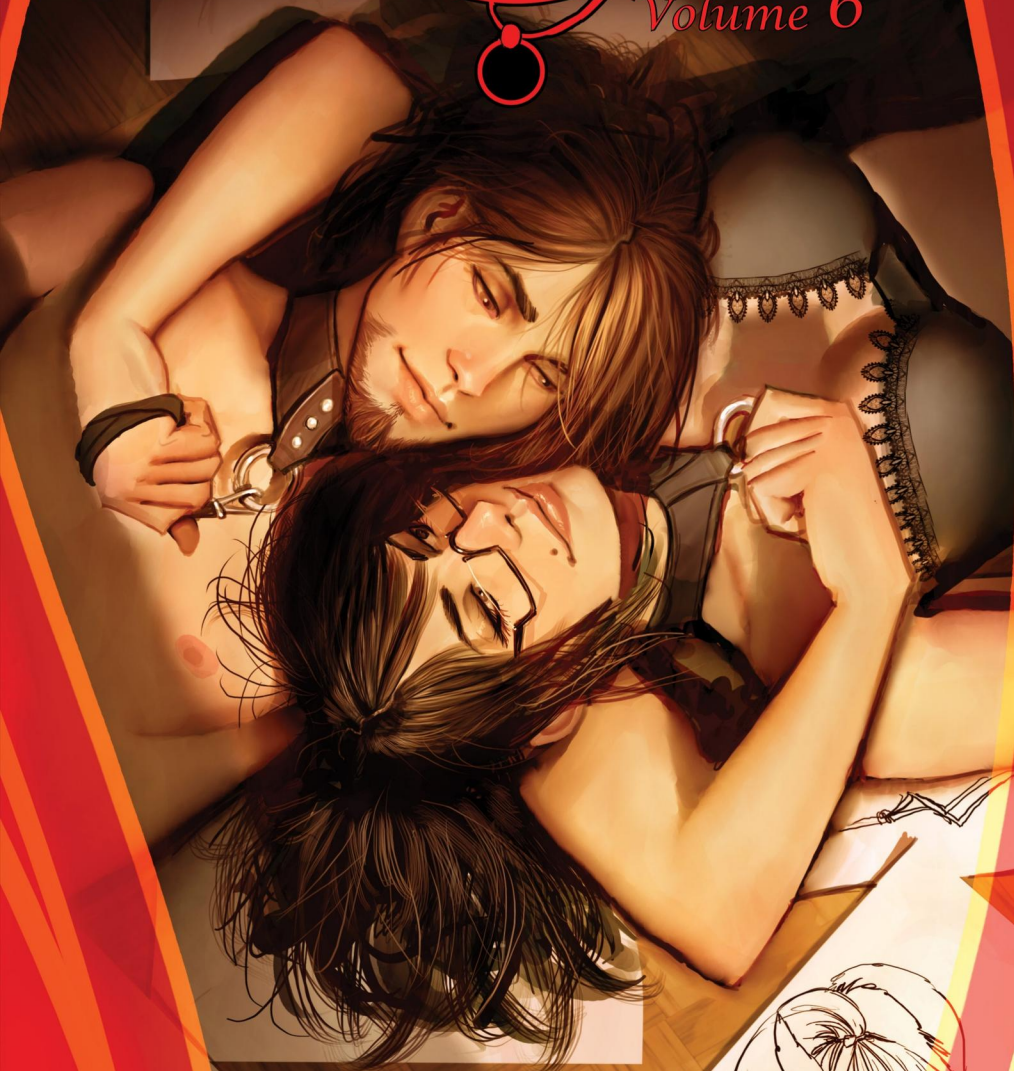


Sunstone Mercy

Volume 6



Stjepan Sejic



Top Cow Productions Presents...

Sunstone Mercy Part One

Created by Stjepan Sejic



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Top Cow Productions Presents...



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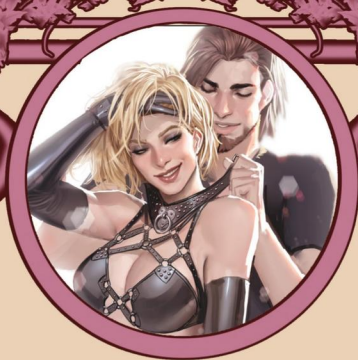
Editor



LEATHER?

INTO
SOME
WEIRD
SHIT?

CALL ALAN
S/M
BENSON!



And so it begins anew.

For a long time I considered what to write here. What do you say to an audience that is already familiar with your work on this subject?

Well, I guess, the first and most important thing would be, forget about *Sunstone*! For a moment at least. Don't spend your time with this book thinking of another. A book is its own kind of a relationship after all, and it's not cool to cheat.

Now, I know it sounds silly for the writer to ever tell this to their audience, but there is value in forgetting, if only for a little while. Forgetting makes you sink into a story without asking the dumbest of questions. That being:

How does *Mercy* compare to...

I can answer that question before it's even finished.

It doesn't.

It won't compare until the storyline is finished and you can competently see each story for what they are. Instead I ask you to forget, and I hope for you to enjoy. For the book you have in your hands right now is the beginning of a journey, and we have merely exited the front doors. *Sunstone*'s powerful moments and its ultimate impact came from its subsequent issues. Same is with *Mercy*. It too will make you laugh and it will break your hearts over and over again, if you let it.

Now, the story itself will expand on *Sunstone* and later even continue it as its events span the times before *Sunstone* and end after it. It is a longer story, a *Lord of the Rings* to *Sunstone*'s *Hobbit*. And coincidentally this whole thing ends with a golden ring as well so make of that what you will.

In the end, what else is left to say but:

Welcome to *Mercy*. A story of two people going on an amazing journey and learning an important lesson.

If you want to have a chance at embracing your future, you must learn to let go of the mistakes of your past.



SEE IF THIS
SOUNDS FAMILIAR?

A COMPLICATED
PAST TURNS A
MAN INTO A
BITTER CYNIC.

HE SPENDS
HIS DAYS GRUMPY
AND ALONE...

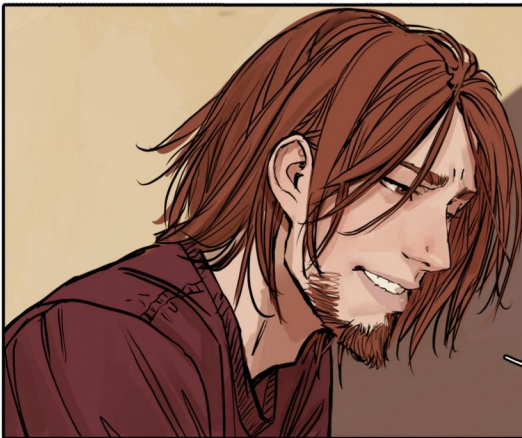


IN COMES THE
GHOST OF HIS OLD
PARTNER WITH A GRIM
WARNING --

"TONIGHT YOU WILL BE VISITED
BY *THREE GHOSTS*."



AND SO, A MISERABLE MAN
IS GIVEN A CHANCE TO CHANGE.
TO BECOME A BETTER
PERSON.



EBENEZER SCROOGE --
A CHRISTMAS CAROL BY
CHARLES DICKENS.



ONCE THERE
WAS A TIME
WHEN I STRONGLY
RELATED TO THE
CHARACTER OF OLD
SCROOGE...

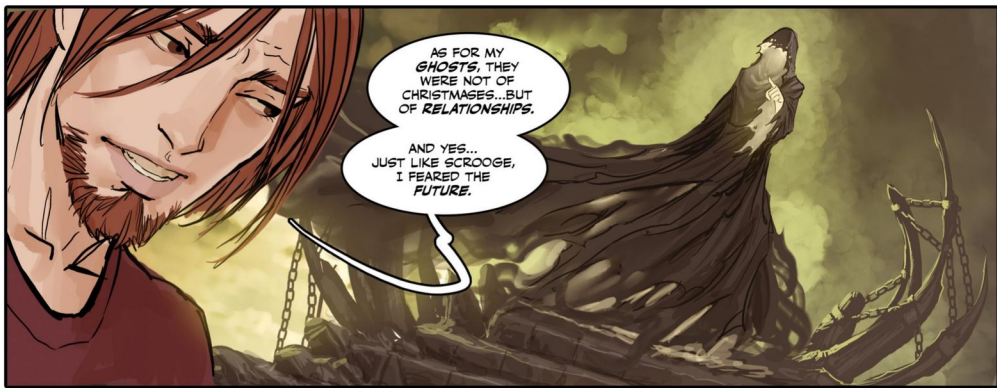
FOR...
MULTIPLE
REASONS.

I MEAN, TO SOME
EXTENT, I GUESS WE ALL
DEAL WITH OUR OWN GHOSTS
OF PAST, PRESENT, AND
THINGS YET TO COME...

DIFFERENT
GHOSTS FOR DIFFERENT
PEOPLE...

AS FOR ME,
I'VE COME TO
PERSONIFY
MINE AS *THREE*
IMPORTANT
WOMEN IN MY
LIFE...

WELL...
FOUR IF WE TAKE
INTO ACCOUNT ALLISON,
MY PERSONAL JACOB
MARLEY. LORD KNOWS SHE
TOO WAS *QUITE PROFICIENT*
AT POINTING OUT MY
FUCKUPS AS WELL AS
RATTLING CHAINS
AND SHACKLES.



AS FOR MY
GHOSTS, THEY
WERE NOT OF
CHRISTMASSES...BUT
OF *RELATIONSHIPS*.

AND YES...
JUST LIKE SCROOGE,
I FEARED THE
FUTURE.



I GUESS THAT'S USUALLY THE
CASE WHEN YOU SPEND YOUR
TIME CLINGING TO THE MISTAKES
OF THE PAST AND YOU SUCK
AT DEALING WITH THE PRESENT.
FUTURE TAKES ON A RATHER
GRIM SHAPE.

YOU
MIGHT
GET HURT
AGAIN.

YOU'LL
MOST LIKELY
DESERVE IT.



AND THAT'S IT, REALLY.
IN A WAY, MINE IS A STORY OF A MAN
WHO LEARNS TO LET GO OF THE PAST,
MAKE PEACE WITH THE PRESENT...

THAT'S
FINE...



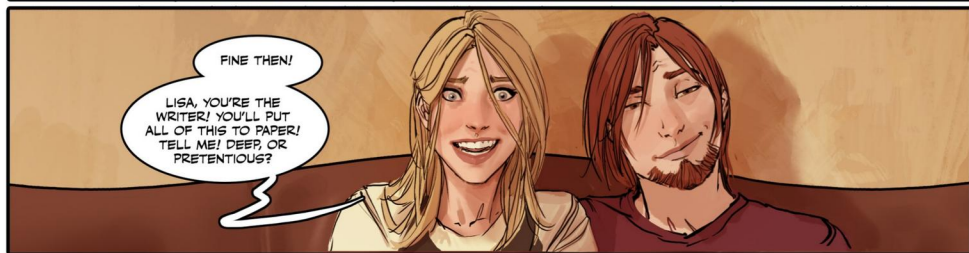
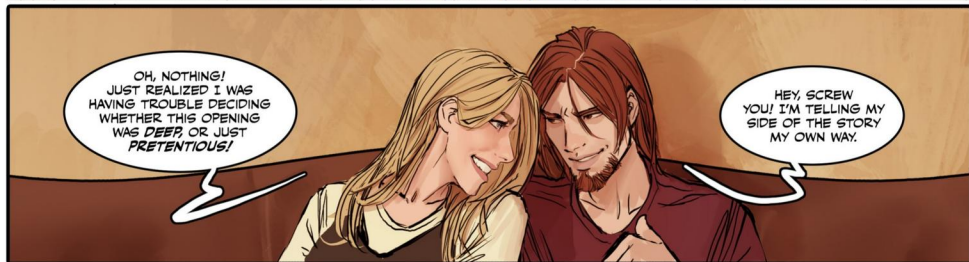
AND FINALLY...

I'LL
TAKE MY
CHANCES.



EMBRACE THE
POSSIBILITIES OF
THE FUTURE...

KHM
PFFT
FUCKING...
REALLY?







ANYHOW...IT ***WAS*** AUTUMN...

SO YEAH!

UHH...

HMMMM...



WELL?



...



****SIGH****

THING IS, I'M KINDA IN A VERY AWKWARD SPOT HERE.

LIKE...

ANY WAY I SPIN IT, THERE IS REALLY NO GOOD WAY TO TELL THIS PART.

IS IT BECAUSE...UH... I MEAN, YOU TOLD ME ANNE KNOWS ABOUT YOUR PAST...

OH... I KNOW!

YEAH, ANNE'S NOT THE PROBLEM. ***YOU ARE!***

THIS FIRST PART IS ACTUALLY ABOUT ***ALLY AND ME...***

AND, WELL... SHE'S YOUR ***WIFE***, SO...



AWWW! LOOK AT YOU BEING UNCHARACTERISTICALLY RESPECTFUL!

OH, FUCK OFF!

HEH! IT'S ***FINE***, ALAN.

I MEAN IT!

ALLY ALREADY FILLED ME IN ON MOST OF IT.

IN FACT, HERE'S HOW WE'LL DO THIS. I WANT YOU TO TELL IT LIKE YOU ARE SPEAKING TO SOMEONE WHO KNOWS ***ABSOLUTELY NOTHING*** ABOUT YOU.

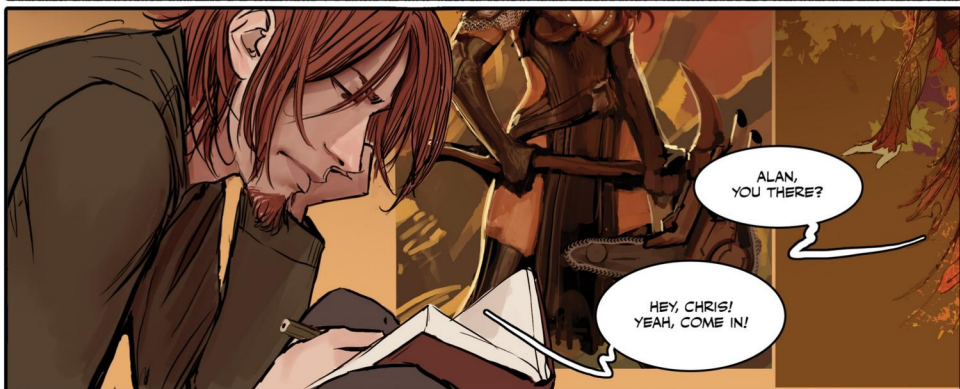
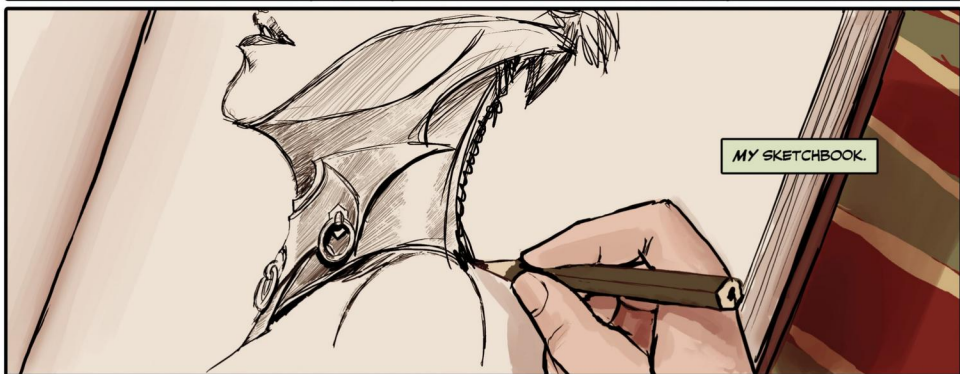
THAT GOES FOR THE BOTH OF YOU.

SO...

HOW 'BOUT IT? YOU DO THE TALKING...



AND I'LL DO WHAT I DO ***BEST.***











CHRIS CONNELLY WAS THE FIRST ON A VERY SHORT LIST OF FRIENDS I MADE DURING COLLEGE.



IT BEGAN AS A CHANCE ENCOUNTER. I WAS MOVING INTO THE CHEAP STUDENT HOUSING BUILDING WHERE HE LIVED. HE SAW ME AND DID THE MOST "CHRIS" THING POSSIBLE... HE OFFERED A HAND.

HEY, BUDDY, YOU NEED SOME HELP?



HUH?

HELP? YOU NEED SOME? THAT IS, IF YOU'RE MOVING IN...AND NOT, LIKE, ROBBING THE PLACE?

HEH. YEAH, I COULD USE A HAND, THANKS!



I'M CHRIS!

ALAN!

THAT A STAR TREK SHIRT?

YEAH, YOU WATCH IT?

HERE AND THERE.

FOR HOW IMPORTANT, AND AT TIMES, *UNEXPECTEDLY ODD* OUR FRIENDSHIP WAS, IT HAD A VERY MUNDANE BEGINNING...



BUT THERE WAS NOTHING WRONG WITH *MUNDANE*.

UH, ALAN... I REALLY HAVE TO GO NOW.

HUH? OH, YEAH, DUDE! HAVE A GOOD ONE!





ALL THE RUMORS ASIDE, THE WHOLE THING WAS PRETTY SIMPLE. I WAS DOODLING IN THE CAMPUS CAFETERIA, WHEN SARAH BENES, A CHARMING GIRL I VAGUELY KNEW, APPROACHED ME AND ASKED IF SHE COULD SEE MY DRAWINGS...

I DODGED HER REQUEST BY CLUMSILY OFFERING TO DRAW HER INSTEAD. SHE SAID YES. HONESTLY, THE WHOLE THING COULD HAVE JUST ENDED THEN AND THERE, BUT I HAD NO SUCH LUCK.

AS IT TURNED OUT, SARAH HAD A BOYFRIEND. A THIRD-YEAR STUDENT WITH A CHIP ON HIS SHOULDER AND A WIDE CIRCLE OF FRIENDS...

POINT IS, WORD GOT AROUND THAT SOME DUDE WAS COZING UP TO HIS GIRLFRIEND.

HE AND HIS FRIENDS STOLE MY SKETCHBOOK, PROBABLY INTENDING TO BURN IT OR SOMETHING. BUT AFTER LOOKING THROUGH IT, THEY FOUND *ANOTHER* USE FOR ITS CONTENTS.

HENCE, *THE SHITSTORM* I WAS ABOUT TO FACE.

A SKETCHBOOK IS SORT OF AN ARTISTIC DIARY. AT LEAST I THOUGHT OF MINE AS ONE. AND IN THIS CASE, IT WAS A DIARY OF A YOUNG *BDSM* FETISHIST WITH A PASSION FOR DESIGN.

NOT A SIDE OF ME THAT I INTENDED TO, AS THEY SAY, "SHARE WITH THE CLASS." SO OTHERS DID IT FOR ME.

I UNDERSTAND THAT THIS WAS NOT YOUR DOING, BUT I INSIST ON YOU... TAKING A *LEAVE OF ABSENCE*. AT LEAST FOR...

THE LADY FROM THE OFFICE OF STUDENT CONDUCT REFERRED TO IT AS A "LEAVE OF ABSENCE"...BUT, YEAH, I WAS *BOOTED* FOR TWO WEEKS.

"TO GIVE EVERYTHING TIME TO BLOW OVER," SHE SAID. SHE MEANT WELL...



IT DIDN'T WORK.

AS IT TURNED OUT, JUST LIKE IN HIGH SCHOOL, **EMBARRASSMENT** HAD STAYING POWER.



TO MAKE THINGS WORSE, WHERE SIMPLE INFORMATION MIGHT FADE, DRAWINGS WERE MORE PERMANENT, AND COPY INK BOUNTIFUL...

SO IT ALL TURNED INTO A JOKE WITH A SEEMINGLY ENDLESS SERIES OF PUNCHLINES. EMPHASIS ON THE "PUNCH."



I BECAME A **MEME**. AN EASY AND EFFECTIVE WAY FOR OTHERS TO DISTRACT THEMSELVES FROM THEIR OWN INSECURITIES AND FUCKUPS...

TO POINT AT AND SAY: "YEAH, I MESS'D UP, BUT I'M NO **S/M BENSON!**"

I GUESS, IN THAT WAY I MADE A LOT OF LIVES EASIER...

THIS SHIT WENT ON FOR OVER **TWO MONTHS**.

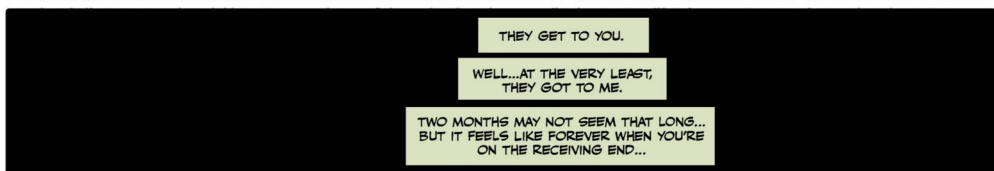


NOW, I'D LOVE TO TELL YOU THAT I SIMPLY EMBRACED THE LONER LIFESTYLE.

BUT THE ROMANTICIZED NOTION OF A LONE WOLF WITH A **FUCK-'EM-ALL** ATTITUDE IS OFTEN JUST PRETENSE.

TRUTH IS, EXCLUSION, DERISION, LONELINESS...

CONSTANT MOCKERY...



THEY GET TO YOU.

WELL...AT THE VERY LEAST, THEY GOT TO ME.

TWO MONTHS MAY NOT SEEM THAT LONG... BUT IT FEELS LIKE FOREVER WHEN YOU'RE ON THE RECEIVING END...



LIKE I SAID -- ALL OF IT GOT TO ME.

WHAT'S WITH THE ARM?

I WAS RUNNING WITH SCISSORS.

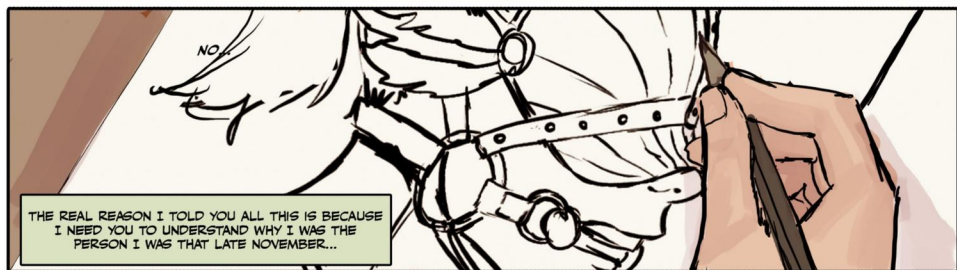
ANYHOW...



WHY AM I TELLING YOU ALL THIS?

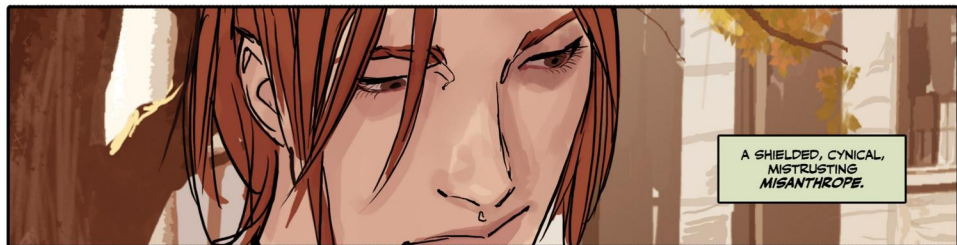
CERTAINLY NOT FOR
PITY'S SAKE...

NOR AM I TRYING TO SET
UP SOME **ANTAGONIST** FOR MY COLLEGE
YEARS. HELL, THE ORIGINAL CREW DROPPED THE
JOKE SOON AFTER -- LIKE ANY MEME, IT WAS
OTHERS WHO PICKED UP ON IT AND SPREAD IT.



NO...

THE REAL REASON I TOLD YOU ALL THIS IS BECAUSE
I NEED YOU TO UNDERSTAND WHY I WAS THE
PERSON I WAS THAT LATE NOVEMBER...



A SHIELDED, CYNICAL,
MISTRUSTING
MISANTHROPE.



IN HINDSIGHT,
IT SEEMED IT
WOULD TAKE A
MIRACLE TO SNAP
ME OUT OF MY
GLOOM...

?

AS IT TURNED OUT,
I DIDN'T NEED A MIRACLE...
JUST A *KINDRED SPIRIT* --
SOMEONE WHO
SPOKE MY LANGUAGE.

IS THAT A
PONY-GIRL
OUTFIT?





IN THOSE DAYS AFTER THE SKETCHBOOK INCIDENT, PRETTY MUCH THE ONLY GIRLS THAT WOULD GO NEAR ME WERE TRYING TO MESS WITH ME. USUALLY PRETENDING THEY WERE INTO THIS "BONDAGE STUFF."

THEIR APPROACH WAS VERY PREDICTABLE.

YOU'RE THAT GUY THAT'S INTO LIKE, **ROPES** AND **LEATHER** AND STUFF, RIGHT?

S/M BENSON, RIGHT? LISTEN, MY FRIEND'S SHOELACE BROKE. YOU GOT SOME SPARE ROPE?

KHM...

YOU COULD SEE THEM COMING FROM A MILE AWAY.

FUCK, WITH THEIR BARELY SUPPRESSED LAUGHTER, YOU DIDN'T EVEN HAVE TO **SEE** THEM.

PFFF... KHM...HEY!

IN THE END, MY PATIENCE FOR THEIR BULLSHIT GREW THIN, AND MY SKIN THICK AND COVERED IN SPIKES.

SO, WHERE MIGHT A GIRL FIND A STURDY PAIR OF HANDCUFFS?

HAS THE GIRL TRIED HER PARENTS' SOCK DRAWER? SHOULD BE RIGHT NEXT TO THE **ANAL BEADS**.

I ULTIMATELY STOPPED GIVING A SHIT, AND AFTER A WHILE, THEY ALL KINDA STARTED BLENDING TOGETHER TO ME.

GUESS THAT'S WHY I'M HERE TODAY STRUGGLING TO REMEMBER HALF OF THEIR FACES.

THEN AGAIN, I **WANTED** THOSE PEOPLE WIPED FROM MY MEMORY.

FADE THOSE DAYS AWAY ALTOGETHER...

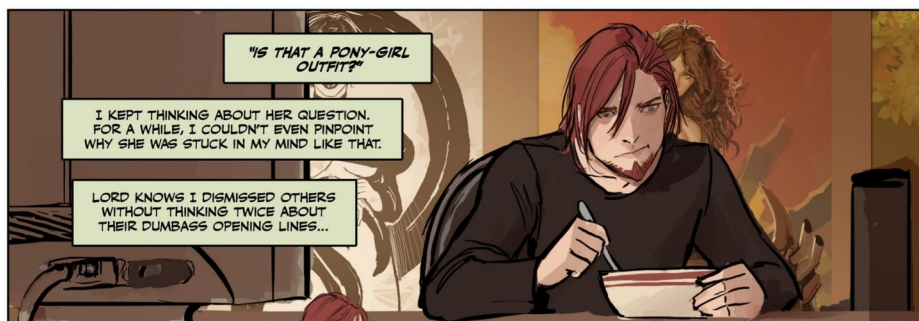
I MEAN, IN ALL HONESTY, EVERYTHING I TOLD YOU SO FAR IS A PATCHWORK OF STUFF I'VE TRIED TO FORGET. HELL, THAT MOMENT I ENTERED THE COLLEGE AND ALL EYES WERE ON ME? THAT WAS ABOUT A WEEK'S WORTH OF BULLSHIT SUMMARIZED INTO A SINGLE MOMENT.

NOW, THE REASON I'M TELLING YOU THIS IS... I REMEMBER **EVERY SINGLE MOMENT** WITH ALLY.

BUT THAT'S ALLY FOR YOU. SHE MADE LIFE **WORTH REMEMBERING**.

AND THE FIRST THING I REMEMBERED ABOUT HER... THE FIRST THING THAT STUCK WITH ME...





"IS THAT A PONY-GIRL
OUTFIT?"

I KEPT THINKING ABOUT HER QUESTION.
FOR A WHILE, I COULDN'T EVEN PINPOINT
WHY SHE WAS STUCK IN MY MIND LIKE THAT.

LORD KNOWS I DISMISSED OTHERS
WITHOUT THINKING TWICE ABOUT
THEIR DUMBASS OPENING LINES...



SO WHY NOT THIS ONE?



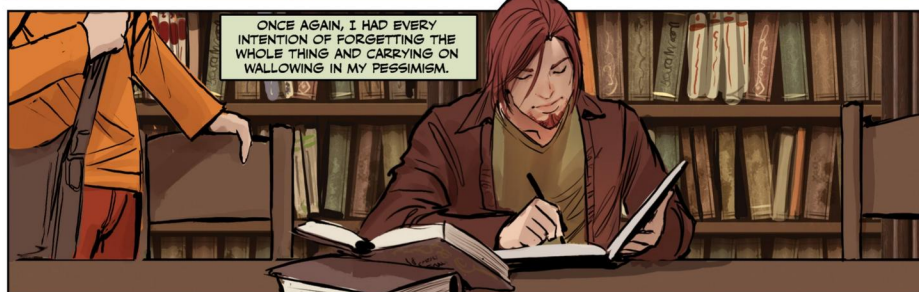
IT WASN'T UNTIL THE NEXT DAY
THAT I REALIZED WHAT IT WAS.

OTHERS USUALLY APPROACHED ME WITH
VAGUE REFERENCES TO SHIT THEY HEARD
IN AWKWARD JOKES ABOUT BDSM.

WHIPS, CHAINS, ROPES...

BUT SHE DID NO SUCH THING. SHE SAW
A SKETCH AND IMMEDIATELY CALLED IT
FOR WHAT IT WAS -- A PONY-GIRL OUTFIT.

THIS REALIZATION DID NOTHING TO CHANGE MY MIND.
THE WAY I SAW IT, SOONER OR LATER ONE OF THEM
WAS BOUND TO DO SOME RESEARCH TO FUCK WITH ME.



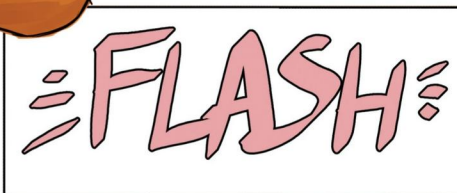
ONCE AGAIN, I HAD EVERY
INTENTION OF FORGETTING THE
WHOLE THING AND CARRYING ON
WALLOWING IN MY PESSIMISM.



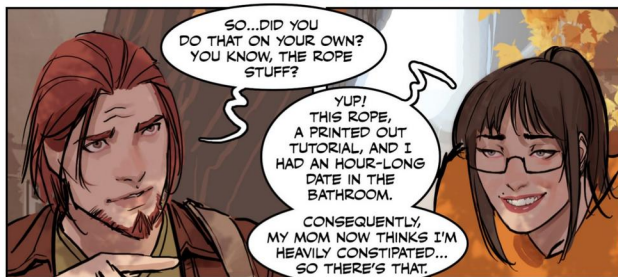
HI THERE!
I THINK WE GOT
OFF ON THE WRONG
FOOT LAST TIME, SO TO
PROPERLY INTRODUCE
MYSELF, I'M ALLISON
CARTER -- ALLY TO
MY FRIENDS!

ALLY, HOWEVER, HAD
DIFFERENT PLANS.









NOW, THOSE SHIELDS I MENTIONED RAISING...THEY WERE A TRUSTY BARRICADE MADE OF 100% PURE, COLD CYNICISM.

FOR MONTHS, THAT WAS MY LAST LINE OF DEFENSE --

IT KEPT THE ASSHOLES AT BAY.

THEY ONLY HAD THEIR FUN IF YOU LET THEM GET TO YOU.

OH, DON'T GET ME WRONG -- THEIR VERBAL BLOWS STILL STUNG ME, BUT MY SHIELD MADE IT SEEM LIKE I HAD NO FUCKS LEFT TO GIVE, SO THEY LOST THEIR INTEREST MUCH SOONER.

THIS BARRICADE OF MISANTHROPY HELD STRONG FOR A LONG TIME AND THEN...THERE SHE WAS.

KNOCKING ON THE PREVIOUSLY IMPENETRABLE WALL, TURNING IT TO GLASS.

I COULD FEEL THE CRACKS SPREADING.

I FELT...VULNERABLE.

DESPERATELY, I HELD UP MY SHIELD ONE LAST TIME.

I CAN'T IMAGINE YOU HAVE PROBLEMS FINDING FRIENDS...

I DON'T...
I MEAN...
"FRIENDS" IS A STRONG WORD...

NONE OF THEM REALLY KNOW ME. THEY KNOW "COLLEGE ALLY."

COLLEGE ALLY LISTENS TO THEIR PROBLEMS, LAUGHS AT THEIR JOKES AND SHIES AWAY FROM SEX TALK BECAUSE SHE MIGHT SPILL OUT A LITTLE TOO MUCH, AND FREAK EVERYONE OUT.

I GUESS I REALLY WANTED SOMEONE IN MY LIFE WHO I COULD TALK TO ABOUT THE OTHER STUFF.

STUFF THAT COLLEGE ALLY KEEPS HIDDEN.

