MY NAME IS RANDA AND I'M A

QUITCLAIM

I GO FOR WEEKS AT A TIME IN A VERY SMALL SHIP WITH NO SHOWER. WHEN I MAKE PORT, I FIND THE HOTEL WITH THE BEST POOL, OR AT LEAST THE ROOM WITH THE BIGGEST BATHTUB.

THE NAME OF THE TOWN IS NEEDLEHEAD. IT'S THE ONLY REAL TOWN ON ALOIAN 5, WHICH ISN'T SAYING MUCH, BECAUSE THE REST OF SENTIENT SETTLEMENT ON ALOIAN 5 IS TINY HOMESTEADER FARMS SCATTERED IN ABOUT A FIVE-HUNDRED-KILOMETER RADIUS OF THE TOWN.

THE ALOIAN SYSTEM ISN'T VERY DEVELOPED YET, WHICH IS STRANGE GIVEN HOW USEFULLY POSITIONED ITS RINGS ARE. PEOPLE PASS THROUGH THE SYSTEM ON THEIR WAY TO SOMEWHERE ELSE, BUT THEY DON'T STAY HERE.

THAT'S ALL RIGHT; I LIKE IT QUIET. THIS WAS MY FOURTH TIME MAKING PORT IN NEEDLEHEAD, AND I HAD THE POOL ALL TO MYSELF.

UNTIL HE SHOWED UP.

My, my! That looks relaxing and refreshing.

Hmm? ... oh. Go away, Stee.

Now, what kind of greeting is that? Besides, I come bearing glad tidings of gainful employment!

Not interested.

Oh, come now. Someone in your profession is always interested. At least hear me out.

If I let you tell me, will you go away?

"Aloian 4 has been deemed habitable. New Horizons dropped off a settlement there. The settlement hasn't been heard from since."

"How long ago was that?"

"Nearly a year."

"A year's barely any time for a new settlement. They probably haven't even gotten their first restock visit yet."

"In fact, my dear, the restock run has been postponed until the settlement is investigated. They were supposed to have set up a comms tower months ago. Nothing."

"Don't call me 'my dear,' Stee."

I SUPPOSE YOU MAY NOT KNOW HOW THIS WORKS. I'M A QUITCLAIM, NOT A SCAVENGER; THAT'S THE POINT. MOST OF MY JOB LEADS COME FROM GOVERNMENTS OR THE COLONY CORPORATIONS. I AGREE TO CERTAIN RULES, AND THE MAIN ONE IS THAT IF I DO FIND A DERELICT, I ASSIGN MY SALVAGE RIGHTS TO THEM, IN EXCHANGE FOR A LARGE FEE. THE GOVS WOULD RATHER CLEAN THE MESS THEIR WAY, AND THE CORPS DON'T WANT TO RISK LOSING THEIR LAND GRANTS. SCAVENGERS WOULD CLAIM THE PROPERTY FOR THEMSELVES.

SO I ONLY GET BIG MONEY IF WHAT I'M INVESTIGATING IS DERELICT. IF I GO OUT AND FIND THE WHATEVER-IT-IS HEALTHY AND ACTIVE, I ONLY MAKE A LITTLE MORE THAN MY TRAVEL COSTS.

THIS SOUNDED LIKE A GOOD BET TO BE DERELICT. THE PROBLEM WAS, I KNEW SOMETHING, AND STEE KNEW IT TOO: THERE HAD BEEN A LOT OF BLUE SKY GANG ACTIVITY IN NEARBY SYSTEMS LATELY. THE BLUE SKY ASSHOLES ARE ONLY A "GANG" IN THAT THEY AGREE NOT TO INTERFERE WITH EACH OTHER. THEY'RE RAIDERS, PLAIN AND SIMPLE, AND NASTY EVEN AS RAIDERS GO.

IF BLUE SKY HAD TAKEN THAT SETTLEMENT--WHICH PROBABLY MEANT ALL THE SETTLERS WERE DEAD--I'D BE WALKING INTO A RISK THAT MIGHT NOT BE WORTH THE FEE I'D GET IF I LIVED THROUGH IT.

Why are you coming to me with this?

-- Ahem -- As it happens, I am the representative of the New Horizons Corporation for the Aloian system ...

Figures. How many hats do you wear, anyway?

Just trying to make a living, my d-- ... ah ... just trying to make a living.

