

Pixie Rangers Season 1, Episode 03 – A Grim Affair

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Teaser

The thrum of the engines vibrated through the green-striped pixie ranger ship as it pushed up its speed in an attempt to close on its quarry. Up ahead, another ship, all black and grey, pushed its own limits, engines and pilot straining to stay ahead. The gap was closing, though.

“Ranger Chrissie, pixie ranger regulations clearly state that pursuit should be broken off if it becomes too dangerous,” a green and purple bot noted clinically from where it floated above and behind the pilot chair of the ranger ship.

The sandy-haired girl in that chair didn’t seem to care, though. Her eyes, one adorned by a little freckle underneath it, were locked on the target in front of her, intense and focused as she tossed back. “You call this dangerous?! This is—Whoa!”

Up ahead, a third ship started to back out of its dock, completely oblivious to the high speed chase that was even then speeding by behind it. The black ship of the criminal snuck by just in time to avoid it, but the CHR1551E was too far back for that. If it kept going straight, it would plow right into the starboard engine of the other craft, an engine that was getting closer and closer by the moment ...

Tfft! Maneuvering thrusters fired, diving the CHR1551E’s nose down just in time for its main engines to force it down under the other ship. Hulls passed within mere inches of one another, but never did they touch. A moment later, the pixie ranger had her ship darting back up to settle into its pursuit.

However, in the CHR1551E’s wake, the other ship finally realized the close call it had been in. It didn’t realize it was over, though. It’s pilot overreacted, trying to stop and turn all at once. The combination managed to do nothing but slam it into one of the docking arms it had been pulling back from.

By then, though, Chrissie was gone, once again focused on closing the gap between her and the criminal she was pursuing. “Melbourne, target his port engine connector.”

“Ranger Chrissie, it is highly inadvisable to fire the ship’s weapons in such a congested environment. A miss could cause serious damage to a bystander’s vessel,” the bot warned.

“That’s why I’m gonna get close enough that we don’t miss, so target the damn connector already!” Chrissie shot back as her hands flew over the controls.

Out in the dock, the criminal's ship darted around a shipping frigate, then cut over the main docking area. It was a good maneuver, but one the pilot wasn't up to making, not perfectly anyway. Along the way, he clipped some docking apparatus, nearly sending his ship flying into the port proper before he wrested control back.

Chrissie had no such issues, though. Her ship cut the same path with just the right adjustments to make it not only faster, but miss everything in the way. Between that and the criminal's mishap, a huge chunk of the gap between them vanished.

Triumphant grin spread across her face, Chrissie muttered, "Gotcha," just before, she started the command, "Melbourne, F–

"Crash imminent!" the bot interrupted in warning.

"What?!" Chrissie gasped, just before she saw the issue.

Up ahead, the black ship cut to the left, revealing a second vessel which had been racing straight toward until that point. That left the CHR1551E's nose aimed right at the stationary bystander, like a torpedo about to take them both out. It very nearly did.

"Hold on!" Chrissie shouted, followed by one last quick adjustment on the controls before she braced herself.

Vrrm! The sound of one of the engines cut out was palpable, leaving only the starboard one still burning hot. In an instant, the centrifugal forces took hold, spinning the CHR1551E like a top. Then, the engines switched, the opposite roaring out while the other cooled to offset the rotation. That left the engines in the exact reverse orientation just in time for them to both blaze to full power, fighting against the ship's forward momentum.

"Inertial dampening compromised," Melbourne rattled off the cost of the maneuver, but the ship held as it slowly dragged itself to a stop.

Immediately, Chrissie leapt back into action, thrusters and engines all working tandem to send her vessel shooting off in pursuit again. In its wake, it left only a pair of scorch marks on its fellow ship's hull, a testament to just how close the engines had gotten before the halt. There was no time to worry about that, though.

"Quarry's star drive is powering up," Melbourne informed his ranger.

"Not ... fast ... enough ..." Chrissie declared, the gap between her and her target once again closing. "Melbourne fire!"

In the silence of space, a pair of red beams cut across the darkness between two ships. Their targeting was perfect, right on the small wing which attached the black ship's port engine to the hull. A moment later, that wing was gone. Down an engine, the criminal found himself in an uncontrolled version of Chrissie's earlier maneuver, his ship caught in a hard spin as it drifted out of the dock and into open space.

"Yes!" the sandy-haired ranger cheered in triumph. "Nice shooting, Melbourne!"

"Target ship has been crippled, Ranger Chrissie," came the bot's flat response.

Chuckling under her breath, Chrissie manipulated the controls once more to get her vessel onto a pursuit angle. "Well, then let's go pick the punk up before he gets himself lost out there."

– Title Sequence –

Opening Act

Stately. That was the best way to describe this office. Every detail was prim and proper, always favoring clean and professional design over any sort of warmth and personality. The only personal details to be found came in the form of a neat, crisp display showing off various awards and commendations.

The woman who owned that office could usually be described in a similar manner. She was older with her brown hair in a short practical style. Meanwhile, her uniform with its longer coat and twin stars on its hip was as immaculate as any other detail.

At that moment, though, the woman was anything, but stately. She was furious, her eyes blazing and her face livid as she stood with her hands on her desk, berating the younger woman seated in front of her. "A damaged docking arm, a ruined comm array, a scorched civilian ship, and on top of everything, the CHR1551E now needs repairs!"

Slouched down in her seat, the sandy-haired owner of that vessel tried to argue, "Well, technically, the comm array was the perp, and the docking arm—"

"Oh no! No technically!" Nova Ranger Louise blasted that defense to shred while swiping her fingers in front of her like they were windshield wipers. "This is all on you, Chrissie, because you're the one who ignored protocol to continue a dangerous chase through a crowded starport!"

"If I hadn't, he would have gotten away," the junior ranger pointed out.

"Yes, he would have," Louise agreed completely, only to follow it with a sarcastic, "However would the galaxy have remained safe with a ... what was this man's crime again?"

“Possession of stolen goods,” Chrissie declared proudly.

Louise, though, merely cocked a brow and pressed for a little more, “Goods? Don’t you mean ‘good’, because all you recovered from this dangerous criminal was a single piece of women’s underwear!”

Even as she winced at that indictment, Chrissie tried, “And he was supposed to just get away with it?”

“No, – you – were supposed to use your better judgment and call off pursuit for the safety of the public!” Louis blasted, before slumping forward to pinch the bridge of her nose with her fingers and heave out a heavy sigh. “But apparently better judgment is something you are completely devoid of, so you are off patrol duty effective immediately.”

“What?!” Chrissie gasped, popping up from her chair. “You can’t put me behind a desk for catching a bad guy!”

“A desk? Believe me, you would be lucky to have a desk after everything you’ve pulled,” Louise sneered coldly, only to let out another sigh. “But ... unfortunately, we’re already short staffed dealing with this recent rash of piracy, so not only will you get to stay in the corps, but you are not going to be stuck behind a desk, either.”

Surprise and excitement widened Chrissie’s eyes. “Wait ... you’re going to assign me to tracking down the pirates?”

A snort of a laugh burst out of the senior ranger as she shook her head. “Rangers preserve us, no! I am, however, going to free up a ranger I can actually trust on patrol duty by giving you her assignment.”

“Oh ...” Chrissie leaked out in disappointment before her eyes narrowed suspiciously. “What’s the assignment then?”

“Don’t worry, star ranger,” Louise assured her junior, even as a rather evil looking smirk curled her lips. “Given the knowledge of starport protocol you demonstrated today, I’m sure it will be very educational.”

“Seriously? A security review for some out of the way mining hub?” Chrissie grumbled as she walked along, eyeing the information displayed on her data pad. “That was your assignment?”

Walking along beside her fellow star ranger, the aptly named Honey chirped out a syrupy sweet, "Uh huh! It's one of my favorite assignments, too. You get to see new places, eat new foods, meet new people." Leaning in a little closer, the sugary blonde added a suggestive, "Particularly cute boys," before finishing the whole thing off with a boisterous, "It's great!"

"Is that right ...?" Chrissie mused, continuing to peer at her data pad skeptically.

"Yep!" Honey declared with utmost positivity. "And since CHR1551E is in for repairs, I get to drop you off on my way out on patrol. Won't that be fun?"

"Great ..." Chrissie muttered sarcastically at the idea of being stuck with the bubbly girl for hours, only for an idea to strike her. "Or ... what if I dropped you off?"

Confusion had the blonde star ranger tilting her head to one side. "Huh? Drop me off where?"

"At this mining hub," Chrissie elaborated, gesturing at the data pad. "You could do the review then take a few days to relax while I run the patrol, then come back by, and pick you up."

Eyes shooting wide, Honey shook her head fervently. "Oh, no I couldn't do that. The Nova Ranger assigned each of our tasks specifically."

"Yes, I know ..." Chrissie conceded that point, but she didn't give up. "But as long as both jobs get done, it doesn't really matter who did which, right?"

That made it Honey's turn to relent, "Well, no ..."

"So, it would be perfectly fine if I took the H0N3Y on patrol while you did the review?" Chrissie pushed the logic right along.