I DON'T KNOW...A FRIEND WHO I COULD BE MYSELF WITH, IN A WAY I CAN'T BE AROUND EVERYONE ELSE.





AND YOU DECIDED
I WAS THAT PERSON
FROM SEEING JUST
ONE DRAWING...



YEAH...I MEAN,
THAT GOT ME STARTED...

UH, ALL CARDS
ON THE TABLE...I MADE
SOME EFFORTS TO FIND
COPIES OF SOME OF THE
PIECES THEY KEEP
POSTING...

A BUNCH OF
THE PIECES...

LIKE...
MOST OF
THEM.



YOU'RE
LEGIT.

...
ALSO,
SORRY.



AND THERE IT WAS.

WITH THE CREAK OF
A ROPE AND SOME HOWLING
LAUGHTER, THE LAST OF
MY DEFENSES LAY BROKEN.

FOR THE FIRST TIME IN
A WHILE, I REALIZED...
HERE WAS SOMEONE I
COULD TRUST.

AND FOR THE FIRST TIME IN
MONTHS, I FELT LIKE MYSELF
ONCE AGAIN.

PPFFT!!!

BWAHA
HAHAHAH!



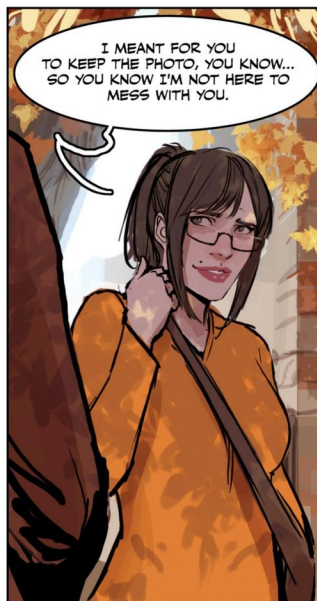
OH, GOD...
HEH! THIS IS *AWKWARD*
AS FUCK. ALLY, YOU WANNA
GET SOME COFFEE OR
SOMETHING?

OH HELL
YES!

PREFERABLY
SOMEPLACE WITH A DECENT
BATHROOM...I REALLY GOTTA
GET RID OF THIS ROPE ASAP...
IT'S, UM...I DID A
GOOD JOB...

A *REAL*
GOOD JOB!

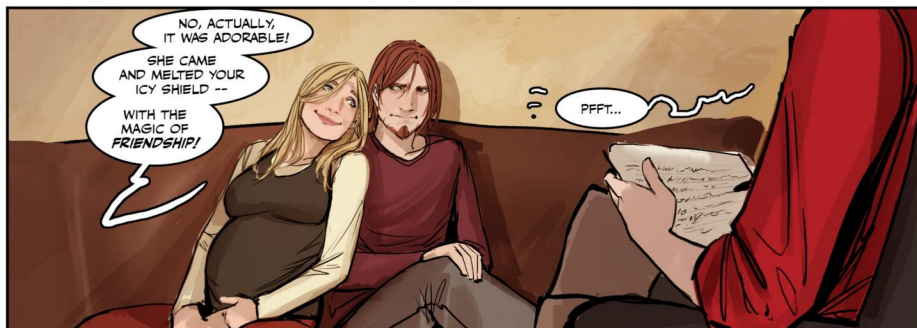
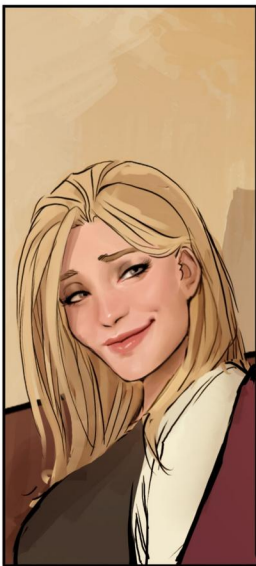


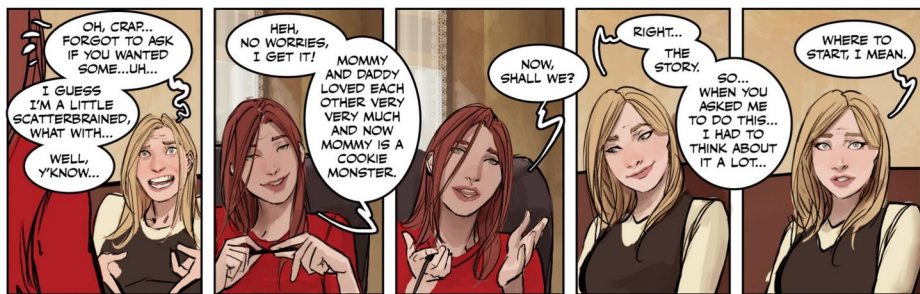


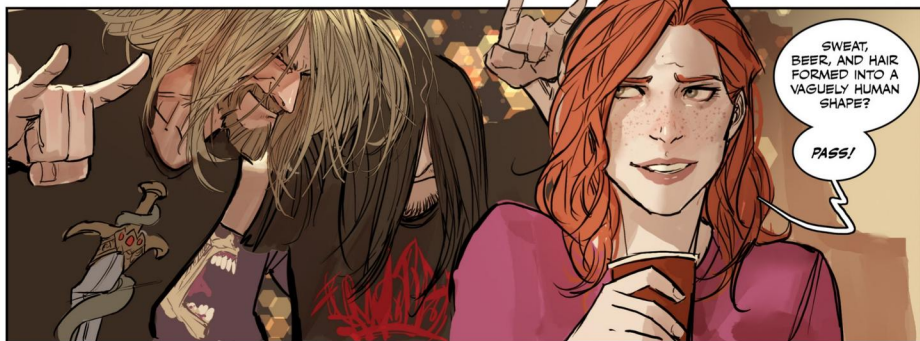
AND SO, WITH THE
SHATTERING OF THE LAST
REMNANTS OF MY
SHIELD, A NEW ERA OF
MY LIFE BEGAN.

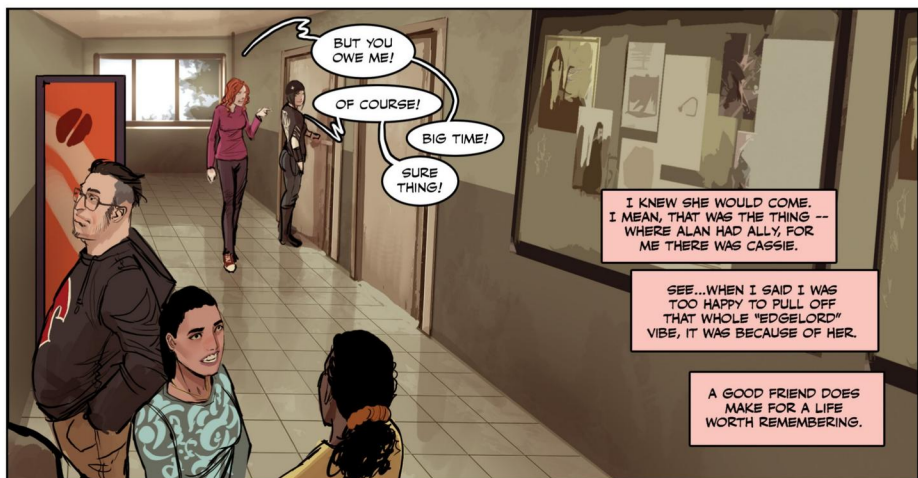
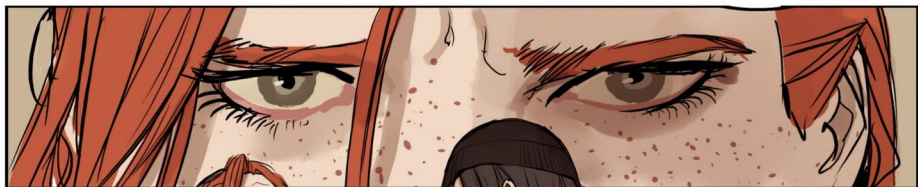
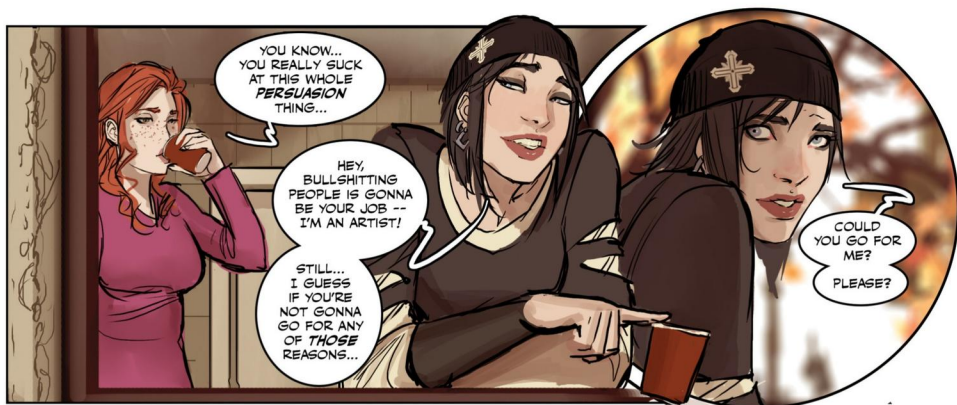
AN AGE I DIDN'T
WANT TO FORGET.

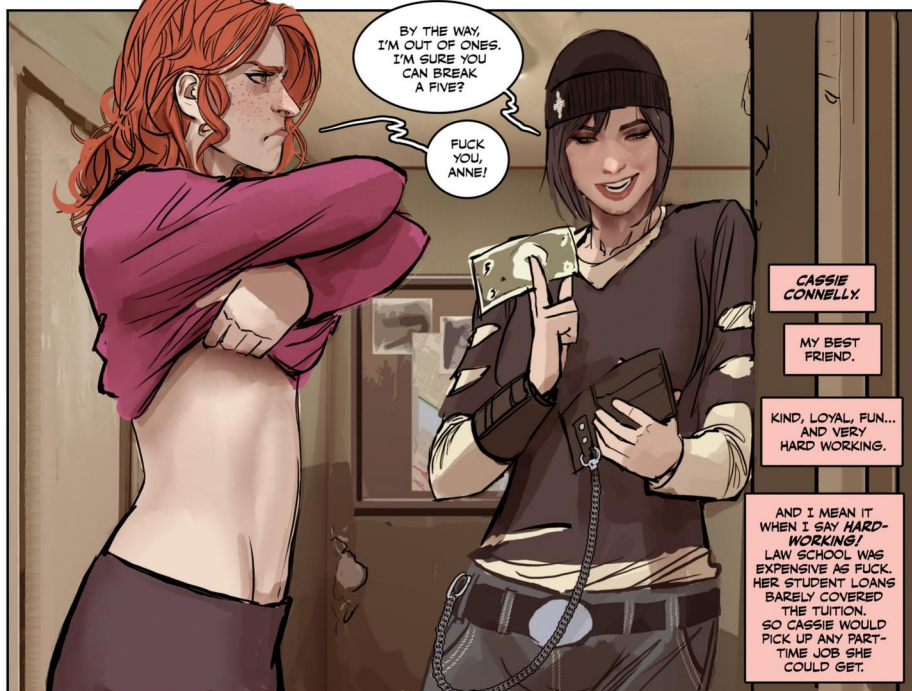
A TIME WORTH
REMEMBERING.













NATURALLY, BEING A GOOD FRIEND,
I INFORMED HER OF AN EASY JOB
POSTING FOR A FIGURE DRAWING
CLASS MODEL.

SHE TOOK THE GIG, AND I
TOOK EVERY OPPORTUNITY
TO TEASE HER ABOUT IT.

THAT IS, AFTER ALL, WHAT BEST
FRIENDS ARE FOR. THEY WILL HAVE
YOUR BACK BUT YOU MAY ALSO FIND
AN OCCASIONAL "KICK ME" NOTE
ATTACHED TO YOU.

CASSIE DIDN'T MIND...WELL...
I MEAN, EVEN IF SHE DID, SHE
FORGAVE IT ALL AFTER THAT
UPCOMING SATURDAY.

AS IT TURNED OUT, THE METAL
CONCERT I WAS PESTERING HER
ABOUT ENDED UP CHANGING HER
LIFE...HELL, IT CHANGED BOTH
OF OUR LIVES.

ALSO ON A CURIOUS SIDENOTE,
TURNS OUT MY STORY ALSO
STARTS WITH SOME ARTWORK
AND MY BEST FRIEND EXPOSING
HERSELF. HEH...FUNNY, THAT.



ANYHOW...THIS FRIENDSHIP THAT CASSIE AND I SHARED.

IT WAS AN UNLIKELY ONE FROM THE GET-GO.

UNLIKE ALLY AND ALAN, WE HAD *LITTLE TO NOTHING* IN COMMON.

SHE WAS A HARD WORKING STUDENT WITH HER EYES ON THE PRIZE.

I WAS A HIGH SCHOOL EDGELORD -- FLUENT IN THE LANGUAGES OF CYNICISM, SARCASM, AND 3 DIFFERENT DIALECTS OF EYEROLLS.

OF THE TWO OF US, CASSIE WAS THE *HONEST* ONE.

SHE WORE HER PERSONALITY ON HER SLEEVE.

ME? I WAS MORE LIKE A *REVERSE ALLY*. ALLY HID HER EDGY SIDE. I *AKHORED* MYSELF IN MINE.

I KEPT THE TENDER MUSHINESS ON THE INSIDE WELL HIDDEN.

I WAS A *GOOTH LOBSTER* IS WHAT I'M SAYING.



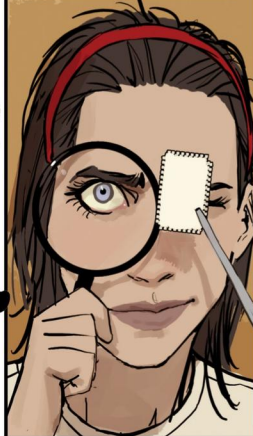
NOW, BELOW THAT DARK CRUSTACEAN SURFACE, THERE WAS A CURIOUS KID CONSTANTLY SEARCHING FOR HERSELF...



...TRYING OUT ALL SORTS OF STUFF, BOTH *GOOD* AND *BAD*...



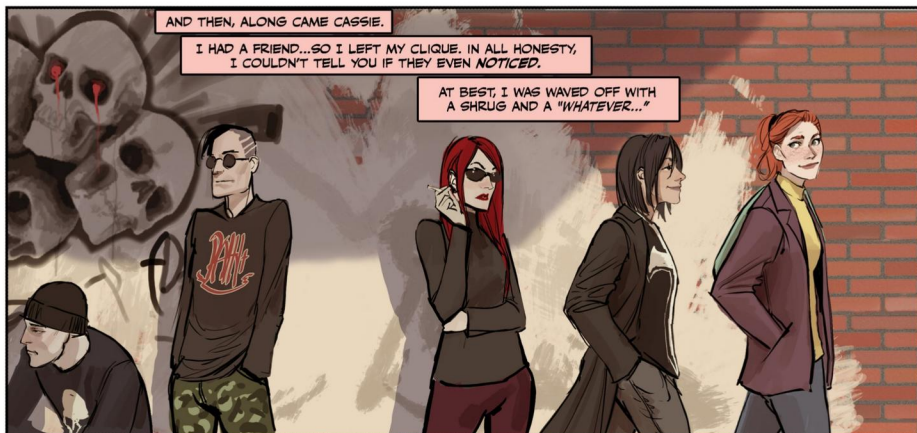
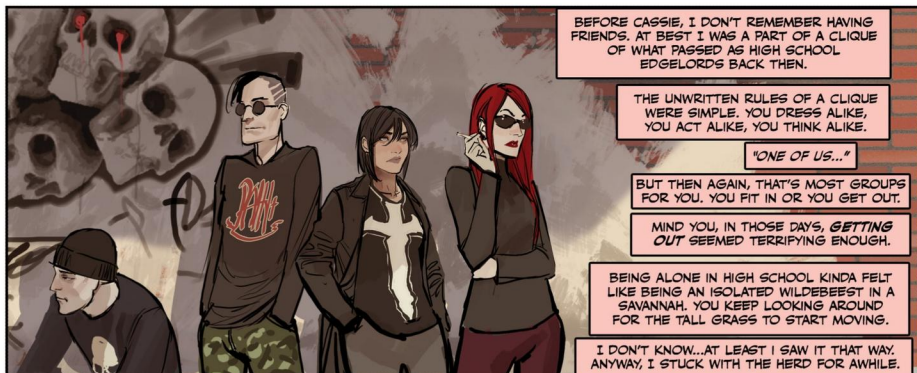
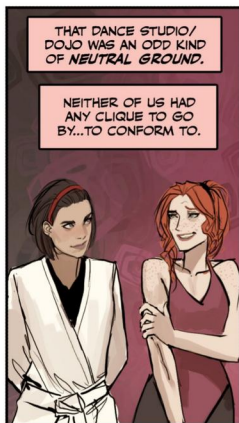
...BURNING THROUGH HOBBIES ON WHAT SEEMED LIKE A WEEKLY BASIS.



IN FACT, TO THIS DAY, I COULDN'T TELL YOU WITH CERTAINTY IF I FIRST MET CASSIE DURING MY WEEK OF TRYING *MARTIAL ARTS* OR *DANCING*. BUT I MET HER DURING ONE OF THOSE.

OH...HEY... UH...WE GO TO SAME HIGH SCHOOL, DON'T WE?







THAT WAS JUST FINE BY ME...

AROUND CASSIE, I COULD BE MYSELF.

NOT JUST SOME EDGY
STEREOTYPE, BUT A LAYERED
PERSON. CURIOUS,
AMBITIOUS...HAPPY.

SHE ENCOURAGED MY
ARTISTIC ENDEAVORS --

AND I RESPECTED AND
CHEERED HER ON HER
OWN AMBITIONS TO
STUDY LAW.

THAT WAS IT, REALLY.
WE HAD EACH OTHER'S
BACKS.

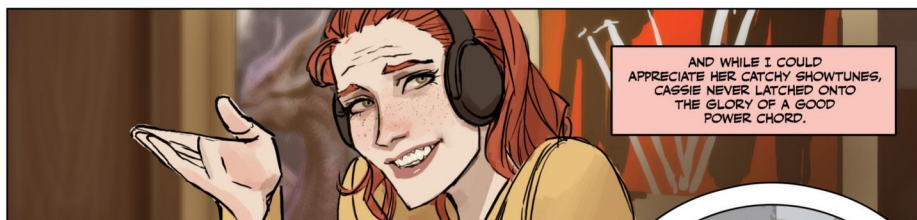


AND EVENTUALLY, AS BEST
FRIENDS DO, WE WOULD TRY
GETTING EACH OTHER TO
CROSS SOME OF THE
BRIDGES LEFT UNCROSSED.

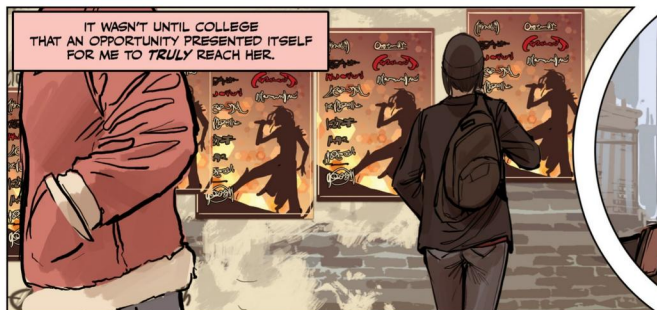
SHE TRIED
RELENTLESSLY TO GET
ME TO SHARE HER LOVE
OF MUSICALS.



I KEPT LENDING HER
MY METAL CDS.



AND WHILE I COULD
APPRECIATE HER CATCHY SHOWTUNES,
CASSIE NEVER LATCHED ONTO
THE GLORY OF A GOOD
POWER CHORD.



IT WASN'T UNTIL COLLEGE
THAT AN OPPORTUNITY PRESENTED ITSELF
FOR ME TO *TRULY* REACH HER.







CLEVER GIRL!

WHAT?

YOU PLANNED THIS!

HEY, I DIDN'T NEED ANY PLANNING.



THIS FESTIVAL LISTED A BAND THAT DOES METAL COVERS OF BROADWAY TUNES...IT'S LITERALLY LIKE, MY MUSIC AND YOUR MUSIC BUMPING UGLIES!

IF ANYTHING COULD GET YOU TO **BANG YOUR HEAD**, THIS WAS IT!

WELL, I'M STILL NOT FULLY SOLD ON THE WHOLE GENRE...

BUT I'LL ADMIT, THIS WAS FUCKING AWESOME.



THAT'S FINE!

YOU SAMPLED THE **GATEWAY DRUG!**



AND NOW, STEP TWO OF MY MASTER PLAN -- WHICH I TOTALLY DON'T HAVE --

WE FIND SOME HOT METALHEADS TO DATE!

AGAIN... **PASS!**

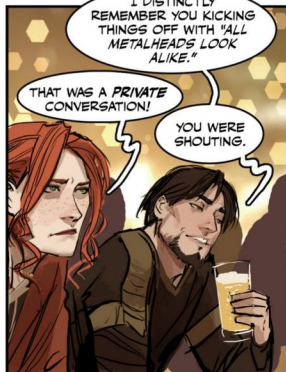
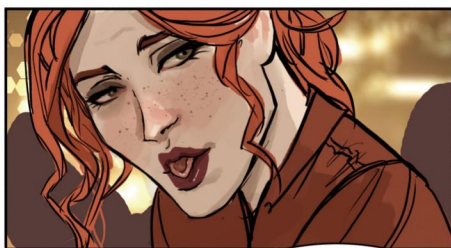


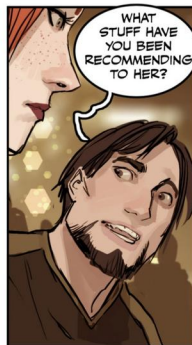
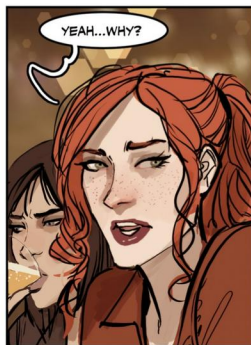
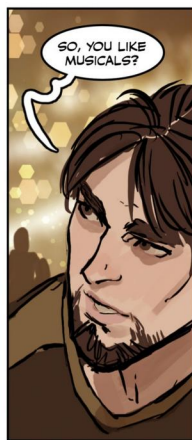
SURE, I MEAN THE SHEER **VARIETY** OF CHOICES IS **STAGGERING!**

WE COULD GO FOR A **LONG-HAIRED GUY WEARING BLACK WITH A BEARD OOR... WITHOOCOUT A BEARD!**

OH, FOR FUCK'S SAKE, CASSIE!

I'M SURE WE COULD FIND SOME NICE GUYS HERE, COME ON!







BUT IF YOU'RE THAT SET ON LEAVING, HERE'S MY NUMBER. IN CASE YOU EVER WANT SOME NEW BAND SUGGESTIONS.

WELL AREN'T YOU JUST INVESTED IN MY *MUSICAL TASTES*.



YEAH...I'VE BEEN KNOWN TO GET A LITTLE PREACHY ABOUT THIS STUFF AT TIMES...

BUT I DO THINK YOU'D MAKE A COOL METALHEAD.



NOW, SEE? THAT'S A MUCH BETTER WAY OF FISHING FOR MY NUMBER! WELL DONE! WELL...*BETTER* DONE.



I'M NOT FISHING! I MEAN, DON'T GET ME WRONG. I DO LIKE YOU. I WOULDN'T MIND GETTING TO KNOW YOU BETTER, BUT I'M ALSO A HUGE METAL GEEK! SO IN THIS CASE, IT'S ABOUT THE MUSIC.



YOU...*LIKE* ME?

JUST LIKE THAT, HUH?

YOU SURE SEEM...

UM...

HONEST?

HEY, FOR YEARS PEOPLE TOLD ME I HAD NO POKER FACE AND COULDN'T LIE FOR SHIT.

I KNOW HOW TO TAKE A HINT...

SO I JUST STICK WITH THE TRUTH. I MEANT WHAT I SAID. ALL OF IT.

I'M TOM. TOM WILSON.



CASSANDRA CONNELLY.

UH... CASSIE.



HEY, CASSIE, YOU DON'T NEED ME HERE, DO YOU? THERE'S A NEW BAND COMING UP...

I'LL BE FINE.

TOM HERE SWEARS TO TELL THE TRUTH, THE WHOLE TRUTH, AND NOTHING BUT THE TRUTH!

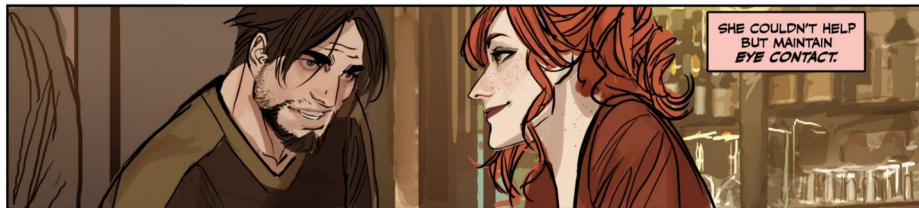
I THINK I MIGHT JUST CROSS-EXAMINE THE WITNESS!



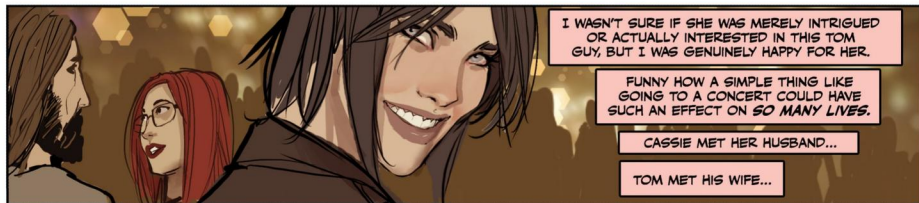
THERE IS THIS *BORDERLINE RUDE* THING CASSIE WOULD DO TO PEOPLE SHE HAD NO INTEREST IN...

SHE HAD AN UNCANNY ABILITY TO CONDUCT HOUR-LONG CONVERSATIONS WITHOUT EVEN LOOKING AT THEM.

BUT WITH INTERESTING PEOPLE, AND THOSE SHE LIKED...



SHE COULDN'T HELP BUT MAINTAIN *EYE CONTACT*.



I WASN'T SURE IF SHE WAS MERELY INTRIGUED OR ACTUALLY INTERESTED IN THIS TOM GUY, BUT I WAS GENUINELY HAPPY FOR HER.

FUNNY HOW A SIMPLE THING LIKE GOING TO A CONCERT COULD HAVE SUCH AN EFFECT ON *SO MANY LIVES*.

CASSIE MET HER HUSBAND...

TOM MET HIS WIFE...



AND ME?

WE ARE UNBREAKABLEEE!!!

I FOUND MIRIAM.



FORGED BY TORMENT SEVENTY TIMES --

IT'S INESCAPABLEEE!!!

TONIGHT YOU'LL PAY THE PRICE FOR YOUR CRIMES!



THE SONG WAS CHEESY AS FUCK...

BUT IT WAS THE GOOD KIND OF CHEESY, THE KIND YOU GET FROM THE *MOST GLORIOUS* OF POWER METAL BALLADS...



MARIANNE,
OF MY DARK HEART!

I REMEMBER THE TIME
WHEN WE HOWLED AT
THE NIGHT --

NOW YOU'RE GONE, AND
IT'S TEARING ME APART...

WE COULD NEVER IMAGINE
LOSING TO THE
MORNING LIIIGHT!

SOMETIMES,
THERE IS A
MOMENT OF *PURE
MAGIC* THAT YOU
CAN EXPERIENCE
DURING A
CONCERT.

IF YOU ARE VERY
LUCKY, DURING
THEIR MOMENT OF
GLORY, AS THE SONG
EXPLODES IN THE AIR,
A SINGER WILL BRIEFLY
LOOK STRAIGHT AT YOU.

AND ALL WILL CEASE TO
MATTER, BECAUSE AT THAT
MOMENT IT FEELS LIKE THEY
ARE SINGING TO YOU...
SINGING JUST *FOR* YOU.

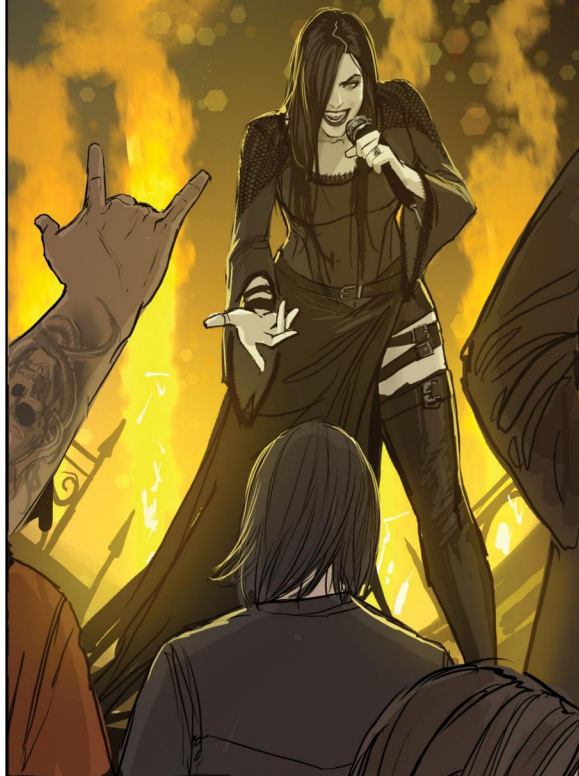
THEN AGAIN,
MAYBE THAT'S
JUST MY WAY
OF SEEING IT...

I WILL ADMIT TO A BORDERLINE UNHEALTHY OBSESSION WITH SOME OF THE FRONTMEN OF THE BANDS I ADMIRER. LORD KNOWS THEIR CONCERT TICKETS TOOK UP MOST OF MY FUN-FUNDS.

AND DURING EVERY CONCERT, I SECRETLY HOPED FOR THAT SPECIAL MOMENT...

THE MOMENT WHEN THEY WOULD LOOK AT ME.

NOT SURE IF IT QUALIFIES AS A KINK, BUT I'LL BE DAMNED IF IT DIDN'T *DO THINGS* TO ME.



THE TRUTH IS, THOSE "*SING TO ME*" MOMENTS TURNED ME ON SO MUCH I COULD ALMOST HEAR AN AUDIBLE *GULP*...AND IT WASN'T COMING FROM MY THROAT.

THAT NIGHT, HOWEVER, IT WASN'T SOME LONG-HAIRED, LEAN GUY CLAD IN LEATHER AND JEANS SINGING ON THE STAGE. IT WAS *MIRIAM* -- AND YET, IT FELT THE SAME. IN THAT MAGICAL MOMENT, I LOOKED AT HER, AND AS SHE GAVE ME A SECOND OF HER ATTENTION...

I FELT THE FAMILIAR WARMTH SPREADING... I FELT *THE GULP*.

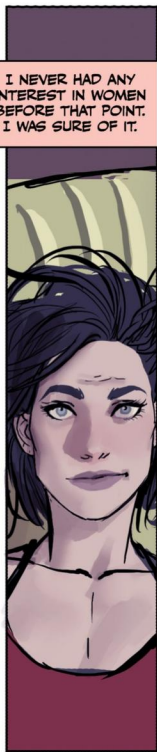


AND AT THAT MOMENT, A PECULIAR REALIZATION HIT ME.





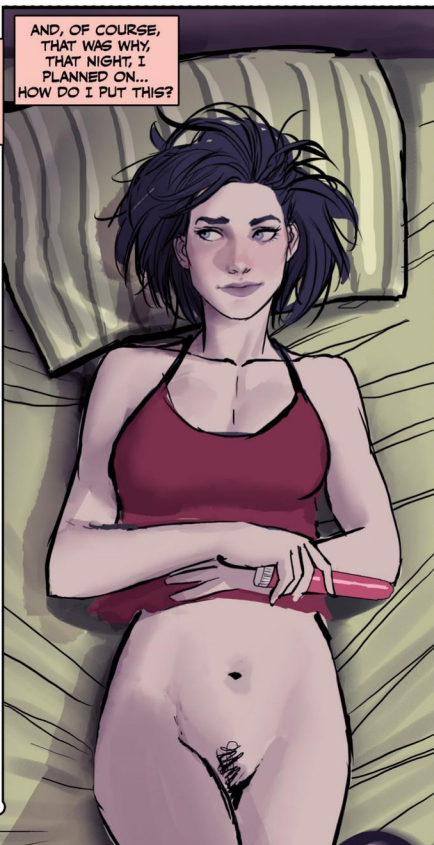
I WAS BEING
STUPID,
OF COURSE...



