

Tinseltop here again, Polks! Got your Christmas shopping done yet?

Now, I know some of you are going to say Christmas is no time for scary stories. But have you been in a mall this time of year? Or Santa's workshop, for that matter? (Trust me, it's grim.)

# TINSELTOP'S TRUE TALES OF TRANSFORMATION

Why, a guy named Stephen King -- you may have heard of him -- set one of my favorite creepy stories during this season! And let's not forget that little ghost story from Dickens ...

\* "THE BREATHING METHOD"

Anyway, our tale begins in late November, with this woman here. Her name's Candace Collier, and she's looking for work.



I think this is the right place ...

I don't mind that this weird old part of town looks like 1800's London, but I wish they'd put in American-style street signs.



Hmph. Not even going to give me a hint, huh?



You are here for the job.

Uh, that's right. How'd you --

I have two kinds of customer. You are not either kind.

So ... ah ... I guess you sell ... dolls?

... They look very well-made.



They are. I make them.

Ones like this, the soft-bodies, I build them and cast the porcelain myself, paint the face, make all the clothing. Everything.

That sounds like a lot of work ... are they ... I mean ...?

You don't have to be polite. They are very expensive, and the people who buy them are very rich. They like that each doll is different. They don't care about price, they want to have something no one else has.



The ball-joints I make too, my own molds, but they are just plastic. These people buy for the clothes mostly. These boxes under the counter are clothes for them. I make all those, the jewelry, the shoes ...

You must have quite a workshop ...

Oh yes.



Those over by the door aren't hand-made, though ...

Definitely not. Factory garbage. --pfeh-- Those are distraction.

My second kind of customer. Has no money, is loud, dresses badly, usually comes in with a daughter.

By the time the parent sees they can't buy any of the good dolls, the child has already seen those.

Momma buys child one to shut her up, and they leave my shop, which I like.

... I see.



Let me look at you.

Hmm. You seem all right. Not stupid. And you are attractive enough.

One month, six days a week, no exceptions. You will need to work late in the evenings, and dress well.

I pay well and I pay cash. I ask very few questions and expect you to do the same.



... OK.

Uh, that is, I accept.

Thank you.

# SHOP OF LITTLE HORRORS

WORDS AND IMAGES BY TRILBY



I think you're a good prospect ... when would you like to try your first shoot? Is tomorrow night too soon?

Wow! I ... you know, when I saw the ad, I wasn't sure you were for real about the "no experience" thing, but --



I don't do things the typical way, Anita. My clients are looking for images of people who aren't supermodels. Normal people. That's who they want the world to see wearing their clothing.

This is also why I tend to do shoots at night. Most of my models have day jobs. In fact, I have another business to run myself.

It's always possible you won't work out, but you have the enthusiasm, so we'll give you a try.

Now, is tomorrow night all right?

Sure!

A FEW DAYS LATER. CANDACE IS SETTLING INTO THE ROUTINE.



So Lyudmila -- she said to call her Lyudmila because "Americans can't say her last name right" -- she insists I be in the shop the whole time I'm on duty. I can't even use the toilet unless she comes out to watch the door.

I mean, I guess when selling one doll means you make a profit that week, you'd be nervous about missing a sale too.

She says that's the problem -- it's her biggest sales time of the year, but she's also low on stock and needs to be making more dolls, and she can't be in two places at once.

She does have an assistant in the workshop, though! Creepy woman named Nitsa. Dresses like the ghost of Christmas Future. I never can see her face clearly. Won't talk to me either. Might not speak English.

... you're not listening to a word I'm saying, are you?

Damn it, Matt, I need the money! I still can't find real work and I've almost burned through everything I had saved. If I can put up with this for a month, you can too.



Not really. I was still stuck on the part where you said, "Hey, I got a job," and then I didn't see you for six days. And it's going to be like this another three weeks?

You don't need the money. We've gone over this before. Just move in with me. Problem solved.

I told you, I'm ... not ready to do that.

Yeah, and I know why.

I hope she got hit by a bus.

EVENING OF THE DAY AFTER THAT CONVERSATION.



... and then Sergei said -- Sergei asked about you, you know, did I say that? --

Ah, yes, Sergei ...

So were you interested in this item?

Of course! It's so charming. You've outdone yourself again, Mila.

