

~ Battle for Mars ~

by Windstar

You might want to read the [North Star](#) and [Southern Cross](#) stories first, since this takes place in that universe but you can probably understand what's going on in this short story without reading the others. Any constructive criticism can be sent to Adarkbow@yahoo.com.

This is not the story of the battle for Mars. That story has been told, and I'm sure you all know of the desperate battle that took place. The heroes who stepped forward, the lives lost, and the sacrifices made so that the Bak'ra did not overrun the red planet.

No, this is not that story, although that is a story well worth telling in itself. Instead, this is the story of life amid war and death, the will to survive in the face of an enemy more dangerous than the Earth and her children, had ever faced.

Among all the other stories that have been told about the battle for Earth, the defeat of the Bak'ra fleet and the narrow victory over them on Mars, I know you may be wondering why should you read this one? I can offer you no reason other than to state that I believe it is a story worth telling, and one worth learning from.

I, of course, may be a tad biased.

I was there you see.

"Here we go again, ladies."

"Speak for yourself Artemis, I ain't no lady."

"Yeah? That's not what Vallarie over in the 5th says, Shepherd."

"Screw you Artemis."

"Nah, you're not my type."

Laughing the two trotted down the hanger deck. This particular little act had become a routine with each of them since they'd been recruited into the 13th fighter squadron, also known as the Sharks.

With a wave to her fellow squadron mates she headed for her own fighter. Even knowing what they were about to fly out and face she couldn't quite manage to hide the grin as she spotted the sleek deadly shape. Flying these Imperial fighters made the Air National Guard fighters she had been used to seem like biplanes.

"He ya Chris, am I good to go?"

A wink to the young tech and the slim woman trailed her fingers along the edges of the long craft as she started her walk around. Chris, a rather ungainly youth from somewhere in Ireland she thought bobbed his head and finished marking her craft as ready to launch. She'd never really gotten more than a dozen words out of him at one time, so she wasn't expecting anything now. His stuttered 'good luck ma'am' got a brilliant smile from the fighter pilot and she surprised them both by giving him a swift hug.

"Thanks, see ya soon, right after I whup a few Bak'ra asses."

Settling her helmet over her short-cropped blazing red hair, Elizabeth Martinu, call sign Artemis, settled into the cockpit of her fighter. After a thumbs up to the ground crew, she sealed the transparent armored canopy, and a quick system check later she hooked into the squad's communications net. Wasn't it odd to think of a squad as only ten fighters, she mused as she opened the link.

"Alright people, heads up, we've got actual bad guys to fight this time."

The commander was already speaking and Artemis kept an ear on what he had to say as she brought her fighter's engines online and double-checked her weapons load.

"In about thirty minutes a portion of the Bak'ra fleet is going to drop into orbit right on top of us. Now since Mars Base is shielded, they probably won't go for the orbital bombardment. Which means we're going to get landing craft and enemy fighters swarming over us. The Marine's are standing ready, and we've got an entire battalion of them heading here from the Fleet but that's all we get. The rest of the Navy's going to try and stop the main Bak'ra fleet from hitting Earth."

He'd gone over this all before in the briefing room, and Artemis rolled her eyes at the "old man". That he was only two years older than she was didn't matter. As far as she was concerned he was a worrywart, and they'd take care of things as they came up.

"So stay loose, remember your training, and cover each other. The 1st, 2nd, 11th, and 17th are all launching with us. Remember to keep the range open, and if the Marines call for some air support, try and give it to them. Understood?"

The entire squadron, more or less in synch, responded affirmatively.

"Good, now let's go."

A fully suited crew chief stepped out into the middle of the bay and using old-fashioned light wands waved Elizabeth and her fighter forwards. Careful not to singe anything behind her she slipped into the queue.

The Old Man's fighter launched first, quickly followed by the rest of the Sharks. Mars Bbase was

buried deep under the north pole of Mars, and even though the hanger bays were higher than the city itself, they still used tunnels to get up to ground level. Making sure her computer was reading the navigation signals correctly Artemis edged her nose around towards the upwards slanted tunnel, activated her anti gravity drives and waited for her turn.

Launching from the base always was a blast, as far as she was concerned. The tunnel ran more than a kilometer at a near fifty-degree angle upwards towards the surface. When *Shepherd's* fighter in front of her launched, she gave him the required ten seconds and then touched her engines. With a whoop of glee, she felt the nimble twenty-eight meter long craft spring forwards.

