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CHAPTER

I

THE BIG SCORE

Well, that's it. We're stuck." Rabbit emerged from under the hood, looking as if she was ready to kick something. Zack opened one eye to look at her and made a mental note to stay out of her way. The one thing Rabbit would never do was kick their battered, ancient pickup, affectionately called "The Camel". The Camel was her pride and joy, and the little mechanic treated it like it was her own child. Anything else was fair game.

"We're out of gas. One of those bolts the raiders shot at us was an armor-piercer . . . it tore right through the plating I put on the fuel tank. I can patch the hole easy, but unless anybody just happens to have some fuel in their pants pocket, we have nothing to fill it with." She threw her hands up in a very Rabbit-esque gesture of exasperation. "So now what do we do?"

Zack watched the other members of the group mill about from his comfortable resting perch in the pickup's flatbed. Rabbit paced angrily. Bang-Bang was cleaning and loading her guns, as if she hoped to shoot her way out of this fix, and Jack, the Albino Giant, sat and stared glumly out at the horizon, as if he hoped that a stack of fuel cans would mysteriously pop up from nowhere. Not that he would be able to see them if they did . . . the Giant's eyesight wasn't the best under

« Gang members on patrol in their vaunted Uber-Wagon, somewhere deep in the Waste.

ideal circumstances. Here, in the glare of the desert sun, he was next to blind. Of the other two members of their party, nothing

could be seen. Merla, the group's Desert Witch, lay unconscious in her lean-to towards the front of the flatbed, as she had been since an Outlaw's crossbow bolt struck her in the chest. The injuries weren't life-threatening yet but having the Witch out of commission, here in the middle of the desert, was bad. Without her powers to protect her from the sun and parching heat, she was in serious trouble . . . and so were the rest of them.

The last member of the party was Rabbit's brother, Rat. Zack wasn't surprised that he was nowhere to be seen . . . that was normal. Rat was, in Zack's opinion, one of the more useful members of the team. He was a fair hand in a fight, willing to get in a dirty blow or three if it would do the trick, but his real talents lay elsewhere. A master scrounge, he seemed to have a knack for finding what they needed, or a reasonable facsimile, no matter where they were. Sometimes, his improvised solutions worked out even better than whatever they sent him out for in the first place. On top of this, Rat was a shaman, who had laboriously picked up a number of druidic spells during a stay with a small clan of the nature-lovers. If there was one thing that Zack had to count on, it was that Rat never came back from a scrounge empty-handed.

"Nothing." All heads turned to see Rat standing at the top of a nearby rise, looking dusty, hot, and discouraged. "There is absolutely nothing within a mile of this godforsaken spot except rocks, dirt, heat, and a nest of nasty-looking scorpions that I steered well clear of. I think we're in trouble."

Zack closed his eyes. If Rat couldn't find anything, they were in bad shape. And that meant it was up to him to pull their collective tuckusses out of the proverbial fire. As the party's guide and scout his skills were of paramount importance in a situation like this, where they could mean the difference

between life or death. In the city, he was content to drop back and let someone else take the lead. Here, in the desert, it was his orders that held weight.

"Okay," he drawled, managing to keep the worry out of his voice. "We got about five gallons of drinking water left. That's not so good. We'll drain what's in the radiator and purify it as best we can. It still won't taste none too good, and we won't drink it 'less we have to . . . but best to have it if we need it." Rabbit frowned, and Zack could hear the objection coming. He beat her to the pass. "I'm gonna take a couple canteens and strike out east. We know that the raiders are to the north, and the mountains are to the west . . . so if there's a town nearby, it's probably to the east. Raiders like to have something reasonably close-by to raid. If I find anything, I'll come back and we'll pack up everything we can. Food gets priority. Then we start walking."

Now Rabbit did object. "What, and leave the Camel out here? What happens if someone comes along and . . ."

Bang-Bang cut her off with a disgusted snort. "Comes along? Take a look around you, chica. Nobody's 'come along' this way in years. At least nobody who wasn't crazy or stupid like us. Even those raiders weren't insane enough to follow us out here."

Rabbit started to snap back at Bang-Bang, but Zack cut her off. The little mechanic had a wicked temper, and was good with her fists, but the bigger woman would have flattened her with no trouble, and they couldn't afford fights. "Bang-Bang's right, Rabbit. Nobody's gonna bother the Camel out here. We'll cover her up with a tarp and heap sand on it as best we can, so it'll look like a dune 'less you know what you're looking for." He paused, then added, almost gently, "But it ain't gonna do the Camel nor us a bit of good if the next bunch that does 'come along' finds six sets o' bones to go with the truck. Merla needs help, an' that's the truth. So do we. We'll come back for the Camel."