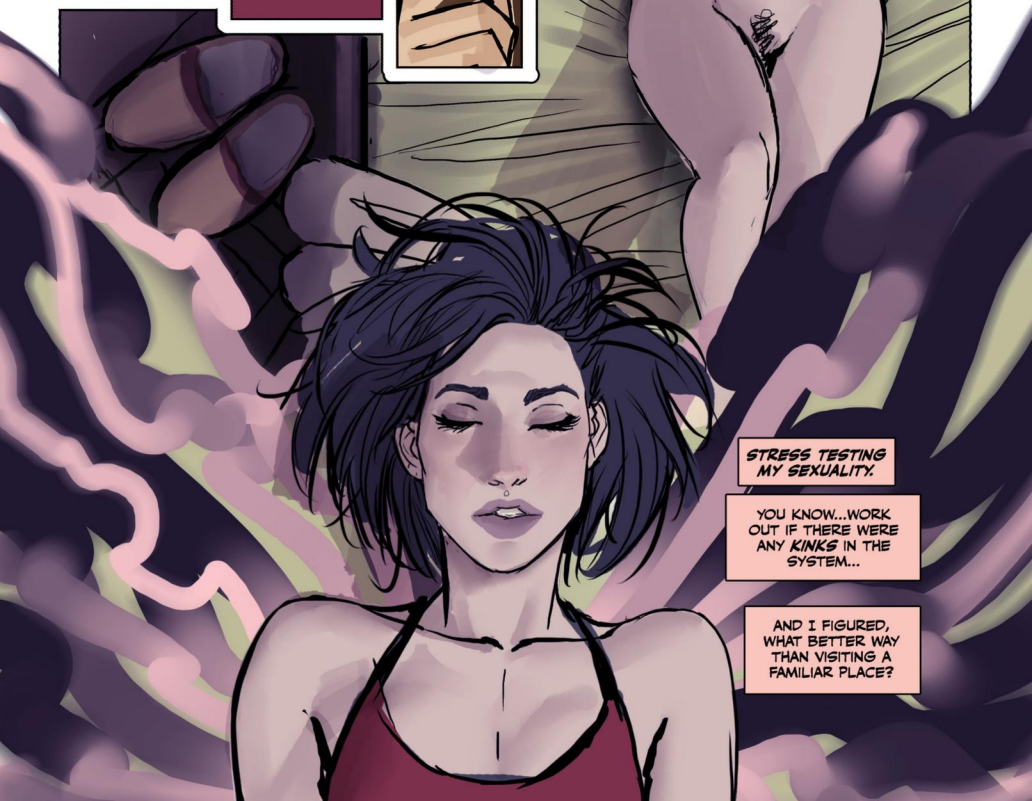
I NEVER HAD ANY
INTEREST IN WOMEN
BEFORE THAT POINT.
I WAS SURE OF IT.



IT WAS
JUST...UMM...
SPELL OF THE
MOMENT...
HER SPELL.



AND, OF COURSE,
THAT WAS WHY,
THAT NIGHT, I
PLANNED ON...
HOW DO I PUT THIS?



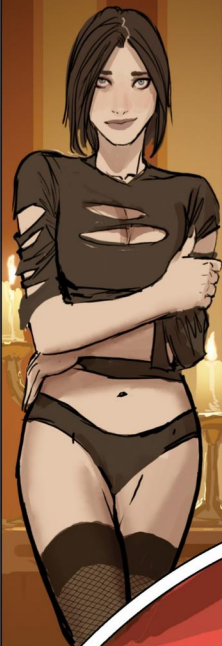
*STRESS TESTING
MY SEXUALITY.*

YOU KNOW...WORK
OUT IF THERE WERE
ANY *KINKS* IN THE
SYSTEM...

AND I FIGURED,
WHAT BETTER WAY
THAN VISITING A
FAMILIAR PLACE?

A FAMILIAR FANTASY,
ONE I INDULGED IN
OFTEN. IN IT, I WAS AN
EAGER GROUPEE CALLED
FOR A PRIVATE MEETING...

A BIT OF SEXUAL ESCAPISM
I OFTEN REVISITED BUT HAD
NO INTEREST EXPLORING
IN REAL LIFE.



MY PARTNERS
WOULD OFTEN
CHANGE --

SINGERS.



BASS
PLAYERS.



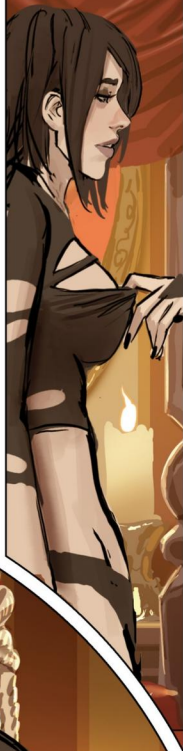
VAMPIRES...

DON'T JUDGE!
IT WAS A
PHASE...



I LOVED THIS
FANTASY FOR ITS
PACING. IT WAS
MY SEXUAL
HAPPY PLACE.

A WELL-SCRIPTED
AND THOROUGHLY
REHEARSED
SCENARIO.



BUT THAT NIGHT,
THE ROLE OF A HAIRY,
STRAPPING MALE
PROTAGONIST
WAS PLAYED BY
A SURPRISING UP-
AND-COMER...

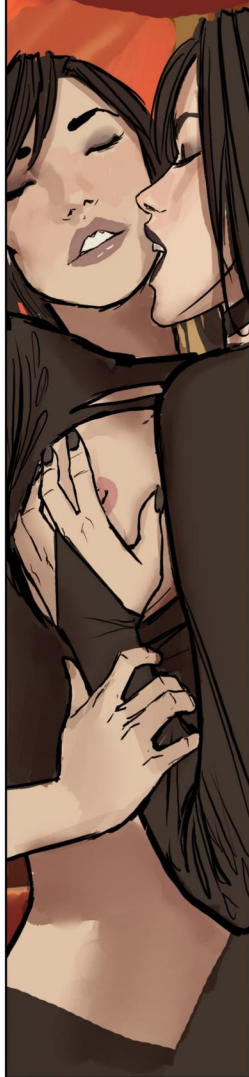


I SLID INTO THIS
SCENARIO WITH
SURPRISING EASE.

WHERE ONCE I THOUGHT
OF ROUGH HANDS TOUCHING
ME AND BRISTLY FACES
PLANTING KISSES, HERE
WAS SOMETHING
ENTIRELY DIFFERENT.

A **TENDER FANTASY.**

I IMAGINED
LONG, SILKY HAIR
CARRESSING ME AS
SHE MOVED.



I IMAGINED HER
SCENT, AND SMALL
WHISPERS OF THAT
WONDERFUL VOICE...

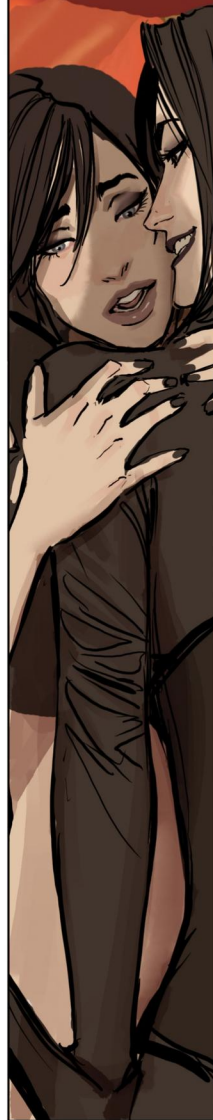
"DO I EXCITE YOU,
MARIANNE?"

YES...



SHE REACHES
DOWN, AND AS
SHE DOES, SO
DO I...

IN MY FANTASY, **HER**
HANDS FIND ME AS
EAGER AS MY OWN DO.



I AM WAY PAST
THE POINT OF
A **SEXUAL**
TEST-DRIVE.

I SLAM THAT
PEDAL TO THE METAL
AND GO OFF-ROAD...





AT SOME LATER POINT, I COULD
FACE THE...REAL-LIFE IMPLICATIONS.

BUT FOR THE MOMENT, THIS
FANTASY INTERESTED ME MORE.

THIS SECRET WORLD
I'VE BUILT FOR US...
AND IN IT, WHERE
ONCE HANDSOME MEN
WOULD PERFORM
IMPRESSIVE FEATS
OF SEXUAL PROWESS,
THERE WAS MIRIAM.

A WITCHY, FELINE
SEDUCTRESS...

AND ME...I WAS MARIANNE,
OF HER DARK HEART...

AND SO I IMAGINE HER
PLANTING A TRAIL OF KISSES
ON ME. LOWER, AND LOWER,
AND LOWER, UNTIL...

WELL...WHAT WAS THE LINE, AGAIN?

MARIANNE, OF
MY DARK HEART --

I REMEMBER THE TIME
WHEN WE HOWLED AT
THE NIGHT!

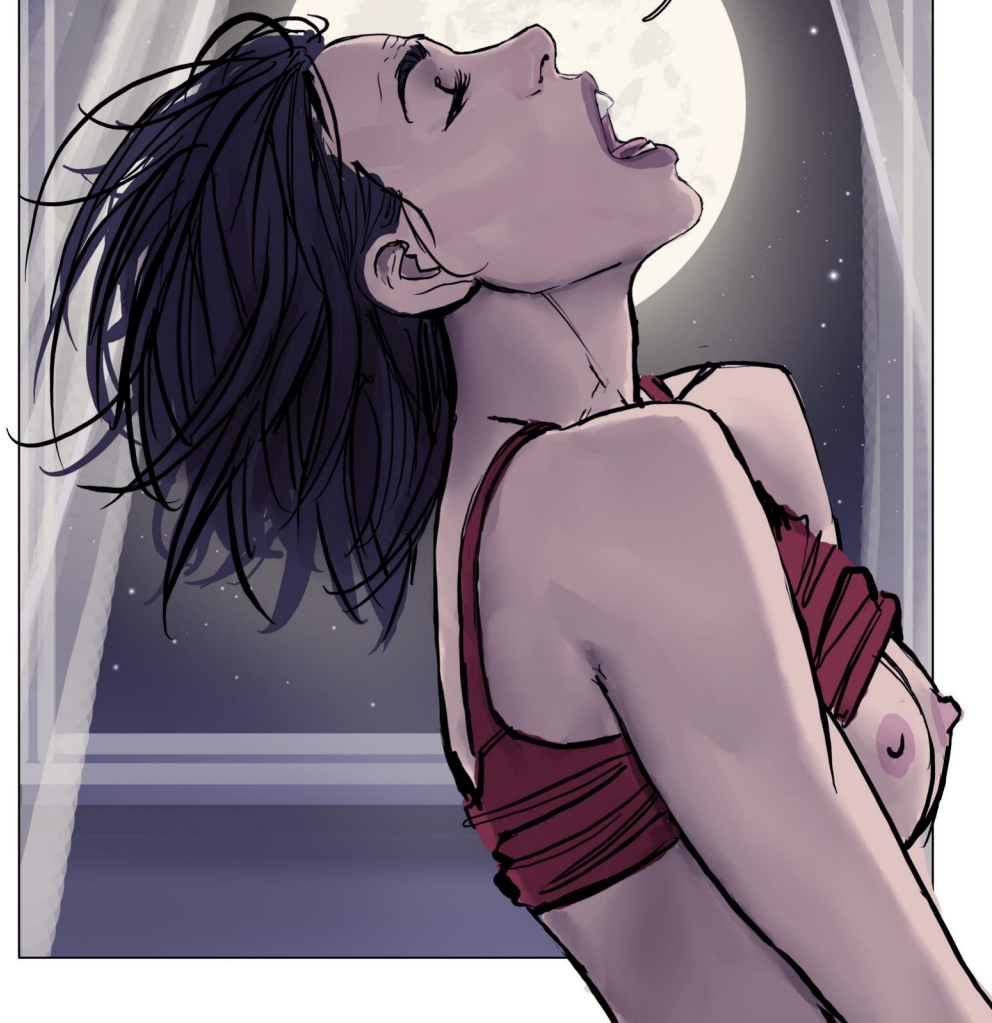
AND SO I DID JUST THAT.

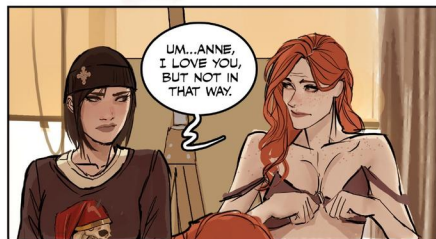
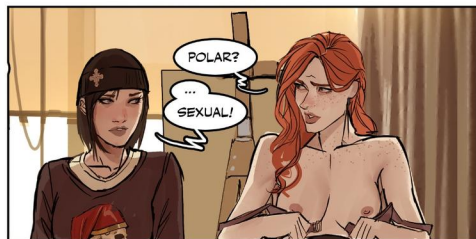
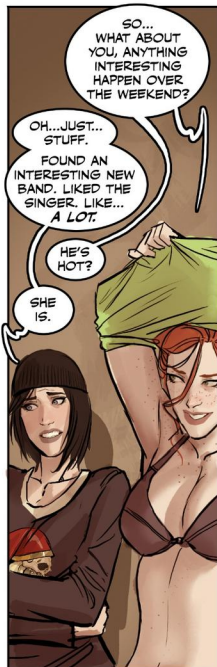
OH FUH-UUUUUHHH --

I HOWLED AT THE NIGHT.

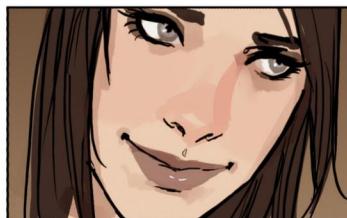
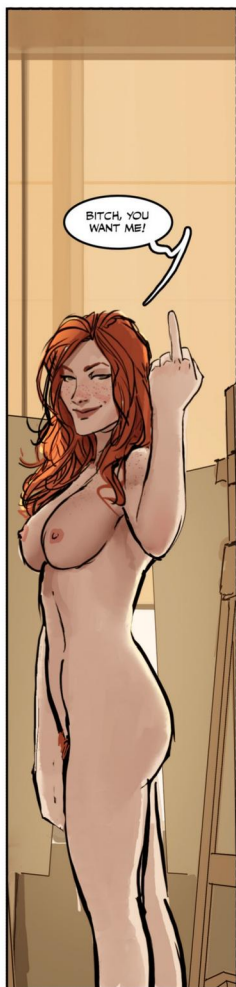
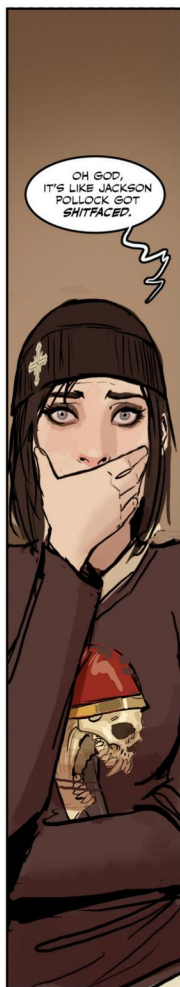
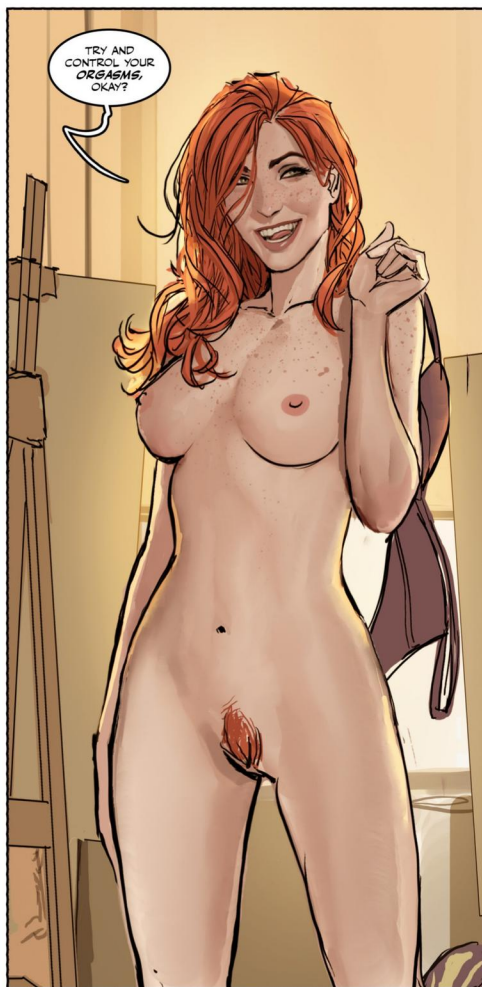
HHHAWWWWW!!!!

WELL...I MEAN...
IT *KINDA* SOUNDED
LIKE HOWLING.









YOU WANNA HEAR SOMETHING FUNNY?

WHEN I TOLD HER I WAS BI, SHE COVERED UP.

I REMEMBER THAT BECAUSE IT WAS THE FIRST TIME I
EVER FELT DOUBT WHEN BEING HONEST WITH CASSIE.

THE FIRST TIME I REGRETTED TELLING HER SOMETHING.

IT DIDN'T LAST LONG...BUT FOR THE FIRST TIME I
THOUGHT TO MYSELF -- "WHAT IF I JUST LOST HER?"

I ASKED HER ABOUT IT LATER THAT DAY...SHE LAUGHED AND SAID
THAT IT JUST DIDN'T FEEL LIKE A TITS-OUT CONVERSATION.

AND THAT WAS CASSIE IN A
NUTSHELL..

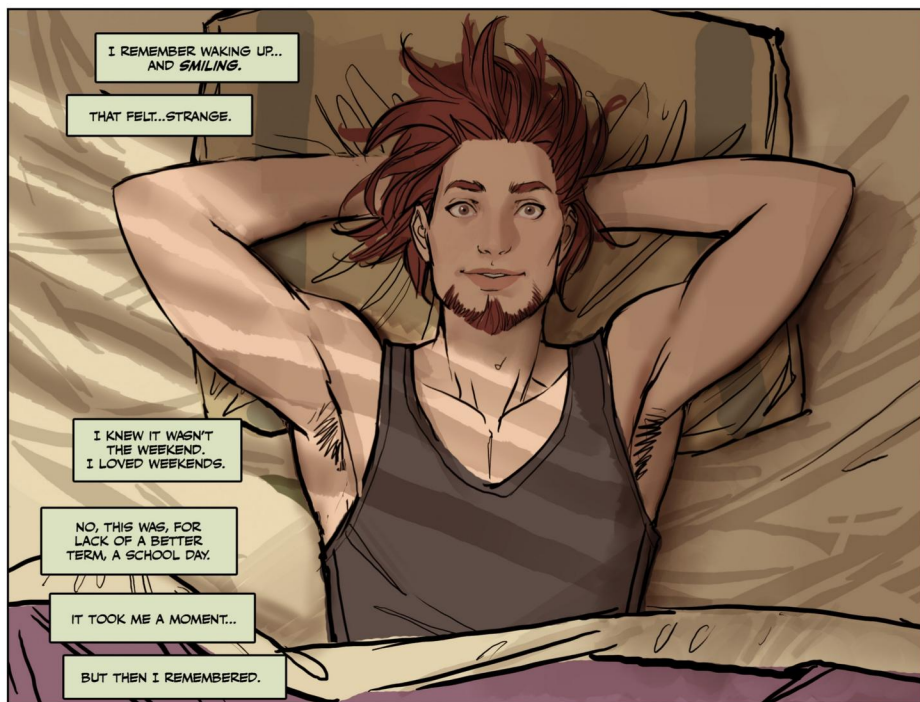
IN THE END, THE ONLY THING THAT CHANGED
WAS THAT NOW SHE HAD SOME AMMO TO
FIRE BACK AT MY STRIPPER JOKES.

AND SO...I WAS MYSELF
AROUND HER ONCE AGAIN.

I MEAN...THAT WAS WHY WE BECAME
FRIENDS IN THE FIRST PLACE...

AND LORD KNOWS I NEEDED FRIENDS --
CAUSE MY LIFE WAS ABOUT TO GET NUTS.





IT WAS TRUE. ALL GOSSIP HAD A SHELF LIFE...AND MINE SEEMED TO BE HITTING ITS EXPIRATION DATE.



BUT THAT WASN'T THE REASON I SMILED.



NO, I SMILED BECAUSE OF A LIBRARY.



A PARK BENCH.



A COFFEE PLACE.



I SMILED BECAUSE OF THE PERSON WHO MADE THOSE PLACES SPECIAL.



DUDE!
HUFF
PANT

SLOW DOWN!!!
I CAN RUN
BUT NOT --
WHEEZE

-- NOT UP
THE STAIRS
WITH A BAG
FULL OF
BOOKS!





YEAH, IT WAS TRUE THAT BY THEN MOST OF PEOPLE WHO MADE FUN OF ME HAD MOVED ON TO *FRESH* ENTERTAINMENT...

BUT GOSSIP IS A HYDRA. EVEN AS IT LAY DYING, I KNEW THAT ALLY AND ME SEEN TOGETHER COULD REAWAKEN IT, GIVE IT FIVE HEADS AND A STRONG PAIR OF LEGS TO STAND ON...

SO I DID THE ONLY THING THAT MADE SENSE TO ME.



I AVOIDED HER IN THE HALLWAYS...



MADE EXCUSES AS TO WHY WE COULD ONLY MEET FAR FROM COLLEGE...



BUT YOU CAN'T *ESCAPE* ALLY.

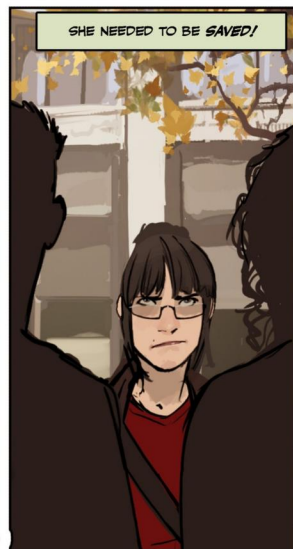


NO MORE THAN YOU CAN *ESCAPE* GOSSIP!



AND SO, INEVITABLY, PEOPLE STARTED APPROACHING ALLY WITH TOTALLY LEGIT "INFORMATION" ABOUT ME...

AFTER ALL, A PERSON IN THE TOILET NEXT DOOR TOLD A CLASSMATE'S NEIGHBOR HOW DANGEROUS I WAS!



SHE NEEDED TO BE *SAVED*!



ALLY KEPT HER *RESPONSE* SHORT, SIMPLE, AND TO THE POINT --





ALLISON CARTER.

I'D KNOWN SHE WAS
FOR REAL SINCE THAT
DAY IN THE LIBRARY.



EVEN SO, MY TRUST ISSUES
KEPT HER AT ARM'S LENGTH.

I WAS AFRAID THAT ONE DAY, WITH ENOUGH
MALICIOUS TALK, SHE WOULD GIVE UP...
THAT THEY WOULD *TURN* HER AGAINST ME.

BUT THERE WAS ONE IMPORTANT
DETAIL THAT I KEPT OVERLOOKING...



WHEN THEY TOLD HER HOW
DISGUSTING AND *PERVERTED*
I WAS...THEY MISSED THE MOST
IMPORTANT THING...

SHE SAID THAT
YOU UNDERSTOOD
HER BETTER THAN I
EVER COULD!

SHE AND I WERE
THE *SAME*.



AND THIS TIME SHE WASN'T
JUST FLIPPING OFF SOME
RANDOM NOBODY.

ALLY CHOSE *ME*
OVER HER BEST FRIEND...

SHE HAD MY BACK.



AND I *SURE AS HELL*
WAS GONNA HAVE
HERS.



I DIDN'T HAVE MUCH TO OFFER HER...BUT I WANTED HER TO KNOW THAT I UNDERSTOOD HOW BIG THIS WAS FOR HER...



I WANTED HER TO KNOW HOW BIG THIS WAS FOR ME. THAT I TRULY APPRECIATED HER. TRULY TRUSTED HER.



AND THEN IT HIT ME...

BUT THAT...



THERE WAS ONLY ONE WAY I COULD SHOW IT...

JUST...FOR SAFE KEEPING.

ON THAT DAY, WE WENT FROM BEING FRIENDS TO BEING *BEST* FRIENDS.

AND THAT LASTED FOR EIGHT WONDERFUL WEEKS.

AS FOR WHAT HAPPENED AFTER THAT...WELL...



I'LL GET TO THAT THE SAME WAY *WE* GOT TO IT -- ONE *SMALL VICTORY* AT A TIME.

ONE PACK OF CHEWING GUM.

ONE BAR OF CHOCOLATE...

TABOO CAGE
27

Special
Interview:
Mistress
Lexis
Ravage

Stay silent!
Stay still!
Full body
harness
spec

Leila
less
Budge
your

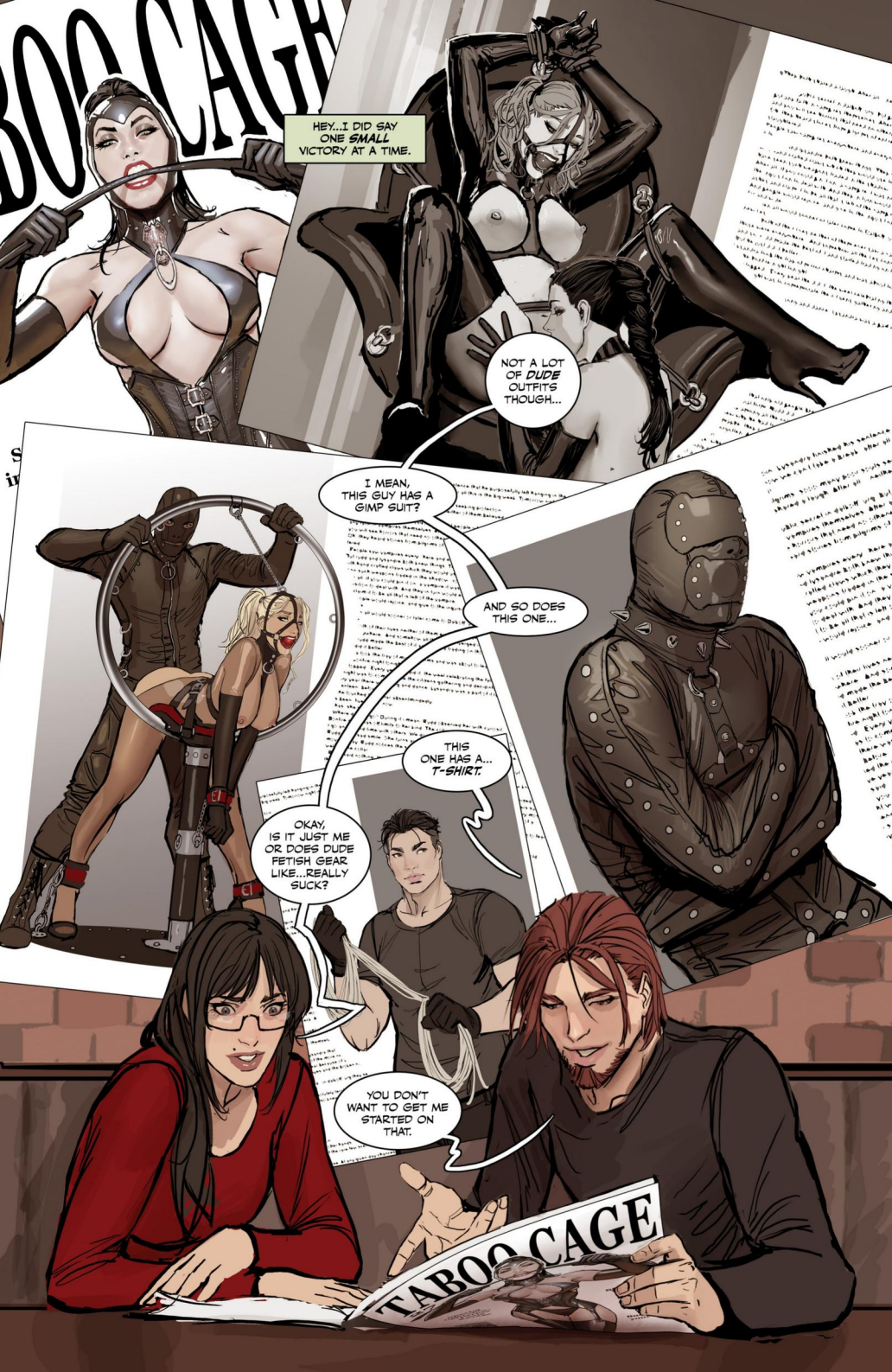
ONE...

TABOO
CAGE?

OH, AND A
COPY OF THE NEW
YORK TIMES.

YES.

WEEK 1 OF OUR FRIENDSHIP:
WE BOUGHT OUR FIRST *PORN*
MAGAZINE TOGETHER.



HEY...I DID SAY
ONE *SMALL*
VICTORY AT A TIME.

NOT A LOT
OF *DUDE*
OUTFITS
THOUGH...

I MEAN,
THIS GUY HAS A
GIMP SUIT?

AND SO DOES
THIS ONE...

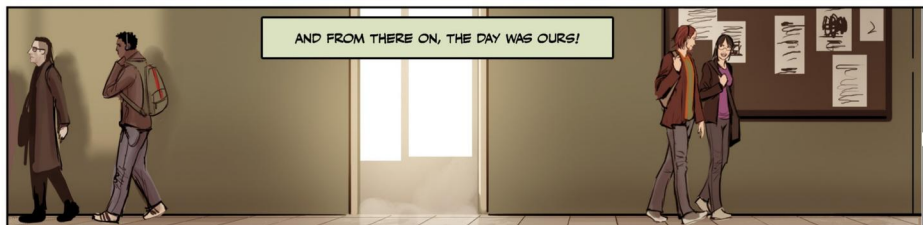
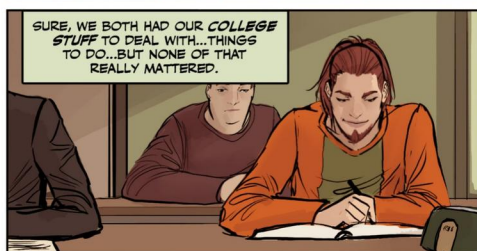
THIS
ONE HAS A...
T-SHIRT.

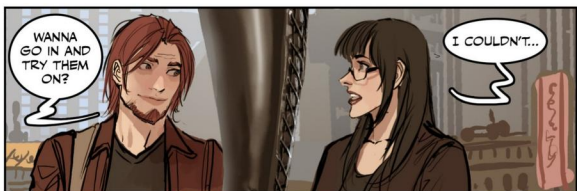
OKAY,
IS IT JUST ME
OR DOES *DUDE*
FETISH GEAR
LIKE...REALLY
SUCK?

YOU DON'T
WANT TO GET ME
STARTED ON
THAT.

TABOO CAGE









NAH, THE LACES ARE DECORATIVE. THE BOOTS ARE ACTUALLY STRETCHY.

SO, NO TIME FOR ME TO GRAB A COFFEE?

NO, BUT YOU MAY WANT TO GRAB YOUR JAW FROM OFF THE FLOOR!

CAUSE, DUDE? YOU ARE *SO* NOT READY FOR THIS!

I GIVE YOU -- THE REASON I'LL BE CRYING MYSELF TO SLEEP FOR THE NEXT WEEK OR SO!

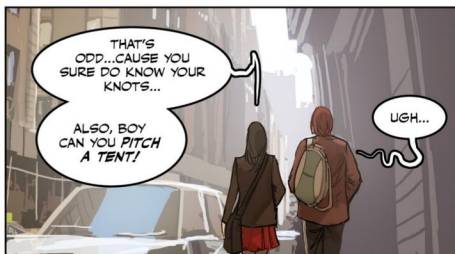
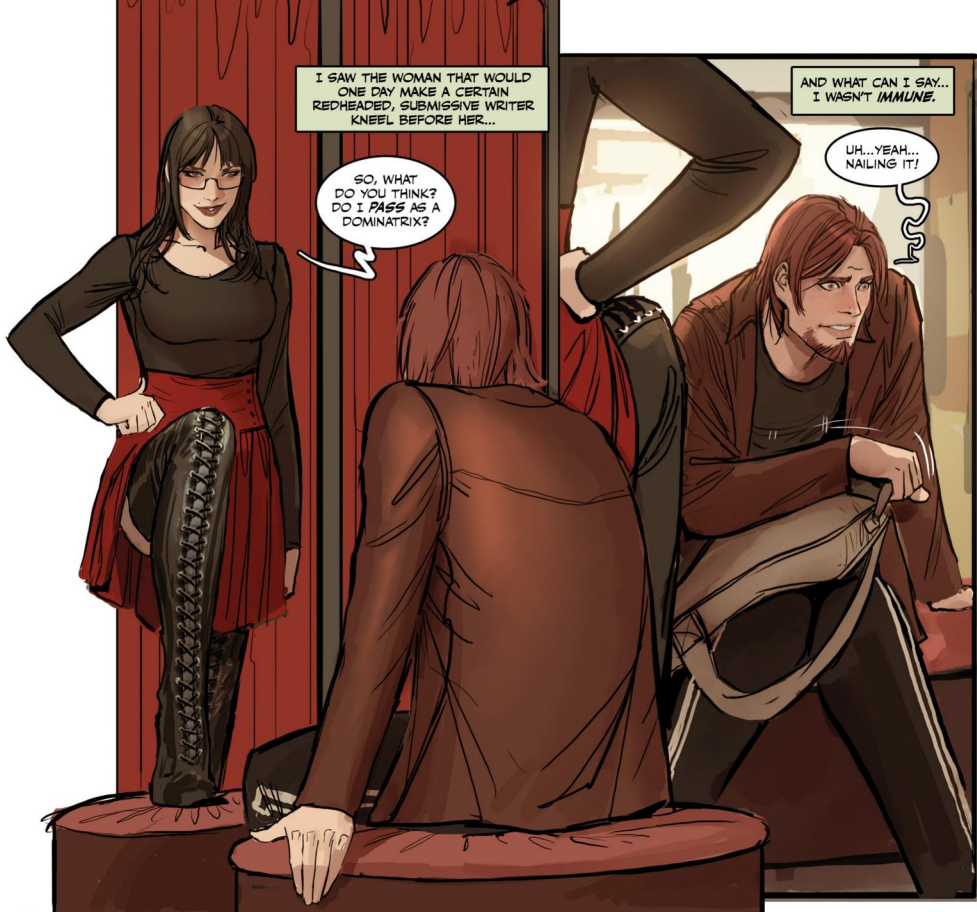


YOU KNOW, THE WEIRD THING WAS...BACK WHEN SHE DID HER ROPE THING IN THE LIBRARY, I WAS TOO STUNNED TO EVEN CONSIDER THE WHOLE THING *SEXUAL* IN ANY WAY.