To the ranger's surprise, though, Honey refused with a shockingly firm, "Nuh-uh! It's a pixie ranger's duty to see her mission through to the end."

"But—" Chrissie tried to get things back on track.

"To the end!" Honey insisted staunchly.

"Alright, alright!" Chrissie surrendered, throwing her hands up in the air. "I'll do the stupid security review. I only offered to switch 'cause I thought you'd have more fun with it."

Rather than just take her win, Honey reached out to grab her fellow ranger's arm and give it a shake. "Oh, come on! I'm sure if you give it a try, you'll have just as much fun with it as I would have."

“Somehow, I doubt that,” Chrissie grumbled.

“Oh, sure you will,” the blonde ranger insisted on being as upbeat as ever. “Plus, you never know, maybe you’ll meet someone really cute.”

Rolling her eyes, Chrissie tossed back, “Yeah, – that – I really doubt,”

– Just outside of Mining Hub Z113 –

A roughly dressed man scurried down the hall of a ship, his every step full of haste and worry. The former carried him quickly to a certain door upon which he knocked fervently, before waiting patiently to be told to, “Come in!”

Fsh! The door hissed as it pulled out of the way, allowing the man who had knocked on it to scramble into the room beyond. Unlike the hall outside, it was quite dark, especially once the door snapped closed behind the room’s newest occupant. The only light that remained was the stark glow of a monitor which just barely illuminated the face of the man sitting before it.

This man was a far cry from the rodent-like fellow who had scrambled into the room. He was obviously tall, even seated, with a strong frame and even stronger features, especially when it came to his stubble-bearing chin. At that very moment, his fingers were rubbing along those black bristles, creating a faint scratching that was the only sound that could be heard in the room besides the new arrival’s frantic breathing.

For the moment, that new arrival went unnoticed. The man behind the desk didn’t look up from his monitor, eyes, one blue and one a mechanical red, scanning along the note it displayed. Only once they had reached his end did he look up to level that hard gaze on his crewman.

“Have we arrived, Mr. Barrie?” the man behind the desk demanded.

“Y-Yes, captain, but, uhm ... there’s been a bit of a ... well ... delay,” the panicky fellow revealed.

Whether mechanical or natural, both of the captain’s eyes narrowed. “What kind of delay?”

“Well, uhm ... according to our contact, a pixie ranger ship just put in a couple minutes ago, so he thought–” Mr. Barrie started to explain.

“Which ship?” the captain cut in. Starting like a frightened animal, the panicky man simply fell silent, until he heard a second, “Which ... ship?” that was far colder and more pointedly enunciated.

Swallowing hard, the first mate answered, “He, uhm ... I believe he said it was the H0N3Y, captain.”

“I see ...” the dark man acknowledged, his fingers once again running over his stubble thoughtfully. “Does he know why she’s there?”

“N-Not yet, captain, but he said he’d let us know as soon as he could,” Mr. Barrie answered.

Nodding slowly, the captain scratched at his chin for another beat before finally letting his fingers fall. “Very well. We’ll play it safe for now. Put the nearest moon between us and the starport and hold that position.”

With an obedient, “Yes, captain,” and a clipped salute, the panicky man turned and darted back out of the room.

That left the man with the mechanical eye still sitting there, both of his eyes getting ever sharper as he considered the news he’d just been given. “The H0N3Y, huh ...” he muttered before finally shrugging. “No matter. One measly ranger’s not enough to stop me.”

– Commercial Break –

Rising Action

“And here we are!” Honey chirped brightly as she exited her ship with a big smile and grand sweep of her hand. “Isn’t it great?!”

There were few people who would describe the vista that awaited Chrissie as she stepped off the H0N3Y as ‘great’. Dingy. Grimy. Cluttered. Those were all words that better described the dockyard of Mining Hub Z113. It was a messy place, full of containers stained with age and mining residue. The men who worked the docks seemed to be in similar shape, most sweaty, dirty, and run down as they ran around servicing ships and moving cargo. Even the air smelled stale, greasy, and riddled with fumes.

Screwing her face up at the sight, the sandy-haired ranger started to remark, “It’s certainly ...” but she never had to find a polite word to finish that thought.

“Star Ranger Honey as I live and breathe!” the voice of an older man called out over the general din.

Two sets of eyes darted over to the source of the sound, finding just about the perfect man to fit that voice. Not only was he older, somewhere in his fifties with pure grey hair, a full mustache, and plenty of wrinkles, but he was also decidedly portly with his bulbous midsection straining the waist of the uniform he wore. In spite of that, he was trundling along at a good clip, puffing a bit and a little red in the cheeks, but sporting a big, friendly smile.

“Marty!” Honey squealed in delight, rushing forward to give the older man a quick hug. “It’s so good to see you again!” she continued right along as she pulled back to look him over. “How are you doing?!”

“Certainly better than I was before I caught sight of your ship putting in,” the older man responded warmly, alongside his own quick once over. “What brings you all the way out to my neck of the woods this time, Sunshine? Is it time for another security review already?”

“It is, but sadly, I won’t get to stay around and do it,” Honey confirmed before turning to gesture at her fellow ranger. “But don’t worry! Chrissie here is a great pixie ranger, so you’ll be in good hands.”

Eyes shifting over to the new arrival, the portly man took his time looking her over from head to toe, “Chrissie, huh?”

“That’s right,” the girl in green answered coolly.

“Oh! Right!” Honey cut in with all of her bright energy. “Chrissie, this is Z113 Security Chief Martin Cooper, and Marty, this is Star Ranger Chrissie.”

Lips breaking back into their previous big, friendly smile, the security chief stepped forward to offer a hand to the ranger. “Ah, well, nice to meet ya. Honey bringing you along to give you some training for your new post?”

“Not exactly,” Chrissie answered as she took that hand for a quick shake.

“Actually, Chrissie’s been a star ranger longer than I have,” Honey pointed out. “I’m just giving her a ride ‘cause her ship had to go in for repairs.”

“That right?” Marty acknowledged, followed by a shrug. “Well, whatever got ya here, we’re always glad to have a member of the corps around. Helps keep the pirates away. But, I do apologize for the mess. The ol’ zee-eleven-three doesn’t get a lot of visitors, especially not ones as cute as you two.”

“That’s alright,” Chrissie brushed off the apology with a nonchalant wave of her hand. “I’m used to getting a little dirty.”

That comment got a chuckle out of Marty, “Well, glad to hear it, ‘cause there’s plenty of dirt around here, that’s for sure. That said, I think I’ve made you stand out in this mess long enough already. Why don’t you two come back to my office for some clean air, coffee, and a chat?”

“Aw, I’d love to, but I can’t,” Honey whined, her whole body slumping in disappointment. “I really need to get started on my patrol. Maybe when I come back to pick Chrissie up again?”

“Lookin’ forward to it, Sunshine” Marty answered with a wink.

“Great!” Honey chirped, clapping her hands together happily. Then, she turned to Chrissie to snare her fellow ranger in a quick hug. “Have fun!”

Stiffening in the embrace, the sandy-haired ranger mumbled, “Yeah ... you too ...”

Then the bubbly girl was gone, pulling away to head back to her ship while she tossed a big wave and bright smile back at the other two, “Bye-bye!”

“Bye, Sunshine!” Marty called after Honey before turning to her green-uniformed counterpart. “Well, Star Ranger Chrissie, since you don’t have a ship, I guess we should find you a place to stay?”

In the midst of a dazed wave at the departing ranger, Chrissie glanced over at the security chief. “Uhm ... yeah, that sounds great, but just let me just grab my bot and things real quick first before Honey flies off with them on me.”

“Sure thing,” Marty agreed brightly. “I’ll be waiting right here.”

“Are you sure you wouldn’t rather stay at my home?” Marty asked for the half-dozen time, as he peered into the room behind me. “I say it’s a damn sight better than this, and it comes with free meals to boot.”

“Thank you, but no. I’ll be fine,” Chrissie assured the security chief with an exasperation born of repetition. “I can’t very conduct an impartial security review, from the guest bedroom of the security chief, now can I?”

“Fair enough,” Marty relented with a shake of his head as he had so many times before. This time, though, he only tossed one, last, dubious peek behind the ranger at what would be her living space for the next few days, before saying, “Alright, then I’ll let you get settled in. See ya in the morning.”

Smiling in relief, Chrissie tossed back, “See ya then,” alongside a little wave before stepping back to close the door. The moment that barrier was in the way, she rolled her eyes and heaved out a heavy, “Finally ...” before turning around to assess her new living arrangement.

The ranger’s hotel room was ... well ... not unexpected given the location. After all, a mining hub was not the sort of place one visited for pleasure. Most of the people who passed through a place like that did so on a ship where they would have their own quarters. Only people visiting someone who lived on the hub would have any reason to stay in a hotel, and it showed.

Everything about the room, and the hotel at large, called to mind one word – rundown. Everything from the creaky floorboards to the scuffed dresser with a view screen above it was worn and aged. In spite of that, it all seemed to be serviceable still. There was a bed, a closet, and even a little kitchenette over by the door to the bathroom.

