

Just as Terra started to bunk down, the warning klaxon went off. "It never fails," she grumbled. She didn't bother putting her top back on, instead just throwing her equipment vest on over her tightly stretched sports bra. She sprinted to the bridge, but that really didn't take long, since her bunkroom was one hatch away. Belinda had the conn.

"So," the big anthropomorphic tigress said. "What's the deal?"

The inflatable wolfess gave her a worried look. Belinda--originally B.E.L.I.N.D.A.: the Bionically Enhanced Lifelike Inflatable Networked Digital Agent--had originally come aboard when Terra's previous partner bought her at auction, thinking she'd be fun to fool around with off duty. Apparently the seller wasn't the only one who didn't realize Belinda's full range of capabilities, however; when Terra's partner tried to screw her over, she ably helped Terra kick the old bastard off, and had

proven a more than suitable replacement. "Wormhole. Looks like a Type Five-A Dark Matter Rift. Unpredictable."

Terra nodded and took over, sitting in her custom acceleration seat, and stroked her fluffy cheek, pondering the greenish-blue interior of the wormhole tunnel on the viewscreen. The small ship began to shake and pitch as it passed through. "So, we ride it out and hope it doesn't destroy us, and find out what scary things are on the other end, or we try and disrupt it and hope *that* doesn't kill us."

Belinda put a pale gold paw on Terra's shoulder. "Whatever you decide, I'll back your play." While the bosomy wolfess had never been shy about expressing her concerns with any of Terra's plans (which could occasionally get a little sketchy around the edges), so the fact that she was trying to comfort Terra was a little disturbing.

"Shields?"

"Holding, but I don't know if they will much longer," Belinda said. "The only way this could get worse would be if..."

"COLLISION ALERT!" said the ship's computer, cutting her off.

Belinda pouted. "Remind me never to say that again."

The viewscreen displayed an old derelict ore freighter, headed right for them. If their shield power kept dropping, her tiny multi-cargo modular ship would flatten against that massive hull. "Collision in 45 seconds." She tapped a key on the console and a pad slid out that was not strictly supposed to be legally available on this ship: the weapons pod controls. Outside the ship, a bay opened, exposing a particle cannon and a

pair of projectile tubes. She armed and fired the cannon, aiming it at the side of the tunnel.

"No effect," Belinda warned.

A missile salvo yielded the same result. "Screw it," Terra said. She dropped through the hatch into the engine room and did a little rewiring.

"15 seconds," Belinda shouted down.

"Got it!" Terra said. She jettisoned one of the fuel pods, hoping its antiproton payload would do the trick.

"5...4...3..."

Just as the fuel pod hit the tunnel, she detonated it, and then did her best to hung on as the ship shuddered and spun. *Just one of those days*, she thought. The ship seemed to make a bouncing motion that she wasn't quite ready for; after she picked herself up off her butt,

she clawed her way back up through the hatch and secured it quickly.

"Damage report," she asked, already worried about the answer.

Belinda nodded. "Engines are down. Thrusters not responding. Hull breach in hold four, and aft subframe shows signs of buckling."

"We're moving, though." While the shuddering and shimmying had largely dissipated, Terra's sensitive whiskers could still pick up the feeling of motion. She called it her "space sense."

"Well, the good news is that we're out of the wormhole. The bad news is that we're in that planet's gravity well." She pointed at her readout, and at the main display dead ahead.

As planets went, it was a pretty thing, bluish green, with some land masses here and there surrounded by what she hoped was water, and it was slowly getting bigger. Terra tapped a few icons, and confirmed that the atmosphere was a little thick, but breathable. "What about these trace gases?" she asked.

"To be honest, I don't know what effect they'll have on biological life," Belinda admitted. "But I'd say our bigger priority is not crashing."

Terra chuckled. "Ya think?" she said, winking. After a little bit of creative work and percussive maintenance, the two managed to get enough emergency thrust to get a halfway decent landing trajectory. "Halfway decent" in this case meant "safe enough to keep them from dying, but not safe enough to keep the ship from carving a 12-meter-deep trench in the scrub and tearing the hull open in several places. The ship would probably never fly again, but at least they had their health.

