

Death in the Fast Lane

Danni Elright watched while the men carried the gigantic wind blade from the factory and loaded it into The Monster, the nickname her family had given their long, rickety airtruck. This was the last of nine blades to be loaded, and she was relieved the job was almost finished. She felt foolish not helping out, but the men insisted on doing it themselves without her help. She knew if her brother had been picking up the blades, the men would have let him help, just because he was a guy. She was taller and older than her brother Mark and was probably just as strong. She had won about half their arm wrestling contests in the last couple of years.

"Ready to go, ma'am," said Big Jim Fox, the grandpa of the family who manufactured not only the thirty-two-meter long wind blades but also the huge towers upon which the windmills were mounted.

"Okay, thanks, Mr. Fox," Danni said. "That's seventy-two gearboxes and twenty-three rotors for you." She waited for him to offer the extra money owed to her after the trade. Plus, there should be twenty percent delivery fee, not because of the fuel so much as the hazard of transporting products in a large moving target like The Monster from one side of the peninsula to the other.

Jim Fox dug into his pocket and handed her a roll of bills. She dare not count them outside in front of him lest the wind carry the bills away.

"Thanks, Mr. Fox," she said, looking him straight in the eye. Just then, a gust of wind swooped up and blew his hat clean off. She took that as her cue to leave.

Holding her jacket hood in place, she scurried into the airtruck. Once the doors were shut, she counted the bills. The proper amount was there. Her father had always said Big Jim Fox never cheated anyone, and that's why he was still in business. But Danni didn't trust anyone—there was always the first time.

Danni stuffed the bills into her leather jumpsuit's leg pocket and started the antigrav drive. Once the pressure was stabilized, she retracted the hydraulic legs and stepped on the throttle. Now came the difficult part of the trip—picking up supplies.

She was relatively safe on the trip over, having an empty truck and all. She'd only taken a few harmless pot shots from the ground—nothing serious enough to even nick the hull of her truck. But the Hell's Pirates knew she was empty—knew where she originated. They had a network of members who kept track of private cargo routes, using their radiophones to communicate with one another.

Danni checked the pistol in her jumpsuit's leg pocket. It was loaded and ready to fire in a hurry if anyone assaulted her. She felt particularly uneasy today. It didn't have to do much with the cargo run, though that task always carried some anxiety. But she was more on edge than usual. Little things bothered her—things like the men not letting her help load the wind blades, or her parents being so involved in their bread baking and sewing projects, they hardly noticed when she left. Or maybe it was because she hadn't had a good night's sleep since the new baby had arrived. But it didn't really matter why she felt this way, she just needed to get through the day without provoking anyone.

Okay, her first stop would be at the Jason's Sewing Products just on the edge of the city. She geared up The Monster and entered into the low lane for slow moving traffic. Here she was more of a target, but at least the windguards were taller. Too bad the highway didn't have protection from below, but building that would have taken more money than the county wanted to pay.

The Monster slid into the low lane behind a tall, boxy moving truck, and Danni slowed to keep the required distance behind it. Then she put her own truck on autopilot

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and gazed at the broken cell phone towers to her left and the dead cement highways below. Here and there a few old shacks patched together with corrugated tin turned green with exposure stood starkly against the mostly wasteland that paved the sixty-some kilometers to the city.

Danni turned her attention to where she would park the big crate while she went into Jason's Sewing to get some special needles her parents just couldn't do without. To her, it would have been easier to just go buy some clothing than to purchase all the fabric, thread, and sewing accessories required for her family to make their own clothing. Still, she was proud of the custom-made jumpsuit and leather jacket, both which bore the embroidered three-bladed windprop logo of their family business.

Less than twenty minutes later, Danni moved The Monster out of autopilot and eased it onto the northwest exit to the city. It would cost her, but just to be safe, she decided to park the big rig in the Sky Tower parking garage. After juggling The Monster around for at least fifteen minutes, she finally backed into a stall large enough to hold her. She pressed a release on the dash and a small aircar rose up out of the top of the truck's trailer. Very convenient for her small stuff shopping, but she would have to pay for parking wherever she went in the city. Oh well, the family wanted their small goods, and this is what was necessary.

