

Crash and Burn

“Ehm, roger that, HELMET base, please be advised...”

The skies were clear. Some clouds dotted the blue ceiling of the world, but aside from these fluffy white dots, Crash saw nothing that could bother her. She was alone, with nobody to share the air with. It was hers, all of it, at least for a brief moment as she listened to the calm voices that droned through her radio.

“Crash is RTB. Repeat, Crash is returning to HELMET base. We will join a little later, over.”

“Ehm, understood. Base to Crash, any reason you are splitting off, over?”

Crash reached for her radio. The base was already showing on the horizon and she had to suppress a small smile at the sight of Home.

“Crash to Base,” she said dutifully, “there are some mechanical issues with Nariko. She’s in need of some TLC and we decided to end my practice run early, over.”

“Roger that, Crash,” was the almost bored response from Morse, the radio operator, “be advised, we had a bit of an accident with a different flight that returned. The runway is currently being cleared. Maintain a holding pattern at one-eight-zero from the base. Please confirm, over.”

“One-eight-zero confirmed,” Crash nodded, cocking her head, “anything I should be aware of, base, over?”

“You’ll see it when you fly by, Crash. Base out.”

Crash narrowed her eyes behind the sunscreen of her helmet. She put a hand on Nariko’s dashboard, rubbing the hard steel of the metal bucket that was supposed to protect Crash from any incoming fire.

“Time to get you some love, my dear,” she muttered, both to herself and to the massive A-10 warplane that was vibrating softly underneath her, “we’ll set you on the ground, get the mechanics to take a good look at that rattling we hear at three-fifty knots, and...”

She trailed off when she saw the smoke trail that rose from the HELMET base. She steered Nariko to the south, which put the airbase between her and the runway, but the base did little to hide the runway from her at her altitude. As she circled towards the south, Crash focused on the smoke until she could make out the different shapes moving around it. Red trucks and white vans, with several squiggly forms of people moving between the two. A bigger, grey truck was already moving in, steaming towards the smoke with a shovel at the front, but it looked like it was going to need a moment to do so.

Crash reached for her radio again. “Ehm, Crash to HELMET base, can I be briefed on what’s happened, over?”

“Base to Crash,” came the immediate response from Morse, “it’s not relevant to your situation, and you’ll be briefed as soon as you’ve successfully landed. Please hold a little longer, out.”

Crash’s fingers tightened around the control stick between her knees as she watched the burning shape on the runway be extinguished. As the flames and the smoke died, the misshapen form of a fighter plane started to show up. Crash looked how the white shapes, the ambulances, briefly moved in before they retreated and drove off. Crash didn’t spot any sirens flashing as they moved away.

“Base to Crash,” came Morse’s voice as the grey shovel moved in and started to push the wreckage from the runway, “we’ve almost got the strip cleared. You can start your landing approach bearing two-five-zero, confirm, over.”

Crash swallowed, but nodded. “Two-five-zero, confirmed,” she said with a dry mouth, “see you on the ground, base, out.”

Crash’s hands dutifully followed the instructions that she was given, even though her head was running with the implications of what had happened. There had been no sirens, no lights. She let her hands go through the motions while her eyes stayed on her instruments. Five hundred feet... four hundred feet... three hundred...

Her eyes widened as her readouts changed. Her artificial horizon started spinning, her computer spat line after line of coordinates at her, and her radio crackled dangerously before it died. She gripped Nariko’s control stick with both hands and braced her knees against the sides of her metal tub as she felt Nariko tilt to the right.

“Not now, darling,” she muttered, swinging the stick to the left, “come on, we’re close to the ground, and this is no time to misbehave.” She grit her teeth, fighting for control, but she could feel her right wing dipping further. It wouldn’t be long until Nariko’s wings would stop supporting the rest of her considerable mass. “Well, Nariko dearest, if you don’t want to behave... I’ll have to resort to harsh measures.”

Crash’s hand slid to the side, where a heavy lever rested against the edge of her bulletproof bathtub. She gripped it and, with a grunt, pulled it back towards her. An audible *clunk* came from behind Crash as her control stick violently banged against her right knee. The suddenly engaged hydraulic systems fought against Crash’s hands as she pushed it with all of her might to the left. Two *cracks* came from her left and right as her landing gear released on their own thanks to gravity and locked in their downward positions.

“There we go, sweetheart,” Crash shouted as the stick started obeying her efforts and moved to the left, “that’s it darling, just like that, we’re...” She gasped for air as her wheels screamed when they hit asphalt. Crash’s stomach lurched as she bounced off the ground and made a short hop that threatened to turn into a full takeoff again. She killed the power to Nariko’s engines with a decisive pull of the lever. “Whoa there, whoa there, let’s stay on the ground right now, kitten, stay down, stay down...”