EVEN AFTER THAT, I GUESS I WAS JUST TOO EXCITED TO TALK TO SOMEBODY ABOUT ALL THIS STUFF TO NOTICE...

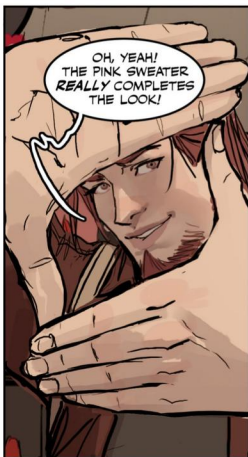
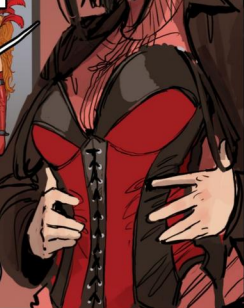
BUT THAT DAY IN THE SHOE STORE...

I TRULY SAW HER.













I HONESTLY CONSIDERED THROWING THE CONDOMS AWAY. TRUTH IS, I WAS NEVER ONE OF THOSE, "KEEP THEM HANDY AT ALL TIMES" TYPES. I JUST LACKED THAT KIND OF SHEER OPTIMISM, I GUESS.

BUT STILL, I POCKETED THEM. I GUESS I KEPT THEM BECAUSE THEY WERE FROM *HER*... THEY WERE OUR SCORE, AND THEY WERE FUNNY.

JUST A NICE REMINDER OF A FUN TIME TOGETHER. HEH...



ANYHOW...

IT WAS ABOUT TWO MONTHS INTO OUR FRIENDSHIP.. EIGHT WEEKS HAD PASSED.

IT WAS THE DAY WHEN **EVERYTHING CHANGED.**

CALL ME MISTRESS!



I MAY NEED SOME PERSUADING...

WHAT TOOK YOU SO LONG, BY THE WAY?



YOUR FAVORITE BANDS?

FAVORITE? **YES. BANDS? NOPE!**

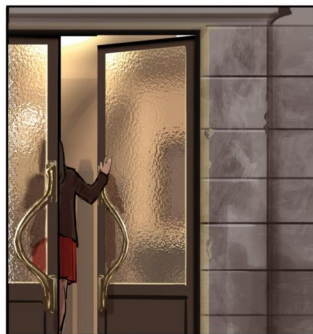
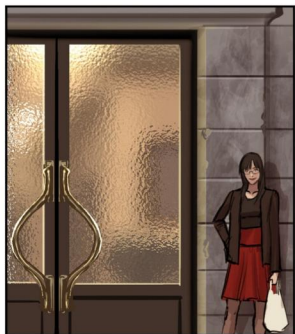


OKAY...SO, THE PROFESSOR THAT TEACHES WEB DESIGN IS ALSO IN CHARGE OF NETWORK MAINTENANCE FOR THE COLLEGE.

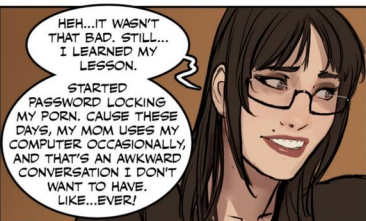
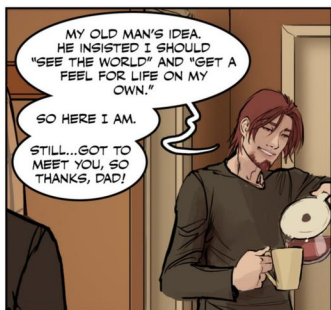
HE HAD TO GO OVER A BUNCH OF COMPUTERS, REPAIR INSTALLATIONS, BASIC-BUT-TEDEIOUS SHIT, RIGHT?

I'LL TAKE YOUR WORD FOR IT.











WE WERE TWO PERVERTS
WITH A BAG FULL OF
BONPAGE PORN --

LIFE WAS GOOD!

AS FOR THE PORN ITSELF?
IT VARIED IN QUALITY.

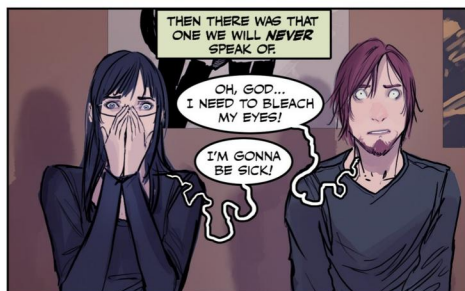
MUCH OF IT WAS
UNDERWHELMING...
BUT AT TIMES FUNNY.



SOME WAS -- AT
THE VERY LEAST -- A
CONVERSATION STARTER.

I DON'T
MIND IT IT'S JUST...
I DON'T KNOW, GAS MASKS
JUST NEVER DID IT
FOR ME?

I KNOW
WHAT YOU MEAN. IN
THEORY THEY KINDA WORK
LIKE GAGS, BUT VISUALLY...
I DON'T KNOW, I THINK
MAYBE WITH SOME
MORE INTERESTING
DESIGNS...



THEN THERE WAS THAT
ONE WE WILL NEVER
SPEAK OF.

OH, GOD...
I NEED TO BLEACH
MY EYES!

I'M GONNA
BE SICK!



I THOUGHT
YOU SAID YOU PICKED
THE BEST ONES?

HEY, I COMBINED
TAGS AND RATINGS...
NOT MY DAMN FAULT
SOME TAGS WERE
IN GERMAN!



THANKFULLY, AN
OVER-THE-TOP CARTOON
PORNO MADE US FORGET
THE UNHOLY...

SHE GREW A
THIRD DICK!!!

LIKE...OKAY! NOW
I LEGIT NEED TO KNOW!
HOW IS THAT ONE EVEN
USEFUL?

LIKE...ONE IN
THE PINK, ONE IN THE
STINK, AND THE THIRD
ONE TO CHEER FOR
THE OTHER
TWO??

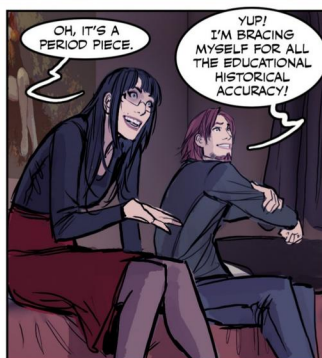
WE WERE
HAVING A
BLAST.
IN FACT,
IRONICALLY
ENOUGH,
THE THING
THAT
ULTIMATELY
DERAILED
OUR
EVENING...



...WAS SOME
LEGITIMATELY
GREAT PORN.

WHICH ONE
IS THIS?

IT SAYS:
LADY IN THE
IRON MASK.



OH, IT'S A
PERIOD PIECE.

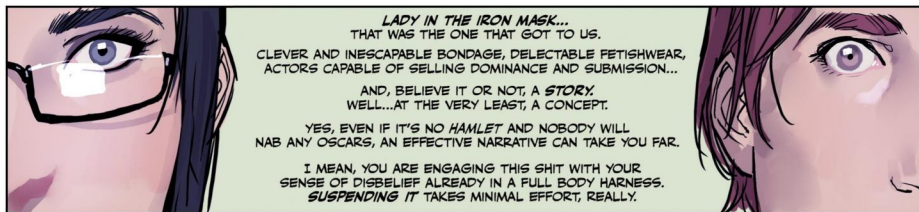
YUP!
I'M BRACING
MYSELF FOR ALL
THE EDUCATIONAL
HISTORICAL
ACCURACY!



TEN MINUTES
LATER.

AH, YES.
THIS *DOES*
SUIT YOU
BETTER!

MMMPF!



LADY IN THE IRON MASK...
THAT WAS THE ONE THAT GOT TO US.
CLEVER AND INESCAPABLE BONDAGE, DELECTABLE FETISHWEAR,
ACTORS CAPABLE OF SELLING DOMINANCE AND SUBMISSION...
AND, BELIEVE IT OR NOT, A *STORY*.
WELL...AT THE VERY LEAST, A CONCEPT.
YES, EVEN IF IT'S NO *HAMLET* AND NOBODY WILL
NAB ANY OSCARS, AN EFFECTIVE NARRATIVE CAN TAKE YOU FAR.
I MEAN, YOU ARE ENGAGING THIS SHIT WITH YOUR
SENSE OF DISBELIEF ALREADY IN A FULL BODY HARNESS.
SUSPENDING IT TAKES MINIMAL EFFORT, REALLY.



AND THIS DAMNED
THING NOT ONLY
SUSPENDED OUR
DISBELIEF BUT
POURED HOT WAX
ALL OVER IT AND
HAD IT *BEGGING*
FOR MORE.

MMNFI!

OH, COME NOW,
YOUR MAJESTY. YOUR
SISTER WILL TAKE GOOD
CARE OF THE THRONE.

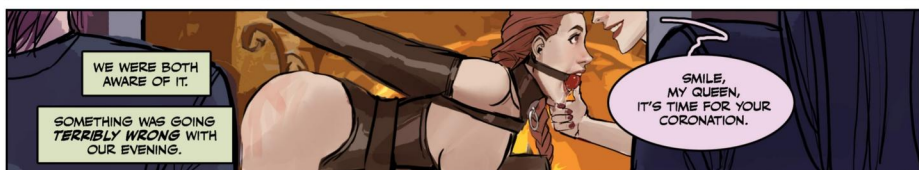
AND LOOK,
YOU STILL GET TO
WEAR A FETCHING
CROWN FOR THE
REST OF YOUR
LIFE.



NOW, I CAN'T SAY WHETHER OR NOT WATCHING
PORN TOGETHER DOES MUCH FOR VANILLA
COUPLES...BUT ALLY AND I WERE DANGEROUSLY
AWARE OF THE *MOOD SHIFT* IN THE ROOM.

WHERE BEFORE THERE
WERE CHUCKLES AND PUNS...

NOW THERE WAS ATTENTIVE
SILENCE, BROKEN BY THE SOUND
OF THE MOVIE, ALLY'S FIDGETING,
AND MY OWN ATTEMPTS TO
CONCEAL THE BLATANTLY OBVIOUS.



WE WERE BOTH
AWARE OF IT.

SOMETHING WAS GOING
TERRIBLY WRONG WITH
OUR EVENING.

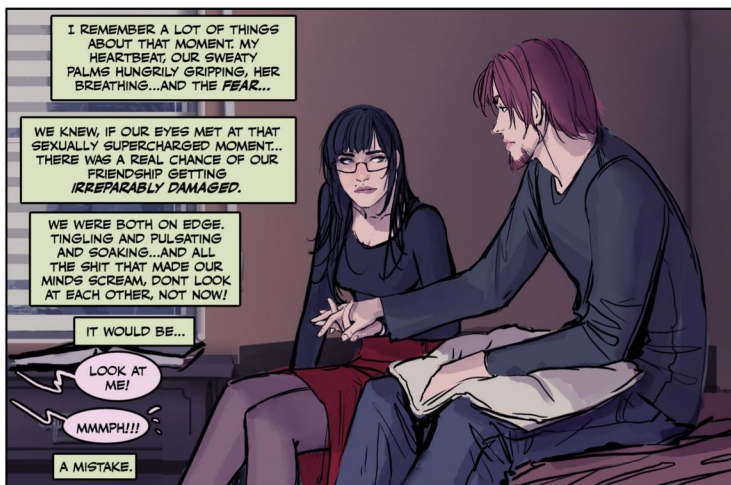
SMILE,
MY QUEEN,
IT'S TIME FOR YOUR
CORONATION.



TERRIBLY...



TERRIBLY WRONG.



I REMEMBER A LOT OF THINGS ABOUT THAT MOMENT. MY HEARTBEAT, OUR SWEATY PALMS HUNGRILY GRIPPING, HER BREATHING...AND THE FEAR...

WE KNEW, IF OUR EYES MET AT THAT SEXUALLY SUPERCHARGED MOMENT... THERE WAS A REAL CHANCE OF OUR FRIENDSHIP GETTING IRREPARABLY DAMAGED.

WE WERE BOTH ON EDGE. TINGLING AND PULSATING AND SOAKING...AND ALL THE SHIT THAT MADE OUR MINDS SCREAM, DONT LOOK AT EACH OTHER, NOT NOW!

IT WOULD BE...

LOOK AT ME!

MMMPH!!!

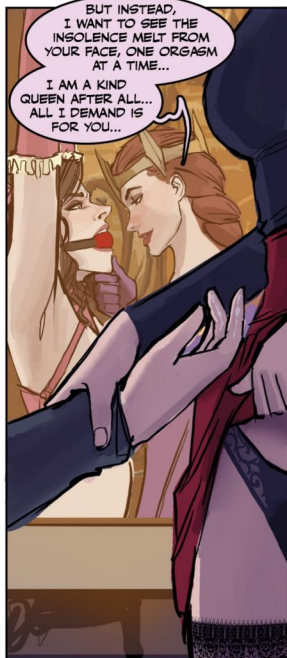
A MISTAKE.



I'LL ADMIT, YOUR LITTLE RESISTANCE WAS AMUSING...BUT YOU WERE DOOMED TO FAIL.



YOU KNOW, I AM HALF-TEMPTED TO MAKE YOU WEAR THAT "CROWN" YOU INTENDED FOR ME...

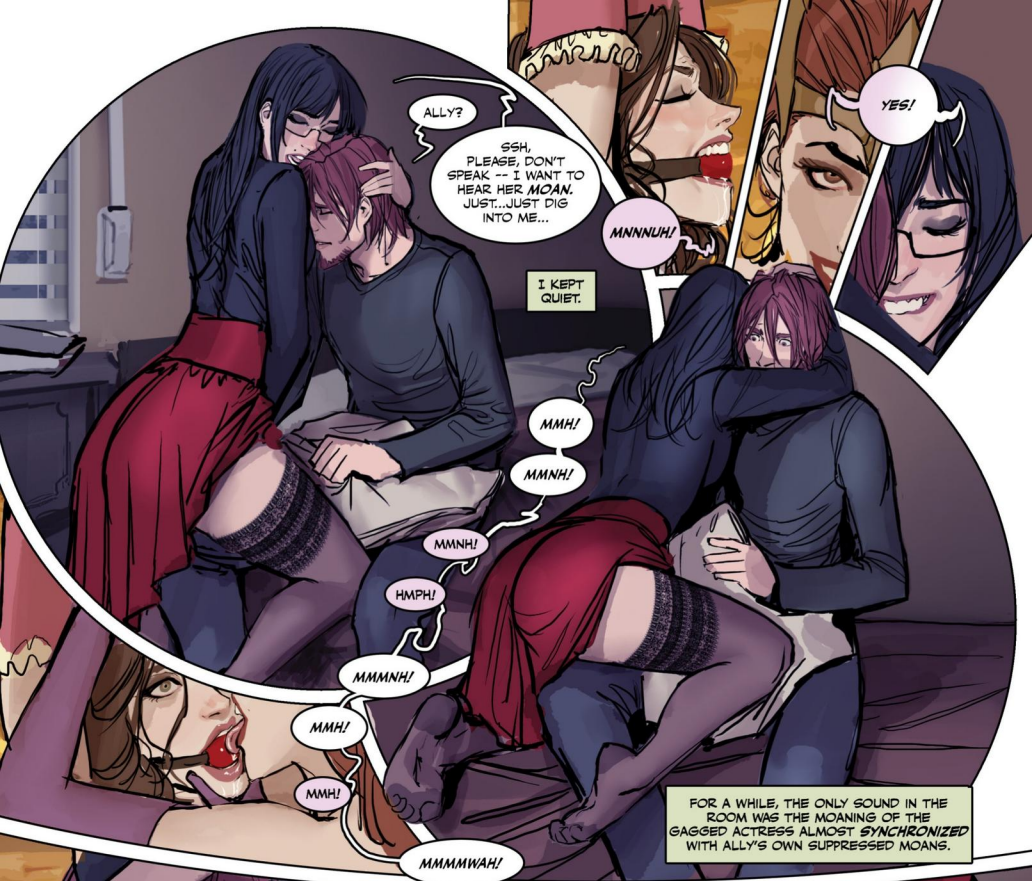


BUT INSTEAD, I WANT TO SEE THE INSOLENCE MELT FROM YOUR FACE, ONE ORGASM AT A TIME...

I AM A KIND QUEEN AFTER ALL... ALL I DEMAND IS FOR YOU...



TO WORSHIP ME.



ALLY?

SSH,
PLEASE, DON'T
SPEAK -- I WANT TO
HEAR HER MOAN.
JUST...JUST DIG
INTO ME...

I KEPT
QUIET.

YES!

MMNNH!

MMH!

MMNH!

MMNH!

HMPH!

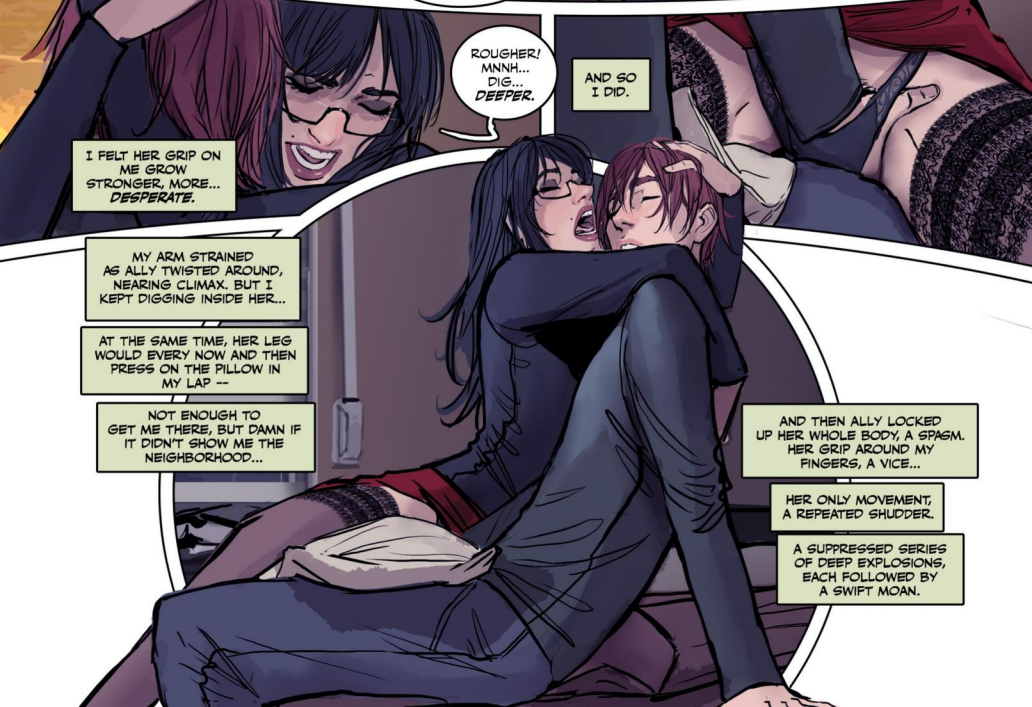
MMMNH!

MMH!

MMH!

MMMMWAH!

FOR A WHILE, THE ONLY SOUND IN THE
ROOM WAS THE MOANING OF THE
GAGGED ACTRESS ALMOST *SYNCHRONIZED*
WITH ALLY'S OWN SUPPRESSED MOANS.



ROUGHER!
MNNH...
DIG...
DEEPER.

AND SO
I DID.

I FELT HER GRIP ON
ME GROW
STRONGER, MORE...
DESPERATE.

MY ARM STRAINED
AS ALLY TWISTED
AROUND,
NEARING CLIMAX, BUT I
KEPT DIGGING INSIDE HER...

AT THE SAME TIME, HER LEG
WOULD EVERY NOW AND THEN
PRESS ON THE PILLOW IN
MY LAP --

NOT ENOUGH TO
GET ME THERE, BUT DAMN IF
IT DIDN'T SHOW ME THE
NEIGHBORHOOD...

AND THEN ALLY LOCKED
UP HER WHOLE BODY, A SPASM.
HER GRIP AROUND MY
FINGERS, A VICE...

HER ONLY MOVEMENT,
A REPEATED SHUDDER.

A SUPPRESSED SERIES
OF DEEP EXPLOSIONS,
EACH FOLLOWED BY
A SWIFT MOAN.



AND THEN...
SILENCE.

I REMEMBER
LUCIDITY CRAWLING
BACK INTO MY MIND.



REMEMBER GENTLY
REMOVING MY HAND ---
SHE FINALLY LOOKED
AT ME ONCE AGAIN...
AND THAT WAS WHEN I
GOT **REALLY** NERVOUS.

"HUFF"
YOU ARE GOOD
"HUFF" WITH YOUR
HANDS.

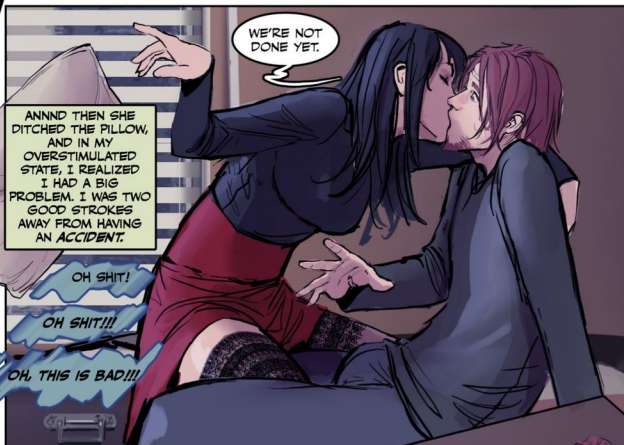
WHAT DO I DO
NOW?



SAY
SOMETHING!!!
WELL...
TECHNICALLY,
I'M GOOD AT
LOCKPICKING.
AAAAAARGHH!!!



OKAY.
UH...THAT
CAME OFF
WEIRD.
JUST...
SHUT IT,
ALAN!



WE'RE NOT
DONE YET.

ANNND THEN SHE
DITCHED THE PILLOW,
AND IN MY
OVERSTIMULATED
STATE, I REALIZED
I HAD A BIG
PROBLEM. I WAS TWO
GOOD STROKES
AWAY FROM HAVING
AN ACCIDENT.

OH SHIT!

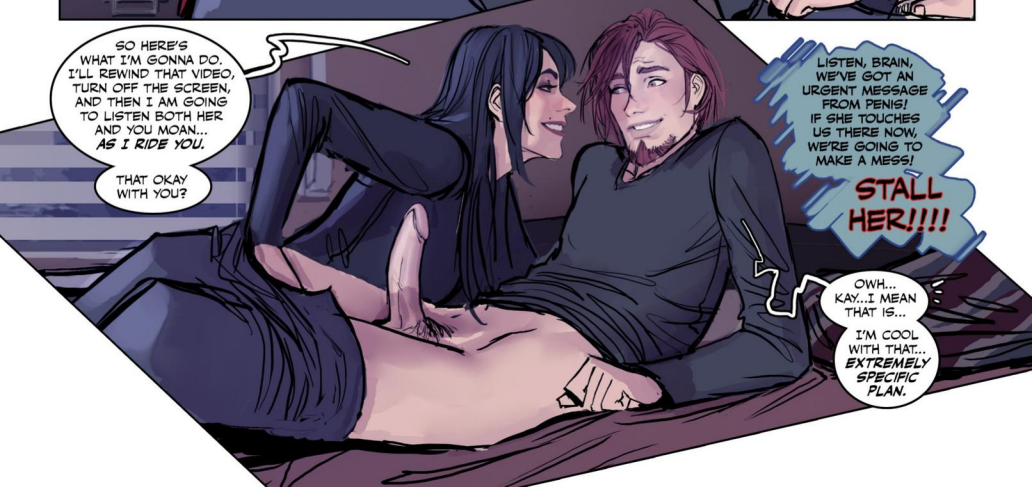
OH SHIT!!!

OH, THIS IS BAD!!!



SHE IS TOUCHING...OKAY! BASEBALL
GAMES BEING NARRATED BY MY OLD
HISTORY TEACHER!...WHILE HAVING
SEX WITH MY OLD MATH TEACHER,
DRESSED AS OLD CLOWNS!!!

OH!
HI, ALAN'S
PENIS!



SO HERE'S
WHAT I'M GONNA DO.
I'LL REWIND THAT VIDEO,
TURN OFF THE SCREEN,
AND THEN I AM GOING
TO LISTEN BOTH HER
AND YOU MOAN...
AS I RIDE YOU.

THAT OKAY
WITH YOU?

LISTEN, BRAIN,
WE'VE GOT AN
URGENT MESSAGE
FROM PENIS!
IF SHE TOUCHES
US THERE NOW,
WE'RE GOING TO
MAKE A MESS!

**STALL
HER!!!!**

OWH...
KAY...I MEAN
THAT IS...

I'M COOL
WITH THAT...
**EXTREMELY
SPECIFIC
PLAN.**



WHAT?

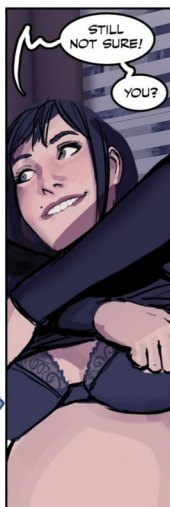
TODAY, I WAS MADE AWARE THAT THE SOUND OF THOSE LADIES' GAGGED MOANS ...DOES THINGS TO ME.

GOOD, KEEP HER TALKING! AND THINK NONSEXUAL THOUGHTS!



AS IN: YOU WANNA BE GAGGED, OR DO THE GAGGING?

I SAID NONSEXUAL THOUGHTS YOU STUPID SACK OF...



STILL NOT SURE!

YOU?



UH...YEAH, KINDA IN THE SAME BOAT.

NOT SURE.

WEIRDLY ENOUGH, WE WERE BOTH *LYING*. IT WAS A STRANGE THING TO BE EMBARRASSED ABOUT AT THE MOMENT, BUT THERE WE WERE, BOTH FULL OF SHIT. WE EACH SAMPLED THE TASTE OF DOMINANCE THAT NIGHT AND FOUND THE FLAVOR APPEALING. SHE TOOK INITIATIVE, GUIDED ME, MADE ME PLEASURE HER. AND ME...I HAD HER SATISFACTION IN THE PALM OF MY HAND. EVERY MOVE I MADE WAS MET WITH HER RESPONSE... SHE WAS A DELICATE INSTRUMENT IN MY HAND AND I HAD THE CONTROL...AND SHE SAID..."NO..."SHE ASKED FOR ME TO BE ROUGHER, TO DIG DEEPER.

TRUTH WAS, BETWEEN *DOMINANT* AND *SUBMISSIVE*, BOTH OF US ALREADY PREFERRED BEING A...



...DOM?

HUH?



A CONDOM, YOU GOT ONE, RIGHT?

AAA! SHE'S NAKED!
BUT...THIS IS FINE! AT LEAST YOU ARE NO LONGER TWITCHING...



ALRIGHT!

DO I HAVE A CONDOM?



WE GOT THIS!

ALLY, I'VE GOT THE CONDOM TO END ALL CONDOMS!
IT GLOWS, IT RIBS, IT...FLAVORS?



HAH! YOU KEPT THEM!

WELL...IT DID HAVE A RESONATING GLOW OF DESTINY AROUND IT!



OH, GOD!



I GOTTA SEE THIS!

≡ CLICK ≡





HEH! HOW'S THAT FOR A SEGUE?

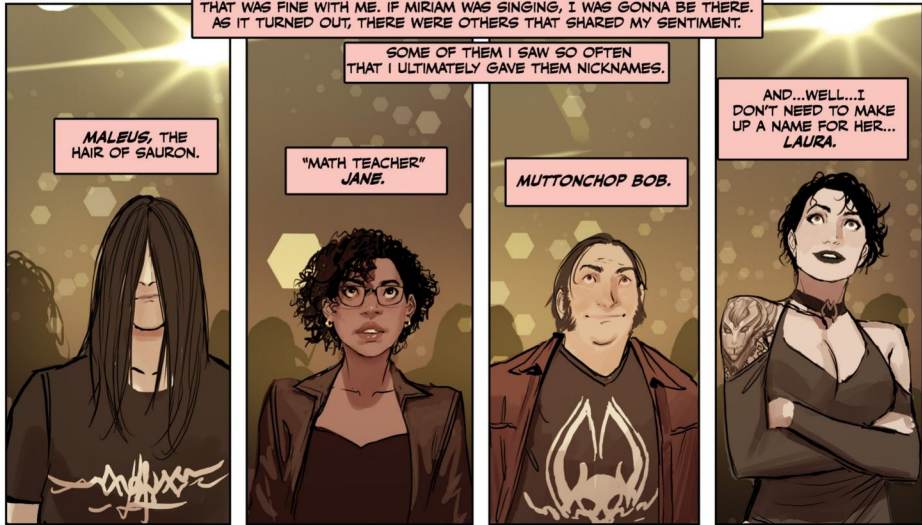
ANYWAY, IN CASE IT WASN'T OBVIOUS, I REALLY GOT HOOKED ON MIRIAM BACK THEN...



I ATTENDED EVERY GIG I COULD. IT DIDN'T MATTER IF THEY WERE SOLO ACTS OR OPENING NUMBERS FOR BIGGER BANDS, I WAS NOT GONNA MISS ANY OF IT!



IN FACT, FOR A WHILE IT SEEMED THAT MY LIFE REVOLVED AROUND COLLEGE, MIRIAM CONCERTS, AND EARNING MONEY TO ATTEND THOSE CONCERTS.



THAT WAS FINE WITH ME. IF MIRIAM WAS SINGING, I WAS GONNA BE THERE. AS IT TURNED OUT, THERE WERE OTHERS THAT SHARED MY SENTIMENT.

SOME OF THEM I SAW SO OFTEN THAT I ULTIMATELY GAVE THEM NICKNAMES.

MALEUS, THE HAIR OF SAURON.

"MATH TEACHER" JANE.

MUTTONCHOP BOB.

AND...WELL...I DON'T NEED TO MAKE UP A NAME FOR HER... LAURA.



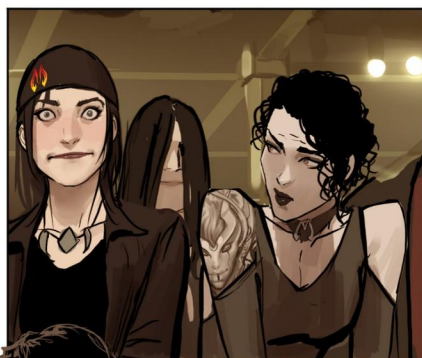
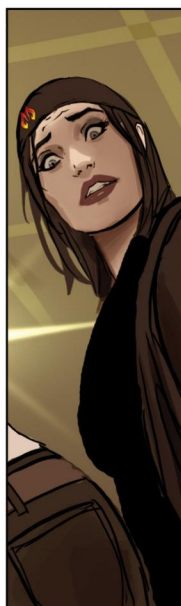
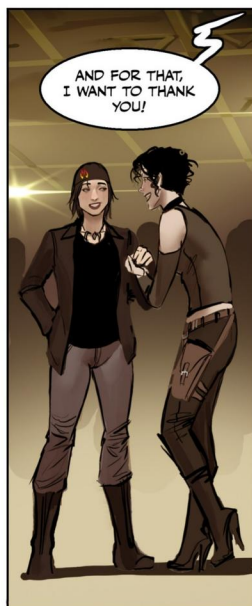
ALRIGHT, I
SEE SOME FAMILIAR
FACES HERE!

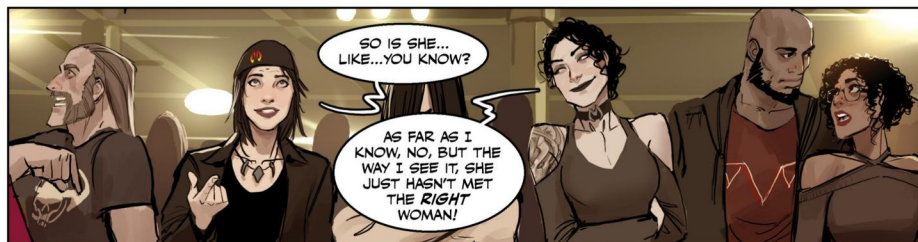
I DIDN'T KNOW
LAURA YET...