She remoted the aircar from the top of the truck to a position right in front of herself, then she activated the electromagnetic field around The Monster. This parking garage was advertised as "secure," but she didn't want to take any chances. Then she piloted her aircar through the parking garage and out into the city lanes. Now, this was fun. She wished she could always take her aircar into the city, but that was impractical, especially when picking up supplies for the entire winter.

Once she got the sewing machine needles, she went to Hanley's Game Supply to pick up a new joystick control for her younger sister, Alice. Alice was only thirteen, whereas Mark was eighteen and Danni nineteen. They all liked playing games, but Alice was not allowed to get out and work in the gearbox factory like Mark and Danni were. Yes, she had school, but she still had more free time than anyone else in the family, except the new baby of course.

Danni shuddered at the thought of those long endless days working in the factory. It was never warm enough in there, and the cold from the metal she worked with seeped through her gloves into her hands. But arriving home from her shift to a warm meal and an even warmer fire in the stove was enough reward to get her through each day. She really had to get out and find a good career. But with no money for the proper schooling, she didn't know how she would ever attain her dream of building communication satellites.

She'd been interested in communications satellites ever since she was in grade school. Her grandmother had told her about the satellites that used to circle the Earth, beaming information and television from around the globe. Her history lessons told her that more than sixty years ago, the Chinese and the Americans had been at war and shot down all the satellites that had been launched. Evidently, each nation didn't want the other to spy on it or its allies. There used to be satellite phones too as well as cellular telephones. The towers for the latter had been wasted in almost every nation, though some local use was made of them. Mostly, people used short-range radiophones.

Only two more stops—one at Sawyer's Kitchen Products for more bread pans, and the other at the Wayne's Vacuum Store for a new, industrial strength hose. Then on to Molly's Hardware for ten new air hoses and two dozen new nozzles. The family's gearbox factory employed thirty-seven people including Danni. The air hoses and nozzles wore out

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pretty quickly, sometimes due to too much horsing around, and Danni claimed no innocence to that.

After leaving the Wayne's Vacuum, Danni thought perhaps Clinton's Wholesale might stock the air compressor accessories. If so, it would save her a trip to Molly's, but she had no way of knowing and was outside phone range to call them. Besides, whenever she did call Clinton's, the line was always busy. Danni sighed. She was tired and about due for a break.

She parked the aircar safely inside the deli's small garage and ran into the store to get a soda. She brought it back to her car, opened her bagel and cheese sandwich, and switched on the radio. The reception was full of static, but she heard enough of the news to find out she should avoid Highway-90 West, the main route that lead out of the city toward the east coast. She would just have to take the aircar onto Lowway-90 West in order to reach the hardware store. She'd be sandwiched between a lot of slow moving big rigs, but it was not illegal to drive on it with any sized vehicle. Unfortunately, a lot of other people had the same idea.

Just as she was merging onto L-90W, she saw an aircar hit the windguard, flip and spiral to the ground. This was apparently caused by a rear-ender three cars back. Danni stomped on her brakes and barely missed the truck ahead of her. Whew, that was a close one and would have caused at least a thirty-car pileup. What she should do is take the express tube back to the west side of the city where The Monster was parked, but she'd been afraid of the tubes ever since her cousin, Oliver, was killed in one less than six months ago.

Danni hit the antigrav controls and quickly ascended so that she was suspended between H-90W and L-90W. It was a stupid thing to do. She could have easily rammed into a guardrail or another aircar whose driver had the same idea. But she couldn't stand the thought of waiting for an hour or more until the accident was cleared up.