Terra groaned and got herself upright. She checked herself over, and pronounced herself more or less alive. "Belinda? You okay?"

The wolfess didn't answer. Uh-oh. She knew the kid's skin was pretty tough, and that there weren't too many sharp edges on the bridge, but she didn't want to rule anything out. She climbed over to where Belinda had been and found her body deflated and draped haphazardly over the console. "You just relax. We'll get you patched right up..." Then she noticed that all her valves were open. She closed all but the one behind her pretty right ear and started blowing.

"Mmmmmmm...usually, I ask for a night out with dinner and drinks first, but that feels nice..." Belinda moaned as Terra's breath began to fill her.

"What happened?" the tigress asked, her partner lying slack in her lap.

"I figured the smartest thing to do in a crash was to belt up and gas out," Belinda said sleepily, "But I couldn't find a crash harness...more air please?"

Terra couldn't resist the request, and soon, both of them were shipshape (in fact, just for her own amusement, she'd blown Belinda up a little bouncier than usual), even if their ship wasn't.

"Guess *Tombo 236* is planetbound," Belinda said sadly. She checked the readouts, bypassing the screens that were cracked. "On the upside, I'm only reading primitive life signs. So..."

"So...free planet for us!" Terra laughed ironically. "Say, did any of the food survive?"

Belinda smirked. "I'm afraid so."

Terra inventoried the remaining food packs and took two off the top, partially out of hunger and stress, and partially to remind herself why she needed to find external sustenance. The survival rations had three virtues: they were cheap, they were nutritious, and they could endure nearly anything. She'd even used one for damage control once.

They grabbed their data pads and headed out to search for food, walking in a spiral pattern around the crash site. If nothing else, the gouge would serve as an excellent landmark. A few hours yielded some tasty grubs and bugs, but not much else.

After she had gathered a few big pawfuls worth in one of the empty food packs, Terra started to chow down, but Belinda grabbed the pack.

"What are you doing?" the big cat asked. "You don't even eat!"

It was true. Belinda relied on a combination of light, heat, and motion to recharge. She also could eat, but it wasn't a necessity. "We haven't even scanned these things, Terra," she said. "We don't know if they have any toxins in them."

"But...hungry," Terra said.

The busty wolfess pulled her handheld scanner out of her tight pants and waved it over the squirming mass of would-be food. "Hm. Well, there aren't any known toxins, but you should just have..." Before she could complete the sentence, Terra had grabbed the pack back and begun feeding her face. "Or, we could see what happens..."

Thus fortified, the two anthropomorphic crewmates set off in search of fresh water. The first sound they heard as they hiked through the scrub, however, resembled rushing water not one bit. It was more of a faint but deep rumble resonating through the jungle floor.

Then, suddenly, the thick vegetation parted and a massive creature covered in coarse, reddish-brown hair tore through it into the edge of the clearing, about 30 meters in front of them. It vaguely resembled a boar in shape, but in place of a pair of tusks and flat herbivore's dentition, it displayed a nasty set of very sharp-looking serrated teeth set off by two pairs of slender canines on each jaw. The beast's jaws closed, showing that the teeth interlocked easily in the giant maw, and it sniffed at the air. A bizarre multi-pronged hoof pawed the ground, and it crouched, looking at them challengingly. Belinda and Terra stared over it, not wanting to look like prey, but not wanting to return the challenge either. Each quietly pocketed their handheld devices and very,

very slowly drew their energy pistols. Terra stood just ahead of her partner.

"Stun," Belinda suggested quietly. "Maximum stun."

"Screw that," Terra countered. "I'm for 'roast' if these things go that high."

Then the beast was upon them, charging faster than either of them had thought possible, and out of instinct, the big tigress dropped to all fours, and just as the thing sailed over her head, dropped her sidearm and lashed out with the weapons nature gave her: her powerful fangs and claws. She connected with the big ugly thing's underbelly and tore it open in two places, so that it let out an ear-piercing bellow as it bled out on the way to gracelessly tumbling to earth at the end of its arc. Terra ate well that night, and for several after, thanks to Belinda's foresight in scavenging solar panels from the hold to power the food storage unit.