Well, find someone else. I just came off a job for New Horizons and I'm sick of their bullshit.

I'm aware. They knew you'd be here. They also indicated that they felt you were the ideal person.

They seem to believe you excel at dealing with ... challenging situations.

I want half of what I'd get for a derelict up front, and I'm not refunding it if they happen to still be alive.

New Horizons likes my work, then they can pay for dropping me into the soup. Assholes will risk my neck before they send their own people.

I'd have thought that risking your neck was implicit in your profession.

At any rate, I'm authorized to accept those terms. I'll go transfer the money now.

Don't dawdle, if you please. The company is very concerned about that settlement.

ALOIAN 4 HAD A HUMAN-COMPATIBLE ATMOSPHERE, SO IT WOULD HAVE BEEN CLASS 1 IN HABITABILITY, IF THE SURFACE WASN'T STINKING DESERT.

IT WASN'T A WELCOMING PLACE.

IN SITUATIONS LIKE THIS IT PAYS NOT TO LAND TOO NEAR THE SITE, OR EVEN DO A FLYOVER.

I CARRIED A SOLUTION FOR THAT. MY ONLY CARGO. I HADN'T GOTTEN TO RIDE IT IN A WHILE.

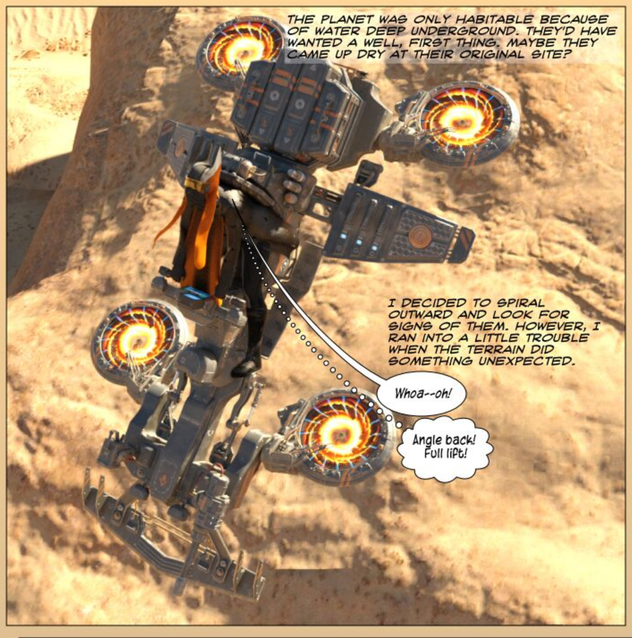
I THOUGHT I WAS READY FOR ANYTHING I MIGHT ENCOUNTER. I WASN'T PREPARED FOR WHAT I ACTUALLY FOUND AT THE INDICATED COORDINATES.

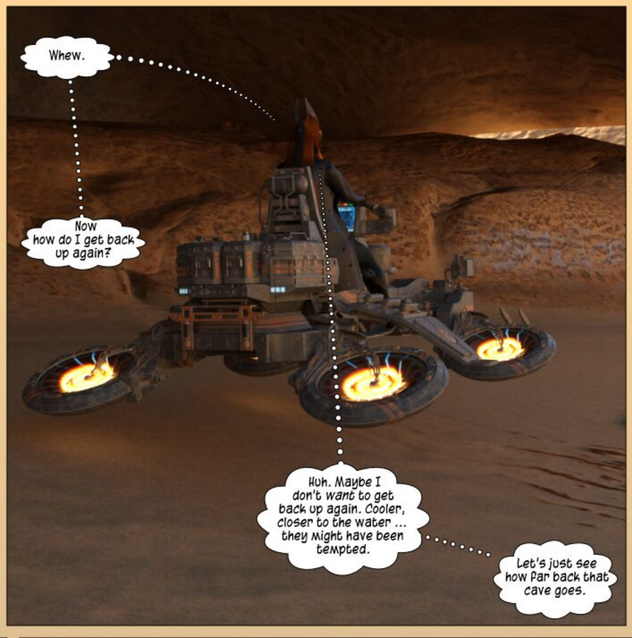
NOTHING.

ABSOLUTELY NOTHING. NO WRECKAGE. NO TRACKS OR MARKS. NO SIGN OF A FIGHT. NO SIGN THE SETTLERS EVER BUILT SO MUCH AS AN OUTHOUSE.