Rabbit bit her lip, then nodded once. She was obviously unhappy about the whole situation, but she had a good enough head on her shoulders to realize that their lives took priority over any piece of equipment, even their prized truck. But she had a point. The truck couldn't be replaced. Outside the dome cities, working gas-powered vehicles were next to impossible to find. The Camel might be battered, but it was priceless, no more a thing to be abandoned

than one of their companions.

"Well, while we're waiting, we might as well take care of that flat tire," she grumbled. "Hey, Jack!" The Giant nodded, walked to the front of the truck, and deadlifted it with a grunt. Though he couldn't talk or write, and they didn't even know if he had a real name, Rabbit had christened the Albino "Jack" precisely because of this handy talent.

"Okay, then." Zack jumped down from the back of the truck. Taking two canteens, he filled them from their small keg of pure drinking water, being careful not to spill a drop. He slung one over each shoulder, then turned to face the other members of his party.

"If I'm not back in six hours, we're in trouble. In that case . . ." He paused, then shrugged. "Take the rest of the water and Merla, and head south."

"Why south?" Bang-Bang wanted to know.

"Because if I'm not back, it means I found something nasty to the east," Zack replied. He slung the second canteen over his shoulder, mentally gauged the weight, then nodded to himself and started walking. "Wish me luck."

Four hours later found Zack still walking. Over half his water was gone, despite strict rationing, and he was starting to get discouraged. He'd have to work hard to make it back to the truck before the six hour deadline as it was, and he hadn't seen anything yet. At least night was falling, and the heat wouldn't be a problem.

Out on the horizon, a glint of something in the slowly deepening twilight caught his attention. Zack looked up, frowning, then fumbled in his pack for his binoculars. He raised them to his eyes and scowled; one of the lenses had cracked, probably in the fight they barely got away from this morning. Still, cracked binoculars were better than no binoculars at all, and they were showing him exactly what he wanted to see. Near a rise of hills in the distance stood an oasis of some sort. Low buildings could be made out here and there, and a wisp of smoke was coming from one of them. A town!

Zack got to his feet, scarcely able to believe his good fortune. The cynic in him warned him to check the town first, and make sure it was safe. He weighed the risk of strolling into an unknown town against the steadily decreasing amount of time he had left to get back to the others and decided that it was a risk he was going to have to take. Knowing whether the town was peaceful or not would do no good if the rest

of the group wasn't there when he got back. Sighing, he turned and headed back down the hill.

The trip back went more quickly than Zack had dared hope. The moon gleamed white in the night sky, lighting the way. Zack's pa had told him when he was still a boy that once, men had lived on the moon, in underground cities . . . but the war had reached even there. As his brisk pace ate up the miles, Zack found a few moments to wonder what it would be like to live on the moon.

They were waiting when he got back. Zack was pleased to see that they hadn't wasted time. All of the most vital supplies were bundled into packs for each member. A makeshift travois had been assembled, presumably to drag Merla, who was resting on it now. The truck had been covered with the tarp and a light dusting of sand, in anticipation of his return. He strode to the center of the camp and put two fingers in his mouth, whistling for attention.

"Well, guys an' girls, things are looking up. There's a town about three hours walk east of here, four with Merla. Looks like they got water an' food. Maybe they got gas, too. And maybe we got something they'll want. Rat, what have we got that kin be spared?"

The wiry little scrounge grinned. "Spared? Nothing. What have we got that we don't absolutely, positively need? Hmm. Seven shotgun shells, a handaxe, eight assorted pots and pans. Two first-aid manuals which I memorized already. And a case of colored toilet paper."

Zack couldn't keep himself from chuckling. No matter when anyone asked, Rat seemed to have a perfect mental inventory of everything they were carrying. If someone were to ask both Zack and Rat what was in Zack's pockets, he was pretty sure Rat's answer would be closer.

"Okay. Load it all up, we'll take it along. With any luck, we'll be up and running again by this time tomorrow night."

A little less than four hours later, the group crouched on a hill close to the town, passing the binoculars back and forth and quietly discussing their options. Bang-Bang was cleaning and loading her guns, kissing each bullet before carefully loading it into the magazine. The kissing of the bullets was a ritual for Bang-Bang, and there was something almost sensuous in it. Zack sighed inwardly as he watched her, because he could tell that she was just aching for the chance to shoot something. It wasn't so much her

in-your-face attitude that bothered him, it was her love of firearms. Out here in the Waste, a bullet could be traded for enough food to last seven days, if you were a sharp bargainer. Didn't the woman realize that actually firing bullets was a waste, especially when a good crossbow would kill someone just as dead? With a slight shake of his head, Zack motioned them back down.

