

THE HOUR OF THE WOLF

by Allison

"Where am I?" Vincent shook his head, trying to clear his blurred vision. As his eyes focused, he could dimly see that he was inside some type of metal container. He couldn't hear any noise outside of where he was. Slowly he rose to his feet, reaching out to steady himself as a wave of dizziness hit him. As the dizziness passed he surveyed his surroundings. In the far corner he saw a tray of food with some blankets on the floor next to it.

'How did I get here?' he wondered. The last thing he remembered was seeing the entrance to the drainage tunnel in Central Park. Another thought struck him. *'How long have I been here?'* He then noticed a small opening in one of the container doors, too small to escape from but enough to where he could see outside. As he examined the opening, he reached for a banana on the tray. Suddenly he could hear some noise from outside the container. A shadow paused outside the opening.

A familiar voice called out. "You better eat, Vincent. You're gonna need your strength where you're going."

"Mitch? Is that you?"

"I told you I'd get even."

"Where am I? Where are you taking me?"

"Some place your precious Chandler won't be able to find or help you." Mitch's voice was tinged with cruel laughter.

"Why Mitch? Why would you do this?"

"Money, Vincent. The all American dollar. You've gotten careless, pal. Father always warned you about going Above. How you could be seen, get caught."

"Then help me. Let me go." Vincent leaned toward the small window, trying to see Mitch.

"Not a chance. Where you're going, you'll be lucky if you survive a week."

"What do you mean?"

"You'll find out soon enough." Mitch's voice faded away and Vincent was once again alone. He tested the door where the window was and found it was securely locked. He knew in his present condition he would never get the door opened. Reluctantly he finished the food on the tray then settled himself on the floor. Soon Vincent felt the container move, then the sound of

an airplane engine. The container containing Vincent was maneuvered into the hold of a waiting C-141. Vincent could catch glimpses of men moving around through the small opening.

"Is everything secure?" one voice called out.

"Yes, the container's secured," another voice said.

"The flight should take 6 hours to reach LA where we'll refuel and then another 14 hours with one stopover. Make sure nothing happens to the contents. Mr. Zonis will have your head otherwise," the first voice reminded the other.

"I know, I know," the second voice responded. "Hey, is that guy real inside that thing?"

"They're ready to close the tail section. We better get going," the first voice said. "We're being paid enough not to ask any questions." The other man nodded.

The sound of footsteps faded away and Vincent could hear the back section of the plane close with an audible clang. He felt the plane start to move, the engine noise suddenly deafening. The plane jolted as the wheels lifted from the ground and he heard them rumble as they retracted into the belly of the C-141. Vincent noticed a pile of cushions in another corner of the container. He settled himself on the cushions and knew he would have to wait till he arrived at his destination for Mitch's plan to be revealed. He could feel Catherine's concern, brought on by a surge in the bond between them. Vincent tried to calm his feelings so she wouldn't be drawn to him and possible danger from Mitch.

Catherine hurried to Father's chamber, a feeling of dread overshadowing every other emotion. She felt Vincent's confusion and anxiety radiate through the bond but it seemed far away. She wondered where he was, what was causing these feelings. The bond felt like it did when she was on the plane, leaving for LA. She wondered why the bond would feel this way. It never felt like this before when Vincent went to the lower tunnels before. The last time she felt something like this was when Vincent and Father were trapped in The Maze. *'Is that where he went? The lower tunnels? The Maze? Did something happen to him?'* she pondered. *'Maybe Mouse can help me find him. He never mentioned he was going anywhere. He usually lets me know if he's taking a journey somewhere like this.'* Suddenly the light from Father's chamber shone ahead.

"Father...?" she called out as she entered.

"Catherine! What a pleasant surprise. We weren't..." His voice faded as he saw her stricken expression. "What's happened? What's wrong?"

"Do you know where Vincent is?"

"No, I haven't seen him since last night. I assumed he was in his chamber."

"Can we check?"

"Certainly." They moved down the tunnel towards Vincent's chamber. One lone candle was burning on his writing desk, the room strangely empty and silent. "That's odd. He usually told me if he was going somewhere. Tell me. What's happened? Do you sense some danger to him?"

"Our bond feels like it did when I went to LA. Like a thin, fine line between us, very faint."

"Is he all right?"

"As far as I can tell, yes. He seems anxious and concerned. That's all I can tell. You know how he can block our connection at times. I don't think he wants me to come to him. Wherever he is, he's afraid for my safety."

"We'll start a search for him. Can you tell where he is? Is he here Below or God forbid...Above?"

"I'm not sure. It does feel like there is a distancing between us. Like he's moving away from me. I have a funny feeling he's not Below, Father. I think He's Above somewhere."

"Dear God. We must contact our helpers, get them to help search for Vincent. If Vincent is Above, heaven knows how we will locate him. I'll get Mouse and the others to search the lower tunnels, just in case."

"Will you keep me advised, please? I have to go back to my office, to see if anything's on the news about him in case he is Above. We'll find him, Father."

"I know, my dear." He patted her arm then drew her into a hug.

Catherine returned to her office, pulled every favor she had with the local TV and radio stations, to let her know if any exotic animals were caught recently. She hated resorting to this tactic but she couldn't think of any other way of getting the media to help her. No one had any news of anything exotic being caught but they agreed to contact her if they heard anything. In the meantime, Father contacted the helpers and the rest of the tunnel community. They searched the city as well as the tunnels but no sign or trace of Vincent was found. Catherine checked Columbia University where Dr. Hughes had held Vincent just in case but nothing presented itself.

"Vincent, be safe, my love," Catherine whispered to the open sky as she left her office to return Below to see if Father and the others had any luck in locating Vincent.

30,000 feet and 300 miles west of Catherine's location, Vincent felt the whispered words on the wind and sighed in despair, knowing Catherine was frantic with worry and unable to locate him.

"Catherine..." he whispered.

Elliot contemplated the vellum invitation in front of him

*'Please join me at my private estate
near Lake Wanaka, New Zealand. I promise the most interesting excursion experience.
Security, transportation and discretion will be provided.
A once in a lifetime opportunity
awaits.
Stuart Zonis'*

"Stuart Zonis," Elliot murmured. "One of the richest men in the world and he's inviting me to one of his little shindigs. I finally get to see what one of his little excursions are all about? He holds one every two years. Anyone who's ever been there has never spoken of what they experienced."

Elliot checked his calendar on the computer screen in front of him and saw that there was nothing pressing that needed his attention. He also checked out a map of New Zealand on the computer to see exactly where Lake Wanaka was. He could attend this little soiree and be back in New York in no time.

"Maggie?" he spoke into the phone's speaker.

"Yes, Mr. Burch?"

"Book me the first available flight to Queenstown, New Zealand. Let me know when you have everything."

"Yes, Mr. Burch."

Elliot picked up the phone and called the number at the bottom of the invitation. "Yes, Mr. Burch." A voice answered after the first ring.

"How did you know it was me?" Elliot asked.

"The number on the bottom of the invitation was assigned specifically to you. You've decided to accept Mr. Zonis' invitation?"

"Yes."

"Excellent. Once you arrive in Queenstown, transportation will be waiting to take you to Mr. Zonis' private estate. You may bring one companion with you."

"Can you tell me anything more specific about this little excursion? Do I need to bring anything specific?"

"No sir. Everything will be provided for you."

"Well, okay then. I guess I'll meet the mysterious Mr. Zonis after I arrive."

"Yes sir. Someone will meet you at the airport. Mr. Zonis' men will be waiting to bring you to his estate. I've been instructed to tell you if you accepted his invitation that he was looking forward to meeting you."

"I look forward to meeting him as well."

"Mr. Burch?" the speaker buzzed.

"Hang on a minute. Yes?"

"Your flight to Queenstown leaves tonight at midnight from LAX. You'll arrive there around 8 am their time Friday morning. Your flight leaves JFK for LA at 6pm."

"Thank you, Maggie. Book another seat for Mr. Manning please. He'll be accompanying me. Did you hear that?"

"Yes, Mr. Burch. We look forward to your visit. I will inform Mr. Zonis and make arrangements for your stay."

"I'll contact Mr. Manning for you sir, and let him know about the flight arrangements. I'll have him meet you at the airport," Maggie said as she wrote the information down so she could inform Cleon Manning of the trip.

"Thank you, Maggie," Elliot said just before the speaker disconnected.

"If there is nothing else then, Mr. Burch," the mysterious voice inquired.

"No. Thank you." Elliot said as the call disconnected. *'This is going to be interesting.'* Elliot thought as he picked up his coat to return home and pack. *'An interesting excursion indeed.'* He smiled as he left his office and with his bodyguard walked toward his limo and home.

After what seemed an indeterminate amount of time, Vincent felt the plane start to descend again toward whatever destination Mitch was taking him to. He felt the jolt and heard the rumble as the plane lowered its landing gear. After what seemed like a few minutes Vincent heard the screech of the tires as the wheels touched down. Vincent thought they had finally reached Mitch's destination but realized the plane was only refueling yet again before moving onward. He wondered where he would finally end up and then wondered how he could possibly escape. Even if he had managed to escape, where could he run to? This time he was truly alone. The plane's engine idled while a fuel truck refilled the plane's fuel tanks. While the plane was waiting, the pilots went into the airport hangar.

"Do you have the flight plan ready?" One of the pilots asked the man behind the desk.

"Yes. Mr. Zonis arranged everything. Keep the plane below 500 feet as soon as you near Christchurch. That will keep you under the airport radar. Once you cross Christchurch follow the course on the map. That will take you to Mr. Zonis' private airfield."

"Thank you."

"Don't mention it. The next time you're here in Fiji I'll take you to a little place I know where the girls are... Oh mama...the girls..." The man gave a low wolf whistle."

The pilots nodded and returned to the C-141. The plane took flight and climbed to its cruising altitude for the final leg of the journey. After another 6 hour flight, the pilot spotted the coastline of New Zealand. The radio squawked. The pilots could hear the air traffic flying around them. The pilot slowly cut the engine's power and the plane descended to the requested altitude. It skirted the radar with ease and the lights of Christchurch. The co-pilot checked the coordinates on the map and adjusted their heading accordingly. The airfield came into view a short time later. The plane made its descent and landed on the darkened runway. The plane slowed and then taxied toward a large transport truck parked at the end of the runway. Vincent felt the plane slow and then shuddered to a halt. He heard the cargo doors creak open and a shaft of light shone through the small opening. Voices soon followed the light. Men carrying flashlights entered the cargo hold.

"Is everything secure?"

"Yes, the container is secure."

"Well, lets get that forklift in here and maneuver this thing out of here and onto the transport truck."

Vincent heard the rumble of the forklift as it entered the cargo bay. Suddenly he felt the container move and braced himself as the container was moved out of the plane and placed onto the transport truck. He saw glimpses of rope as the men threw them over the container, tying it to the truck bed.

One voice called out, "Hey, where's the driver? Mr. Zonis is waiting for this. Make sure it arrives in one piece or he'll have your head as well as mine."

"I'm here, Freddy, I'm here." Another voice stated with a twinge of tiredness. You could hear it in his voice.

"Make sure nothing happens to this container, Hank. Denton will skin you alive if there is as much as a scratch on the contents."

"Don't worry, Freddy. It's only a short drive from here to Lake Wanaka and Zonis' facility. It'll get there in one piece. What time is Denton arriving?"

"Denton's plane should be landing at Queenstown as we speak."

"I guess he'd want to inspect the contents before I leave," Hank said, looking at his watch.

"Probably. Better to wait for him then leave and hear about it later," Freddy stated.