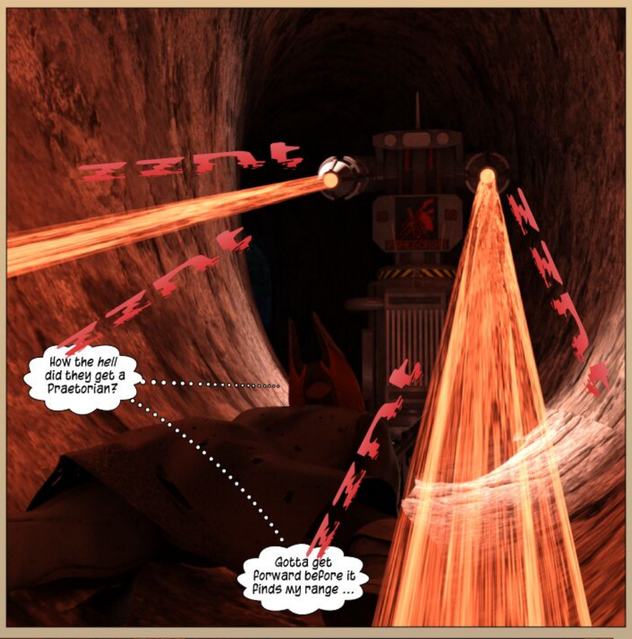
THE TOWN THAT WASN'T THERE

WORDS AND IMAGES BY TRILBY


THE PLANET WAS ONLY HABITABLE BECAUSE OF WATER DEEP UNDERGROUND. THEY'D HAVE WANTED A WELL, FIRST THING. MAYBE THEY CAME UP DRY AT THEIR ORIGINAL SITE?
I DECIDED TO SPIRAL OUTWARD AND LOOK FOR SIGNS OF THEM. HOWEVER, I RAN INTO A LITTLE TROUBLE WHEN THE TERRAIN DID SOMETHING UNEXPECTED.
Whoa--oh!
Angle back! Full lift!


Whew.
Now how do I get back up again?
Huh. Maybe I don't want to get back up again. Cooler, closer to the water ... they might have been tempted.
Let's just see how far back that cave goes.

A LITTLE FURTHER IN, THE CAVE GOT TOO NARROW FOR THE BIKE. I PUT IT IN A SHADOWY CORNER AND HOPED FOR THE BEST.
... Light ahead somewhere ... and ... something blocking the way?
oh shit--!


How the hell did they get a Praetorian?
Gotta get forward before it finds my range ...

PRAETORIAN
Is that a person back there?
Hey! Turn it OFF!!
... Why would I?

Because I'm not hostile?
Better yet: because I'm already under its bottom angle and I know where to shoot it and you're about to lose an expensive weapon?
... OK. But put away your gun first. And don't try anything.

Mid, what is this?
Uh ... a visitor, I guess.
You should have let the gun get her.
She knows how to get past the gun. She would have gotten in anyway.
All right. Take her to the power tunnel, shoot her, and put her body in the solid recyclers.

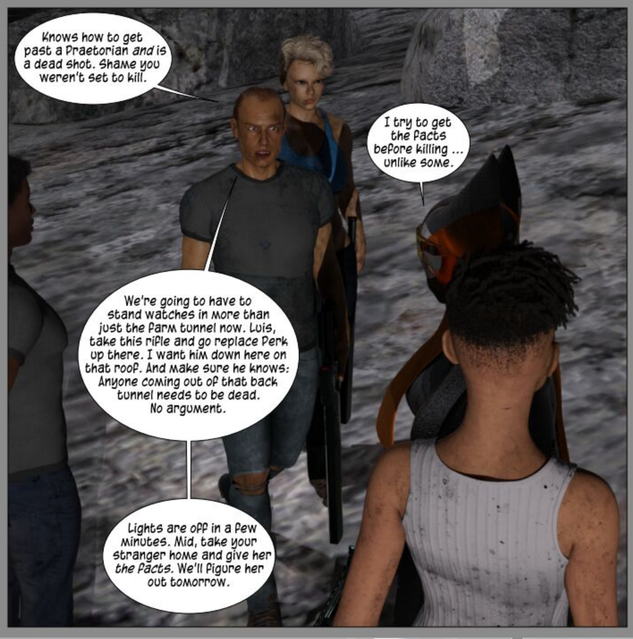
What?
Cort, she's not a raider!