She reversed thrusters and eased her way into H-90E, just barely missing a mid-sized aircar. Danni was unsure if it was going to let her in, but it slowed at the last second and she squeezed her way onto the lane, accelerating like mad to get in pace with the rest of the traffic. She headed back to the shortcut tube, which she should have taken in the first place. Damn that fear of tubes anyway. That fear was going to get her killed.

Well too bad. She dove into the southeast bound shortcut tube, holding her breath as she went. The shortcut tube was full of twists and turns, and Danni had no time for any thoughts but keeping control of her car. The vacuum sucked the cars at a constant rate, but the danger was if another car broke down or the tube's power suddenly went out. Neither of these things happened very often, but when they did, the outcome was disastrous, often resulting in multiple injuries and deaths.

Only seventeen seconds in the tube, Danni was so tense, she was still holding her breath when she came out. She let out her breath in a long whoosh and eased her way onto the short length of highway and back to the parking lot where The Monster was parked. The factory was just going to have to suffer without their new hoses and nozzles if Clinton's Wholesale didn't have any. She was not going anywhere else in the city. Not today anyway.

As she approached The Monster in the parking garage, she thought she saw the right side of the trailer portion compromised. Her heart stopped for a moment. She was afraid to draw closer for fear of the damage her rig might have incurred. How could someone deactivate the field around the truck? She guessed if they had hacked in the proper codes, they could have removed the field. But she was drawn like a magnet toward the truck

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anyway. Upon closer inspection, she saw what looked like a torn off side was only an optical illusion. The sun's bright rays coming through the side of the garage had caused the deception. She let out a sigh of relief, but her heart continued to pound for at least another couple of minutes.

The trip to Clinton's Wholesale was much easier than she figured it would be. The earlier traffic accident on H-90W was cleared now, and much of the rush hour traffic had passed. Still, she was going to skip the hardware store. It was getting late, and she didn't want to drive home in the dark.

Okay, smooth sailing right into Clinton's parking lot and around to the shipping docks, where she had to wait only thirty-seven minutes for a spot. Disembarking from her rig, Danni erected the electromagnetic field, climbed through to the store, and inserted a coin into the floating pallets rack. Once the pallet was released, she took its remote and guided it around the store. She thought how easy this was compared to the times when people had to use carts with wheels. Again, she knew this information because her grandmother had informed her of it.

Danni loaded two hundred kilos of bread flour, five kilos of active dry yeast, five kilos of baking cocoa, five hundred and ten grams each of ground cinnamon, black pepper, and corn starch, thirty kilos of rolled oats, thirty liters of corn oil, twenty-five kilos of dried milk, two crates of oranges, fifty kilos of dog food, forty kilos of cat food, one hundred fifty rolls each of paper towels and toilet paper, ten kilos of ground coffee, three hundred twelve tea bags, thirty kilos of pinto beans, eight four-liter bottles of pickles, fifty-five kilos of assorted meats, ten four-liter bottles of assorted fruit juices, one hundred kilos of cheese, seven new water filters, ten air hoses, no nozzles, four huge jars of mayonnaise, six smaller bottles each of mustard and horseradish sauce, fifty dozen eggs, and enough sourdough starter to bake bread for the entire village for three months. She felt as if she were shopping for an army, but she wasn't far off. A lot of the supplies were for the stores in her village as well as for her family.

Danni finally departed Clinton's Wholesale after more than two hours, including at least a half hour spent waiting in line to purchase the goods. She was tired but more relaxed than when she had started out. Yes, this would be the most dangerous part of the trip, but she was just relieved to be done with the shopping. The Monster was big and would protect her, even if someone took some shots at it. All she wanted was to get home now.

About twenty minutes into her trip home, she switched on the truck's outside lights. Traversing the countryside in the dark was hazardous, not only because of the pirates, but also because the guides were not well lit. The air lanes' power had to be stretched from the city's hydroelectric source at one end to the villages' wind power at the other. Because there was not enough of it to power neighborhoods in between, it barely covered the air lanes. She hated to have her lights on though, because it made her a bigger target.

