

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

It fell to Michael to break the news to the ladies in Bloomsbury. They sat in awed, saddened, silence as he told them in a faltering voice and relayed the contents of a letter that had arrived quite unexpectedly from France.

"This is the most dreadful news I could ever have imagined," said Helen. "And it is made all the worse by its coming as it does upon your return from your honeymoon. Is it clear exactly what happened?"

"There is a long and detailed account from the Count de Manienne. I will read you the whole account if you wish."

"I do not think that I could listen to it!" sobbed Angela, standing. "I do not want to be upset any more. I am going to my room."

"What about Mark?" whispered Christina, as if afraid to say anything out loud. "Does he know? Do we know where he is?"

"I did call at the studio on my way here as I thought he should be the first to be told, but I could get no reply. I felt that I could simply not wait in the hope that he might suddenly appear, so I came around here. I felt that you should all know as soon as possible."

"Thank you, Michael. I am sure that was the right thing to do," said Helen softly. "Now, if you can bring yourself to do it, tell us what happened. Take your time as it must be infinitely more painful for you to bear than it is for us to hear."

Michael looked down at the paper in his hands, then out at the garden which looked incongruously bright and colourful. "You know," he began, "that Natacha and Miss Crotchet rented a cottage for their holiday and hired a car in Nice to drive up to it. It all appears to have started with an accident at the cottage one evening. The Count says that they are not certain exactly what happened because no-one was in the room with Natacha at the time, but he thinks that she either knocked over, or attempted to pick up, an oil lamp. In any event there was a fire and she was burnt on her legs, arms and hands. Miss Crotchet was in the kitchen, heard Natacha cry out, and rushed in and smothered the flames with a tablecloth. Her action probably saved Natacha from serious injury. She then went for help, this being late at night, in the dark, and half way up the side of a mountain. She could not start the hired car because the battery was flat. So she ran down the track to the village below to get help. In doing so she fell into a crevice, cutting and bruising her face and breaking her arm. It is still in a sling."

"Poor Miss Crotchet," said Helen. "I had completely forgotten about her. She must feel absolutely devastated."

"Anyway," continued Michael, "one of the villagers heard her cries for help and went to the Count's house. It appears that Natacha had been his guest on a number of days before the accident and the villager considered it important that he should know. The Count had Natacha moved straight to his house, there being no hospital or proper medical facilities for miles around, and he called in a doctor from Nice. He sent to Paris for a specialist. The Count says their initial concern was the extent and severity of burns to Natacha's hands and legs. Anyway, they gave her morphine to ease the pain."

"Surely they could have taken her to a hospital," said Christina. "There must be one in Nice, if no where else."

"I must admit that the Count's letter is a little vague in that respect. I think they thought that there was initially little a hospital could do and that it might be better not to move her. The Count suggests that they hoped that she might recover better if she was - I think these are his words - in familiar surroundings and with the ones who loved her. It seems that she spent several days either drugged or asleep, waking up only a handful of times. There is suggestion that she may have had a fever because the letter talks of delirium. Or it could have been the effects of the morphine. But what actually happened at the end is something of a mystery. According to the Count's mother who was in the room at the time, Natacha suddenly woke up, got out of bed, ran across the room to an open window onto a balcony and threw herself off. She fell thirty feet to the patio below."

"Oh, no!" murmured Helen. "It is too dreadful for words!"

“There is a little more. At the Count's direction Natacha has been placed in his family crypt. He implores us to let her rest in peace there, in a place that she appeared to love.”

“Rest there? Buried there, in France. Is she not to be brought back to England?” exclaimed Christina.

“I think that is for Michael's father to decide.”

“Mark will never stand for it! Can you imagine how he will feel when he hears what has happened? And I must say that the account appears strange to me. How can someone with severe burns to her legs suddenly run across a room and scale a balcony?”

“Christina, please,” implored her mother. “We do not know how large the room was nor how high the balcony was.”

“But why would she do it? What would make someone like Natacha do a thing like that?”

“Perhaps it was the effects of the morphine?” said Helen.

“Dare I say,” said Michael quietly, “that it might have been the thought that she might never play again?”

“I think that it is distasteful to debate a matter such as this,” said Helen. “She was such a lovely girl, so full of life and joy. I cannot for one moment accept that she would have taken her own life and I am not prepared to allow speculation on the subject.”

“But if she did not, Mama, who did?”