“All the comforts of home ...” Chrissie muttered sarcastically, only to shake her head and turn to the side.

There, next to the door, lay the ranger’s things, and they actually fit the room pretty well. Her luggage was worn, practical, and far from excessive. There were only three pieces in total, one for her personal effects, one for her pixie ranger gear, and the nicest piece of all, a metal box.

“Alright, let’s get you set up, Melbourne,” Chrissie said as she got herself moving over to that box.

The thing wasn’t so much a box as it was a portable charging station for a ranger’s bot companion. From the outside, it looked pretty plain, but once the sandy-haired ranger had wrestled it over into a corner and plugged it in, that all changed. Immediately a front panel slid out of the way, revealing the purple disks and green bulb of her automated companion.

“There we go,” Chrissie heaved out as she dropped sloppily back onto her butt on the floor. “Activate Melbournebot,

Zwuu. Vrrm. A whirring hum filled the air as the lights on the robot came on. A moment later, the whole thing floated up off its little pad to hover in the air as it announced. “Melbournebot activated. Running self-diagnostic. Self-diagnostic complete. Scanning surroundings. Scan complete. Star Ranger Chrissie identified. Good afternoon, Ranger Chrissie. How may I be of service today?”

Chuckling, Chrissie shoved herself up to her feet with a sarcastic, “Nice to see you again, too, Melbourne. How are things going?”

“All systems appear to be fully charged and operational,” Melbourne rattled off technically.

“Glad to hear it,” Chrissie tossed back as she turned away to get started on her other bags.

Floating along behind his ranger, Melbourne inquired, “Would you like an overview of our mission directives as well?”

“Nope,” Chrissie dismissed with an emphatic shake of her head. “Should be simple enough. Walk around, look at some stuff, mark off checks on a list.”

“Those are the basic parameters of our mission, yes,” Melbourne confirmed, completely missing the ranger’s tone.

“Almost sounds worse than getting stuck behind a desk,” Chrissie muttered as she started unpacking her gear.

“Security reviews are a vital component of the pixie rangers’ efforts to combat piracy,” Melbourne noted.

Hearing that had Chrissie snorting out a laugh. “Please. Like one of these reviews has ever stopped a pirate.”

“Captain on the deck!” a voice called out with sharp clarity

Every single other person on the bridge immediately snapped to attention as a man in a long, black trench coat and sporting a matching eyepatch stepped onto the bridge of the starship. The captain didn’t notice any of it, though. He merely strode straight to the empty captain’s chair while barking, “Mr. Barrie! Have we heard back from our contact on Z113 yet?”

“N-No, sir,” the panicky first mate stammered out quickly.

The man’s lone, blue eye leveled its hard, cold stare on his fidgety underling before finally commanding, “Then contact him.”

“W-We, uhm ... w-we can’t while the moon is between us and the hub,” Mr. Barrie pointed out.

“Then move, so it isn’t,” the captain stated with cold simplicity before turning away to drop into his chair.

The moment his superior was in his seat, Mr. Barrie spun around to bark orders. "Helmsman! You heard the captain! Take us around the moon. Be ready to hail our contact on Z113 as soon as we're clear."

"Aye aye," two separate crewmen answered one right after the other as they leapt to begin their tasks. It didn't take long at all, before the communication officer of the pair was announcing, "I have our contact now, captain."

"Put him on the screen," the man in the eyepatch said as he leaned forward in his seat to rest his chin on his interlocked fingers.

Wnk! The viewscreen winked on, bringing up a feed of a chubby face with a full grey mustache and a hefty helping of sweat on its brow. "Captain Grim! I was just about to call you!"

"Is that right?" the captain mused darkly.

"Yes, I just got back from dropping the ranger off at her hotel," the hub security chief assured his associate. "You were the very first thing on—"

"Enough!" Grim snarled the portly man into silence. "Why is there a pixie ranger in port, Mr. Cooper? You assured me that no one would find out about our operation, an assurance for which you are being very well paid."

"And no one will, I promise," Marty stammered out quickly. "The ranger is just here for a routine security review. I'll run her around for a few days, keep her far away from any of your operations, and then she'll be gone, none the wiser. You have nothing to worry about."

For a moment, Grim merely peered at his contact with his lone, cold, sharp eye before finally he leaned back in his seat. "I hope you're right, Mr. Cooper ... for your sake. End transmission."

The sound of knuckles rapping on a door resounded through the hotel room, only to be immediately followed by a man's voice calling out, "Knock! Knock!"

While the combination might have been unnecessary to get the job done, it did prove effective. In the gloom of her room, Chrissie started awake with a groaned, "Ugh ... what the hell?"

"Someone is at the door, Ranger Chrissie," Melbourne answered quite needlessly.

"Yeah, I can hear that," the bot's owner grumbled as she pushed herself up with one hand while using the other to rub at her eyes. "What time is it anyway?"

“It is seven-oh-four AM local time, which happens to also be standard space time,” Melbourne rattled off.

Popping her head up from her hand, Chrissie tossed an incredulous look at her bot. “Seven?”

That question prompted a correction of, “Seven oh four AM,” from Melbourne.

While the incredulity remained in her gaze, Chrissie shifted its focus to the door, “Who goes around banging on people’s doors at seven in the morning?”

“Scanning. Scan complete. Subject identified as Security Chief Martin Cooper,” Melbourne revealed.

Face screwing up in apprehension, Chrissie muttered, “Ugh ... great ... Just a second!”

With that called out, the sandy-haired ranger immediately reached her hands up as far into the air above her as they would go. “Mmm,” she moaned as she wiggled her way through that stretch, working out the kinks the poor mattress had put in her back and shoulders. Only after a couple seconds of that did she finally feel awake enough to hop out of bed and pad over to the door. There, she just barely cracked it open, using it’s bulk to hide the fact that she was wearing nothing but a loose sleep shirt and a pair of panties. “Chief Cooper! Good morning!”

“Good morning, Ranger Chrissie!” Marty tossed back bright and chipper. “Did you sleep well?”

“Until just a couple minutes ago, yeah,” Chrissie remarked dryly. “What can I do for you?”

“Well, I was rather hoping you’d join me for breakfast, followed by a guided tour of the facility for your review,” Marty replied with a big smile. “I know this wonderful little dinner that has simply the best pancakes.”

Feigning a smile, Chrissie remarked, “Thanks, but I really shouldn’t. Pixie Ranger Reviews are supposed to be conducted independently, right Melbourne?”

“That is correct, Ranger Chrissie,” the girl’s bot confirmed helpfully.

“See?” Chrissie chirped. “I do appreciate the wakeup call, though.”

“But–” Marty tried to say more.

Before more than that one word could get out, though, Chrissie rushed out a quick, “Bye!” and shoved the door closed once more. With the barrier in the way, she heaved out a heavy sigh and muttered, “Who does he think I am, Honey?”

“Perhaps he was trying to influence the results of your review?” Melbourne proposed.

“Pfft! He was trying to influence something alright ... but I’ve had enough of pervy old men for one day. I’m gonna get a shower,” Chrissie scoffed as she shoved herself off the door to start toward the bathroom. Along the way, she stripped off her shirt and tossed it sloppily on the floor. That left her in nothing but a pair of panties, cute tush swaying back and forth while the smooth muscles of her back danced along with the movement of her arms. “See ya in a bit, Melbourne.”

“Thanks a lot, Frank!” Chrissie chirped alongside a wave at the gate guard who’d just let her through.

“No problem, but keep your head up! Lots of big, heavy stuff moving around back there!” the guard tossed back with a wave of his own.

With a quick, “Will do!” that exchange came to an end, leaving Chrissie strolling along a line of massive shipping containers. There were plenty of others around as well, all stacked up in high neat rows. Other than some slight variation in color, though, they all looked pretty much the same, old, dingy and industrial.

“Alright Melbourne, I guess that checks off gate security,” Chrissie noted as she glanced around.

“Are you sure?” Melbourne questioned. “The guard did allow you to pass without attempting to verify your credentials outside of visually observing that you were wearing a pixie ranger uniform.”

Chuckling, the bot’s owner tossed back, “Yeah, I’d rather not endure a ten minute Q&A every time I walk through a gate, so just mark it good, and let’s move on.”

“Yes, Ranger Chrissie,” Melbourne confirmed, followed quickly by. “The next few items on the list are open area lighting, fence integrity and maintenance, and warehouse security measures. Would you like to move on to one of those?”

“Hmm ...” Chrissie hummed thoughtfully, tapping a finger on her chin. “Well, the warehouses are right over that way, so why don’t we start with them?”

“As you wish,” Melbourne agreed. “The first item on the warehouse sublist is door locking mechanisms and other anti-ingress measures.”

Shrugging, Chrissie remarked, “Alright, guess it’s time to walk around and see if we can’t open any doors.”

That was exactly what the ranger did, moving from one warehouse to the next, inspecting walls and windows while trying to open every door she could find. Time after time, she heard the clunk of a door that wouldn’t budge as she tried to move it. A few times doors were wide open, but only at warehouses currently in use by starport staff. As far as she could tell, there wasn’t anything out of–

“Ranger Chrissie!” a by that point familiar voice called out.