MIRIAM,
MARRY ME!!!

BUT, YOU KNOW WHAT?
I KINDA *WANTED* TO.









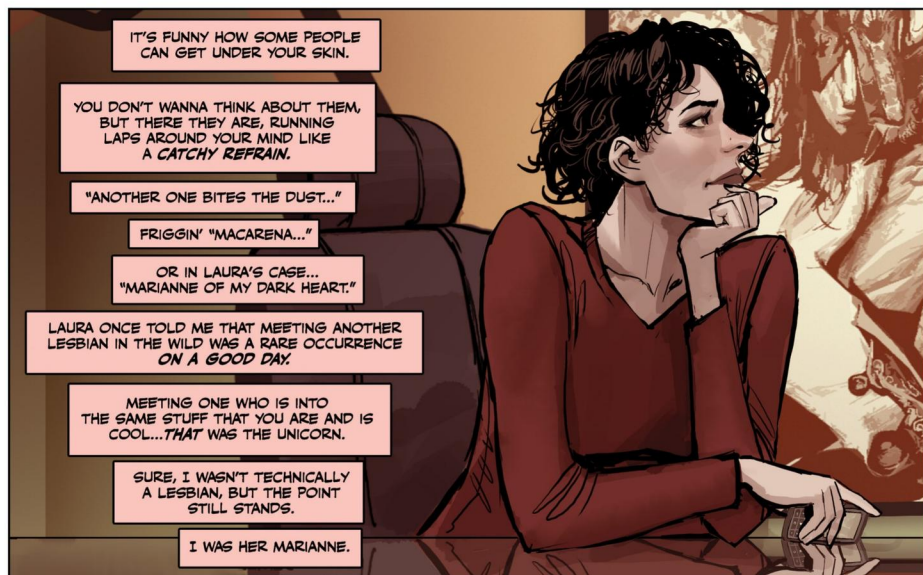


OH, I GOT
HER NUMBER...









IT'S FUNNY HOW SOME PEOPLE
CAN GET UNDER YOUR SKIN.

YOU DON'T WANNA THINK ABOUT THEM,
BUT THERE THEY ARE, RUNNING
LAPS AROUND YOUR MIND LIKE
A *CATCHY REFRAIN*.

"ANOTHER ONE BITES THE DUST..."

FRIGGIN' "MACARENA..."

OR IN LAURA'S CASE...
"MARIANNE OF MY DARK HEART."

LAURA ONCE TOLD ME THAT MEETING ANOTHER
LESBIAN IN THE WILD WAS A RARE OCCURRENCE
ON A *GOOD DAY*.

MEETING ONE WHO IS INTO
THE SAME STUFF THAT YOU ARE AND IS
COOL...*THAT WAS THE UNICORN*.

SURE, I WASN'T TECHNICALLY
A LESBIAN, BUT THE POINT
STILL STANDS.

I WAS HER MARIANNE.



THE TRUTH WAS, HER TEASING ASIDE,
WHEN SHE GAVE ME HER CELL PHONE
NUMBER, SHE DID SO IN EARNEST.

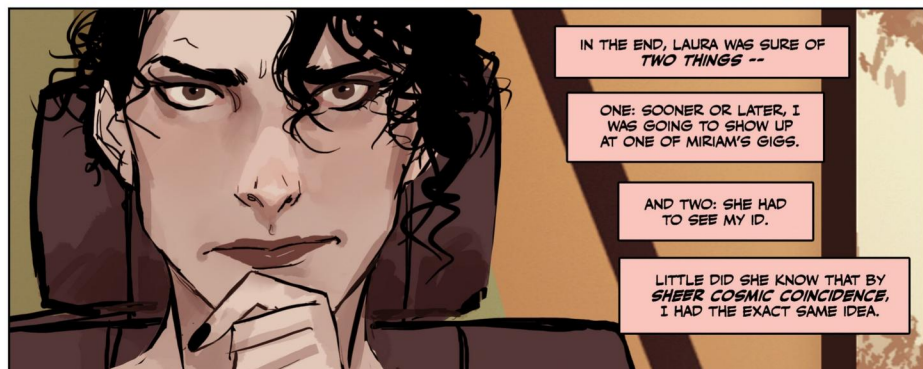
SHE *HOPED* I WOULD CALL...

SHE WANTED ME TO CALL.

IN FACT, SHE WOULD HAVE ASKED
FOR MY NUMBER IN RETURN IF IT
WASN'T FOR THE ONE BIG PROBLEM.

SEE, WHILE I TOLD HER I WAS IN FACT
NINETEEN, I HAD NO ID ON ME TO PROVE IT.

NOW, I WAS OBVIOUSLY WILLING TO
LIE ABOUT MY AGE TO GET A DRINK. IT
WASN'T MUCH OF A STRETCH TO CONSIDER
THE POSSIBILITY THAT I MIGHT DO SO
FOR...OTHER TYPES OF PLEASURES.

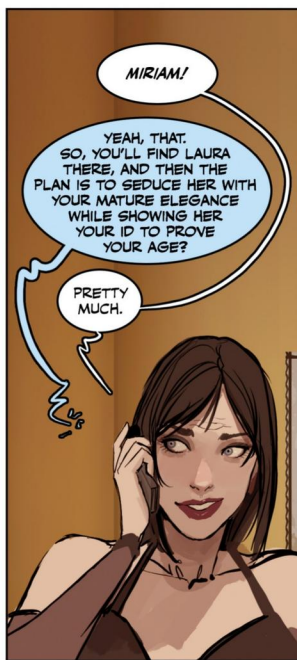


IN THE END, LAURA WAS SURE OF
TWO THINGS --

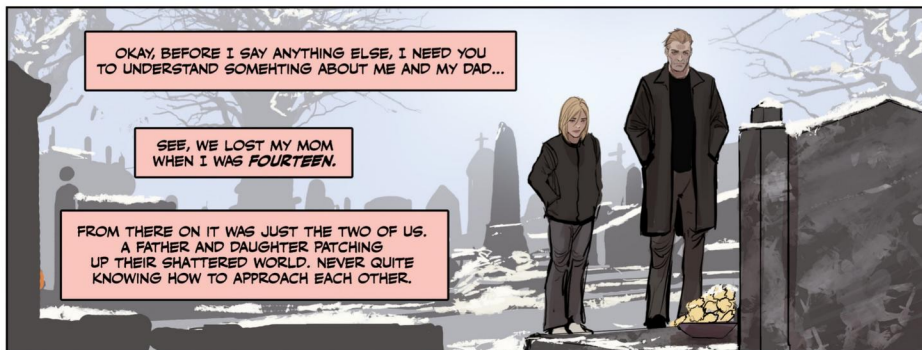
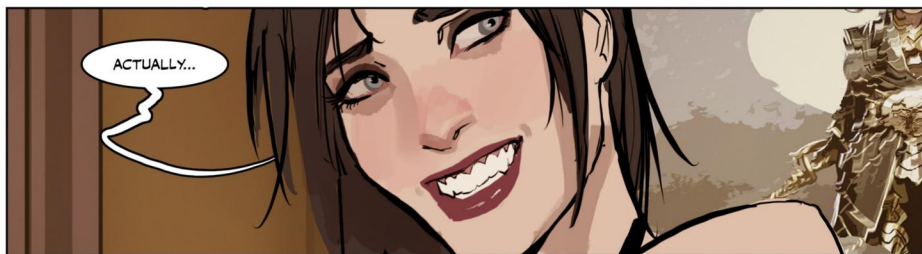
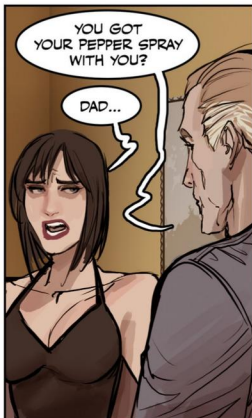
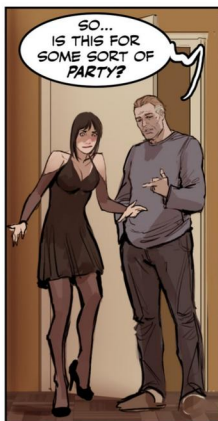
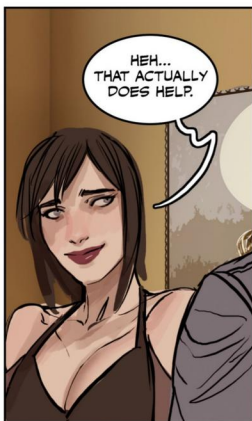
ONE: SOONER OR LATER, I
WAS GOING TO SHOW UP
AT ONE OF MIRIAM'S GIGS.

AND TWO: SHE HAD
TO SEE MY ID.

LITTLE DID SHE KNOW THAT BY
SHEER COSMIC COINCIDENCE,
I HAD THE EXACT SAME IDEA.









I WAS AN ANGRY KID FEELING CHEATED BY LIFE FOR STEALING MY MOM.



HE WAS A *COP* UNPREPARED FOR THE ROLE OF A SINGLE PARENT.

NEITHER OF US WAS HANDLING IT WELL.

SOMETIMES, IT SEEMED LIKE ALL WE EVER DID WAS ARGUE.



I GUESS WE HAD TO HIT ROCK BOTTOM BEFORE WE STARTED CLIMBING UP. AND I REMEMBER THE DAY THAT HAPPENED.

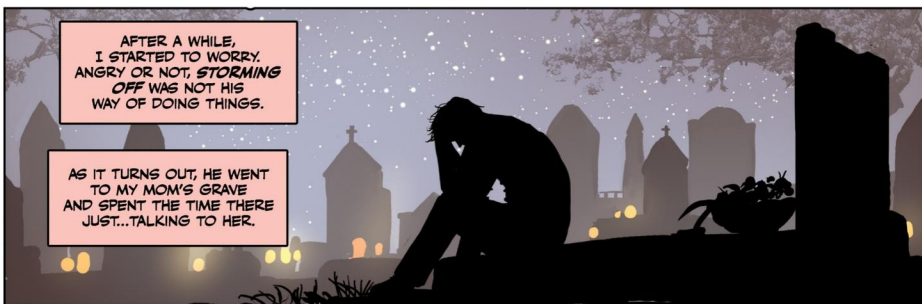
SOME KIDS AND I BROKE INTO AN ABANDONED WAREHOUSE TO PAINT SOME GRAFFITI...I GOT CAUGHT.

DAUGHTER OF A COP ESCORTED HOME BY THE POLICE...



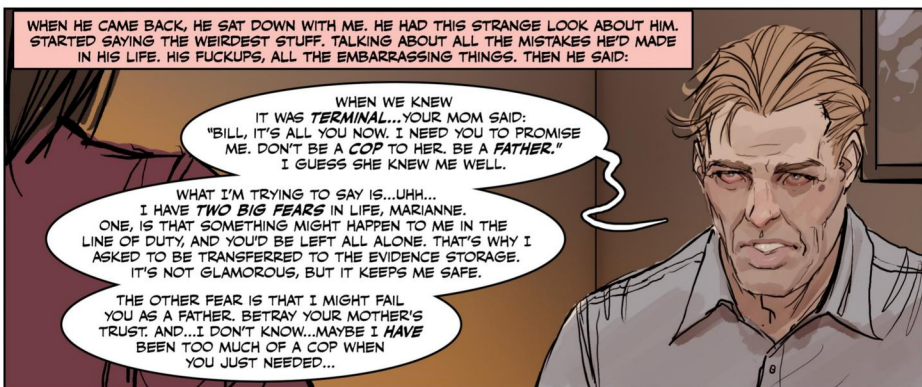
WE MUST HAVE YELLED AT EACH OTHER FOR OVER AN HOUR THAT NIGHT.

AFTERWARD, MY DAD LEFT THE APARTMENT AND WAS GONE FOR HOURS...



AFTER A WHILE, I STARTED TO WORRY. ANGRY OR NOT, *STORMING OFF* WAS NOT HIS WAY OF DOING THINGS.

AS IT TURNS OUT, HE WENT TO MY MOM'S GRAVE AND SPENT THE TIME THERE JUST...TALKING TO HER.

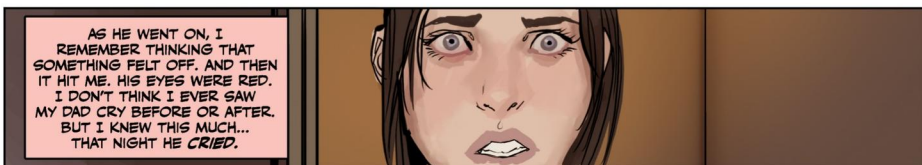


WHEN HE CAME BACK, HE SAT DOWN WITH ME. HE HAD THIS STRANGE LOOK ABOUT HIM. STARTED SAYING THE WEIRDEST STUFF. TALKING ABOUT ALL THE MISTAKES HE'D MADE IN HIS LIFE. HIS FUCKUPS, ALL THE EMBARRASSING THINGS. THEN HE SAID:

WHEN WE KNEW IT WAS *TERMINAL*...YOUR MOM SAID: "BILL, IT'S ALL YOU NOW. I NEED YOU TO PROMISE ME. DON'T BE A *COP* TO HER. BE A *FATHER*." I GUESS SHE KNEW ME WELL.

WHAT I'M TRYING TO SAY IS...UHH... I HAVE *TWO BIG FEARS* IN LIFE, MARIANNE. ONE, IS THAT SOMETHING MIGHT HAPPEN TO ME IN THE LINE OF DUTY, AND YOU'D BE LEFT ALL ALONE. THAT'S WHY I ASKED TO BE TRANSFERRED TO THE EVIDENCE STORAGE. IT'S NOT GLAMOROUS, BUT IT KEEPS ME SAFE.

THE OTHER FEAR IS THAT I MIGHT FAIL YOU AS A FATHER. BETRAY YOUR MOTHER'S TRUST. AND...I DON'T KNOW...MAYBE I *HAVE* BEEN TOO MUCH OF A *COP* WHEN YOU JUST NEEDED...



AS HE WENT ON, I REMEMBER THINKING THAT SOMETHING FELT OFF. AND THEN IT HIT ME. HIS EYES WERE RED. I DON'T THINK I EVER SAW MY DAD CRY BEFORE OR AFTER. BUT I KNEW THIS MUCH... THAT NIGHT HE *CRIED*.

AND SO I DID THE SAME.
I **CRIED** THAT NIGHT. I CRIED
IN HIS ARMS, ALL PRETENSE OF
THE EDGY HIGH-SCHOOLER **GONE**.

THAT MOMENT,
I JUST LET GO
OF IT ALL. THE PAIN.
THE RESENTMENT.
ALL OF IT.

I HELD ON TO THE
LAST VESTIGE
OF WHAT WAS MY
FAMILY, AND I HELD
ON TIGHT.



NOW, MAKE NO MISTAKE! WE DIDN'T JUST MAGICALLY FIX
YEARS OF ESTRANGEMENT WITH A SINGLE HUG, BUT IT WAS
THE HUG THAT BLEW A HOLE IN THE WALL BETWEEN US.
I STARTED SHARING. I TOLD MY DAD OF MY OWN FUCKUPS,
ALLEVATED MANY OF HIS FEARS, AND WE AGREED THAT
NO MATTER WHAT, WE WOULD BE **HONEST** WITH EACH OTHER.



SO WE DID JUST THAT, AND
BELIEVE YOU ME, IT
WASN'T ALWAYS EASY.

BUT WE KEPT AT IT...

WE CHANGED. I CHANGED. AT SIXTEEN, I
STILL WORE MY EDGY EXTERIOR, BUT
ON THE INSIDE I WAS THAT CURIOUS
KID JUMPING FROM HOBBY TO HOBBY.

AT SEVENTEEN, I MET **CASSIE**.

LIFE WAS **GOOD** AGAIN. AND
WE OWED IT ALL TO A MOMENT
OF HONESTY. WE BUILT ON THAT
MOMENT. WE BUILT ON THE
FOUNDATIONS OF TRUST IN
EACH OTHER.

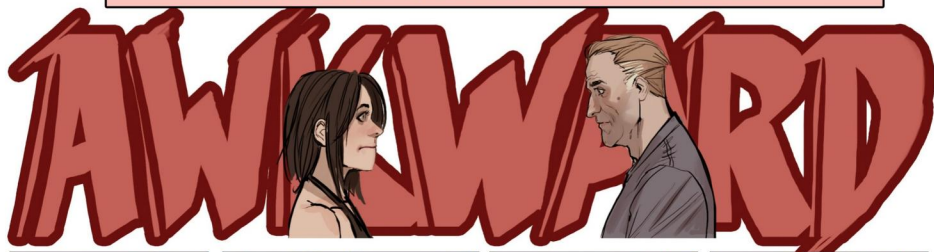
WE WERE A SMALL
FAMILY. BUT A **FAMILY**
NONETHELESS.



WHY AM I GOING ON ABOUT THIS? WELL, SOME OF MY REASONS WILL MAKE SENSE MUCH LATER, BUT FOR NOW I GUESS IT MIGHT HELP YOU UNDERSTAND WHY WHEN HE SAID THIS...



HOWEVER, EVEN WITH ALL THE HONESTY BETWEEN US, THIS WAS STILL SUPER...





TELLING MY DAD I WAS MEETING A GIRL WAS AWKWARD,
BUT THIS? THIS SOMEHOW FELT *WORSE*.

I HAD JUST SPENT TWO DAYS
OVERTHINKING MY CLOTHES,
BECAUSE AT SOME POINT IT
HIT ME THAT I DIDN'T
ACTUALLY KNOW HOW TO
SEDUCE A LESBIAN.
DON'T LAUGH!
THIS WAS ALL NEW TO ME.

YES, IN HINDSIGHT, I'M WELL AWARE
THAT THE FIRST TIME I GOT HER
ATTENTION I WAS WEARING MY
EVERYDAY CLOTHES. BUT THAT'S
HINDSIGHT FOR YOU. IT ALWAYS
ACES THAT EYE EXAM.

IN THE END, I OPTED
FOR THE DRESS
AND SHOES I WORE TO
MY COUSIN'S WEDDING
AND KEPT MY FINGERS
AND TOES CROSSED.
THE FINGERS FOR LUCK,
AND TOES CAUSE I COULDN'T
WALK IN HEELS *FOR SHIT*.

THE POINT IS...FOR THE
FIRST TIME EVER I FELT LIKE
I WAS STICKING OUT AT
A METAL CONCERT.

NOW DON'T GET ME WRONG, IT WASN'T MY CLOTHES THAT STOOD OUT THAT MUCH. A LOT OF GIRLS WOULD BRING THEIR *SEDUCTIVE A-GAME* TO THESE SHOWS. HEELS, CORSETS, LEATHER...METAL CONCERTS COULD AT TIMES EASILY BE MISTAKEN FOR A *BDSM EVENT*.

BACK THEN, HOWEVER, THAT WAS SO NOT ME.

MY JEANS AND JACKET WERE MY COMFORT ZONE.

MY ARMY BOOTS WERE MY FOUNDATION.

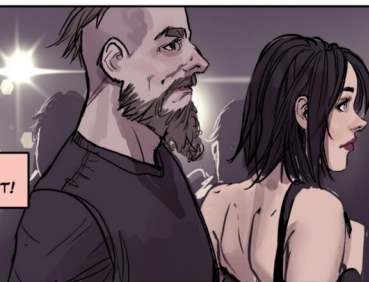
THIS...THIS WAS JUST WEIRD.



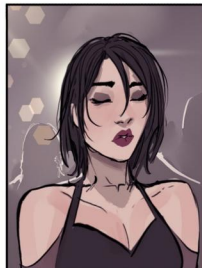
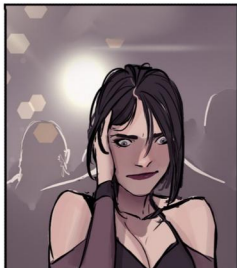
PEOPLE'S LOOKS FELT WEIRD, THE DRESS ALWAYS FELT LIKE IT WAS GETTING SHORTER BY THE MINUTE. THE GROUND FELT WOBBLY, AND IF I WAS TO BE PERFECTLY FRANK, I WAS A LITTLE COLD.

STILL...I HELD ON TO HOPE THAT IF I FOUND HER IT WAS ALL GONNA BE WORTH IT!

AND YOU KNOW WHAT...



I DID FIND HER...



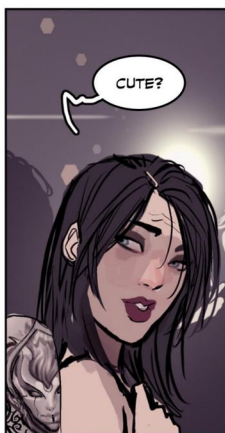
SO, WHAT DOES A GIRL NEED TO DO AROUND HERE TO GET A CUP OF COCOA FROM YOU?

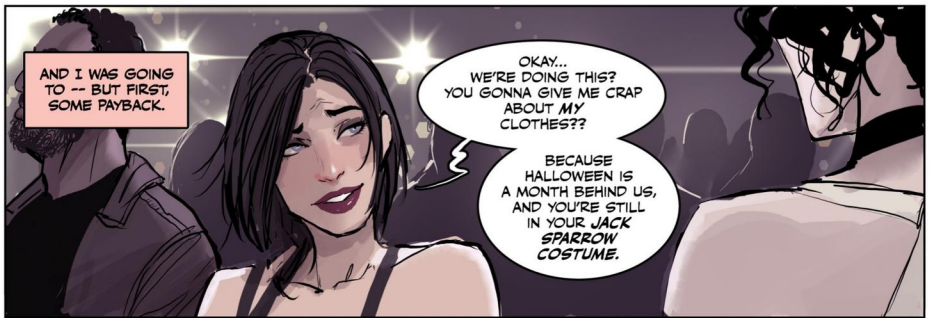


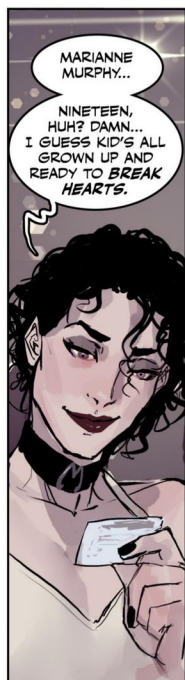
AND IT WAS SO FUCKING WORTH IT!

MARIANNE!?











LIKE EVERY TIME
BEFORE, MIRIAM
CLAIMS THE STAGE
AS HER OWN,
AND WE ALL JOIN
IN HER CELEBRATION...



I REMEMBER
THE CONSTANT FEAR
OF FALLING AS I
JUMPED WITH THE
CROWD.



I REMEMBER
LAURA'S ELATED
SMILE.



I REMEMBER
MY HEART RACING.



I REMEMBER THE
MOMENT MY NAME
ECHOED THROUGH
THE HALL...

"MARIANNE!
OF MY DARK
HEART..."



AND...

"I REMEMBER
THE TIME WHEN
WE HOWLED AT
THE NIGHT!"



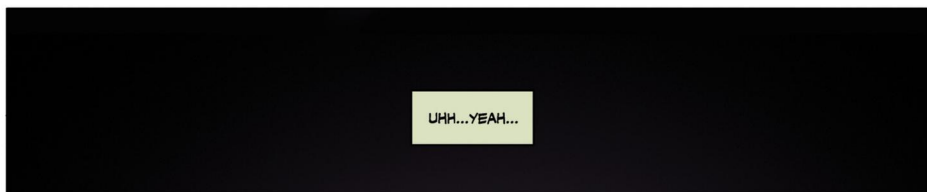
I REMEMBER THE
PERFECT KISS.



AND FROM THERE
ON MY MEMORY IS
A BIT *BLURRY*.



IT WAS A SLOW,
TENDER START TO
SOMETHING AMAZING.



UHH...YEAH...



MISTRESS...

UM...



PLEASE,
MAY I COME?



AH...
ALAN...

OKAY...



ASK ME!

MMM...

ASK ME NOW!

MISTRESS...

I MEAN...COMPARED TO WHAT
WAS AHEAD OF US, ALLY AND I
WERE OFF TO A SLOW...UM...
NOT-SO-TENDER START AS WELL?



MAY I...

MMH...
YES?

MAY...
OH, GOD...

SAY IT!



MA...

MNHHH,
TOO
LATE!



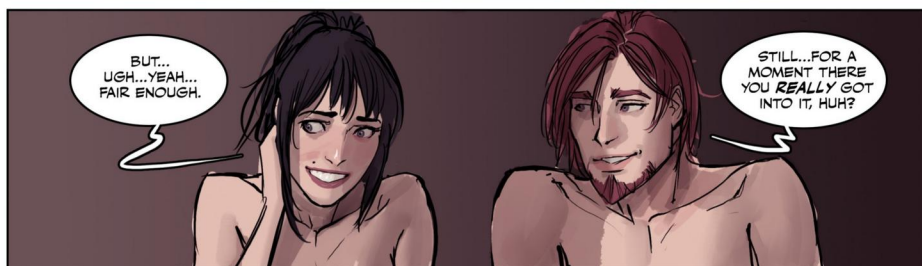
OH, COME
ON!



YOU
SUCK!



HEY,
THIS WHOLE
ORGASM DENIAL
THING DOESN'T
WORK IF YOU KEEP
HUMPING ME!



BUT...
UGH...YEAH...
FAIR ENOUGH.

STILL...FOR A
MOMENT THERE
YOU **REALLY** GOT
INTO IT, HUH?



IT WAS
THE MOVIE...

SURE THING...
"MISTRESS."

TWO WEEKS
HAD PASSED
SINCE OUR FIRST
NIGHT TOGETHER...

TWO...INTENSE
WEEKS...

HEH...
SPEAKING OF
MOVIES, THOUGH...
YOU THINK WE
GOT A PROBLEM
HERE?

HEH...
MAYBE?

WE GONNA
DO SOMETHING
ABOUT IT?

THEY SAY
ADMITTING
THE PROBLEM IS
THE FIRST STEP
TOWARDS ITS
SOLUTIONS.

HOWEVER, WHEN
WE MADE THAT
FIRST STEP --

PPFFT...

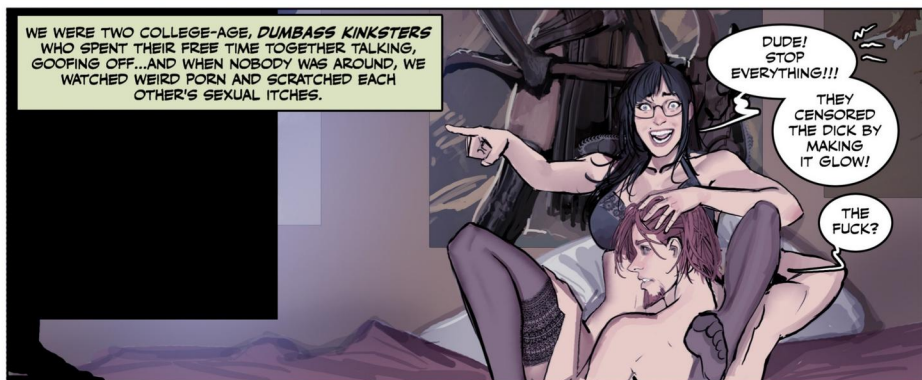
WE WERE
FACING THE
WRONG
DIRECTION.

FUCK NO!



ALL THE JOKING ASIDE,
WE NEVER SAW THIS
AS A PROBLEM.

IN A WAY, WE HAD
OUR OWN PLEASANT
ROUTINE BY THEN.



WE WERE TWO COLLEGE-AGE, *DUMBASS KINKSTERS*
WHO SPENT THEIR FREE TIME TOGETHER TALKING,
GOOFING OFF...AND WHEN NOBODY WAS AROUND, WE
WATCHED WEIRD PORN AND SCRATCHED EACH
OTHER'S SEXUAL ITCHES.

DUDE!
STOP
EVERYTHING!!!

THEY
CENSORED
THE DICK BY
MAKING
IT GLOW!

THE
FUCK?



THE WAY WE SAW IT...
LIFE WAS GOOD!

I can't. I'm working
right now.

Ally:
Working? Oh please!
You're probably all
alone polishing your
wood as usual!

Ally:
Also, look
back!



AND REALLY, WE
COULD *QUIT*
ANYTIME WE
WANTED TO.





"DO YOU *EAGERLY* WANT TO BE RESTRAINED? DOES IT HELP YOU SINK DEEPER INTO YOUR ROLE, WHERE YOU TRULY SUBMIT TO YOUR DOMINANT?"



"DO YOU FIND YOURSELF EASILY ASSERTING YOUR *WILL* OVER YOUR SUBMISSIVE PARTNER? DOES SLIPPING INTO THAT STATE OF MIND COME QUICKLY AND WITH LITTLE EFFORT?"



"DO YOU FEEL MORE COMFORTABLE IN YOUR *DOMSPACE*, OR YOUR *SUBSPACE*?"



"THIS TEST IS HERE TO HELP YOU ANSWER THOSE QUESTIONS."



"WELL, SHIT -- IT'S A TEST IN A PORN MAGAZINE. SEEMS LIKE *LEGIT SCIENCE* TO ME."

"HEH...
..."





LIKE I SAID, WE
COULD QUIT ANY
TIME WE
WANTED TO.

IT'S JUST...

WE *REALLY*
DIDN'T
WANT TO.

HEH...WELL,
I GUESS WE'VE GOT
SOME *SHOPPING*
TO DO!

I GUESS
WE DO!

BUYING PROPS FOR A BDSM
SESSION IS ALMOST A KIND
OF *FOREPLAY* ON ITS OWN.

THESE ARE MORE THAN JUST
THINGS YOU ARE BUYING. THEY
ARE BUILDING BLOCKS TO
SITUATIONS. PLOT POINTS
TO SCENARIOS. THEY ARE
SEGMENTS OF CRAZY,
ENTICING IDEAS.



THE EXCITEMENT WHEN YOU FIND
JUST THE RIGHT PROP -- I'D IMAGINE --
RIVALS THAT OF A SCULPTOR FINDING A
PERFECT PIECE OF MARBLE, BRIMMING
WITH UNDEFINED POTENTIAL.

THAT IS EXACTLY WHAT THESE
THINGS REPRESENTED FOR
US. *POTENTIAL*.



AND LIKE THE AFOREMENTIONED
SCULPTOR, WE WERE OUT
IN THE WILD, LOOKING FOR
JUST THE RIGHT MARBLE.

AND WE HAD A FEW
VERY SPECIFIC QUARRIES
IN MIND...



OH, AND ALSO
THE RUBBER BALLS!
OUR PEANUT LOVES
THESE!



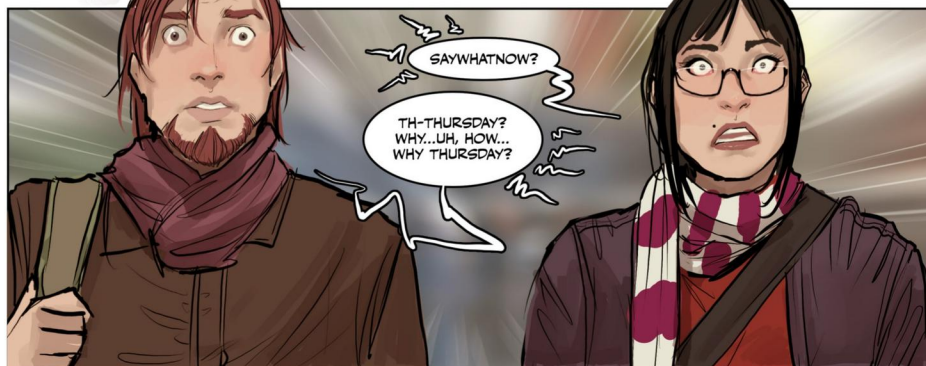
YUP...WHEN YOU'RE AN ADULT WITH A FETISH AND DISPOSABLE INCOME, YOU MAKE YOUR WAY TO A SEX SHOP, OR NOWADAYS, JUST ORDER STUFF IN...

WE, HOWEVER, WERE COLLEGE STUDENTS ON A TIGHT BUDGET. SO TIGHT THAT ALLY HAD ONE PAIR OF SEXY STOCKINGS WHICH SHE ALWAYS MADE SURE I WAS CAREFUL WITH.

WE IMPROVISED. PET STORES, GENERAL STORES HARDWARE STORES, YOU NAME IT. WE WERE THERE LOOKING THROUGH THEIR STOCK WITH A DIFFERENT MINDSET.







SEE, EVER SINCE OUR FIRST NIGHT TOGETHER, THERE WAS SOMETHING WE BOTH ACTIVELY REFUSED TO ADDRESS.

WELL, NOW...

YEAH...

THAT WAS...

SOMETHING.

I'LL SAY...

