

Excerpt from
The Obsidian Quest
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by
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Chapter 1

Terror in the Bush

Peter sighed in frustration, peering at the blurred photograph of a young woman holding a baby of a few weeks old. The woman was Peter's mother Marian, killed in a car accident when he was five. What a disappointment it was finding that Aunt Angela shared only her twin's fair hair and the gray eyes Peter himself had inherited. Also, Aunt Angela's face was longish and fashionably thin, whereas the face of the woman in the photo was small and youthfully round.

Peter jumped as he realized his aunt had entered the bedroom where he was unpacking and was looking over his shoulder at the photograph. The expression on her face startled—almost frightened—him. Her pretty mouth had gone hard and there was a faint flush on her prominent cheekbones.

For a few moments it was as though the air crackled with tension and he thought his aunt was angry. The feeling washed over him with

unbelievable force. How, he asked himself, could she let him know so clearly how she felt without saying a word?

Then, as their eyes met, he saw it was anguish that Angela Marilyn grappled with. So after eight years she still hadn't recovered from her twin's death. Maybe that was why he and his stepfather hadn't seen her since. His heart warmed to her even more than at their first meeting a bare half-hour before on his arrival from Wellington to stay with her while his stepfather was in Australia on business.

"Would you rather I kept it hidden?" he offered, referring to the photograph.

Aunt Angela looked surprised. She gave him a crooked grin and patted his shoulder.

"Bless you for being so thoughtful." She glanced at the photograph with a puzzled frown. "Perhaps it might be best." With a yearning expression she watched him put the photograph into an empty drawer. For a few moments, the puzzled frown returning, her gaze remained glued there even after Peter closed the drawer. Abruptly she seemed to

remember what she had come downstairs for. “When you’ve finished unpacking come up and have some lunch—you must be famished. Your Uncle Paul will be home any minute.”

As she spoke the front door opened. They had been so engrossed they hadn’t heard the car. Several long strides brought Peter’s uncle to the bedroom door. Peter found himself looking up into twinkling dark eyes that had the capacity to make one feel their owner could read one’s thoughts. The eyes were set deeply under bushy brows in a craggy face topped by a mop of unruly dark curls.

“So this is young Peter FitzArthur, the nephew you’ve kept me in ignorance of all those years,” the newcomer chided his wife, who made no reply. Peter received the impression that the teasing remark annoyed her.

He had jumped to his feet on his uncle’s entry—Paul Merrilyn was the type of man who commanded such respect—and his hand was now clasped in the tall man’s warm grip.

“Glad to meet you, Peter.” Uncle Paul’s voice was rich and deep.

Peter found his uncle's scrutiny so embarrassing he hastily drew the man's attention to the dog his Aunt Angela had reluctantly said he could bring with him—a magnificent male German shepherd who had been watching with head on paws, but who instantly sat up, ears alert, at Uncle Paul's entrance. "This is Dreyfus."

With deliberation Dreyfus raised his right paw. Uncle Paul dropped Peter's hand and took the paw, subjecting the dog to the same intense scrutiny he had given Peter. Dreyfus held his gaze for a long moment before looking away.

Uncle Paul released the paw and turned back to Peter with a boyish grin. Peter received the strange impression that his uncle was relieved—as though he had feared both boy and dog might be lacking in some way Peter couldn't understand.

"Yes, you'll do. You'll do very well, both of you," was his odd comment before turning to lead the way upstairs.

As she served the lunch of home-made pizza and scones, Aunt Angela kept her husband up-to-date with the latest news.

“The two boys who disappeared after school haven’t been found. There’s still two weeks to the end of the year and the police are warning children not to talk to strangers and to go straight home. They must suspect foul play.”

To Peter’s surprise, Uncle Paul looked at his wife in open-mouthed dismay. “What children? I didn’t know there were any children missing.” For a moment he looked white and strained. Then it was as though a mask dropped over his face, wiping away all expression.