Just about to try another door, the sandy-haired girl stopped and winced. That wince was covered up by a pasted on smile a moment later, though, when she turned to greet, “Chief Cooper! Nice to see you again.”

“Nice to see you too,” the portly man tossed back as he trundled the rest of the way over to peer at the ranger quizzically. “What are you doing all the way out here?”

“My security review,” Chrissie answered before starting to turn away. “Which I really should get back to, so–”

“How very ... diligent of you,” Marty remarked. “But you must be tired from walking around so much. Why don’t I call a scooter up for us and drive you around for a bit, showing everything?”

Rolling her eyes, Chrissie reached out to grab the handle of the door she’d been about to open. “Because, I can’t do – this – from a ... “

Much to the ranger’s surprise, when she flipped the handle and pushed on the door, it didn’t just clunk against its frame. Nope, unlike all its predecessors, this one swung open, wide and easy. In fact, it was so easy that it compromised the balance of its opener, leaving her wobbling unsteadily for a moment.

Meanwhile, a sharp breath sucked in through Marty’s teeth. “I can explain!”

“Explain what?” Chrissie questioned with a chuckle as she recovered from the unexpected occurrence. “One unlocked door is hardly going to sink the whole re–”

Once again, the ranger found her thought unfinished by something unexpected. This time, though, it wasn’t something as mundane as opening a door. No, it was a blood-curdling

scream of a woman crying out, “Noooo!” which spilled through the now open passageway, echoing up from somewhere deep within the warehouse beyond.

There was no unsteady wobbling this time. Instantly, Chrissie broke into motion, her body tensing with readiness while her wrist executed a quick flick. A moment later, her blaster had finished materializing in her grasp, while its wielder ordered, “Cooper, get your security team here now.”

Far from as immediate in his response, Marty leaked out a bewildered, “What?”

“I said now, damn it!” Chrissie snapped, followed by a quick, “Come on, Melbourne!” before she darted through the door and into whatever danger lurked beyond.

– Commercial Break –

The Twist

“Get off me, you brute!” a young woman in decidedly trashy attire screamed. She didn’t rely on just words to get her point across, though. She also pummeled the chest and shoulders of the man who had her pinned up against one of the massive shipping containers that were scattered about the warehouse.

Far from discouraged, the man doing the assault had a big grin on his face as he snickered at the woman’s ineffectual attempts to dislodge him. “That’s not what you were saying last night, baby.”

“Last night, you were paying! Today, I’m leaving!” the woman shot back, punctuating her words by driving a knee up into the man’s crotch.

Instantly, the man fell away, freeing the woman from the pin. She didn’t get far, though. After all, the guy who had been holding her was only one of many. While the others might have been laughing at their friend for getting hit in the gnads, that didn’t mean they were really distracted. The moment the woman tried to make a break for it, another one grabbed her.

“Let go!” the woman squealed as she was yanked off her feet by a new snickering man.

Across the warehouse and out of sight, Chrissie slipped onto the main floor, dashing over to press herself up against a shipping container for cover. “Melbourne tactical assessment.”

“Yes, Ranger Chrissie,” the bot acknowledged before quickly floating up toward the rafters.

While her bot scouted, the sandy-haired ranger got moving, skulking along the crate she had alighted against, looking for a path that would take her deeper into the main floor. She found it at the far end of that container, spinning around the corner with her sidearm raised. The path on the other side was clear as well, allowing her to return to skulking along.

Midway down the path, Melbourne dipped out of the sky to come back down by his owner. "Five hostiles, one hostage, no weapons detected."

"Thanks Melbourne," Chrissie rattled off absently as she kept moving.

"You're welcome, Ranger Chrissie," Melbourne replied pleasantly, floating along in his ranger's wake.

Coming to the end of another crate, Chrissie swept around with her sidearm raised once more. Again, she found no one, but she knew that wouldn't last long. The sounds of struggling were getting louder and clearer with every step. She was definitely getting close.

Rip! The distinctive noise of cloth tearing was paired with another scream of, "Nooo!" all while men continued to snicker.

Picking up the pace, Chrissie darted around one last corner. This time, there was more than just an empty pathway. There was an open square full of people, including one woman with a torn top who was lying on the ground, pinned under a man who was practically slobbering over her.

"Hold it right there, scumbags!" the ranger belted out over all the racket.

Suddenly, all the laughter and grins were gone as all five men whipped their heads about to orient on the arrival of law enforcement. "Shit! It's a pixie ranger!"

"Help me!" the pinned woman followed up with a plea, reaching out a desperate hand out toward Chrissie.

"That's exactly what I'm gonna do," Chrissie promised even as she kept her weapon trained on the man on the ground. "Now, you, get off the girl, and then everyone get your hands in the air."

Slowly, the attackers began moving to obey. The one on top of the woman started to swing a leg over to free her. Meanwhile, the hands of the others started to rise in surrender. Started was all any of them did, though.

On the very edge of Chrissie's vision, slow turned into fast as one of the men dropped his hands to his waistband. One flipped his shirt up, revealing a blaster tucked underneath it. His other hand was already latching on to it to pull the weapon—

Btew! The ranger got there first, her weapon flicking over that way to blast the man in the chest with a beam of green light. As soon as she fired, though, she was already on the move, diving to her left. Her shoulder hit the ground first, sending her tumbling over into a roll that got her behind the cover of a shipping crate just before several red blasts cut apart the space where she'd been standing.

"No, weapons, huh, Melbourne?!" Chrissie growled in frustration as a couple more blasts tore into her cover to really hammer home how wrong the bot had been.

"Sorry, Ranger Chrissie, but I was not able to detect anything," the bot apologized.

Rolling her eyes, the ranger heaved out a frustrated, "Whatever," before darting a hand inside of her coat to get at an interior pocket. "Guess we're doing this the hard way."

Another couple blasts tore at the metal container before Chrissie found a gap to stick her hand around the corner. A flick of her wrist sent the items she'd gotten from her belt skipping along the ground like rocks for a few feet, before their spherical shape turned their movement into a roll which carried them just far enough into the space before ...

Bsh! Bsh! Bsh! The three little balls burst apart, unleashing a sudden cloud of smoke which quickly started to fill the clearing the criminals were in. Cursing filled the air, but so did blaster fire as limited visibility made the men unload a blistering but blind volley at where they'd last seen the ranger.

Chrissie, however, did not panic. Her cover held as she calmly returned her focus to her belt once more. One hand dematerialized her blaster with a flick of her wrist while the other dove into her coat again, this time to grab something that looked like a pair of sunglasses. When she placed them on her face and pressed a button, though, extra parts extended out to transform them into a pair of tactical goggles that would keep the smoke out of her eyes while painting the world around her in the cool blues of thermal vision.

"Alright ..." Chrissie huffed as she shoved herself up to her feet and got into a ready crouch. She didn't move again right away, though. Instead, she waited.

It didn't take long for the frenzy of blaster fire to die down, followed by a guy calling out, "Did we get her?!"

"I don't know! Why don't you go check?!" another man shouted back.

In turn, a furious growl followed, but what really mattered to Chrissie was the sound of footsteps approaching her position. Even as her fingers twitched in anticipation, she slowed her breathing to help steady her nerves for what was to come. Then, without any warning, she burst into action.

Whirling around the corner, the world of blue suddenly had a large hotspot in its center. It was close too, only a couple of feet away, although those feet didn't last. A quick lunge had the ranger across the gap with one hand coming up from below to swat the guy's hand skyward.

Btew! The blaster the criminal held fired up into the ceiling, followed by a startled, "What the—" that ended in a pained wheeze when the ranger's elbow planted itself right below his sternum.

A spinning backfist dropped that guy to the ground for good, just before Chrissie found herself diving again. This time, it wasn't back to cover. It was forward and to the right, somersaulting herself into danger.

Meanwhile, a new volley of blaster fire flew by well above the tumbling ranger, cutting only smoke. In its wake, Chrissie came out of her roll, but she didn't spring back up straight. No, she stayed low and spun around, kicking a leg out as she went.

Crack! Her heel caught the side of one man's knee buckling the whole leg and pulling a yelp from his lips. That yelp got out just before the ranger's knee got there, slamming him in the face with enough force to shatter his nose, plant him on his back, and knock him out cold.

With only two smoke-blinded men left, Chrissie didn't even need to dive this time. A graceful twirl carried her more than far enough to evade the unaimed retaliation the last two men tried to fire. Then, she was descending upon them, bursting through the smoke at the first to grab his wrist and twist.

"Ah!" the man cried out, blasting falling limply from his hands as he dropped to his knees to cradle his now broken wrist.

The last of the enemies tried to whirl on that sound and fire, but he hit only smoke. The sandy-haired ranger had no such issues with her flying kick, though, catching the man right in the chest and launching him back into the shipping container behind him. With a resounding thud, he struck then limply crumpled to the floor.

