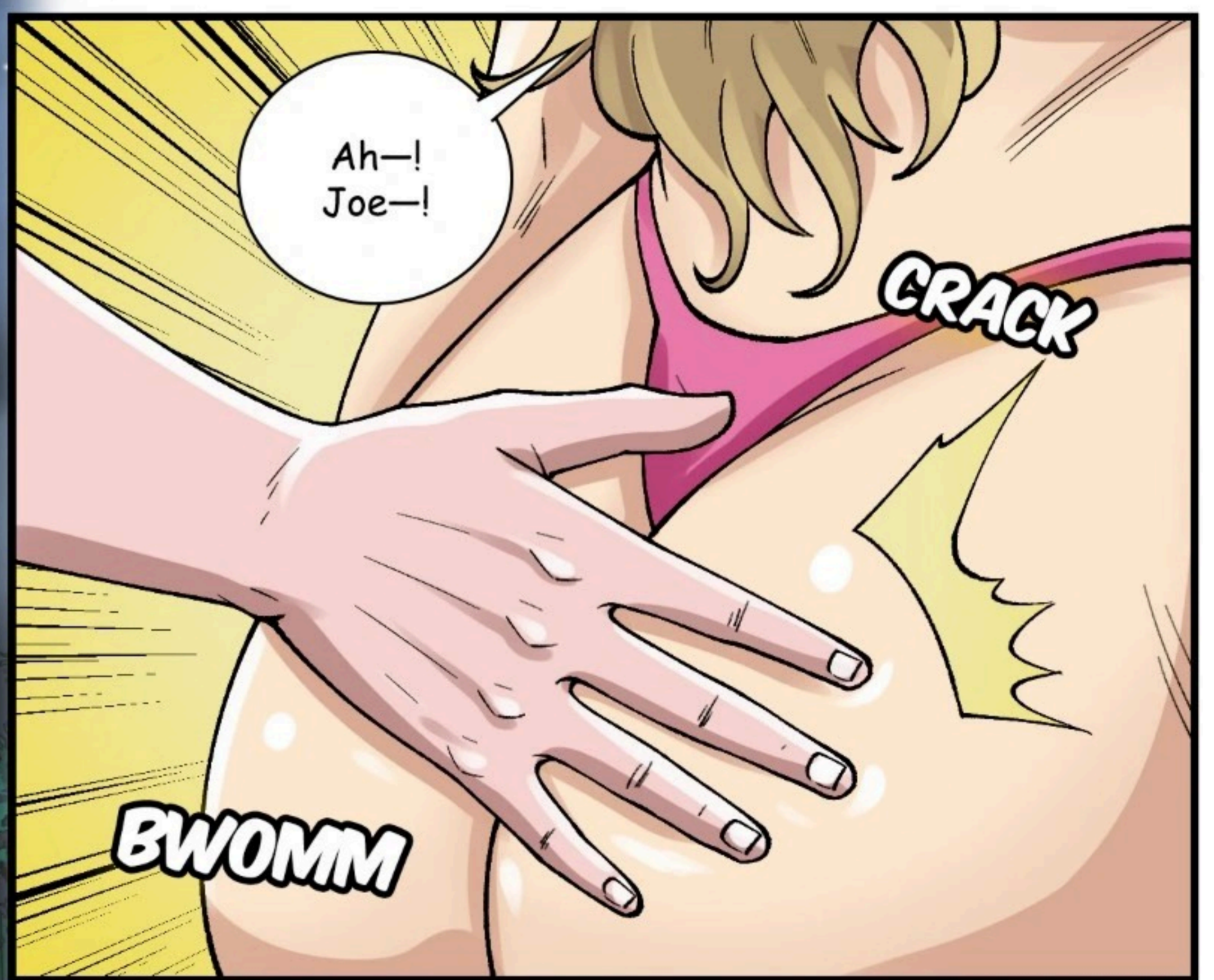
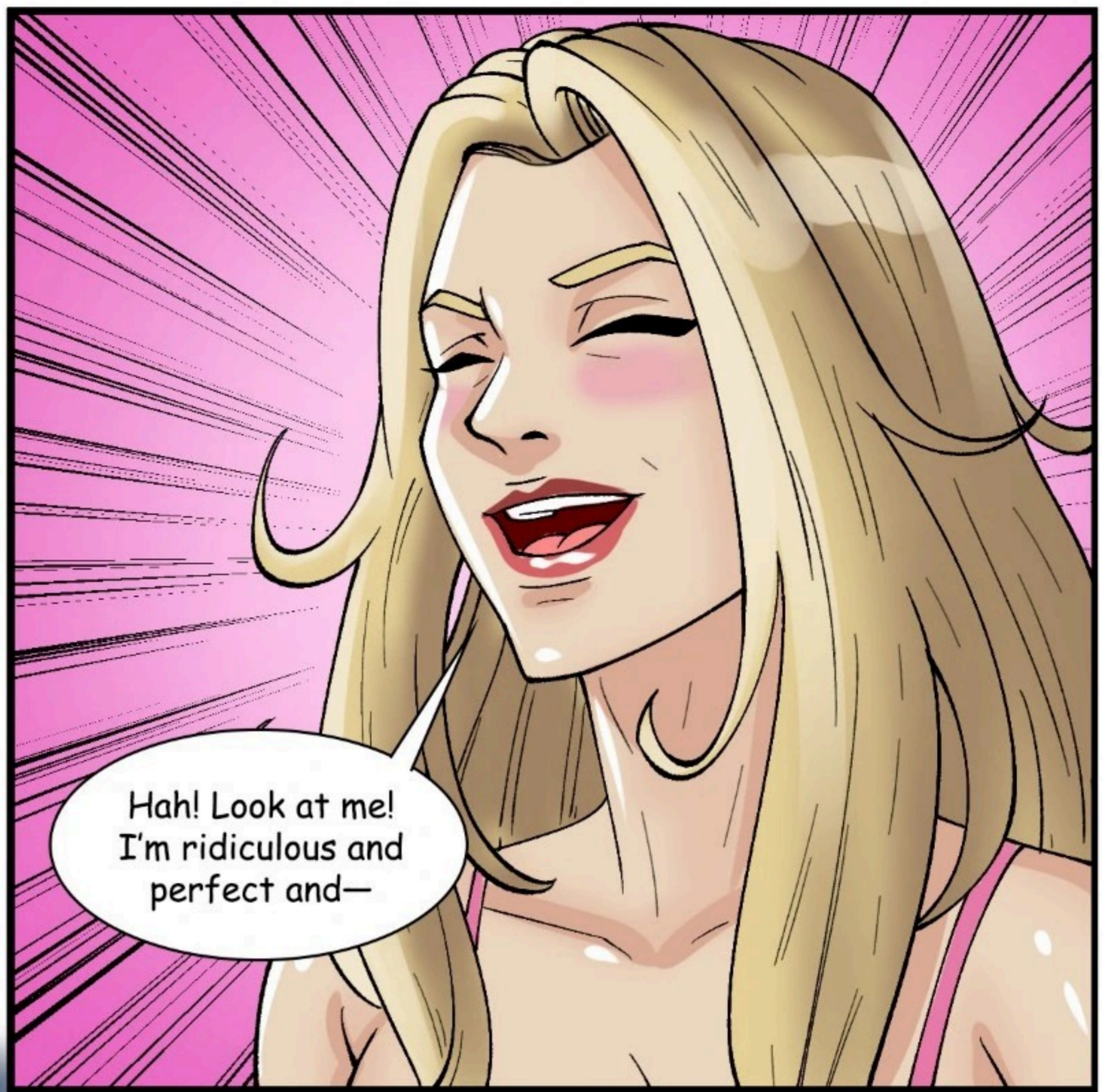