Nariko obeyed. Though she was clearly Crash’s sweetheart, she still knew when it was better to listen to her commands. The second time her wheels hit asphalt, Nariko stayed on the ground and let friction take over until she had slowed down to a calm roll.

Crash ignored her heart jackhammering against her chest as she swallowed. “Good girl,” she choked out when she trusted her voice again, her hand moving to her radio, “Crash to Morse, ehm... did you see that, over?”

“We saw that, alright, Crash,” Morse’s voice came back through a cloud of interference, “good landing. Head to your hangar and we’ll make sure you’re debriefed. Morse out.”

Crash swallowed again. She felt a pain in her chest and could taste bile rising up in the back of her throat. She opened her cockpit, allowing fresh air and the tangy smell of abused rubber to flow into the stuffy little room, and unclasped her helmet before she carefully opened up the gas to roll

towards Nariko's hangar. The path was familiar, but Crash still fought against a trembling in her hand as she carefully led the stubborn plane towards home.

"What was that, you little bint?" she muttered, swatting the dashboard with her hand, "are you getting stubborn on me? Or did something happen? Something that..."

She trailed off as Nariko drove her stoically by the burned-out husk of a warplane. A billion-dollar piece of hardware that had been reduced to ashes in a matter of seconds. A piece of hardware that had been piloted by someone who was damn well able to take care of it. Crash's eyes briefly trailed the remains as they passed it and she remembered the ambulances again. They hadn't been in a hurry.

As she passed by the door of her hangar, Nariko came to a stop and Crash got up from her seat. She took off her helmet, shook out her hair, and briefly allowed herself to just breathe the slightly musty scent of the hangar before the sound of boots on concrete got her attention.

"Quite the show, Crash," a man's voice said. Crash knew that voice, "didn't want to pay tribute to your callsign?"

"My callsign is a reminder of things we don't want to happen," Crash said, forcing herself to snicker in reply to the words, "every time I'm called, people can say the word without the context of the disaster." She looked over the edge of Nariko's cockpit, down at the man that was looking up at her, before she continued a little more quietly. "Not that it stopped every crash... who was that, Gearhead?"

"Tempest," Gearhead said, "she lost control of her plane at the last moment. Twisted over and crashed before she could correct... and before she could eject." His shoulders slumped a little, before he shook his head. When he looked up at Crash, she could see his eyes narrow. "We feared the same would happen to you. It sure looked like it, for a moment, before you recovered. There's clearly something going on, we think due to a recent update. We're getting everyone back on the ground, before more things go wrong."

Crash shuddered as the image of Tempest, stuck in her cockpit, fighting with unresponsive controls, came to her mind. She hopped down the little ladder that was attached to Nariko's side to help her get up and down before she looked at the mechanic. "What do you mean, get everyone back on the ground?"

Gearhead grimaced before he shrugged. "Bishop gave the order," he admitted, "he doesn't want people in the sky with planes that could come falling down at any moment, so he called everyone back in until we know for certain what's up. The call just went out as you landed."

"That would explain why Morse was so short," Crash said, before she frowned, "isn't that... if there is something that goes on while we're landing, isn't that a bad idea?"

"I'm going to have to kick the responsibility up the chain for that one," Gearhead said with another shrug, "Bishop gave the order. This is not something I can stop, and... well, I think I'll be happier to see our friends out of the sky and with both feet safely on the ground."

"I'm sorry, what?" Crash said, "we're asking them to go do... to land right through... through..."

"Yeah," Gearhead said, "I can't explain what happened, either. It may be a fluke, it may be a bug in the systems. Morse and his team are going to talk everyone through the landing, meanwhile we're going to identify the cause and see if we can help them from here."

“That’s why you’re already here, aren’t you?” Crash asked, looking at the man, “to pick Nariko’s brain apart.”

“That’s the plan,” Gearhead said, “the sooner we know, the better.”

“Well, nobody knows my girl’s head better than I do,” Crash said immediately, “you can run diagnostics, but I know how to make her give up her secrets.”

Gearhead’s eyebrows came up a fraction as Crash was talking, before he shook his head and gestured at Nariko’s ladder.

“You’re not going to argue with me?” Crash asked.

“Your team can’t be more than fifteen minutes out,” Gearhead said, “I’m not going to argue with you.”

Crash blinked before she nodded and climbed back up. Nobody would search through Nariko’s brains without her express permission.

