

**SLEEPER SQUAD**



**#35 WHISKEY BUSINESS**  
Story and images by Trilby

RUBY'S PRIVATE SPACE, THE NEXT DAY.

So I don't guess you remember me ...

Sure I do! Melinda messed with you to try to get to me. A couple of times.

Jenny, right?

Oh ... well, I'm flattered ... I'm sorry to just come to your place, but you know how it is with messages, sometimes people don't see them for ages ...

I was a little worried about coming ... I didn't want to see you and, y'know, relapse ... but it seems like it Paded after I stopped going to the club, like you said it would.

Not only that, the club's gone now ... and we caught Melinda. Not long before the Sprue. She's out of the picture.

... I probably should have sent you word of that. I'm sorry.

JENNY APPEARED IN ISSUES 22, 25, AND 27 ... BUT HAS NEVER BEEN CALLED BY NAME BEFORE THIS.

Glad to hear it, though.

OK, so, last night I was at the sidebar ... Do you know it?

Yeah. Never actually been in it.

Two women were together at the bar. Everything fine, they were having a drink ... then all of a sudden they both started ... uh ... changing.

Their noses and ears got really big and they started laughing. Like, they couldn't stop laughing. They couldn't do anything else.

They turned into clowns.

All the way, after a little while. Makeup on their faces, and their clothes changed. They completely freaked out, and they both ran out of the bar.

Glad you didn't freak out. I could see where that might give you nasty flashbacks ...

Right? I did kind of think "oh, no, why is it clowns again?"

But it wasn't me changing, thank goodness.

No one else in the bar was affected?

No. There were five other customers, counting me, and the bartender. We were all fine.

Once I got my head together, I went out to the street to see if there was anything I could do to help them, but they were gone.

Hmm.

I'm curious. What made you decide to come tell me about this?

Well, you know, the last time we saw each other, I didn't know who you were. But then the Sprue came, and there were the rescues ...

You look into it when weird things happen, right?

Yeah, I guess I do. Me and a couple of others.

Not that we planned it that way, you understand.

Anyway, it wasn't a bad idea to come tell me ... but there might not be a lot we can do. We'll keep our eyes open, and that may be it, unless we get lucky. Or really unlucky.

THE OPS ROOM.

I don't actually mind our having a reputation as the troubleshooters of A4, but I feel like we need to keep expectations pretty low. Sooner or later we're going to hit something we can't solve.

This might be one of those times.

Especially since no one got the names of the victims.

I can't track someone if I don't know who to track.

Likely we'll have to wait until it happens again and hope we get more data.

Yeah, that's what I was thinking too. I just figured I'd stop by and let you know.

And where are you off to on this beautiful day?

It is a beautiful day. You should get out of this dungeon for a while. See some sunlight.

I'm off to find Jex. It's a training day today.

Don't forget our dinner tonight.

Jex is perfectly welcome to come, if she doesn't mind being odd person out.

Oyo!

Jex, I gotta know--do you hang in the skeevy parts of Serenity because you're more comfortable here? I mean, does it feel more like what you're used to, or something like that?

An't the place. Least an't think so. Han't miss Awake, not for that.

Might be Polk, tho. Some them in the Plash sides haz me little bit.

Goin that-- need to tell you some from last night.

Was in one of them, walking, just seen out ... passed by a bar ...

"Han't hear them from outside ... was gon keep on, but saw some big rosh ..."



Laughing big, but wan't happy ... could tell.

Went aPter. Figured could help, maybe. Han't Pind her. She hauled rightup quick.

You're the second report of that happening from last night. There were two others, also in a bar. Nowhere near yours.

Yeah, they seem to want to go oPP and hide ... I guess I can't blame them for that ... makes them hard to Pind, though ...

HMM.

But that does give me an idea.

The part of Serenity where your bar is has the older style streets and commons, and it has a lot of places to disappear. But where the sidebar is, there aren't all that many. Too flash.

If they weren't together enough to recall, and they didn't want to be seen by anybody, then they're still trying to hide somewhere in that area.

I know we're supposed to be training today, but how would you peel about going to poke into some dark corners instead?





Actually I don't like the Plush parts either. I don't know why people want places that look like you can't do anything in them except shop.

But I can also see why people don't want back alleys ... unless they're looking for somewhere to hide ...

Hasn't none hiding in this one ...

Can't expect to get lucky on the first try. C'mon, let's--

Oh, no.

What kind rosh's this?

I thought they were Euphorics, but now I'm not sure.

I'll explain later. It'll take a while.



Hello!  
I'd like to tell you about achieving perpetual bliss.

There is no need to continue in this system around us when for no effort you can have euphoria at all times!

We're not in the market. Trust me.



Pink is kind of a new look for you, isn't it? Why did you change?

Ah ...  
I believe you must be confusing us with an unrelated group.

You've got to be at least somewhat related. You use a lot of the same material. I've heard it bePore.

Well ... yes ... but we don't care for their methods and do not recommend them.

And what do they think about you?

Er ...

Nothing good. Got it.



Multiple factions of them ... terrific. Leyna's going to have a pit.

Oyo! Slow up! Gon tell or what?

Yeah, sorry, I--

Hang on.

Do you hear something?

hyuck  
hyuck



hyuck  
hhyuckk  
hy hyuck  
hhh  
hyuck  
hy hy  
hnh yy

DR. CHAPMAN'S MEDICAL FACILITIES, A WHILE LATER.



Here's the other one. She wasn't too far from where we found the first.

Guess we should go look for the one Jex saw, but she has a lot more places to hide.

Hyuck  
hnh



Same extreme physiological changes as the other. Rapid, too, if this happened last night.

Between this and the robot virus, you've been bringing me interesting challenges lately

but I'd like to remind you that my qualifications are in psychology. I didn't study much physical medicine.

Actually, they don't really bother to teach physical medicine anymore.



An't it all mind trouble, in here, tho?

HM!  
Yes ... but that's more philosophical than practical. It may all ultimately be in your head, but what we have here is manifesting as physical symptoms. I can't help them mentally ... I don't think there's anything to "fix." Judging from their reactions to us, they're fairly lucid.

This is lucid?

They're unable to communicate, but again, that seems like more of a physical block. Imagine you were poisoned and you couldn't talk because you were going into anaphylaxis. You wouldn't be looking for a psychologist. You'd be looking for an antidote.



At any rate, there's nothing I can do for them except keep them comfortable and monitor for complications.

heeee

This was almost certainly algorithmic. They consumed or wore or activated some item.

These changes are very specific and well-planned. Whoever did this knew what they were doing. I suppose that's what you need to look for.

Although ... I hate jumping to this kind of conclusion, but especially given the symptoms, I wonder if you should talk to Forbes.

Yeah, I did have that thought.

Me, too.



Who's Forbes?

That's another one that will take a while to explain.

Leyna, should we just go try to find her right now?

hnhguck

You go. I have something else to chase. As far as I know, there's only one top-tier algorithmist still working out of Serenity ... and we haven't spoken to her in a long time.

Oh!

Yes, that's a good idea.

Jex, who you riding with?



Uh.

Gon tell me bout Forbes on way?

hnh

Absolutely.



Hi!  
Welcome to LittleSpace! Are you a new customer? We have appointments available at every age range ...

Though if you want one of the infancy ranges you do need to reserve several days in advance. Toddler we can do on a walk-in basis.

We recommend you do toddler your first time anyway.

Oh, wait! Are you here to apply for a MOMMY position? You look like you'd make a good mommy ...

Uh ... I really doubt that.

I'm a friend of the owner, and I need to talk to her.



I think you'd be a great MOMMY. You've always been concerned about taking care of people.

Not that I'm trying to recruit you--though we do need more MOMMIES ...

Hello, Dina.



... been doing amazing. I mean, it doesn't get the same crowds Bliss did ... but on the other hand, it's supervised and not addictive, so ...

Yeah. You might have had to close Bliss down even if the Sprue hadn't happened. I admit, this Peels a lot weirder to me ... but also a lot safer.

Snub, I expected to see you sitting in front of a console!

Dina's been convincing me it's good to take downtime.



You should try it, you know. It's very relaxing. We have some customers who think it's better than a spa day.

Yeah, but a spa day doesn't mess with my head ... I don't think I trust anybody enough to do that. No offense.

Oh, none taken!  
It does definitely need a lot of trust. That's why we're so careful about hiring and training MOMMIES.

And why we have a MOMMY shortage.

--sigh--  
Yeah.

Anyway, what's up?  
If you're on the trail of something algorithmic, I didn't do it.



I don't know if I'm on the trail of anything, that's the problem. We've got two people suffering from something that we're pretty sure was algorithmic.

I didn't think it was you--for one thing, it seems deliberately malicious--but I was wondering if you know of any other really skilled algorithmists working out of Serenity right now. Because I don't.



No ... but, you know, they wouldn't have to be, not these days.

People are doing all kinds of stuff now that I'd have said a few years ago was impossible without a lot of algorithm training.

It's like they just have to want it hard enough, and be able to envision it clearly.



Yeah. Desire and imagination.

You knew what I was going to answer.

I was kind of hoping you wouldn't, though.

"Oh, yeah, there's this new evil genius" is much easier to handle than "could be anybody."

It's gotten a whole lot harder to find and deal with people who just want to make trouble. It's depressing.

If that depresses you, I've got some news you're really not going to like.

I've been meaning to send you a message about it.

Oh, boy. OK, hit me.



Well, you never did revoke my Pull access to the network systems, so I figured I might as well keep an eye on them, just because.

We didn't revoke it on purpose. Use your powers only for good.

Anyway, the network's completely down. What's to monitor?

I monitor to make sure there's still nothing to monitor. That's the problem--there has been.

There's evidence that something has been trying to reactivate the network. Or at least parts of it.

They haven't succeeded yet, and I don't think they will, but the attempts don't stop. And it's disturbing that something even managed to get deep enough in to try.