She is so tall and
gorgeous now!



They can stare all
they want. I'm only
walking for an audience of
one tonight.







Harder... don't be gentle with what's yours.



Nnh— yes—!

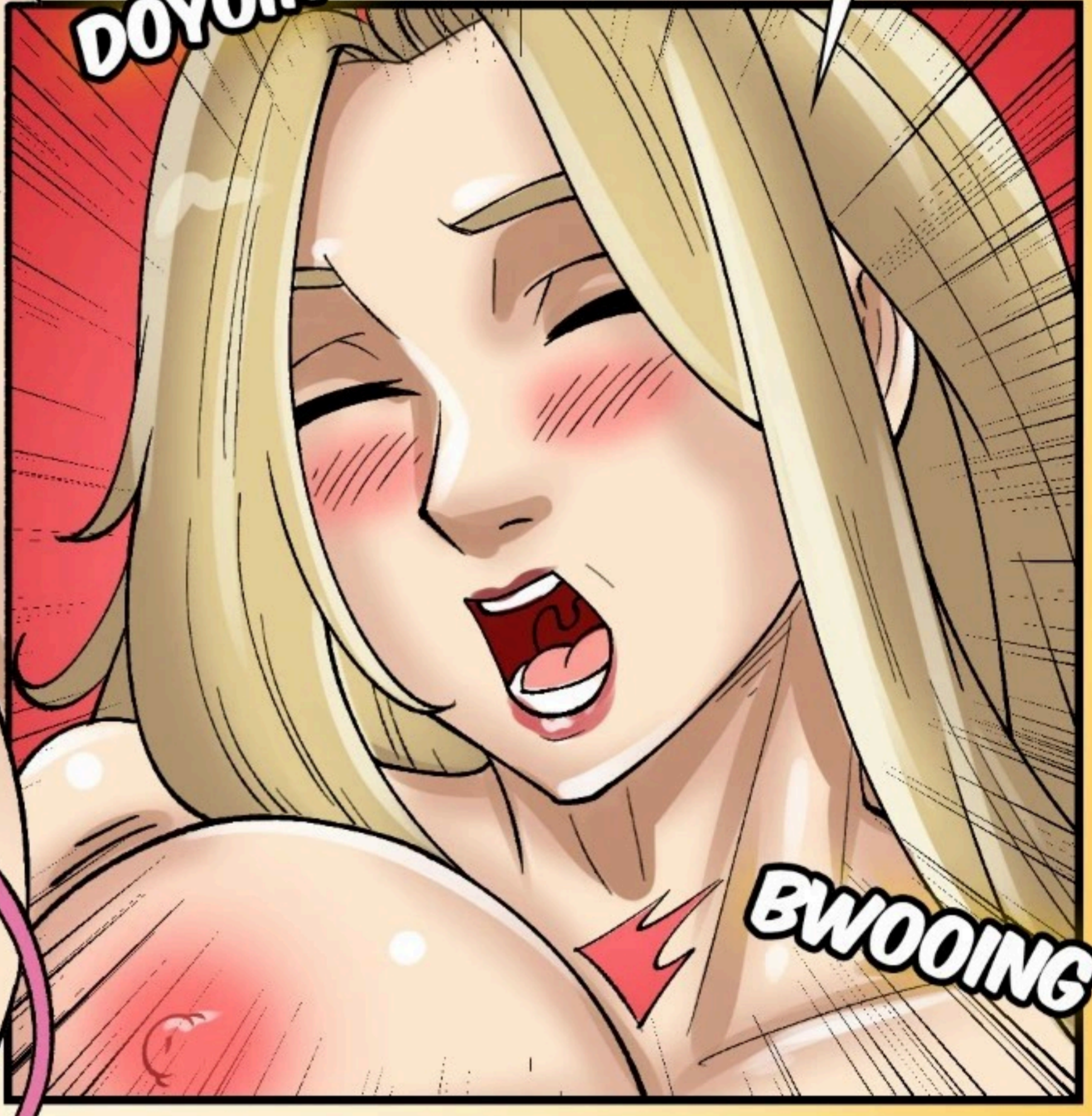


SNAP

SNAP

Finally...