As the sun set over the picturesque forest, they both heard the same welcome sound: the rush of a river. Sure enough, over the next ridge of rocky red soil, they found water bubbling over a short rocky outcropping and into a wide path cut by years of that flow into the gentle downhill slope. "Ooo!" Terra yowped, and started to fill her canteen, but stopped. "Let me guess: we need to test it."

"Bingo," The wolfess said approvingly. There were a few trace compounds they couldn't recognize, but they didn't seem immediately dangerous, and the pH balance was pretty normal for mineral water.

"Okay," Terra said. "We have almost all the basic survival needs."

Belinda nodded. "True: air, water, shelter, food, and a positive mental attitude."

"Right. All we need now are pizza, a hot tub, and a harem of males." They giggled and relaxed by the river for awhile, watching the sunset before returning to the wrecked ship.

"Belinda?"

The wolfess looked over, her pale golden skin shimmering a little in the fading light.

"If it makes you feel any better, there's nobody else in the universe I'd rather be marooned with."

Belinda considered this, and smiled. "It does.

And...likewise. Hurrgh..." The last sound came unbidden as Terra grabbed her paw and drew her in for a big hug, which, while unexpected, she actually found herself rather enjoying. For one thing, the atmosphere had begun to cool off rapidly, and even through her vest and equipment harness, the cat was *warm*.

Over the next couple of hours, they made camp as best they could. At first, they both tried to use their combined strength to tilt the ship upright, but even though it was only about the size of an old-style city bus (at least after having shed a few parts on re-entry and landing), it was too big and anchored too well in the hill. When that failed, they got out some tools and rearranged the least damaged furniture so that the starboard bulkhead was now the deck.

"Well, I don't know about you, B'linda," Terra muttered sweetly, "but I'm gonna need some sleep now."

"You've sure earned it, Terra," Belinda said--or started to, when she realized that Terra had already collapsed in her outsized bunk and started snoring. Belinda cut the lights to save what was left of the ship's batteries, and sat, passing the time. She hardly slept, so it seemed only natural for her to keep watch, using as little of her

internal energy as possible until the sun came out. She would see about getting one or two of the generators working again later, she thought.

About halfway through the night, Terra started tossing and turning in the dark, and woke up at least partway.

"Belinda?"

She nodded, knowing the big cat could see her in the dark.

"I had a bad dream."

"Oh?"

Terra nodded. Her big green eyes shone in the dim moonlight streaming through the damaged compartment, her expression making her look almost like a gigantic cub.

Belinda put her book down and sat on the bunk, instinct guiding her to run delicate plastic fingers through the tigress' head fur. Terra put a paw on her wrist.

"You're so cold."

"I'm saving energy," the wolfess said.

"Come here. I have enough warmth for both of us," Terra said. "And...I need to hold something."

Considering that "something to hold" had been part of her original job description before she had found herself mysteriously upgraded, Belinda had no qualms about sliding in close and snuggling up. And she couldn't help but admit that the warmth felt very, very good. She still kept a watchful eye out for the rest of the night, but the moons of the planet made way for the sun in just a few hours without incident.

Well, almost.

Belinda could feel her bedmate's warmth, but her skin felt different. She looked under Terra's smooth, thick fur and couldn't help but notice that her black stripes looked more purple in the sunlight streaming in. And so did her skin. At least she seemed to feel properly snugly.

She waited for Terra to awaken. "Hi there," the big tigress said. "Feeling nice and warm?"

"I am," Belinda allowed. "Thank you. It's been awhile since..."

"I know. Since we threw that clown off our ship, and struck out on our ohmyGODS!" Terra finished, noticing her color change. "Oh, my Gods! Am I like this all over? I..."

Belinda grabbed the scanner. "No serious life sign changes, but we'll have to watch that..." she trailed off.