Could it be the Sprue?

I'm so glad you said that. I was worried you'd think I lost my mind.

Not at all. We know it's an autonomous process of some kind--that's just about all we do know. We have no idea what it's capable of.

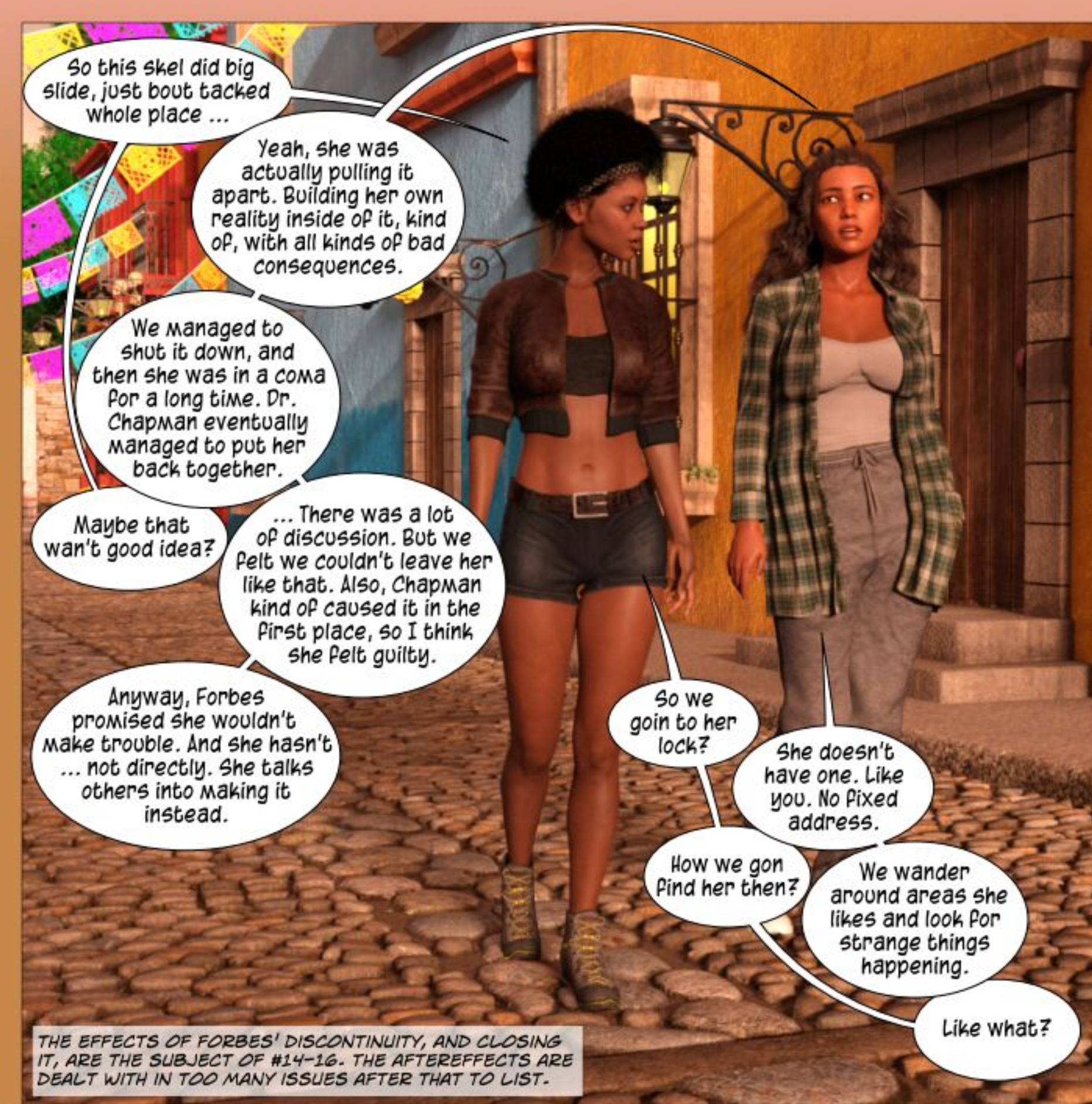
Also, you said "something" and not "someone." Twice.

I don't need to tell you that it is the Sprue, and it does reactivate the network ...

... that would be really, really bad. Yeah.

In several different ways. You OK with continuing to monitor?

Sure. I'll let you know if anything changes.



So this skel did big slide, just bout tacked whole place ...

Yeah, she was actually pulling it apart. Building her own reality inside of it, kind of, with all kinds of bad consequences.

We managed to shut it down, and then she was in a coma for a long time. Dr. Chapman eventually managed to put her back together.

Maybe that wasn't good idea?

... There was a lot of discussion. But we felt we couldn't leave her like that. Also, Chapman kind of caused it in the first place, so I think she Pelt guilty.

Anyway, Forbes promised she wouldn't make trouble. And she hasn't ... not directly. She talks others into making it instead.

So we goin to her lock?

She doesn't have one. Like you. No Pixid address.

How we gon find her then?

We wander around areas she likes and look for strange things happening.

Like what?

THE EFFECTS OF FORBES' DISCONTINUITY, AND CLOSING IT, ARE THE SUBJECT OF #14-16. THE AFTEREFFECTS ARE DEALT WITH IN TOO MANY ISSUES AFTER THAT TO LIST.



ABRE ASAS PRA MINHA FOLIA JÁ ESTÁ CHEGANDO A HORA  
ABRE ASAS PRA MINHA BANDEIRA JÁ ESTÁ CHEGANDO A HORA  
APARE OS TEUS SONHOS QUE A VIDA TEM DONO E ELA VEM TE COBRAR  
A VIDA NÃO ERA ASSIM, NÃO ERA ASSIM NÃO CORRA O RISCO DE FICAR ALEGRIA

Like that.



You win, Ruby Martinez! You've forced us Barkers to get rid of the bed Pees. I hope you're satisfied.

Hooray! We will have a new era where everyone isn't constantly struggling just to pay you.

Now people in Sleep will get to do the things they want to do!



So now we can all change and rearrange things to suit ourselves, the way you do?

Don't be ridiculous! We'd never let you do that. How would we keep control over everything?

It would be too dangerous! What if somebody made something we don't like?



But you made a promise! You said you would make this a better place! You're just doing what the Barkers want you to do! You're not actually on our side at all!

Of course not! I'm powerful. Why would I want to share?

Hmph.



Is that the best you can do?

Might as well build a booth and put on a puppet show.

Oh, no, the Spruel! Now that we have to start everything over, surely we'll do it differently, right?

No indeed. We're going to go to a lot of trouble to make sure it's just like it was before.

That'd work too.

But this gets larger crowds.



They're stupid. They're all stupid. You have to make it really easy for them, and even then, most of them ignore it.

Why don't you go down there and tell everyone what you really think of them? That'd go over well, I bet.

You know, I don't believe you actually want to make anything better or help anybody realize their potential or any of that.

You like to think you're some kind of activist or something, but really you're just bored and more than a little bit malicious.

You still have to grind and grind to get anything good. There's no bed Pees but all the nice things will cost you, so better go sell something!

And if you try to protest, or do anything we don't like, we'll hunt you down.



Why do you stay in Serenity? There are zones where you could make all the trouble you want --

You haven't unlocked that cutscene.

Go away.



THE USUAL PLACE.

"You haven't unlocked that cutscene."

I swear that is actually what she said. I have Jex as a witness.

Well, if you'd like to know the answer to your question, I think I can give you a good guess.

If you promise not to consider it a professional opinion.



Oh, this should be good.

It's not that exciting. She just knows she doesn't have better options. If she went to Highpoint or the Souk they wouldn't tolerate her at all.

The Cobbles would be worse because she wouldn't know what would push it too far, and then one day the boss there would just take her apart.

In Century there are so many people doing so many disruptive things that she might not ever get noticed ...

I was thinking the Yards ...

But the Yards are so spread out ... that she might not ever get noticed. There's no public commons there.

She needs an audience.



I could try to set her up with one of the theatrical groups ...

LOU LAURENCE, RUBY'S USUAL PRODUCER AND AGENT, AND LEYNA'S SIGNIFICANT OTHER. LOU'S BEEN MENTIONED A COUPLE OF TIMES RECENTLY, BUT NEW READERS HAVEN'T LAID EYES ON THEM BEFORE NOW.

You think you're kidding, but honestly, this isn't the first time I've wondered if the solution isn't just to find her something to do.



Anyway, she's not responsible for our current thing. I didn't even have to ask. If she had been, she wouldn't have been able to keep Prom gloating about it.

All right, here we go ...

Yay, food! Thanks, Shan. I'm starving.



Everything all right, Jex? Is your Pood OK?

Hm? ... Oh, yeah. S'good.

You can't possibly know that. You haven't touched it.

Ruby, you said were hungry. That Por real? Not yankin me?

Don't know why I'd lie about it ...

Han't been hungry since I got here.

Hunger is an atavism.

Exactly what I was going to say.

OK, you two are going to need to explain that in English.



You want to do it?

No, no, you go ahead.

All right, well ... Our bodies are kept Fed at all times, so we don't actually experience hunger in the "I need nutrition" sense. We only think we do.

What we think is hunger is really just craving the *experience* of eating Pood. The tastes, the smells. It doesn't have anything to do with needs. It's a want.

Jex, no offense, but I don't think any of the Pood you had Awake could have been very compelling. What do you call the stuff the Barkers dispense out there?

Spack.

Right. No Flavor and not visually appealing, as I understand ... you can't really have hunger the way we have it in here if you never before ate anything worth hungering Por.



You'll probably pick it up, though, when you find some things here you like eating. You decide if that's good or bad.

Aright. Add it to list.

What list's that?

List of rosh shit they an't tell you about when come in.

Han't get hungry ... han't need to piss ... han't need to sleep ...

Ooh, don't let Zoe hear that last one.