F-fuck... look what you do to me—



DOYOING

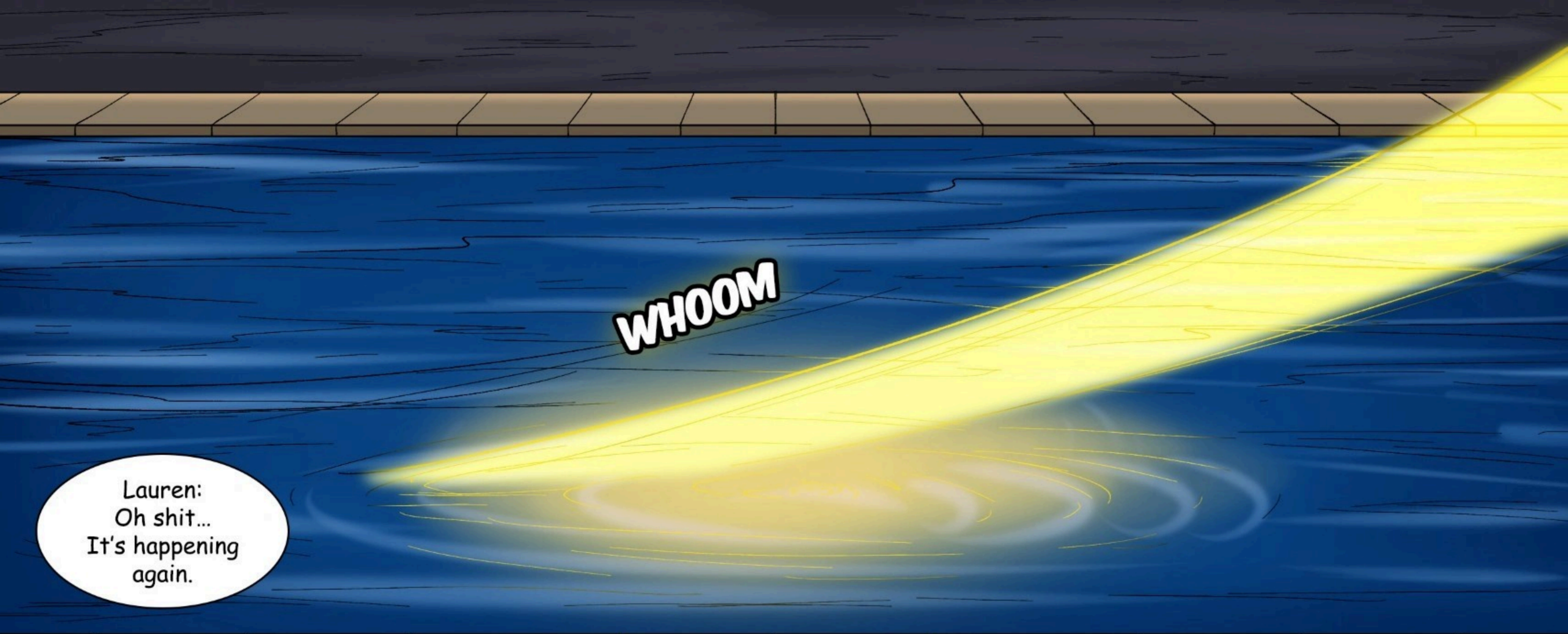
BWOOING



I'm never letting go... never...

FWOOMP

RRRRIP



WHOOM

Lauren:
Oh shit...
It's happening
again.



Okay, nobody
go outside
for like...
ten minutes.

Make it twenty.
Dude's gonna
need oxygen.



You doing okay
down there, Joey?

I'm literally seeing
God right now,
so yeah.



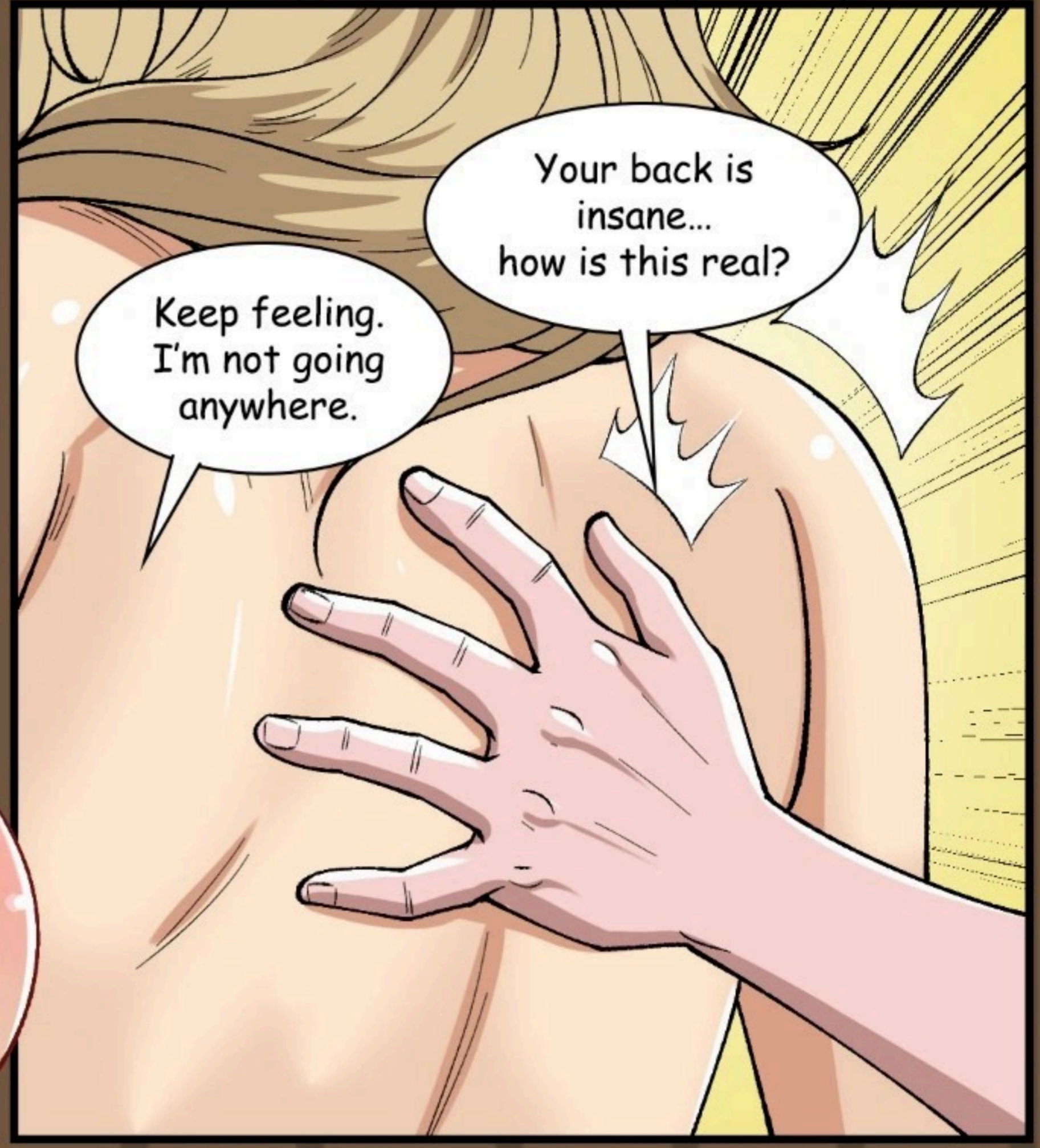
Lauren, I swear
if you keep
doing that
I'm gonna—

Gonna what?
Use your words,
baby



Yes ma'am, fuck—

Hands stay up here, got it?