Gearhead sighed as he lightly slapped his diagnostic tablet against the side of Nariko’s cockpit. “Ironically, by surviving, you destroyed all possible information we could have gotten from your girl, here.”

Crash felt herself turn red as she looked at the tablet. The gap of information was as clear as day, taunting her from the screen. “I had to do something to keep us alive,” she muttered, “I didn’t think the computer would just... stop... when I disengaged it for the old-school hydraulics.”

“I know,” Gearhead said, patting her shoulder, “and, well, we know when it started going wrong.”

Crash looked at the screen. The exact moment that Nariko’s computer had stopped recording was only moments after the control tower had sent information to assist her landing. The computer had received a burst of data, mostly meteorological, that would make sure the A-10 would land without a hitch. Ironically, that was when the problems had started. “Not everyone has the redundant systems to stop their plane from misbehaving,” she muttered, “do we really want to risk others crashing?”

“Not my call,” Gearhead stubbornly repeated, “all I can do is try to make sure the next people to land get the best possible chance.”

“We only have a couple of minutes, then,” Crash said, “and we haven’t learned anything, except that it came from the signal...”

Gearhead rolled with his eyes as she suddenly looked up with realization in her eyes. “We’ll make an investigator out of you yet, Crash,” he smirked, “I’ll stay with your girl and see if I can pry something loose. Why don’t you go and talk with the guys in the tower.”

Crash swung her legs out of the cockpit and let herself fall the short distance down to the ground. She didn’t need to hear more, for she knew exactly where she had to go. She rolled as she hit the asphalt and quickly jumped up, easing her legs in a steady rhythm to pound the asphalt as she ran for the traffic control tower by the side of the runway.

She ran by a blonde man who was walking in the other direction, her arms steadily pumping by her sides. Though regular training had made sure that Crash wasn’t flimsy, the man was built like a brick

house. He turned around as she blew past him and it didn't take long before she was overtaken by him. The man jogged next to her as they closed the distance to the control tower.

Crash let her eyes briefly wander towards him. Their eyes made contact and she could see the faintest grin on the man's face as she briefly looked into his grey eyes. She blinked and drew her eyes back towards her goal, where they came to a stop. Crash could feel sweat build up under her insulated flight suit, which was made to keep her warm in even the coldest temperatures. The man's eyes widened for just a moment as she pulled the zipper down a bit, just enough to let some fresh air in.

"Good run," he said, sticking his hand out to Crash, "just landed and already in a hurry to scream at traffic control? I know the feeling. Light, pleasure to meet you."

Crash tilted her head a little as she shook the man's hand. "Light?" she asked, "as in, Light as a feather?"

The man shook his head with a little grin. "Light as the sun that blinds your eyes as I disappear into it," he said darkly, "hiding me from your sight while I line up a perfect attack run."

"Ouch," Crash snickered, "I think I cut myself a little on that edge, there, kitten. I'm Crash... and I thankfully didn't. Got close, though... so I want to see what we can do about this. You're new on the base?"

"I am," Light admitted, "I'm just a guest right now... though I had a good view of the accident. Terrible. They just turned over while they were landing, nothing could be done by then. I'm sure the technicians are working hard to figure out what happened, aren't they?"

"Well, I'm going to help where I can," Crash said, "there's no use in twiddling my thumbs and waiting."

"Then I'm coming with," Light smiled, "two brains are better than one, isn't it?"

Crash nodded. She opened the door to the air traffic control tower and started climbing the stairs, jumping two steps at a time. Light's steps behind her sounded heavy, certain, and weirdly reassuring as Crash climbed on, until she heard them falter for a second.

"Did you just call me 'kitten'?"

Crash stopped at the door on top of the stairs and briefly knocked before she opened it. The control tower was busy, with several radio operators talking into their headsets while others were checking a radar readout. A couple of people looked up at her with a disturbed look on her face, but Crash ignored those looks until she found Morse sitting behind his desk.

"Ehm, understood, Skittles, you're approved to approach," the radio operator said, holding up one finger at Crash as she walked up to him, "be advised, we're experiencing issues around the runway. You will be escorted closely as you land. Confirm received, over." He didn't lower his finger as he listened while Crash fidgeted next to him, her fingers drumming a steady rhythm on her hips. "Very good, Skittles. Complete your turnaround and start your approach when you're ready. Base is standing by." The finger got lowered. Morse pushed his glasses back up on his sweaty nose as he turned over to her. "I have only a few moments, what do you want?"