I'm pleased you think so. My assistant will wrap it for you.



An old friend of yours?

She thinks so.

Still, good she came when she did, or we would have missed the sale. I came out to tell you we close early tonight. You can leave.

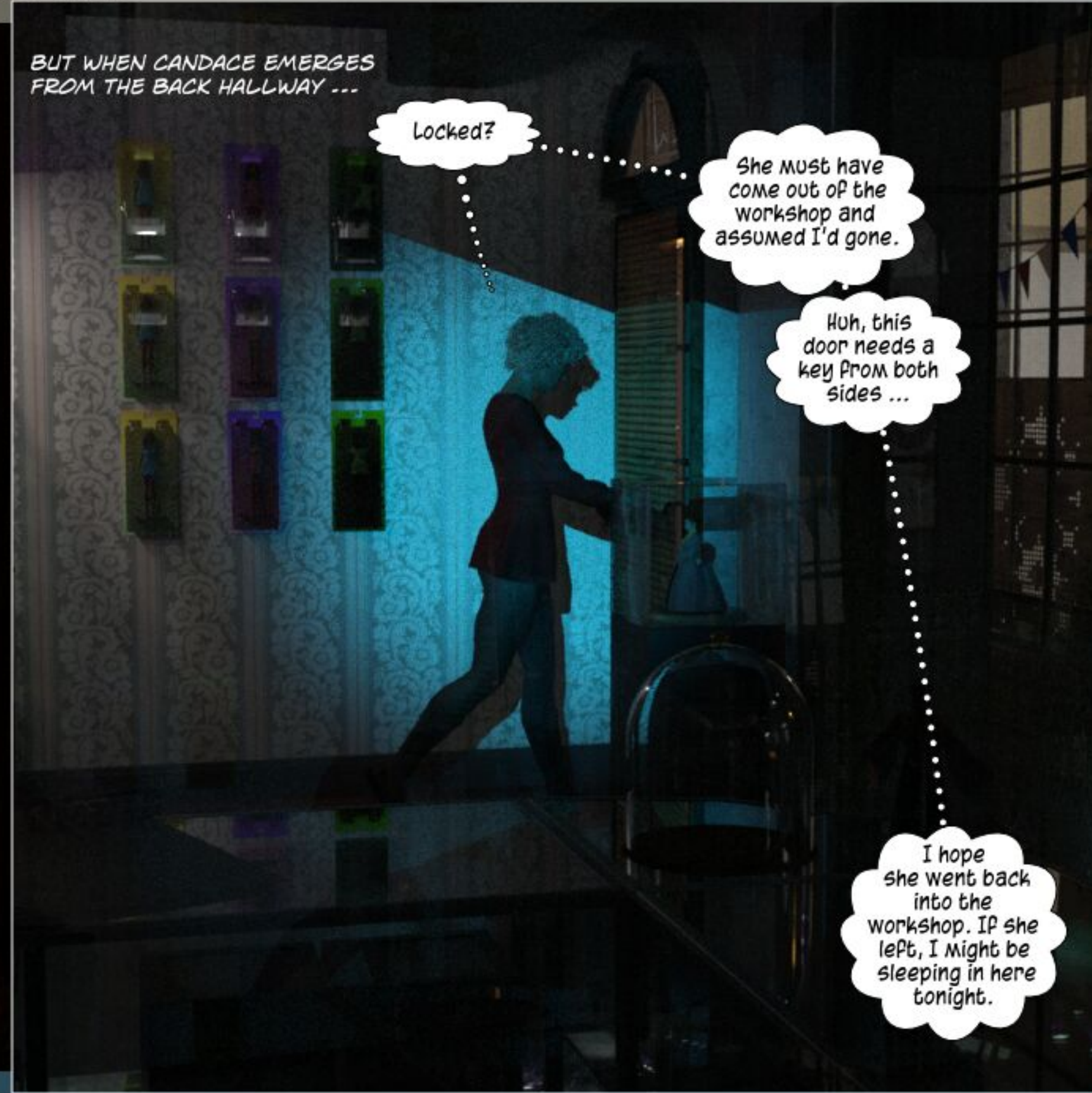
Oh! OK. See you tomorrow.

MME DZIWOZONA DUCKS BACK INTO THE WORKSHOP BRIEFLY.