Mitch rolled up in a jeep a short time later. He jumped out and inspected the container as it lay on the waiting truck. "Did you inspect the container doors when you loaded it?"

"Yes. Both doors were securely locked. No sign of anything trying to get out," Freddy said as Mitch checked the truck.

"The truck is fully fueled and ready to depart," Hank told Mitch as he entered the cab of the truck. "I'll get it there in one piece, Mr. Denton. Not a scratch on anything, I promise."

"Okay, get on with it then. Mr. Zonis is waiting for this to arrive so he can start his little excursion with his friends. They should be arriving in the next few days." Hank nodded his head and then put the truck into gear.

Vincent heard all of this and quietly settled himself in a corner of the container. He knew he would get his answers once he reached his final destination and met this mysterious Mr. Zonis. He didn't know what Mitch had told Zonis about him and he wondered what Zonis' excursion was about and what it had to do with him.

Mitch watched with a grin as the truck pulled away then turned and walked to the waiting jeep which would take him to the compound where he would finally introduce Mr. Zonis to Vincent.

Twelve men were standing around the prone figure lying on the floor of the large cell. The figure had been thrown into their midst a short while ago, battered, bruised and moaning softly.

Paul bent down and shook the man's shoulder. "Hey buddy, come on, try to get up. I'll help you." The others pitched in and helped the man to his feet.

"Thanks," the man said.

"What's your name?" James asked.

'D--Devin," the bruised man stated.

The men introduced themselves as Paul, James, Scotty, Harry, Jerry, Glen, Tom, Jose, Luis, Derrick, Jack and Danny.

"Boy, Zonis' men did a number on you," Luis said as Jose punched him in the ribs.

"Leave him alone, Luis," Jose said. "You weren't much better after Zonis' men brought us here."

"By the looks of the men who threw you in here..." Scotty started to say. "...You must have given some of them a run for their money."

"Hey, at least I tried. If my brother were here..." Devin trailed off as he thought of Vincent. "I'm glad he isn't here. They'd kill him for sure. Zonis, you say? Stuart Zonis? The billionaire?" Devin stopped for a moment then asked. "Where are we anyway? Any idea what Zonis wants us for?"

"We don't know," Harry said. "We were all brought here in the last few weeks. No idea why or what they want with us. All we know is that they all work for Stuart Zonis. They've mentioned his name a couple times in passing. Guess we'll find out soon enough."

"They're waiting for some creature to be brought here by Denton," Glen spoke up for the first time.

"Denton? Mitch Denton?" Devin said in a low voice.

"Yeah, you know him?" Derrick asked.

"Yeah, I knew him when I was younger. We grew up together. If they're waiting for some creature then that means..." Devin trailed off as the horrible thought struck him. Mitch Denton managed to capture Vincent somehow and is bringing him here. "Anyone have any idea what they have planned for the creature?"

"The men have joked about some big hunting expedition that Zonis has planned and that the creature is the quarry." Jack stated. "Whatever this creature is, it won't stand a chance against Zonis and his men. I've heard them talking. They say Zonis is an excellent shot and never misses." Devin paled at the thought.

"That cell over there has reinforced steel and those chains there are made of tungsten carbide. Denton wanted the strongest he could find to hold this creature." Tom spoke up.

"Have you heard when it's arriving?"

"Later tonight. One of the men said the plane bringing the creature just landed and it was loaded onto a transport truck after Denton inspected the container it arrived in." Jerry stated.

"Guess we'll find out when it gets here. Come on, let's get you cleaned up at least." Scotty led Devin over to their makeshift bathroom and gave him a clean towel and a clean shirt.

"Thanks," Devin said as he proceeded to clean himself up after the beating he received at the hands of Zonis' men. He came back a few minutes later. "Anyone ever try to get out and go for help?" Devin asked the group.

"We've tried but anyone who got out was caught quickly and brought back here," Danny said,
"How did you all end up here?" Devin asked.

The various men explained that four of them were brought in as part of a construction crew that built wherever they are now. Four others were part of a plane that went down close by. Three others were on a camping trip when they got grabbed and the final man was grabbed right off the streets in Christchurch.

"What about you?" Paul asked Devin.

"I just landed my plane at Wanaka airport earlier today. I transport cargo between Australia and New Zealand. I was on my way back from my last drop off when this car ran me off the road as I pulled into the airport. Two men grabbed me and threw me into the trunk of their car. I resisted of course and you can see the result. Then I ended up here."

"Is your plane still there?" one of the men asked.

"As far as I know. I'm friends with the local air traffic controller and he keeps an eye on her for me 'till I'm ready to leave again. Sometimes it's right away and sometimes..." Devin trailed off. "She's parked on a side runway out of the way of other traffic. That way she's out of the way and I don't have to worry about her too much." Devin thought a minute. "If we can figure out a way to escape, I can take all of us back to Australia. From there the authorities can get you back to your families."

"What about Zonis and his men?" one man asked.

"We have no proof of where we are now. No evidence to prove we are being held against our will. We'll just have to take our chances that the authorities believe us." Devin stretched his sore muscles. : Thanks for all of your help just now. I appreciate it."

"We have to work together if we are going to get out of this alive." Paul shook Devin's hand. "Come on, lets get some rest till the creature arrives. Then we may finally get some answers." The rest of the men shook their heads in agreement and went to the various bunks and either laid down or sat at a table and played cards. Paul showed Devin where he could bunk down if he wanted to. Devin decided to lay down and rest up for what seemed to be an unusual adventure indeed.

Father collapsed into his chair, his face stricken with worry. There had been neither sign nor trace of Vincent since he disappeared. The others in the tunnel community were gathered around Father in his study. Each face showed concern for the tunnel patriarch and their missing friend.

"Must increase sentries," Mouse stated. "Make more false walls. Need to make tunnels safe

since Vincent gone."

"Mouse...." Jamie scolded him.

"Sorry...But Vincent would want us to protect ourselves 'till he comes back."

"Mouse is right," William agreed. "We've relied on Vincent solely to protect us. I'm sorry to say this but if he doesn't return..." There were several audible gasps heard throughout the chamber. "...We need to make changes to ensure our safety."

"Would Catherine's friend be willing to give us some self-defense training?" Kanin suggested. "Since he knows about us somewhat, he might have some ideas."

"I'm sure Catherine would be willing to talk to him for us," Cullen commented. "I'll go to her office tomorrow and ask her to inquire for us."

"Thank you all," Father said quietly. "You are all right. Until Vincent returns, we must make the best we can of the situation at hand. We must have faith that he will return to us from wherever he is." The others nodded their agreement. Slowly they exited the chamber till only Father and Mary were left. Mary wrapped Father in a hug and they clung to each other, both silently praying that Vincent would return to them, safe and whole.

Elliot called Catherine after he hung up with Zonis' contact to let her know he was going to be out of the country for a while and asked if she and Vincent would keep an eye on Shannon for him.

"Elliot, I'll keep an eye on Shannon as much as I can. Vincent..." She said with a sob. "Vincent is missing."

"Missing? What happened?"

"I don't know. No one has seen him since last night. We've searched everywhere Below, Central Park and the surrounding area Above. Our helpers have searched every place he might have gone to Above and Father and the others have searched Below. Nothing."

"He's not..." Elliot started to ask with a sense of dread.

"He's alive, Elliot. I would know if he wasn't."

"Is there anything I can do? I can have Cleon's men at your disposal if you need them for anything."

"Thank you, Elliot. I'll keep that in mind. For now, all we can do is wait and pray until something turns up."

"Will you keep me updated? I'll let you know how to contact me as soon as I get settled. Zonis' estate is pretty isolated. I'm sure I'll be able to receive and make phone calls."

'Zonis? Stuart Zonis? The billionaire?'

"Yeah, I got invited to one of the little excursions he has every two years. Not sure who else will be there but from what I've heard through rumors only, is that anyone invited is sworn to secrecy for the rest of their lives."

"Intriguing. Thanks for caring, Elliot. Father, I and the rest of the tunnel community appreciate it."

"They, along with Vincent, are my family too. You'll find him, Cathy, I know you will."

"I have to believe that. That's all I can count on for now."

"I've got to go, Cath. I have to pack and then I'm meeting Cleon for our flight."

"Thanks again, Elliot. Don't worry about Shannon. We'll take care of her. You take care of yourself."

"I will, Catherine. Talk to you soon."

Elliot hung up the phone and proceeded to pack appropriate clothes for summer weather in New Zealand. He wasn't sure how long he would be there so he packed accordingly. He made sure his assistant had all the information for the upcoming projects. He called Cleon to make sure he was set to come along.

"Exactly where are we going, Elliot?" Cleon asked.

"New Zealand, my friend, New Zealand. The billionaire Stuart Zonis invited me to go on one of his little excursions and said I could bring someone with me. You always complained that I never want my bodyguard along when I go out so who better to protect me down there than you. Besides, it might be a great business opportunity."

"Do I need to bring anything specific?"

"No. His contact said he would provide transportation to his estate and security. I just feel better having you along."

"Thanks for the compliment, Elliot."

"Maggie gave you the flight details, right?"

"Yes, I have them. I'll meet you at the airport."

"Is he awake?" Zonis was talking to Mitch outside the container after it arrived at the holding area.

"Yes, Mr. Zonis."

"When can I meet him?"

"I can arrange to bring him up to the house later today if you wish."

"No, that won't be necessary. Are the facilities for me and my guests ready?"

"All the accommodations you asked for will be ready and waiting for you."

"What about the other participants I requested?"

"They are all in the holding cell as we speak."

"And the *'other'* implements I asked for?"

"Everything will be set by the time you and your guests arrive."

"Thank you, Mr. Denton. From what you've told me about this creature, it's going to be a very intriguing adventure. My guests and I are going to enjoy this."

"You won't be disappointed, sir. Vincent will definitely give you the experience you're looking for."

"I look forward to it. Until later, Mr. Denton." Mr. Zonis turned and walked toward the waiting jeep to return him to the cliff house.

Mitch walked into the holding area and surveyed the men lying around the cell. He noticed one near the cell entrance. His eyes widened in surprise. "Well, well, well, look what the cat dragged in. Devin!"

Devin looked up into Mitch's eyes. "Hello Mitch."

"Your cat brother has gotten himself into a bit of trouble. Seeing you here, I can now kill two birds with one stone. You'll be seeing him shortly."

"We'll get out of this, Mitch. Just wait and see. I don't know how yet, but Vincent and I will survive whatever you have planned."

Mitch laughed. "I told Vincent he'd be lucky if he survived a week. With you, I cut that time in half."

"What exactly is this little *'excursion'* you and Zonis have planned for us?"

"You'll find out soon enough. Vincent will be brought in shortly. I'll have my men standing by. If he tries anything, anything at all, I will kill him and then I'll kill you."

"If you were going to kill him, you would have done it already and damned the consequences with your boss. I guess you're more afraid of your boss than you are of Vincent right now."

"Shut your trap, Devin. You didn't know anything in the tunnels and you certainly don't know anything now. Mr. Zonis paid me a lot of money to get Vincent here and I am not going to ruin his plans for him."

"You better pray Vincent and I don't find you first. Vincent let you go once after what you did to Catherine. I doubt he'll grant you a second chance. I know I wouldn't."

"Big words coming from someone inside a cage," Mitch laughed. Mitch shuddered as a thought struck him but quickly put it behind him.

"Just remember what I said, Mitch. We'll get out of this."

Mitch just smiled and walked back outside to the truck carrying Vincent. He motioned to the men standing around the container.

"Get ready. We're going to be bringing him out. Vincent," he called out. "Put your hands through the opening in the door."