"Gearhead and I think that the issue lies in the signal we receive as we land," Crash blurted out. She could see people roll with their eyes and return to their screens as she spoke the words, "my

computer stopped behaving as I was about to land. I disengaged all electrical systems in order to land properly and almost didn't make it."

"Yeah, we also thought of that," Morse said, "but we scrubbed the signal. There's nothing coming out of this tower that could cause such a severe reaction from your computer... and besides, you should all have countermeasures against electrical warfare installed. We think it's a bug, and..."

"And Gearhead is investigating it," Crash completed his words, "but... Gearhead said that it started..."

"It's the first thing we checked, Crash," Morse said, "trust me, if it had been our fault, we wanted to know before we let someone else land. The signal is not what caused this issue, and..." He stopped talking and put his finger back up. "Roger that, Skittles. Commence approach, over."

Crash looked with growing unease as Morse turned to his systems, fingers dancing with practiced ease over his keyboard. She could see a single plane fly at them from the distance, an F-22 that gracefully cut its way through the sky.

"Only one?" Light asked, "someone called *Skittles* is a Solo Ace? I thought I knew them all."

"They flew ahead of their team," Morse said, "after hearing about the issues, they were sent to check in." He pressed a button on his radio. "Slow and steady, Skittles. Pull up if you experience any issues, over."

Crash watched as the F-22 came closer. "It's a flying computer," she said, "if they're going to experience computer problems, they are not pulling out of it."

"They've got the best electronic warfare suite HELMET can offer," Morse countered her, though Crash could see that he had his eyes glued to the plane in the sky, "there is nothing that could..." He trailed off as the plane wobbled.

Crash swallowed and licked her lips when Skittles recovered. Her hands tightened on the back of Morse's chair, creasing the leather. The wheels dropped out of the plane's belly, which already let Crash's heart slow down a little. At least there was a chance.

"Transmitting final details," Morse said, throwing Crash a look, "be kind, Crash, you know that we..."

"Look!" Crash shouted, interrupting him. Morse flinched as Crash lunged forward, pointing out of the window and at the plane. It tilted, turning and flipping on its axle.

"Pull up, Skittles," Morse immediately shouted, "correct and pull up right now!"

The F-22 turned further while Morse was shouting. It tilted and turned, until the canopy blew off of the plane and a chair flew out, shooting away at an angle from the out-of-control plane and directly towards the control tower.

Morse threw up his hands, falling backwards. Crash ducked to the ground, but Light stayed standing as the sounds of violence came in from outside.

Nobody came flying through the window. When Crash slowly came up, she saw the canopy of a parachute drop just out of sight below the window, carrying something calmly down. She swallowed as she already saw emergency vehicles race across the runway, towards a crumpled mess of an aircraft.

"We can't let people land," Morse said slowly, "not until we've figured this out."

"How many wings are still in the air?" Crash asked, unable to tear her eyes off of the crumpled remains.

"Two," Morse said, "Skittles' and yours."

"Only two?" Light asked, skeptically.

"That's still six people," Morse said, "Skittles... they're part of a big group. A complete combat unit."

"And my buddy is still out there, all alone," Crash added, "we can't let them land."

"We've got nowhere else for them to go," Morse stated, "this needs to be resolved... quickly, before..."

"Control tower, this is Burn," came an all too familiar voice through a speaker, "we're getting ready to land, any preferences, over?"

"Burn?" Crash swallowed. She turned to Morse, who put his headset back on his head.

"Burn, this is base," the man said, though Crash could hear the small tremor in his voice, "please move to a holding position bearing one-eight-zero from the base... we've got some problems to deal with before you can safely land. How long until you are at zero fuel, over?"

"About ten minutes, base," Burn said, "I'll hold, over."

Morse nodded. "Standby." He turned to Crash. "We'll figure this out. We can't use you two up here... please go downstairs and wait at the barracks. We can't..."

A screeching came through the speakers. Morse grimaced and pulled his headset off of his head, almost throwing it at the desk as he looked at it. The screeching held for a moment, until it died down again.

Morse took up his headset again and put the microphone to his mouth. "Burn, this is Base, do you read me, over?"

Crash looked at the speakers. They didn't make another sound.

"Damnit," Morse muttered as he reached for a walkie-talkie, "you two, out. Keep your radio close by for emergencies." He put the radio to his mouth. "Hello, engineering? This is tower, we need..."

Crash felt her hands clenching and unclenching, forming into fists and relaxing as she descended the stairs of the control tower. Light was walking behind her, his arms folded as they went down. He hummed softly.

"We can't just sit by and wait," she complained, "that's my friend up there. He's got minutes before there's no choices left."

"Well, it's no use panicking," Light said, "we're not in the air right now. We can't help him."