“It was an accident. I am certain of it! And I beg the two of you to think of it, and treat it, in the same way. I will arrange for a Requiem Mass to be said for her.”

“She was not a Catholic, mama.”

“What does that signify? I really do not care for such distinctions at times like these. If I ask Father William he will, most certainly, oblige me.”

“And who is to tell Mark?” asked Christina.

“I suppose that I will have to tell him, not that I relish the thought,” said Michael.

“He will never believe you,” observed Christina.

“I will still have to tell him.”

Mark sat in stupefied silence as Michael related the account using much the same words as he had used to tell his wife, her sister, and his mother-in-law. “I do not believe it,” said Mark. “Not a word of it! It is a tissue of lies from beginning to end.”

“I am sorry, but I have given you a faithful account of what was said in the letter. You may read it if you wish.”

“Oh, I will accept that. I am not doubting your veracity. But it is a conspiracy. Natacha is not dead. They have abducted her! It happens all the time, you know. White slaving, and all that! The South of France is particularly notorious. And that Miss Crotchet is in on it, too! I cannot imagine what some mid-eastern potentate would give for someone like Natacha, a world-class pianist, as well I mean, look at the facts as you describe them. It was Miss Crotchet who suggested the Nice competition. It was her who arranged the chalet which just happens to be owned by this Count. Miss Crotchet was there when this accident is supposed to have happened and Natacha received the burns. And where do they take her? To the Count's house! The next thing we know she is dead and buried. Rubbish! it is an abduction! She is not dead. They are clearly hiding something. And I plan to find out what it is!”

“What do you mean? Exactly what are you proposing?”

“I will go out there and find her!”

“To France?”

“To France, to Morocco, to Palestine, to the ends of the Earth if it means that! I am sure that Mother will advance me the money. And if she will not, will you?”

“I am not sure,” said Michael. “I will have to think about it.”

“Then to Hell with you, all of you! I am going to find her, and that's that!”

Michael made his reluctant way back to the house in Belgravia. He would rather have not had to visit it and disturb all the memories that clung like dust to the walls and floors. The

sooner that he and Christina could move out and into a flat, the better. Without Natacha, without the sound of the music she had filled the house with, it stood dark and empty, like a giant mausoleum. Sophie had taken to her bed and was refusing to come down to meals. His father had shut himself in his study. It was left to Christina to greet him.

“Miss Crotchet is here,” she hissed. “I had her shown into the Drawing Room for the present. Will you see her? She is very upset and petrified at the thought of having to meet your father. And he is not seeing anyone, anyway. Will you talk to her?”

Miss Crotchet rose as he went in. Her face was wet and her eyes were swollen and red. Her left arm was supported in a sling that reminded Michael immediately of the white sash his mother would sometime wear. “What am I to say?” she wept. “This is terrible, terrible. It is such a tragedy!”

“It is a great loss to us all,” said Michael softly. “I have lost a loved and living sister. You have lost your student and protégée.”

“Oh, Mr Bernstein! Please do not put it like that. That is not 'ow it is, or the way I see it. I weep not for me, but for Natacha and for the loss of a talent that could have thrilled thousands. I weep because we are so frail and vulnerable and close to death at all times. I weep because I loved 'er as a daughter and I miss her charm, her wit, her gaiety and her companionship. And I do not know what to do now. The whole purpose 'as been taken out of my life.”

“What really happened?” asked Michael, softly, embarrassed by the thought that he would have to tell this wretched, unfortunate, woman that her services were no longer required.

“The Count? I thought 'e wrote to you and told you about it? Is that not so? He told me what 'e was writing. It was what 'appened. He wanted to marry 'er, Monsieur.”

“The Count wanted to marry Natacha?”

“Oui. He did not propose formally but it was clear to 'er and me that 'e was building up to it. I 'ave no doubt of that.”

“But he could hardly have known her, nor she him.”

“It was, as you say, love at first sight for 'im. Perhaps you English do not think that such a thing 'appens.”

“Oh, I believe such a thing can happen. I am just surprised, that is all. What did Natacha think?”

“I am not sure. I think she was flattered, but I do not think she 'ad made up 'er mind one way or the other.”

“Now, about your - .”

“I know what you must say, Monsieur,” she sobbed. “You are to say that there is no position for me 'ere, any more. I know that before I come back. I only wish that I could 'ave left this 'ouse under 'appier circumstances, but I would not wish to stay 'ere now.”