You absolutely do need to sleep, and I wish they'd add a stronger warning about it in the orientation.

It's a good point, though. I don't think it ever occurred to them to tell newcomers these things. Especially now that there are so few.



The orientation in the recall space isn't likely to change. It would take a majority of shareholding Barkers to approve a new script, and we don't even know where some of them are.

The message about consulting with the Daughters of Sekhmet only got tacked on because it was considered an emergency and two Barkers decided to abuse their abilities in order to get it in there.

We could probably get the Daughters to revise their orientation ...

Might already in it. Han't got that, so an't know.

Oh, right. You were kidnapped before you could ...

THIS PANEL MAKES MUCH MORE SENSE IF YOU'VE READ #30.

INTERLUDE.  
THE SOUK.



... the path of light is the path that is without sin! Your wicked ways are keeping you in darkness!



We don't come to scold you or punish you--we want to *help* you! We want you to achieve salvation, to attain the light! But to get there, you *must* give up your licentious ways! Your Pornication will destroy you!



We can guide youuuuu



uhhhh?





The path of sin is the path of light! Without wickedness we remain in darkness!



We want to help you attain the light! We are ready to guide you! Embrace your salvation!

Hey!



You can't just mess with people like that around here ... you need to undo it right now--



--orrrr what are yougggggh



Come along now.



Honestly, I don't think I have enough brain left to think about the clown situation right now.

Want to get together tomorrow morning and start fresh?

Sure. Come to my place, so that Jex can get there.

And what are you doing with the rest of your evening?

I have patients, remember? I don't think they're a danger to themselves or anyone, but I don't want to leave them unsupervised much longer.

You'll have to take a raincheck.



She your dore?

I don't know what that means. Must have been after my time.

You're not asking if we have sex, because you've guessed that, and also that's kind of a low bar in A4.

She's a friend, now, and I trust her. We confide in each other.

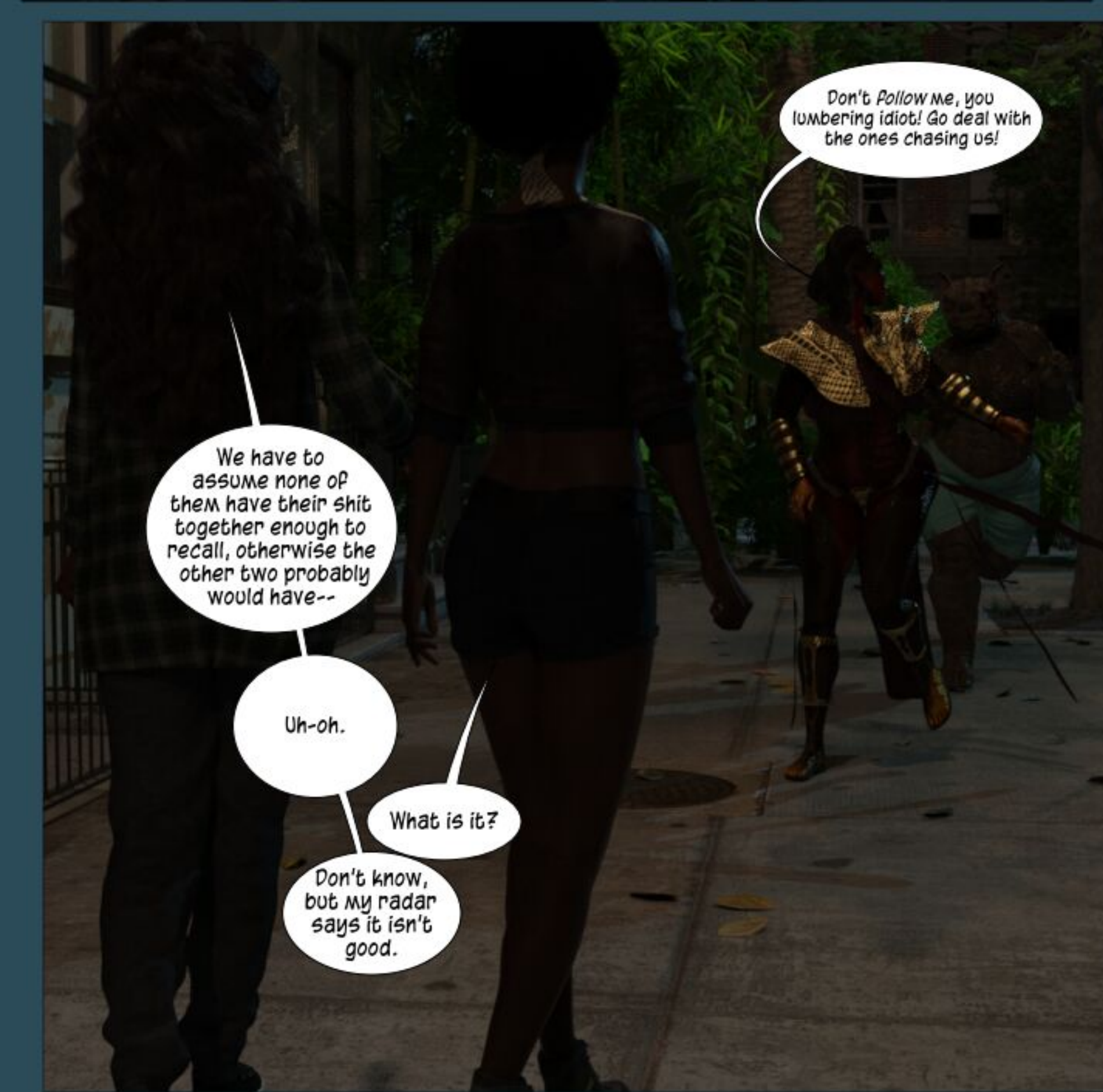
But if you mean do we go home to each other every night, depend on each other, that kind of thing ... she's not that type.

What bout you?

I used to think I wasn't. I don't know anymore.

Hey, you want to go see if we can find the one you saw get clowned?

I'm not ready to call it a night and I've got nothing better to do.



Don't follow me, you lumbering idiot! Go deal with the ones chasing us!

We have to assume none of them have their shit together enough to recall, otherwise the other two probably would have--

Uh-oh.

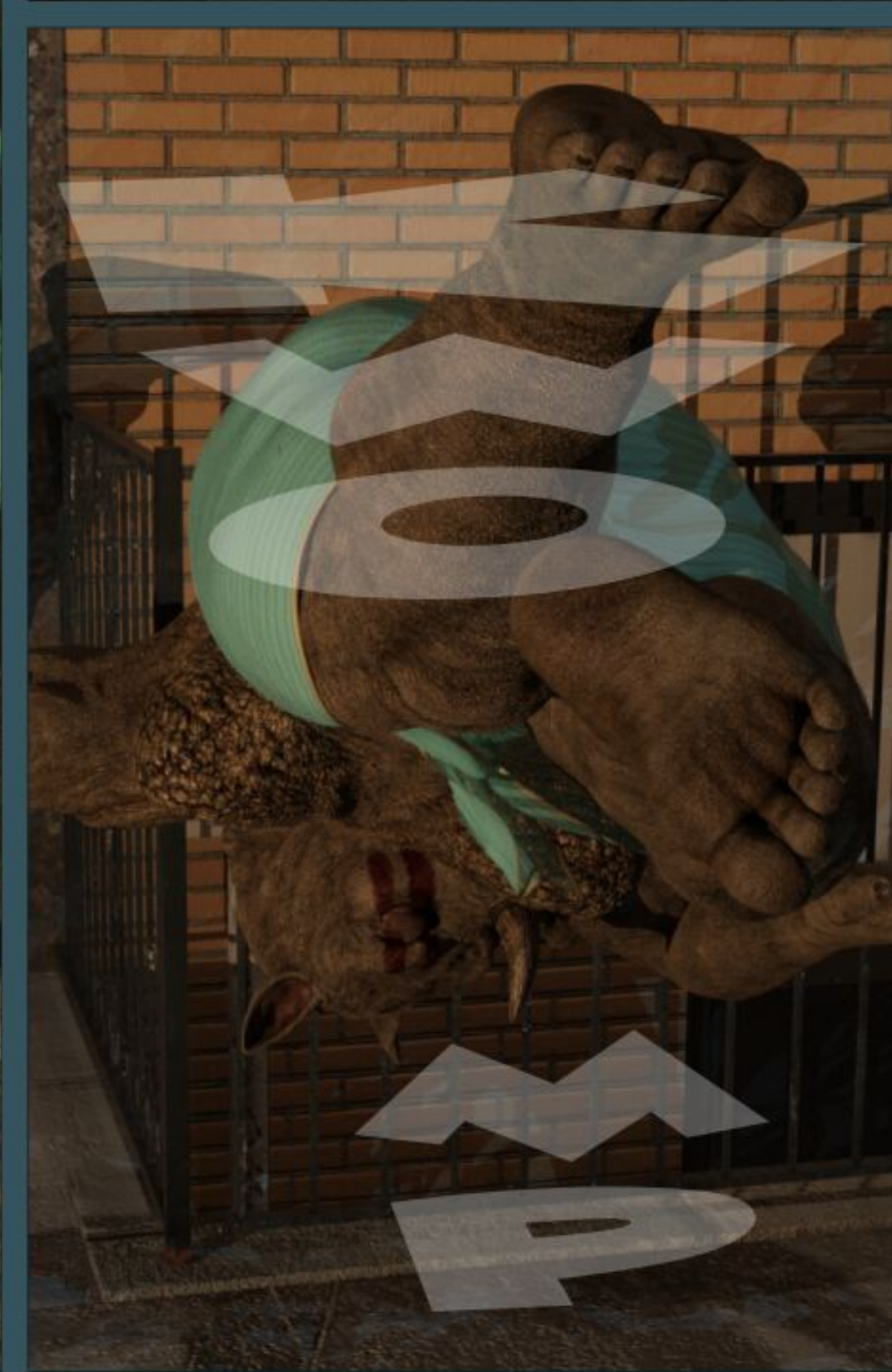
What is it?