Absolutely need to pee before I head across town ... the no-potty regime here is a real problem.

If she's already declared we're closed, I don't think she'll mind.



BUT WHEN CANDACE EMERGES FROM THE BACK HALLWAY ...

Locked?

She must have come out of the workshop and assumed I'd gone.

Huh, this door needs a key from both sides ...

I hope she went back into the workshop. If she left, I might be sleeping in here tonight.



She said the workshop was off-limits ... I hope she considers this an emergency ...



She's in there ...  
... and ... someone else? Nitsa? IP that's her, that's sure not what I expected her to sound like.

For that matter ... Lyudmila sounds completely different ... no accent, and less terse ... What's going on here?

Now, you didn't tell anybody you were coming, right?

Well, no ... you said ...

Just checking. I'm sorry about the secrecy, but it's worth it. We have a celebrity joining us for the shoot. She has to keep it quiet for now, but it'll get lots of media attention when the time comes.

Oooh! Who is it?

You'll find out when she gets here! Now, let's get you ready. We've got a lot to do before she arrives. First, get out of those clothes.



There.

Uh ... what is this? I'm not --

Don't worry. It's just to keep you from moving. We've got a lot of complicated makeup to put on you for this, and you'll need to be still.



Wait ... I don't --

Hmm. You're much too agitated. I have something for that.

There we go. Breathe nice and deep. Isn't that better?

You see, I need to cut off your hair now, and I wouldn't want you making a fuss about it.

but ... my hair ...?



A WHILE LATER.

You're almost ready!

The muslin's all stitched up, and the coating on your hands and feet is setting nicely.

Uhhh ... Why ... do ...?

Those measurements I took the other day came out exactly right.

Now, you stay right there while I try to remember where I left your mask ...



There we are! Your new face. Aren't you pretty!

Mmm!



I know, you can't see, and your feet don't move the way you want them to anymore.

It's all right. Listen to me and let me guide you. We're going over here to take some reference photos.

That's good. You don't even need to pose. Just stand right there. Don't move!

I'm just going to go start the spell -- I mean, get the camera ...



Perfect.

Let's get you dressed. I've made something adorable, just for you ...



They must have come in this other door ... I hope it goes somewhere I can get out ...

THE NEXT DAY.



I shouldn't have come in ... but if I didn't, she'd know I knew ... I should have gone to the police ... but they wouldn't have believed me ... what am I going to do?



Are you even in there? I mean, are you aware?

... It's probably better if you're not.



Oh! Nitsa.

I, ah, didn't hear you come in.

... Hi.



... Nice talking to you.



She knows.

Does she?

Not really a surprise. I can't use the stupid ones in the shop.



We just need to make it to Christmas. I was already planning on adding her to the stock after that.

She could cause trouble.

I'll string her. You worry about that police detective. She came to ask questions at the studio a third time.

Unless you want me to kill her, I have no idea what you expect.

I was hoping you could distract her.

That only works on men. She's your problem.



Lyudmila! Is ... anything wrong?

Of course not. What would be wrong?

But I want you to listen to me most carefully.



You are a doll. You just don't know it yet.

Dolls like to do what people want them to do. It makes them happy.

You want to be happy, yes?

... uuh?

Now, little doll, I want you to do two things for me.

First, do not tell anyone where the dolls really come from. Do not tell anyone that you know where the dolls come from.

Second, keep coming to work as you normally would and do not let anyone think anything is wrong. You are happy to work here. All is well.

Do you understand, little doll?



... Yes, ma'am.

Good.

CANDACE SPENDS THE NEXT FEW DAYS IN A HAZE. EVENTUALLY HER NIGHT OFF COMES AROUND AGAIN ...



Well, if I can only see you once a week, we should make the best of it, huh?

Anything you like.



You know, you could at least try to be enthusiastic.

Oh, Matt, I am! I like to do what people want me to do! It makes me happy!

I'll do anything you want!



Really? Anything?

OK, I want ...



WAKING UP THE NEXT DAY.



AAAGH!



-- gasp --



... Candace? What was that noise? Are you OK?

I'm Pine everything's Pine I love My job I have to go to work where are My clothes gotta run



She's going to have me thinking like a doll forever if I don't do something.

And that's if she doesn't just turn me into one.