Landing from her kick, Chrissie cast about as she huffed heavy breaths through her lips. All of the hostiles she'd hit seemed to still be down, though, allowing her to bark out, "Melbourne, clear the smoke!"

"Right away, Ranger Chrissie," the bot obliged, followed by the whirr of a fan starting up.

The ranger didn't wait for the smoke to be cleared, though, before she straightened up and announced, "Alright. I hope you all love bracelets, 'cause I've got some you're gonna be wearing for a while."

“Here,” Chrissie announced as she set a mug of coffee down on the table. “Cream, sugar, and a little kick I hope you won’t tell anyone I gave you.”

Huddled under a blanket, the woman the ranger had rescued chuckled and leaned forward in her seat to wrap her hands around the mug. “You’re secret’s safe with me, Ranger.”

“Thanks,” Chrissie replied as she snagged another chair and dragged it over next to the woman before plunking down with a coffee of her own. “Now, I know you’re not gonna want to, but I need you to tell me a little about what happened back there.”

Blankly, the woman stared into the coffee in her hands before finally taking a deep breath and asking, “What do you want to know?”

“Your name would be a good place to start,” Chrissie remarked, trying to keep things light.

The effort did get a little laugh out of the woman. “Beth.”

“Chrissie,” the ranger gave her own name in return.

“Yeah, I know,” Beth replied, followed by a pointed glance down. “It’s written on your leg.”

“Still, polite to introduce myself, though,” Chrissie tossed back with a smirk.

Another little chuckle slid out of the woman as she mumbled, “I guess,” then raised her mug up for a sip. Throughout that sip, the sandy-haired ranger just waited patiently, letting Beth be the one to speak next. “I guess you’re gonna want to know how I ended up there next?”

Chrissie started with a half shrug. “It would be nice, but only if you’re ready.”

“I’m ready, and it’s really not that complicated,” the woman revealed before dragging her gaze up to offer a wan smile to the ranger. “I’m in the business of providing ... company, if you catch my meaning.”

“So they were your clients?” Chrissie question.

No words past the escort’s lips, but the coy smile they adopted combined with her vague shrug worked as confirmation enough.

“I see ...” Chrissie took that in with a nod before moving on, “And do you know anything about them?”

Beth shook her head. "No, only that I'm not surprised they tried what they did. All the girls know not to tell any of the dockworkers in black no."

That little tidbit had Chrissie cocking one brow. "What's so special about the dockworkers in black?"

"I have no idea," Beth admitted with a helpless shrug. "Everyone's just afraid of them, even the security guys, so they get away with whatever they want."

"Is that right ...?" Chrissie mused, looking down thoughtfully.

"Yep," Beth confirmed, followed by another sip of her drink. "Anything else you wanna know?"

"Hmm ..." Chrissie hummed for a moment before tilting her head back and forth. "Well ... I suppose I should go ahead and ask, but you wouldn't by any chance know anything about that warehouse or the containers in it?"

Slowly, Beth shook her head. "No ... why? Something strange about them?"

"Only that all the containers are registered to a ship that never arrived here," Chrissie answered. "... or anywhere else for that matter."

"Oh ..." the escort breathed out in understanding. "Well, I'm sorry, ranger, but I'm afraid I don't know anything about that."

"It's alright," Chrissie brushed that off before pushing herself up from her seat. "I've still got those guys to talk to. Thanks a lot for what you could tell me, and let me know if you need anything."

Reaching up, Beth tugged at the loosely torn cloth around her chest. "A new top would be nice."

Smirking, Chrissie nodded and answered, "I'll see what I can do."

"Rrgh!" Chrissie growled in frustration as she stepped out of the interrogation room and slammed the door closed behind her. Even after that was done, she just stood there, hands on her hips, glaring at the door.

It was in that state that a familiar voice found the ranger. "I take it questioning the perpetrators didn't go well?"

At first, only Chrissie's head moved, twisting about to locate the speaker. When she saw the portly frame of Marty walking over to her, though, she heaved out a frustrated sigh, let her posture slumped, and turned to face him fully. "Not well would be an understatement. These guys are giving up nothing. None of them would say anything other than, 'I'm not answering questions'."

"Really?" Marty questioned with a tilt of his head. "Nothing at all?"

"Not a thing," Chrissie seethed, tossing one last glare toward the door.

In contrast to the ranger's frustration, Marty proved pretty unbothered by the whole affair, merely shrugging and saying, "Well, it's not like we need them to say anything. You did catch them in the act of trying to hurt that poor woman."

Rolling her eyes, Chrissie turned back to the security chief. "There's more to it than that! There's something about that warehouse they were in. The containers were all—"

"Likely stolen, I know," Marty interjected with a placating wave of his hands. "But don't worry, I've already got my men scouring the place for clues. They'll find something. In the meantime, I think you should get some rest."

"Get some rest?!" Chrissie blasted incredulously. "I'm in the middle of an investigation!"

"Yes, an investigation that included a massive gunfight just a little bit ago. Anyone would be a little frazzled after that," Marty countered. "My men can handle the grunt work while you take a breather."

Irritation played across Chrissie's face as she bounced one foot with excess energy and glanced around. Only after a second of that did she finally huff, "Fine. Maybe you're right."

"I am, and just think, this way, you'll be fresh and ready to go as soon as my men find something," Marty assured the ranger.

While clearly far from happy about it, a bit of weariness crept onto Chrissie's face as she nodded. "Yeah, alright, but I expect to be notified the moment you find anything, no matter how small."

"You will be," Marty promised. "Now, go, get some rest."

Another huffed, "Fine," slid out of Chrissie as she turned to leave.

"Hope to see you again soon!" Marty called after the departing ranger, all bright and cheerful. The moment she was out the door, though, that all changed.

In an instant, the smile was gone from the security chief's face, replaced by a dark scowl and eyes full of anxiety. Spinning away, he scurried off through the station, not using his usual languid stroll but a scrambly rush. None of the other security members dared to talk to him when he was like that, allowing him to make it all the way to the solace of his office without disturbance.

"Damn, damn, damn, damn!" Marty cursed, each word louder and more frustrated than the last. "Why did she have to go wandering off on her own?! Why did those idiots have to decide they couldn't be bothered to pay for their company?! Why, why, why?!"

The only answer the man got from his empty office was the echo of his own fist pounding into his desk at the end of his rant. It was followed by the strained creak of his chair as he dropped heavily into it. There, he lolled back, huffing and puffing as he rested with one hand over his eyes.

"Now I'm gonna have to tell him what happened ..." the man whined, legitimately afraid of that requirement. His associate was not a tolerant man. No, he was as cold as he was calculating, and there was no telling how harshly he would come down on such a failure. There was no hiding it now, though. "If I don't say anything the whole operation could go down, and me with it."

Knowing there was just no other way, Marty swiped his hand over his face before forcing himself to sit up. On his desk, his communicator came to life. A few taps had a comms officer up on the display, who left him waiting for a few moments before the image shifted to someone far darker and more intimidating.

"Mr. Cooper," Captain Grim greeted without so much as a hint of warmth in either his voice or his lone, ice blue eye. "Has our pixie ranger problem been dealt with?"

"Uhm ..." Marty stalled as he felt a cold sweat break out all of his body, forcing him to wipe his brow with one hand before he could continue. "Not exactly, captain ..."

That lone blue eye narrowed sharply. "Then you had better give me exactness right now, Mr. Cooper."

"The ranger ... she stumbled on one of your warehouses," Marty revealed, flinching in anticipation of an outburst.

None came. That lone eye just grew even narrower, even shaper, as if it could cut the man's heart out right through the view screen. "And how did that happen when you assured me that I had nothing to worry about?"

“It’s not my fault!” Marty leapt to defend himself. “She wouldn’t have found anything if a handful of – your – men hadn’t decided to play doctor with some streetwalker without paying for her.”

“Then how did she find one of my warehouses, Mr. Cooper?” Grim questioned pointedly. “Unless, this happened in one of my warehouses after you failed to keep her away from them?”

An audible gulp slid down Marty’s throat. “Th-That’s ... I tried ... she wouldn’t ...”

“Stop,” Grim cut the man off. “I have no time for useless babbling just as I apparently have no further time to waste on leaving this in your hands. I will be in dock shortly. Meet me there, and do not make me wait for your arrival.”

Even as he blanched, Marty nodded. “Yes, captain.”

For a moment after that affirmation, Grim just stared at the security chief, his eye hard, unforgiving, and piercing. Then, without preamble or warning, he just declared, “End transmission,” and the screen on Marty’s desk cut to black.

– Commercial Break –

Second Rising Action

“No ... no ...” Chrissie muttered as she sat cross-legged on the bed in her room swiping through one piece of evidence after another. It all showed the same thing, shipping contains from a missing ship. “Obviously stolen, but when ... where ... by whom?”

“Records indicate the missing ship’s intended route was–” Melbourne started to inform the ranger.

“I know what the records say!” Chrissie growled, punching the bed beside her.

Immediately, the bot diverted to saying, “My apologies, Ranger Chrissie.”