Don't know, but my radar says it isn't good.



Oyo!

Aaaahh!!





Was that enough to knock you out of it?

Strong Pence ...

I need to hear something besides a grunt, Crel, or I might throw you into a wall myself.



Yeah, yeah, I'm Pine ... so much damned Puss all the time ...

Just need a minute to ... uh ... no, don't help or anything ...

I'm guessing the rude cobra woman who ported out is the one who messed with her head?

She claims she's the leader of the snakes. I don't know if that's true. I do know she likes to make trouble.

Uh, so ... where are we? And do you have any idea how we got here? We were chasing her through a ruin and ...

You're in Serenity, and it looks to me like a data collision.



Yep. This chunk of the Yards collided with us. It should still be contiguous--you should be able to go back through the ruins.

You probably want to go ahead and do that, because they usually drift apart again soon after the collision, and if you're stuck on this side you'll have to portal back.

Thanks. Thanks for dealing with Crel too.

Don't thank her for that. I'm going to ache for a week.



That happen a lot?

Not a lot. More often than we want.

The blocks of data are ... well, they drift. Serenity's like a big ship with no engines, just floating aimlessly in interspace. Sometimes the blocks bump up against each other.

It wasn't like that once, but the Sprue destroyed all the stuff that would keep it from happening. Ask Leyna if you want the boring details.

... Hey, do you mind if we look for your clown tomorrow? I'm really exhausted all of a sudden.



OK, so, our usual suspect didn't have anything to do with it ... and we know, unfortunately, that it could be just about anybody. Asking "who had the ability" isn't going to help.

You're the one who writes crime plots ... how did you describe it to me that time?

Motive, method, and opportunity.

We're not going to get anywhere with motive. Do either of the other two sound promising to you?

Maybe! Remember, Chapman's sure it's an algorithmic vector.



There've been five cases so far that anyone's bothered to tell us about ...

Five? Last I heard, there were three.

Yes. There were two more cases in a third location. Same night as the others. Someone told Gina and she told me. Sorry--I didn't want to mention it last night. I wanted dinner to be social, not business.

No one's found those two victims yet, by the way.

The point is, all three of the incidents happened in bars. Seems to me like that can't be coincidence ...



Tack.

Sorry?

Tack's anything that gets you tacked. Wasted, drunk, stoned, messed up.

She means it was what they drank.



Exactly! So maybe if we go visit the three bars, and find out what those people were drinking ...

I don't know, Leyna. Most bars serve stuff from standard manifests. It's the same everywhere. Nobody bothers to invent their own special booze.

Well, we also don't really have anything else to chase.

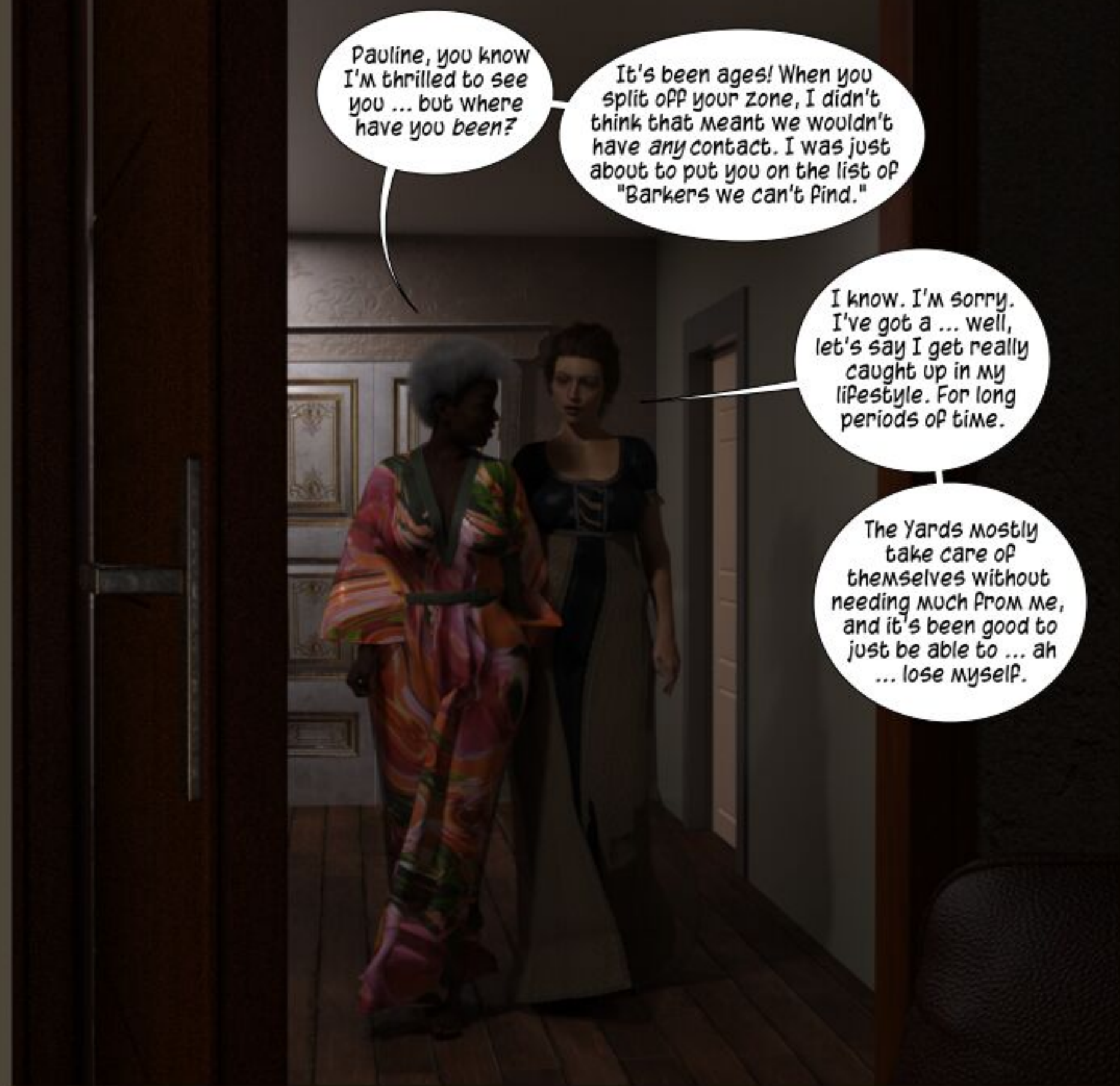
... I'll go put some shoes on.



Who on earth ...?

There are maybe six people who can even get to this door. One of them's already in here, two wouldn't bother to ring, and one of them is--

Pauline?!



Pauline, you know I'm thrilled to see you ... but where have you been?

It's been ages! When you split off your zone, I didn't think that meant we wouldn't have any contact. I was just about to put you on the list of "Barkers we can't find."

I know. I'm sorry. I've got a ... well, let's say I get really caught up in my lifestyle. For long periods of time.

The Yards mostly take care of themselves without needing much Prom Me, and it's been good to just be able to ... ah ... lose myself.



You've met Corazon. Cora, you remember Pauline Barker.

Oh ... yes, of course.

The young lady is Dolores. Lor, say hello to Pauline.

Hi.

Lor, why don't we finish reading the story in your room, OK?



Oh ... I don't ... you don't need to do that ...

It's no problem at all. Trust me, you wouldn't get a lot of conversation done with Lor in the room.



So ... ah ... the child is Corazon's?

Both of ours, actually. Since you last saw us, we have become a two-mother household.

And neither of ours. Though it's not as complicated as that makes it sound.

Take a seat.



It would probably be good to tell another Barker. Just in case. This is the sort of thing that we used to make group decisions about.

Leyna and Ruby know, but no one else outside this household. Truth is, it's not just secrecy. I don't see people much anymore.

This would have been a few months after the Sprue, so you just missed it. We'd finished the rescue and restoration operations, and you'd gone off to set up the Yards.

I got a notification that something had taken place in one of the beds I controlled that the system did not know how to handle. An intervention was requested.

*"The problem was a newborn. Everything was fine medically, the whole pregnancy had been monitored, the birth had no complications ... the bedders moved the infant to a growth bed as usual ... and then went to notify the mother in sleep so she could pick up her baby there."*

*"They couldn't find the mother. I mean, of course they knew where the mother was physically ... but they couldn't locate her sleep presence. She was nowhere. This made them very nervous; they didn't want to interrupt the mother and talk to her directly, for fear she was in an unstable mental state somehow."*



*"We think the mother fell in a hole or was eaten by the Sprue. All the people who have are unfindable like that--they're not dead, we don't dare interrupt them, we don't know where they are, and we don't know how to get them back. We might never find her."*



So you adopted Lor.

hm. I hope it works out well, however it works out.