I can't tell anybody the truth, and I can't run away ... but she didn't say I couldn't go into the workshop, and she didn't say I couldn't take a crowbar to her head.

Drastic, maybe, but I think it's her or me ...



... and of course she's not in here. Damn it.

She must have gone out the other way, through the photography studio.

I wonder how many of her "Models" are dolls now ...

Back through here. Watch your step, there's not much light. Do you own all of this? Big space.



Oh, hell. I don't know who that other is -- I think I'd better get out of sight, quick --



Damn it, there's nowhere to hide in here!

Wait ... there's some kind of crawl space back there. It'll be tight, but at least I'll be well out of view.



I still think you are wasting your time, Detective. And mine.

I don't care what you think, Ms. Danzig.

I have a warrant, and that's all that matters.

Even if you're not responsible for these missing young women, shouldn't the fact that they were all associating with you just before they disappeared bother you?



Wow, this sewing machine's a real antique. You still use it?

Yes. I am also a dressmaker. And shoemaker -- you saw the shoe and glove forms when we came in? And jeweler.

Woman of many talents. Which is your--



MMMF!!

This is probably a very bad idea, I realize. You don't have to say so.

Mmhp! Mm mh gm!

But I just don't think you're ever going to quit, and while normally I'd admire that resolve ...

MMMP! MM ...!

But good news for you! You get to solve the case!



MMWwhhh ...

There we go. Now let's get started. We have a lot to do.

Oh boy.

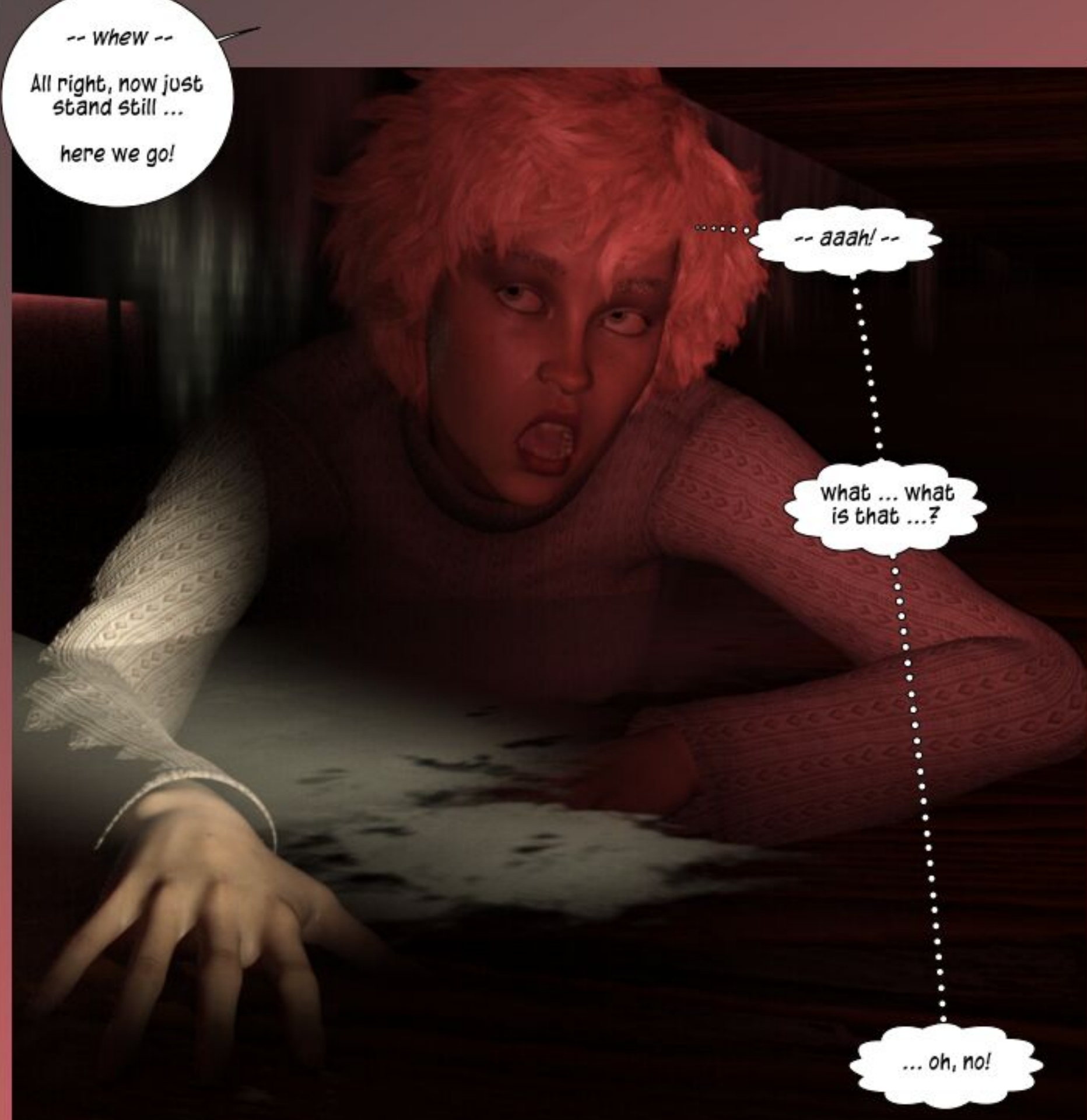
Sorry, Detective, whoever you are. If I'd realized you were on my side we could have teamed up on her.