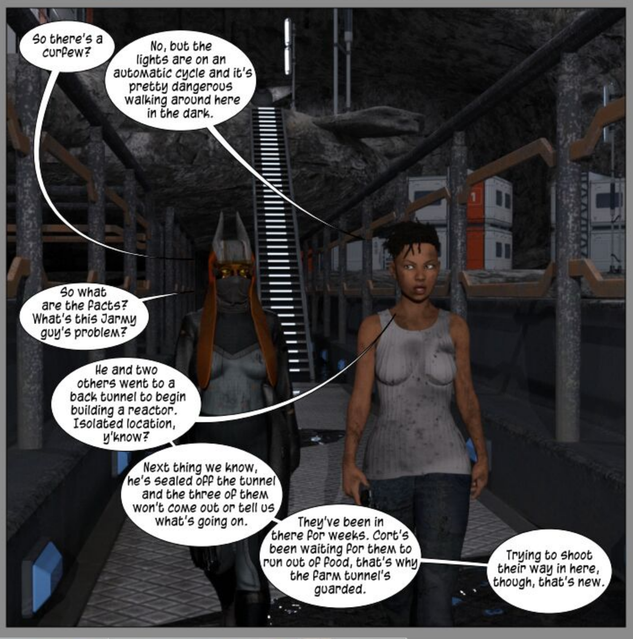
That's not the problem, and you know it, Mid.
Come on, we had an agreement. You broke the rules, now clean up your own mess--
FZAT
FZAT
FZAT
... What the hell is that noise?

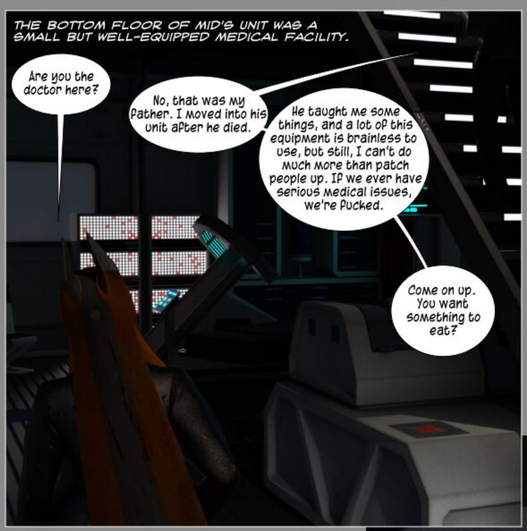
FZAT
It's Jarmy! They tried to get up to the Farm, but Perk's holding them off ... now they're coming in here!
Son of a bitch! Barah, go grab the rifles!
Mid, you've got a gun, use it!

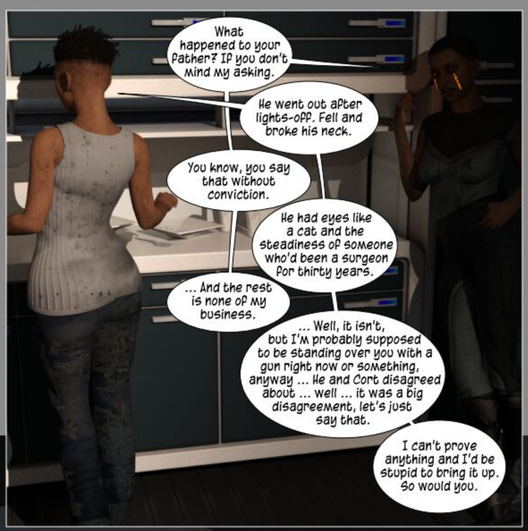
Mid, look out! He's on the roof!

-- aaagh! --









HER RIGHT NAME WAS AMIDNA. AMIDNA MARISH. HER FATHER, SOREL MARISH, PROBABLY SHOULD HAVE LED THE SETTLEMENT, BUT WASN'T VERY INTERESTED. SO CORT ENDED UP IN CHARGE.