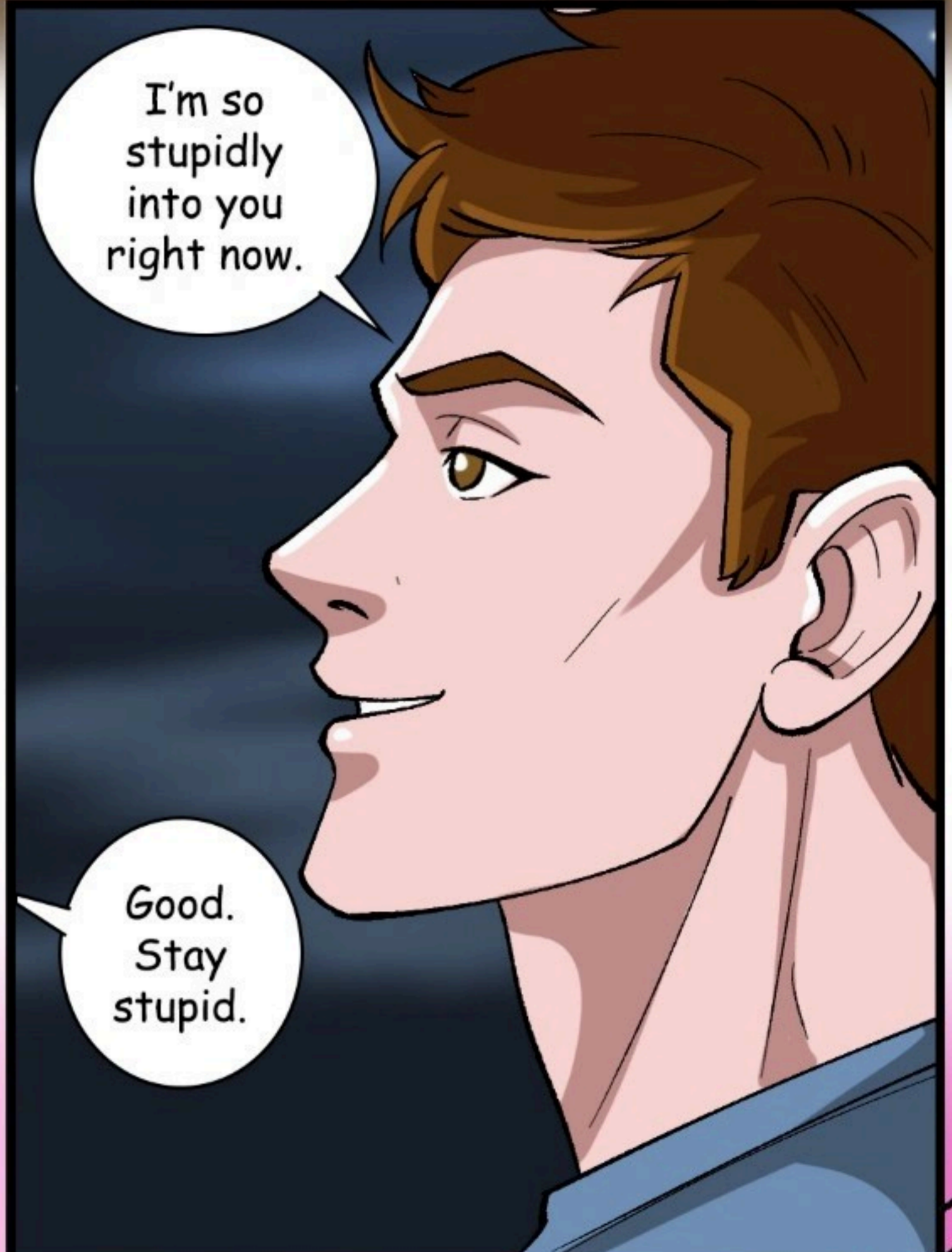
Keep feeling. I'm not going anywhere.

Your back is insane... how is this real?



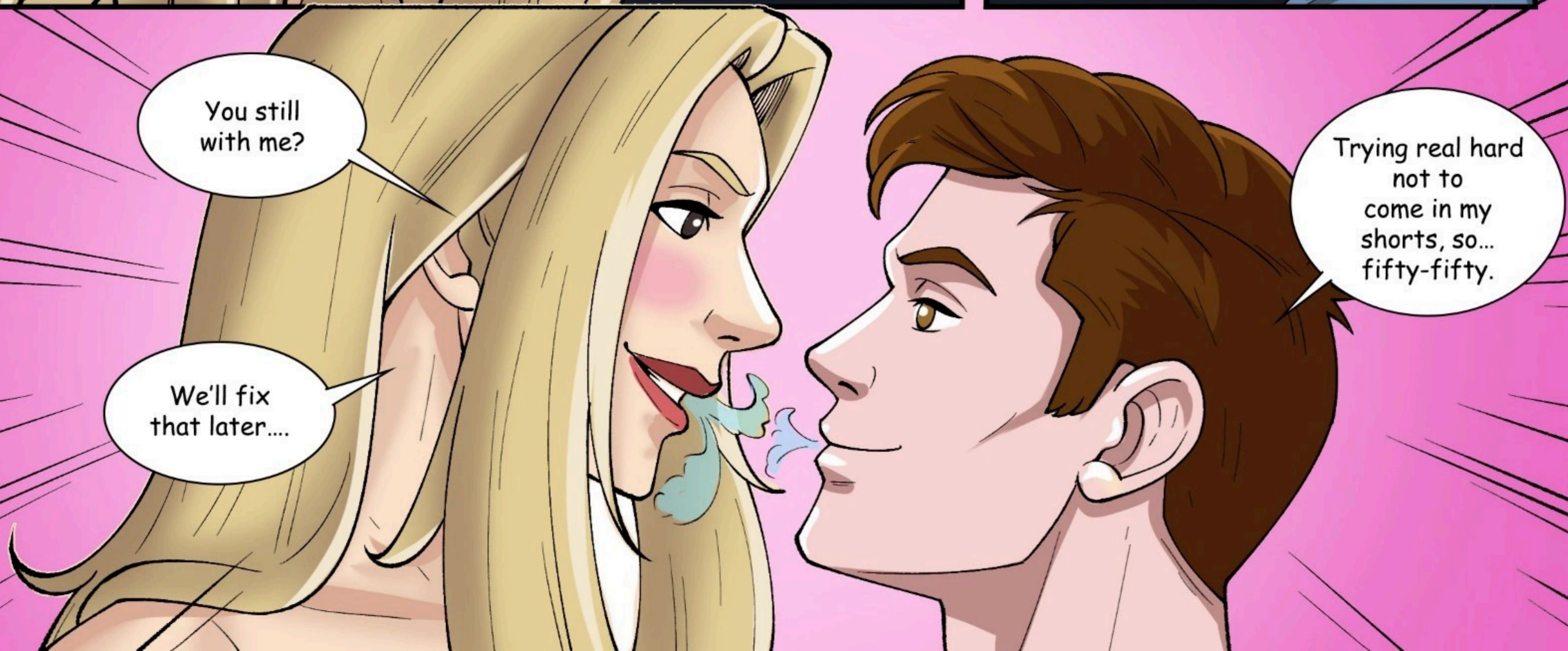
You're shaking.