“I understand. I wish we could part under happier circumstances. And I pray that your arm mends quickly. If you need references, I would be pleased to furnish them. You will let me know if there is any way in which I can help you?”

“Than you,” she said, trying to wipe her face dry. “I do not think I will seek another position. I may go home and simply teach the piano to the local children. I 'ave not finally made up my mind.”

“Has she gone?” hissed Christina, pausing in the writing of a letter.

“Yes,” said Michael softly. “I have agreed to send all her possessions to a place of her choosing. She will let us know where. And I have given her a year's salary in lieu. It should be enough to get her set up in her new life, what ever she chooses to do.”

“A year's salary? Isn't that somewhat excessive? Your father would never have agreed to give her that. He probably would have sued her. He certainly would have given her nothing!”

“Ah!” said Michael. “I am not my father.”

“And Mark, have you seen him? Have you seen Mark?”

“I have now seen both Mark and Miss Crotchet. I am not enjoying having to do this.

Is there anyone remaining?" said Michael wearily, dropping into a chair.

"What did Mark say?"

"It is just as you said it would be. He does not appear to believe a thing. He was rambling on about conspiracies, that Natacha was still alive and had been abducted. He says he is going to go and find her. But having talked to Miss Crotchet, I believe *her*. I am worried about her, but I cannot see what else we can do for her."

"I would have thought you had done enough already," said Christina, coldly.

"It doesn't really feel enough to me. But what can we do? I can tell you one thing we must do and that is move out of here. It feels like a morgue."

Christina stared at him then resumed her writing. "Very well, she said. "I will step up the search for a suitable flat. And as for Mark, I expect that it is just shock. He will come to accept it in time. And whilst we are on the subject of change, I have decided to find a new secretary. I am writing to Moira to tell her."

"A new secretary? Why? Has Moira done something wrong? We should bear in mind that the Canterbury office has now closed and I do not know what has happened to her intended, except he did not transfer to Maidstone. He could be out of work." Although Michael found himself saying this, secretly he was pleased by his wife's decision and did not wish to argue at length against it. So long as he said something, his conscience would be clear. Miss Muir represented the very last connection with his past life in Dover. He would not be at all sorry to see this removed. There was always Newington, of course. There was always the possibility that someone there might have seen him and Felicity together and remember the fact, but it was unlikely that this particular someone would know who Felicity was. Christina knew he had been seeing somebody. Although she probably wondered, she did not know who it was and might never know once Miss Muir was gone.

They had discussed Newington as they sat under the Italian sun and sipped white wine. Christina had surprised and relieved him by saying that she would prefer to live in London rather than at Newington. He had told her that suited him because his work made it essential for him to be in London most of the time. His wife did not seem to think that it was important that they should live together every day of the week, but she could write in the Town as easily as in the country. They could go to Newington occasionally, but she was less than enthusiastic and declared it might turn out to be a bore. They would go when the fancy took them, when they wanted to escape the pressures and felt a need to get away from her publishers or Michael's fellow partners.

"No," she said, "I am not aware that she has done anything wrong. Are you?"

"Me?" he said, astonished. "How would I know?" Christina looked at him and shook her head sadly, then wrote some more. "What is it?" he asked. "What have you got on your mind?"

"You know that it has been on my mind for a long time, this problem of having Moira working from Dover whilst I am up here, in London. I thought a great deal about it whilst we were in Rome and you were dashing in and out of churches. In fact I thought a great deal about a number of things whilst we were in Rome. It seemed that with all the preparations for the wedding I didn't have time to think before. I have to admit that it was the thought of Natacha and Miss Crotchet that clinched it. Do you remember that day when you went off to St Maggiore and I was beset by the odious Herr von Cerny? And you came back and said two things? You suggested that I should see the churches for local colour and inspiration. And you said you wondered what Natacha was doing."

"Did I? I don't remember."

"That was the moment. It suddenly occurred to me that I should travel, to get local colour and background for my books. The next will be set in Rome. And I thought I needed a companion to travel with me. You would be too busy to go to places like Vienna, Prague, Budapest or Istanbul. I realised I needed to go back to my original idea of a secretary who is also a companion."

"A kind of Miss Crotchet? She would have to be single. In a way it is a shame she cannot type. She is a personable old stick. Yes, a typing Miss Crotchet is what you want."

"You would not mind, I trust?"