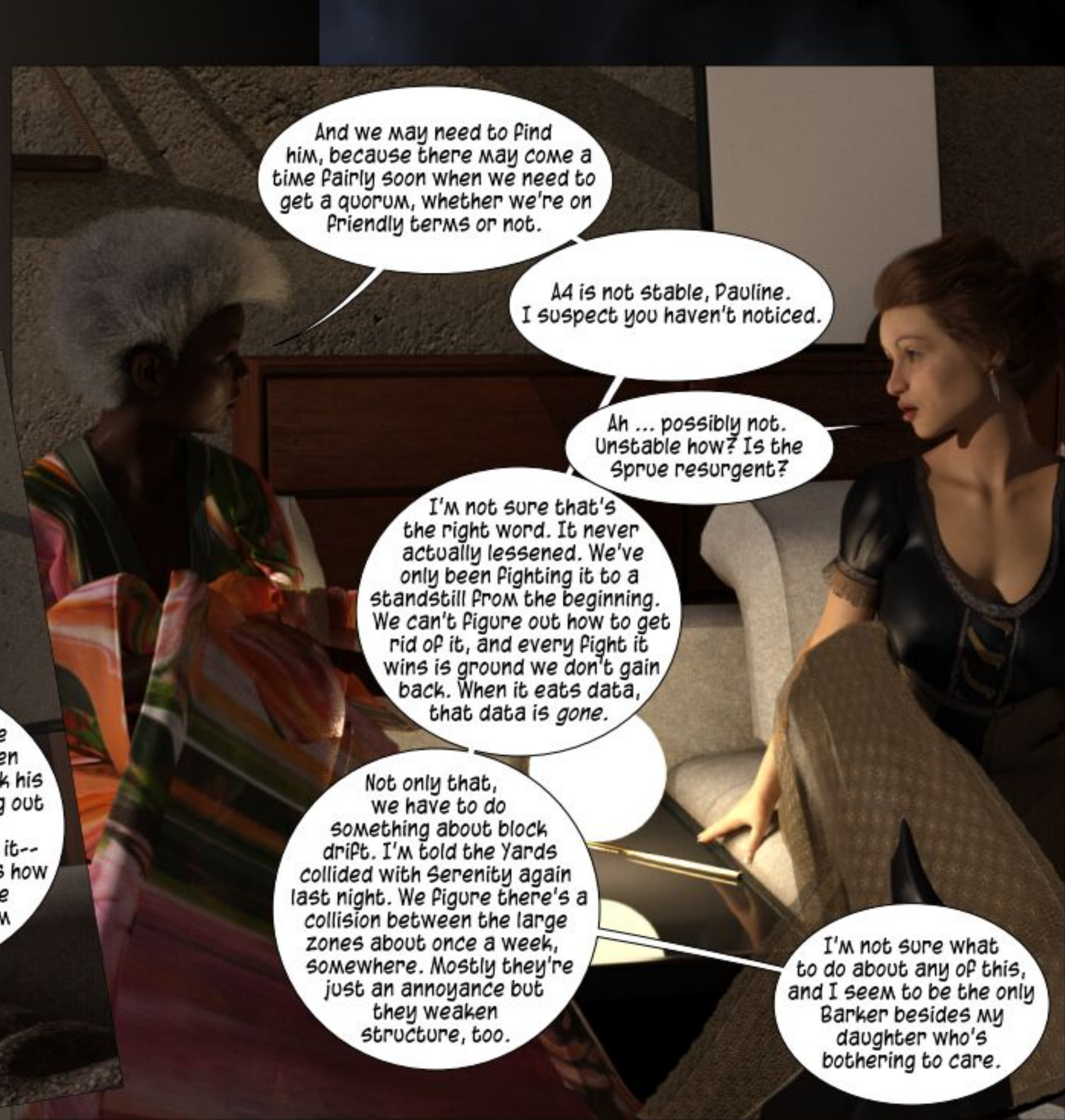
So who is on the "Barkers we can't find" list?

Well, let's see. Hamilton is in Serenity somewhere but won't check in ... Ezekiel is in a small zone of his own, apparently, that we're not sure how to get to ... No one knows where Clayton is, or cares ...

But the big problem is Josiah. He was unresponsive even before the Sprue. I think his private space is floating out there by itself somewhere--with him in it--and heaven alone knows how we'll find it, unless he does something from his end.

Not formally. There hasn't been a need. When she gets old enough, she can decide for herself.

She doesn't call either of us "Mama." We love her and she loves us, but it's possible we're just temporary caretakers.



And we may need to find him, because there may come a time fairly soon when we need to get a quorum, whether we're on friendly terms or not.

A4 is not stable, Pauline. I suspect you haven't noticed.

Ah ... possibly not. Unstable how? Is the Sprue resurgent?

I'm not sure that's the right word. It never actually lessened. We've only been fighting it to a standstill from the beginning. We can't figure out how to get rid of it, and every fight it wins is ground we don't gain back. When it eats data, that data is gone.

Not only that, we have to do something about block dript. I'm told the Yards collided with Serenity again last night. We figure there's a collision between the large zones about once a week, somewhere. Mostly they're just an annoyance but they weaken structure, too.

I'm not sure what to do about any of this, and I seem to be the only Barker besides my daughter who's bothering to care.



Look, I got enough to deal with in this place without having to remember what people were drinking, OK?

Now, if they were regulars, I'd remember their usual, but they weren't. Never saw them before.

... Say, aren't you Ruby Martinez? Sorry I can't be more help.



Ruby Martinez! It's nice to finally meet you.

Can't tell you, though. I wasn't on that night. Oh, we all heard about it, but you need to come back and talk to Darnelle. She's the one who served her.

She'll be in tonight, if you want to stop by.



Everybody knows Ruby?

Well, you see, Ruby's reputation precedes her, at least in Serenity. Some people know her from our work dealing with troublemakers and other cleanup, but most people here remember her from just after the Sprue, when she was amazingly Pabulous.

Ppt.



Don't believe everything she tells you--

All of A4 was coming apart and we were trying to save what we could, while at the same time trying to keep people from falling into interspace right and left. We didn't have enough people to do both. We probably would have been a lot worse off, but Ruby--somehow--managed to shove a lot of data blocks together and hold them that way. By sheer force of personality.

She also rescued a lot of people. There was a point where she basically was the rescue effort. Nobody could keep up with her.

So she's kind of a celebrity. I'm glad it's her and not me. I think it's better to keep a low profile.



Oh, yeah, I can tell you exactly what they drank. I was the one who served them.

They tried that guy's booze. I'm sorry I recommended it to them. I tossed the rest of the bottle. I don't know, maybe I was being nuts, but I didn't want to serve it to anybody else, y'know? And we only had the one bottle anyway.

"That guy's booze?"



The guy is trying to sell his own line of handmade whiskey. He poured me a sample one night. It was pretty good. I told him I'd take a bottle to try out and see if customers liked it.

The shot I tried didn't do anything horrible to me ... then again, he didn't pour that from the bottle he left with us ...

... I think you were probably right to toss the bottle.

What's the guy's name? And is there any chance at all you have an address for him?



I love it when we find someone who's paying attention. Makes everything so much easier.

This must be the place.

Yeah, and that must be him, leaving.

Yo! Chad!

Can we talk to you for a second?



Hey!!

Forget it, he's out of here. We'll have to get to him some other way.

That was you, you know. He took off as soon as he saw your face. That's what I mean about notoriety.

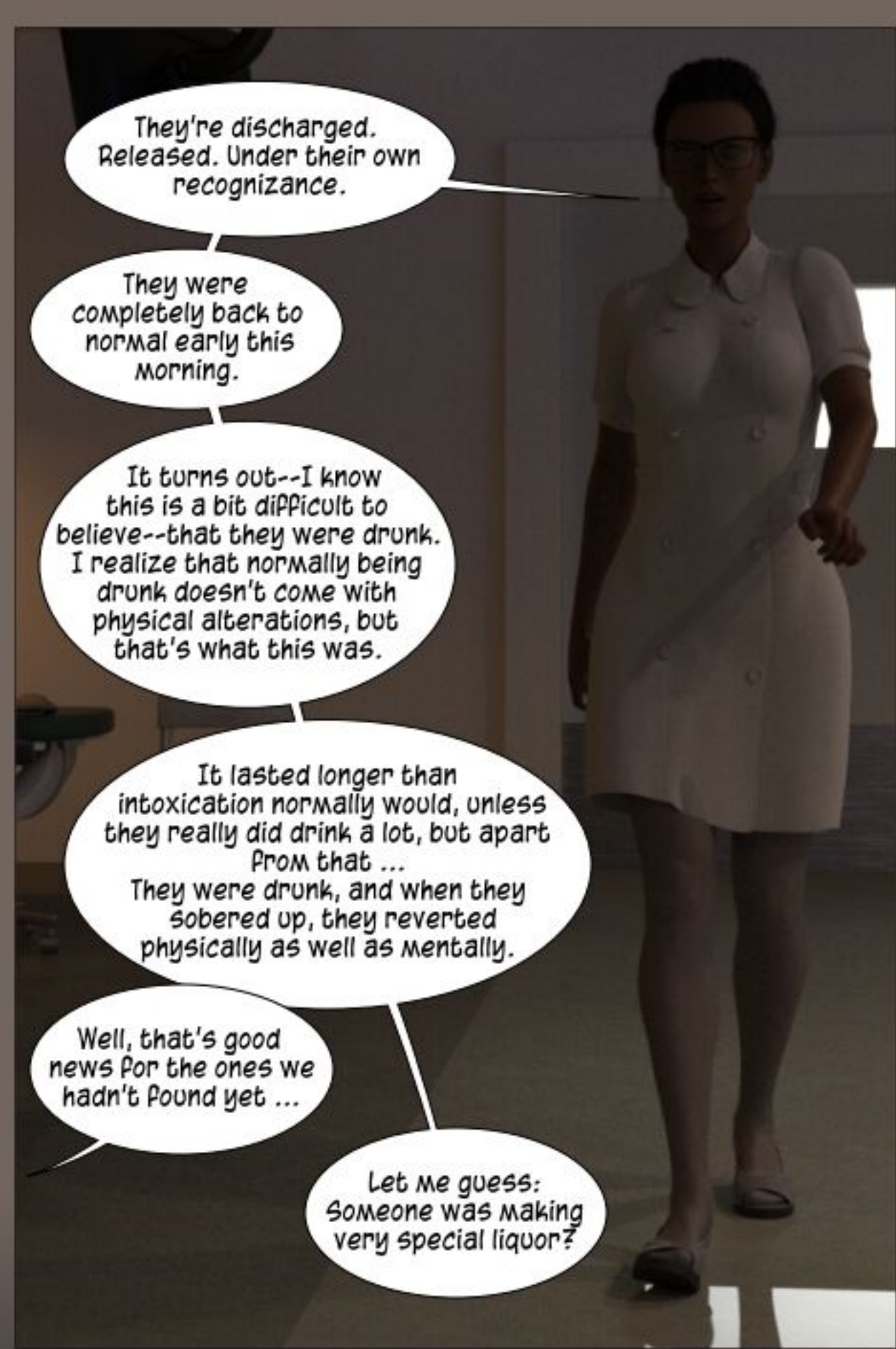
Yeah, well, I didn't ask for it.