Danni checked her fuel gauge. She had plenty of hydrogen to make it home. Accelerating would use more fuel, but she didn't care, just as long as she got back soon. She pressed down on the throttle. After a few minutes, she caught up to another rig in front of her. She decided to drop down and pass. But as soon as she did, a black figure emerged from behind her seat and held a knife to her throat. The truck swerved. Since she was not within the lane, The Monster didn't hit anything.

"Don't say anything, just do as I say," came the hot breath of the person clutching her throat. It sounded like a woman's voice, but she wasn't sure. It could have been a young teen's. "Now turn toward south on a heading of one hundred eighty-four point three degrees."

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Danni's heart was stuck in her throat, but still beating, very fast. "But..." She barely got that word out. She wanted to ask where they were going. There might not be enough fuel.

"I said not to talk!" came the voice again, this time, angry. When Danni didn't say anything more, the arm let up on her neck, and the small, slim figure slid into the passenger seat, still holding the knife to her throat. The pirate was dressed all in black, including a facemask, which revealed only her nose, mouth, and eyes. "If fuel is what you're worried about, I've attached a spare tank to your rig, so don't worry. We've got plenty for where we're going."

The knife was pressing into Danni's throat, and she saw a drop of blood fall onto her jacket. She thought about the pistol in her pocket and wanted so badly to reach for it, but it seemed as far away as her village right then.

Danni continued driving, as her heart gradually returned to its proper place in her body. After an indeterminable amount of time, the pirate reached over and punched a button on the dash. The engine coughed then purred again as the fuel tanks switched. Danni watched the gauge needle float up to register full. So much for the fuel argument. They were flying blind, with no lane guides, nothing but The Monster's headlights.

"Okay now, ease more to the left," said the pirate, more calmly now. Danni did as she was told. "Now straighten out."

Danni decided the pirate was a woman by the shape of her body and the fact that her feet were small. She moved the knife from Danni's throat and aimed it into her ribs. Danni wished she had zipped her jacket. At least then, she would have some protection from a stab. But maybe the pirate didn't plan on stabbing her. Maybe the pirate didn't know how to drive her rig. In that case, the knife was just an empty threat and nothing else.

"I've got a transponder," Danni dared to say. But the woman refrained from shutting her up.

"I know. Took it off at Clinton's."

"But I..."

The pirate finished Danni's sentence for her. "Put up an electromagnetic field?"

Danni could only nod.

"Those are so easy to hack, and yours was one of the easiest."

Danni felt foolish. She shouldn't have been using such an old system, but then again, she was using an old truck. The family just couldn't afford the latest in transportation and technology.

"If I'm overdue, someone will be out looking for me," Danni said.

"By that time, we'll have your supplies and you'll be dead," said the pirate.

Dead? Would they really kill her? The voice inside her head said yes. Pirates were ruthless and thought nothing of knocking someone off for far less than what she had. Her mind raced with possible scenarios. Her family would start looking for her once they'd lost the transponder signal, but they might not find her until well after dark, if at all. And how would they find her without one? She hoped she'd still be in radiophone range. That was another thing they needed—wider bandwidth phones. If only the satellites were still up, or even the cell phone towers. Communication must have been so wonderful in the old days. That was one reason she wanted to help build new satellites. That dream was even more

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distant now that she'd been hijacked. With the village's stash stolen, they would all experience a long, hard winter.

As Danni was musing over her circumstances, the wind kicked up and flakes of snow started bombarding her windshield. The Monster swayed.

"What's the matter with this thing?" The pirate was shaken.

"The wind." You dummy, Danni felt like saying. For a pirate, this one wasn't very intelligent, about navigation anyway. Danni decided to play her. She let The Monster rock in the wind, pretending she had no control over it. Soon the pirate was hanging onto the safety rail with both hands and had dropped the knife on the seat between the two of them. Danni dare not eye it, but it didn't matter. The pirate grabbed the knife again when the rocking subsided.