Vincent complied and one of the men put a set of heavy cuffs on his wrists. Two lengths of chain were attached and held by four men. Mitch nodded to the men and they tightened their grip and pulled the chain taut. Vincent felt the chains tighten but didn't react. Two men with automatic weapons stood poised as two more men waited with long poles with loops at the end.

"All right, open the door."

Another man unlocked the container door and slowly pulled the big door open. The men with the looped poles rushed in and threw the loops over Vincent's head. Vincent tried pulling away but found the chains held him tight. They fastened the loops and stood on either side at arm's length. Vincent noticed the two men with guns in the doorway and knew any resistance he had wanted to try would just get him killed...

"I won't fight you." Vincent said quietly. The men gave startled looks as they heard Vincent speak. The guard who opened the door came in and unhooked the chains from the cuffs. The man motioned Vincent outside and they exited the container. The chains were reattached and Vincent was led into the holding area.

Devin and the other men heard the noise outside and watched the door. Devin was waiting for Vincent to walk in, the other men were wondering about the creature Denton was bringing in. They gave a small gasp as Vincent's massive frame entered the building. They stopped outside the other cell and Mitch opened the cell door and stood by the chains attached to the wall. Vincent was brought in and stood waiting. He extended one wrist and the cuff and chain was removed and the one attached to the wall replaced it. He extended his other wrist and the same procedure was performed. Once the chains were secured, the two men with the looped sticks removed them and exited the cell.

"Welcome to your temporary home, Vincent. Get acquainted with your companions here. You're in for a surprise." Mitch laughed as he, too, exited the cell and followed the men outside. Vincent bowed his head as Mitch left, ashamed that he allowed this to happen to him.

"Vincent!" Devin called out.

"Devin?" Vincent looked up at the sound of Devin's voice and noticed him and the other men standing at the bars of their cell.

"Hey, he can talk!" One of the men exclaimed.

"Yeah, bro, it's me."

"What are you doing here?"

"Mitch's men grabbed me earlier today and brought me here." Devin started to explain. "The others here were all kidnapped as well. Did Mitch tell you what he wanted with you?"

"No, he said I would find out when I got there."

"Does Chandler know you're missing?"

"Yes. She is frightened. Our connection is so faint though. I can sense she is with Father and the others. I'm afraid this time I won't be able to return to her."

"Stop it, Vincent! We'll get out of this. I have a plane near here. I'll get you home to her somehow, I promise." Vincent bowed his head and looked away.

The men in Devin's cell went back to their bunks and started asking questions of Devin. Devin told them what he could of Vincent's origins and of his accomplishments over the years. The men seemed duly impressed. After a short while they dispersed and went to their bunks to await the dawn of a new day and whatever Zonis had planned for the creature named Vincent and for them.

Elliot and Cleon boarded their 6pm flight to Los Angeles. They knew they would have to

change planes in LA, then fly to Auckland and then catch another plane to take them to Queenstown. Once there they would meet Zonis' contact and be brought to Zonis' estate. Elliot was looking forward to this little excursion. Cleon was more worried about Elliot's safety while they were there. Elliot assured Cleon that Zonis' New York contact promised security would be well represented. They both settled down for the flight to LA and soon both men dozed off.

Soon the pilot was announcing they were landing in LA. Elliot and Cleon made sure they had their boarding passes for the flight to New Zealand. Once the plane landed, they made their way quickly to customs and were quickly processed for the next leg of their journey. A short time later their flight to Auckland was announced and once again they entered the first class cabin of the plane and found their seats. Again they settled down for the long flight and again both men dozed off.

The morning sun shone through the plane's windows as it started its descent into Auckland. "Welcome to New Zealand," the pilot announced.

"Morning," both men said to each other.

"Once we're down, do we have time to get a cup of coffee somewhere? Do they even have coffee?" Cleon asked.

"Don't be silly. *'Flat white'* with coffee is the new rage throughout the city. It's traditionally a less milky brew with texturing rather than frothy milk. It has a thinner band of the textured milk, ideally with a shinier surface. I tried it once. Fabulous."

"I have no idea what you are talking about but I believe you."

"Ladies and gentlemen, we are about to land in Auckland. Welcome to New Zealand and we hope you've had a pleasant flight and look forward to serving you again." The co-pilot announced.

Elliot asked one of the stewardesses as she passed his seat. "Do you know how much time we have till the connecting flight to Queenstown?"

"You have about 45 minutes Sir," she commented.

"Thank you. That should give us plenty of time to get through customs and get you your cup of coffee, Cleon."

The plane landed a short time later and Cleon was able to find himself a decent cup of coffee. They only had to wait a short time until the call came for their flight to Queenstown. They boarded the plane again and soon they were on their way. Two hours later the pilot announced they were landing in Queenstown.

"Zonis' representative should be waiting for us when we land," Elliot told Cleon as they heard the wheels extend.

"You sure you can trust him?"

"That's what you're here for, my friend."

Elliot looked out the window of the plane. They were sweeping down towards the sapphire-coloured arm of a very long, narrow lake that was encompassed by rolling brown hills on all sides. As they descended rapidly towards the water he drew in a concerned breath. It looked far too close to him, but he figured the pilot knew what he was doing. *'Or at least he hoped he did... Too late now...'*

Just then the plane banked to the right and a sprawling, white-walled town flashed past beneath the plane's left wing. The multi-layered town climbed from the lake shore half-way up the slopes of forest-clad hills behind it, which in turn topped out beneath the sheer rocky cliffs of an awesome mountain range that clawed its way almost vertically into the sky. Bleak and barren, they stood out brown and broken-looking against the clear blue of the heavens.

Elliot dropped his eyes to frown at the map folded on his knee, tracing their route with his finger. The mountains certainly lived up their name, The Remarkables. It looked like there was even a gondola service to the top of the lower hills. Adventure they had been promised and it certainly looked like they were going to get just that in spades. If they ever got down on the ground safely.

He gritted his teeth as the plane continued to skim along above the restless lake, slowly descending towards the far end where an airport had been laid out, tucked into the end of a narrow valley running back from the lake's terminus. Elliot frowned. There barely seemed enough room to turn around, let alone land a plane, and the mountains on either side loomed way too close. But they continued to roar in, descending slowly. Suddenly there was the lake-shore beneath the belly of the plane, then a row of houses and a fence he was sure they were going to remove as they flew in over it and suddenly they were down, the wheels screeching as they struck the end of the runway tarmac almost immediately.

Elliot released his pent-up breath, turning to look at Cleon who sat rigidly beside him. He heard his chief investigator blow out his breath and then mutters something to himself as he consciously unclenched his fingers from their death-grip on the seat arms.

"That was a rush," Elliot laughed shakily.

"I was sure we were gonna lose a wing on that last bit." Cleon turned his head to stare at him. "Tell me we're driving out of here, boss, and not flying. Those damn mountains look way too close."

"Ah, I wish." Elliot shrugged. "But you have to admit, it certainly makes you feel alive and focused your attention on what's really important."

"Yeah, like the state of my underwear," Cleon complained moodily.

"Yep..." Elliot nodded in sympathetic understanding as a member of the crew made their way down the plane towards them. Cleon and Elliot waited until most of the passengers had left the plane before they made their way to the exit.

"Thank you for flying with us," one of the stewardesses said with a smile. "I hope you enjoy your stay here."

"I'm looking forward to it," Elliot replied, flashing one of his brilliant smiles at her. The young lady blushed then turned to greet the next passenger.

"This is different," Cleon observed as he exited the plane and started down the stairs. He looked up into a cloudless blue sky, bright sunshine showering the area with light. Elliot followed and gave a low whistle as he too glanced up at the sky. As they reached the bottom they took in the open airfield. They heard the rumble of engines as planes taxied for take-off, the motors of the sky tractor bringing the luggage rack to offload the plane's cargo, the muttering of passengers as they headed toward the customs area and the main terminal.

"Mr Burch?" A voice sounded off to their right. Elliot and Cleon turned to find two men waiting for them. "Mr. Zonis sent us, sir. If you gentlemen will follow me, we'll get you quickly through customs.

"When do we meet our mysterious host?" Elliot asked.

"He's waiting for you at his estate near Lake Wanaka. His other guests have already arrived. You're the last."

"Well, let's not keep our host waiting. Lead on, Macduff." Elliot and Cleon followed the two men who did, indeed, get them quickly through customs and brought them to a waiting range rover.

"What, no limo?" Cleon joked.

"I'm sorry, sir. Some of the roads leading to Lake Wanaka aren't the best. This is more practical for the area."

"That's all right," Elliot stated. "I'm sure we'll be comfortable."

The two men loaded their luggage into the back of the range rover. They held the rear doors open for Elliot and Cleon. Once they were settled, the two men got into the front seats.

"Does that mountain have a name?" Elliot pointed out the windshield toward the snow covered peak in the distance. Elliot watched as a plane slowly climbed toward the mountain, just barely creasing the ridge and took off for parts unknown.

"It's called Queenstown Hill," one of the men explained. "Te Tapu-noi."

"Te Tapu-noi? What does that mean?" Cleon asked.

"Mountain of intense sacredness in Maori. Maori is the language of the indigenous people here in New Zealand. There are some stunning views from the peak. I'm sure Mr. Zonis can arrange a private tour for you."

"I might just take him up on that," Elliot commented.

The range rover made its way out of the airport. Elliot and Cleon admired the different landscapes as they made their way to Zonis' estate. Soon they could see Lake Wanaka ahead of them. The water while calm had so many different hues of blue, reflecting the bright blue sky. Near the shore it was pale blue, nearly translucent as it got deeper it changed from pale blue to a deep, deep dark blue. The trees on the far side of the lake were mirrored in the lake. As the lake rippled, they seemed to dance with a life of their own. They turned before they reached the lake itself and followed a winding road toward one of the small hills surrounding the lake. They noticed a large Victorian style house nestled into the side of the hill.

"What a beautiful house." Elliot commented. "It must have taken a long time to construct something like that."

"Mr. Zonis spared no expense. He values his privacy."

"Security must be a bitch, covering a place like this." Cleon noticed the security cameras as they passed through an electric fence.

"Everything is state-of-the-art, Mr. Manning. I assure you. You and Mr. Burch will be quite safe here."

"Calm down, Cleon. We haven't even met our host yet."

"Yes, boss," Cleon muttered under his breath. He didn't like this place. No, he didn't like it one bit. Going into a situation where he had no control over the circumstances made him very uncomfortable especially when it concerned Elliot's safety. "I'd like to see your security arrangements."

"Someone is waiting to escort you to our security control room and explain everything for you."

"Thank you."

Soon the range rover pulled up in front of the elegant house. The two men opened the doors for Elliot and Cleon. Again the view of the lake and the surrounding area stunned both men as they stepped out. The front door opened and they were escorted inside.

"Take their luggage up to their suite, please. I am Charles. Mr. Zonis' major domo. If you will follow me, Mr. Zonis and his other guests are waiting in the drawing room." He turned and led

the way down a long hallway. Soon they entered the drawing room and finally met the mysterious Mr. Zonis. "Mr. Burch and Mr. Manning, sir."

"Thank you, Charles." The man nodded his head and quietly left the room.

Elliot whispered to Cleon as they entered the drawing room. "Those are some of the richest men in the world. No wonder this excursion is so exclusive."

"Do you know any of them?"