"Okay, here's how we do it," he said. "We're gonna go in in two groups. Rat." The little scavenger looked up from his place by Merla. "You and I will go in first, take a look around, see what's what. The rest of you follow us when we signal you, or after fifteen minutes if you don't hear nothin' from us. No guns, Bang-Bang!"

She glared at him. "That's what you always say. Look, I don't care how many ears of punkcorn we could get for a bullet. You ever tried to drive off a mutant grizzly bear by throwing corn at it? Besides, a little village like this, they've probably never even seen a gun. One shot in the air and they'll think we're thunder-demons or something, and go running!"

"Yeah, you could be right. Or, you could be wrong. And if you're wrong, we don't need the whole damn town coming to see what the noise is! Crossbows and hand weapons only. Rabbit, keep her outta trouble, okay?"

As he spoke, Zack cocked and readied one of the group's four prized crossbows. These weren't the crude Homespun devices of the Waste. They were top of the line aluminum custom-jobs, production made for certain. When the little peddler had offered them, nobody had asked him where they'd come from, and although they'd cost an arm and a leg, the weapons had paid for themselves ten times over since then. Everybody in the group was a mean shot with the crossbow. Bang-Bang preferred her 'babies', of course, and Jack habitually used a Repeater that Zack probably couldn't have lifted, let alone fired.

Seeing that everything was ready, Zack motioned to Rat, who gave Merla's shoulder one last gentle pat, hefted another of the crossbows, and nodded. Without a word, the two of them crested the hill and began the descent towards the town below. They moved quickly, and silently, communicating with small gestures and facial expressions that told just as much to the trained eye as words could have. Rat gestured to the ground beneath their feet, which was plowed in regular furrows — a farmer's field. Zack

nodded to show that he'd noticed. Five minutes' walk brought them to the first of the buildings, a one-story stone and adobe structure, probably the farmhouse which belonged to the field they'd just passed. Zack scowled; something wasn't right. A second later, he realized what. No noise at all, not from the house, or from the fowl yard he could just see around the side of the house. He turned to look for Rat and that was when he felt something pointy being pressed into his back.

"Don't move," a voice hissed from behind him. "Don't even think about moving. And drop the 'bow, while you're at it."

Zack set the bow down, slowly, and equally as slowly raised his arms in the air. In his head, he was trying to gauge his position. Could the others up on the hill see him, or was he hidden by the house? He wasn't sure, and wasn't about to risk turning around to find out. "We're not here to make trouble. We came to trade."

The voice behind him sneered. "Yeah, right. In the middle of the night. With a loaded crossbow. That ain't how we trade around here, stranger. PA! Hey, pa! I got t'other one right here!"

A grey-haired man dressed in homespun clothes came around the side of the house, brandishing a spear and scowling like a thundercloud. "Shut'cher fool mouth, boy! Just 'cause we caught these two here don't mean there ain't more of 'em!" He walked over to Zack and studied him with a scowl. "All right, bandit-boy. Your kind always travels in packs like rats. Where's the rest of your rat-pack?"

He raised his spear slightly, aiming it at the middle of Zack's chest.

"Right here." From the shadows to the left came the distinctive sound of a bullet being chambered into a rifle, and Bang-Bang stepped out of the gloom. Flanking her to the right and left were Rabbit and Jack. Each held a loaded crossbow, and kept their backs to each other. Bang-Bang smiled coldly. "You're lucky we're not the bandits you thought we were, hombre, or I'd drop you where you stand for pointing a spear at a friend of mine. As it is, I'm gonna give you and Junior there to the count of five before I do something which I'm sure we'd both regret. I hate wasting bullets." She directed a quick grin at Zack, then started counting. "One. Two. Three."

The spears hit the ground before she got to four.

Twenty minutes later, they were sitting in the

kitchen of the farmhouse, relating their story by the light of a kerosene lamp. Rabbit's face had brightened when she first saw this, and smelled the distinctive fumes, and Zack couldn't say as he blamed her for it. Kerosene meant gasoline, more likely than not, which meant that they might get the Camel running yet. In the back of the room, Merla had been laid as comfortably as possible on a cot. She kept drifting in and out of consciousness, and was obviously in a great deal of pain, but at least she wasn't comatose anymore, and that was a good sign.