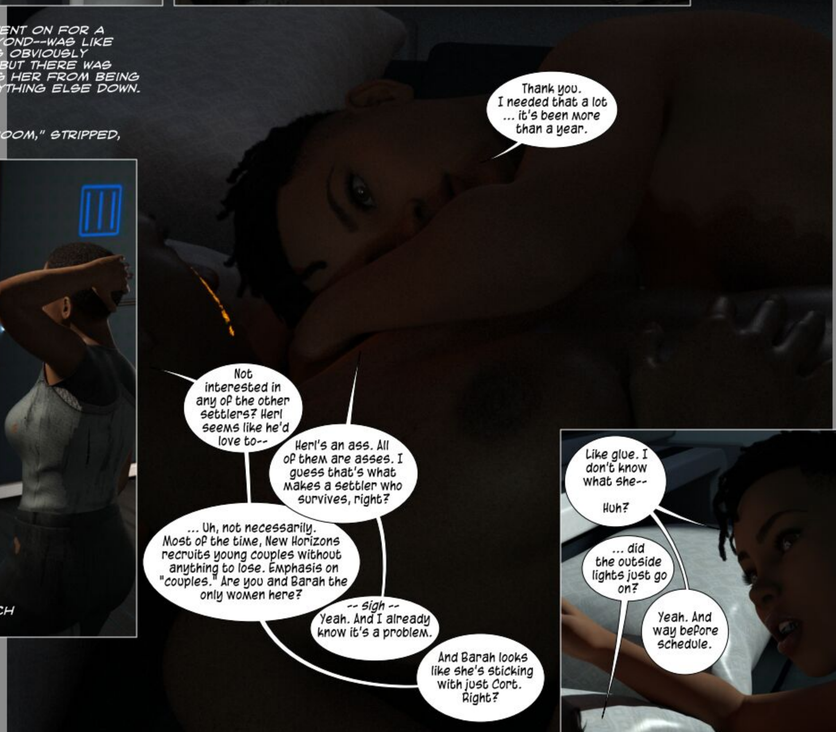
MID DIDN'T DIRECTLY SAY WHAT SHE THOUGHT OF CORT, BUT SHE DIDN'T REALLY NEED TO.

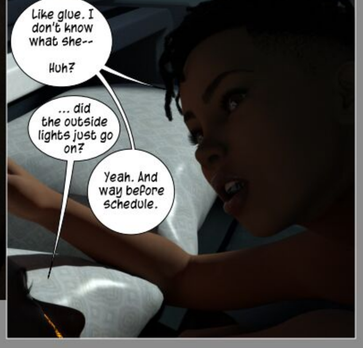
THE WHOLE CONVERSATION WITH MID--WHICH WENT ON FOR A COUPLE OF HOURS, THROUGH DINNER AND BEYOND--WAS LIKE THAT. THERE WERE A LOT OF THINGS SHE WAS OBVIOUSLY DESPERATE TO TALK ABOUT WITH SOMEBODY, BUT THERE WAS SOMETHING IN THE CENTER THAT WAS KEEPING HER FROM BEING ABLE TO DO SO, LIKE A ROCK HOLDING EVERYTHING ELSE DOWN.

I HAD A SUSPICION WHAT THE ROCK WAS.

EVENTUALLY, SHE HEADED TOWARD THE "BEDROOM," STRIPPED, AND SAID ALMOST DEFIANTLY:

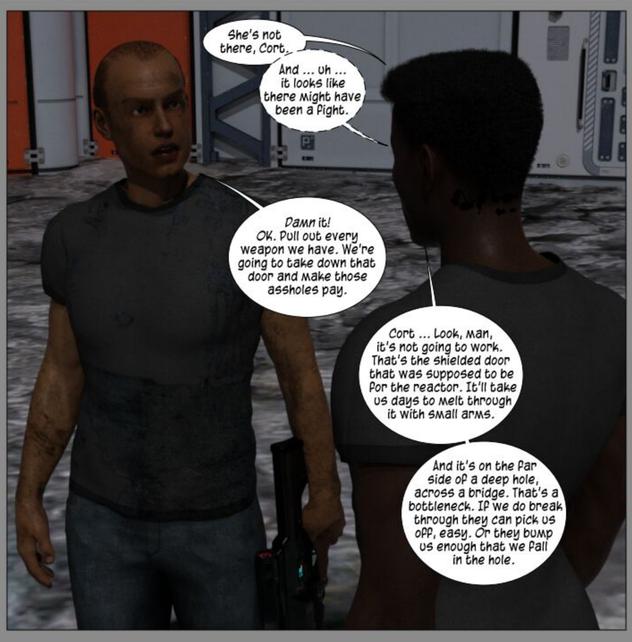
I THOUGHT IT WAS PRETTY CLEAR WHICH OPTION SHE WANTED ME TO PICK.