"Only by reputation. That's Prince Al-Waleen Bin Talal from Saudi Arabia." Elliot nodded to the gentleman in front of him. "That's Warren Edward Buffett. He owns Berkshire Hathaway and that's Larry Koch. He owns Koch Industries. David Ellison--Oracle Corp, Bernard Arnault--Christian Dior, Amancio Ortega-Inditex Group and Mukesh Ambani-Reliance Industries." Cleon took a look at each man as the name was mentioned. "Impressive," Elliot muttered to himself.

"Elliot Burch...I've heard so much about you. I'm glad you decided to join us." Zonis walked over to Elliot and shook his hand. Let me introduce you to the others." Zonis went on to introduce Elliot to the other six men standing around.

"This is Cleon Manning, my security chief."

"Mr. Manning, welcome. You wanted to see the security arrangements." A man stepped forward. "This is Mr. Quartermaine, my head of security. Show Mr. Manning your arrangements for Mr. Burch's safety while he is here."

"Thank you, Mr. Zonis. I'm sure everything will be satisfactory to Mr. Manning. Don't underestimate him though. He's very good at his job and takes it very seriously."

"This way." Mr Quartermaine indicated and Cleon followed him out of the room.

"Now that you are all here, I can explain what my little excursion is all about. Everything you say and do while you are here must remain confidential. No one on the outside is to know what we are about to do. Do I have your world on this, gentlemen?" Everyone nodded their agreement. "Good. Now I have a hunting excursion planned for all of you but not just any hunting experience. A truly unique experience."

"What type of animals are we expected to see?" One of the men asked.

"No animals, per say."

"Then what?" Larry Koch asked

"My sources have told me you all...", pointing to the six men, "have expressed an interest in hunting something unique. Mr. Burch has shown he's intrigued by challenge. I've hunted animals all over the world and nothing has intrigued me as our quarry awaiting us."

"Zonis...You're not suggesting what I think you're suggesting, are you?" Mr Buffett murmured.

"And why not? My huntsman's heart thrilled at the prospect of bringing down a live human..." Several gasps were heard. The six men in the room looked at each other.

"...who alone in the animal kingdom has the capacity to outwit and even best his enemies through sheer intellect?"

"You actually have men willing to participate in this?" Someone asked.

"Willing? No, but they will be given a choice. A financial incentive if you will. They participate and survive, the money is theirs. If they refuse..." He left the sentence hanging.

Several men expressed they always had a fantasy about killing someone. Amongst themselves, they've joked about it but never thought of actually doing it. They wondered how Zonis found out. They wondered how Zonis could possibly get away with it. Offered the right incentive and the right price, any man might be willing to participate. Elliot paled at the thought.

"You really expect us to hunt these men?" Elliot asked.

"You may hunt them if you wish or not. That is your choice. There will be a few animals as well as an added bonus. But there is one unique creature that may ease your sense of conscience. He is with the others. He is intelligent or so I'm told."

"Creature? What kind of creature?" Several men asked at the same time.

"You'll see."

Elliot wondered at Zonis' mention of a creature with the men he was holding. *'Must be some exotic creature native to this region.'* Elliot mused. Suddenly a video screen lowered from the ceiling. The screen lit up and the men could see two cells. One with something chained to the wall and the other cell holding a group of men.

"Gentlemen, I give you the quarry of our little excursion." Zonis had the camera pull a close-up of Vincent. "This is the creature I was telling you about. I'm told he is extremely intelligent, resourceful and deadly."

Elliot looked at the screen and tried to school his features. *'Vincent! Somehow Zonis managed to capture Vincent and bring him here. No wonder Cathy can't find him.'* Elliot thought about getting a message to her telling her about Vincent but then changed his mind. He knew Vincent wouldn't want her brought into a situation like this and neither did Elliot. *'I'll just have to figure out a way of getting to Vincent before Zonis and the others do and get him out of here somehow.'*

The video ended and the screen retracted. "Gentlemen, facilities for us have been arranged for

our stay during this and a specific area has been laid out for this expedition. We will take you there tomorrow and get things started."

The men nodded their agreement and were escorted to their rooms.

Cleon arrived at the room he and Elliot were assigned to a short time later. "I must admit, Zonis' security is state-of-the-art just like they said." Elliot went on to explain that Zonis had managed to capture Vincent and bring him here.

"Vincent? The one from the tunnels you told me about, that Catherine Chandler knows."

"Yes. We have to get him out of here."

"That's a tall order, boss."

"I know. But we have to do something or Zonis or one of the others will kill him, if or when they find him. He won't be able to hide from them. Not here at least."

"How do you propose we get him out of here once we DO find him?"

"I haven't figured that out yet."

Cleon and Elliot talked long into the night, trying to come up with some type of plan to save Vincent from Zonis and his party. By morning they had no idea of how to pull it off. They hoped they found Vincent before the others do.

The next morning the men in the cell were rudely awakened by Zonis' men. Handcuffed, they were led to a waiting truck. "Where are you taking us?" Paul demanded.

"Shut up. You'll find out soon enough," One man said as he pushed Paul into the truck.

"What about that creature?" Devin asked.

"He's going in a separate truck. Denton wanted extra guards on him."

Devin tried waiting until the very last minute to get into the truck, hoping to see where they were taking Vincent. He was suddenly slammed in the ribs with a rifle butt which drove him to his knees. Scotty and Jack helped Devin to his feet and reluctantly he got into the truck with the others.

"Don't let them know that you know that thing...Sorry, Vincent," Derrick whispered. "It's bad enough Denton knows that you two know each other. The guards would only make it worse for him."

"I know you're right," Devin said. "He's always been my *'little'* brother and I wasn't there during his teenage years with Mitch when I should have been."

"Little!" James exclaimed. "He's bigger and probably a lot stronger than all the guards put together."

"I have to find him when we get to wherever we're going. I have to get him back to our family."

The truck travelled for over an hour, over some of the roughest roads Devin had ever been on during his trips to New Zealand. The men were thrown around in the back of the truck without mercy. Once in a while the flap opened and they could catch a glimpse of the landscape. No trees were seen, just flatlands of brown and grey. No houses or towns were spotted.

"They're taking us out to the middle of South Island. Nothing but open country for miles," Harry said. "I've flown over this area quite a few times. There's no one around, not a living human being. I have seen the occasional herd of sheep and a jeep with them."

Vincent watched as Devin was hit by one of the guards. A low snarl rumbled from his chest. He watched as the other men helped Devin into one of the trucks and leaves the compound,

"Don't try it, Vincent. They'll cut you down before you even got to Devin," Mitch said as he came forward.

"If you hurt him, Mitch, there won't be any place I won't be able to find you. Remember New York..."

Mitch shuddered as the memory of the warehouse catwalk once again flashed before his eyes. He saw himself on his knees, begging for his life. In front of him an enraged Vincent. He remembered Vincent standing over him, snarling, roaring, one claw-covered hand raised to strike the final death blow. Mitch knew he was going to die that night, knew Vincent would kill him without mercy when he found him. Mitch also knew Catherine was the one who saved his life. Somehow he knew she calmed Vincent before he struck. Mitch knew he wouldn't be as lucky this time around.

"Put him in the truck," Mitch snapped, his attention once more focused on the task at hand. "I won't hurt him, Vincent, but I can't promise on what the others or Mr. Zonis might do."

Vincent allowed them to once again chain him in the back of the truck. There were two guards with him, one with his gun muzzle showing through the driver's cab window and a jeep following with another guard manning a machine gun mounted in plain sight. They caught up to the other truck and together they travelled the back roads of South Island until they arrived at their destination. The trucks pulled up to a fence covered with barbed wire. The truck carrying Devin and the other men was unloaded first. The men filed slowly into the fenced in area. A large cabin-like structure stood off to the side. A smaller structure stood next to it. They watched as Vincent exited the second truck, still securely cuffed and heavily guarded.

"Vincent...", Devin whispered as he started to move forward.

"Devin, don't." Scotty grabbed him by the arm as the others moved to block his path.

Vincent glanced at Devin and slightly shook his head 'no' as he was led to the smaller structure. Devin bowed his head, ashamed that he was unable to protect Vincent. Protect his little brother as Father constantly reminded him when he was younger.

Zonis and his guests arrived a few hours later and were escorted into a large redwood log cabin. Security was ever watchful as they exited the large land rovers that brought them and they were quickly ushered inside. Elliot tried to catch a glimpse of Vincent but all he could see were one or two men outside the large cabin-like structure. The men were heavily armed and there were two other men outside a smaller structure.

"That must be where Vincent is being kept." Cleon nodded in the structure's direction.

"Gentlemen..." Zonis gestured and they quickly followed their host inside. "I hope the accommodations are adequate for you all. My men spared no expense in seeing to your comfort."

"When will this hunt start?" Elliot asked with a slight tone of disgust in his voice.

"Everything will be explained in the morning. My chef has prepared quite a feast. Come...lets enjoy ourselves tonight and savour the anticipation of the hunt tomorrow." After the meal Elliot and Cleon took a walk outside. The night air was crisp, unlike the mugginess of the July day that slowly ended. In the distance they could see immense grasslands, the start of a dark forest and they could just make out foothills beyond in the fading light.

"Come on, Elliot," Cleon said. "Lets get back inside and try and get some rest. We'll need our wits about us when this hunt starts so we can find Vincent and get the hell out of this insane asylum."

"I agree." Elliot followed Cleon back into the house.

Morning dawned with bright sunshine. The temperature was quite pleasant for that time of day. The men and Vincent were all brought to the front entrance of the redwood cabin. Devin could see Vincent was a little worse for wear after being confined in the small structure. Vincent noticed the same of Devin. He also noticed the other men unobtrusively guiding Devin closer to where he was chained. He gave a slight acknowledgment smile towards them then turned as their so-called host and his party came out into the open. Vincent noticed Elliot and Cleon as they were the last to exit. His eyes gave no hint of recognition and neither did they, but they both knew they had seen one another. Vincent's hopes rose slightly at this new information.

"Gentlemen. So glad you could join us," Zonis started.

"You gave us little choice," Tom mumbled.

"Choice? There is always a choice. Let me explain. I will pay you each \$500,000 if you can elude me and my friends for the next five days."

The men looked at each other. "What? You mean, we're to be part of some kind of human hunt?" Glen asked.

"Exactly, the ultimate hunting experience. You will each be given a knife, supply of food and the location of your final destination. It is quite simple. Arrive at that destination before we find you, you keep the money and will be returned home. If we find you first, well..." Zonis let the sentence hang.

"What about him?" Elliot asked, pointing at Vincent.

"He obviously can't use the money," Koch laughed.

"He is offered the same choice as you gentlemen. If he can elude us and arrive at that destination, I will let him go and return him to wherever he came from."

"No," Luis started. "No, I want no part of this."

"Luis...", Jose grabbed his arm.

"No." Luis pulled away. "I'm surprised any of you are even considering doing this. Zonis can keep me locked up here, but I will not be a willing participant in this."

"Very well." Zonis motioned to Mitch. Mitch nodded to one of the guards. Suddenly a shot rang out. Luis clutched his chest as a red stain started forming and collapsed to the ground. "The choice is yours, gentlemen. I await your decision."

Devin and the others stood immobile, horrified at the callous way Zonis ordered Luis' death. Jose rushed over to Luis' body and quietly cried his grief at his friends' death. He rose to his feet and joined the others. After a short discussion, Devin stepped forward for the group. "We have no choice but to accept your offer."

"Excellent. Your supplies are over there." Zonis pointed out a table that had thirteen backpacks on it. "We will allow you three hours before we set off."

"What about him?" Devin gestured at Vincent.

"He may have your unfortunate friend's backpack. He may leave with you or set out on his own. His choice."

"Will you unchain him so he has an equal chance?"

"Very well. Mr. Denton, if you will do the honors."