Danni looked at her. Although she wore a facemask, Danni could tell she was not feeling well. Ah, if I can just make her sick, Danni thought, but the knife was pointing into her side again.

Now Danni tried to hold the rig steady, but the wind had kicked up even more. They were headed toward the north coast, the narrow tip of the peninsula where a small wind farm powered the area. Snow was coming at them harder now, and it was completely dark outside.

"I can't see where I'm going, and we're under the radar. I'm going to have to set this thing down." This time, Danni was not faking it. She had bottom lights on the rig, so she thought she'd be able to set the thing down without a problem.

"Keep going," the pirate said.

"But..."

"Shut up!" Danni heard fear in her voice.

"Do you want to get both of us killed?" The pirate was being unreasonable, and perhaps Danni could coax her into her own point of view.

The pirate said nothing, and Danni kept driving. Now the snow flew into the windshield in huge flakes, like stars streaming by in hyperspace. Whenever Danni tried to say something, the pirate poked her knife deeper into Danni's side. Danni dared to glance at her out of the corner of her eye. The pirate's eyes were fixed ahead at the snow.

Finally, Danni asked, "What's your name, anyway?"

The pirate was silent for a moment, then mumbled, "Jax."

"I'm Danni." Jax didn't respond. "Jax, I'm gonna set us down. Now if you don't like that, I'm sorry." Danni started to lower the rig, and Jax didn't stop her. The Monster tipped to the right, throwing Jax against the passenger door. The knife was no longer at Danni's side, but she was too busy to look and see if Jax dropped it. She wished she had a third hand so she could reach down and remove the pistol from her pocket.

Danni finally straightened the rig, slowed it to a manageable speed, and set it down gently on a flat surface in the mounting snow. Jax had removed her facemask and was coughing into it. Danni quickly reached for her pistol and held it on Jax. When the pirate finally looked up, Danni was shocked to see her pale face was that of a girl who couldn't be more than fourteen years of age.

Jax started to reach for her knife, which had fallen on the floor.

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"Not so fast," Danni said, feeling more confident now that she knew she was older than Jax. "Pick it up slowly and hand it to me." Danni pushed the gun into the girl's side.

Jax did as she was told, and Danni stashed the knife in her leg pocket where her pistol had been. Then she tried her radiophone, but all she got was static.

The engine growled softly. Danni frowned.

"What's wrong," said Jax.

"I don't know." Danni turned the engine off, waited a few seconds, then turned it back on. This time it growled louder. Danni was familiar with that particular sound. "Damn!" she yelled and hit the steering wheel with the palms of her hands.

"What is it?" Jax demanded.

"The antigrav drive just went out. Looks like we'll be here for the night. I really don't want to have to stay awake all night to keep an eye on you, but I will if I have to."

Danni patted Jax down and found another knife in her boot. She considered making the girl remove all her clothing, but it was already getting cold in the rig's cab. Besides, she hadn't felt any other weapons on her. Danni removed the knife from her pocket and stashed both knives in The Monster's lock box, slamming it shut. Then she reached under her seat and pulled out a couple of blankets. She tossed one to Jax. "Here. Don't want you freezing. We're likely in for a long, cold night."

Jax caught the blanket and draped it over herself. Danni considered tying her hands but then decided against it in case Jax had to use the toilet in the middle of the night. It was conveniently located in back of the passenger seat, with no doorway to the cargo area.

Once they were settled, neither one of them spoke until Danni woke at 2:13 a.m. and heard Jax moving about. "What's going on?" Danni demanded. She held the gun on Jax just in case she tried anything. What could she try? Danni had her two knives locked away. But just in case....

Danni spent a sleepless night, even though Jax was next to her sound asleep. She couldn't stop thinking about her predicament and wondering whether the pirates or someone from her family would find them first.

By the time it was dawn, Danni's stomach was rumbling with hunger. She looked out the front window. As far as she could tell, it had stopped snowing. She grabbed her phone and tried to call out, but she still got static. "Damn," she said to no one in particular. That woke Jax.