"Maybe we should get in the air, then," Crash snarled at him, "it's not feeling good, okay? What would you do in a situation like this?"

"If I was in the air, unable to land because of whatever reason, out of options and alone?"

Crash came to a sudden stop. Light stopped as well, two steps higher than she was, looking down at her with his arms still folded across his chest. "Yes," she said, throwing him a defiant look, "also, that was oddly specific."

"I usually fly alone," Light said, "which means that I'm forced to make my own solutions. Resolve my own problems. Improvise. There is usually nobody to help me but myself."

"Must be lonely," Crash muttered.

"It's not as bad as you probably think," Light said, "it means I've got nobody to get in my way."

"Nobody to look out for you," Crash countered.

"Nobody that makes me panic when they're about to get in serious danger."

Crash winced. "How would you resolve this?"

"Find out what's causing the issue," Light shrugged, "they're clearly convinced that it has nothing to do with the systems of the tower... so what else is sending a signal to the planes in the sky?"

"Hundreds of things," Crash immediately said, "every signal bouncing up is bound to get to them. We've got satellites keeping track of their location, there are radio signals, even the old AM and FM signals can be picked up... any of these can be used to contact the pilot."

"And how many of those are powerful enough to affect the plane?"

"Out here?" Crash shook her head, "not a lot. Unless someone parked a truck with a very strong transmitter close by, I think that only we can do that... from the radio towers."

"Towers?" Light asked, a small grin appearing on his face, "multiple?"

"Would be stupid to not have a backup transmitter, in case something goes wrong with the main, right?"

"That sounds like as good a place to start as any, right?" Light asked, "it may take too long for the engineers to check everything. We can do that for them... what if I check the backup tower, and you check the main? We can stay in contact."

He wiggled a handheld radio. Crash looked down at her flight suit, where she had her own hanging from her shoulder.

"I'll go to frequency zero-six-nine," Light winked, "nobody in their right mind uses that."

Crash was already halfway through setting her radio when what he had said clicked. She smirked up at the broad man, briefly forgetting the danger to her friend. "Well done, darling," she said, "stay in touch... we'll figure this out."

"Oh, we will," Light nodded.

Crash had to skirt around the site of Skittles' crashed F-22, where the emergency vehicles were still parked. Thankfully, she didn't see any smoke or fire, only wreckage, and she didn't notice any ambulances parked around. The shovel vehicle was already there, ready to push the wreck out of the way, though engineers were still looking into it.

HELMET would have to work hard to deal with the loss of two multi-billion dollar planes in a single day.

"Looks like Skittles at least survived the crash," she muttered into her radio, "I can see an empty ejection seat not too far from the tower. They got out before it was too late."

"Well, that's a relief for HELMET," Light responded, his voice slightly distorted over the radio, "good pilots are hard to come by."

"And we just confirmed the short-range radio's actually work," Crash added, "good news all around."

"Good news indeed," Light replied. He was quiet while Crash made her way to the radio bunker just off of the control tower, but he returned when she was looking for any way of opening it, "did you really call me 'kitten', by the way?"

"I found the radio transmitter," Crash said, though she couldn't suppress a grin, "trying to get in and see what we can find. There should be a door for maintenance, but... ah, found it." Her fingers traced the little hole in the metal wall, which was set with a triangular locking mechanism. "Needs a triangle key, though. I can't get in like this..."

The radio was quiet for a moment. She imagined that Light was thinking hard on how to beat this new challenge. "How opposed are we to just forcing the lock?" he asked.

"Very," a third voice came over the radio. Morse. "Really, you two... you know we can see you from the tower, Crash? There's engineers working on this. Don't mess with the radio, please, over."

"I won't mess with it," Crash said, "I'll just give it a quick look-see, to see if the sweetheart is not being bothered by something that's not supposed to be there."

"And how are you going to identify that something's not supposed to be there?" Morse asked, "you're not exactly radio engineers, are you, over?"

Crash felt her blood rise to her face as she realized that the man was right. "Well, I can at least take a look and see if it's something obvious. If we find anything, it'll save the engineers' time! Do you know how to get into this bunker?"

"Every engineer knows to carry a triangle key," Morse said, "and really, you two... frequency sixty-nine, over?"

"And what if they... forgot their key?" Light asked, innocently.

Crash heard a sigh coming from the other side of the radio. "That's not how base security works," Morse explained, "they would need to go and retrieve their key..."

"Or..." Light asked, interrupting the man, "if they were in a big hurry, they would...?"