"I mind? No, you should do all that you career demands of you. I assume that you are not going to ask Moira if she can fill that rôle. Circumstances can change, you know."

"I expected that you might say that. No, I am not! I will ask her just to finish her work on the current book and that will be that."

"On a practical note, then," said Michael, fearing he was not understanding everything that was going through his wife's mind, "will this new secretary and companion live in with us?"

Christina glared at him. "Why do you ask?"

"I ask because it obviously affects the size of flat we look for."

"I suppose so, if she is to act as a companion. I can see that you would not mind that."

"No, I would not mind. At the very least, we had better, make provision for her."

A flat was found in Kensington on the third floor of a block not far from the Royal Albert Hall. Lady Newington went to examine it before Christina and Michael moved in and immediately declared that it required complete redecoration and re-furnishing, and that it should all be done under her direction. "I am running out of things that need doing at Newington," she said. "I can use Mark, and this will take his and my mind off other things."

Christina and Michael agreed that this would be an irritating source of delay, but they decided to bear it. Christina fretted about the delay it would cause in her recruitment of a secretary and companion, whilst it allowed Michael to have second thoughts about leaving his parents' house, in particular leaving Sophie alone. And throughout the period of redecoration, Mark ignored his mother's appeals to help her chose the papers and paints, and continually maintained that he was going to leave. Then, one day, quite without warning, he was gone.

A single shot rang out across the valley, echoing between the wooded slopes and sending flocks of birds soaring into the sky, croaking their protests and frantically beating the air with their wings in an effort to escape.

"Can you see anyone?" hissed a young Irish man who was crouched in a shallow depression in the ground.

"Not a thing," said the man next to him, attempting to crouch lower whilst peering out across the valley. "Perhaps it was one of ours, or the French? They are like the Italians, prepared to shoot at anything, damn them!"

"I know, the devils. You'd think they'd have the common sense to save their ammunition for the enemy. God knows we will need every bullet we've got when they come. Can you see anything?"

The birds were beginning to settle again into the leaves and branches of the trees on the opposite side of the valley. "I cannot," said the other man, settling down and plucking a long stalk of grass. "I suppose its too much to ask that they should be like us and just wait until we can have a crack at the bastards. Where the hell are they?"

"We don't even know that they have crossed the Tajo yet. All we know is what the Platoon Commander said, that they are advancing and that we are to hold the line here."

"That's one of the things that bugs me. Who told our Commander that? Where do they get their intelligence from? I can't say we have had any that appeared reliable since we left England. Look at what they tell us - Comrades! This time it will be different. We are going to stop the enemy and achieve a glorious victory. This time we will be supported by our magnificent artillery who will lay down a barrage of tremendous power which will decimate our foes. There will be overwhelming air power which will shoot the enemy planes from the sky, and the massed tanks will drive the enemy back down the road to Toledo, or wherever. Do we ever see any of it? Christ! Look at him! He's standing up again! Someone tell him to get down before he's shot!"

"Mark," hissed the Irishman. "Be a good fellow and get down and come over here! Come along now."

Mark stood, shielding his eyes against the sun, on a small bank high on the side of the valley, studying the opposite ridge. "It would help us greatly if the Commanders issued us with field glasses. I cannot make out a damned thing!" he said.

"Mark!" hissed the Irishman. "Will you being doing as we asked and getting down or

shall I be making you? At the best you'll get yourself killed. At the worst, you'll give away our location and get all of us killed. Now, get down will you?"

"The trouble is," said Mark, scrambling down into the depression in which his two companions were now crouched, "down here you cannot see a thing. They could be right on top of us before we knew about it. Are we in the right place anyway? Shouldn't we be nearer the top of the slope?"

"This is the right place to be sure," said the Irishman, turning to look out across the valley once more. "It isn't that much of a slope and if we attempted to get any higher the lads up there are as trigger happy as the Frogs and they'd be as likely to gun us down as soon as they seen us."

"That would be all we need," moaned Mark. "To be shot by our own forces."

"It happens often enough," said the other Englishman.

"Well, not to me if I can help it. I still can't help thinking that we are in the wrong place," Mark continued. "I cannot understand Russian - can any of us? And God knows what we are supposed to do if the enemy advances on us. We need something better than these useless things. We need a heavy machine gun so that we can rake the bushes down there with fire. Don't you agree, Phil?"

"I wonder if one of us ought to be up in a tree as a lookout. You would be able to see better from there."