BEFORE OR AFTER SLEEPING TOGETHER, PEOPLE HOPEFULLY AT LEAST HAVE *SOME* IDEA WHAT THAT MEANS FOR THEM. BE IT A FLING OR A RELATIONSHIP MILESTONE, OR WHATEVER.

AND EVEN IF THEY ARE UNSURE, THEY WILL AT LEAST, AT SOME POINT, HAVE "THE TALK."

AS FOR US, WE WERE DOING OUR VERY BEST TO AVOID "THE TALK."

"THE TALK" WAS BAD.

"THE TALK" THREATENED OUR LITTLE SLICE OF HEAVEN.

IT MEANT ACKNOWLEDGING THE FACT THAT THIS FRIENDSHIP OF OURS JUST WENT INTO THE DARK WITHOUT A FLASHLIGHT.

SO INSTEAD, IN SILENT AGREEMENT, WE CHANGED THE SUBJECT AND JUST SKIPPED ALL OF IT. FEELING OUR WAY THROUGH THE UNKNOWN, PRETENDING WE COULD SEE JUST FINE.

NEXT MOVIE?

OH, HELL YES.

AND THIS NOT HAVING "THE TALK" THING
WAS WORKING FINE. *JUST. FINE.*

...UNTIL WE BOTH REALIZED
WE PICKED VALENTINE'S DAY
FOR OUR FIRST BDSM SESSION.

BUT YOU KNOW WHAT?

SOOO...
THURSDAY.

YEAH...
I MEAN, IF YOU'RE
COOL WITH IT.

I'M COOL
IF YOU'RE
COOL!

OH...
UH, YEAH!
COOL!

KEEEEWL...

WE WERE
COOL WITH IT!





IT'S COOL!

COOL?

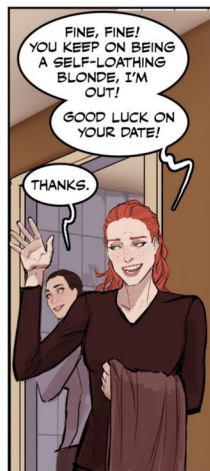
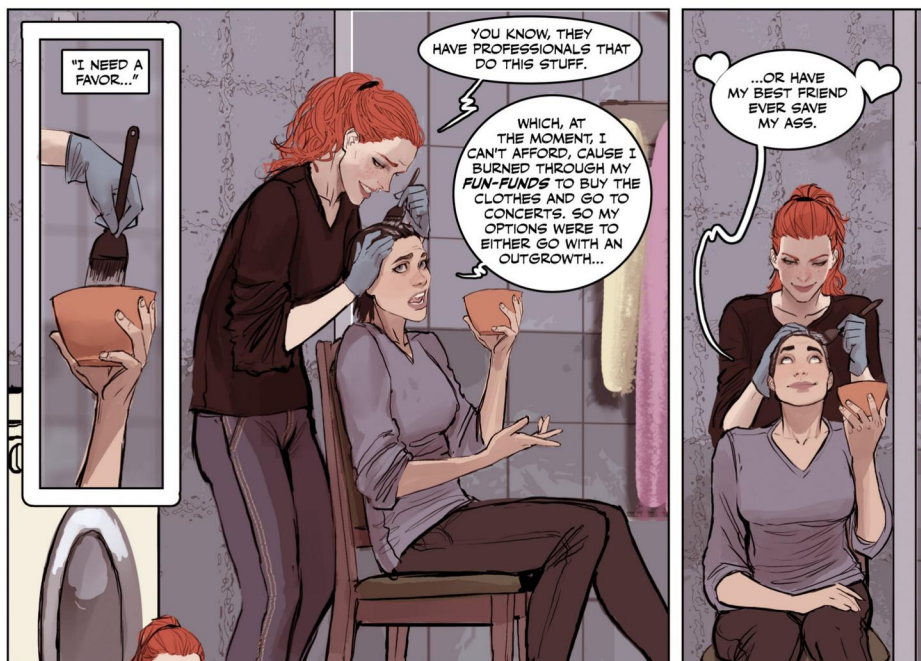
YOU KNOW...
IT'S NICE!

I'M NOT
REALLY LOOKING
FOR JUST "NICE"
HERE!

I MEAN, IT LOOKS
GOOD ON YOU.

UGH...YOU'RE
NO HELP.







ALTHOUGH...



"ALTHOUGH,"
WHAT?



YOU GET
ALL DOLLED UP LIKE
THIS, MAKE SURE YOUR HAIR
AND YOUR EYEBROWS ARE
NICE AND DARK BECAUSE
YOU ARE ONE COOL, DARK
METALHEAD...



WHAT'S
YOUR POINT?



LET'S SAY
YOUR DATE GOES
REALLY WELL...

GONNA BE REAL
FUNNY WHEN SHE
NOTICES THE CARPET
DONEN'T MATCH THE
DRAPES.

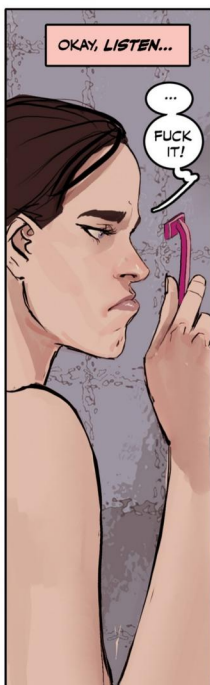


HAH!



...

YOU
UNBELIEVABLE
BITCH!



OKAY, LISTEN...

...
FUCK
IT!



SHAVE
SHAVE
SHAVE

IT WAS EITHER THIS OR
DYING *EVERYTHING*
DOWN THERE.

AND YES, I KNOW IT
SEEMS LIKE A MASSIVE
OVERREACTION.

IN HINDSIGHT,
IT PROBABLY WAS...

BUT, LIKE I SAID...
THIS WAS
THE BIG NIGHT.

THE BIG DATE...

AND YOU KNOW WHAT?
FUCK YEAH, I WAS GONNA
DO *EVERYTHING* IN MY
POWER TO MAKE IT
A PERFECT ONE!

BUT I GUESS I SHOULD
EXPLAIN WHY THIS NIGHT
WAS SO IMPORTANT...

SEE...COUNTING FROM OUR FIRST KISS,
THIS WAS GONNA BE OUR FIFTH DATE.
NOW, WHY DID I SKIP TELLING YOU
ABOUT DATES TWO, THREE, AND FOUR?

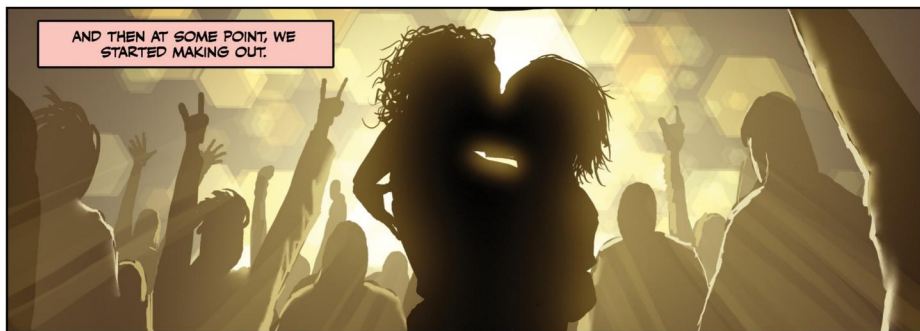


WELL, HERE IS MY
SECOND DATE WITH
HER IN A
NUTSHELL:

WE MET, WE FLIRTED,
SHE TEASED ME
ABOUT THE LEGAL
DRINKING AGE...



WE LISTENED TO
MIRIAM.



AND THEN AT SOME POINT, WE
STARTED MAKING OUT.



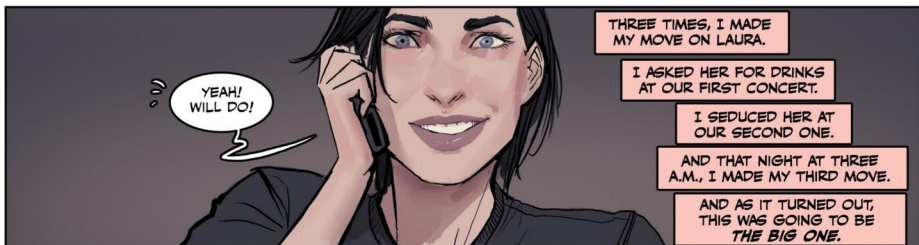
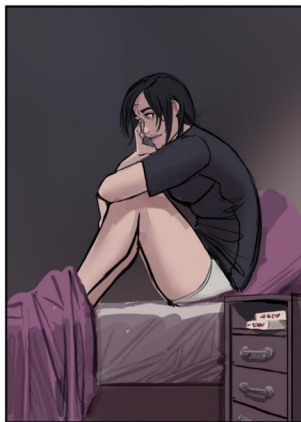
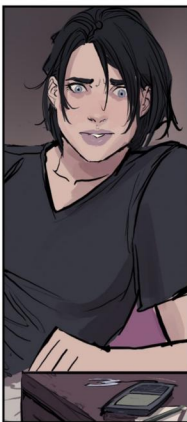
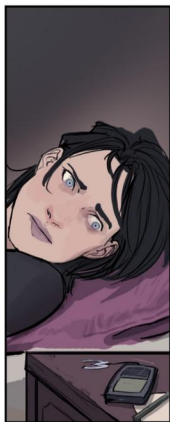
AFTERWARD, I WOULD COME HOME
AND BASK IN THE MEMORIES.

SOUND FAMILIAR?

IT SHOULD. TAKE AWAY
THE HEELS AND FANCY
DRESS, AND IT WAS A
BEAT-BY-BEAT REHASH
OF OUR *FIRST DATE*.









IT WAS A COLD FRIDAY NIGHT IN JANUARY. BUT I WAS OBLIVIOUS TO EVERYTHING.

I GUESS IT'S HARD TO THINK OF THE COLD, WHEN YOU ARE EQUAL PARTS *ECSTATIC* AND *FEARFUL*.

ECSTATIC FOR THE DATE... BUT FEARFUL OF SCREWING IT UP.

I MEAN, I WAS THE ONE WHO INITIATED ALL OF THIS.

AS AN ARTIST, I WAS WELL FAMILIARIZED WITH THE NAGGING WORM OF SELF-DOUBT, SO I RECOGNIZED ITS WHISPERS IN THE BACK OF MY MIND.

"WHAT IF I SCREW IT UP?"

"WHAT IF I BORE HER?"

"WHAT IF WE GET TO KNOW EACH OTHER AND DON'T LIKE WHAT WE SEE ANYMORE?"



WHAT IF...

WHAT IF...

WHAT IF...

MARIANNE?

AND ALL OF A SUDDEN, JUST LIKE THAT, ALL OF THE *WHAT-IFS* WERE GONE.

SHE WAS THERE.

HER SMILE AND VOICE TURNING MY HEART INTO A RACING ANIMAL, RESTLESS AND WILD.

AND I THOUGHT, "ALL OF MY EFFORT WAS WORTH IT. *THIS DATE IS GOING TO BE AMAZING.*"

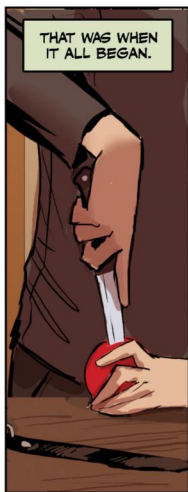
I WAS HALF RIGHT.

THAT WAS THE NIGHT I FELL IN LOVE WITH LAURA.

THE NIGHT OF OUR *BAD DATE*.



IT WAS
VALENTINE'S
DAY.



THAT WAS WHEN
IT ALL BEGAN.



THAT WAS THE
DAY I CRAFTED
MY FIRST PIECE
OF *BDSM*
GEAR.



I DIDN'T DO IT OUT
OF ANY CREATIVE URGE. IT WASN'T
EVEN A MATTER OF GETTING READY
FOR THE NIGHT AHEAD OF US.

TRUTH WAS, I NEEDED
A DISTRACTION.

A NET OF SORTS, TO
KEEP THE BUTTERFLIES
IN MY STOMACH AT BAY.



THE STRESS OF OUR FIRST TRY AT *BDSM*
WAS MORE THAN ENOUGH ON ITS OWN, BUT
THAT OTHER THING. THAT WAS WHAT HAD
BOTH OF US ON THE EDGE.

THE POSSIBILITY OF *THE TALK*.

IN HINDSIGHT, MAYBE THAT
WAS WHY MY FIRST PIECE
OF CRAFTED GEAR
WAS A *BALLGAG*?

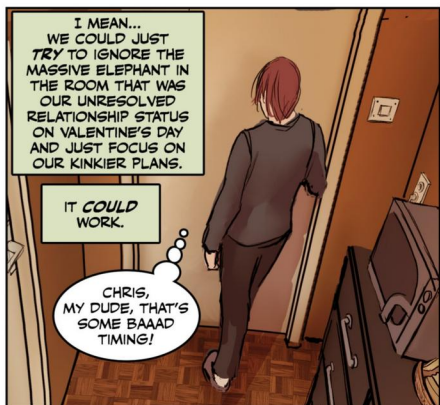
CAN'T DO MUCH TALKING
WITH ONE OF THOSE.

OKAY, I MAY BE OVERTHINKING
THIS SHIT A BIT.



IN THE END, I MADE
A SURPRISINGLY
SIMPLE DECISION --
IF SHE DOESN'T
BRING IT UP,
I WON'T BRING
IT UP.

HUH?



I MEAN...
WE COULD JUST
TRY TO IGNORE THE
MASSIVE ELEPHANT IN
THE ROOM THAT WAS
OUR UNRESOLVED
RELATIONSHIP STATUS
ON VALENTINE'S DAY
AND JUST FOCUS ON
OUR KINKIER PLANS.

IT *COULD*
WORK.

CHRIS,
MY DUDE, THAT'S
SOME BAAAD
TIMING!

THEN AGAIN...

SO...UHH...
HAPPY VALENTINE'S
DAY?





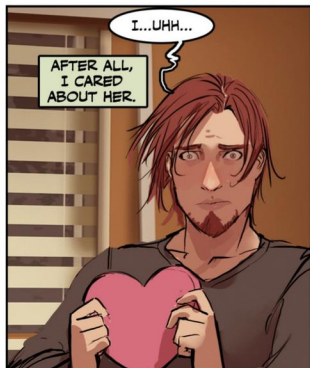
AND LIKE
I SAID...HAPPY
VALENTINE'S DAY?

YEAH, THERE
WAS NO GOING
AROUND IT...



I...UHH...

AFTER ALL,
I CARED
ABOUT HER.



I CARED ABOUT HER TOO MUCH TO
NOT BE HONEST ABOUT THIS ONE
BIG, IMPORTANT THING. EVEN IF
IT ENDED UP ALIENATING US, I HAD
TO SAY IT. I HAD TO, BECAUSE
SHE WAS THE ONLY PERSON WITH
WHOM I COULD BE HONEST ABOUT
MYSELF BACK THEN. BECAUSE SHE
WAS MY *BEST FRIEND*.



OKAY,
LISTEN. I
CAN'T DO
THIS.



DO...
WHAT?



YOU ARE
WAY TOO
IMPORTANT TO
ME TO FUCKING
LIE TO. THE
TRUTH IS,
ALLY, I...



I *DON'T*
LOVE YOU...





OH, THANK
GOD!



I....UH,
WAIT WHAT?



I DON'T **LOVE**
YOU, EITHER!!!

YOU...DON'T?



NO! I MEAN, I LOVE
YOU, BUT LIKE A FRIEND?
I DON'T, YOU KNOW...



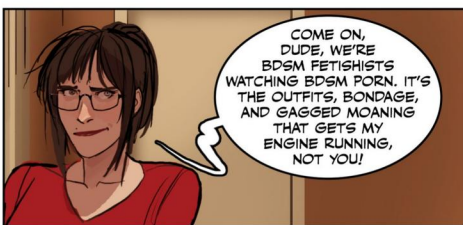
...**LOVE** LOVE YOU!
I KNOW! LIKE NO MATTER
HOW HARD I TRY, I JUST CAN'T
IMAGINE SNUGGLING NEXT TO
YOU, OR LIKE, JUST SPOONING AND
BEING ALL LOVEY-DOVEY
AND SHIT.

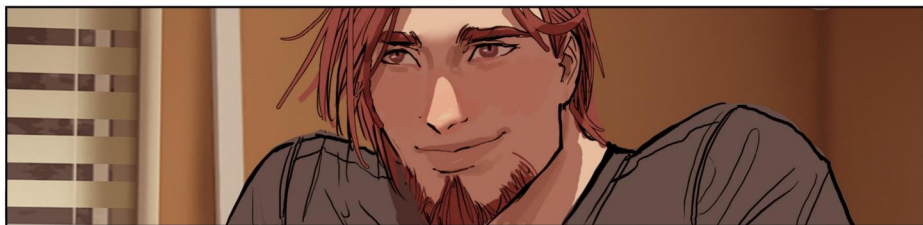


RIGHT?

OR HAVING A ROMANTIC
CANDLELIT DINNER!

LIKE,
HONESTLY, I
CAN'T EVEN SAY
THAT I FIND YOU
PARTICULARLY
SEXUALLY
APPEALING!
LET ALONE
ANYTHING
ELSE!

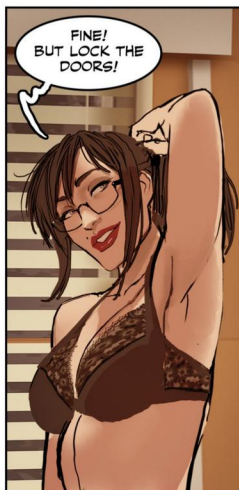








FUCK! HOLD
THAT THOUGHT!
I'LL BE RIGHT
BACK!



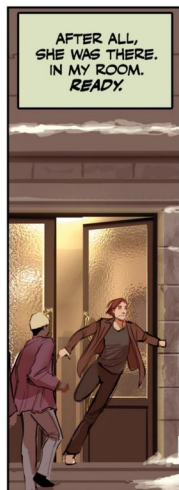
FINE!
BUT LOCK THE
DOORS!



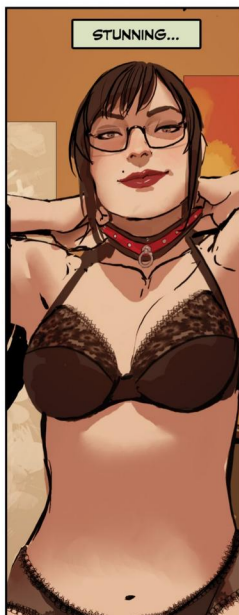
THE STRESS OF THE WHOLE
THING HAD MADE ME TOO
DISTRACTED TO RESUPPLY.
BUT THAT STRESS WAS
NOW GONE AND FORGOTTEN.



ALL THAT WAS LEFT WAS
EAGER ANTICIPATION...



AFTER ALL,
SHE WAS THERE.
IN MY ROOM.
READY.



STUNNING...

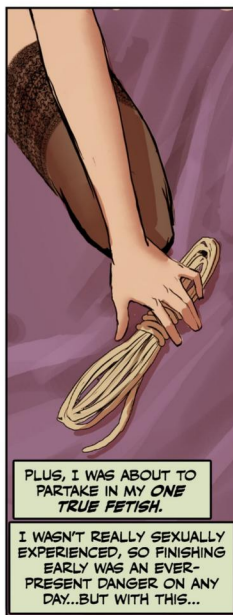


AND ALL I HAD TO DO
WAS *NOT* FUCK IT UP.

BE A TERRIBLE DOM...

LIKE...MESS UP THE
KNOTS AND MAKE IT
ALL UNCOMFORTABLE.

OR COME IN WITH NO
IDEA FOR WHAT WE
SHOULD DO...



PLUS, I WAS ABOUT TO
PARTAKE IN MY *ONE*
TRUE FETISH.

I WASN'T REALLY SEXUALLY
EXPERIENCED, SO FINISHING
EARLY WAS AN EVER-
PRESENT DANGER ON ANY
DAY...BUT WITH THIS...



UNDERSTANDABLY,
BY THE TIME I
CAME BACK TO THE
ROOM, MY EAGER
ANTICIPATION WAS
SLOWLY BUT SURELY
REPLACED WITH A
CHILLING, CRAWLING
SENSE OF...

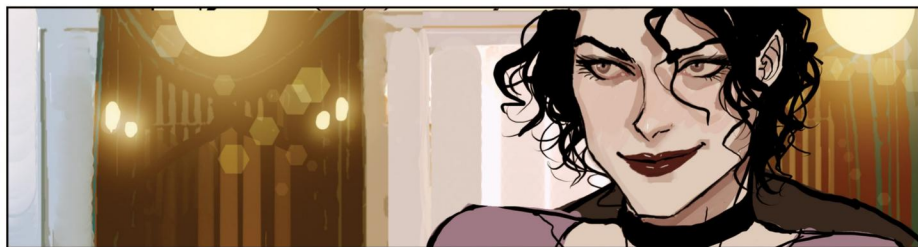
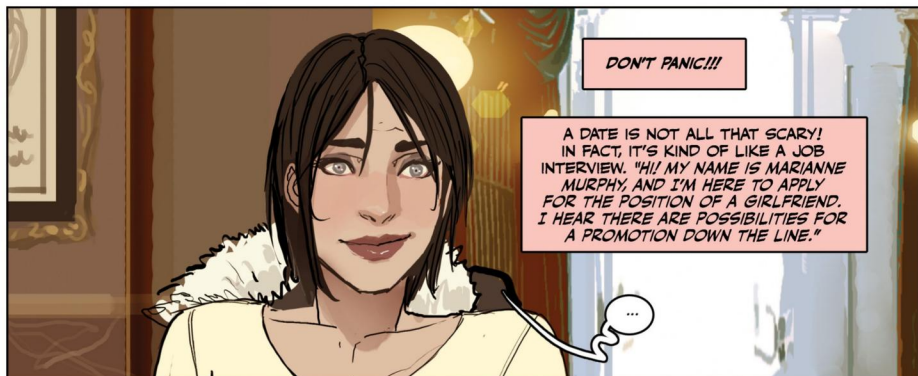
GOT 'EM!

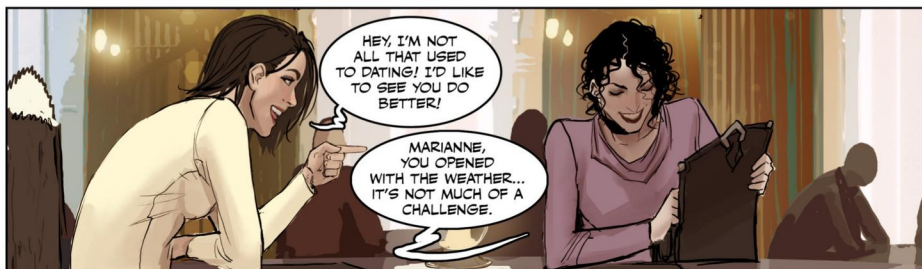
SLAM

PANIC!

WELL, THEN,
SHALL WE BEGIN,
MASTER?









WAIT!
THAT'S...
THAT'S YOU AND
MIRIAM!?

HOLY CRAP...
WHEN WAS THIS?



HAH! THAT'S COOL...
SO **THAT'S** YOU
AT MY AGE.

ABOUT THREE
YEARS AGO. IT'S
FROM ONE OF THEIR
EARLY GIGS!



SO, WHO'S
THE PIXIE?

JUST A...
FORMER
ACQUAINTANCE.



THAT'S AN
ODD WAY OF
INTRODUCING
SOMEONE.



STILL TRUE.
I USED TO HANG OUT WITH
HER AND I NO LONGER DO
THAT. ANYWAYS...LET'S
ORDER.



I'LL HAVE...

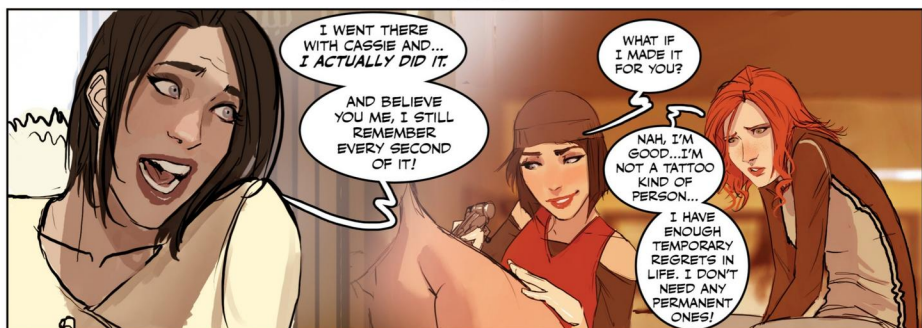
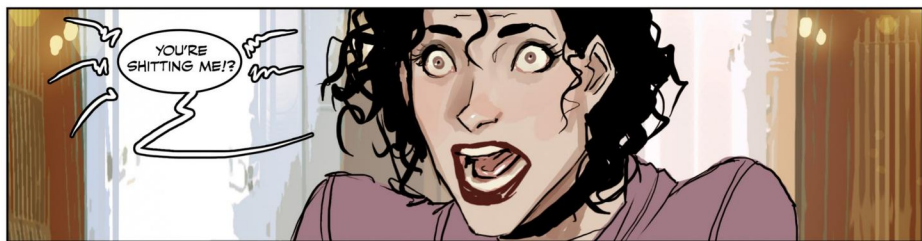
THE **UNDERAGE**
YOUNG LADY HERE WILL HAVE A
DIET COKE AND AN APPLE
MARTINI FOR ME.

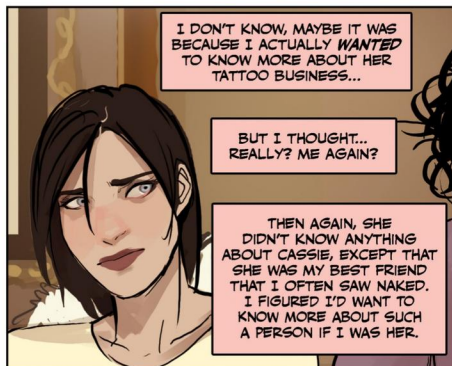
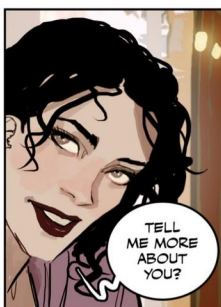


HEY,
LAURA...HERE'S
A THING TO
STIR YOUR
MARTINI.

NOW, NOW,
DON'T FROWN,
YOU BUY ME FOUR
MORE OF THOSE AND YOUR
CHANCES OF SEEING A
NAKED LADY TONIGHT
WILL GROW
EXPONENTIALLY.







AND I WAS, UH...
WELL, I WAS
SUPPRESSING
SOME
FEELINGS
ABOUT THAT.



AT THE HOUR-AND-
TWENTY-MINUTE MARK,
DINNER WAS OVER, AND
NOTHING HAD CHANGED.

AND THAT'S
PRETTY MUCH ALL
THERE IS TO SAY
ABOUT ME...



UH...SO
YOU WANNA
CHIP IN?



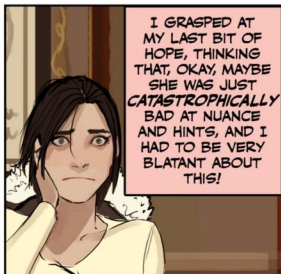
I DID!



NOT
THE MONEY!
I TOLD YOU
A LOT ABOUT
MYSELF SO, I DON'T
KNOW...I FIGURED
YOU WANTED
TO...YOU KNOW...
SHARE SOME
ABOUT
YOU.



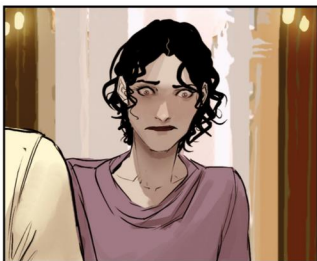
INK AND METAL,
BABY. THAT'S ALL
I'M ABOUT.

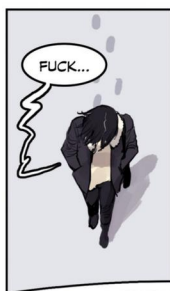


I GRASPED AT
MY LAST BIT OF
HOPE, THINKING
THAT, OKAY, MAYBE
SHE WAS JUST
CATASTROPHICALLY
BAD AT NUANCE
AND HINTS, AND I
HAD TO BE VERY
BLATANT ABOUT
THIS!



I KNOW
BUT...I MEAN...I
WANNA GET TO
KNOW YOU. LIKE,
AS A PERSON, I
DON'T KNOW, THAT
WAS SORT OF
THE POINT OF...
WELL, **ALL OF
THIS.**





NO, LAURA! YOU SAID WHAT YOU WANTED TO SAY, AND APPARENTLY THAT WAS NOTHING!

SO, JUST...

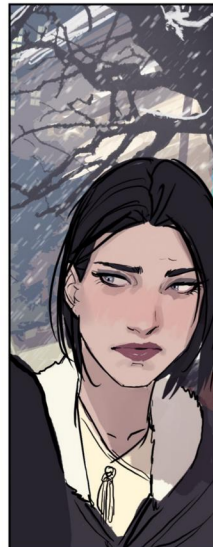
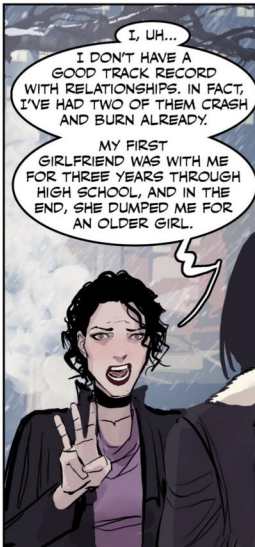
LEAVE ME ALONE!

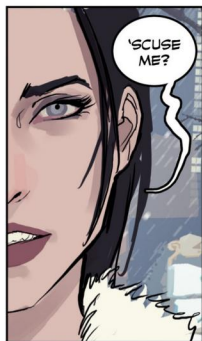
JUST GIVE ME THIS ONE MOMENT, PLEASE!

IF YOU EVER FELT THERE COULD BE SOMETHING MORE BETWEEN US, GIVE ME THIS ONE CHANCE!

I'LL TELL YOU, OKAY?

THING IS...





IT WAS A BAD DATE. A FRUSTRATING EXPERIENCE. I WANTED TO KNOW SO MUCH ABOUT HER, YET IN THE END, I LEARNED SO LITTLE...

BUT THE LITTLE BIT I LEARNED WAS SO IMPORTANT...

I LEARNED THAT SHE WAS A BIT OF AN EMOTIONAL MESS...

SHE WAS AFRAID OF BEING HURT AGAIN...

SHE HAD AN *UNREALISTIC, IDEALIZED* OPINION OF ME...

AND I LEARNED WHAT A KISS FELT LIKE WHEN YOU'VE JUST *FALLEN IN LOVE*.

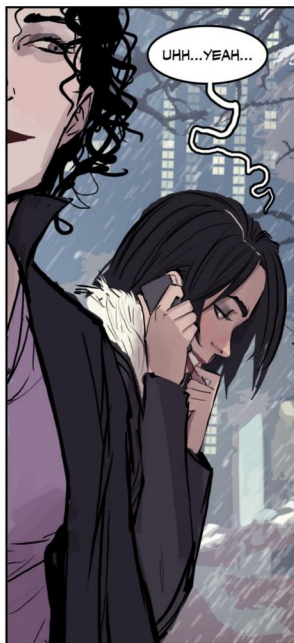
THERE WAS NO MUSIC THIS TIME.

NO CHEERING CROWD. BUT I SWEAR, AS SHE KISSED ME, I COULD HEAR IT ALL SOMEWHERE IN THE DISTANCE...OR MAYBE CLOSER...BUT QUIET...BETWEEN THE HEARTBEATS.