"They would take the key hidden under the lip just to the right of the door," Morse said, with pain in his voice, "these keys are dirt cheap, anyway. Anybody could carry them, over."

"That wasn't too hard, now, was it?" Light asked, while Crash felt around underneath the door's lip.

Her fingers found the little metal key that was stashed there, closing around it and pulling it out. "Got it!" she announced over Morse's annoyed grumbling, "thanks, Morse!"

"If you break anything, it will be on you," Morse said, "and would it kill you to follow proper radio procedure and say 'over' every now and again, over?"

"I'll do it when I'm in the sky," Crash said innocently, "I'll be careful, thank you Morse, Crash out."

"Oh, now she can do it."

Crash opened the door to the radio bunker and poked her head in, looking around at the lights that blinked and listening to the fans that were whirring. She saw what looked like a radio unit, with several cables going up to the roof of the bunker. Multiple cables came out of the ground, connecting to the unit, while other cables went to other devices which were, themselves, connected to the central unit. It sat in the middle of the bunker like an octopus on a rock, extending its arms in all directions.

"Well, Morse was right," she muttered in her radio.

"What's that?" Light asked.

"I have *no idea* what I'm looking at, here," Crash admitted, "it could be fine, or any one of these devices could be malicious. I was hoping for some menacing red lights or something, but..."

"Does anything look newer than the rest?" Light suggested, "maybe... I don't know, different materials? Other logos?"

Crash looked at her radio for a moment. "We're so far out of our depth, aren't we?" she asked, feeling some desperation creep up. When she turned around, she could see Burn's A-10 slowly circle to the south of the base, burning fuel with every passing second, "how are we going..."

The whirring and soft beeping behind Cage stopped. Crash wanted to turn around to look what happened... but Burn's plane dipped for just a moment at the same time. Crash felt her heart skip a beat as she saw the dip turn into a downward turn. She imagined Burn jerking on his stick as he tried to keep his Eleanore from falling from the sky and for just a moment she couldn't get it out of her head.

Then the plane recovered. The nose came back up and the devices behind her beeped loudly for just a moment before the whirring restarted and the radio started working again.

"Morse," Crash said through a dry mouth, "did something just happen on your side, over?"

"We attempted to contact Burn to check on his fuel," Morse said, "the signal got interrupted suddenly, over."

"I could notice that from here," Crash muttered, "everything suddenly turned off when you did."

"Well, we did get in touch for a moment," Morse said, "it was not an immediate loss of contact, only when we tried to get more information from him, over."

"So... it turned off only when you were in touch with him?"

"And then he started dipping, yes, over."

Crash swallowed. She still didn't want to think about what would have happened if Burn hadn't been able to recover and he'd been forced to... No. "Light, did you reach the backup radio?" she asked, "maybe something happened over there?"

Silence reigned as Crash paced in front of the open hatch to the radio bunker. The radio remained silent.

"Light?" she tried again, "this is Crash, did you reach the backup radio, over?"

The radio didn't respond to her. It remained silent as she paced.

"You are expected to respond when I say 'over', over."

She shook her head as she was again ignored.

"I read you, by the way," Morse said quietly, "your short-range still works, over."

"Then that means something is going on," Crash concluded, "or he's in trouble. I'll go and check out the backup tower."

"That's where he went, over."

"Exactly. I'll see what is going on over there."

"Be advised that we've got word that an engineering team went that way, too," Morse said, "I can't get a hold of them, either. It may be that they're experiencing some kind of interference, over."

"I'll confirm that for you. Out."

Crash didn't want more of the man's words to hold her back. She turned to the offices of the HELMET base, where she knew the backup radio antenna was. She was able to force herself to walk at a brisk pace for about a minute before the look of Burn's plane made her turn that walk into a jog, and then into a run. She ran by several people who looked at her with confusion on their faces. Several more were keeping their eyes on the plane that was circling just outside the base. She saw a man she recognized as Skittles sitting at a table, clutching a steaming cup in shaking hands.

She ignored all of those to run up the stairs, following the signs that told Crash and the engineering corps exactly where the backup radio set would be. Every second was one second closer to Burn falling to the ground.

It was at the end of a hallway dotted with cleaning supplies and maintenance gear, away from the people who had to live in the building. Crash could see that the door was already slightly opened as she approached. She heard sounds of anger and discomfort coming from the doorway as she got closer.

Then the door flew open and Gearhead came flying through, shouting in terror as he sailed towards the concrete wall opposite the door. He collided with a crash, a sickening *snap* ringing through the hallway as he fell on the ground in a crumpled heap.