A guilty wince flickered across the sandy-haired ranger’s face, followed by a furiously huffed breath. Then, her rage was gone, replaced by sagging shoulders and a quiet and apologetic, “Sorry, Melbourne ... I just feel like there’s some piece I’m missing, something I should have, but just ... argh!” Flopping onto her back, the ranger rested an arm on her forehead and stared up at the ceiling. “What could it be?”

Almost as if in answer to that question, a couple of quick knocks on the door resounded in the dingy room. Exhausted by her failure to find the missing piece, Chrissie was slow to lift her hand and call out, “Who is it?!”

“It’s, uhm ... it’s Marty!” the security chief’s voice called back.

It took only the time required for Chrissie’s eyes to widen for her weariness to vanish. “Coming!” she called out, followed by her previously slow movements turning into an excited scramble to get out of bed and over to the door. In fact, she was so eager, she was already talking to the man before she even got there. “Please tell me you found something use—”

That was the moment when the ranger yanked the door open, but it wasn’t Marty’s pudgy and gregarious features waiting for her. No, before the barrier was even fully out of the way, a shoulder slammed into it. The knob was torn from Chrissie’s hand as the door itself was sent flying back into the wall. The man responsible, unfamiliar and dressed in black, didn’t stop with that either, his shoulder charge kept right on going, merely shifting targets from door to ranger.

Even caught off guard, Chrissie still managed to react in time. Dipping into a crouch, she got her own weight under that of the man charging her. At the same time, her hands lashed out to grab his arms, followed by a sharp thrust of her hip into his body. All of that worked together to give her the leverage necessary to turn his attempted tackle into a hip throw that left the man flat on his back and groaning.

There was no time for the ranger to celebrate that takedown, though. No, lashing out with a spinning backfist, she whirled around to catch the next guy in line right on the jaw. Crack! His head snapped to the side, sending his whole body stumbling in that direction.

In spite of that, it was Chrissie that grunted, “Oof!” as the third guy in line found her guard still down from the strike. That let him dive through the space his friend had just occupied to catch the ranger around her waist. She tried to slip to the side and let him fly by, but his grip proved too strong. All she did was get him to whip around before finally dragging her to the floor.

The moment the ranger was down, her hopes of fighting back disappeared. She tried to elbow the man who had tackled her off of her, but while she did break his grip, more men were already descending upon her. Every hand and foot she tried to lash out with got snared, then a sharp punch in the gut drove both the fight and all of the air out of her.

Through the hacking and wheezing that followed, Chrissie heard a cold voice command, “Quit playing around and knock her out.”

A moment later, the ranger felt a sharp prick on her neck. She tried to lurch away from it, but the damage was already done. In just a couple of seconds, her world was already blurry. It didn’t take long after that for it to fade away into black.

Mumble, mumble. Indistinct gibberish hovered around the edges of a black void. Except it wasn't just black anymore. There was a spot of light in the middle now, one which slowly grew into a blurry glare.

"... why are we doing this?" a familiar man's voice was asking.

"Because I have to know what she's told her people," another man answered, his voice cold and callous. "Otherwise, I'll have to cut my losses here, including you."

That threat caused a gulp so hard that the ranger could hear it. "Yes, Captain."

Chrissie was starting to see things as well. The world, and her own head, were still hazy, but she could make out a few details. The most obvious was that she seemed to be dangling from something. Her arms were above her head, her wrists bound, her fingers cold and tingling from a lack of blood. Meanwhile, her feet weren't resting on anything, but just dangling in the air – a classic way to hold someone captive.

Meanwhile, in front of her, the ranger could make out two shapes. One was taller, leaner, and dark. She didn't recognize that one. The other, though, squatter and decidedly portly was recognizable, especially when paired with that earlier voice.

"Chief Cooper ... I should've known," Chrissie remarked, her voice groggy but working.

Immediately, the two figures turned to the ranger, but it was the chubby one which barked in Marty's voice, "No, what you should have known was to play along! You could've had a few days of warm beds, nice meals, and a quiet, uneventful tour of the most pristine parts of the hub, but no! You just had to go off on your own, sticking your nose where it didn't belong!"

"I'm a pixie ranger. My nose belongs wherever scumbags like you are up to no good," Chrissie tossed back fearlessly.

"Yeah, and look at the trouble that landed you and your nose in," Marty retorted. "And it's a lot of trouble, 'cause you're not just dealing with nice ol' me anymore, no ma'am. You brought the captain into this."

Knowing she should keep the man talking, Chrissie asked, "What captain?" but the words only took part of her attention. The rest she reserved for her predicament. Yes, she was bound and dangling, but that didn't mean she was helpless. It looked like it was just rope on her wrists which had been looped over a hook that was dangling from the ceiling by a chain. If she materialized her blaster–

A flick of her wrist attempted to summon her weapon, but nothing came of it but an empty hand and that cold voice commenting, "Looking for this, ranger?"

Chrissie's eyes snapped over to the taller man, seeing him standing there with one hand raised. However, it took a couple of blinks and a squint before she could get the item held in that hand to come into focus enough to see. It was her weapon bracelet.

"You're not the first member of your corps I've encountered," the man noted before tossing the bracelet onto a nearby table. "But you are certainly the most difficult. My associate failed to even provide me with your name until after I'd already captured you."

"I only said it was the H0N3Y that docked, not that—" Marty tried to excuse himself.

"Yes, exactly, that is – all – you said, despite having more useful information to provide," the cold man hissed like a bitter winter wind. "Perhaps, later, we will have to go over the meaning of the word 'informant'."

Cringing back in fear, the traitorous chief nodded meekly, "Yes, captain."

"For now, though, leave," the cold man commanded curtly, his lone blue eye locking onto the dangling ranger. "You're a needless distraction."

"Yes, captain," Marty answered again before quickly scurrying out of the room.

Affecting a sympathetic sigh, Chrissie remarked, "Wow, it's so hard to find good henchmen these days, isn't it?"

"It certainly is," the captain played along with a little sigh of his own. "But alas, people such as yourself are usually too riddled with honor and morality to be turned to the side of villainy."

"Yeah, damn people sticking up for the little guy. We're just the worst," Chrissie kept up the sarcasm.

"You truly are," the captain answered with utmost seriousness.

Grinning, Chrissie dropped the act to level a hard look at the criminal. "Yeah, well, I think it's scumbags like you who are the worst. I can hardly wait to get you behind bars."

For as icy as he was, the captain chuckled at that. "Well, I'm afraid you are going to have to wait ... for a very long time at that. Forever actually."

"Wouldn't count on it, tall, dark, and one-eyed," Chrissie shot back.

The captain just shrugged and turned away to bark, "Mr. Blythe!"

A moment later, the door to the room slid open, revealing a man so tall and broad that he could barely fit as he stepped into the room. "Yes, captain?"

"Find out what she's told her superiors," the cold man declared, followed by a dismissive little wave of his hand as he turned to go. "Goodbye, Ranger Chrissie."

Grin never wavering, the dangling girl shouted after him, "I'll see ya in a bit!"

Fsh. The door slid closed behind the captain without him saying another word. Then, it was only Chrissie and her interrogator left in the room.

"Alright, girlie," Blythe began as he pounded a fist into his palm. "Don't suppose you're gonna make this easy on me?"

"And ruin your chance at job satisfaction? Never," Chrissie quipped. "If you want me to talk, you're gonna have to beat every word out of me."

With a little shrug and dismissive, "If that's how ya want it ..." the man started forward

In spite of her nonchalance, Chrissie watched every one of those steps like a hawk tracking the movements of a mouse in a field below. At the same time, she rolled the muscles in her shoulders. They were sore, but ready to act. Everything else seemed to have kicked whatever they'd shot her full of to knock her out as well. All she needed was ...

Coming into range, Blythe reared back for his first big swing. It was aimed at the ranger's midsection and had the entirety of the big man's body behind it. That was exactly what Chrissie had been hoping for.

As that fist came in, the sandy-haired ranger yanked her gut back, contorting herself into a hanging V. It was just enough to make the strike whiff entirely, a fact that caught Blythe completely off guard. Overbalancing, the man staggered forward a step before he recovered, but that was too late.

The moment her dodge was done, Chrissie switched to yanking her unrestrained and perfectly functional legs up. That and Blythe's stumble worked perfectly to allow her to snare the man's neck between her thighs like a pair of scissors trying to cut a straw. All that was required after that was to lock her ankles and squeeze.

"Urk! Ark!" Blythe slobbered and gurgled as he tried to fight free. However, big as he was, he couldn't overpower the ranger's locked legs with his out of position arms. That didn't stop him from trying that as well as other things. He tried to thrash, but Chrissie would not be dislodged. He tried to yank away, but the angle the ranger was dangling at just changed to keep him in range. He even tried rushing forward, but that was his biggest mistake.

As the man's mass came under her, suddenly, Chrissie had something to rest her weight on besides just the ropes that bound her hands. A quick flip of her wrists was all it took to get those ropes unhooked from the chain from which she'd been tangled. They were still bound, but they were free enough for the moment, allowing her to add a few overhand punches to Blythe's face before the lack of air finally caught up to him.