Terra's luxuriant fur had begun to fall out. The wolfess reached out experimentally and touched Terra's arm, and came away with a pawful of it. The dark skin underneath had a smooth texture, a rubbery feel, and a purple sheen that both Terra and Belinda probably would have considered attractive at any other time. Right now, however, it mostly caused further concern.

"Um...are you feeling any pain?" Belinda asked.

"Oddly, no. It feels nice and cool, especially where the fur is...I guess you'd call this molting?" Terra asked.

Belinda ran some scans. "Surface temp is down a bit-- four degrees C below normal. Your core temp and other vitals seem fine, though." She looked up from the small

handheld scanner. "Do you feel any weakness, lightheadedness, tremors, or..."

"Belinda, relax. It looks a little odd--okay, a lot odd, but I feel fine," the tigress reassured her partner. "Better than fine," she continued, suddenly realizing. She crouched experimentally, and then sprang up...and completely through the up-tilted hatch opening into the tree canopy. "Look, Belinda, I'm bouncier than you are now!" she yowled, laughing. She alit on a branch about 20 meters up.

"Terra," Belinda said, paws on her hips, "you really should come down from there. We don't know what other effects this sudden change could be caus..."

Terra came down right in front of the hatchway, and Belinda's warning trailed off. "Geez, wuffie, you're always so worried about everything. Lighten up a little...hee! Lighten up! You're inflatable and..."

The wolfess failed to hold back a smile, but did manage to stifle the laugh--mostly. "Okay. Just...be careful. You're the only partner I've got."

Over the next several days, the pair researched possible causes, and determined that the combination of a very rare recessive trait in her genome had combined with some of the mysterious substances that seemed to pervade every aspect of the planet's ecosystem to yield the sudden transformation. It didn't seem to have any negative effects, and in fact, while Terra proved conclusively that she could still eat, she also discovered that she didn't need to.

"Is this what it's like to be...you, Belinda?" Terra asked.

"In a few aspects. You seem to have lost weight..."

"Yay!"

Belinda laughed, a soft, musical sound. "But you're also still apparently solid rather than gas-filled, and the scanner still detects a skeletal structure and analogous internal organs..."

"So I'm still mostly tigress."

"Very much so. Just with a soft thick stretchy polymer outer coating where your skin had been."

Terra frowned cutely. "D'ya think it's permanent?"

"Hard to say. For all we know, once we get off this rock, and your body finishes flushing the reactants out of itself, you could go back to the way you were," she said.

"In the meantime, it's not causing any obvious harm, and..." she sighed. "We couldn't change it if we needed to anyway."

They relaxed for awhile, and Belinda continued to observe her shipmate. Terra had also seemingly gotten rid of the need for sleep, and while she acted about the same as before, her mind seemed to work..."more effectively" probably summed it up.

Terra, Belinda reflected, had always been a seat-of-the-pants type of person--not just at the helm (in fact, Belinda had always respected her flying skills) but when it came to life. Belinda had happily taken over all the practical aspects of managing their small cargo freighter, especially budgeting, maintenance, and inventory. Terra had always performed well at tasks that required a steady hand, but only when something absolutely needed to be done. She seemed to have always lived by an ironclad moral code to have as much fun and get as much sleep as possible.

Now, however, while she still happily leapt high and far about the surrounding jungle, there seemed to be more

purpose to her. She gathered firewood. She built an addition to the ship out of tree trunks and leaves without any help from Belinda, using plans from the ship's archives--after successfully rewiring the damaged holoprojector and two remaining viewscreens to get them to display the information she needed. She even made herself and Belinda matching loincloths.

"Terra, it's lovely, but my jumpsuit is perfectly comf..." Belinda said when presented with the skimpy garment.

"But I worked so hard on it..." Terra pouted.

"And it's absolutely gorgeous. But...I've spent years trying to get others to take me seriously. As flattering as this would be, it's a little...skimpy. I'd rather wear my regular, if slightly dull, clothing, unless we find out that other sentient life is wearing something similar to these."