That's good. You're doing great. I know you can't bend your knees anymore. I'll help you up the steps ...

-- oop --

You're surprisingly heavy for your size ...



-- whew --

All right, now just stand still ... here we go!

-- aaah! --

What ... what is that ...?

... oh, no!



Look at you! You came out so well. And I have a special outfit just for you, too. Let's go put it on.



This is bad. This is really bad.



Were you aware there's no one minding the shop?

What?

She can't have broken the string. It's not possible. She must be hiding in the building somewhere.

You have to be very specific --

--With the instructions. Yes, yes, I know.

I'll go search for her.



Wait! Don't bother. There are too many spare rooms full of junk in this building. You could search for days.

That may take a while. Is anyone going to notice when she doesn't come home tonight?

I doubt you missed her in the shop. I'll hurry out there now, and lock the door. The studio corridor's locked and will stay that way. She has no other way out of the building.

Let her come out herself when she starves. She's already ruined Christmas.

No ... wait, yes, maybe. She has a lover. It may be better if you go distract him.



But I can't do anything about Matt now. I have to figure out what I'm going to do about me.

Maybe she's wrong about ways out of the building. There's some kind of vent in the floor back here in this corner. Maybe the ducts lead somewhere useful.

Matt! Oh, no ...

... orrrr maybe they just lead to the furnace. Guess I'll find out!



There! Such an adorable little scarecrow.

I've even put you in one of the cases out front, so you can watch for trouble.

See? You still get to detect. Isn't that nice?



I was hoping for somewhere other than the shop.

Still, once she leaves for the night, maybe I can ...

Ah, who am I kidding? Even if I can get out, then what? Walk home at this size? I don't think I'll be riding the subway ...

I'm Pucked. It's just a matter of time, and she knows it.



OK, OK, I'm coming. Keep your pants on.



Aaagh!

What is this? It's Christmas, not Hallowe'en.

What's the difference?

I heard your girlfriend was working tonight so I thought I'd come keep you entertained.

What? Who are you, anyway? Are you a friend of hers?

Oh, no, I wouldn't say that. But I'm definitely entertaining.





THE NEXT MORNING, A VISITOR ARRIVES IN TOWN BY WAY OF THE BUS DEPOT.