"Hey, Artemis! Keep it down, you damn near ruptured my ear drums."

"Screw you Viking, I'm just enjoying getting off."

Shepherd's voice cut into the channel.

"Hey, need any help with that?"

"Like I said, you boys aren't my type."

"What's the matter Artemis, too much for you?"

"Nah, I've seen you showering Viking, you sure don't live up to your call sign."

"All right children, that's enough. Artemis, try not to yell over the squad net if you can avoid it ok?"

"Sorry, Commander."

Still grinning, *the second she sailed out of the edge of the tunnel* she brought her fighter to almost a ninety degree angle with the ground below. Shark Eight and Nine were exactly ten and twenty seconds behind her, and the entire squad formed up in a loose holding pattern over Mars base. Below, her scanners could pick up the base's exterior defenses coming online, as well as the Marines stationed on Mars ready to defend the access points down into the base.

"Sweet God, will you look at all of em!"

Thankfully they were all speaking Tiri, or she wouldn't have understood a word of what Sonta said. Chinese was not one of the languages she'd spent time learning. There were, as Shark four had said, a lot of them. The Bak'ra were entering the atmosphere a good sixty kilometers south of Mars Base, well outside of the base's weapons range. Ten minutes behind them were the Marines the home fleet had desperately dispatched.

"Bandits!"

The cry came out of nowhere and everyone jerked at Viking's warning. Bak'ra fighters that had

been protecting the enemy drop ships curled up and around, obviously heading towards the incoming Imperial drop ships.

"Okay people, the other squadrons are going to try and take out those landing ships. We're going to protect the Marine drop ships. Tally ho!"

"Tally Ho!"

The Sharks brutally accelerated upwards; slicing through the thin Martian atmosphere in a bid to reach the Bak'ra fighters before they got to the Imperial drop ships.

"Light them up!"

Scanners probed forward and Artemis smiled as she got positive locks on the incoming fighters. They'd have no choice but to turn away from the drop ships now. The smile turned to horror as the Bak'ra fighters did no such thing, and continued right on their course. Missile warnings flashed across her screen and two, then four, Marine drop ships turned into fireballs.

Someone, she wasn't sure who, swore. Almost at the same instant every fighter in the Sharks launched two missiles.

"Take that, you son of a bitches!"

The Bak'ra started to break off, but they were far too late now. Imperial missiles slashed into their ranks, blowing fighters apart. The Martian sky was suddenly filled with twisting and dodging fighters, as the Bak'ra and Imperial fighters tried to kill each other.

"Damn it!"

Artemis jinxed right, went into a steep inverted loop and used her anti grav to literally bounce off the surface of Mars as a Bak'ra fighter swung in behind her. Plasma cannons ripped at the red dirt and in the near vacuum of the Martian atmosphere, gouts of red spray sprung dozens of feet upwards.

"Shepherd, I could use some help here!"

She barreled through a canyon, went vertical at the end just as missile exploded in her wake. Two Bak'ra fighters charged past just in front of her, so intent on catching the Imperial fighter in front of them they never saw her as she launched two missiles right up their tail pipes. She only had two left now.

"Sorry Artemis..." he grunted over the com link "I've got some problems over here."

"Well shit."

The fighter barreled straight through the debris of the two fighters, and she didn't even have time

to see who's ass she'd just saved. The fighter behind her hung on despite everything she could do, and desperately she went to ground again, ducking into one of the kilometers long canyons as missile warnings blared to her.

"I know he's targeting me!"

The computer neither knew nor cared that she was yelling at it.

"Join the Imperial Marines, I said. Save the world, I said."

The lone figure stopped and glared about her at the empty Martian plains. Red rocks and sand for as far as she could see.

"What the fuck am I doing out in the middle of nowhere, TWENTY KILOMETERS FROM THE FIGHTING!"

The yelling helped a bit and still snarling to herself, she kept on moving. She had twenty kilometers to cover after all; maybe she could get there before the fighting was completely over.

Stupid Navy, had to drop me way the hell out here.

To be fair the drop ship she had been on had been hit on the way through the atmosphere. Which didn't make things all that better considering she'd been the only one to survive what could jokingly be called a landing.

"At least I have my hard suit.