"You got any water?" Jax asked.

Danni tossed the phone down and grabbed a bottle. "Here," she said, and handed a large plastic container to Jax. The girl took it without looking Danni in the eye. "You don't talk much."

Jax looked up and gave Danni an evil stare.

"Well, we're in a bit of a fix. You threw away the transponder and we're buried in a half-meter of snow. You have any ideas of how we're going to get ourselves out of this mess?" Danni heard both fear and anger in her own voice. Not only that, she was shaky from lack of food. She hadn't eaten since yesterday afternoon. She silently cursed herself for not bringing any emergency food with her, but she'd truly planned to be back home before dark yesterday.

Just then, Danni's phone chirped. She fumbled for the bulky piece. "Yes?"

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She heard only a few words from a woman's voice amid mostly static, but the voice sounded familiar.

"Grandma? Grandma, is that you?"

"Yes, Danni," came the reply, then more static.

"Grandma, where are you?"

"I'm approximately twenty kilometers southeast of your position."

"But, how...?"

"I'll explain later. Just hang tight. Grandma out."

Danni removed her phone from her ear and stared at it for a moment. She was distracted from watching Jax only for a couple of seconds, long enough for Jax to poke a sharp object into her throat. "You don't want to do this, Jax, believe me," Danni said through strained breath.

"Hand over the phone," she demanded. Danni reluctantly did as she was told. Jax took it and punched in a number, still holding the sharp object to Danni's throat. Danni backed up as much as she could, but that drew an angry frown from Jax, who just moved the sharp object closer. What was it, anyway, Danni wondered.

"Hello, Dix?" Jax punched a couple of buttons on the phone. "Dix? Yes, it's Jax. I'm stranded out here with a rig full of loot—mostly food. Can you locate us?"

Jax listened, then spoke again. "No, no transponder." She didn't tell whomever she was talking to that she had thrown it out. "Can you get a fix on this phone?"

Maybe that was how Grandma had found her—zeroed in on her phone's radio signal, but the radar would have had to be low enough.

Jax looked troubled as she listened to whomever she was talking to. A few seconds later, she punched the phone off. "What's wrong with this thing?" she said.

"Let me see." Danni held her hand out to take the phone, but Jax pulled it back.

"No!" Danni drew her hand back. "There's a red light on it."

"Battery's low. We'd better save it for when my Grandma gets closer. And would you take that ice pick or whatever it is out of my neck? I'm not going anywhere."

Jax thought about that and lowered her weapon, which turned out to be a sharp pencil. Danni took the pencil, pulled her pistol from her pocket, and aimed it at Jax. "Okay, no more funny business."

Danni's stomach growled, this time, louder. She thought about climbing into the back of the rig and getting a bottle of fruit juice, but she didn't want to leave Jax alone and didn't want the hassle of taking her with her. She would just wait for now. They had water.

To keep her mind off her hunger and her fear, Danni started a conversation with the girl pirate, all the while holding the pistol on her. "So, I don't understand how you people can do what you do." Jax glanced at her then continued to stare straight ahead. "I mean, don't you have any sense of integrity? Stealing from other people? I just don't get it." Jax gave her an angry stare but said nothing. Danni decided it would be better to keep quiet, not rile the girl up.

Danni covered herself with her blanket and tried hard not to doze off, but the howling wind had a hypnotic effect on her, and she soon fell asleep. It seemed as though she had been asleep only a few minutes when she heard a loud banging on her window.

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"Open up!" a hooded figure yelled. She didn't recognize the voice. Must be one of Jax's hoodlums. She kept her pistol trained on Jax.

"Forget it. Get away!" Danni yelled.

The hooded man scraped snow away from the driver's side of the rig and pointed a shotgun into Danni's face. "I'm afraid I can't do that," he said. "Open up...now!"