Hey, we figured out what's--

Huh. Where is she?

Never mind that. Where are the patients?



They're discharged. Released. Under their own recognizance.

They were completely back to normal early this morning.

It turns out--I know this is a bit difficult to believe--that they were drunk. I realize that normally being drunk doesn't come with physical alterations, but that's what this was.

It lasted longer than intoxication normally would, unless they really did drink a lot, but apart from that ... They were drunk, and when they sobered up, they reverted physically as well as mentally.

Well, that's good news for the ones we hadn't found yet ...

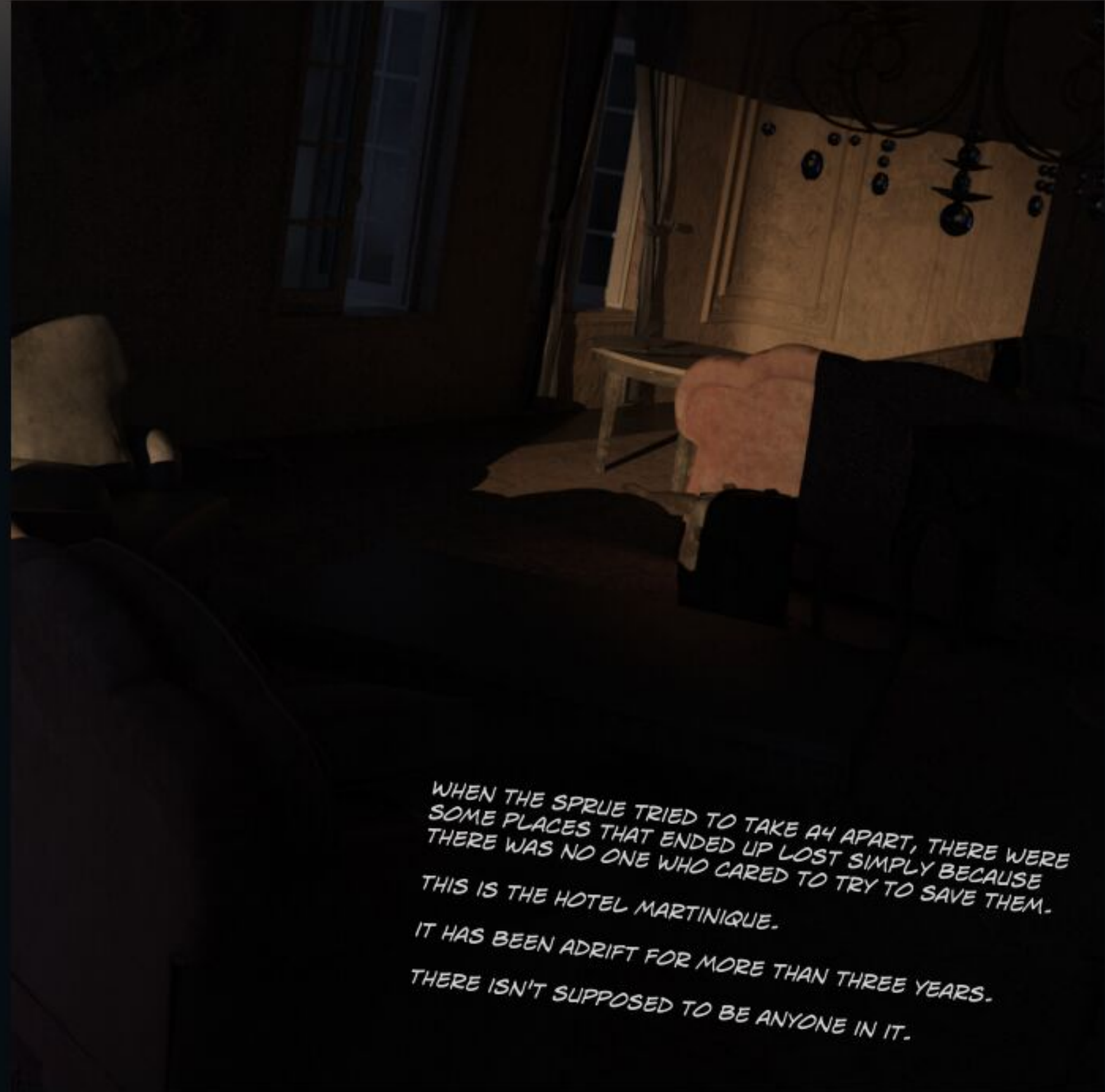
Let me guess: Someone was making very special liquor?



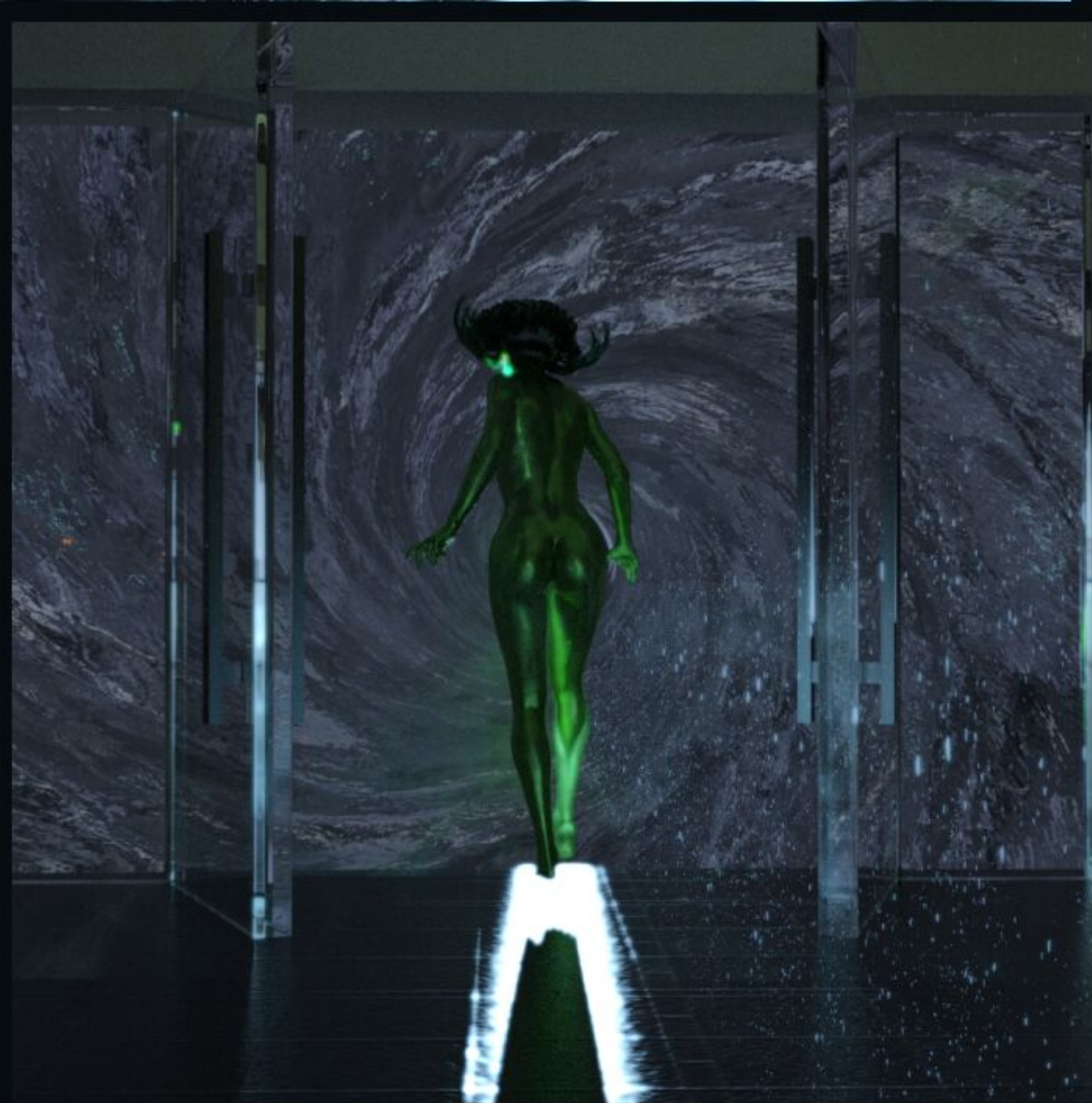
Yes, and now that you've told us that, I feel a lot better about my plan.

Which is good, because I was a little bit worried about asking Jex to volunteer.

INTERLUDE.



WHEN THE SPRUE TRIED TO TAKE AH APART, THERE WERE SOME PLACES THAT ENDED UP LOST SIMPLY BECAUSE THERE WAS NO ONE WHO CARED TO TRY TO SAVE THEM. THIS IS THE HOTEL MARTINIQUE. IT HAS BEEN ADRIFT FOR MORE THAN THREE YEARS. THERE ISN'T SUPPOSED TO BE ANYONE IN IT.





An't like look some else.

I know. But we don't know whether he saw you before he ran.

I haven't changed much. Just a little bit in the face. I want to make sure he doesn't recognize you.



But why me?

An't good at this. You are.

We don't have a good way of dealing with people who do things like this. Never have.