It was Aunt Angela’s turn to look surprised. “It’s been on the news more than once. The police have no leads. No one saw the boys with anyone who looked suspicious, or with any stranger at all. They just vanished—two boys about Peter’s age: Jamie and John Evans. They live in the bay, too. I keep getting a feeling I should know them, but I’m sure I haven’t even met them.”

She sat frowning for some time as though trying to remember something. Uncle Paul, too, looked thoughtful. Neither seemed interested in eating.

Suddenly Aunt Angela, putting her hand to her forehead, stumbled to her feet, nearly upsetting her chair. "I'm sorry. I've been getting the most dreadful headaches lately and another one's come on. I'll have to lie down."

In silence Uncle Paul watched her leave. Then, abruptly, he rose and started clearing away the half-eaten lunch. Within minutes he was driving back to work, having hardly said another word to Peter, who felt too much in awe of his uncle to break the heavy silence that had settled between them.

As the car disappeared up the drive Peter looked at Dreyfus. "Aunt Angela won't want us inside making a noise so we might as well explore."

Boy and dog ran down the path at the side of the house. With Dreyfus in front, Peter pelted across the grass to the edge of the bush. After the cramped conditions of townhouse living in Wellington, it was good to have all this room so near home to play and exercise Dreyfus.

To Peter's delight he found the start of an overgrown path at the bottom of the lawn. Dreyfus instantly set off along it. About to follow, Peter

received the uncanny idea that someone was watching. If there was anybody on the path ahead, he reasoned, Dreyfus would be kicking up a fuss. All the same, despite the dog's silence, the uneasy feeling of being watched persisted. He swung round and looked back up the lawn. His gaze was drawn to the two huge picture windows at the back of the house. He laughed in relief. For there at the living room window stood Aunt Angela. He waved to her. She raised her own hand before disappearing.

Peter turned back to the path, aware that he could no longer hear Dreyfus. He quickened his steps, calling the dog's name and expecting him to reappear on the path ahead at any second. But Dreyfus, normally obedient, didn't come. And he still didn't come when Peter, realizing the path was no longer overgrown, broke into a run, at the same time raising his voice to a shout.

As the echoes of his cry died to silence, Peter skidded to a halt, straining his ears for the slightest noise. But the bush was deadly quiet. There wasn't so much as a breeze rustling the leaves. All he could hear was his heart

thumping. Should it be this quiet? he wondered. With so many pines, wattles and other exotics among the pittosporums and silver tree-ferns, there wouldn't, he knew, be much native wildlife—some tuis, gray warblers, fantails, and maybe the odd pukeko. But where were they? And the blackbirds, sparrows and other common birds? Surely there should be birdsong at this time of year?

In spite of the lack of wind, a chill swept over him. He realized in the same instant that the bush was unnaturally cool and dark despite the warmth of the early summer afternoon.

There was something wrong—something terribly wrong. He could sense it in the air—a wrongness that was all but tangible. And the strange certainty of being watched had returned. His eyes scanned the gloom in the rising ground on either side of the path. But there was no one there. Above the usual undergrowth he saw only trees, saplings, ferns and tree-ferns. Panic seized him by the throat. His next shout of Dreyfus's name came out in a strangled gasp ...

And the gasp was cut off as a strong arm seized him from behind. At

the same time a large hand clamped over his mouth; his head was dragged back against a brawny chest.

A voice hissed in his ear, “Shut up, you meddlesome young lout! You’ll bring the whole neighborhood down.”

Peter’s first instinct was to bite the hand over his mouth. But he couldn’t open his jaw wide enough—a huge thumb was pressed hard beneath his chin. He tried to struggle. But the arm clamped around him was unbelievably strong. It had both his own arms pinned down. In desperation he drove his heel into the man’s shins.

He had the satisfaction of hearing a hissing intake of breath. The man spat out a stream of foul language and threw Peter flat on his stomach. His attacker’s considerable weight on top of him drove the breath from his lungs. He managed to lift his head and open his mouth. But with all that pressure on his lungs he couldn’t draw sufficient breath to yell. A rag—dirty and smelly—was thrust into his open mouth. Pain jerked at his shoulders as his hands were yanked together and tied behind his back. Darkness fell as a sack was thrown over his head and he was bundled

into it. The man slung the sack over his shoulders as though Peter weighed no more than a bag of potatoes.