The heavily armored hard suit had survived the impact more or less intact. Which was good since it was doubtful she would survive the twenty-kilometer hike in front of her without it.

"Okay"

With a deep breath, she double-checked her heads up display, noting the coordinates it laid out in green trails over the Martian landscape in front of her.

"I'm here."

A dot appeared on a topographical map.

"Mars Base is here."

An entire mountain was outlined in red as the computer obediently translated her cryptic requests.

"The fighting is here."

An entire section to the south of the mountain, hundreds of square kilometers in size, flashed blue. The problem was she was north of Mars Base.

"Got it."

In the suit, she ate up a few more hundred meters of ground at a surprisingly high speed, long-legged run, but there were limits to how fast she could push it. The faster she went, the faster the suit drained the power cells, and she only had two spares with her. The others had gone up in the crash.

"System check."

The computer beeped and once more started processing. She'd done **an earlier** system check only seconds after she'd realized she had, by some miracle, survived the crash.

Best to keep right on moving, and not think about my buddies that I just left behind.

Christina Thornhold wanted to make certain her suit wasn't going to do something unexpected if she happened across any enemies out here.

Like Dad always said, always be ready for the unexpected.

Ten seconds after she'd asked for it, the system check results scrolled by on her HUD.

"Right, power cell at 78%, plasma rifle functional, gatling cannon functional, no grenades, and a slight problem with my right arm hydraulics. Communications pack completely shot up. No calling in sick, I guess."

Still muttering to herself, she kept on moving. The faster she got to Mars Base, the faster she'd be able to do something and to keep her from thinking about the mates she'd trained with laying strewn in pieces across the sand behind her.

Oh no you don't.

She battled down the familiar sense of rage welling up from inside her. There would be time for that soon enough, not yet though.

Get to the battle first.

Then, Christina had every intention of trading her life for as many Bak'ra as she could take to hell with her.

Warning: Approaching enemy fighter.

The computer's warning refocused her attention on the here and now quite nicely. Her HUD resized as she watched and the suit's sensors picked up the approaching aircraft. Elizabeth frowned in thought as she spotted an Imperial fighter that the enemy chasing. They were going to come really close to where she was right now if that Imperial pilot did what she thought they were going to do. The canyon the two fighters were racing down ended only a few meters to her left. Making a snap decision, Christina lowered herself to the ground and powered up the shoulder mounted plasma cannon.

"Come to mama."

Elizabeth was in trouble.

She couldn't seem to shake the fighter on her tail and the Bak'ra was hellishly good. So far she'd managed to dodge everything the enemy had thrown at her, but the last few missiles had used up the last of her decoys.

Which meant if he got another target lock on her, she was dead.

Cold sweat trickled down the back of her suit and she focused on not crashing into the sides of the canyon. At the speeds she was traveling that would be a messy way to end things.

They'd be picking up pieces for weeks.

That is, if there was anyone on Mars left to pick up the pieces.

She didn't worry long about that last thought. That was far beyond her pay grade. Right now all she wanted was to avoid becoming dead in the next few minutes. Swallowing hard she glanced at the terrain mapping plot speeding along besides her. The canyon was going to end in another two kilometers, and then she'd be out of options. The damn Bak'ra would get a shot at her as she climbed out, and still she couldn't force herself to come up with any sudden brilliant ideas.

This is going to hurt.

Burning along at well over Mach five didn't leave one with much time for decision-making. Two kilometers roared past faster than she wanted, and the imposing wall of the end of the canyon raced towards her with lethal intention.

Shit

Her short haircut was not only for show; all Imperial pilots wore their hair short for a very simple reason. It needed to be short. The helmet was more than just protection but a part of her life support suit. Sensors along the back allowed her to control the fighter mostly by thought, allowing for near instantaneous reactions. It was the only way the Empire could compete with

the Bak'ra, who somehow had actually implanted live brains into their fighters.

All of that didn't mean a thing to Elizabeth as she waited to the last second, before boosting her antigrav drive to the max and launching the fighter vertical. She'd hoped the Bak'ra fighter would crash into the canyon wall behind her; unfortunately it did no such thing. The enemy fighter arched upwards easily following her maneuver and fresh warning lights blazed as it got a weapons lock.

I'm going to die.