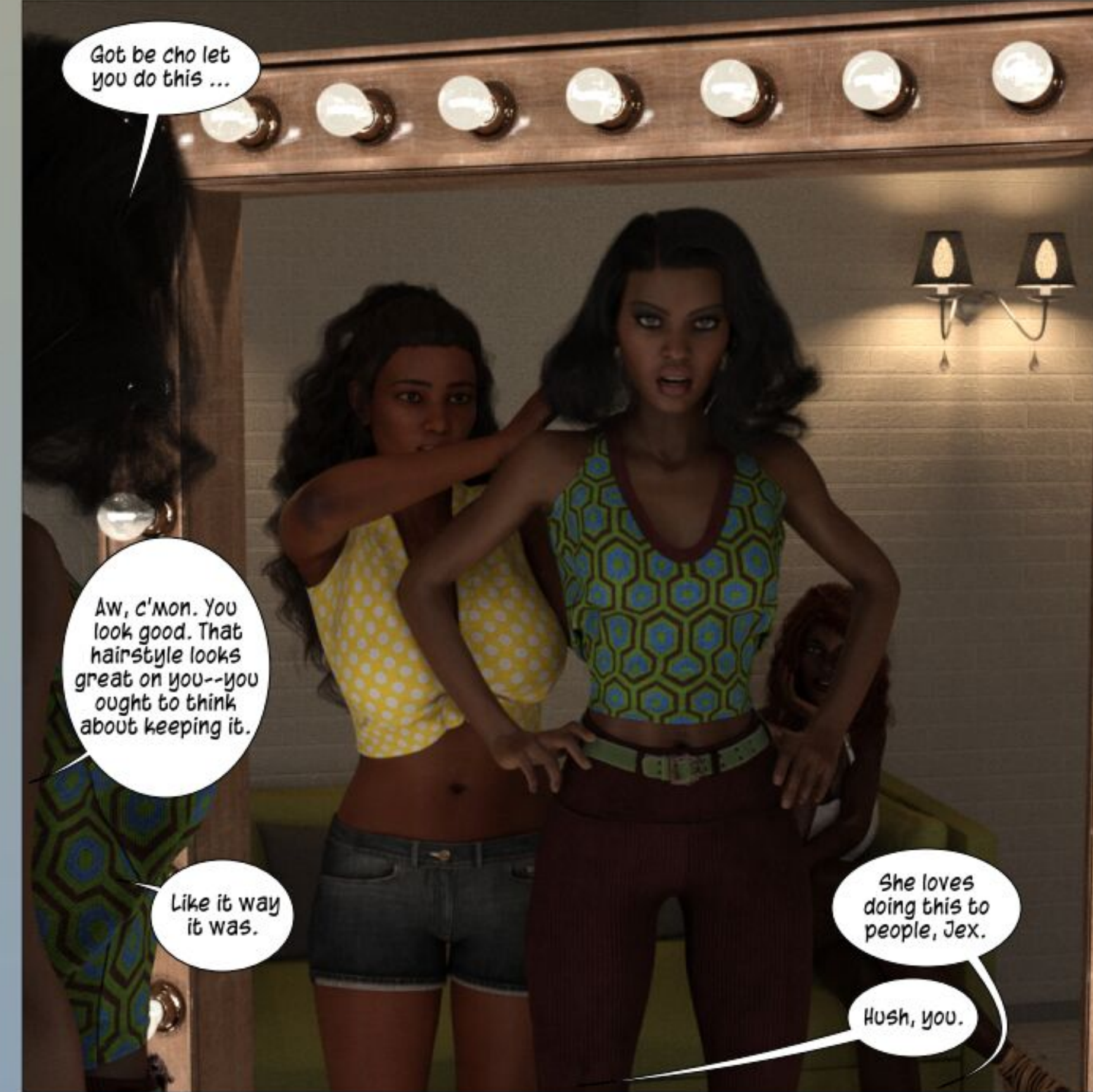
If we do decide we have to deal with him then and there, it'll probably take two of us to get him into a loop, where we can hold him until we figure out what to do.

And you don't know how to do it yet.

You know, I think I'd better change your hair too. And I'd like to put you in some different clothes.

No skirts.

I promise.



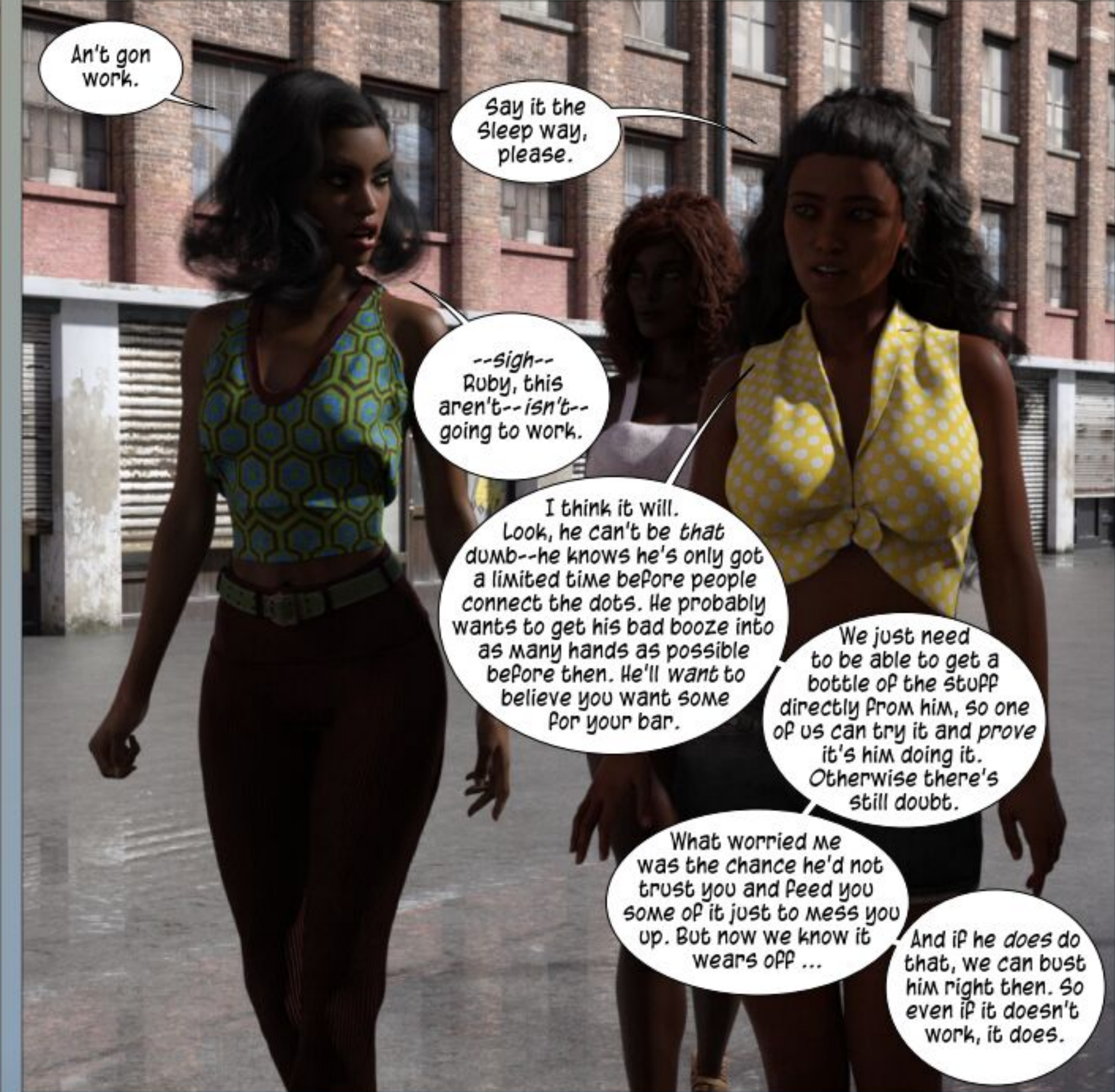
Got be cho let you do this ...

Aw, c'mon. You look good. That hairstyle looks great on you--you ought to think about keeping it.

Like it way it was.

She loves doing this to people, Jex.

Hush, you.



An't gon work.

Say it the sleep way, please.

--sigh-- Ruby, this aren't-- isn't-- going to work.

I think it will. Look, he can't be that dumb--he knows he's only got a limited time before people connect the dots. He probably wants to get his bad booze into as many hands as possible before then. He'll want to believe you want some for your bar.

We just need to be able to get a bottle of the stuff directly from him, so one of us can try it and prove it's him doing it. Otherwise there's still doubt.

What worried me was the chance he'd not trust you and feed you some of it just to mess you up. But now we know it wears off ...

And if he does do that, we can bust him right then. So even if it doesn't work, it does.



"Don't worry. We'll be close by."

Uh ... Mr. Cantwell?

Are you here?



ha ha ha

Huh?