Mitch stepped over to Vincent and unchained him as instructed. Vincent stood there, unmoving, until everything was removed. He rubbed his wrists then stepped toward the other men. The guards stood ready to fire into the group should Vincent attempt to take the opportunity to attack. The men as a group moved to the table and inspected the backpacks before they picked them up. Each indeed had a small supply of food, a small hunting knife and the name and approximate location of their final destination on a small map.

"Three hours gentlemen. You better get moving. I and some of my guests are quite eager for this experience to start." Zonis said with an evil grin.

Elliot subtly tried to get Vincent's attention but the men surrounding him made it quite impossible. He also didn't want to make it appear as though he knew Vincent.

"That man standing close to Vincent..." Elliot whispered to Cleon.

Cleon took a meaningful look at the man in question. "The one with the three scars on his left cheek?" Elliot nodded 'Yes'. "What about him?"

"That's Devin. I'm sure of it. That's Jacob's son. The one who left a long time ago."

"The old man in the tunnels. The one everyone calls '*Father*' right?" Elliot nodded. "Well then, he's sure to stick close to Vincent. When we find one, the other won't be far behind."

The men and Vincent grabbed the backpacks and made their way to the roadway outside the compound where several jeeps waited.

"Hold one minute." Mitch stepped up to the men. "You can leave three at a time."

"What are you doing, Mr. Denton?" Zonis walked over to stand behind him, two of the guards following.

"Keeping it interesting for you, Mr. Zonis, and a little more challenging for him," pointing at Vincent. "See this man here..." pointing at Devin. "...is Vincent's brother."

"Brother! Interesting."

"Yes sir. We send Devin out first with the first group and hold Vincent until the end. Besides trying to elude you and your guests, I know they would try to find each other."

"I like your way of thinking. Do it."

"No! I won't go without Vincent. If Vincent stays here, then I'm staying too," Devin demanded. He moved toward Vincent.

"If that is your choice then you can suffer the same fate as Mr. Luis. Denton..." Zonis started to walk away as Mitch came forward.

"Mitch...", Vincent spoke for the first time in Zonis' presence. Mitch stopped to look at him. "Devin..." Vincent turned to Devin who was being held back by the other men. "Go. I will find you. Believe me, I will find you."

"Vincent...", Devin started.

"Go." Vincent said quietly.

Devin nodded his agreement and allowed the others to escort him to the waiting jeeps.

"These men will take you in any direction you wish to go but they will stop within two miles of here and not go any further. Do not try to take the jeeps. They have orders to shoot to kill if you try."

Devin and the others climbed into the jeeps. One turned north out of the compound, one turned east. Vincent watched as Devin's jeep took a southerly direction. One by one the jeeps came back. The drivers in the last jeep were snickering to each other.

"What's so funny?" Mitch asked.

"Some of the men tried to take a jeep just like Mr. Zonis told them not to," one driver said.

"What happened?"

"We wounded two of them and the rest backed off," the other driver stated. "They took off into the woods."

"Was this thing's brother one of them?" Mitch watched Vincent's reaction as they both thought the same thing...that Devin would be fool enough to attempt to take one of the jeeps and come back for Vincent.

"No sir. The man with the scarred face just waited until it was over, then helped the two wounded men into a clearing. He even tried to stop his companions beforehand. The rest scattered after that."

Vincent breathed a sigh of relief. Now it was his turn to leave. He got into the jeep, muscles tensed in case Mitch would defy his boss and not let him go.

"Which way?" the driver asked.

"South," Vincent answered but looked at Mitch, waiting for him to tell the driver to go in the opposite direction. Something he would expect of Mitch. Mitch stood silent and just nodded his head. The driver also nodded and put the jeep in gear. Two miles later the jeep stopped in

front of a large clearing. As Vincent stepped out he could see signs of a struggle and spots of blood on the ground. There was no sign of Devin, the wounded men or anyone else. The jeep shifted into gear and then sped off down the road.

Vincent looked around the clearing. The bright sun casting shadows from where he stood. He closed his eyes and took in the sounds around him, momentarily basking in the freedom awarded him. "Catherine," he whispered, wishing she was there with him.

"Vincent?" Catherine whispered as she looked up from the book she was reading.

"Do you sense him?" Father and Mary asked at the same time. "Is he all right?"

"Wherever he is, he's thinking of me. I also sense he is outside. Somewhere, the sun is shining down on him. Come home to me, Vincent," she prayed.

Father placed his hand on Catherine's arm and she looked over at him. "Have faith, Catherine. Vincent will return to us." Father chuckled. "I'm sure though, through all of this he will have some stories to tell about his adventures."

Catherine giggled. "I can't wait to hear them. Have you heard from Devin," she asked.

"We sent a message to where his last letter came from," Father told her.

"Where is he?" she inquired.

"New Zealand and Australia," Mary answered. "He's flying cargo back and forth for several companies. He's doing rather well or so he tells us."

"Devin's a pilot?"

"Yes. He got his license a few years ago he said but never thought he's actually make a living out of it." Father gave a smile to Catherine.

"Imagine that," she smiled back. "Thank you, Father." She rose and gave both of them a hug then returned to her book. Catherine had taken a leave of absence from the DA's office in order to stay Below and help Father out wherever she could. Father and Mary were both grateful for her company and the rest of the tunnel community was as well. All praying for Vincent's safe return from wherever he was.

Vincent heard a rustling in the bushes to his right. He didn't know much about the wildlife of New Zealand, or even if there were any wild animals. He sniffed at the air. Whatever it was, it didn't have an animal smell. With his acute hearing, he could hear whispered voices. Two men

urging the other to make a run for it. Vincent took a chance and called out. "Devin?"

"Vincent? Is that you?" one of the voices called back.

"Yes."

"Are you alone?" one of the other voices called out.

Devin reprimanded the voice. "Vincent would never lead Zonis and his cronies to us."

"I'm sorry, Devin," the voice answered with regret.

Slowly Devin stood up from the thick bushes he and the others were crouched behind, a heavy tree limb in his hands. If Denton, Zonis or anyone else found him first, he wasn't going to go down without a fight.

"Boy, am I happy to see you." Devin placed the tree limb on the ground and went to embrace Vincent.

"And I, you," Vincent answered.

"I was afraid Denton and Zonis wouldn't honor their promise to let you go. I was going to get these guys to safety then figure out a way to get you."

"Thanks to Elliot, Zonis agreed to his promise at least of allowing me my freedom if he doesn't find me."

"Elliot Burch? Here?"

"Yes. He was with Zonis and his associates."

"I'll bet he can't wait to blow you away. That way Catherine's free and clear for him to move in. I wouldn't put it past him."

"No, Devin. Elliot is a man of honor. He knows of me and my relationship with Catherine. He has also met Father and has been to the tunnels."

"Really?"

"Yes. He and Father have been discussing with the council ways to improve what we have. He's already helped us with supplies for the pipe repairs that are a constant problem as you recall."

"If you two will stop jabberwalking, we'd like to get out of here." Paul called out.

The two men quickly went to check on the other two men. Paul had a wound to his shoulder that Devin managed to patch up and Scott had a bandage wrapped around his head.

"Can you both walk?" Vincent asked.

"Don't worry about us. We'll make it." Scotty struggled to his feet, still feeling a little dizzy.

"We need to set up a little surprise for Zonis," Devin said.

"What did you have in mind?" Paul asked.

"We could take some of these vines and make a snap trap. That will leave at least one of them high and dry. Vincent, use your claws and sharpen some of those sticks." Vincent looked at Devin. "Look, these knives don't make much of a dent in these sticks. They're pretty blunt. We've already tried."

Vincent nodded then went to work. Soon they had a couple traps scattered around the clearing, covered with whatever brush they could find.

Vincent's acute hearing caught the sound of an engine in the distance. Suddenly a plane zoomed overhead. Devin, Paul and Scotty breathed a sigh of relief as the plane banked to the south. "We better get moving," Devin said. "I'll take point. Vincent, you watch our backs in case Zonis shows up early. I think I know where we are. Zonis' destination for us is 25 miles northwest of here, I think. We should start heading that way." Devin pointed over his shoulder.

Paul and Scotty were waiting at the edge of the clearing. The bandage on Paul's shoulder was already caked with blood. Scotty's vision was still blurry. Devin looked at them with concern. "Go on, Devin," Paul stated. "We're right behind you." Devin nodded and started off. The others soon followed.

Zonis and his guests emerged from the redwood cabin, dressed as though they were going big game hunting on the Serenghti plains of Africa. Elliot and Cleon were dressed in more casual attire.

"Gentlemen. Our three hours are almost upon us. I took the liberty of setting up a variety of weapons you may choose from." Zonis stepped forward and picked up a P90 machine pistol from the table that recently held the backpacks. There was a wide variety for the men to choose from.

"Grab that 12 gauge there." Cleon whispered to Elliot as he picked up a Glock 9mm pistol. "Make it look as though you plan to go through with this insane expedition." Elliot nodded his head in agreement and grabbed the shotgun and a couple boxes of shells. Cleon made sure he had extra magazines for the Glock.

"Now, I have been informed that some of our quarry went north, some went east and some went south once they exited the jeeps."

"Where is the final destination if they make it that far?" Mr. Ortega asked.

"25 miles northwest of here. Near Lake Wanaka but no one has ever reached it in the last 10 years. They always slip up and I eventually find them."

"Which way did that creature go?" Prince Talal asked. "That's who I'm interested in."

"I'm not sure," Zonis replied. "Mr Denton, can you answer Prince Talal's question?"

"The creature went south, sir."

"That's the direction we have to head for then," Elliot whispered to Cleon. "If we can find Devin, I'm sure we'll find Vincent."

"I just hope we find them first," Cleon whispered back.

"One way or another, that creature will not be leaving alive. You have my word on that, gentlemen," Zonis laughed. "I plan on making him my trophy piece."

"Not if I get him first," Mr Ambani stated. "He would be an interesting specimen to examine alive."

"Very well. If any of you find him first, you may do as you will with him. If I find him, I will kill him."

"Even if we decide to return him to wherever he came from," Elliot spoke up.

"Yes, Mr Burch. If you find him first and it is your wish to return him to wherever, you have my word that my men and I will honor your request. And if he makes it to their final destination on his own, he will have his freedom as well. I seriously doubt he will though."

Mitch gave Elliot a suspicious look. Elliot stared back at Mitch. "We'll have to keep a lookout for Denton. I know he won't let Vincent or Devin leave here if he can avoid it," Elliot commented to Cleon.

"That's gonna be the least of our problems once we find them," Cleon said. "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it. Let's grab a jeep and get going." Cleon headed toward one of the jeeps.

"Gentlemen, the game's afoot. My men will take you to where each group was dropped off. You each have a SAT phone should you need assistance. We'll meet back here at sunset."

Half of the group decided to head north and east. Zonis, Elliot, Prince Talal and Mr. Ambani decided to go south. The jeeps dropped Zonis and his party at the clearing.

"This is where that creature, his brother and the other men were dropped off," one of the

guards told Zonis. Mitch stepped out of the jeep as part of Zonis' security detail.

"I know this creature, Mr. Zonis. He'll try to find his brother first, then head for the lake. When we find Devin, Vincent won't be far behind. They won't leave without each other."

Some of the guards started checking the brush, trying to flush the men out in case they were hiding, thinking they could take one of the jeeps again. Suddenly, one of them yelled as one of the snap traps was sprung. Zonis and the others watched as the man was flung high into the air and then left hanging, his arms flailing wildly.

"TIKO!" The man yelled as he swore in Maori.