Afterwards Peter realized his memory of the journey must have been faulty. Terror made it seem long—though he worked out it couldn't have been much more than five minutes. But he never forgot what a painfully bumpy—utterly terrifying—journey it was.

Towards the end they must have left the path, for Peter heard the rustle of the man pushing his way through the undergrowth. Without warning he was dumped on the ground. With ungentle hands the man pulled the sack off him and tied his legs together before retying his hands in front. With the same roughness he was picked up and dumped onto what felt like a wooden bench.

Only then did Peter realize it was no longer dark. But the light—two flames hovering either side of his head—at first blinded him. Then he saw what the lights were: two thick black candles, so close he could feel their heat but couldn't see much beyond them. He was aware of movement and a rustling sound behind one of the flames.

Suddenly the man stood beside him, dressed in some type of dark flowing garment. He spoke quietly, gently—and for some reason this tone of voice was more menacing.

“I think it’s time to remove that gag. You won’t scream now. My master wants to assess whether you’re the One everyone’s waiting for. The others aren’t, but we know they’re connected. If you are the One it’ll be unfortunate for you because we’ll have to ...detain you.” The significant pause made Peter’s skin crawl with increasing terror.

A large hand hovered over his face. The gag was removed with such violence his head banged against the wood. He tried to scream but found he couldn’t move, let alone open his mouth. The cave seemed to swim around him. The candles started to smoke. Their flames danced madly, growing larger and larger. The smoke wreathed itself around him like a mist. A stench like rotting meat filled his nostrils and with it his terror grew.

The man gave one loud cry: “Ready, Master!”

Peter then realized the reason for the stench. Paralyzed with fright, he

saw a huge spider advancing towards him. He wasn't the type to be afraid of creepy-crawlies—as a small boy he had found them fascinating. But during a holiday in Australia he had been bitten by a spider and had nearly died. For years afterwards spiders had given him nightmares. And this one stood higher than a man. One of its legs was at least equal in breadth to Peter's body. Its movements were slow—threateningly so—but not because it was too ponderous to move quickly. With terrible clarity, Peter was certain it could pounce faster than a flea could jump.

The smoke from the candles entwined itself around the creature like a loving caress. Peter could only watch as the monster came closer and the odor grew stronger. As it stopped near him it seemed to Peter that something inside him snapped. He opened his mouth and screamed.

Through the scream he thought he heard a few strands of strange bell-like music. Hands laid hold of him from both sides. Gentle hands and rough hands were having a tug-of-war with him. Then the rough hands pushed him—or did he fall? He felt as though he was plummeting into a dark pit. He hit the bottom with a thud. He lay for a while, winded and

only half-conscious.

When he came to he was lying on his stomach in a small clearing in the bush. The first thing he saw was the spider, crawling from the back of his hand onto his arm. Although it had shrunk to a span of less than the size of a saucer, it was still the biggest spider he had ever seen. It was only later he realized it must have been a harmless huntsman spider from Australia, known locally as the Avondale spider. With a gasp he shook the creature off and to his relief it scuttled into the undergrowth.

Peter sat up and touched his head, where a lump had formed. But he forgot it as he became aware that he could hear the strange bell-like music he thought he had heard in the cave. However, it was faint. He strained his ears, striving to work out what could be making it. Then it was gone. His surroundings darkened. And for some reason he found himself yearning to hear the music again. But there was only silence.

He looked around, aware with dismay that he had no idea where he was. He rose, hoping to get a better bearing, but only succeeded in staggering to a tree, where he was violently ill.

He had barely time to recover when a rustling sound made him start. He was looking for the best place to hide when bounding through the trees came the most welcome sight he had ever seen.

“Dreyfus!”

A moment later the panting dog found himself all but suffocated by his young master’s embrace. He returned this display of affection by completely washing away the sweat of fear that had gathered on Peter’s face with a tongue like a large wet flannel. To Peter’s surprise, the dog grabbed his sleeve between his teeth and started dragging him along the path. Dreyfus didn’t let go until they emerged onto the lawn at the bottom of the Merrilyns’ property, where Peter was astonished to see it was early evening.