"... and that's how we come to be here. I know having us roaming around your yard at night must have looked bad, but we ran into a pack of raiders north of here, and didn't much like the idea of strolling into their hometown without some warning." Rabbit was talking, and doing a good job of it. For all her mercuric temper, the little mechanic could charm the antlers off an Orgon if she had to. "We were hoping to trade for fuel, care for Merla, and maybe some water, if possible."

Jebb, the farmer, nodded. His three sons and wife sat listening, but seemed content to let him do the talking. And Zack reflected inwardly, if they were all as bright as the one who caught him and then yelled out loud for Jebb, maybe that was a good thing.

"Believe you 'bout the raiders. They been hitting us pretty hard of a late. One of the reasons we caught you. Town's been sending out patrols a'night. Only thing is, we can't rightly do much trading with bandits taking everything extra we got an' then some. T'morrow, I'll take you t'see the council, and we'll get the Healer t'come see your friend. For tonight, best to get some sleep." With that, the old farmer stood and dimmed the lamp. "Fraid we ain't got but the one extra cot, but you're welcome t'use the floor, same as the boys." Zack shrugged, nodded a thank you, and spread out his blankets, as he could see the others doing around him. They'd certainly had worse accommodations for the night before.

Early the next morning, Jebb roused them to go to the Council. Jack elected to stay and help out around the farmhouse; the bright sun was especially painful to his eyes today. Anneke, Jebb's wife, seemed a little wary of the huge, menacing-looking giant at first, but his gentle demeanor seemed to take away most of her fears.

On their way to the Council House, they met Jorly, the youngest of the boys, returning to the house

with the Healer, a slender man of indeterminate years who was introduced as Brother Hanjis. The Healer gravely promised them that he would do his best for their companion, and seemed at least mildly pleased by the news that she had been conscious the previous night. Despite the fact that the Healer wore plain white robes, rather than the flashier garb preferred by many mages and witches, Zack was impressed by his quiet confidence.

The Council Hall was a larger building near the center of the oasis. It had the same adobe construction as Jebb's farmhouse, but was painted white, and even had a few windows of real glass. Inside, a group of twelve older men and women heard their story. After deliberating, the spokesman, an ancient man who must have been at least 60, came forward and spoke.

"We have the things you need. Food, water, yes, even fuel. But such things are precious, especially when the need is great. Your need, unless I am wrong, is great . . . and so is ours. We will give you the supplies you need, but first, you must do something for us. You must drive away the bandits who raid our town!"

"This is nuts," complained Rat when they'd assembled outside to discuss the Council's offer. "It was messing with those damn Outlaws that got us in trouble in the first place! Look, we know they've got the fuel to spare, or they wouldn't be dangling it in front of our faces. I can find it, and we'll get out of here no problem!"

"That's not how we do business!" Rabbit glared at her brother. "We're a part of the Underground now, and that means we're supposed to help people like this, not steal from them! Or had you forgotten that, little brother?"

Rat scowled back, and Zack groaned to himself. This had all the makings of a patented Clearwater Twins Family Argument, and a big one. "Wait a minute, before you two tear each other apart, let's jus . . ."

TWUNG! The distinctive sound of a bowstring releasing interrupted their discussion, and Zack felt something whistle past his cheek. Less than an instant later, a spiderweb of cracks appeared in a nearby wall as the crossbow bolt imbedded itself, but Zack wasn't there to see it, he was already diving for cover. Out in the wastelands beyond the Domes, beyond the Shanty Towns which surrounded them, there were

two kinds of people. One kind was very, very good at knowing when to duck. The other kind was very, very good at catching bullets. Zack was the first kind, and it was only after he'd found cover behind a good, solid hillock that he took stock of the situation.

What he saw made him curse to himself. At least two dozen mounted raiders, maybe more. Their crossbows and hand weapons were crude, the hand-made products of the Wretched, but they were still plenty deadly. That was bad. Next to him, Bang-Bang was grinning. That was much worse. "Showtime," she whispered, with a feral smile and all of a sudden, she was gone, sprinting across the distance between their hillock and the nearest building.

"Here's a kiss from Bang-Bang, you bastards!" Bang-Bang's scream was half berserk rage, half laughter. She enjoyed this sort of thing. She cranked off shot after shot from her revolvers, firing two-handed while still running. As Zack popped up to fire, he saw that she'd already managed to drop three of them. Smiling grimly, he planted a bolt square between the eyes of another. Four down, too damned many to go and now the raiders were scattering, firing back. Some of the townsfolk were taking up positions with weapons of their own, spears, bows, and even a flintlock musket, but they were no fighters. Things were looking bad.