The thought crossed her mind the second the warning lights blazed to life, and her hand had actually reached for the eject latch when her sensor's suddenly lit up new warning lights. A Marine hard suit, and she had no idea why they were way the hell out here in the middle of nowhere, had been waiting at the exit from the canyon. It's plasma rifle aimed upwards and even as Elizabeth blinked in surprise, it fired. The powered armor suit was a nasty bit of work. Elizabeth had gotten to see some of the weapons field-tested. They'd been awe inspiringly deadly, although not on the same scale as the weapons her fighter carried, but somehow they'd felt more real.

The plasma bolt slammed into one side of the Bak'ra fighter, perfectly aimed just behind the main power generator bulge where it's shields were the weakest, and out the other side. The enemy fighter hung suspended for the briefest of instances then exploded in incandescent glory.

Elizabeth didn't realize she was shouting until a good three seconds later.

"Yeah! Take that you bastard! HA! Bet you never expected that!"

Hell, I didn't even expect that.

Wagging her wings in thanks, Elizabeth brought her fighter up in a large loop. She'd gotten quite a bit off track. Her fellow Sharks were south of Mars Base, opposite from where she was now. They looked like they were getting the living hell pounded out of them, and even with communications being shredded by the Bak'ra jammers, she knew they needed help. With one last glance down at the marine below, and another mental thank you, Artemis turned her fighter south.

Artemis had only just started to head south when the fighter's sensor's started to once more go berserk.

Great, now what?

Instead of going straight south as she'd wanted, she banked the fighter into a wide circle centered almost directly over the Marine below. Narrowing her eyes the red head focused her fighter's sensors. The Marine had started moving south as well, but he or she stopped now that Liz had startled circling her.

Probably thinks I'm out of my mind.

Liz frowned at her instruments, trying to figure out what they were showing her.

What is that? One hell of a big power source under that rock, and it's moving.

Except there shouldn't be anything under that rock. Least of all, a power source like the one her scanners were suddenly picking up.

Where did that come from? Wow, it's moving too. Whatever it is it's heading south at a good forty kilometers an hour.

The Marine seemed to have picked up on whatever it was Liz had, and was starting to move after the power sources as well. They were paralleling the canyon, Liz noted, and she bit her lip waiting for her computer to plot out the course of the thing.

That settles that, it's headed for Mars Base. It's sure as hell not one of ours, so it must be one of theirs.

Which simplified her problems considerably. She had two missiles left, and she knew exactly what she was going to do with them. Jammers were hashing the com channels so badly she didn't even try to get a hold of the Marine below to tell him to get clear. Liz didn't seem to need to anyway, the Marine had stopped back by the beginning of the canyon, while the power signature had continued to move along underground.

A thought and the fighter's missiles armed themselves.

Smirking, Artemis gained a bit more altitude, locked onto the energy signature and sent the command to fire.

The two missiles dropped smoothly from their racks underneath the slim fighter and then swept towards the ground almost faster than the eye could follow. Both had anti-starfighter warheads and packed a nasty punch. Dirt and rock erupted from the impact site and subsequently, the energy signature disappeared from her scanners.

"I don't know what you were, but you're toast now."

Razor sharp reflexes reacted before she even realized fully what was happening. A gout of plasma blew past her right wing and hazel eyes widened in shocked surprise as she automatically put the fighter through evasive maneuvers. Power readings once more spilled across her sensors as something moved inside of the dust filled crater her missiles had created.

Something big.

She'd never heard of a Bak'ra construct that big on land before, or below it as the case may be. It

had to be at least three times the size of her fighter. What it was and how it had gotten there weren't important right now.

The fact that it was trying to kill her was.

Things that looked suspiciously like turrets on its massive armored carapace swiveled towards her and she didn't wait to find out what was about to happen. Something whizzed past her cockpit. She didn't need the fighter's sensors to tell her that missiles had just barely missed her suddenly fragile feeling fighter. Another missile detonated so close, it tossed her fighter a hundred meters to the side sending warning lights blazing as fragments tore through her ships systems.

Fear chocked her as the fighter began an uncontrolled tumble towards the red ground below.

Christina gasped as the thing reared up out of the crater. She'd been certain that the Imperial fighter had destroyed whatever it was. That much high explosive would have turned even an Imperial tank into debris smeared across the Martian landscape.

Instead her suits sensors had detected the thing as it moved up out of the ground.