Danni realized she was outgunned. Her small pistol was no match for the pirate's shotgun. Reluctantly, she lowered it and unlocked the door. Before it was open, another pirate barged into the passenger side and removed Jax. The cold wind assaulted Danni at once and she covered her head with her blanket. Before she knew it, her pistol had been snatched away and she was thrown down onto the snow-covered ground.

A large hand grabbed her collar and pulled her to her feet. "Unlock the back," the voice demanded. She was thrown toward the back of the rig and stumbled the rest of the way to the back door. She thought about "forgetting" the lock's combination, but then decided against that. No one would believe her.

Danni fumbled with the number pad on the outside of the truck, trying to go as slowly as possible.

"Hurry it up. I don't got all day," said the man.

"My hands are freezing. Give me a minute," Danni answered angrily.

When she finally got the door open, the two men stepped up into the rig and surveyed the loot. Jax held Danni's pistol on Danni. When the men returned, they decided they could use everything in the truck. Danni thought they'd transfer it all to their own rig, but as it turned out, they had a truck capable of pulling Danni's rig out of the snow. Her heart sunk as she realized they were going to leave her stranded there or maybe even kill her before they took off. She would freeze to death before Grandma even found her.

"Let me grab my handbag at least, said Danni." She had stuffed her radiophone inside it, but it wouldn't do her much good if the pirates took it away from her. And of course they did, once they searched her bag.

Danni watched while the men connected their towing cables to her rig. Worse than being cold was the sick feeling inside her. Thoughts of her family's work, the villagers who had entrusted her with their money to buy supplies, the long winter they would endure without those supplies, and herself letting them all down, made her start to cry. She was losing her grip, and the harder she tried to hold onto some sense of reason, the harder it was to keep from crying. She held her breath as long as she could before letting go with her emotions, then she buried her face in her hands and wept.

She couldn't watch. She listened while the giant grappling hooks attached to her rig and heard the tow truck's grating motor pull The Monster out of the snow. Her rig, well it wasn't hers anymore, would have ugly scars from the hooks poking into her underside, and if she were ever to recover her rig, it would have to have major body work to hide the embarrassing fact that it had been hijacked.

The tow truck's lift stopped, and Danni dared to peek at her rig hanging in the air. Pretty soon they would attach a tractor beam to it, and The Monster would vanish from her sight for good. Danni's heart beat faster as she more fully realized her dire predicament. If she only had a transponder or even her phone, she would have some hope. But as it was, she saw no way out. Her heart filled with despair and she fell to the ground on her knees, burying herself in the snow.

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A moment later, Danni heard gunshots. She looked up to see a medium-sized aircar coming toward her. As it got closer, she recognized it as belonging to her family by the windprop logo on the side. She saw a rifle poking out of each side of the car, and she heard shots fired. Her heart filled with hope.

Jax looked away, and Danni used her distraction to try and knock the pistol out of her hand, but Danni wasn't quick enough. Jax saw her coming and took a shot at Danni, barely missing her left shoulder. Danni was shocked. She didn't expect the girl to actually fire on her, but these pirates were taught to be ruthless.

In the meantime, the Elright family's aircar drew closer. The rifle shots from the aircar became louder and more frequent. Danni and Jax turned toward the sound of the fire, Jax keeping the pistol trained on Danni. Danni recognized Grandma in the driver's seat and her brother, Mark, in the passenger seat. The pirates fired back but only managed to scar the hull of the aircar with a few pockmarks.

Grandma zoomed in closer and shot the gun out of the larger pirate's hands. He twisted and shook his hands. The other pirate took a shot at Grandma and came dangerously close to hitting her. The bullet nicked the window frame of the driver's side. Grandma jerked and made a sharp U-turn. Mark caught the pirate by surprise and hit him smack between the eyes. He fell with no struggle, dropping his shotgun into the snow.