"Neek Hallack", Prince Talal said.

"Fuck! I didn't think they had time for something like this. There's probably more than one," Mitch whispered to Zonis.

"Quite right, Mr Denton. Search the area. I don't want anyone else caught by one of those things."

The guards quickly sprung the other traps Devin rigged and had the area cleared in short order. After a thorough search of the clearing, no trace of Vincent was found.

"They covered their tracks pretty well," Elliot whispered. "How the hell are we going to find them?"

"Somehow we'll find them, Elliot. I'm sure of that at least. Come on, lets get started."

"Mr. Burch, before you set off, I have something that might help you."

"Oh?" Elliot inquired.

One of the drivers activated a small GPS device which showed 12 red dots. Four were shown to be five miles west of their location, five were shown five miles north, one dot was only a mile from them and two were heading south.

"These red dots, gentlemen, are our quarry." Zonis showed them the GPS. "The GPS has a five mile radius. We should have no difficulty finding them. The transponders are in their backpacks. I have one for each of you." The driver handed one to Cleon and the other men and their associates. "The jeeps will remain here until 8 pm to bring you back to the compound. Mr. Denton, you know this creature and its brother, which way should we go?"

Mitch thought for a moment. "South, sir. They'll probably turn north once they put some distance between them and the clearing."

"Then we shall head in that direction." The prince and Mr. Ambani nodded their heads in

agreement. Elliot started to nod as well when Cleon elbowed him in the ribs and pointed to the four dots. Elliot looked at him with a question in his eyes but Cleon just nodded.

"I think I'll go after the one heading north," Elliot said, getting into the spirit of the hunt.

"Then I shall wish you happy hunting and will see you later tonight. That creature will be dead by the end of the day, if I have anything to say about it. Once he's dead, we'll go after the ones heading west."

Zonis' SAT phone rang and Mitch answered, listened for a moment then hung up. He whispered the message to Zonis, who laughed. "It seems Mr. Koch, Mr. Ellison and Mr Buffett have all scored the first kills."

Prince Talal and Mr. Ambani looked disappointed at not getting the first kill.

"Not to worry, gentlemen, your time will come. Elliot, we shall see you tonight then." Elliot nodded as the others turned to leave and start the hunt for Devin and Vincent.

Once out of earshot, Elliot turned to Cleon. "You think the ones heading west are Vincent and Devin?"

"Yes," Cleon stated. "From what you've told me, I don't think they would leave two injured men to fend for themselves."

"You're right but why didn't Denton say something. He knows Vincent and Devin better than I do. He knows Vincent wouldn't leave anyone injured."

"I think he figured the other prisoners were either afraid of Vincent or afraid they'd make an easy target since Zonis and that prince want him so badly."

"Lets hope you're right. Lets move."

Hours later the sky was a brilliant blue under the late New Zealand sunshine. Vincent couldn't believe all the colors in the landscape. Rolling grasses of sea green and brown as far as the eye could see. In the distance they could see a waterfall cascading down into a small lake. They could catch glimpses of the rainbow effect the water at the bottom of the falls was creating as well. Flowering plants of various colors were also around the edge of the water.

Paul and Scotty were starting to show signs of exhaustion. They had to move slowly to accommodate Paul and Scott's injuries. Vincent knew they should stop and rest, but he had to get them to a place of relative safety for the night. He and Devin knew it wouldn't take long for Zonis to reach the clearing where they were dropped off. Vincent noticed two men in the distance behind them. He signalled to Devin then pointed toward the waterfall.

They stopped for a minute. "We're being followed," Vincent told Devin.

Devin looked over Vincent's shoulder. "Zonis? Could they be tracking us somehow?"

"I don't think it's Zonis. He'd have more men spread out like a safari hunting party since he's after me and there's only two of them."

"Let's get Paul and Scotty to the waterfall, then we can plan our next move. Zonis probably went after the others first and is saving you for last. They may not even be after us." Devin pointed to the two figures.

"Unlikely," Vincent said to him.

"You're right, Vincent. This area is too remote for mere hikers. What are you going to do?"

"Capture them if I can. If not, then..." Vincent looked away.

"It's them or us, Vincent. No two ways around it. Them or us." Vincent nodded.

Cleon looked at the GPS. The four dots were still moving in a westerly direction. "They look to be about a mile ahead of us." Cleon told Elliot as they stopped to catch their breath.

"With two injured men, they can't move very fast or they would have been long gone by now," Elliot commented. He took a long drink from his canteen and wiped at the sweat with his hat. "Come on, if we push it, we may be able to spot them over the next ridge."

Elliot and Cleon picked up their equipment and made their way to the ridge ahead of them. Cleon reached the summit first and was able to spot four figures in the distance. He also noticed a large waterfall that the figures were heading towards. "There's probably a cave of some type behind the waterfall." Cleon pointed it out to Elliot. "I figure that's as good a place as any to hide since it's gonna be dark soon."

The SAT phone suddenly started ringing. Cleon answered and listened for a moment. "They got the two who were heading south." Cleon told Elliot.

"It wasn't the creature," Zonis was heard to say. "Tell Mr. Burch we'll catch up with him and go after the one heading north and two of my men will scout out the ones heading west and report back. This creature is certainly resourceful. Call us if you catch the one you're after before we catch up with you."

"Acknowledged." The SAT phone went dead and Cleon placed it back into his backpack.

"It won't take those men long to get here in their jeep. We have to take them out before they report back to Zonis." Elliot said.

"We have to make sure Vincent and Devin dump those backpacks they're carrying. I've already checked ours and no tracking device but the SAT phone probably has a locator feature in an emergency." Cleon commented.

"We'll dump that too once we reach Vincent and Devin. Problem right now is how to contact them without Vincent or Devin attacking us by mistake?"

"You said you think Vincent recognized you back at the compound," Cleon paused.

"Yes. I believe he did."

"Silly thought. What about a white flag, waving it as we approach?"

"It might just work." Elliot took off his outer shirt. "Here. Use this for strips or whatever you need for the flag." Elliot reached down for a stick. "You can use this to tie it to." Cleon fashioned the flag and soon it was waving over their heads.

Devin saw the flag through the waterfall. "Look, they're waving some type of flag."

"It's a trap," Paul said.

"Don't trust them," Scotty stated.

"Can you tell who it is?" Devin asked Vincent

"No. You three stay here," Vincent told them.

"I'm with you," Devin told Vincent. "Paul and Scotty can go deeper into the cave to hide."

"No." Vincent tried to reason with Devin.

"I'm going and that's the end of it. Chandler will kill me if I make it back to her and you don't. Father would probably disown me as well."

They crawled behind some rocks as the flag got closer. They waited till the two men were right below them when suddenly Devin launched himself at the man carrying the shotgun.

"Devin! No!" Vincent yelled. He made a grab for him then started after him, fearing the worst. The two men landed in a heap. The other man dropped the flag and went to separate the two men.

"Cleon! Stop! It's Devin. Vincent, it's me, Elliot". He looked around as he made a grab for the two men. Vincent finally reached the two fighting men and hurried to Elliot to help pull them apart. Cleon and Devin kept throwing punches, trying to get the upper hand. Devin landed two good punches to Cleon's jaw and midsection before Vincent pulled Devin away. Cleon did the

same to Devin as Elliot got ahold of Cleon. Both men glared at each other.

"Get out of here, Vincent," Devin yelled.

"How did you find us?" Vincent managed to ask as he adjusted his hold on Devin.

"Those packs have a tracking device with a five mile radius. Zonis is sending two men to check on your position. He thinks I'm north of here, going after one of the other prisoners. Zonis already got the prisoners heading south and now he and his men are heading north to meet me. Once he finds out I'm not where I said I'd be, they'll be heading this way en masse. I want to help Vincent get away from Zonis and his insane idea," Elliot explained.

"We have to get Paul and Scotty out of here. They'll never make it out on their own," Devin stated.

"Are they able to travel?" Cleon asked

"They'll manage," Devin told him. "Hey, sorry. I was trying to protect Vincent."

"Listen, man, you didn't know who was following you."

"I'm just glad it was you instead of Zonis or one of his cronies," Devin explained. "Vincent doesn't need any more deaths on his conscience right now."

"I do what I must," Vincent quietly stated.

"Not if we can help it, pal," Elliot said. "Lets go get your friends and get the hell out of here."

"There's an airport outside Lake Wanaka. If we can make it there, I can fly us out of here."

"Fly?" Cleon looked at Elliot, remembering their landing at Queenstown.

"Fly, Mr. Manning," Elliot stated firmly. "Unless you have any other tricks up your sleeve?"

"Sorry boss. Just remembering our arrival here."

Elliot laughed. "That certainly was quite a landing."

"Queenstown airport, right?" Devin asked.

"Yes. Have you flown from there before?" Elliot inquired.

"I've missed that mountain more than once and had a couple close calls. I hold my breath every time I have to land or take off from there."

"Is the plane large enough to carry all of us?" Elliot asked.

"It's a Bristol freighter MK21 with two Bristol Hercules engines. Top speed 225 mph." Cleon

whistled as Devin described the plane. "It'll definitely get us away from here. It can haul 30,000 pounds of cargo. It'll get us to Australia with no problem, to drop off Paul and Scotty, and then with a little island hopping, off to New York."

The men reached the cave behind the waterfall. Paul was standing just inside the entrance holding a club, Scott right behind him with a couple large rocks.

"We heard the commotion outside. Thought Zonis' men found us," Paul said.

"Hey! Those two were with Zonis!" Scotty pointed to Elliot and Cleon.

"No, no, You've got it wrong." Elliot said as Paul raised the club he was holding.

Devin stepped in front of them. "They're friends of Vincent's."

Paul lowered the club as Scott dropped the rocks. Both men kept a wary eye on the group as they entered the cave. The SAT phone rang again. After a few minutes, Cleon turned to the group and relayed the conversation.

"Zonis got the guy heading north. Said he would meet you at the clearing and will go after the last group in the morning."

"The last group?" Scott inquired.

"Yeah. It looks like you three and Vincent are the last ones standing," Cleon softly stated. The men bowed their heads in silent respect for their fallen comrades.

"Cleon, call him back and tell him we'll be roughing it tonight and will catch up to him in the morning. Tell him I'm too tired to get back to the clearing."

"Will do, boss." Cleon made the call and after he was finished, he spoke to the group. "Zonis is pretty pissed off. I could hear him cursing at someone named Denton for sending him in the wrong direction." Cleon looked at Vincent. "Now he knows you came this way."

"I must leave, I cannot allow this to continue. You will have a better chance of escaping if I were not with you." Vincent turned away from them.

"NO WAY VINCENT!" Devin started to yell.

"Ain't gonna happen pal," Elliot stated firmly.

"Sacrificing yourself won't help Devin and the others, Vincent. Zonis will kill them regardless when he finds them," Cleon said.

"I must." Vincent turned to leave.

"YOU'RE NOT LEAVING!" Devin, Paul and Scott yelled at the same time.

"Dammit, Vincent! I won't let you do this!" Devin demanded.

"We feel safer with you." Paul told him. Scott nodded his head in agreement.

Devin went and stood in front of Vincent. "I promised myself I'd get you back to Chandler and Father. We'll get back, Vincent. Believe me."

Elliot and Cleon stepped in front of him as well. "You'll have to get past us to get out of this cave," Vincent moved to walk past them but they stood their ground, blocking him. Vincent bowed his head, accepting their judgement. He also felt humbled that they were all willing to stand with him against this threat.

"Now that that's settled, we need to get rid of those damned backpacks and pronto." Cleon said as he walked over to where the packs were stacked and started emptying them. Devin and the others came over to help.