"And be picked off better," said Mark. "You had a go at me. How much more vulnerable would you be up there?"

"They wouldn't see you," Phil maintained.

"Oh, something would give you away. A glint of some kind, caught in the sun. And if the Moors didn't get you, our own chaps would. You'd be like a sitting duck."

"That really raises a point that does worry me," said Phil, laying on his back with his hands placed behind his head, and closing his eyes. "If the enemy does come and we are forced to retreat, what is to stop our own comrades shooting us as we go up the slope?"

"We'd be out of uniform, to be sure," said Shaun.

"I don't recollect any order about any order about only shooting people in uniform," said Phil casually. "None at all."

"Perhaps it didn't get translated," suggested Mark.

"Perhaps there is a lot that didn't get translated. Who is it we are supposed to be stopping?"

"The Moors."

"Shame it's not the Italians," continued Phil. "I can see them now, in their smart clean uniforms with their polished transport and equipment, frightened of engaging in case something gets scratched or dirty. The Moors are a different story. They'll shoot any foreigner on sight! Aren't you pleased that you came?"

"I do not regret coming," said Mark, peering out over the brink of the hole but seeing nothing other than bushes, trees, and a clear blue sky. "I only wish things were more evenly balanced. We are stuck with the arms embargo imposed by the League which is completely ignored by the Germans and the Italians. They seem to get all the arms, tanks and planes they need."

"They'd be hard pressed to use any of their tanks here, I'd be thinking," said Shaun. "And Russia is providing some weaponry."

"Yes," hissed Mark, "much of it bought in Germany."

"We would hear tanks miles away," said Phil. "We'd probably know if they were bringing tanks."

"We don't now what is going on over the other side of the hill," complained Mark. "They could be doing almost anything. You would think we'd have some kind of intelligence but I haven't seen a single reconnaissance plane. Perhaps one of us should cross the valley and have a look?"

"And either run into the Moors or be shot by our own brave fellows?" said Shaun.

"They're crack troops, the Moors from the Army of Africa. And there's some talk about some German platoons having been sent here. But we shall win," said Phil. "We have

right on our side!"

"Or we'll die in the attempt," said Shaun. "Blessed Jesus, what I'd give for a drink right now. My throat feels like the inside of a baker's oven!"

"You fancy being back in Dublin, eh, Shaun?"

"I didn't hail from Dublin. My folks come from Shannon, and they're good Republican folks, too. I'd do not think they would ever have dreamed that the day would come when their only son would be fighting alongside the English!"

"So, you are an only son, then, Shaun?" said Mark. "What do your parents think of you being out here?"

"Now, to tell the truth of the matter, they don't know and I am not about to start telling them."

"Won't it come as a dreadful shock when they hear that you've been killed?" asked Phil.

"We won't be killed," said Shaun. "No chance of it."

"We will all be killed," said Phil. "We have little chance of making it through to the end, if there is an end."

"Something tells me that you didn't come here for the cause," said Mark, laughing. "Of course we will make it through to the end."

"I wish you luck. I cannot believe it for myself. As I've said, if the Moors catch you they'll shoot you whether you are with a Brigade or not."

"Away with you," exclaimed Shaun sceptically. "If they catch you all they do is send you back."

"Not so," insisted Phil quietly. "There was this case of an Irish seaman, yes - Irish, who missed his ship when it sailed. He didn't even get a trial. They stuck him up against a wall and summarily shot the poor blighter. If they'd do that to an ordinary foreign national, what do you think will happen to us?"

"Hush, you two," whispered Mark. "I thought I saw something moving. Over on the other side, about a third of the way down."

"Perhaps it was a deer," said Phil, not moving. "There's plenty of them around here. Reminds me of the Quantocks. Perhaps that's what the shot was. Someone bagging a supplement to his platoons rations."

"I sometimes think that grass would achieve that," said Mark, squinting.

"Can you see anything now?" said Shaun lifting his rifle from its resting place on the side of the hole.

"Nothing. Nothing moving. It's pretty hopeless all this. I reckon they could be crawling right up to us now. We would never see them. In fact, they could have crept past us. There's enough shrubbery to camouflage a battleship. What is there to stop them outflanking us anyway?"

"I don't know and I don't care," said Phil. "If you two don't mind, I am going to get some shut-eye. Wake me if anything happens."