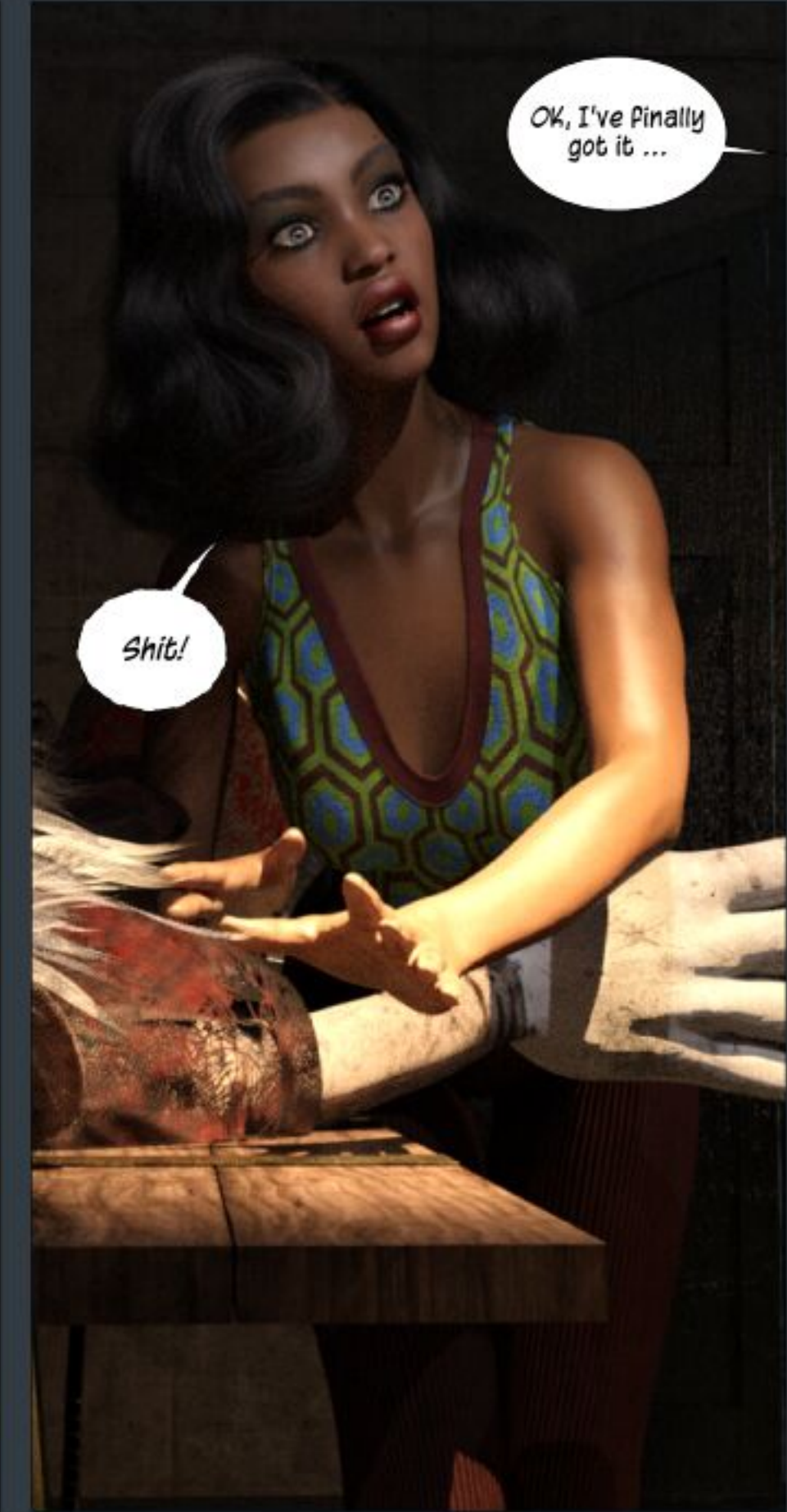


ha ha ha hahaha ha hhh



hhaha ha haa

Hold still ... get these off easy ...



OK, I've finally got it ...

Shit!



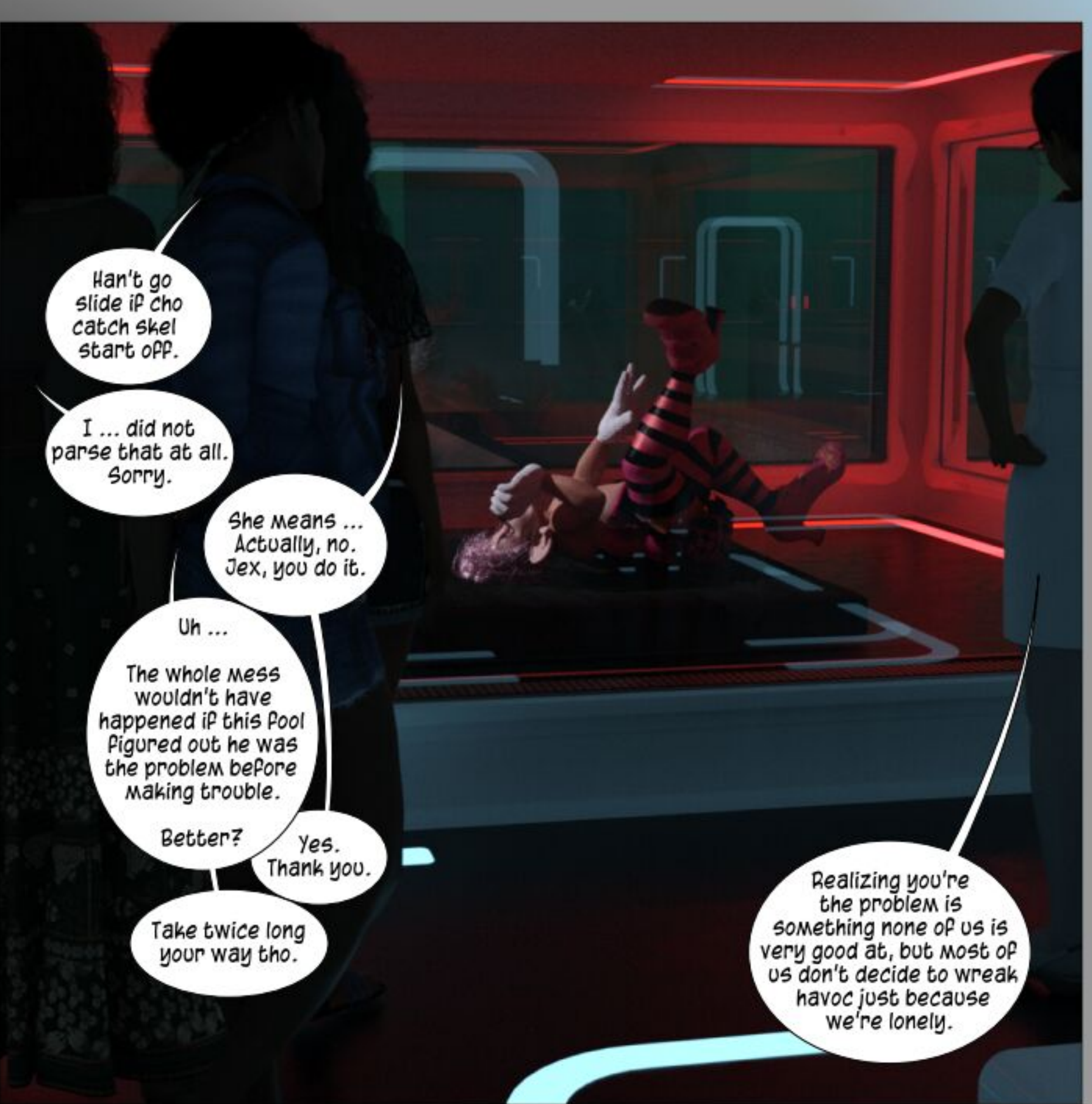
This is it. The permanent version. This time it's not going to wear off.







TWO DAYS LATER.



Han't go slide if cho catch skel start off.

I ... did not parse that at all. Sorry.

She means ... Actually, no. Jex, you do it.

Uh ...

The whole mess wouldn't have happened if this Pool figured out he was the problem before making trouble.

Better?

Yes. Thank you.

Take twice long your way tho.

Realizing you're the problem is something none of us is very good at, but most of us don't decide to wreak havoc just because we're lonely.



Yeah. When his victim from the warehouse recovered, she said he'd been keeping her on the stuff for days. She was the first one. Apparently messing with her didn't soothe his hurt feelings enough.

Sorry, but going supervillain because you can't get sex ... I'm not real sympathetic to the guy, is what I'm saying.

Well, nor am I, but you know we really should try to undo it.

We can't let him wander around Serenity like this. There's too much chance of accident. He's not paying a lot of attention to his surroundings.



Don't worry, we're looking into it. But it's messy.

The thing about the intuitive algorithmists--the ones who just make algorithmic items by force of imagination instead of writing code for them--is that their stuff is almost impossible to reverse-engineer.

Reverse-engineering was already a pretty rare skill. I have a rumor about some people who can do it ...

... but we're not sure how to find them. Yet.

Hm. Well, there's no reason he can't stay here for a while, I suppose.



K, done with that, got some push now. Han't gon say in front of doctor.



An't like how you two just throw me into shit.

Han't ask come sleep to be slide fixer team all time. "Who you ridin with Jex?" Maybe an't ride none!

Midnight lady did it too. "Oh hey Jex, go see Leyna ..." Knew would get sucked into robot slide! Didn't catch till later.

"Learn how do this, Jex." "Talk like Sleep Polk, Jex." Tryin train me, be rightup bout it! Skel shit's hazzing me big.



I don't feel like we've exactly made a big secret out of it.

And it seemed like you didn't have a problem going along with it. I mean, I know some of it's been new and weird to you, but--

Han't even figured if stay in sleep yet!

Sure an't ready say "do this now on." Han't know what want to do.

Maybe an't do none.



Would you really go back awake?

An't the point!

Jex ...

We think you would be good at doing this ... whatever-it-is that we do.

It wouldn't have to be the only thing you do. In fact I can guarantee it wouldn't be. Only person in A4 who does it full-time is me. Ruby's got two other careers.

Midnight can be pushy, but she wouldn't have thrown you into the robot thing unless she thought you would be interested and would be a help. Which you were.

You can always say no. Every time. You don't want to do a thing, nobody's going to make you.

But we can use all the help we can get.

MEANWHILE ---

THE COBBLES, LATER THAT NIGHT.



Did you have a good time?

Oh, yes! Thanks so much for taking me. I know you've been so busy lately, but sometimes I do get tired of staying in ...



I start to worry when I find you sitting in the dark.

I saw her, fell.

Eh?



I saw her. In the Cobble. Less than an hour ago.

She was with Ulster, of all people! ... if she ran off on me to go be with him, I ... I don't know what I ...

... Why the look?

I came to tell you that I just saw her.

In Serenity. Less than an hour ago.



You're sure?

As sure as you are.

Well, there's not two of her.

I certainly hope not.

I think someone must be trying to pull something. Maybe not for us--

I don't care what the scam is, or who it's meant for. Find out.

I have unfinished business with that woman.

NEXT: MAN OF A THOUSAND FACES