Light walked out after him, one eye black and swelling shut and bleeding from his nose. "Shouldn't have attacked me," he said, reaching into his jacket, "should have let me explain. Why didn't you..."

Crash couldn't stifle a gasp when Light's hand left his jacket with a gun. He looked over, alarm on his face, but he relaxed when he saw Crash.

"You're just in time," Light said, aiming his pistol at Gearhead. The engineer froze on the ground, cradling his arm as he looked up at the barrel pointed at his head, "this idiot attacked me when I was looking at the radio. He probably wanted to keep me from discovering something. Together, we may be able to get out of him what, exactly."

"Gearhead?" Crash asked, "what just happened?"

"I just told you," Light said, "there's no time, Crash. We need to figure out what he knows, before your friend..."

“Shut up,” Crash interrupted him, “Gearhead?”

Gearhead didn't take his eyes from the pistol in his face. He swallowed and shook his head. “I got called away from Nariko,” he said, “she's still in the hangar, waiting for maintenance, but this was more important. I was closer to this room than you.”

“So Morse did think that there was a source of truth to our conclusions,” Crash nodded.

“And when I got here, well... this man was bent over some device that definitely has nothing to do in our radio. Looked like he was rigging it to do something new, maybe something even more dangerous.”

“Preposterous,” Light objected, “we were looking for the source of the problem together, Crash. My short-range stopped functioning when I got in here, probably because of the jamming. I was trying to see if I could turn this thing off without destroying it, so we could investigate it properly. We can't learn anything without investigating it.”

“The radio stopped jamming moments after it started, though,” Crash said, “are you sure that you...”

“I'm sure,” Light bit at her as he jabbed the gun towards Gearhead again. Gearhead winced, but he didn't interrupt Light, “everything this guy does is suspect. He attacked me, can't you see that? In fact, we should just get rid of him right...”

“No!” Crash shouted, putting her hands up to calm the angry Light down, “no more death today. We'll figure this out, okay? Let's just make sure that our friends can safely land, and we'll get this figured out. I'm sure we can investigate this and find out what happened.”

Light looked at her. Crash's eyes went from Light to Gearhead and back. Gearhead was still cradling his arm, which looked like it had bent at an awkward and unnatural angle. All of them jumped when the radio's on Crash's and Light's shoulders started crackling again.

“We don't have a lot of time left,” Morse's voice came over the radio, “Burn will need to land, and soon. Crash, please tell me that our engineers have found something, over.”

Crash swallowed. Good. Something for them to focus on. She slowly brought her hand to her radio. “We've found something,” she said softly, hearing her voice returned to her from Light's radio, “I think we can resolve the issue, but we need a security team here to assist. Can you do that, over?”

“We'll see what we can do,” Morse replied, “do what you can to resolve the issue and let me know if you need help. Morse out.”

Crash felt like she could use some help as she looked at Light.

“Let's put the gun down and see what you found, okay?” she said, “Burn's life first.”

Light nodded. He gestured with his free hand to the door that he and Gearhead had come out of.

“I'll keep an eye on him,” he said, “just so he won't jump you. I can tell you what I saw from here.”

“Whatever you want,” Crash nodded. He was the one with the gun, after all. She walked forward, slowly. She didn't want to give Light any reason to accidentally pull the trigger and do something that they would all regret, later. She kept her hands carefully by her sides until she was close enough to slip by Light.

He tensed. Crash looked over and ducked, just in time to avoid the butt of the gun being swung at her head. She forced herself to drop and roll, away from Light and deeper into the hallway, into a dead end.

Light already had the pistol raised at Crash. She twisted to the side and stepped towards the man as the weapon barked, the shot rung through the enclosed hallway and the window behind Crash shattered. Crash's ears protested against the noise, an insistent beep building up in the back of her head.

She resisted every urge in her body to drop and cover her head. It was the one of many things that would secure her death at the hands of Light, who in her eyes had very clearly shown whose side he was actually on.

He swung at her, muscles rippling underneath his shirt. Crash ducked underneath his swing and jumped forward, grabbing him along the waist.

People often tended to underestimate Crash. She was smaller than a lot of the men and the heavy flight suits hid most of her build. She also enjoyed wearing baggier clothing, which did nothing to show what she looked like.

But she was still a bomber pilot. She was often subjected to g-forces as she maneuvered to evade enemy anti-aircraft fire and she prepared for that. She trained for that, like all the other pilots at the HELMET facilities. Underneath all her baggy clothes was a trained body with muscles that were built to resist pressure.