Yeah, because you're literally the hottest thing that's ever happened to me.



I'm so stupidly into you right now.

Good. Stay stupid.



You still with me?

We'll fix that later....

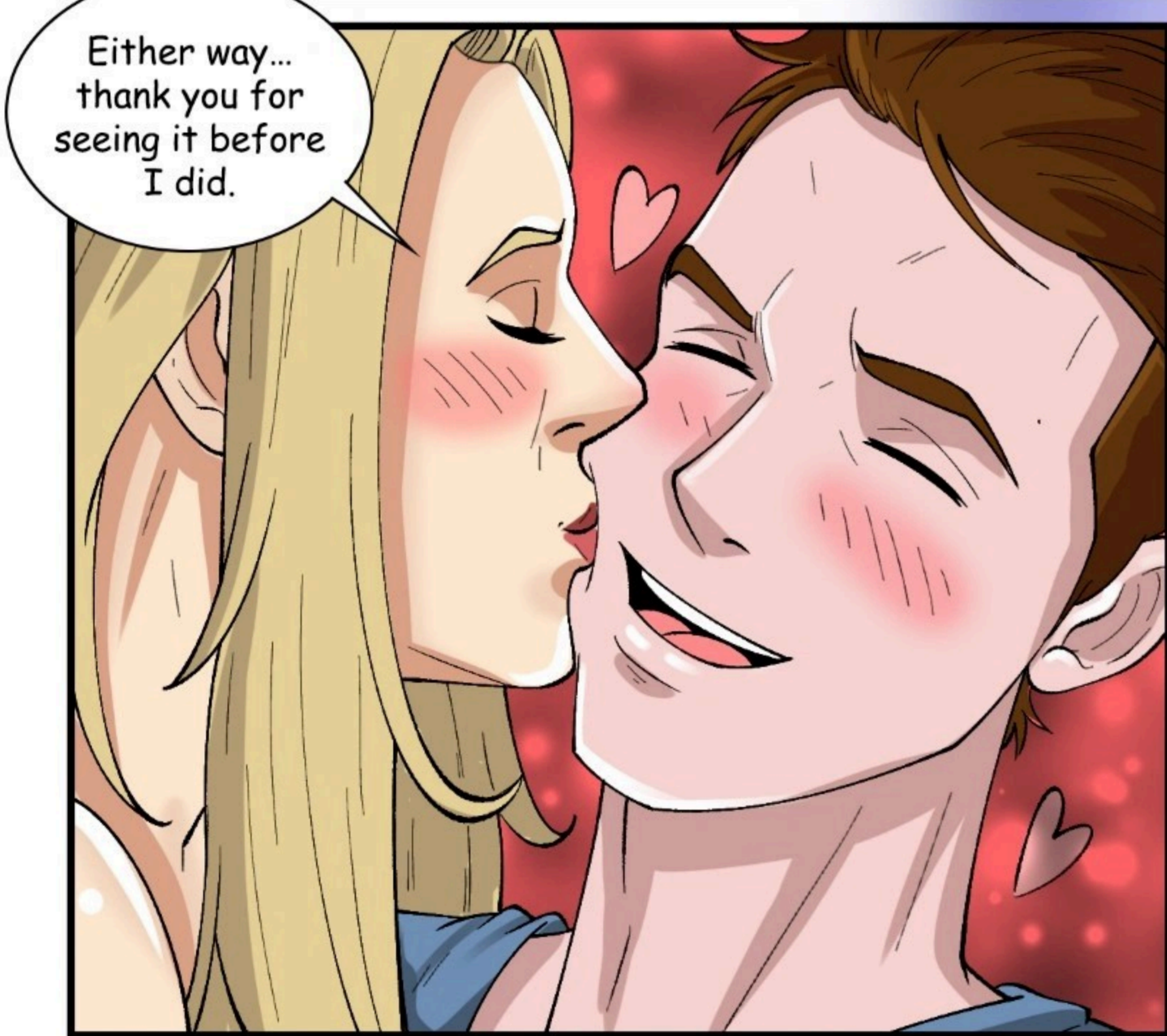
Trying real hard not to come in my shorts, so... fifty-fifty.



If this all disappears tomorrow morning, I'm still walking outta here knowing I finally felt like me for once.

And if it doesn't disappear?

Then I guess the rest of the planet's gotta catch up.



Either way... thank you for seeing it before I did.



Think they're gonna freak when we walk in?

They're gonna need therapy.