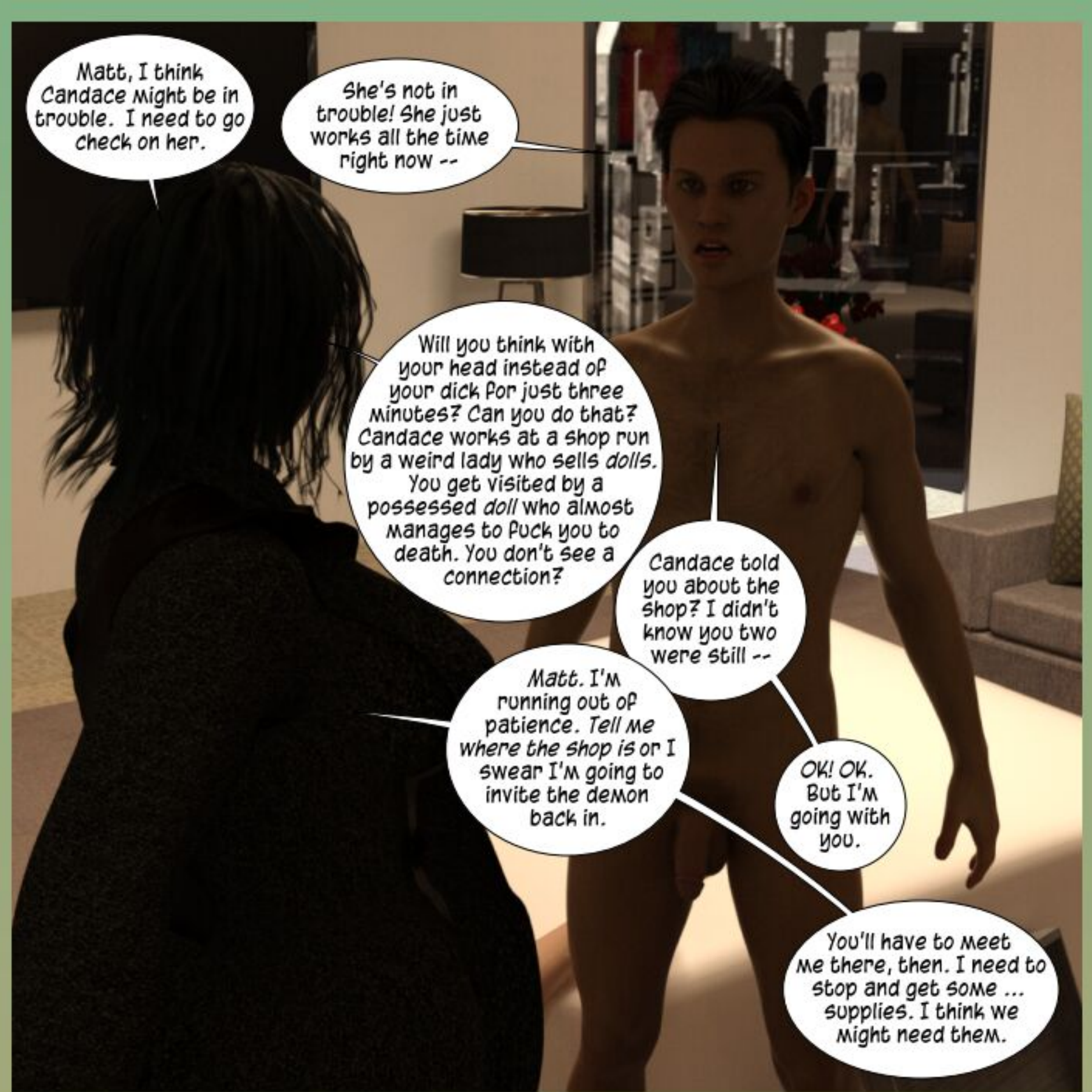
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Not home either ...  
Wait. Did I just hear someone shouting in there?  
I can charm the lock, but ...  
I guess I'd better.

... how ...?

HAHAHAHAHA  
... stop ... please ...  
oh shit!  
Contra nequitiam et insidias diaboli esto praesidium!!







I bet that asshole didn't wait for me ...

Hm. Locked, but they don't look closed.

Hey! Anybody home?



Ivy!

No way she can hear me ... I've got to get out of this!



Oop! Damn, this is heavy!

Gotta ... -- umph -- ... put everything I've got into it ...



And not go over the edge with it --!

AAAAA!



aagh!

Didn't think this through ...

Can't get a grip on this glass ...

I'm slipping!!



Gotcha!!

Ivy! Oh, thank goodness.

Saw you through the window.



How'd you get in?

Charmed the lock. Tell you later.

How'd you get like this?

I ... I can't tell you.

Hm. Are you under geas?

What's a geas?

A compulsion. An order you have to follow.

Um ... I think I'm not allowed to tell you that either?

That's a yes.

We have to save Matt! She's going to ... Uh ... Well, we have to save him!

It's OK, I can guess. Climb on my shoulder.



You see? Under the muslim, no one can tell what you have down there. And once you're changed, it won't matter at all.

I don't make boy dolls. No one buys them. Now let's get you over here ...

Oh, no, she's finished the prep already!