A mountain of metal, turrets and armor gleaming through the dust filled air.

Oh boy.

Oddly enough her first thought was to wonder what her father would have thought of it, how he would have tried to be prepared for this one.

Then the missiles detonated high above, and she had no trouble seeing the fighter begin its uncontrolled tumble.

What? Do I have to save that guy twice?

A flitter of annoyance passed through her as she toggled the plasma cannon once more. It didn't take long to power up since she'd still had the power on stand by. Her visor darkened as the rifle fired, dimming out the starburst brilliance.

A plasma burst that would have blown apart a normal Bak'ra soldier sloughed off the armored behemoth before her. A corner of her mind was relieved to see the Imperial fighter regain control and arc upwards away from them. The rest of her was busy sending the powered armor suit into a desperate jump backwards as turrets swiveled towards her and pulverized the ground where she'd just been standing.

Warning: power cells at 15%, change power cells immediately.

The plasma rifle drained power like nothing else, the anti grav drive built into the back of the suit that she was using to hop sideways away from the behemoth drained the power cells nearly as fast.

"Thanks, I'll do that when I'm not being shot at!"

Another jump backwards as the thing slowly started to lumber around towards her. It was even bigger than she thought, and she could only imagine the damage it could cause if it got into Mars base itself.

She sent a shot back at it with her plasma rifle, not even bothering to use her gatling canon. If the plasma rifle didn't do any damage to the thing, the gatling canon had less than no chance.

Warning: power cells at 10%, change power cells immediately.

Ignoring the warning she sent herself in a desperate leap towards the nearby canyon. If she didn't get some cover soon, and her power cells completely died, she would go with them.

A missile launched from the Bak'ra construct and would detonate just in front of her. Thankfully she'd touched her anti-grav off and while the generator wasn't strong enough for true flight, it had more than enough strength to let the Marine's take long bounding leaps away from it. Unfortunately, the missile blast was at least twice the strength of the one's ones that the Imperial fighter had carried, and it picked her up like a toy doll and sent her flying backwards to land sprawled on her back. Dazed and confused, she could only stare up at the huge monstrosity as turrets turned to track her.

I'm dead.

Christina tried to force herself to get up, but even as she started to move she knew it was too slow.

Then, like an avenging angel, the Imperial fighter reappeared. She'd almost completely forgotten about it in her desperate bid to survive. It was trailing smoke, even in the thin Martian atmosphere, and the normally graceful movements of an Imperial fighter were gone. It swooped down right over the behemoth and Christina blinked in surprise wondering what it's pilot was doing. The Bak'ra must have wondered the same thing, because the turrets that had been swinging towards her began to swing upwards towards the fighter.

What the...

Christina's thoughts derailed as she saw the fighter's nose come up sharply and her antigravity drives come to life underneath the length of the fighter.

Holy shit!

That fighter pilot had to be insane.

Antigrav drives did nasty things to anything organic underneath them. For that reason, Marines releasing from drop ships always made sure that drop ship pilot had his anti-grav drives off before jumping. Passing through an active antigravity drive was a death sentence. Even as she watched bits of the behemoth crumpled in on itself as the fighter struggled to hover above the mountain of armor and weapons. Things snapped and the Marine had a glimpse of a turret exploding, then more and more explosions riddled the thing.

The explosion picked her up and tossed her back with even more stunning force than the missile had. Lights danced in front of her eyes and her ears rang as she tasted a coppery twang. The fighter went cart wheeling end over end above her and only seconds before it made its own crater, the front cockpit exploded off just as the pilot jettisoned.

"Christ."

Coughing, Liz blearily opened her eyes, trying to figure out where she was. The star like pattern right in front of her turned out to be the shattered canopy top when she managed to focus her eyes. Beyond the shattered transparent armor was the desolate surface of Mars.

Groaning, she pushed against the harness release, tumbling down onto the side of the cockpit as the straps obediently let go. The cockpit was trashed. That much was obvious, and with a shove to the release lever, she tried to pop the top off.

Nothing.

Swallowing against a rising sea of panic, Liz squirmed around until she could kick at the armored cockpit top. Even the shattered sections were still more than strong enough to resist her kicks, making her want to scream in frustration.

If that Bak'ra thing was still out there, she was a sitting duck.

All that another kick managed was to make her yelp in pain as she hurt her ankle.