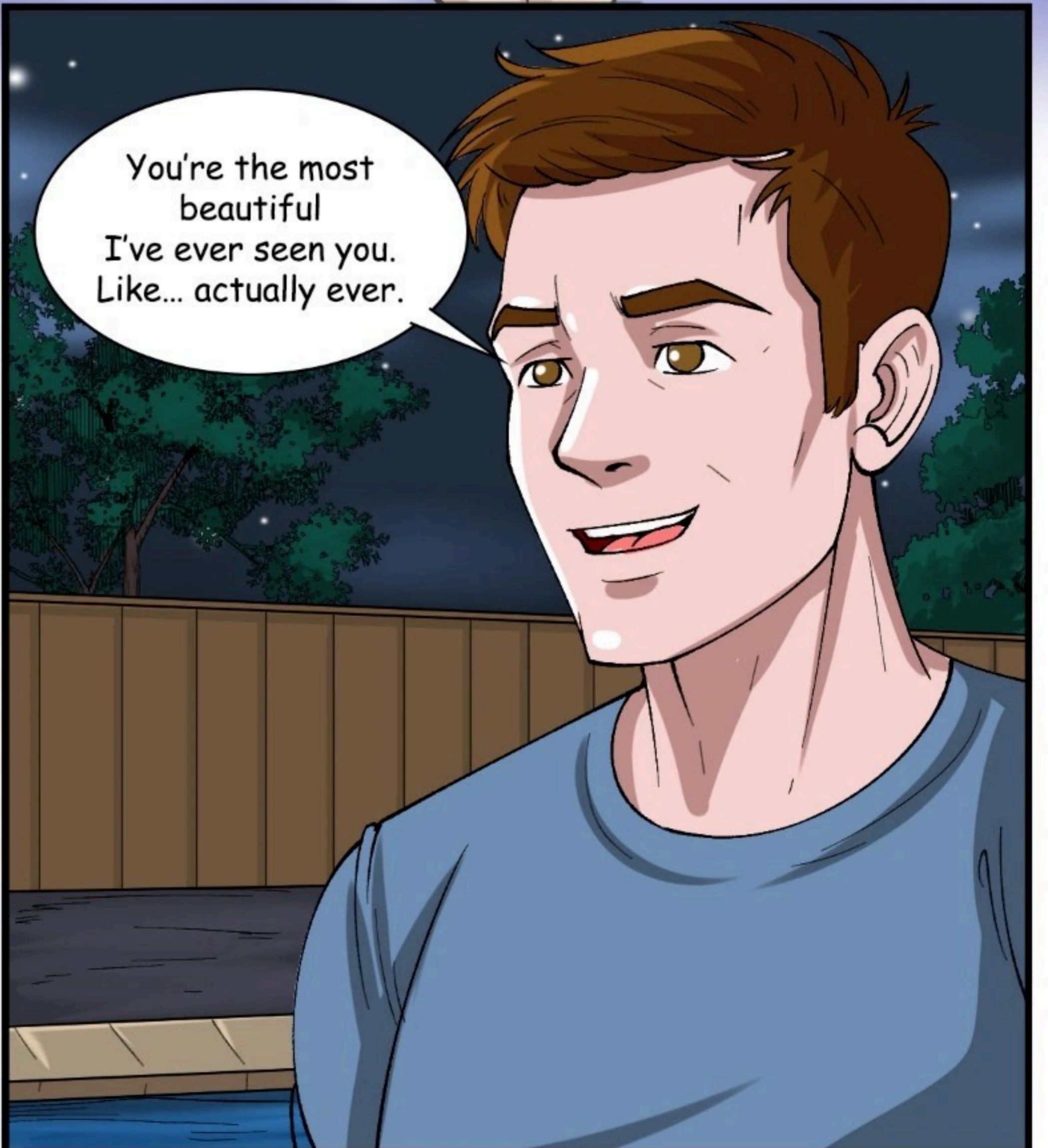
Oh my god it's still going— look at this thing!

TIK

TIK

SHRRMP

I'm looking, I'm looking—



You're the most beautiful I've ever seen you. Like... actually ever.



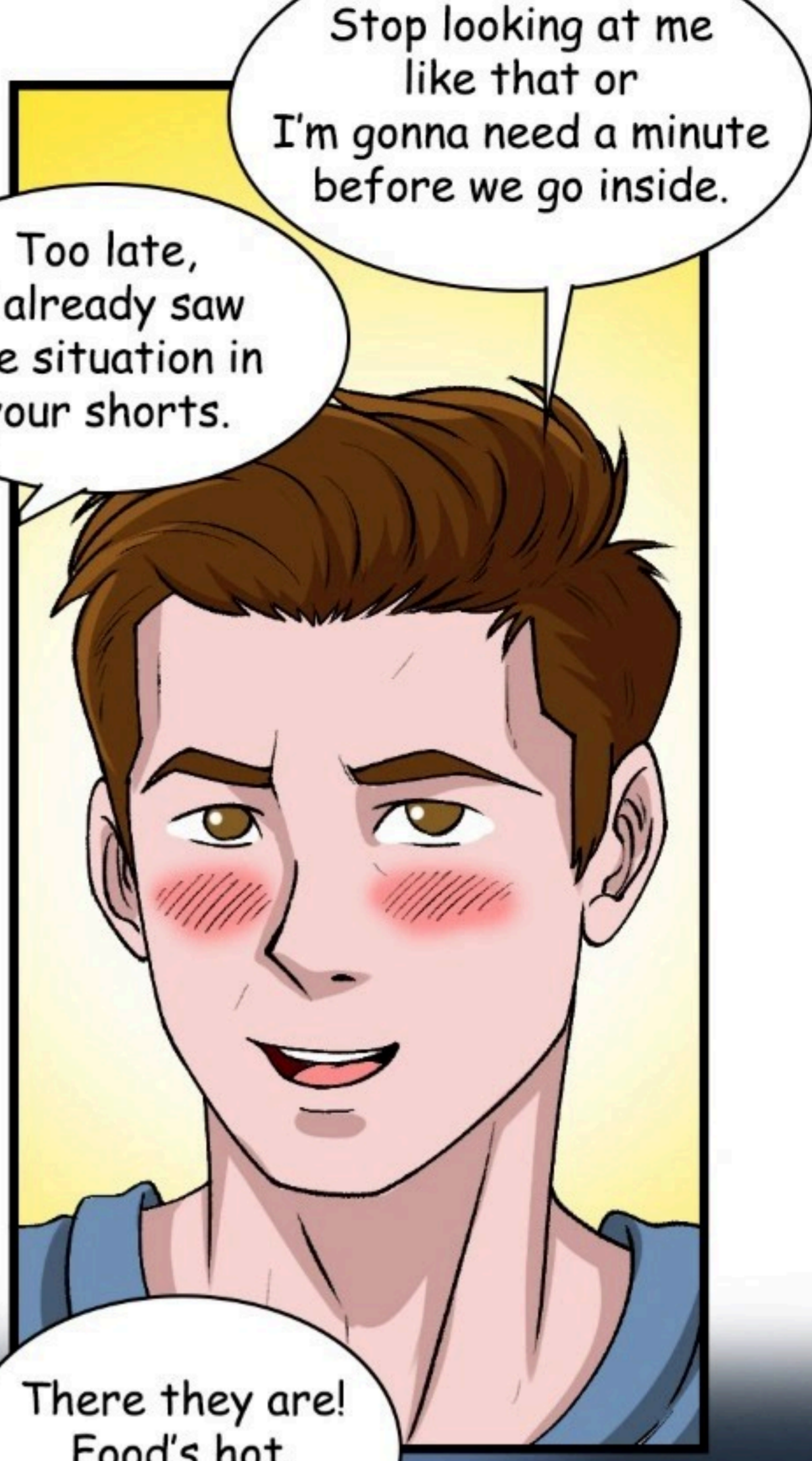
This thing is basically a crop top on me now.