We have to stop ... what she's about to do!

No time to salt or anything ... OK, hang on tight ... I hope this works ...



*defende nos in proelio adversus principes et potestates, adversus mundi rectores tenebrarum harum, contra spiritalia nequitiae, in caelestibus.*



Aaaah!!

Stupid child! Do you know what you've done?

There are rules --



**YOU HAVE BROKEN THE FACT!**

No, no! It was her! She did it!

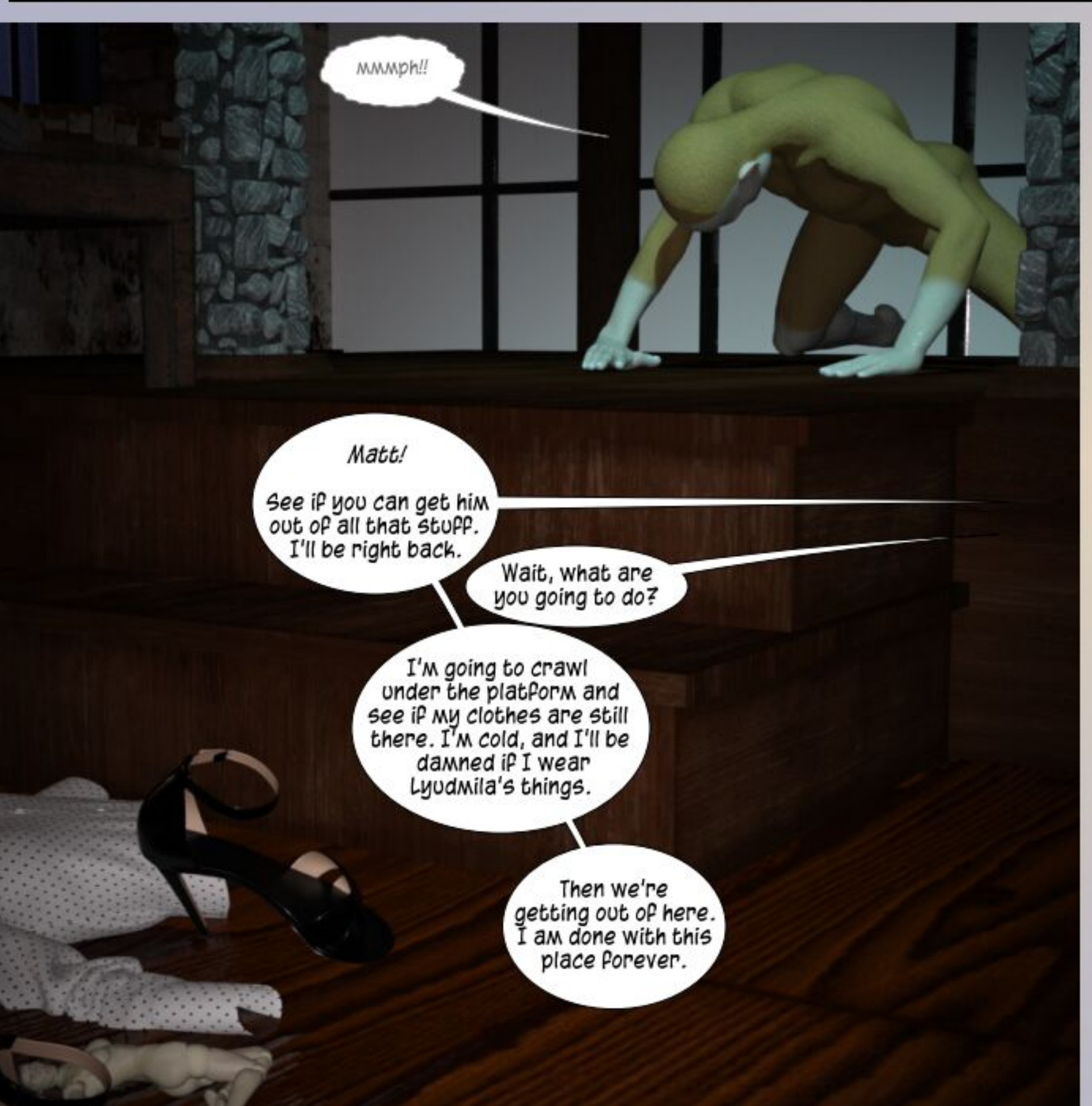
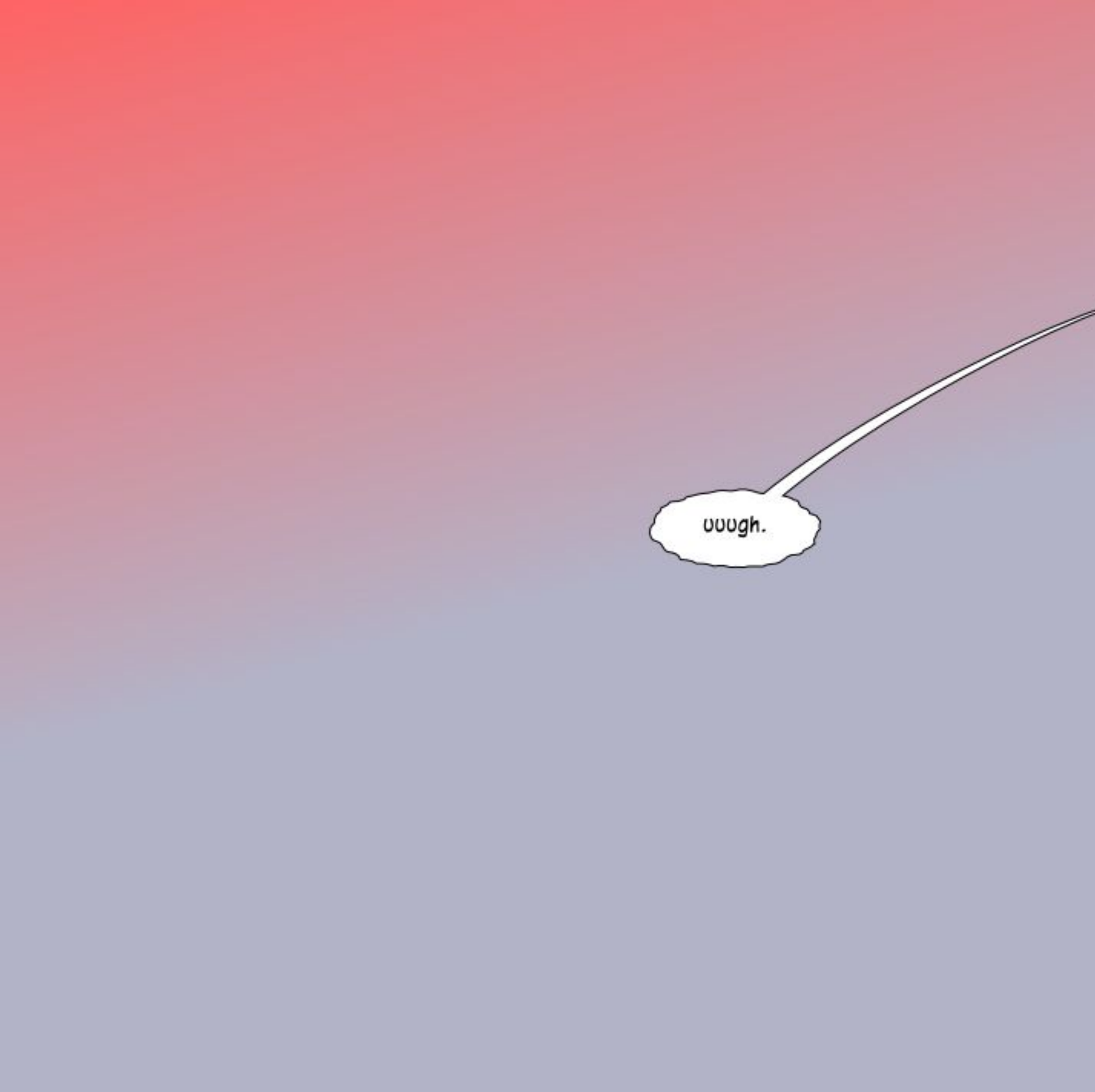
**WE MUST SURRENDER THE SOULS YOU HAVE GIVEN US--**

No ...

**-- SO WE CLAIM YOURS AS FORFEIT.**

Noooooo!!

**WHOOOM!**



LATER, AFTER THE CHAOS HAS BEGUN TO CALM.