"God damn it!"

A quick check of her flight suit reassured her that it at least was working like designed. It was reading as fully intact and she had twelve hours of air left. A shadow fell over the cockpit and panic flared anew as she scrambled to try and get out. The cockpit resolutely withstood her attempts and she cursed every engineer, their parents, and their parent's parents vehemently.

"Open, you stupid piece of junk!"

Standard survival gear consisted of one pulse rifle, three magazines, a survival shelter, four days

worth of rations, and a small portable homing beacon. Unfortunately all of that was housed in a separate compartment on the outside of the cockpit as Liz screamed in frustration. The Bak'ra were about to open fire on her and she couldn't do anything!

Except.

Except the shadow didn't blow her to kingdom come. Instead a large armored fist traversed down into her field of view, casually gripped the edge of the cockpit roof and ripped it off. Gaping in surprise, all Liz could do was stare upwards in shock at a Marine hard suit. She'd completely forgotten about the marine, and it wasn't until the suit took a step backwards that she suddenly half slithered, half tumbled out of the ruined cockpit.

"Hello?"

No answer, either her short range com gear was fried or the Bak'ra jammers were a lot better than everyone had thought. Hesitantly Liz raised her hand in a wave, frowning as the towering suit of armor stayed immobile.

"Hey, anyone in there?"

Talking was probably useless but she took a step towards the towering suit nonetheless. Maybe the Marine was really hurt, she owed whoever was in that suit and she owed them big.

Of course, I kind of saved their ass as well. So maybe we're even? If it's a guy, we are definitely even.

The center section of the armor whirred outwards, then slid up revealing the vac suited Marine inside.

Oh. Definitely a she.

Taking in the curves and the way the Marine jumped lithely to the ground, Liz couldn't help but smile appreciatively. Unlike the Navy vac suits, the Marine ones were designed to be skin tight to fit on the Marine while they were inside of the powered armor.

Liz wasn't above a little leering, but she wanted to get a few things first. Climbing around the cockpit wincing as she saw the long furrow her craft had plowed in the planet's desolate surface, she got her first look at where the Bak'ra thing had been.

Whatever it had been, there was only a big crater now and Liz had the urge to shout and dance in joy.

"Take that! HA!"

Then she nearly jumped clear out of her vac suit as a hand settled on her shoulder.

"AAHHH!"

Swinging around she sent both herself and the Marine tumbling. The only difference was that the Marine came up in a ready crouch where as Liz fell down on her ass.

"Don't do that!"

The Marine held up both of her hands in apology, even though it was obvious that she didn't hear a thing that Liz was yelling.

"You're going to give me a heart attack."

Still shaken, the pilot got back up onto her feet and crawled under her cockpit. Swearing as she undid the side panel, she started to pull out the emergency supplies. It was hard to drag most of them out since they were practically underneath the cockpit, but the Marine helped and they managed. Once they had removed everything they could, Liz felt a bit better while holding the awkward but comforting weight of the pulse rifle. She pointed questioningly towards the tall powered armor.

Exaggerating the motion so that Liz could see it, the Marine squatted down and wrote in the reddish dust.

No juice.

A string of curses later, Liz set about setting up the survival shelter and stowing the gear. At the very least they could talk to each other in there and she had no intention of walking into a major war zone carrying only a pulse rifle either. She glanced over her shoulder and winced. With daylight waning, it was going to get really cold in a little while.

A tap on her shoulder almost sent her sprawling in the dust again, although this time she swung around with the rifle also. The Marine, whose name was apparently Thornhold if the name on her vac suit was accurate, smoothly relieved Liz of the rifle before she shot something. Gulping down a yell of surprise, Liz looked towards what the Marine was pointing at.

"Son of a bitch!"

Now that the shelter was fully inflated she could easily see where shrapnel had ripped through the small life support system attached to the shelter. It was obviously toast and she really wanted to just sit down and weep. That meant the only oxygen they had was what they had in their suits' life support systems. The marine had obviously already come to the same conclusion as she crawled through the survival shelters small air lock, and then into the shelter itself. Liz waited until the small lock had cycled then climbed in after her.

It was a tough fit, the shelter was officially rated for two people but Liz decided both people would have to be a lot smaller than her and the female Marine to make it comfortable. Somehow they managed to get their helmets off without too much fumbling, and Liz got her first look at

the Marine.