What's going on, Sim?
When I went to relieve Perk, he was out cold. Looks like someone sniped him with a stun shot.
Farm's fine. Luis says he never saw anybody get near.
Cort wants everybody to assemble in the "plaza." I was just about to come find you.

Is this everybody?
Perk's still a mess, so not counting him ... let's see ... everybody but Barah.
Barah? Where is she?
Uh ... you'd know better than me ...
We don't sleep together every night, idiot. Go check her unit!

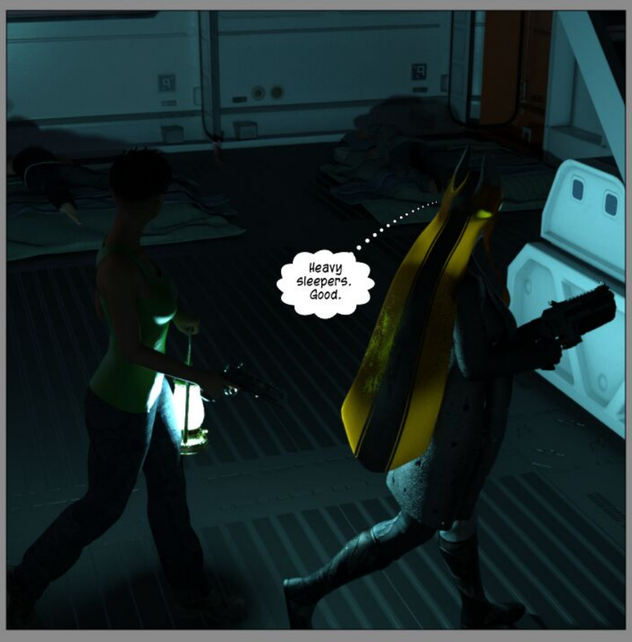

She's not there, Cort.
And ... uh ... it looks like there might have been a fight.
Damn it! OK. Pull out every weapon we have. We're going to take down that door and make those assholes pay.
Cort ... Look, man, it's not going to work. That's the shielded door that was supposed to be for the reactor. It'll take us days to melt through it with small arms.
And it's on the far side of a deep hole, across a bridge. That's a bottleneck. If we do break through they can pick us off, easy. Or they bump us enough that we fall in the hole.

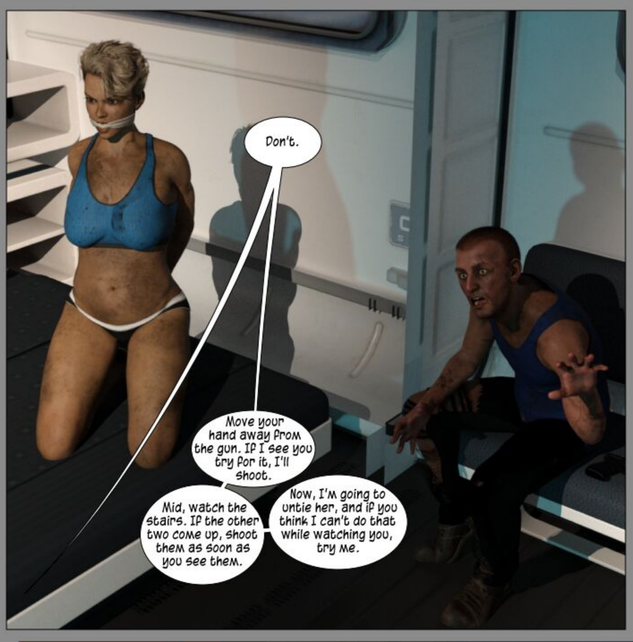
So you want to just sit around here and let him get away with it? What happens next? You let him kidnap someone else? You let him keep trying to shoot everybody? You let him raid the farm? Maybe you'd just let him take over the place?
Cort, come on ...
You know, there's another way into that tunnel.

I used to explore a lot. I'm the one who found these caves in the first place. Made Daddy crazy. Said I was going to get myself killed.
Never told Cort about this, I notice.
Well, at first there was no reason to. Then, when Jarmy sealed himself off, I figured I'd better wait until ...
Look, I don't like the way Cort does things, OK? I mean, Jarmy's an ass too ... but Perk's not dead right now.
Noticed that too.
And it sounds like Cort would like any excuse to kill Jarmy.
Jarmy thought he'd have done a better job leading than Cort does.
Ah.
Most of us think he gave Jarmy the reactor job to get him out of the way ...
OK, up here we're going to have to crawl a little, but it opens out after that.