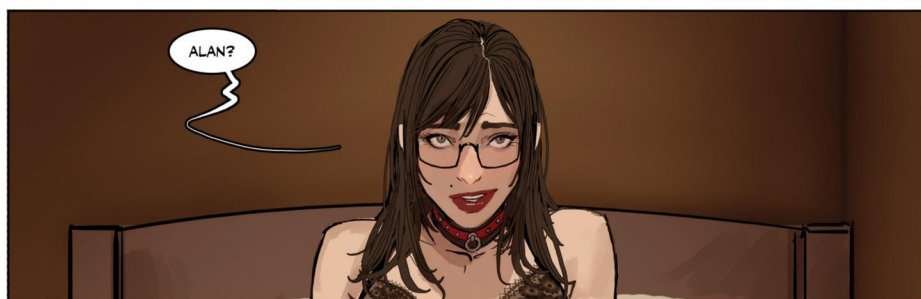
A FAMILIAR SONG...OUR SONG. A LYRIC ECHOING IN THE DISTANCE -- "*I REMEMBER THE TIME...*"

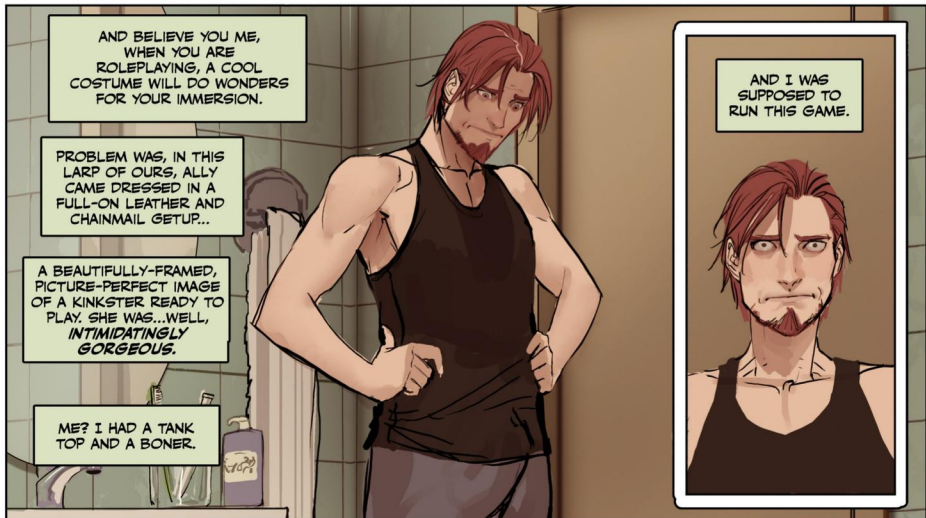
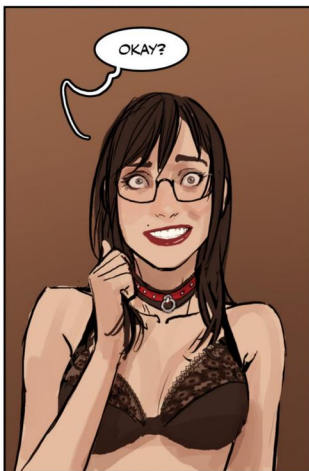


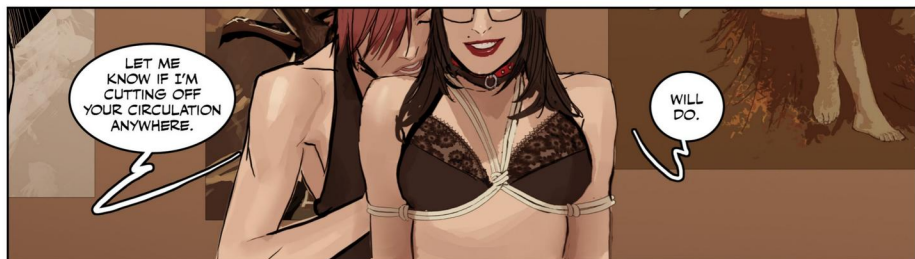
IT WAS *ABSOLUTELY WONDERFUL*.



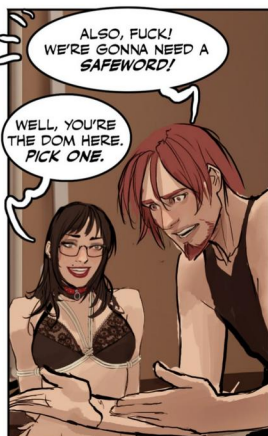
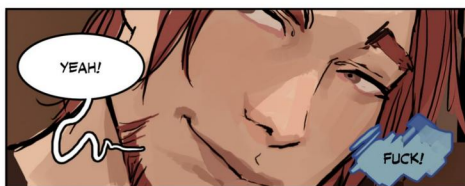


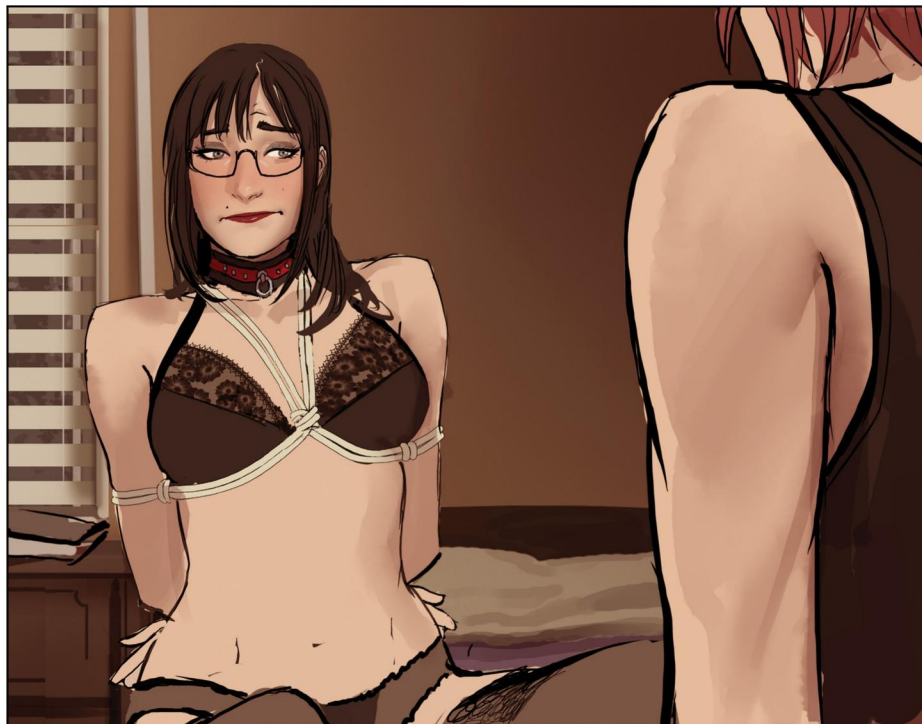


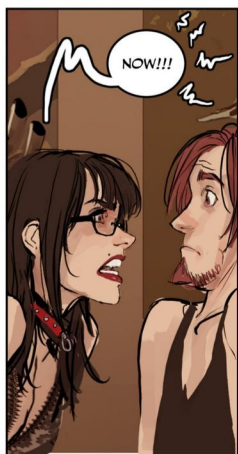
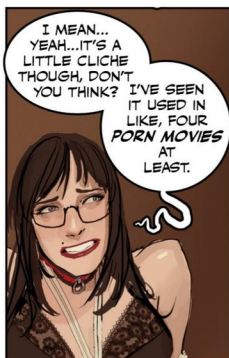






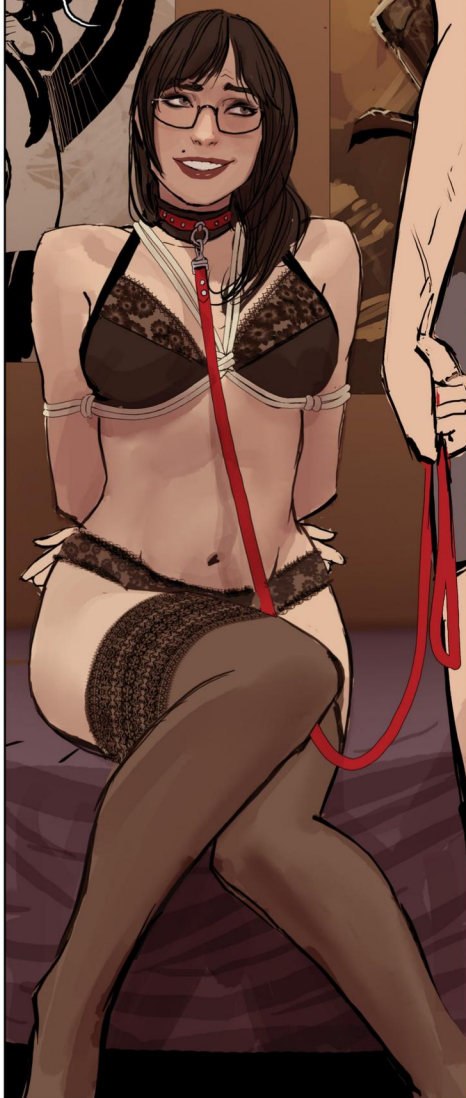






BLESS HER LITTLE HEART. FOR A PERSON I STILL CLAIM HAS **NO SUBSPACE** WHATSOEVER, SHE WAS GENUINELY TRYING...

WELL, GEE, I'M ALL TIED UP AND HELPLESS NOW. WHAT ARE YOU GONNA DO TO ME... **MASTER?**



I...

...
DON'T KNOW...

MEANWHILE, THERE I WAS -- FACING THE POINT OF NO RETURN AND **CHOKING!**

AND THAT'S WHEN IT FINALLY DAWNED ON ME...



THE DOMINANT MINDSTATE, "THE DOMSPACE" -- WHATEVER YOU CALLED IT...I DIDN'T HAVE IT.

THIS WAS WHY I WAS OBSESSING ABOUT FETISHWEAR AND TAKING MY SWEET TIME WITH THE KNOTS AND EVERYTHING ELSE...I WAS SWEATING ALL THE SMALL STUFF, HOPING THE BIG PROBLEM WOULD SOLVE ITSELF.

AS IF MY DOMINANCE WOULD JUST **RANDOMLY ACTIVATE** IF I JUST STARED AT HER TIED UP FOR LONG ENOUGH.

BUT THERE I WAS, AT THE END OF MY ROPE, AND THERE WAS NOTHING BUT **COLD FEET** AND **PANIC**. IF THERE WAS A DOMSPACE IN ME, I DIDN'T KNOW HOW TO FIND IT...NO COMPASS, NO MAP...

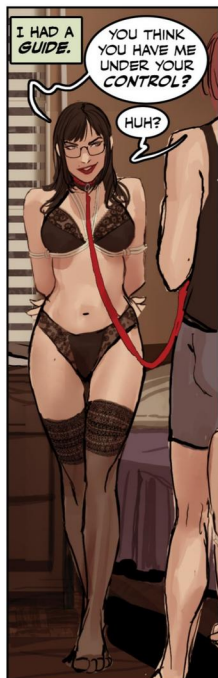


BUT AS IT
TURNS OUT,
I DID HAVE
SOMETHING...



SOMETHING
BETTER.

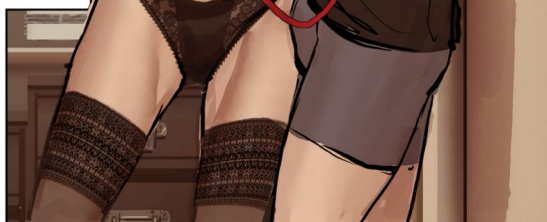
HEH!



I HAD A
GUIDE.

YOU THINK
YOU HAVE ME
UNDER YOUR
CONTROL?

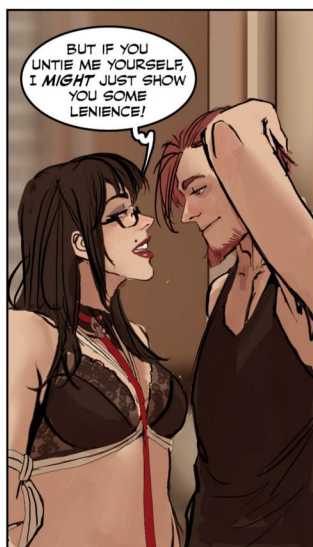
HUH?



YOU ARE
A *JOKE!* YOUR
HIGNESS...

WH...

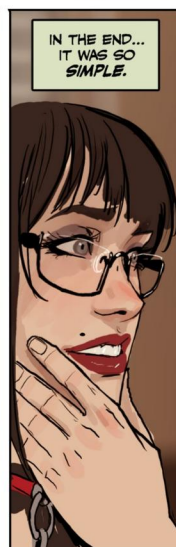
I WILL BE FREE
OF THESE BINDS SOON
ENOUGH, AND YOU WILL
KNEEL BEFORE ME LIKE
THE *WEAKLING* THAT
YOU ARE!



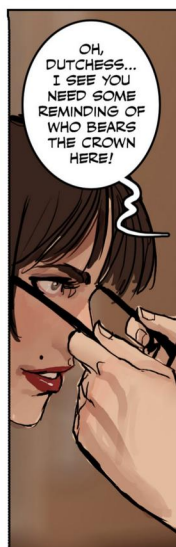
BUT IF YOU
UNTIE ME YOURSELF,
I *MIGHT* JUST SHOW
YOU SOME
LENIENCE!



I AM
WAITING!



IN THE END...
IT WAS SO
SIMPLE.



OH,
DUTCHESS...
I SEE YOU
NEED SOME
REMINING OF
WHO BEARS
THE CROWN
HERE!



TO MOVE FORWARD, WE HAD TO LOOK **BACK**.
BACK TO THE THING THAT STARTED IT ALL. OUR MOVIE --
THE LADY IN THE IRON MASK.

AND I DO MEAN *W/E*. AS UNCONVINCING AS I WAS AS A DOM,
ALLY WAS DOING NO BETTER AS A SUB. SHE WOULD NEVER
ADMIT IT, BUT EVEN BACK THEN I HAD A FEELING THAT
HER HEART WAS SET ON BEING A DOMME.

FOR HER, PLAYING UPON THE WELL-TRODDEN PORN TROPE
OF A *DOMINATRIX CONQUERED* WAS THE CLOSEST
SHE COULD GET TO EVEN APPROACHING A SUBSPACE.

AS FOR ME...WELL, SHE SHOWED
ME THE WAY INTO MY DOMSPACE BY
AWAKENING THE AWARENESS OF
WHAT I LIKED IN A SUB.

DEFIANCE.

IN THE DEEPEST SHRINE THAT WAS
OUR DOMSPACE, WE BOTH BELIEVED
IN THE SAME RULE. A PUNISHMENT IS
MOST SATISFYING WHEN DESERVED.

AND NOBODY DESERVED THEIR
PUNISHMENT MORE THAN A
DISOBEIENT, BRATTY SUB.

I'LL
ENJOY
WATCHING THAT
INSOLENCE MELT
FROM YOUR FACE...
*ONE ORGASM
AT A TIME!*

ALSO, BECAUSE OF THIS,
ALLY WOULD LATER ON
REFER TO US AS *LAWFUL
GOOD DOMS*. HEH!

BUT YEAH...THAT'S HOW OUR FIRST GAME STARTED. WE BOTH FOUND OUR MOTIVATION THROUGH PORN. THEN AGAIN, THAT'S THE THING WITH BDSM PORN. IT HAS WAYS OF GIVING YOU IDEAS...

YOU WOULDN'T DARE!

OH, SURE, ON ANY GIVEN DAY ANYONE CAN TELL YOU THAT BASING YOUR OWN SEXUAL EXPERIENCES ON PORN IS A **TERRIBLE IDEA**...AND THEY'D PROBABLY BE RIGHT.

A KING DARES ALL!

OH, DEAR!

BDSM PORN, HOWEVER IS BOTH AN ENCYCLOPEDIA AND A PROOF-OF-CONCEPT FOR WILD, KINKY IDEAS. ALLY AND I WOULD END UP USING A LOT OF IT AS INSPIRATION. AS...**ADVENTURE MODULES** FOR OUR KINKY ROLEPLAYING GAME.

A BASIC SCRIPT TO POINT US IN A GENERAL DIRECTION, AND WHERE WE WENT FROM THERE WAS ON US.

BUT FIRST I'LL HAVE TO PUNISH THAT DEFIANCE OF YOURS.

AND YES, IF YOU WERE WONDERING, IT **DID** OFTEN COME OFF SOUNDING **CRINGEY AS SHIT**.

ANYWAYS, WHERE WAS I? AH...RIGHT...

SO, ALLY THE DEVIOUS DUTCHESS HAD PISSSED OFF THE DUNGEON MASTER AND **CRITICALLY FAILED** HER INITIATIVE ROLL...

OKAY, LISTEN -- I'VE HAD SOME BAD TIMES IN MY LIFE AND FRIENDS HELPED ME BY... GETTING ME INTO ROLEPLAYING. LOOK, JUST...TRUST ME! THE METAPHOR WORKS!

OH... HEY, NOW!

I SUPPOSE IT'S TOO LATE FOR AN APOLOGY?

OH, YES! MUCH TOO LATE!

MNNH!

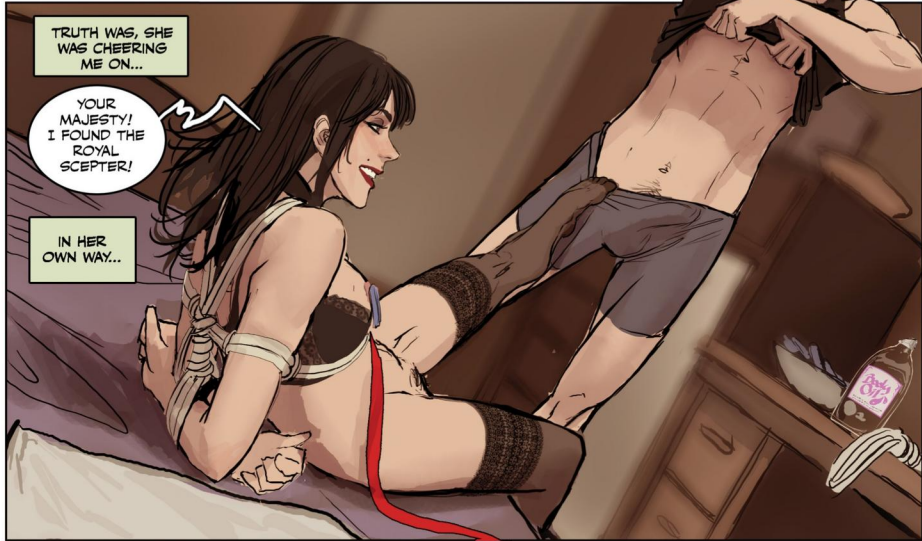


MAKE NO MISTAKE! EVEN THEN, I DESPERATELY WANTED TO ASK -- "DOES IT HURT?" "IS THIS OKAY?"

SUCH BOLDNESS!

I DON'T KNOW. I GUESS I FOUND IT HARD TO GET USED TO THE IDEA OF A SAFEWORD BACK THEN. SO EVEN WITH ONE FOOT IN MY DOMSPACE, I PROCEEDED VERY HESITANTLY AT FIRST.

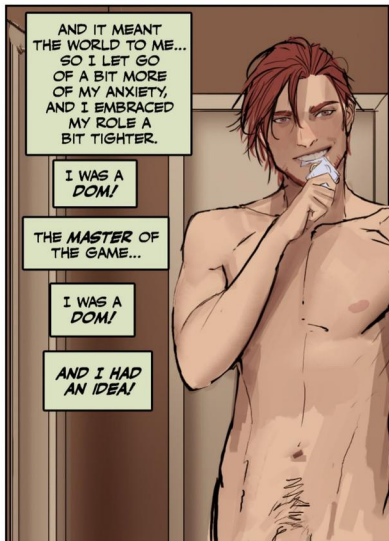
BUT EVERY TIME I HESITATED, SHE WOULD GIVE ME A SMALL, REASSURING SMILE.



TRUTH WAS, SHE WAS CHEERING ME ON...

YOUR MAJESTY! I FOUND THE ROYAL SCEPTER!

IN HER OWN WAY...



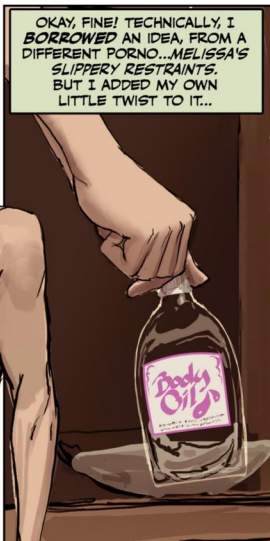
AND IT MEANT THE WORLD TO ME... SO I LET GO OF A BIT MORE OF MY ANXIETY, AND I EMBRACED MY ROLE A BIT TIGHTER.

I WAS A DOM!

THE MASTER OF THE GAME...

I WAS A DOM!

AND I HAD AN IDEA!

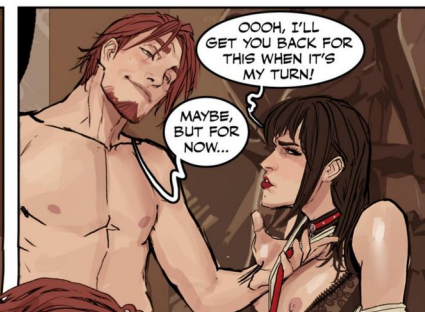
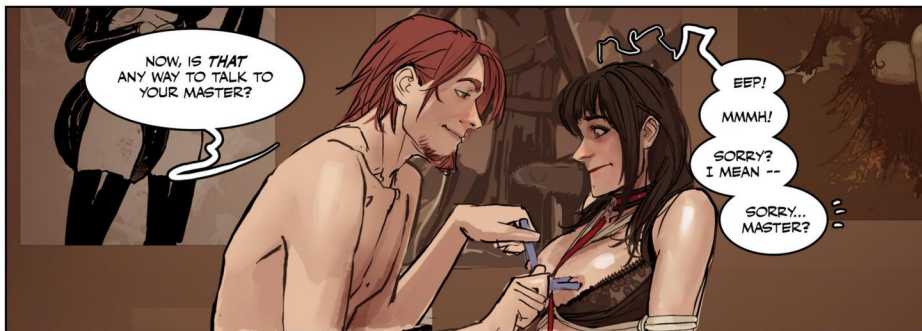


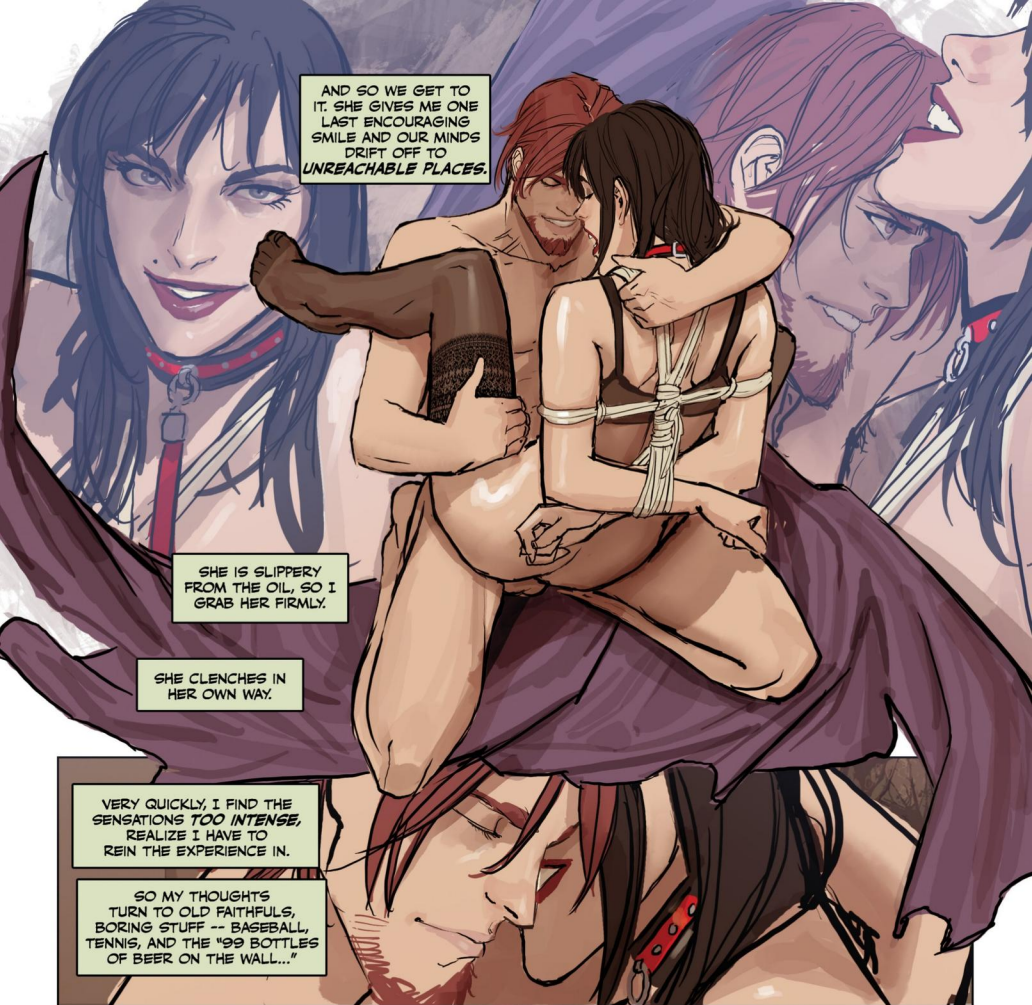
OKAY, FINE! TECHNICALLY, I BORROWED AN IDEA, FROM A DIFFERENT PORNO...MELISSA'S SLIPPERY RESTRAINTS. BUT I ADDED MY OWN LITTLE TWIST TO IT...



OH, HEY, NOW!







AND SO WE GET TO IT. SHE GIVES ME ONE LAST ENCOURAGING SMILE AND OUR MINDS DRIFT OFF TO UNREACHABLE PLACES.

SHE IS SLIPPERY FROM THE OIL, SO I GRAB HER FIRMLY.

SHE CLENCHES IN HER OWN WAY.

VERY QUICKLY, I FIND THE SENSATIONS *TOO INTENSE*, REALIZE I HAVE TO REIN THE EXPERIENCE IN.

SO MY THOUGHTS TURN TO OLD FAITHFULS, BORING STUFF -- BASEBALL, TENNIS, AND THE "99 BOTTLES OF BEER ON THE WALL..."

BUT SHE RIPS ME RIGHT OUT OF MY DISTRACTION, BY SAYING THE ONE THING THAT WOULD DESTROY ME...

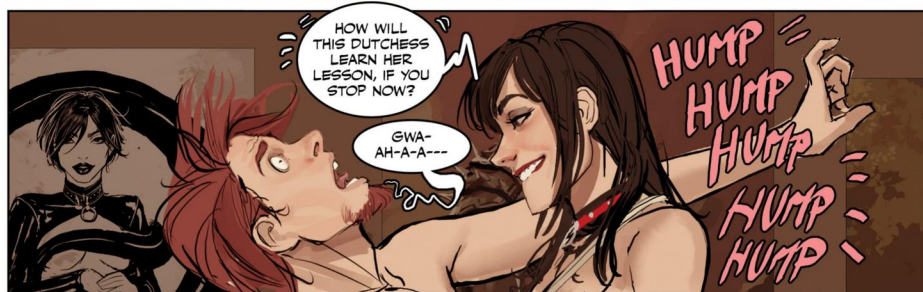
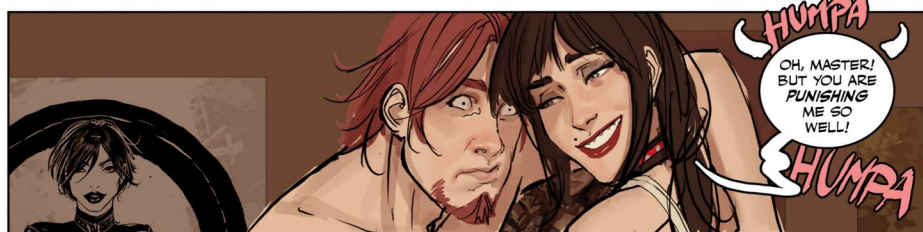
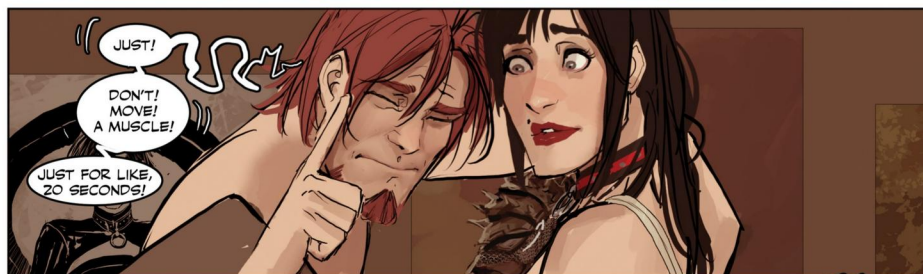
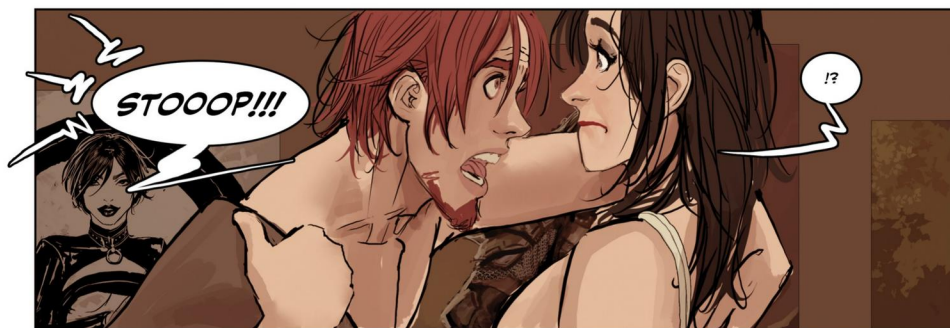
MASTER...
HUFF...
MMM...
DEEPER...
ROUGHER!

AND INSTEAD OF DISTRACTING MYSELF WITH BORING, NONSEXUAL THINGS, MY MIND DOES A BACKFLIP INTO OUR FIRST NIGHT, WHEN I HELD HER CLOSELY... MY FINGERS INSIDE OF HER...

AND HER WORDS...

"ROUGHER...
DIG DEEPER..."

AND...



IT WAS LIKE THE ENDING
TO A FAIRY TALE...

BUT, YOU KNOW...LIKE AN
X-RATED DIRECTOR'S CUT...

...OR ONE OF THOSE ADULT-
THEMED FANTASY SHOWS...
WITH NUDITY AND STUFF.

ANYHOW, I GOT THE PRINCESS, CRACKED
HER ICY SHELL, AND THEN WE KISSED
ON AN ETERNITY AND A DAY, AS SHE
TOOK ME FOR A TOUR OF HER PALACE.

AND WHAT A *PALACE* IT WAS...

THERE WAS A
LIVING ROOM...

A KITCHEN...

OH...A BATHROOM!
DEFINITELY HAD ONE
OF THOSE!

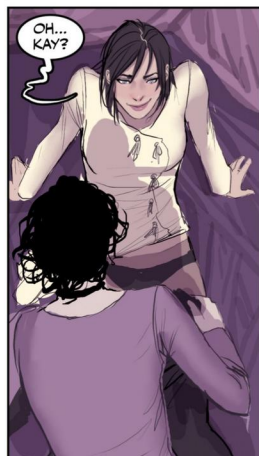
OKAY, FINE. FOR ALL
I KNEW OR CARED, WE
COULD HAVE BEEN IN AN
ABANDONED WAREHOUSE.

NONE OF IT MATTERED.
I WAS WITH HER.



MMM...NICE
PLACE!

MMM...
THANK YOU!



OH...
KAY?



YOU SURE
SEEM EAGER...

WHA?
UHH...TOO
FAST?



NO, BUT
RELAX. YOU HAVE
ME FOR THE WHOLE
NIGHT!

HEH...YEAH...
I ACTUALLY DO,
DON'T I?



OKAY...UHH...
SO, HOW ABOUT SOME
DRINKS, THEN?

I PROMISE
I WON'T TELL
ANYONE...

IT WAS SO ENDEARING.
OUTSIDE THE SAFETY
OF A METAL CONCERT,
WITH NO AGE JOKES TO
COVER HER INSECURITY,
SHE WAS A BIT OF AN
AWKWARD MESS.



YOU KNOW
WHAT? I'M GOOD.
I DON'T THINK I NEED
ANY MORE LUBRICANT,
SOCIAL OR
OTHERWISE!

THERE WAS AN HONEST EAGERNESS
TO HER THAT MADE ME WANT HER
EVEN MORE...

IN FACT, I THOUGHT THEN AND THERE...
"SHE COULD NOT BE ANY SEXIER THAN
SHE IS RIGHT NOW!"



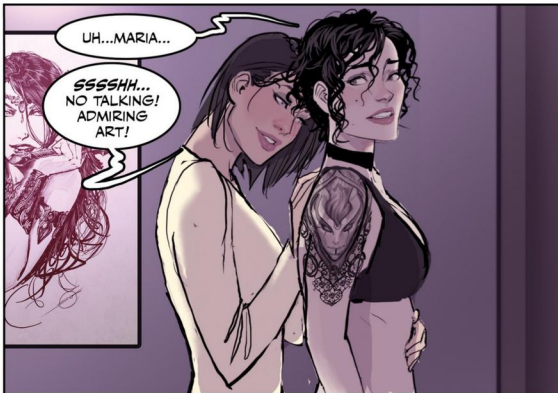
I WAS
WRONG!

I THINK I
MAY GET
ONE...

!



?



UH...MARIA...

SSSSHH...
NO TALKING!
ADMIRING
ART!



THIS IS...
GORGEOUS!

EHUEHUE...
UH...I MEAN,
THANKS?



AND THAT WAS HOW I
DISCOVERED THAT INK
WAS MY FIRST KINK.



AND THAT IS HOW
LAURA DISCOVERED
THAT MY INK KINK
WAS HER KINK.



COME
HERE!

WAH!



DID IT
HURT?

I GUESS?
I MEAN, PARTS OF
IT DID. SPINE AND
SUCH...