Liz knew she was staring, but she didn't really care at the moment. The Marine probably was never called beautiful, Beautiful just didn't seem to fit with the powerful charismatic face that stared back at her out of a tangle of sweat drenched dark locks. The Marine arched an eyebrow and Liz felt a faint blush work its way to her cheeks.

"Umm... Hi."

A long low chuckle and the Marine offered her hand, which Liz automatically shook.

"Hi. Nice to meet the person who saved my life out there."

Liz blinked, then laughed.

"You have that backwards, don't you? I mean, you are the one who blew that Bak'ra fighter off my tail, right?"

The other woman laughed and Liz could feel some of the awful tension start to drain away.

"Okay, let's call it even all right?"

"Deal. My names Elizabeth Martinu."

The Marine smiled, a swift bright thing that made Liz stare in astonishment.

When she does that she is beautiful. Oh boy, well things could be worse I guess. The view's pretty darn good in here.

A mental slap.

Stop it, down girl!

"A pleasure to meet my savoir, I'm Christina Thornhold."

Neither of them wanted to drag rank into the introductions so they both just let that be for now.

Christina discreetly glanced at the petite red head next to her. She tried not to leer.

Jesus, she looks beautiful. I don't mind waiting here to get picked up with her, not at all!

Trying her best to resist the smirk she knew was trying to find its way onto her face, the Marine helpfully offered the small pilot both of her own O2 cylinders. The smaller woman plugged them into the survival shelter's damaged life support system in a bid to allow them to keep their

helmets off and share air.

I wouldn't mind sharing something else...

"Okay, all done. That should give us twelve hours of air, more or less. Now we just have to hope someone finds us before then."

The abrupt return to the reality of the situation did an excellent job of cooling her libido as Christina slumped down into a corner of the shelter.

"Let's hope someone figures out we're out here before our twelve hours are up."

The two stared at each other with varying degrees of uncertainty and nervousness. The silence stretched until Christina was about to scream so she blurted out the first thing that came to mind.

"You must be insane."

"What?"

Christina motioned *vaguely* to the outside of the shelter.

"You destroyed that thing with your anti grav drive. That was an insane and impossible maneuver, I doubt any pilot's done that and survived the experience before."

Liz blinked then giggled, pointing at the Marine.

"I'm insane? You're the one who stood still and shot down a Bak'ra fighter. I don't know many Marine's who have tried that and lived."

Light blue eyes met hazel and both grinned in reflex.

"Are we done telling each other how insane we both are?"

Liz shrugged in answer and settled down into her spot. The shelter was just barely big enough for the two of them to sit opposite each other as long as they didn't mind their legs touching.

Christina at least didn't mind that part at all.

"So," as the silence became oppressive once more, "know any good card games?"

"You did not!"

Liz laughed, regarding her companion with amusement, while Christina somberly nodded.

"I did, I shot his car."

Groaning in disbelief, the young pilot leaned her head back against the resilient side of the survival shelter.

"I can just picture that, what happened next?"

Christina chortled, Liz was certain that was the only word you could use for such an evil laugh.

"Wellllll... guys tend to back off when you show them what exactly you can do with a plasma rifle. It was pretty funny seeing the look on his face when he realized what had just happened to his precious Ferrari."

Liz laughed, wiping at the tears that were trying to streak down her face. They'd tried to sleep, but neither had been able to as the hours ticked by. They both knew that they should just stay silent and conserve oxygen, but with only four hours of breathable air left, Liz didn't want to just sit and wait for rescue ... or death. If she sat and thought about it too much, her stomach started to tighten and the walls started to close in on her.

Much better to talk and trade stories than sit alone in silence. It helped to keep her mind off the small space they were both stuck in. The very small space they were both stuck in.

Stop it!

She concentrated on the jokes they'd been telling each other trying to dra her mind away from those kind of thoughts before her claustrophobia started up.

Funny stories too, like the time she'd gone hang gliding and gotten trapped up in a tree in the middle of a junkyard. Or the time Christina and her unit had mooned an Admiral as he swept past in a motorcade

Or the story that Christina had just finished telling. Liz shook her head once more and rolled her eyes at the still smirking Marine.

"I bet your Sargeant just loved you at boot."

Dark eyebrows waggled up and down as Christina grinned.