As the big guy started to tumble, the ranger finally released her death grip on his throat to kick off. That allowed her to roll as she hit the ground, quickly popping back up to her feet. Then, she was rushing over to the fallen man to search him.

"Come on ... come on ... ah ha!" Chrissie exclaimed in excitement as she found what she was looking for on the man – a knife. Click! The blade popped out, allowing her to invert her hold on it, then quickly saw through the ropes binding her wrists. "Okay, next is my blaster ..." she rattled off, tossing the knife aside to walk over to the table, snare the bracelet which had been left there, and snap it on. "Big thanks to Captain One-eye for leaving my bracelet here for me." A flick of her wrist made her blaster appear, leaving nothing else for her to do but turn to the door and grin. "Now, time to go round up some punks."

– Commercial Break –

The Big Finale

"Well, I just think a more generous share system might help incentivise higher performance amongst low level crew members like ourselves," one pirate was reasoning as he and his fellow walked down the hall.

"And I keep telling you, go ahead and propose it to the boss. See what happens," the other pirate answered.

A shudder ran through the first guy. "No way. I'd wet myself for sure the moment he looked at me with–"

Before that thought could even finish, Chrissie burst into motion, rounding a corner to cut that man's words off with a back roundhouse kick that left him crumpled against the wall. As she came out of that spin, her blaster was up and aimed perfectly at the chest of the other pirate. "Sorry to interrupt, but I need directions to the bridge ... now."

Hands flying up, the pirate stammered out, "I-I-It's ... it's right that way," followed by a meek point back the way he'd come. "Take the elevator to the command deck, and you can't miss it."

"Wow, thanks a lot," Chrissie remarked in surprise. "You wouldn't believe how often people try to just stall for time then make a move for my blaster."

The pirate screwed his face up dubiously. “Wouldn’t that just get me either shot or beaten up?”

“Yeah, but they do it anyway,” Chrissie responded with a shrug. “Oh well. Sorry about this, you’ve been great, but I am gonna have to knock you out anyway. Can’t have you warning One-eye that I’m coming after all.”

“Wait! I won’t–” the pirate tried to promise, but it was too late.

By the time she’d finished speaking, the ranger was already rushing the man. She didn’t actually attack from the front, though. Her target already had his hands up defensively after all. No, she just darted right by him before whirling back the way she’d come with.

Wham! Thud. A sharp chop to the back of the pirate’s head made him act like a puppet with its strings cut, just limply falling to the ground. Looking down on him, Chrissie’s features twisted apologetically. “Sorry about that, but you–”

Wheeer! Wheeer! The sound of a ship alarm cut off the ranger’s words while red lights began to flash in warning.

“What the ...?” Chrissie questioned, glancing between the man she’d knock out and one of those flashing lights.

A brief lull into the alarm sound followed as a panicky voice came on the intercom. “A-A-All h-hands to b-battle stations! P-P-Pixie Ranger ship inbound!”

“Pixie ranger ship?” the only currently visible ranger repeated back, furrowing her brow. It didn’t make any sense to her, but she didn’t have time to question it. As such, she just dismissed the alarm with a shake of her head and refocused on the task at hand. “Just bag Captain Cyclops and figure the rest of this out later,” she muttered before taking off down the hall to find that elevator to the bridge.

All around were the screens and personnel necessary to command a large starship. Helmsmen waited at the ready, bodies tense and ready to leap into action. Other crew members were on weapon systems, defenses, and communications. All of these various crew had one thing in common, though – they were all women.

Included in that bevy of femininity was the woman at the center of it all, a curvy brunette who was lounged in her command chair with sensual ease. Her legs were crossed, her chin rested languidly in one hand, and her blue-accented uniform strained around the chest. All of that was topped off by a little smirk which curled her lips.

“Open channels,” Bay commanded without a hint of urgency.

“Channels open, Nebula Ranger,” the girl on communications answered immediately.

“Unidentified vessel, this is Cruiser BA4 of the Pixie Ranger Corps,” the brunette identified herself.

“And the H0N3Y!” another bright, bubbly voice chimed in.

Rolling her eyes slightly, Bay continued on, “We are responding to a distress signal from one of our fellow rangers. Power down all non-essential systems and prepare for us to dock and unload a search party.”

Wnk! The viewscreen came alive to show the crew of the other ship, including a particular dark man with a lone, icy blue eye and an eyepatch. “Hello, Nebula Ranger. This is transport ship P1R4T3. I’m sorry to hear about your fellow ranger, but we have a medical emergency that requires us to depart immediately and can not comply with your request.”

“Departure denied P1R4T3,” Bay countered. “The H0N3Y will dock and take on your emergency patient. You will remain here and be—”

Before the nebula ranger could even finish, the captain just curled a lip in disdain and barked, “End transmission!”

Instantly, the view on the screen vanished followed a moment later by a bot warning, “Suspect ship charging weapons.”

Smirk spreading into a full on grin, Bay finally cast aside her lazy posture to sit up, leaned forward and on the edge of her seat. “Alright, girls! This is it! Evasive maneuvers, get a boarding team ready, and prepare to return fire! Remember, one of ours might be on that ship, so we’re trying to cripple ‘em, not kill ‘em!”

Dshj! The cruiser rocked as the first shot from the pirate ship slammed home.

“I said evasive maneuvers!” Bay barked, driving her crew into action as the space battle began.

Dshj! A different bridge rumbled, one with a very different person in charge of it, a man, one who was quite angry at that moment. It was written all over his usually calm and cold features, twisting them so his teeth were bared and his fury known.

“The next shot that hits us better kill you, helmsman or I will!” Grim snarled at one incompetent crewman before whipping about to yell at another. “Where’s our next volley?!”

“Weapons are just about charging, captain!” the man on the ship’s weapons called out. “Just one more–!”

Btew! A bolt of green light lanced through the air to slam into the panel in front of that crewman. Ktsh! Sparks flew as screens and controls twisted. Boom! An explosion threw the bridge officer back, leaving behind nothing but ruined panels.

In an instant, the turmoil of the bridge came to a standstill, replaced with eyes slowly shifting toward the source of that blast. None moved slower than Grim’s, his lone blue orb narrowed and his teeth grinding against one another. The sight that awaited him was an obvious one.

“Chrissie ...” the name seeped out of Grim with all the malice and disdain he could muster as he glared at the sandy-haired ranger who’s blaster was currently aimed right at him.

“Hey, talk, dark, and one-eyed,” the girl in green tossed back with a wry smirk. “Told ya I’d see ya in a bit.”

“You did warn me of that, yes, but as you can see I’m a little busy,” Grim noted coolly.

Eyes briefly glancing past the pirate captain to the view screen showing the BA4, Chrissie shook her head. “Yeah, but not any more you’re not. Tell your men to stand down and let Bay and her girls round you all up.”

“That is certainly one possible path I could take ...” Grim noted intellectually before his own lips curled into a grin. “But I think I prefer the – laser eye – approach.”

Btew! A red beam of light tore off the captain’s eye patch, revealing the mechanical glow of the eye beneath before lashing out across the bridge. Its target tried to dodge, to twist out of the way, but she wasn’t quite quick enough.

“Ah!” Chrissie hissed as the light tore across her upper arm, ripping through her uniform to sear the bicep of her weapon hand. It wasn’t fatal, but it was enough to get her to drop her blaster.

“Get her!” Grim immediately snapped, jabbing a finger the ranger’s way. However, even as most of his bridge crew charged toward their now-unarmed opponent, he did not. Beyond that, he also lashed out to snare one of his men by the arm before he could get out of reach. “Mr. Barrie with me,” was all the command he gave before he whirled about to drag that crewman away with him.

Spotting that, Chrissie shouted after him, "Wait! Get back here!"

"Sorry! Have to run!" Grim called out as he raced over to another elevator and darted inside, his first mate getting yanked in behind him. Then, as the doors started to close, he locked eyes with his adversary, red and blue both shining with the same promise. "But don't worry, Star Ranger Chrissie. This time, it is I who will see you again."

Kachunk! The doors locked closed, taking the pirate captain away. There was nothing Chrissie could do about it, either. While she did take a step forward, her way was blocked by the approaching bridge members who hadn't been diverted toward the escape.

"Damn," the ranger muttered under her breath before shifting her focus to the enemies in front of her. There were four in total, all approaching slowly on the girl whose good hand was clutched to her injured arm. "I don't suppose you'd like to come at me one at a time?"

While the quartet of pirates did respond by spreading out, they did so while also keeping their approach in unison. All it did was make it even harder to engage them all at once by giving them more angles to attack from. All Chrissie could do was step back until her trail foot found the hull blocking any further retreat. At the same time, her eyes darted around desperately searching for some kind of opening she could—

Dshj! Another shot from the BA4 rocked the pirate ship, and with it the bridge. The careful approach of the bridge crew was left staggering and disorganized. Chrissie, herself, had to fight the shift in the ship's mass, but she'd already braced herself against the hull, ready to lunge at any opening. Now, that opening had arrived.