Mark sat back and contemplated the view. In a way it was like looking out from the House at Newington, across the valleys towards the sea. Once he had stood there, under the Cypress, and done that with Natacha. Now it seemed a very long time ago and he knew he would never do it again. To think it had come to this!

When he had heard that Franco had crossed from Africa and landed on the Spanish mainland, when the call went out for volunteers to join the Internationale, he had no hesitation in putting forward his name. In one sense he had nothing more to live for. In another, he had to live through what ever happened to him in Spain because he still had a mission to fulfil. What ever occurred, he had eventually make his way across France to find her. She would be there, waiting. He knew that.

The sun dropped lower in the sky and slid behind a thin wafer of cloud. Still nothing happened. Nothing stirred in the valley or on the hill opposite, no sound, no movement.

"I would be asking you if you have all noticed that the birds have stopped singing?" asked Shaun. "Do you think something has scared them off?"

"Perhaps they don't sing at this time of day?" suggested Mark.

“It is probably you two twittering on,” muttered Phil, surfacing. “What time is it? Is anything happening?”

“It is about five,” said Mark, abandoning his day dream, “and nothing is happening. Not a single thing except I am getting the cramps.”

“They aren't coming,” murmured Phil, closing his eyes again. “They'll pull us all back in the morning.”

The storm broke in the early hours of the morning shortly before daybreak. It was Mark's turn to watch and he was beginning to doze off. He did not understand how someone like Phil could sleep all afternoon and now be asleep soundly. He had never known anyone to sleep as soundly as this West Country man. It started with a distant flash in the sky, perceived out of the corner of Mark's eye and almost missed. His initial thought was that it was lightning and he was about to wake his compatriots when the thunder sounded like a dull thud some way off on his right. Then another flash, this time almost directly in front of him, illuminated the trees on the top of the opposite ridge. This time the thunderbolt drove into the ground not one hundred yards behind him and pandemonium started. He heard boughs splintering and crashing to the ground as the earth rained down. Men were calling out, some in fear, some in pain, some in anger. Another flash and another shell impacted into the hill side somewhere on his left. And then, quite suddenly as if someone had lit a gigantic, awesome fuse, the whole ridge came ablaze with light. “Oh God!” he screamed. “Come on, wake up you two! This is it! Wake up before we are all killed!”

A projectile whistled overhead, and another crashed into the trees on the slope below, sending splinters of wood flying through the night air. Mark was thrown sideways by the blast from one which drilled into the hill about fifty paces away.

“They've brought up artillery to the other side of the ridge,” yelled Phil. “What the hell should we do?” Around them the whole hill was erupting, with sheets of flame, trees disintegrating and tumbling, and craters bursting, opening the ever-changing ground around them.

“We are not dug in deep enough for shelling,” yelled Shaun. “Head for a crater. We'll be safe in one of those, to be sure. It's like lightning. They never land in the same place twice! And you be keeping your heads down in case they're advancing under the cover of this barrage.”

Stumbling in the darkness, Mark had just reached what he took to be a crater when another blast behind him blew him forward. As he fell he felt a sharp pain in his leg and when he came to rest there was something hot under him, burning through his trousers, although he barely noticed it at the time.

“What the hell do we do now?” yelled Phil, again. “I am not stopping here!”

“What can we do?” Mark yelled back.

“Get out of here for a start! What do you think, Shaun? Make a run for it? Up the hill?”

“That's madness!” shouted Mark, trying to make himself heard above the roar.

“So is staying here,” Phil shouted from somewhere in the darkness. “What about it?”

“Be Jesus! I'm with you! Let's be getting on with it.”

“Well I am staying,” said Mark firmly. “For a start, it would make more sense to go down the hill, under their fire.”

“And run into the infantry?”

“You won't get more than fifty yards up the slope!”

“And you won't get five yards under your own steam if you stay here! But have it your own way. Come along, Shaun. Where are you?”

Mark heard them scramble up the slope and briefly saw their outlines as they reached the brim and disappeared. He was tempted to follow. He felt a coward, staying there. But there was this growing pain in his leg which was also beginning to feel wet. Either there was water at the bottom of the crater or he was bleeding. Before he could move and investigate further a shell blew apart close at hand, burying him with earth debris. As he tried to extricate himself, he was deafened by another explosion and, quite suddenly and almost silently,

something huge, dark and prickly descended upon him, pinning him to the ground, smothering him and plundering his consciousness.

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