"Wouldn't you love to know?"

Laughter died on Liz's lips at the sudden smoky tone in Christina's voice and she met the other woman's eyes with a small teasing smile.

"And if I did?"

The silence this time wasn't oppressive at all, and both smiled at each other. Liz was about to

climb over and see if Christina's lips tasted as good as they looked when a soft beeping started. With a sigh she removed one of the empty tanks and replaced it with the last full one, making sure the seal was tight before checking the pressure readings.

"Four hours of air left, give or take a few minutes."

The grim reminder of their situation cut through the sexual tension quite nicely and they both stared at the pressure gauges. Gone was the laughter of a few minutes before and Liz swallowed against the sudden tightness in her chest.

She couldn't breath.

Gasping she turned and started to fumble for the exit.

She had to get out of here.

The walls were starting to close in on her.

Strong hands gripped her and she was pulled against a warm body despite her struggles.

"Sshhh, it's alright."

The panic eased, but her entire body was stiff with fear and she gulped for air.

"Nice deep breaths."

"I c-c-can't breath, n-n-need to get out!"

"No you don't. There's plenty of air here for four hours remember? You just told me so yourself."

Liz tried to fight against the hands holding her close, only managing to get pulled in tighter.

"We're all right, we're all right, I promise you we'll be all right."

Soft lips brushed her forehead and she could feel the tightness in her chest start to recede. The desperate gasps for breath slowed until she was breathing almost normally once more. Closing her eyes, the red head tried to slow the hammering of her own heart. She whispered into the fabric her hands were gripping, although she didn't remember grabbing onto the front of Christina's suit so tightly.

"Sorry."

The arms around her tightened and Liz could feel Christina's shrug.

"For what?"

"For nearly losing it."

A warm pair of lips once more brushed her forehead.

"Don't worry about it. What happened?"

"Umm, I just, well I kinda have this problem with small little spaces."

She peeked up to see the incredulous look on the Marine's face.

"Not to try and contradict you or anything, but isn't the cockpit of a fighter a lot smaller than this?"

Liz shrugged, returning her head to its rather comfortable resting spot.

"That's different."

"Oh?"

"Yup, when I'm in the cockpit my link with the fighter let's me feel like I'm flying. It's a fantastic feeling."

The Marine shifted, laying down more so that they were both comfortable before speaking up again.

"Nice call sign."

"Hmm?"

"Artemis, right? That's what was written on your helmet."

"Oh, yup that's me."

"I bet there's a story that goes with that."

"There is, and if you're really good I'll tell it to you."

Marine and Pilot stared at one another, and it was Liz who surprised them both by moving up the small distance between them. Warm lips grazed their partners, and they both sucked in a surprised breath at how good that felt. Christina made the next move, the taller woman ducking her head to press her lips to the smaller woman's. Neither was certain who moaned first, but suddenly lips were open and tongues were hesitantly tasting one another.

Gasping for breath for an entirely different reason, Liz hugged the body she was using as a pillow and laid her head back down.

"Wow."

"Yeah."

"Christina?"

"Yes?"

"If we didn't have to worry about running out of air..."

A finger stopped her before she went any further and Christina grinned.

"I know, and I want too, but we can't."

Liz nodded and then, grinning, bit the finger pressed against her lips lightly. Earning a startled yelp from the dark haired woman.

"We get out of here, you better make good on that promise, Marine."

"You got it, Navy."

Chuckling, Liz settled into the arms of the taller woman happily. This was much better than sitting across the shelter from each other. Closing her eyes, she let the gentle rise and fall of the chest beneath her cheek lull her into a peaceful state.

They told us later they found us like that. Twined together on the floor of the survival shelter, both still in our vac suits.

It was close; we'd actually passed out from lack of oxygen before they managed to pull us out. We both spent a few days in recovery afterwards and got out of the hospital just in time to find out that the Bak'ra invasion had been sent packing.

The cost was high. God it was high. Eighty percent of the Sharks would never go home, and they were one of the luckier units that fought on Mars. I like to think that the two of us were spared because we were destined to be together.

I don't know if that's true or not, but I do know that I'm going to do my best to make sure it is. For now though, I have a Pilot I need to go meet. We're both mustering out today. It's been a long year for us while we rode out the rest of our enlistment.

Today we start a new life.

Together.