Light was not ready for her. He stumbled and tripped under her weight, falling towards the door that he had thrown Gearhead out of. Crash felt the air get pushed out of her lungs as they hit the ground and she rolled to get off of Light before he could recover. She heard something metallic scraping away over rough concrete floor before she got her feet back under her.

"Crash, this is Morse, did you do what you have to do? Burn is currently going in to land, over."

"No, not yet!" Crash snarled, though she couldn't reach over to the switch on her radio as Light was already rolling away from her, towards a machine that had a plate missing, as if someone had been working on it recently, and was plugged into an extension cord.

Crash jumped forward, her leg lashing out, but Light caught it with his hand. She pulled back before he could grab it, but was forced to jump backwards when he lunged at her. He was bigger, his reach was better, and he had several pounds on Crash. If he got a good hold on her, she would be toast.

Where were those security officers? She had to buy time for them to arrive.

"Why are you doing this?" she asked as she danced backwards, away from the man again, "what is the endgame, here?"

Light wasn't even breathing heavily as he raised his hands, taking a more classic boxing stance as he looked at her. "Nothing but a test," he said, "just a proof of concept, really... and if it takes a couple of your airwings out with it, that's only great." He grinned. "We got a couple of your planes. That's good enough. Now I'm just going to make sure that there isn't enough left for you to learn anything from it... and beat a quick retreat, so if you'd like to be a good little girl and step aside...?"

"What do you think?" Crash muttered, "my friend is up there, and I'm not letting him crash like the others... besides..."

She circled around Light. He followed her, turning and moving. Crash tried to keep her eyes on the man, but it was impossible to ignore where the curious machine stood.

Light stayed between her and the device. It was the one that she needed. The device that was causing all the issues. Light was only defending it. "Besides what?" he asked.

"Besides that, I can't just let you get away." She stormed forwards. Light was ready, bracing himself to catch Crash, but she didn't let him. As his arms opened to grab her, she jumped aside and rolled, grabbing the pistol that Light had dropped.

"He's wobbling," Morse said defeated as she felt her hands grab the gun, "Crash, you didn't fix it yet, did you?"

Crash tried to ignore him. She aimed the pistol at Light, who suddenly raised his hands.

A grin appeared on Light's face. He had heard the same as she had. "Do it," he said, "shoot me. You're too late to help your friend, anyway."

Crash growled at him. Then she aimed the pistol at the device he had been defending and pulled the trigger.

The blasts were deafening in the small room. Gearhead was shouting from outside the room while Crash just kept yanking at the trigger until the gun stopped recoiling into her hand.

The machine burst into flame.

Light looked at her with disbelief in his eyes.

"He's recovering!" Morse shouted over the radio.

"Gotcha, kitten," Crash snarled, throwing the empty gun at Light. He recoiled, which left him open for Crash to jump his waist, "don't threaten my friends!"

She wanted to get a few good punches in. She desperately wanted to pay him back for what he had done to Tempest, and Skittles, and almost to Burn... but she heard heavy boots come running towards her.

Hands grabbed Crash by the shoulders. She let herself get pulled away from the man and pushed to her ass on the floor again.

"He's safe," Morse said, "I don't know what you did, Crash, but you did it. Burn has safely landed and is driving to the hangar. Are you okay, over?"

Crash felt her heard thunder in her chest, but she managed to put a hand on the radio before the base's security operators could pull it away. "Good to hear, Morse. I'm okay. Thanks for sending in the security team, over."

Then the radio got snatched from her shoulder by the closest security officer. He put it to his mouth. "We'll need someone to tell the whole story," he said in the radio, "meanwhile, we're detaining these two. Please come to the brig as soon as possible."

"What!?"

Crash was leaning against the bars of her small cell as she watched the man in the room opposite to hers. Light was looking at her with anger in his eyes, but he was just as stuck as she was. She couldn't keep a grin from her face. "I have nicknames for people," she said, "you seemed too dangerous to be careless around. Someone who could scratch me if he wanted to... so 'kitten'."

Light rolled his eyes at her. Crash grinned.

"I'll be out of here soon enough," she continued, "Gearhead will support me... and I think there were some security camera's in that hallway, too."

She still didn't get a rise out of the man who had killed a pilot and destroyed two planes. The man who had tried to shoot her. It was fine.

They both turned their heads as the door suddenly slammed open. A man came running in, looked around for a moment, and then jumped towards Crash's cell door.

Burn. Crash opened her arms and reached out through the bars, until she felt her hands reach around the wide torso of her teammate. She pulled him tight.

"Hey, tiger," she said, despite the bars between them, "heard you had some trouble on the way back?"

Burn just laughed as he pulled Crash into his arms. Even through the bars, she could finally relax.