"Hey, Zack! Catch!" One of Bang-Bang's revolvers thunked into his hands, and she pointed before running off to rejoin the fray. "The kids need help!" Rat and Rabbit were back to back, holding off half a dozen circling attackers on horseback. The arrows and bolts of the attackers were coming perilously close to them already, and it was obvious that soon, the raiders would grow tired of playing. Dropping into a low sprint, Zack took up position behind a wagon.

Six riders. Six shots. He was going to have to make every one count.

CRACK! The first rider went down, clutching his chest. "Hey, you!" CRACK! Only a shoulder wound, but it knocked the second rider from his horse. "I hate . . ." CRACK! "Having . . ." CRACK! "To waste bullets . . ." CRACK! "On the likes of you!"

Zack snapped the revolver around to point at the last white-faced rider and pulled the trigger. There was no 'crack', this time, only a sickening 'click'. Zack's stomach dropped into his shoes.

The rider sneered and slowly began to lower his

wrist crossbow. "Out of bullets? Aww, now isn't that just too . . ." A look of surprise crossed his face, and he stared stupidly down at the point of the bolt protruding from his chest. ". . . buh. Bad." He slumped and fell off the horse. Behind him, Rat was sneering to himself as he reloaded. "Hey, dung-head, in your next life maybe you won't be stupid enough to turn your back on armed opponents!"

The three of them sprinted up a side street, following the staccato reports of Bang-Bang's other revolver. They found her and two of the townies making a stand at the council hall. What looked like the rest of the raiders had them pinned in the building, and for the thousandth time that day, Zack cursed. There was at least fifteen of them left! It was going to take a miracle to get Bang-Bang out alive.

And then the miracle came, a gentle breeze that gradually picked up speed and intensity until a massive dust devil whirled in the middle of the street. With supernatural precision, it darted this way and that, knocking riders off their horses and surrounding them with blinding, stinging sand. Merla! Zack looked around, and saw the Desert Witch, supported by Jack, standing nearby. Her face was set in intense concentration, forcing the twister to conform to her will.

Confronted by an enemy they couldn't fight, the raiders broke ranks and ran. Zack and the twins were able to drop half a dozen more with their crossbows before they got out of range. The twister vanished, and Merla slumped exhaustedly against Jack. "Thank all the powers of sand and sky for superstitious bandits. I couldn't have kept that up much longer."

Later that evening, as the townsfolk tended to their wounded, another reunion of sorts took place. With the aid of several plow animals, the Camel was successfully towed into town. While Rabbit made sure that no harm had come to 'her baby', the rest of the group met with the Council again.

"Okay. So, you want us to hit the raiders' home base up in the hills and make sure that they don't come back to bother you again." Rat was pacing slowly, face thoughtful, as he handled the negotiations. "And in exchange, we get fuel, enough to fill the Camel's tanks. Food and water. Medical treatment, if we need it. Plus, you reimburse us for the ammunition we burned up saving your village earlier today. Fair enough?"

The Council elder nodded slowly. "If you can do

this thing, that is certainly fair. There is one small difficulty. We are a small village. Spears and bows are our weapons, not guns. We cannot replace the shots you fired. However . . ." He motioned, and a girl near the back of the building brought forth a largish wooden case. "We can offer this." He opened the case. Inside was a shotgun, one from before the war for sure, beautifully preserved, without a speck of rust to be seen anywhere on it. Bang-Bang looked as if she might pass out. "We offer you this gun, fourteen shells for it, food, water, fuel, and the hospitality of our village. In exchange, you will eliminate the raiders. Is this an acceptable bargain?"

Rat looked to the others. Zack nodded slightly. Bang-Bang still looked as if she had just found her one true love. Merla and Jack gave no indications. Rat turned back and spat on his hand. "Deal." The Elder did likewise, and the two of them clasped hands.

"Anything yet?"

Rabbit's soft whisper sounded loud in Zack's ears. Then again, when you're sitting in a ravine less than a quarter of a mile from a bandit camp, just about anything sounds loud, at least Zack thought so. He shook his head slightly. "Nothing. The last sentry switch was three hours ago." He put away the binoculars and stood, behind the shelter of the rock outcropping. "We won't get a better chance. They'll be changing guards again in an hour. I'm pretty sure that everybody else is sleeping out the heat of the day, an' those guys out there are startin' ta get tired. You know the plan?" Five nods. "Okay, then. Let's do it. Rabbit goes with Bang-Bang, Jack with Merla. Rat, you're with me."