"I thought I saw a ledge off to the right as we reached the falls," Elliot said.

"Devin, let's you and I check it out." Devin nodded and followed Cleon out of the cave entrance. Cleon turned. "Vincent, why don't you and Elliot go keep a lookout for Zonis' men in case they get too close before we dump these things. Just in case he heads this way tonight instead of tomorrow."

"I underestimated this creature," Zonis said to the others as they arrived back at the clearing where the jeeps were waiting. "We'll wait till morning for my men to report back, then we'll bag this Vincent of yours."

"What do you have in mind?" Mr Ambani asked.

"Sending my men in different directions to try and form a perimeter to trap them. He won't get away this time. No one has ever survived this course yet and I'm not going to let him spoil my perfect record."

"What if he takes out your two men?" Prince Talal asked.

"You have a point, my dear prince. We'll wait till dawn then we'll proceed whether my men report back or not."

"Will you warn Mr. Burch?" Mr Ambani inquired.

"We'll give him advance warning when we start out, so he isn't caught in the crossfire. Come gentlemen. Lets retire and enjoy the spoils of privilage."

Devin and Cleon checked out the ledge and spotted the fast flowing river below. "Lets dump those packs here and hopefully the GPS will lead Zonis' men away from here." Devin nodded and afterwards they made their way back to the cave and shortly thereafter the packs were floating down the river.

The men in the jeep saw the waterfall in the distance when their GPS suddenly pinged. The directional indicator showed 4 dots now heading back in their direction. They scoured the area but found no sign of them. The dots were moving away from them toward the south, "Lets follow the signal," one man offered.

"What if it's a trick?" the other countered.

"It's better for us to check it out than give Mr. Zonis the wrong information. If it is a trick, we can bring him back to the waterfall and start searching from there."

"You're right. Let's go.

Vincent breathed a sigh of relief as he saw the jeep turn around as Cleon and Devin came into view. Elliot stepped over to the two men. "Looks like your idea worked, Cleon," Elliot commented.

"Once they find those packs, they'll report to Zonis and come after us with everything they've got. As soon as your friends have rested enough, we'll head out," Elliot stated. The other men nodded then returned to the cave where Paul and Scotty were waiting.

"Did it work?" Paul asked.

"Yes. The men in the jeep are now following the packs downriver. It won't take them long to find them though," Devin said.

"We'll wait a couple hours then head out. Zonis said he won't start in this direction till dawn. We have to be long gone before then," Elliot said.

"How are you two holding up?" Cleon asked Paul and Scotty.

"We'll make it." Scott told him.

The men then gathered whatever food they could find. Mostly berries but it was at least something, They combined what meager supplies Zonis gave as well and filled their canteens with the cool fresh water. Vincent took first watch as they settled down to get whatever sleep they could.

Zonis' men caught up with the packs a mile downstream from the waterfall. The leader of the two radioed base camp.

"Mr. Zonis?"

"Yes."

"Mitchell, sir. We found the packs one mile downstream from the Cameron Valley Waterfall. We searched the immediate area but no sign of them."

"Isn't there a cave in that area?"

"Yes sir."

"They're probably hold up there for the night. We'll leave here at 4am and meet you at the waterfall by copter. Have two of the SUV's meet us. Don't let them out of your sight."

"Very well, sir."

Zonis' men returned to the waterfall, one slept while the other kept watch.

Vincent's sense of time told him it was around 4 am. It wouldn't be long till dawn appeared. Vincent gently shook Devin and the others awake.

"It's time to leave." Vincent said softly as the men got themselves ready to leave.

Vincent gathered the packs Elliot and Cleon were carrying and placed them by the cave entrance. Cleon took his pack, unzipped the flap and pulled out two P90 machine pistols. He made sure both were in good working order and fully loaded before handing one to Devin.

When Devin started to protest, Cleon exclaimed, "Was it just talk or are you willing to do what it takes to protect Vincent and the others?" Devin looked away then nodded his head. "Hey..." Cleon continued, "I know this isn't easy but these will help even the odds." He pulled out extra mags for both pistols.

"When did you grab those?" Elliot asked.

"After you grabbed the shotgun. I grabbed these and a couple extra mags. We'll need all the firepower we have to defeat Zonis. He won't let us get to Devin's plane without a firefight, since he wants Vincent dead at any cost. Once he finds out we're with him, our lives won't be worth a plugged nickel as far as he's concerned."

Vincent caught a glint of light off in the distance as he stood outside. The first rays of dawn were appearing as he saw the light bounce off the roof of the jeep. Vincent knew then that

Zonis was on his way.

"We must hurry," he told the others.

The telltale sound of a helicopter could just be heard over the roar of the waterfall. The men looked at each other, wondering if it was too late to flee. Vincent led them toward the back of the cave.

"Through here, quickly. There's an opening at the other end."

Silently, the men made their way through the crack and finally emerged on the other side of the cliff. They slowly made their way down the steep incline. Cleon taking point and Vincent, waiting at the exit, watched in silence to see if anyone was following.

"I know you're in there, Vincent." Mitch's evil taunt sounded throughout the cave. "Why don't you make it easy on Devin and the others. It's you Zonis wants. He'll let the others go."

As Vincent turned toward the voice, Devin roughly grabbed him by the arm. "No way, little brother." Devin pulled him toward the incline and continued to pull him to where the others were waiting below the ledge. "We all go or we all stay." Vincent nodded and followed Devin and the others down the incline. They heard the copter flying overhead.

Zonis and his associates cautiously entered the cave. One of the men stated,

"All clear, sir. No sign of them."

Denton entered the cave with Zonis and spotted the crack with its dark opening in the rear of the cave. He sprinted ahead and spotted them at the bottom of the incline.

"They made it to the bottom," he shouted to the others.

"Damn! He eludes us at every turn. After them." Zonis swore under his breath.

Vincent and the others headed for cover as two SUV's came screaming around the hillside, heading straight for them. They knew that the helicopter had landed at the top of the incline. Once under cover, Cleon cocked the P90 as the SUV's drew closer. Suddenly a burst of gunfire exploded from one of the vehicles. Cleon returned fire as Elliot joined in and watched as both vehicles swerved as their hoods blew apart. Before either could regain control, both cars flipped over several times then both landed on their roofs. No movement could be seen. They spotted Zonis and Denton at the top of the cliff watching the carnage below.

"So, Mr. Burch and his associate have joined them," Zonis said angrily. "Denton, how is it you didn't know this? I should shoot you for your incompetence. I've killed men for less." Zonis raised his gun and aimed it at Mitch.

"Mr. Zonis, I swear. I didn't know they knew each other. Your men have the area surrounded.

We can wait them out." Mitch held his hands up as he backed away from his boss.

"Radio the others. Make sure the area's secure. I don't want to lose him."

"Yes sir." Denton got on the radio and informed Zonis that the area was secure.

"Have the pilot land the copter down there. Once we take care of them, we can return to the compound and enjoy our victory."

In the meantime, Vincent and the others were considering their options. They knew it was only a matter of time before Zonis' men flushed them out and then that would be the end of everything.

"We have to take Zonis himself out," Cleon stated. "Take out the leader and the rest usually go by the wayside."

"We need that copter," Devin said. "If we can grab that, we can make it to the airport and freedom."

"What did you have in mind?" Elliot asked.

"Whatever we do, Denton's mine," Devin said with conviction.

"Devin...," Vincent warned.

"Not this time, Vincent. You gave him a chance after he shot Catherine..." Devin stopped at the look on Elliot's face.

"He's the one who shot Cathy?" Elliot said in shock.

"Yeah. He's not getting a second chance this time to hurt anyone I care about."

"Not if I get him first," Elliot said with venom in his voice.

Devin looked at Elliot then nodded his head. "Zonis is mine then."

"Agreed."

"Elliot...Devin...You don't know what you're saying. You don't need to do this on my account. Let Mr. Manning get you and the others to safety. I can take care of them."

"Vincent..." Cleon began. "I believe they've made up their minds." He looked at the two men for confirmation. They both nodded. "I know Elliot. Once he decides on a path, nothing will stand in his way to accomplish his goal."

"Devin is the same way, I'm afraid," Vincent told him.

"Then my advice is to stay out of their way. We'll stand by just in case, of course. We could take out the rest of Zonis' men so they at least have a fighting chance."

"Do you doubt them?"

"Elliot...No way. If Devin's anything like Elliot..."

"Let's get the others undercover and out of harm's way."

As they moved off, two more SUV's roared into view. In short order they met the same fate as the previous vehicles. By this time Zonis, Mitch, Prince Talal, Mr. Ambani and four security personal exited the copter. Cleon took out two of Zonis' men as the others scrambled for cover. The other two guards had the unfortunate sense to pass in front of the rock Vincent took cover behind. They, too, met the same fate as the other two.

"Prince Talal, Mr. Ambani. If you value your lives, I suggest you leave now and make your way back to Zonis' base camp," Elliot called out. "If you leave now, no harm will come to you."

"Do we have your word on this?" Ambani asked.

"You coward!" Zonis spat.

"Better to live another day," Prince Talal said.

"I don't think so." Zonis turned on both men and fired his P90 in their direction. Both men crumpled to the ground.

"Now it's just you and me, freak!" Zonis taunted.

"Not this time," Elliot said.

"What? Are you challenging me?"

"No. He is." Elliot pointed to Devin. "You..." He pointed to Mitch. "Let's dance," waving his fingers in a '*come here*' gesture.

Zonis and Mitch dropped their weapons as Elliot and Devin handed theirs to Cleon. They moved off to a patch of open ground and stood staring at each other.

"Be careful Elliot," Devin said. "We grew up with Mitch."

"Yeah, Elliot," Mitch taunted. "You wouldn't want that pretty boy face of yours damaged. Your old man probably taught you Latin and poetry. You wouldn't know the first thing about good old-fashioned street fighting."

"That's where you're wrong. I grew up in Hell's Kitchen. Worked those very docks for most of my youth."

"We'll see, pretty boy. We'll see."

"And what about you...Devin, is it? You have some dodgy saying about me," Zonis smirked.

"Nah. I just want to beat you to a bloody pulp."

" 'Cry Havoc! and let slip the dogs of war', " Zonis quoted Shakespeare as he squared off against Devin.

Devin gasped. his entire head spun with a sudden burst of pain. Zonis, his face livid and teeth gritted in rage, had struck Devin with his fist. The impact did not carry the solid weight of a planned punch. Zonis' unthinking, explosive action came from complete loss of self-control. Devin immediately shrugged it off.

Mitch unsheathed an eight inch knife and crouched, thrusting it palm up in the unprofessional but still lethal stance of a street fighter. As Mitch charged, Elliot threw every ounce of his strength as he pressed the flats of his hands together and whipped them in a scything chop to the side of Mitch's neck. Elliot lunged sideways to avoid the knife in Mitch's hand. Elliot landed on his knees as Mitch straightened and stood bending over him.

Devin's muscled arm swung with all the strength of his shoulder behind it and caught Zonis unawares. He reached around the small of Zonis' back with one arm and pulled, while the other forearm pressed Zonis' chest. Then he slowly increased the pressure. Zonis gnashed his teeth together as the agony suddenly mushroomed inside him. He could feel his heartbeat pounding in his head as his eyesight began to dim and waver before his eyes.

Elliot heaved in a corkscrew motion and brought his fist up from his knees, striking Mitch in the adam's apple. With the cartilage of the larynx crushed, most men would have gagged to death, the rest should have at least gone unconscious. Mitch did neither. He simply clutched his throat, made a terrible gurgling noise and reeled backwards. Mitch opened his mouth as if to say something. Then his eyes rolled upwards and he crumpled to the ground.