In truth, the average individual from their civilization would probably disagree strongly with the idea that the inflatable wolfess' well-tailored clothing looked "slightly dull" on her. It showed off her curves quite flatteringly, and even stretched with her up to a point. That had come in quite handy during the occasional partial depressurization--one of their former partners' ideas of a hilarious practical joke, and one of the reasons why he'd had a black eye before they'd turned him in to the Galactic Patrol for his various offenses. Belinda looked at the loincloth again.

Terra looked pleadingly at her, holding it out.

"But...looooooincloth..."

Finally, unable to argue with such a persuasive argument, Belinda unceremoniously peeled out of the sturdy one-piece, and tied the pair of leather panels in place. "Say, where did you find this...?"

Terra shrugged, setting her rubbery bosom in a brief motion that would have made any male present (and some females) weak in the knees. "Oh, I skinned that weird alien boar thing from when we got here."

"Well, I never thought they would look this good," Belinda admitted, "but where did you find the right chemicals to tan them?"

Terra hesitated. "Um...well, they're all-natural..."

Belinda mentally reviewed some information she'd once read about primitive garment leather, and said simply, "Oh." At least the scent had worn off.

She also had to admit that the skimpy things felt rather free, and exposed more of her skin to the recharging rays of the sun. Since her structure was easily tough enough to deflect anything short of armor-piercing weapons, she didn't really feel as uncomfortable while

nearly naked as she thought she would. Maybe it had just been the auction all those years ago.

She thought about that long and hard while she and Terra made spears and other weapons. After all, their pistols wouldn't stay charged forever, and solar power was limited.

Over the next several months, the two made further improvements, and even managed to get the subspace beacon back up, though the rest of the radio was permanently dead.

While the planet had no native sentient life, the two contented themselves with each other's company and learned to enjoy their simple life together, at least until a passing scrap merchant found their signal and came down to investigate.

The bronze-colored shuttle, a well-maintained if somewhat older model, barely rustled the leaves as it

landed softly in the clearing below their wreck. Belinda and Terra each held up a paw in greeting, but kept their trigger fingers ready, paws on their sidearms.

"Greetings, greetings," said a powerfully-built middle-aged gorilla as he ambled out of the shuttle's rounded hatch. He wasn't much to look at, but his gregarious expression and open stance suggested that he seemed to have accepted that long ago. "I'm Captain Hiram Solomon. I couldn't help but pick up your signal. Do you two lovely ladies happen to need a lift?"

Normally, Belinda would have expected Terra to, if not play damsel-in-distress, at least try to use her feminine wiles on the older gent in an attempt to lull him into assuming she wasn't too bright. Now, however, their time marooned on the primitive world had apparently forged her into sterner stuff. "Depends," she said in a clear, assertive tone. "What's the asking price?"

"Ahhhh, a plain dealer," the simian said. "Normally, I rather like the pleasantries of bandying about a bit, but I do respect a lady who doesn't mince words." He looked at what was left of the ship. "This derelict...is it yours?"

"Clear title and everything."

"For what this is worth, I could easily take you to the next Union world, in my largest cabin, and cut you in for ten percent of whatever cargo you have left."

Terra chuckled. "You must think we've gone native. We'll give you fifty percent of the lot for room and board while we're on your vessel. Destination to be named later." She and the inflatable wolfess looked at each other. "And you and the crew keep your paws to yourselves unless we say otherwise."

"Oh, you've got spirit!" the gorilla said, delighted. "You do realize that since you're not technically in distress, I am not legally obligated to transport you anywhere?"

"True," Belinda said. " And we don't necessarily want to go anywhere." She and the tigress had gone over thousands of possible negotiation scenarios in their ample free time.

"Exactly," Terra said. "And we've been over the charts and laws surrounding planets of this type. So perhaps we can come to a different kind of deal."

Ten years and a few thousand offworld hires later, the three found themselves absurdly wealthy, and living on the fifth most popular primitive vacation destination in the entire Galactic Union.

And when the money rolled in, Terra would jump for joy--20 meters in the air.