I'm not complaining.



Guess that's as decent as it's getting.

You look like a gym thirst-trap, and I'm very okay with it.



Too late, I already saw the situation in your shorts.

Stop looking at me like that or I'm gonna need a minute before we go inside.

There they are! Food's hot, details later.



Ready for the interrogation?

As long as you do the talking. I'm still buffering.



We saved you the crispy ones, superwoman.

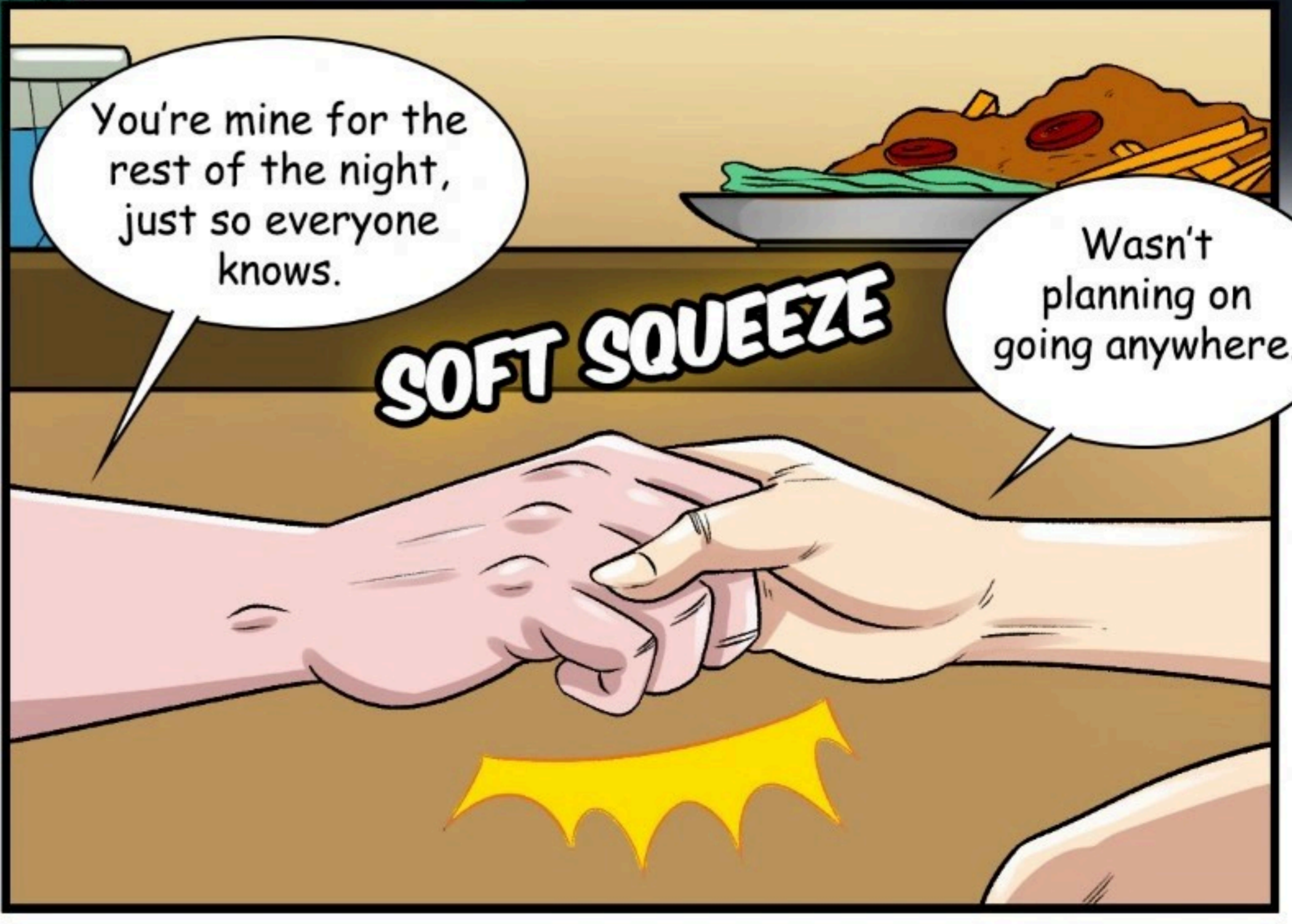


Mike: You good, bro? You look like you just met God and he bench-pressed you.

Pretty much.



So yeah, long story short: lemonade was spiked with steroids from Zeus or something. We cool?



You're mine for the rest of the night, just so everyone knows.

SOFT SQUEEZE

Wasn't planning on going anywhere.