With the few final beats left in his heart, Zonis swung his fist, landing a solid blow into Devin's stomach. Devin drifted to his knees, dazed, the breath punched out of him. Devin slid to a sitting position and rested for a moment. Gasping for air, massaging the pain in his gut, he rose awkwardly to his feet and gazed down at his opponent.

Vincent came to Devin's side and placed his hand on his shoulder. "Devin..."

"It's okay, Vincent. It had to be done."

"You okay, boss?" Cleon asked Elliot as he helped him to his feet. Elliot merely nodded as he looked over at Devin. Scott and Paul came over as the others gathered together over the bodies of the two dead men.

"Lets grab Zonis' copter and get the hell outta here," Paul stated.

"Can you fly that thing?" Cleon asked.

"Not me...him." Paul pointed to Scott.

"Just get me into that thing and into the air and I can figure our way to Wanaka airport. I was a chopper pilot for Australian Medical Command. I can get us there."

Scott was as good as his word. Right after everyone climbed aboard, Scott expertly handled the controls and soon they were aloft. Before long the lights of Wanaka airport came into view.

"There she is!" Devin pointed to a plane parked at the far end of the runway. "Set her down there." Scott landed the copter and Devin had everyone hustled into the plane. "I need to let Keith know I'm back and that I'm taking the plane. Wait here."

"What about passports for getting us into Australia?" Paul asked. "Zonis took everything we had."

"Elliot and I have ours so you don't have to worry about us."

"Another trick, Cleon?" Elliot smirked.

"Didn't know when or if we would need a quick getaway, boss."

"Don't worry. Keith and I will work something out." Devin stated as he headed for the airport office.

"Devin! Where the devil have you been?" Keith exclaimed as Devin came through the door. "We found your wallet and passport by your plane. I was waiting to call the authorities if you didn't show up soon."

"It's a long story, pal, and will tell it to you one day. Right now, I need a favor."

"Name it."

"Need papers for two friends of mine, to get them into Australia. No questions for now, okay?"

"Okay, but you'll owe me big time for this."

Devin brought Scott and Paul into the office so Keith could take their pictures for the papers. Soon everything was done and they returned to the plane. Devin made sure he had plenty of fuel for the flight to Australia. They were airborne a few minutes later and four hours later the landing lights of the cargo terminal Devin worked out of came into view.

"I don't know how to thank you." Paul shook Elliot and Cleon's hands. "And you..." He went to shake Vincent's hand. "You saved us from a fate worse than death. We'll keep your secret.

Good luck." Scott nodded in agreement.

"Thanks to Keith, you all exited New Zealand as proper tourists. Once I make the arrangements to fly to New York, the only thing we need to worry about is just you, Vincent. We may need to hide you for a little while till I can get us cleared. You can hide in the avionics bay. They don't search that section of the plane usually. Once we reach New York, we'll smuggle you out of the airport with no one the wiser. Once we're airborne, you can sit up front with me."

Vincent agreed and Devin showed him the hatch for the avionics bay. They decided to get a good night's sleep and leave in the morning.

"He's coming back," Catherine exclaimed.

"Catherine..."

"Yes, Father. Wherever Vincent is, he knows he's coming home, coming back to us." She grabbed at Father's arm.

"Thank God." He hugged her as if his life depended upon it. "Is he all right?"

"I sense he's tired but..." Catherine's face glowed in the candlelight. She softly cried into Father's shoulder as he gripped her tightly. His own eyes brimmed with tears as he was too choked up to acknowledge anything else she might have said.

"He's coming back." They both said together.

Devin led them to a deserted hangar next to where the plane was parked. "Welcome to my humble abode."

Devin's home was indeed unique--a remodeled and refurbished hangar on the outskirts of the Sydney airport. A cast iron staircase lead into a cluttered apartment. The apartment and hangar also housed items collected from prior adventures over the years, such as a cast iron bathtub with an outboard motor fixed on one end and a totem pole, among other things. Two cars stood out - a 1936 Rolls Royce Silver Ghost and a 1958 Chrysler 300D convertible.

Cleon gave a long whistle as he entered the hangar and saw the two classic cars. "Whoa! What sweet rides." Then he spied the craft in the far corner. "What the...? Is that a Messerschmitt airplane from World War II?"

"Yup," Devin smirked.

"A Rolls Royce Silver Ghost." Elliot's fingers lightly grazed over the polished finish as he admired the cars.

Vincent had never seen such cars, nor the aircraft, in his life. He honestly didn't know what to make of them. "They're beautiful," he breathed. Vincent's curiosity drifted to the cast iron bathtub. He pointed to it and asked, "Where in the world did you get this?"

"That, bro, is a long story with which I will regale you all in on our flight home. Right now, I'm bushed."

The others nodded their heads in agreement. Devin showed them where they could bed down and soon gentle snores could be heard. The next morning as they were getting ready to leave, Devin said to Vincent.

"Vincent, I know you're in a hurry to get home to Chandler, but a couple days longer won't make any difference...right?"

"Devin...", Vincent looked at him.

"What did you have in mind?" Elliot asked.

"Giving Vincent an aerial view of a few things while on our way home."

"I'm game," Cleon called out.

"Sounds like fun," Elliot chimed in.

"Just no crazy landings okay, Devin? Queenstown was enough for me."

"No promises, Cleon, but I won't make us crash. Father and Chandler would kill me if I survived."

"Shannon would too, I suspect," Vincent stated. Elliot just smiled and nodded.

"All aboard for the Wonderland Express. First stop Ayers Rock."

"Good choice, Devin," Elliot said.

"I figured since we're here already, might as well see one of Australia's most famous landmasses."

Devin left them to go to the office. Devin filed two separate flight plans. The first to Ayers Rock and back to Sydney. The second was his international one detailing his course over Fiji, The Cook Islands, with refuels, and then onto the Hawaiian Islands. Once in Hawaii, Devin would file his US course that would allow him to fly over the various destinations he wanted to show Vincent.

"Everybody ready?" Devin called out as he returned to the plane.

"Lead on McDuff!" Elliot chimed.

"Lets get this show on the road," Cleon added.

"Show me, Devin."

"And *'Away we go!'*" Devin mocked in his best Jackie Gleason voice.

Devin made the three hour flight to Ayers Rock in short order. He made several loops around the orange-red monument so that Vincent could see it from every angle. They returned to Sydney and Vincent got to see the Sydney Harbor Bridge and the clam-shaped top of the Sydney Opera House. Heading toward the ocean, he flew ove the Great Barrier Reef. Its lush tropical scene, a memory Vincent would cherish for the rest of his life. Four and a half hours later they were landing at Suva, Fiji to refuel. Vincent was enthralled with all the colors of this tropical paradise, sad though, to only be seeing it through an airplane window. They left an hour later for the three hour flight to Paratonga in The Cook Islands for another refuel and stopover. Devin made Vincent as comfortable as he could in the plane for the night. The next day they left for the longest of their oceanic trip, the six hour flight to Hawaii. The ocean was a brilliant blue and Elliot pointed out a pod of dolphins that came into view. Soon the long chain of the Hawaiian Islands came into view.

"Back in US territory," Cleon remarked.

"Can we fly over the Mauna Loa volcano?" Elliot asked.

"I don't see why not," Devin stated.

As they neared the volcano Vincent could see people near the crater, looking down into the mouth of the volcano. Not so close to be in any danger but mindful of how unpredictable the volcano was. Their next refuel was at Honolulu International Airport. Devin finished the refuel and was airborne again. He wanted to fly over Pearl Harbor and show Vincent the Arizona memorial. They bowed their heads in silent homage as the white monument over the wreck came into view. The morning sun shone bright as the tip of Diamondhead rose in the windscreen.

"I have seen wonders to last a lifetime," Vincent said as they passed the ragged peak.

"You ain't seen nothin' yet. We still have the entire US to cover before we reach New York," Devin coaxed.

"Catherine will just have to wait a couple more days to get her arms around you," Elliot teased. "Since we're flying cross country, we're bound to see loads of things."

Next stop LAX, for another refuel, and then slowly they passed over the white Hollywood sign in the hills overlooking the city. Devin veered east so that he could fly over Hoover Dam. Vincent marveled at the large structure as Elliot explained how it serves to power the city of Las Vegas to the west. Turning north Devin flew over the Grand Canyon, The landscape was spectacular in the early afternoon sun. Further north as they passed through Yellowstone National Park they just happened to see '*Old Faithful*' sprouting a mighty plumb of steam and water into the air. By late afternoon they were flying over Devil's Tower in Wyoming.

"They say it's haunted by the spirits of Indians," Devin explained. "I think we have time for one more sight before landing for the night." Devin turned the plane and soon Vincent could see four distinct headlike shapes on the mountainside before him.

"Mount Rushmore," Vincent said with awe. "Four presidents who changed the course of our history."

They landed at an airport near the monument and were soon settled down for the night. Devin managed to sneak Vincent into the room he had at the local motel without incident. After a comfortable night's sleep they were once more on their way. After refuelling at the Rapid City airfield, Devin took once more to the air.

"One more flyby then homeward bound," Devin stated.

"Let me guess, Washington DC," Cleon commented.

"We can't pass up the opportunity for Vincent to see the Washington Monoument, The White House, Arlington National Cemetary among others," Elliot quipped.

All Vincent could do was nod his head. Four hours later, Vincent could see the white tombstones which covered the landscape ahead of them. He bowed his head in homage to the fallen heroes. A small flame flickered in the distance.

"The grave of John F. Kennedy," Vincent whispered.

No one said a word as Devin flew overhead. He made a slight bank and then they saw The Tomb Of The Unknowns with its solitary honor guard, guarding the soldiers buried within from the crowd outside. Once more they bowed their heads. Devin turned the plane again and they saw the Washington Monoument in the distance. As they flew over Vincent could see the White House, Lincoln Memorial, Jefferson Memorial and the multitude of buildings which encompassed the Smithsonian Institute.

"One day...", Vincent whispered.

"One day indeed," Elliot clapped him on the shoulder.

"On to New York," Devin called out.

As the sun started to set they could see the lights of New York and the landing field for the cargo terminal Devin was going to land at. Once the plane was down, they settled it into the corner of the airfield and with a little ingenuity managed to get Vincent off the plane and into a car Elliot had waiting at the airfield.

As soon as Vincent's feet hit the tunnel floor, he took off running as if the hounds of hell were pursuing him. Devin tapped out a message as soon as he took off, warning everyone to get out of his way. They quickly cleared the tunnels, all knowing where Vincent would eventually end up - right in Catherine's arms. Elliot quickly followed suit, eager to get back to Shannon. Devin led Cleon to Father's chamber. Father looked up surprised.

"Devin! Heaven be praised. We thought we might never see Vincent again. How on earth...?"

"We have Elliot and Mr. Manning here to thank for that."

"Mr. Manning." Father took his hand. "Thank you for returning him to us."

"Cleon, please."

"Father, this is one adventure Vincent will never forget for the rest of his life. He's been able to see the world, limited though it was. We would have been back sooner but I took advantage of the situation."

"Devin, whatever you did, was worth it," Vincent commented as he entered the room with Catherine. "Father..."

Father limped over and gave Vincent one of the longest hugs of his life. "You must tell me everything, all you've experienced."

"I've played the most dangerous game of my life. Thanks to Devin, I've seen the wonders of this world I've only ready or dreamed about." Then Vincent looked at each person in the room. "But...like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz says,

'THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME!'

FINI