Grandma turned the aircar back around so that she was facing Jax, who was still holding the pistol on Danni. Danni hoped Jax would give it up—she didn't want to see the girl shot. "Let it go," Grandma yelled out to Jax. But Jax grabbed Danni around the neck and held the pistol to her head. Danni didn't dare struggle. She suspected the girl would have no qualms about shooting her. Grandma pulled back her rifle and swooped the aircar down, setting it lightly on the wet snow. Grandma got out and walked toward Jax and Danni, while Mark ran for the tow truck, which was now holding The Monster by a thick green tractor beam.

Jax wouldn't let up on Danni. "Get me outta here and I'll let her go," Jax told Grandma. Now that her fellow pirates were down, she needed a ride home or wherever she wanted to go. Grandma didn't even answer. She whipped around the back side of Jax faster than a rabbit running from a coyote and disarmed her in one slick motion, taking the pistol right out of her hand and releasing Danni from her grip.

"It's all clear in here," Mark yelled from the tow truck. He ran toward Grandma, Danni and Jax. "We're going to need it to haul The Monster home," he said. "What'll we do with the bodies?" He looked over at the two fallen pirates. They were dead as doornails.

Just then, Jax pulled out of Grandma's grip and dug one of her cohort's shotguns out of the snow. Danni ran toward her and tried to grab it, but Jax already had the gun cocked and ready to fire. Grandma, upon seeing Danni's life in danger, pulled her own pistol with lightning speed and shot Jax smack in the chest. She must've hit an artery, because blood spurted out of her just before she fell.

Danni was horrified. She looked at Grandma as if to say, "What have you done?"

Grandma read her mind. "She was going to shoot you, Danni. I couldn't let her do that."

Danni said nothing, just went over to Jax's side and fell on her knees into the snow beside her. Danni couldn't talk. Her throat felt like she'd swallowed a whole chicken, feathers and all. Tears welled up in her eyes. Why did she care so much for the girl? Was she thinking she could take her home and somehow reform her into a model citizen? How

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foolish of her to think so. Still, she was only fourteen. Perhaps she could have changed. She just didn't understand the criminal mind.

Grandma let her grieve for a few minutes. Danni barely noticed Grandma and Mark loading the men's bodies into The Monster. They could have left them there, but Grandma did what was right. Even though they were nasty pirates, they were still human beings.

"Come on, Danni. We gotta get going. That tractor beam won't hold forever. Not even sure if we'll make it back to the farm, but we're gonna try.

Danni reluctantly stood and watched while Grandma and Mark picked up Jax and set her in The Monster beside her fellow pirates, then covered them with a blanket.

"How'd you finally find me?" Danni asked Grandma when they were in the aircar and on their way back. Jax threw out my transponder.

Grandma picked up Danni's radiophone that she had fetched from one of the pirates. She tapped the bottom of it. "I had a small chip installed in this thing before you left. It's got a transponder in it. Only trouble is, the phone had to be turned on for it to send a signal. So when you tried your phone, then turned it off again, there wasn't enough time for me to pick up your signal. It was only after I got close enough and spoke to you that I got a fix on your location." Grandma shook her head. "In the old days, I could have got you in a few seconds with GPS."

Danni frowned. "That have something to do with communication satellites?"

"You betcha," said Grandma. "People are still afraid of their privacy being invaded, but that technology saved a lot of lives."

"Well, I still want to learn to build those satellites," Danni said. "But I think I'll hang around the farm for a while, maybe another year. I've got a lot to think about."

"Sorry I had to kill her," Grandma said.

"I know, you had to." Danni felt unusually quiet, even withdrawn. Her job at the gearbox factory didn't seem so awful now. In fact, she was eager to get back to it—to work with her hands and not have to think too much. She should be glad the pirates didn't get away with her supplies. She should be glad she wasn't wounded or dead. She should be glad she had a family that cared for her. She should be glad.... But she'd started to get to know Jax. Maybe should could have reformed her. Maybe Jax could have become part of the family. Maybe. Or Jax could have ripped them off royally. Who knew? It was too late to know now.