Zack and Rat made their way around the perimeter of the camp carefully, at a low crawl. Being spotted would be the worst thing that could possibly happen; the whole plan depended on timing. After what seemed like hours, they reached the relative safety and concealment of the horse pens. Peeking out around the rear of a piebald mare, he could just make out the mouth of the bandits' cave. Now it was all up to the others.

Rat nudged him, and pointed. Above the rim of the cave, a black silhouette moved briefly, then was gone. Everything was ready. "Straps cut?" he whispered, so softly it was barely a noise. Rat nodded. "In that case . . ." With an earsplitting yell, Zack stood.

Rat echoed his actions, shouting and waving at the horses. Spooked, the horses began to move, then to run, then to stampede. As the guards rounded the bend, they had barely enough time to gape before they were swept under by the wall of horses. Zack and Rat grinned, then grabbed the reins of the six horses they had left tethered.

Over the thundering of the horses' hooves and the high sounds of their whinnying, a new sound emerged from the cave, cries of warning and shouted directions. Zack turned to see the first wave of bandits pour out of the cave mouth, already loosing bolts and arrows in their direction.

Suddenly, there was a tremendous roar, and the face of the hill seemed to come down and swallow the raiders! Zack cheered inwardly. Rabbit had done her job. It had taken a lot of talking to persuade the Council to part with enough fuel for a fuel-bomb. Thanks to that, and Rabbit's skill with timers, they might just get out of this alive.

Rabbit and Bang-Bang were waiting for them a little ways down the ravine. They didn't waste any time with greetings; already they could hear from behind them the sounds of the remaining raiders mounting pursuit. They thundered down the ravine, the horses' hooves splashing in the shallow river which ran along its bed.

Then they reined in next to a dip in the ravine wall. Dismounting, they slapped the horse's shanks, sending them galloping on ahead riderless. Bang-Bang looked back up the trail and hissed, "hurry." Rat nodded. Removing a pinch of small seeds from the medicine pouch he wore about his neck, he quickly dug a shallow hole and buried them. Then he began to concentrate. Within seconds, the ground began to swell and bulge. A clinging vine, as thick around as Zack's wrist, shot out of the ground and began to wind its way up the cliff to the top.

"Start climbing," Rat gasped. "It'll hold." They started up, hand over hand, first Rabbit, then Zack, then Bang-Bang, and finally Rat. The climbing was treacherous, but they pulled themselves up as quickly as possible, the sounds of pursuit growing louder every second.

Rat reached the top just in time. Below, the remaining raiders tore by at breakneck speed, mounted on what horses they'd been able to recapture. The four of them exchanged glances, and then looked up. Seconds later, clouds began to form in the clear mid-

day sky. The light grew dimmer as ominous black thunderheads took shape. A single drop of rain fell on Zack's nose and then the clouds broke open and the rain came down in a solid sheet. The sound of the rain and thunder was loud enough to almost drown out the bandit's distant cries of alarm but not quite. And now there was another sound, from further up the ravine, a very ominous rumbling which grew louder with every second.

Flash flooding was always a danger in ravines like this, especially when you had a Desert Witch to provide a sudden, intense downpour. Merla's spell had done its work. A massive surge of water came roaring down the bed of the ravine, thundering past them towards the hapless, trapped bandits. Within seconds, it was over, and the cries of alarm had died away. The rain slackened, then stopped, leaving a clear blue sky once again.

Twenty-four hours later found them on the road again, already six hours out from Oasis. Zack was comfortably sprawled in his usual seat in the back of the Camel, enjoying the feel of the wind on his face. Next to him were Merla and their newest recruit, Brother Hanjits' apprentice Andin. Even an apprentice Healer would be useful, and it would be an opportunity for him to gain valuable experience in his quest for full Healer status. As they rolled out of the village, he smiled a little. For all the trouble they'd been through, things had turned out well enough. Nobody lost or seriously hurt, the Camel fully stocked with provisions, and they'd managed to save a small town from destruction. It was shaping up to be a good day and then the truck's engine spluttered and died. Five minutes later, Rabbit looked up from under the hood. "I don't believe this! The battery's dead! We're stuck in the middle of nowhere, all over again!"

Zack couldn't resist. "But at least we've got plenty of gas."

Rabbit threw a wrench at him.