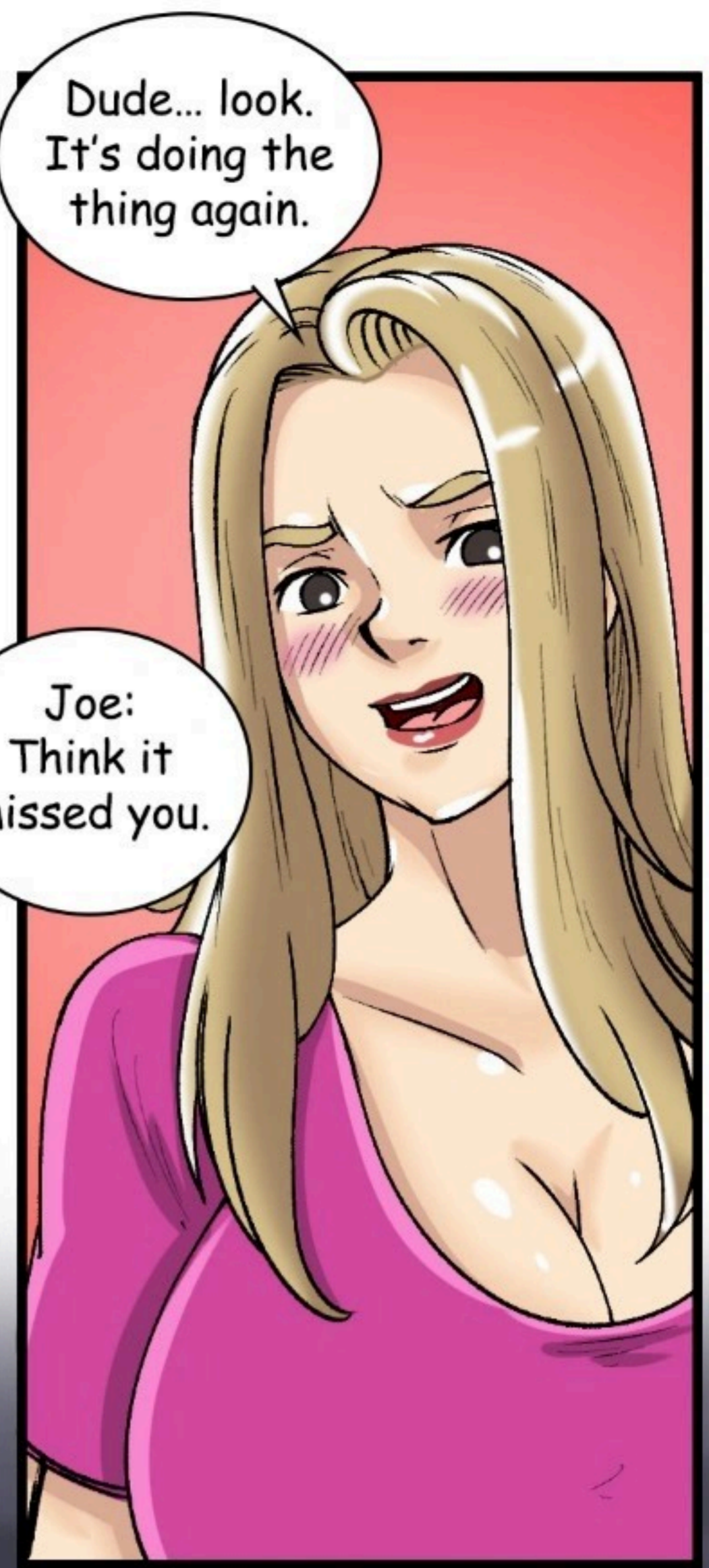
Later...

Still can't believe that actually happened.



Hey... you disappeared on me.

Just needed a second. It's a lot.



Dude... look. It's doing the thing again.

Joe: Think it missed you.



Whoa...

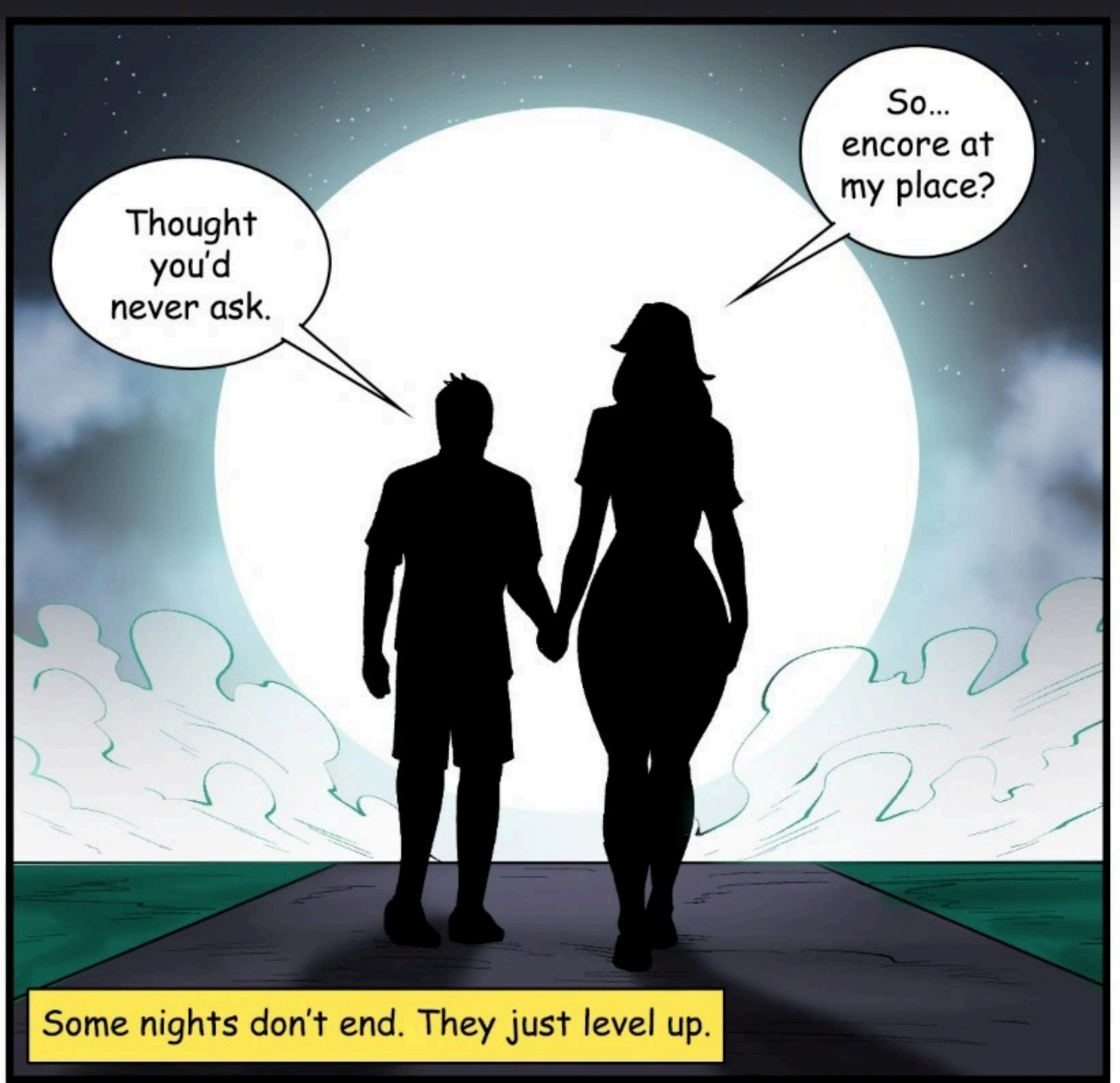
WHOOM

WHOOM



Feels like... it's staying. For real.

Good. World's not ready, but I am.



Thought you'd never ask.

So... encore at my place?

Some nights don't end. They just level up.