To account for the state he was in he told his aunt and uncle he had slipped and fallen. Aunt Angela clucked over him like a fussy hen, while Uncle Paul looked over his newspaper, frowning and pursing lips as though in disapproval. Was this stern stranger who was his uncle changing his mind about him? Peter was surprised to find how much the man’s good

opinion mattered.

Not unnaturally, Peter had a restless night full of weird dreams. Except for the dreams, he would have insisted he hadn't slept at all. One dream in particular was so clear he had to keep telling himself it was only a dream. In the dream he saw a tall man in a long midnight-blue cloak. Although his surroundings were dark, his figure was outlined in light. But Peter couldn't make out the source of the light. For a moment he thought it came from the man himself. Then the man moved and Peter saw the edge of a full moon behind his head. He looked to be standing by some type of rough stone building. Peter could make out a mass of stone on the man's right.

Mist curled around the figure, partly obscuring both man and moon. The man took a few steps forward and the crunch of his shoes sounded loud in the eerie, spellbound night. The mist swirled aside and a shock thrilled through Peter as he realized the man was looking straight at him.

The man spoke, his voice deep and otherworldly. "When the moon shines full on the eve of winter solstice the power of the Evil One shall be

great enough to win the war before the first battle has begun. But you and I shall be there to stop him. Remember, Peter, we shall both be there ...we shall be there ...we shall be there."

The figure faded and Peter woke to find himself muttering "we shall be there", while Dreyfus frantically licked his face. It was some time before Peter could persuade the dog to settle down.

Peter drifted off to sleep again, this time staying asleep until he was woken by his aunt wanting to know if he was going to sleep all day or did he want some breakfast?

As it was Saturday and promised to be very warm, Aunt Angela suggested they spend it on the beach, taking a picnic lunch with them.

"In that case," Uncle Paul said dryly, "we'd better use the car. It's not my idea of fun lugging to the beach on foot a woman's idea of a picnic."

Aunt Angela looked indignant. "You'd be the first to complain if I provided only measly sandwiches and a flask of tea!"

Uncle Paul laughed. "Well, what are we having then?"

"I've some Cornish pasties in the freezer, also bread rolls I can crisp up

in the oven. There's ham and chicken and some tomatoes and a lettuce in the fridge and I'll hard-boil a few eggs and grate some cheese. There's also home-made cake I can defrost."

Uncle Paul laughed. "A feast fit for a king. I'll put some chilled wine in the chilly bin and a bottle of soft drink for Peter. By the way, when's high tide?"

"Not till two. So we might as well leave around lunch time."

"Can Dreyfus and I go now?" Peter asked. "That is, if Aunt Angela doesn't want any help with the picnic," he added.

Aunt Angela laughed. "Be off with you. I think I can just manage to defrost bread, pasties and cake without help."

Peter returned her grin and he and Dreyfus went bounding down the stairs.

"Make sure you put plenty of sunblock on," Aunt Angela called after him.

"I will."

Within a matter of minutes the front door banged behind Peter and he

and Dreyfus charged up the drive, leaving Aunt Angela to her preparations.

When Peter arrived at the beach, where the tide was too far out for swimming, he found a stick and threw it for Dreyfus to fetch. In this way they drew further away from the main beach until the clubhouse and jetty were out of sight. Peter and Dreyfus were alone in a world of their own—a world made specially for dogs, where Dreyfus was having the time of his life and getting dirtier by the second. Peter stood watching as for the umpteenth time the dog charged madly after the stick, which this time had landed among some boulders near the bush. Dreyfus's tail waved wildly until, before he reached the stick, his whole body went rigid. His tail went between his legs and his ears flattened as he picked up a scent he clearly didn't like. Head down, he began to follow an invisible trail.