OH...WELL
THAT'S JUST
TERRIBLE.

PRETTY
BUTTERFLY HAS
A MEAN BITE,
HUH?

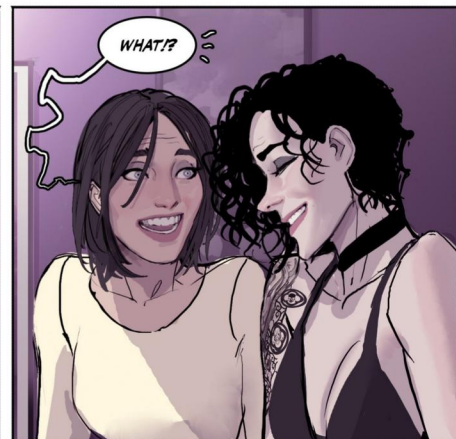
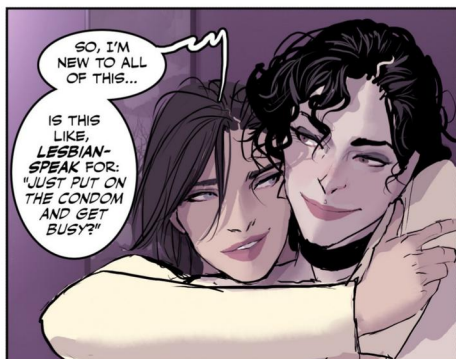
HEH!
OKAY, DONE
ADMIRING
THE ART?

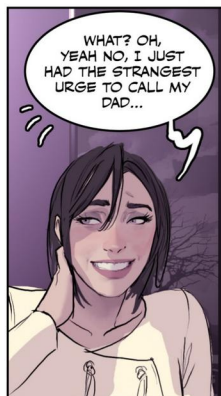
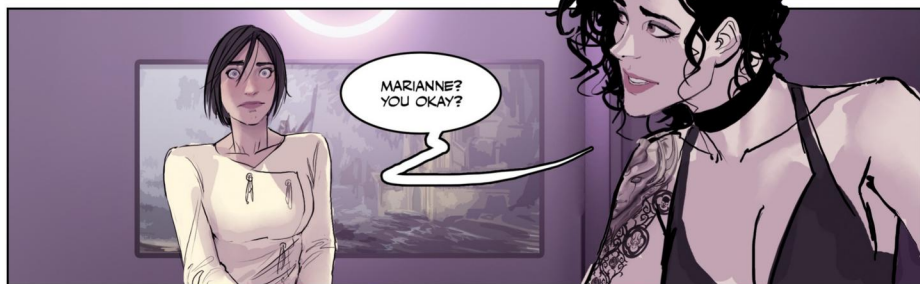


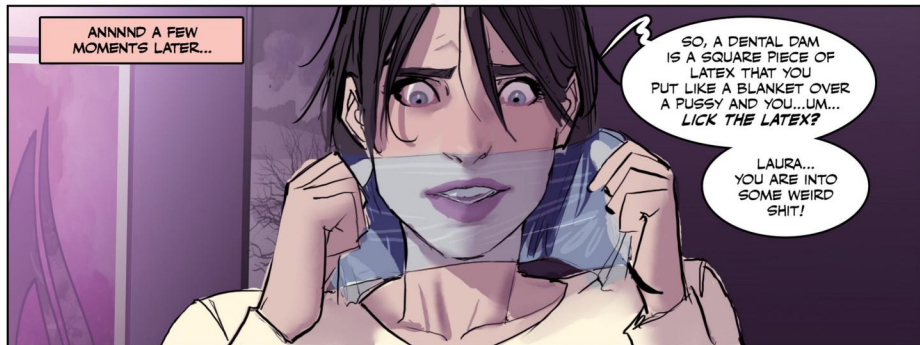
NOPE! THE MEAN
BUTTERFLY HURT YOU,
AND NOW I HAVE TO
LICK IT BETTER!

EHWEH?!

TRANSLATION:
"DON'T YOU
MEAN KISS IT
BETTER?"









HEHEH...HEH...
OKAY, CARDS ON THE TABLE,
I AM ABSOLUTELY CLEAN SO
YOU DON'T HAVE TO WORRY
ABOUT THAT.

OKAY...FAIR
ENOUGH.



MY LAST TIME
WAS ABOUT A YEAR AGO,
AND I'M 99% SURE I
DEFLOWERED THE
GUY.

USED
PROTECTION,
HAD NO PROBLEMS.
SO I'D SAY IT'S ALL
GOOD ON MY END
AS WELL.



OKAY...
THEN...



NOT GONNA LIE. WHAT I
THOUGHT OF SAYING WAS:
"I GUESS -- NO DAMS,
JUST THE BEAVERS!"

I'M GLAD I DIDN'T
SAY THAT.

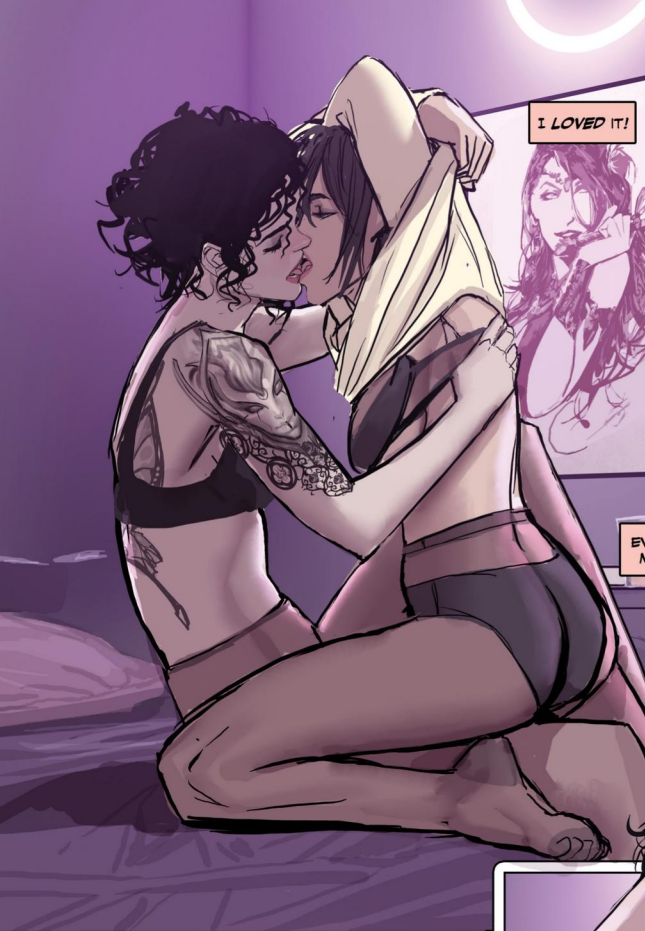
THEN?



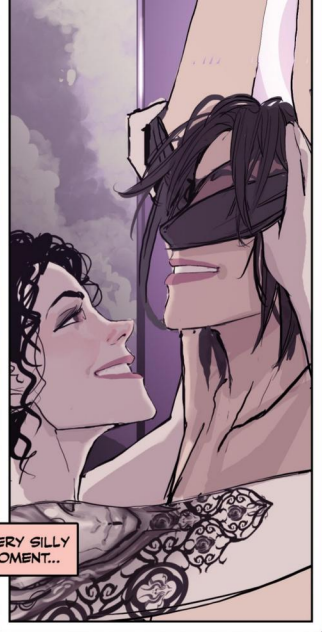
THEN HOW ABOUT
YOU AND ME **HOWL**
AT THE NIGHT?

GOD, THAT WAS
CHEESY.

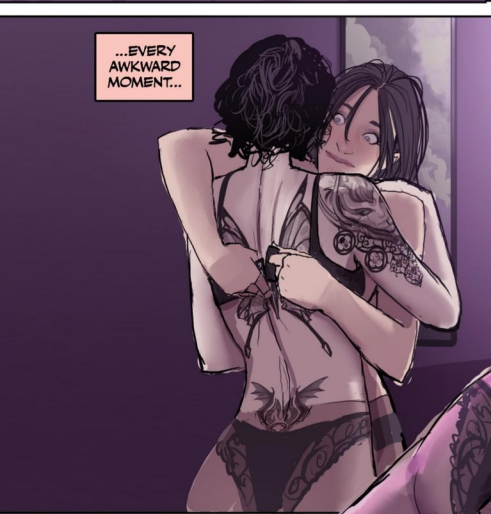
AND YOU
KNOW WHAT?



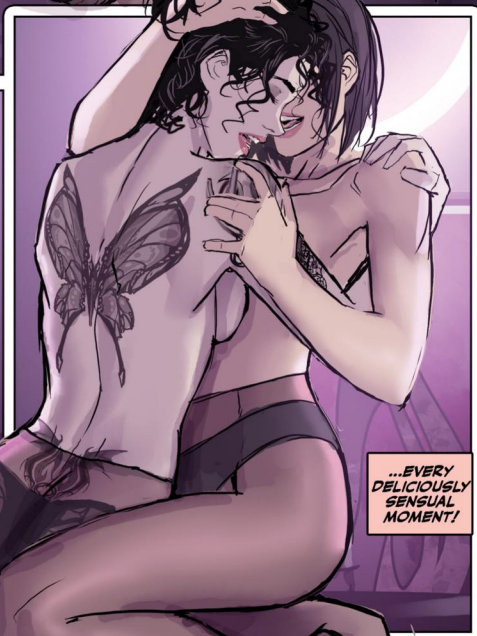
I LOVED IT!



EVERY SILLY
MOMENT...



...EVERY
AWKWARD
MOMENT...



...EVERY
DELICIOUSLY
SENSUAL
MOMENT!



I LOVED THEM ALL.



AND MORE THAN ALL OF IT...



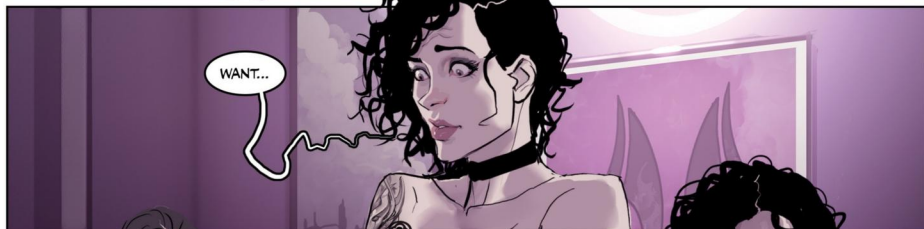
I LOVED HER!

I THOUGHT IT EVERY TIME SHE SMILED.

"FIVE CONCERTS AND A BAD DATE AND I FUCKING LOVE YOU!"



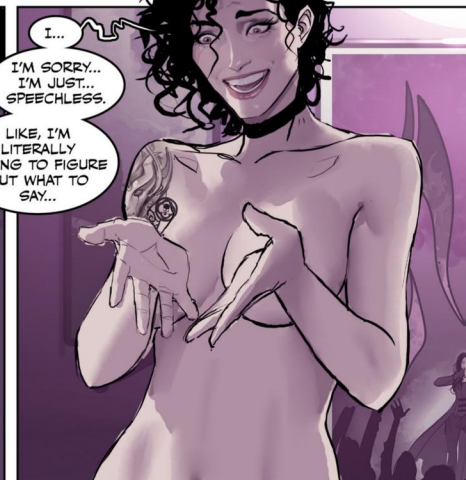
YOU KNOW, IT JUST OCCURRED TO ME! I COULD ACTUALLY PUT SOME MUSIC ON IF YOU --



WANT...



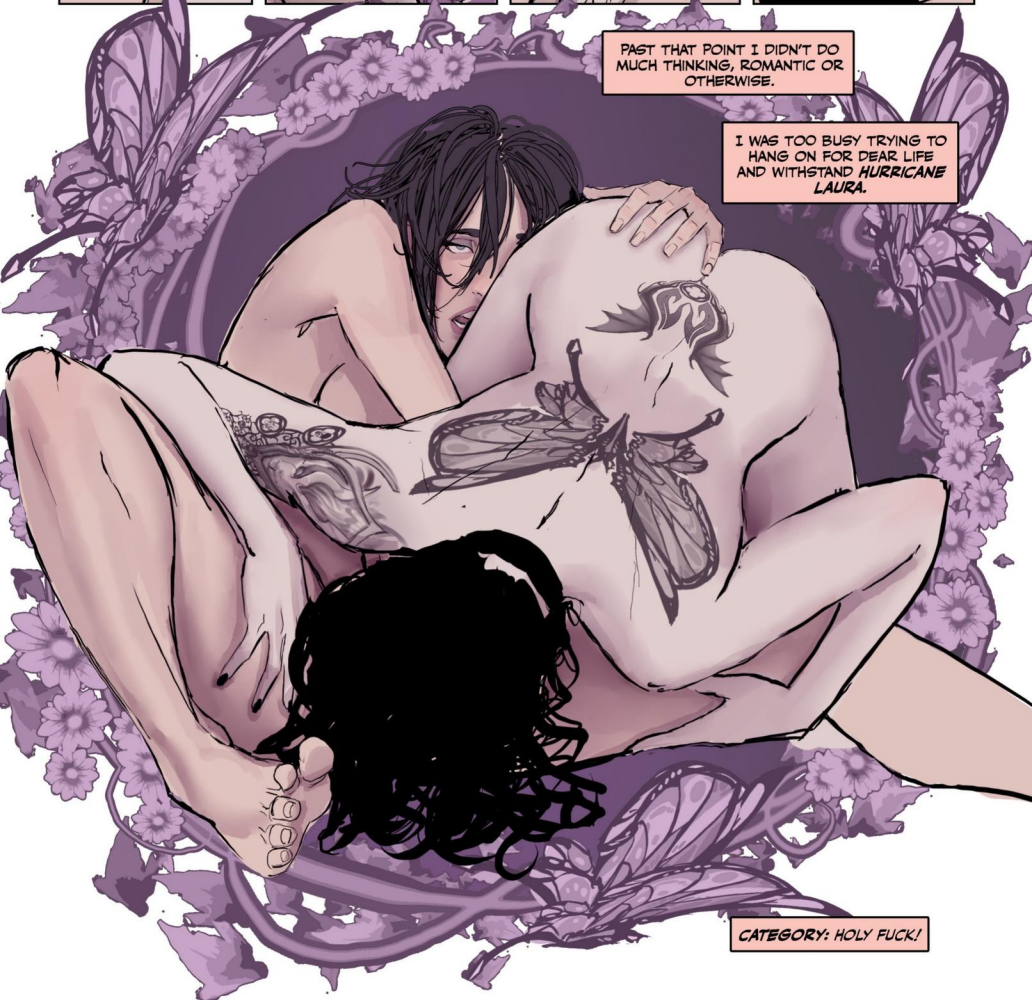
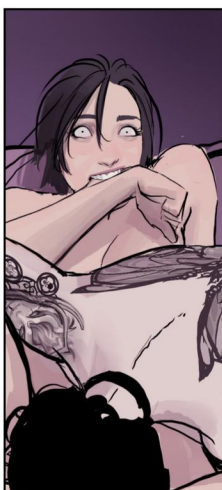
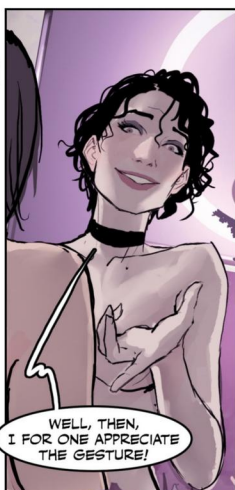
WHAT?



I...

I'M SORRY... I'M JUST... SPEECHLESS.

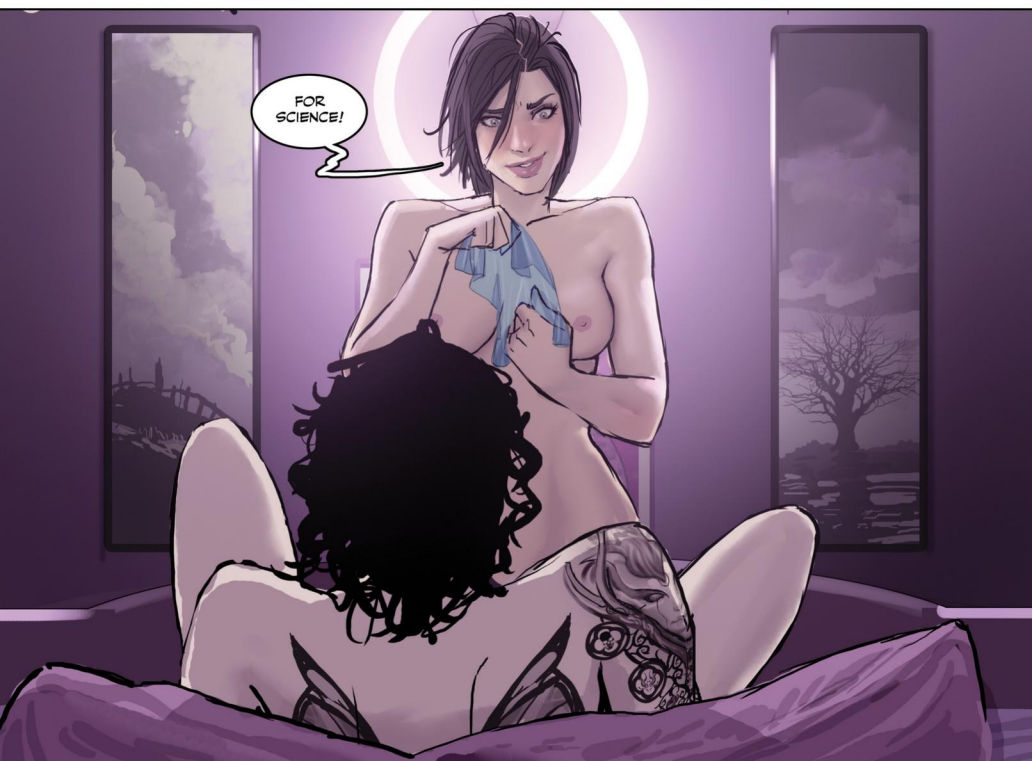
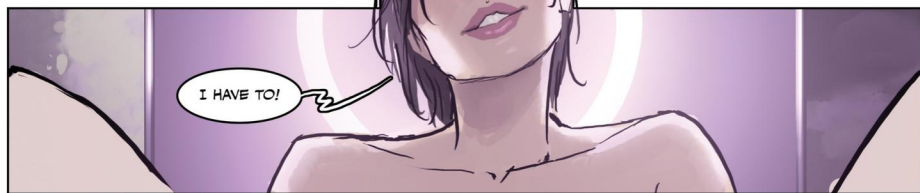
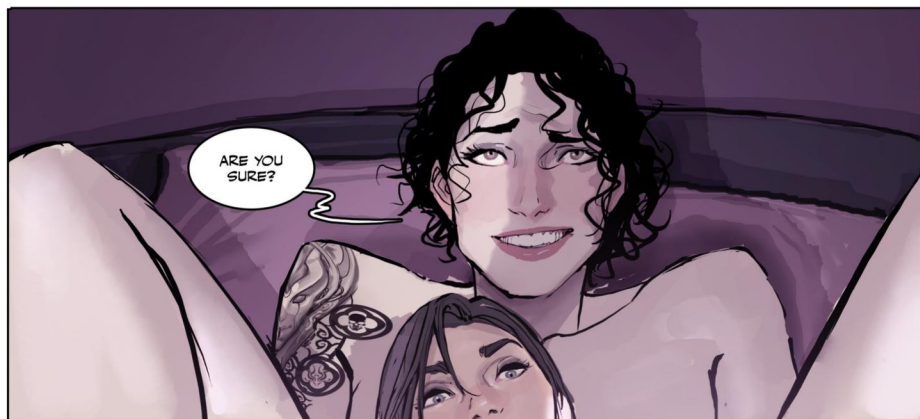
LIKE, I'M LITERALLY TRYING TO FIGURE OUT WHAT TO SAY...



CATEGORY: HOLY FUCK!

OH, WAIT! ACTUALLY --
THIS WILL BE IMPORTANT MUCH LATER!

SO, IT WAS MY TURN TO RETURN THE FAVOR, AND...





IN HINDSIGHT, IT TRULY WAS AN UNLIKELY ROMANCE.

SUCH AN UNLIKELY FRIENDSHIP...

AND IT ALL STARTED THE DAY I TOOK THAT PHOTO OF HER...

OUR CRAZY JOURNEY DOWN AN UNCHARTED PATH...

IT WAS EXHILARATING!

IT WAS EXCITING!

IT WAS... UNEXPECTED...

INTENSE...

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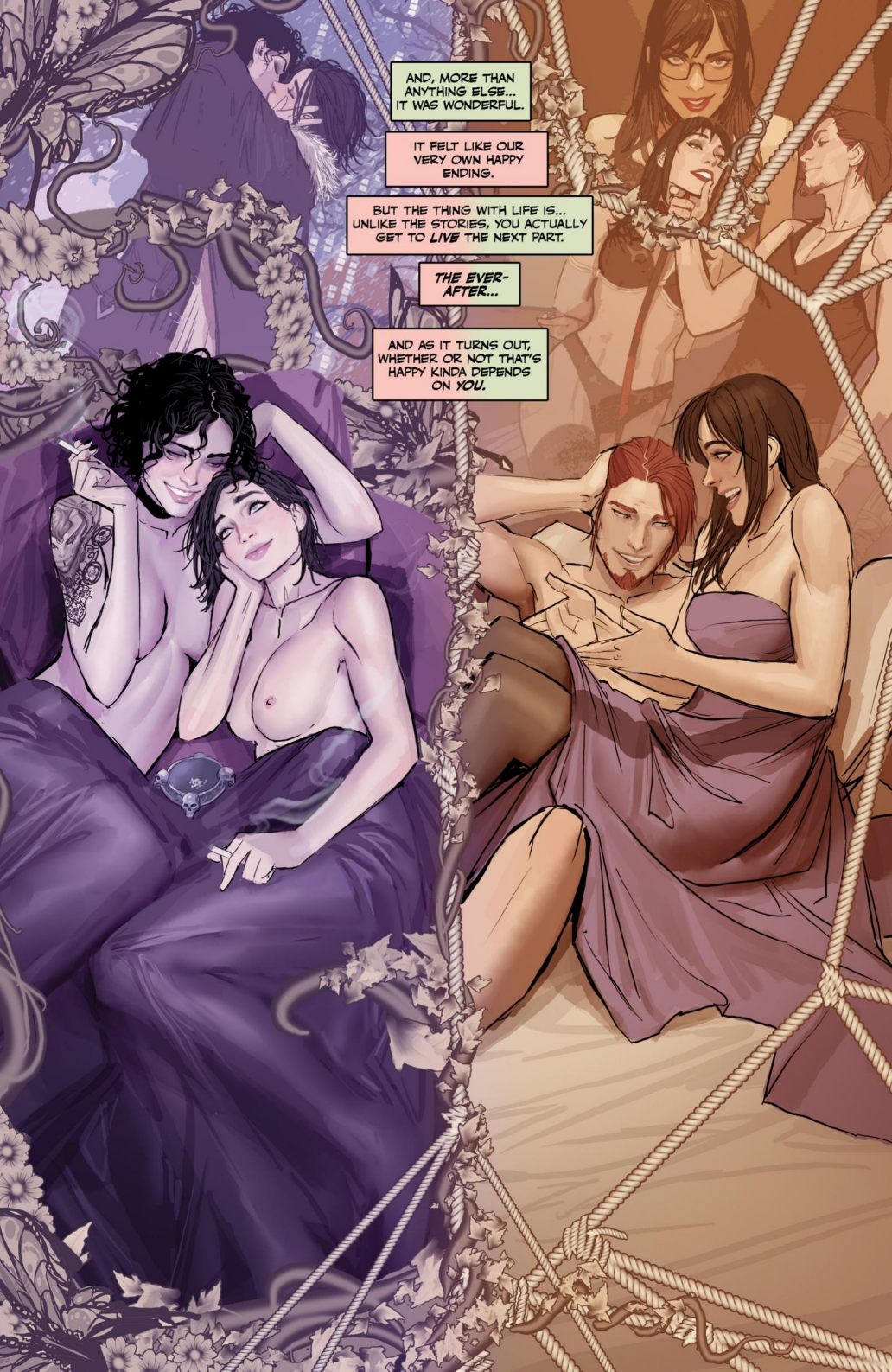
OUR CRAZY JOURNEY DOWN AN UNCHARTED PATH...

IT WAS EXHILARATING!

IT WAS EXCITING!

IT WAS... UNEXPECTED...

INTENSE...



AND, MORE THAN
ANYTHING ELSE...
IT WAS WONDERFUL.

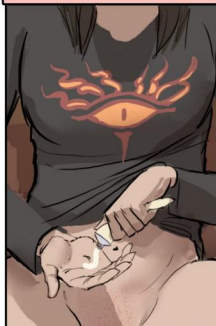
IT FELT LIKE OUR
VERY OWN HAPPY
ENDING.

BUT THE THING WITH LIFE IS...
UNLIKE THE STORIES, YOU ACTUALLY
GET TO *LIVE* THE NEXT PART.

**THE EVER-
AFTER...**

AND AS IT TURNS OUT,
WHETHER OR NOT THAT'S
HAPPY KINDA DEPENDS
ON *YOU*.

YEAH, THE EVER-AFTER PART IS A MESSY BUSINESS. IT'S LIFE'S GREAT EXTENDED POST-CREDITS SCENE, AFTER YOU JUST GOT DONE WITH YOUR HAPPY ENDING. AND YES! IT MORE OFTEN THAN NOT ALSO CONTAINS THE **BLOOPER REEL**.



A SHAVING RASH...ARE YOU FUCKING KIDDING ME?



OH! HEY, LAURA.

HEY! WHAT'CHA DOING?



SIGH... YOU KNOW... TALKING TO YOU, AND TOUCHING MYSELF.



WHAT'S UP? I THOUGHT WE WERE MEETING AT FIVE?



YEAH, UH, ACTUALLY I'M CALLING TO TAKE A RAINCHECK ON THAT.

OH?

YEAH, TURNS OUT LOOKING HOT DOESN'T REALLY PROTECT YOU FROM THE COLD. I CAME FOR OUR LAST DATE A BIT UNDERDRESSED AND AM...***KOFF*** PAYING THE PRICE NOW.



DAMN...I GOTTA SAY, YOUR VOICE IS ACTUALLY SEXIER NOW...



A SMALL UPSIDE... WITH A BIG FEVER FOR A DOWNSIDE...



SAY NO MORE...

EVER-AFTER WILL TEST YOUR RESOLVE.



MARIANNE?

IT'S NURSE MARIANNE TODAY!



UHHH...OKAY, NURSE MARIANNE...

WHAT'S WITH THE WEIRD WALK?



UGH.

SO, YOU KNOW HOW I SHAVED DOWN THERE?

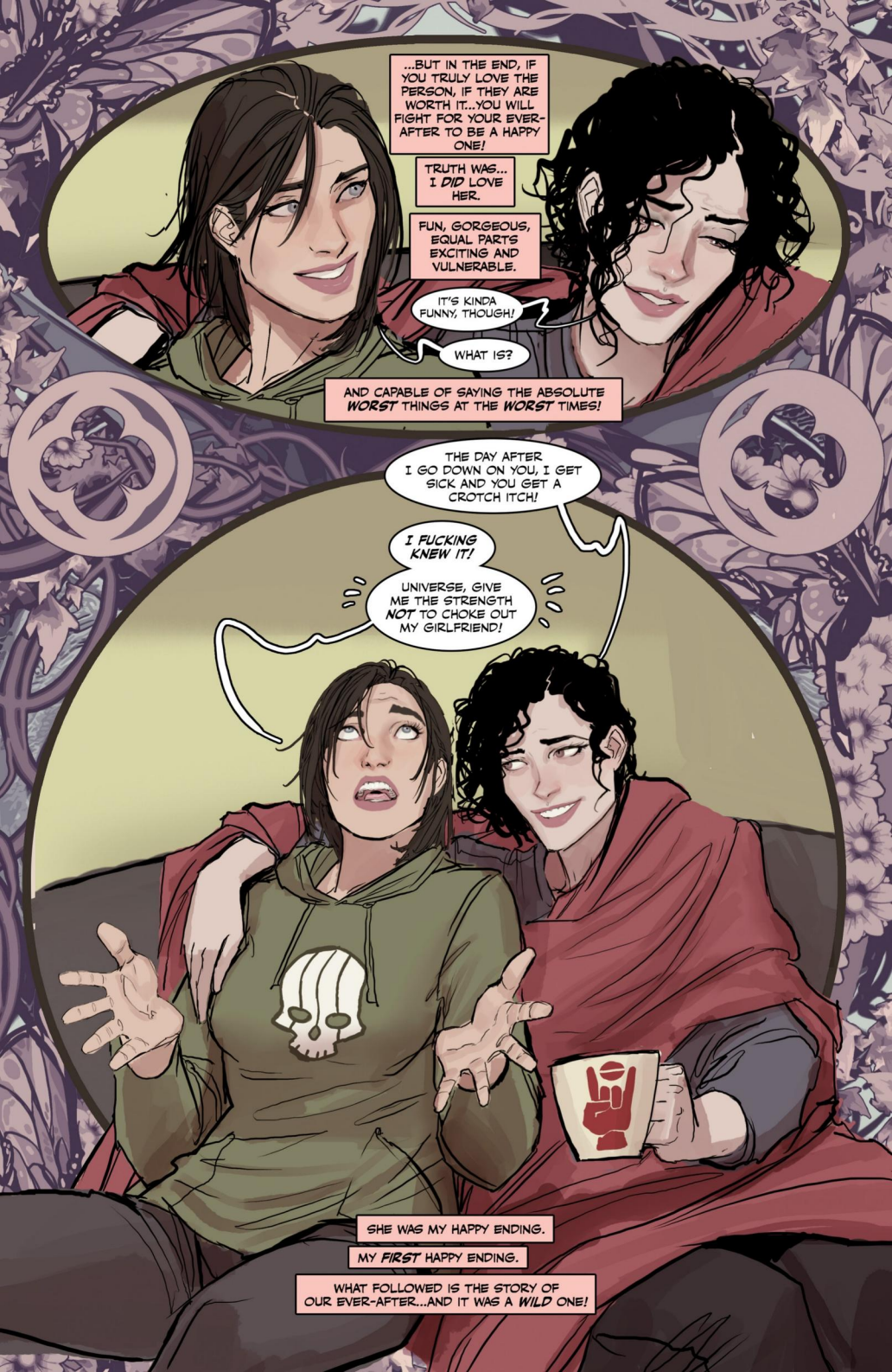
YEAH?

WELL, NOW I'M PAYING THE PRICE FOR IT!



PPFFTBWAHA HAH HACK COUGH

IT WILL TEST YOUR DEVOTION TO EACH OTHER...



...BUT IN THE END, IF
YOU TRULY LOVE THE
PERSON, IF THEY ARE
WORTH IT...YOU WILL
FIGHT FOR YOUR EVER-
AFTER TO BE A HAPPY
ONE!

TRUTH WAS...
I *DID* LOVE
HER.

FUN, GORGEOUS,
EQUAL PARTS
EXCITING AND
VULNERABLE.

IT'S KINDA
FUNNY, THOUGH!

WHAT IS?

AND CAPABLE OF SAYING THE ABSOLUTE
WORST THINGS AT THE *WORST* TIMES!

THE DAY AFTER
I GO DOWN ON YOU, I GET
SICK AND YOU GET A
CROTCH ITCH!

I *FUCKING*
KNEW IT!

UNIVERSE, GIVE
ME THE STRENGTH
NOT TO CHOKE OUT
MY GIRLFRIEND!

SHE WAS MY HAPPY ENDING.

MY *FIRST* HAPPY ENDING.

WHAT FOLLOWED IS THE STORY OF
OUR EVER-AFTER...AND IT WAS A *WILD* ONE!



AND WE WERE JUST
GETTING **STARTED**.

YEAH...SPEAKING
OF PROBLEMS, WE'LL HAVE TO
WORK ON YOUR LITTLE
STAMINA ISSUE...

UGH...

YEAH...

GONNA HAVE TO
RESEARCH **ORGASM
DENIAL**.

SO...UH...MY
TURN -- COULD WE DO IT
ON THE TWENTY-SECOND?

FUN!

WHY NOT
THE TWENTY-
FOURTH?

OH...SO THAT'S YOUR
BIRTHDAY GIFT TO ME?

NOPE...I GOT
ONE BETTER.

BY THE WAY...GIVEN
ANY THOUGHT TO
YOUR **SAFESWORD**?

YEAH...

SUNSTONE!

...

SO THAT'S LIKE, A
TEMPORARY **SAFESWORD**,
OR?

OH, YOU ARE
SO **FUCKED!**

HEH! **YES,
MISTRESS!**



"It felt like our very own happy ending."

After months of confusion, missed signals, and near-heartbreaks, Ally and Lisa are bonded together in love, and in BDSM. The story of their life together is just beginning, but parts of the larger tale have gone untold—until now.

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