Almost there. Keep your voice down.
... Troxylite?
Huh? You mean that weird blue stuff? It's all over these back tunnels.
It's a dense energy source. Lots of bang per gram, but it's tricky to handle.
Oh. Is it ... valuable?
Very.

Yep, that's a big door.
They must all be in the unit. How do we handle this?
Gun on stun? OK. Be ready and keep your guard up.


Heavy sleepers. Good.


Don't.
Move your hand away from the gun. If I see you try for it, I'll shoot.
Mid, watch the stairs. If the other two come up, shoot them as soon as you see them.
Now, I'm going to untie her, and if you think I can't do that while watching you, try me.

Who the hell are you? Did you just walk in? I'm surprised Cort didn't kill you.
He's considering it.
So let me see if I've got it all straight: You found troxylite while scouting for the reactor. You want to make some cash from it.
But you're stuck, because when you moved underground, somebody decided you'd all go into hiding and become a missing settlement. I think it must have been Cort, because he's not very smart. Now you can't contact anybody to sell the stuff.

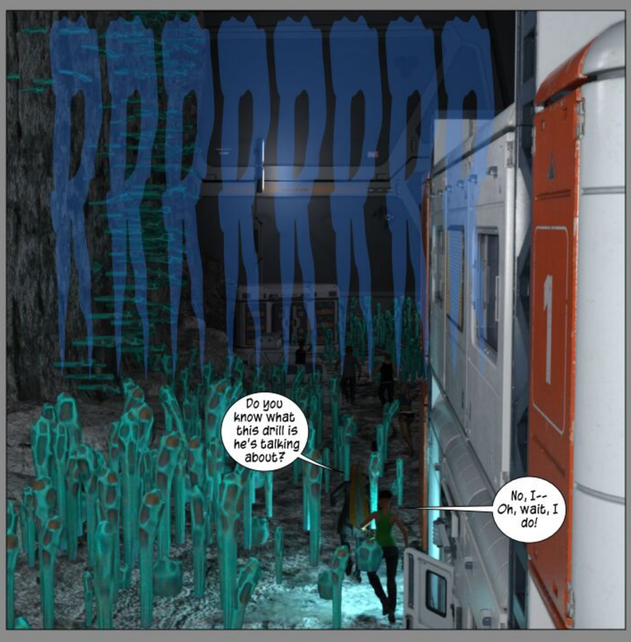
"Not very smart?"
Do you have *any idea* how badly New Horizons is trying to screw us? They recruit broke people, promise them land and opportunity and all that shit ... and then hit them with startup costs it takes a lifetime to pay back. It's a swindle!
Yeah, I know. There's a lot of parts of their business plan I don't care for.
But think about it for a second, would you? It was never going to work long-term. You can't resupply ... you can't replace your doctor ... all kinds of things.
Also, Blue Sky is active in the area and you can't call for help if they attack. "Debt-Free" won't matter if you're dead.
You know, there's more than enough troxylite here to pay off the whole settlement's debts. Why not do that instead?

Hell, no! I'm not sharing any money from that with Cort. That son-of-a-bitch needs to be tossed down a hole. He decided one day he ran the place and everybody else was just going to have to suck up.
Only person who can stand him is Barah, and that's because he doesn't treat her like everyone else, because she keeps his dick happy.
Why, you--!
You seem to get things done. Go shoot him in the face and then I might try your idea.
You're not really in any position to--

What the hell is that?

Hey, wait--
Shit! I was hoping he wouldn't think of it.
Bol! Mark! Get up! He's using the drill!
Um, hello? "Held at gunpoint?" No? ... Guess not.

Oh no, you don't, you bastard!
You too?
Should have left you tied up.