Peter followed, knowing it was pointless calling him back. Dreyfus had found a rough path—obviously someone's private access to the beach. Aunt Angela had told him the reserve, known as the Avondale South

Domain, was administered on behalf of the Government by the Auckland City Council, who kept the public paths clear. But no attempt had been made to clear this one: long grass trailed over it from both sides and it would have been nothing short of treacherous in wet weather. As it was, there were patches of damp that were still slippery, and the bracken growing thick along the sides was strong enough to trip the unwary.

The track reached a wider path, less overgrown. To the right it ran downhill and Peter noticed a flight of steps. Straight in front of him was another narrow track running through thinning vegetation to the bottom of someone's garden. Between two scraggy trees, Peter saw the back of a house. Curious, he walked towards it. The steeply sloping lawn was overgrown and weed-infested and someone had made a path through it. Above the weeds and grass Peter could see the house, a two-storeyed, many-gabled wooden villa that had obviously been moved there and set on a deep basement at the back. Its very height made it look narrower than it was. Although in better condition than the lawn, it frowned at Peter from beneath the bristling brows of its gables. Its tall uncurtained

windows seemed to glare down at him. To Peter they became all-seeing eyes urging him forward. Anxious to get his dog back into sight, however, he managed to resist the house's magnetic pull and dodged back along the broader path. He soon realized that Dreyfus, who had been sniffing the ground at the intersection, was nowhere in sight. He plunged along the broad path away from the house, his only concern to find Dreyfus.

He had gone some way before he saw the dog. This time Dreyfus was sniffing the area where another narrow path branched off the main one, leading away from the houses in the street down to the beach. Dreyfus nosed along it, then stopped, sniffing at an area of hanging ferns and other vegetation. Unaccountably, Peter felt the hairs on the nape of his neck start to bristle.

“Dreyfus!”

But Dreyfus took no notice. He vanished into the undergrowth. Peter followed. To his intense surprise he found himself standing in front of a small cave mouth.

Instantly he realized where he must be. But before he could force a

retreat a strange sound—a high, sweet voice—poured from the cave.

“Pie Jesu, Domine, Dona eis requiem ...”

The singing was unsteady, as though the singer was nervous. The voice was a boy’s, singing with expression not often heard from a treble voice.

The fact that the person inside the cave was someone no older than himself did nothing to calm Peter’s fears. The hairs on his head continued to prick his scalp like needles. Dreyfus looked twice his size. Then the dog moved.

“No, Dreyfus!” Too late; Dreyfus was through the opening.

Peter forced himself to follow. Reaching out in the semi-darkness, his finger’s closed over Dreyfus’s tail.

“Stop, Dreyfus!” he hissed. “Wait!”

The dog was crouched on the floor and apparently had no intention of moving anyway. He growled softly. Peter put his hand in his pocket and brought out the packet of matches he always kept there. Briefly he let go of the dog’s tail. With shaking hands he struck a match, put the box back in his pocket and grabbed Dreyfus’s tail again.

The singing started to waver. There were pauses between words and phrases that weren't in the music. Then the singer stopped.

"Who's there?" a small, quavery voice demanded. "Who is it?"

"Who's that?" Peter cried.

There was a stifled sob and a scuffling noise. Then the other voice rang out, strong and clear: "Keep out! Cerberus guards us!"

But it was too late. At the shout from inside the cave, Dreyfus tore himself from Peter's grasp. Before the match burnt his fingers and he dropped it, Peter saw something that made his gasp of pain catch in his throat with terror. As Dreyfus brushed past him, out of the cave's hidden depths leapt an animal that looked to have three heads: a huge dog with three pairs of red, glowing eyes. It made straight for Dreyfus's throat. Both animals went down in a snarling, snapping heap.

Instinctively Peter leapt forward to help Dreyfus. But those same instincts screamed at him: *there's nothing you can do. One boy can't fight a pack of wild dogs.* Reluctantly he drew back again. He opened his mouth to scream—but his throat felt too dry. When a scream echoed and re-

echoed around him, the sound of his own voice only heightened his terror. The cave burst asunder with the force of the noise. A red whirl of glaring light filled the air. His screams turned to a roaring sound in his ears. The cave floor started falling away beneath his feet. “Dreyfus!” he heard himself yelling through the din.