Kicking off, the ranger aimed straight for the man on the far left. Not only was he one of the most isolated, but his position had left him with his back to a low array of control panels. That meant when Chrissie lowered her good shoulder and plowed into him, he had nowhere to go but up and over the thing, tumbling well out of the fight.

"One down," the girl in green remarked as she immediately planted one foot before spinning around and lashing out with the other. The next guy over, trying to recover and lunge at the ranger, found only a foot slamming into his face, splattering his nose and planting him on his back. "That's two."

By that point, the final pair had recovered from the blast and reset. Each maintained the same distance between himself and Chrissie, while keeping just enough of a gap between them to make it impossible to defend against both at the same time. At the same time, their hands were up and at the ready, just waiting for the ranger to try something.

"Alright, I'll go first," Chrissie relented, charging toward the man on the right.

Instantly, the dynamic shifted. The ranger's target braced for defense while his counterpart moved to counterattack. That all was quite tactically sound – if not for what came next.

Planting a foot, Chrissie cut off her feint and whirled on the guy to her left. He was not caught entirely off guard, managing to catch her reverse spin kick before it could crush his ribs, but her assault didn't end there. Hopping, she switched feet to get the other one coming in high, slamming into the side of the man's head and dropping him before the ranger landed lightly on the foot she'd kicked with first.

“One le–” the girl in green started to rattled off, only to cuff off with a pained, “Oof!” as the last remaining pirate slammed into her from the side.

In a tangle of bodies, ranger and pirate slammed into the ground. The latter came out on top, driving his fists into the woman underneath him in a frenzy. Her ribs took a pounding, but it was actually when he caught her blaster-seared arm that his strikes stung the most.

“Gah!” Chrissie screamed, her whole body curling toward her injured arm. She used that to her advantage, though, lashing out with her other elbow to catch the man on top of her in the face.

Rearing back, the pirate clutched at where he'd been hit, granting the ranger a momentary reprieve from his assault. Even wracked with pain, she didn't waste it. The fingers of her good hand lashed out to jab the pirate in the throat, then another elbow followed, driving in just below his sternum

A choked gurgled was all the noise the criminal could make as he tried to simultaneously clutched at his face, throat, and gut. He didn't have enough hands, but it also didn't matter. It was all just distraction, so that Chrissie could finally buck his pin of her, rolling him over so that she was on top with a knee pressed down on his throat.

“And ... done,” the sandy-haired ranger confirmed as the man below her went limp from loss of consciousness. Immediately she rolled off him, struggling to fight her way back to her feet.

Dshj! Another blast rocked the ship, nearly sending Chrissie back to the ground. Only by catching herself on a nearby panel did she manage to keep her feet. Meanwhile, the hum of the ship's systems noticeably lessened as the overhead lights shifted to a dim emergency glow.

“Bout time, Bay,” the ranger grumbled as she shoved herself off the panel she'd been leaning against to stagger over to the captain chair. There, she flopped heavily into the seat to start toying with controls. “Ship computer, locate the captain.”

Wnk! The viewscreen popped on. The camera was zoomed out, but that only made it easier to tell that the space displayed was a docking bay. Most of the ships within were small shuttles, but there was a larger vessel nestled within as well, roughly the size of a pixie ranger patrol ship, but clearly built for speed rather than comfort. At that moment, two figures were just running up this ship's gangplank.

"Ship computer, close dock bay doors," Chrissie tried.

"Unable. Captain emergency override in effect," a robotic voice rattled out.

"Ship computer, vessel has been officially commandeered by Star Ranger Chrissie!" the girl in green tried. "Now remove the captain override and close dock bay doors!"

"Unable. Pixie Ranger Authority not recognized by this ship," the robotic voice answered.

Fury drove the ranger's fist into one of the captain chair's armrests. She didn't stop, though, but kept working the controls, trying to find something that would work. Meanwhile, on the screen, the speedy vessel's gangplank closed and its engines powered up.

"No, no, no, no, no!" Chrissie snarled in futile frustration as attempt after attempt failed. In the end, all she could do was watch as the pirate captain's escape ship lifted off, darted out of the bay, and fled the battle. Seeing that, she was left to sink back in her seat, sigh, and mutter, "Next time, Captain One-eye. Next time."

– Commercial Break –

Epilogue

"Ah ..." Chrissie hissed as the medical ranger's ministrations caught the wound on her arm. "Careful. I need that."

"That's what I should be saying to you," the doctor countered, finishing up bandaging the wound before stepping back to wash her hands. "It's generally unadvised for single rangers to assault the bridges of enemy ships by themselves."

"Yeah, but Chrissie's never been the type to listen to advice, eh Chris?" another voice cut in.

Looking up, the girl in green spotted her blue counterpart, causing her eyes to immediately light up. "Bay! What brings you down here?"

"To give you this back," the busty girl answered, followed by an idle little swipe of her hand.

Floating through the door to the medical bay came a bot of purple and green who was ready with a pleasant, "It is good to see you are alive, Ranger Chrissie."

"Melbourne!" the sandy-haired ranger exclaimed as she jumped up from the exam table to race over to her bot. "You the one who called that glory thief on me?"

"As per pixie ranger regulation, I sent out a distress call with all pertinent information at the time of your abduction," Melbourne revealed.

"And he got himself pretty beat up for his trouble," Bay noted as she stepped over to rap her knuckles at a spot of rough patching and scratched paint. "One of my girls was able to fix him up, though, at least until you can get him a proper refit back at HQ."

Leaking out a relieved sigh, Chrissie turned to tossed a grateful, "Thanks, for this and coming to save me – even if I didn't need it."

"Yeah, I saw the mess you made of those guys on the bridge," Bay commented with a chuckle. "Just a shame you couldn't snare their leader."

"Well, I would have if you hadn't scared him off!" Chrissie countered.

Bay shrugged helplessly. "Sorry, I should've known better than to think you actually needed help."

"Yea, you should have," the girl in green huffed with feigned irritation, even going so far as to fold her arms. She barely got all of that done, though, before the whole act was ruined by both girls breaking into giggles.

"Anyway ..." the busty ranger segued as their mirth died down. "Orders are to return with the captives ... and you."

A wince shot across Chrissie's face. "Don't suppose I could go back to my security review instead?"

"Afraid not," Bay answered with a smirk and shake of her head. "Nova Ranger Louise wants to hear how this mess happened straight from the horse's mouth."

That answer had a heavy sigh seeping out of Chrissie, followed by a muttered, "Ugh ... wonder how she's gonna yell at me about this."

Stately. That was what the office was. That was how its resident wanted to be. Yet, once again, she found herself facing down the most troublesome ranger in her command as she shouted, "I don't understand how you can't just do a simple security review without stumbling on a conspiracy, getting yourself abducted, and forcing a major space battle!"

"Well, that last one was really Bay's fault," Chrissie muttered under her breath.

"Oh no! No one else's fault!" Louise blasted that defense to shred while swiping her fingers in front of her like they were windshield wipers. "You're the only reason Bay had to be called to that sector at all! Now, her and Honey's ships are both damaged and there's an entire mining hub security team that has to be scoured for traitors and replaced."

Cocking an eyebrow at that last detail, Chrissie dared to ask, "Are you saying you're unhappy that my review unveiled a major security breach and a pirate operation?"

Fury tightened every muscle in the higher-ranked ranger's face, clenching her jaw and narrowing her eyes, but she still had to hiss through her teeth. "No. Of course, I am thrilled at how effective you were at completing your assignment."

Seeing her superior so furious had Chrissie grinning. "Well, I was just doing my job, really."

"Ugh," Louise was unable to suppress a groan as she smacked a hand over her eyes. "Just ... go back to patrol duty, and try your very hardest to not have a reason to be back in this office again for at least a month. Can you at least manage that?"

"I'll do my best, Nova Ranger," Chrissie promised alongside a quick salute before whirling about to stroll out of the office with a bit of extra pep in her step. Outside, her bot hovered patiently, waiting for her to be finished. "Well, Melbourne, the CHR1551E's supposed to be good as new. What do you say we take her out for a spin and see how the nebrons did?"

"A pixie ranger should always know the capabilities of her vessel," the bot noted technically.

A grin spreading across her face, Chrissie nodded. "Exactly what I was thinking."

Dark and quiet, that was what the room was. Everywhere was shadow and still, except for one spot. There a single red eye glowed in the dark while the scratch and crinkle of fingers running along beard stubble broke the silence.

"Star Ranger Chrissie," the name leaked through Grim's lips, quiet and brooding.

A flick of a wrist brought another light into the room, this from a data pad which had been turned face down on the desk. With its face now up, the light from its display spilled out into the room. That made it easy to see what it was showing, a whole collection of pictures, some showing action scenes, others merely portraits, but all focused on the same sandy-haired ranger in her green-accented uniform.

The lids around that glowing, mechanical red eye narrowed, sharpening the light it emitted down to a narrow beam not that far from the blast it could unleash. That narrow slice came to rest right on one of the pictures of Chrissie, aimed right at her smiling face. "Next time."

– Credits Roll –