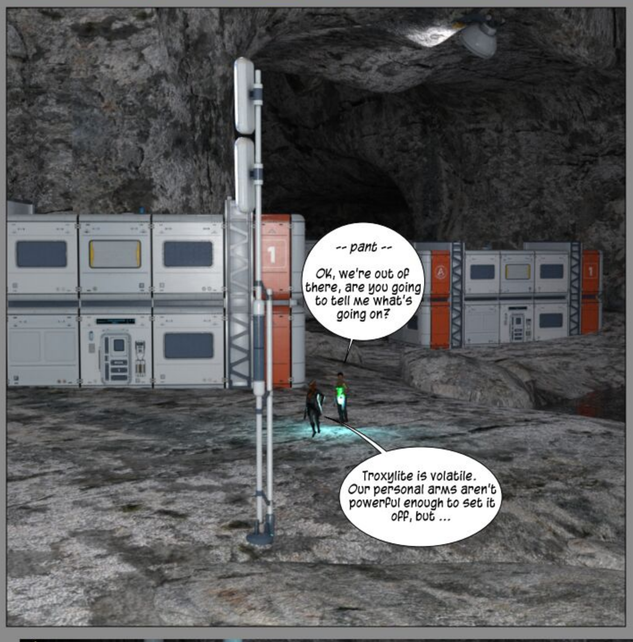

Do you know what this drill is he's talking about?
No, I-- Oh, wait, I do!

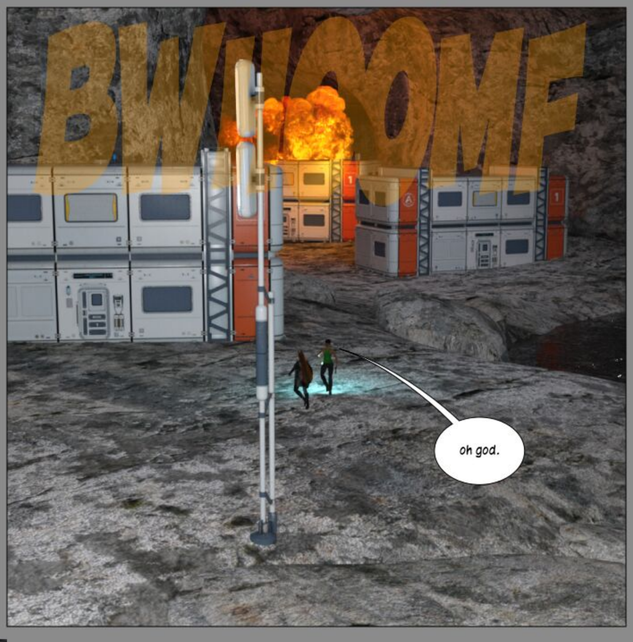
"We have a big beam drill for digging deep wells ... we never unpacked it, because we went into the caves ..."

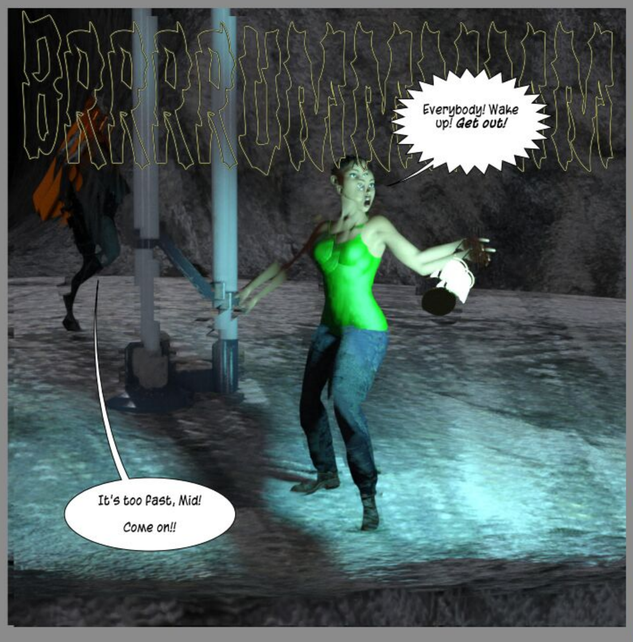
Beam drill? Like, a focused energy weapon?
Yeah, pretty sure. Laser or something like that.
Ah, shit.
Barah! You have to make Cort stop, right now!
... Barah?

I'm going to break your fucking back, asshole!
-- aargh! --

She's not listening, and he's almost through the door.
Mid? We have to leave. Now.
But--
Trust me. Run.


-- pant --
OK, we're out of there, are you going to tell me what's going on?
Troxylite is volatile. Our personal arms aren't powerful enough to set it off, but ...


BWOOMF
oh god.


Everybody! Wake up! Get out!
It's too fast, Mid! Come on!!

WE SPENT A FEW DAYS RECUPERATING.