

CRYSTAL NIGHT

A Prometheus Saga Short Story

by

CHARLES A CORNELL

The Alvarium Experiment

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— Charles

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The Prometheus Saga - An Introduction

What's past is prologue . . .

—William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*

The individual keeps watch on other individuals. Societies keep watch on other societies. Civilizations keep watch on other civilizations. It has always been so. Keeping watch is sometimes benevolent, sometimes malevolent. It is most certainly prudent.

It is not a trait exclusive to the human species.

Out of such prudence an advanced intelligence, far across the vastness of space, delivered to Earth a probe 40,000 years ago, to observe and report the progress of the human species. This probe was "born" here fully formed, a human being, engineered from the DNA of *Homo sapiens*. It possessed our skin, our organs, our skeleton, our muscles.

And it still lives among us.

The probe keeps watch.

The probe is one of us. Almost. It possesses a nuclear quantum computer brain, emitting a low-level electromagnetic field. It manipulates DNA and stem cells, healing itself as needed. It dies, but remains immortal. It enters human societies, adopting any guise, any race, any gender, any age it wishes, following a three-month metamorphosis. It witnesses the events, great and small, good and bad, that shape our destiny.

The probe keeps watch.

Everything it sees, hears, feels, experiences, and thinks, it flashes instantaneously across a thousand light-years, in real-time quantum-entangled communication with the intelligence that sent it here.

The probe keeps watch.

And sometimes it acts.

"How fortunate it was for the world that when these great trials came upon it, there was a generation that terror could not conquer and brutal violence could not enslave."

—*Winston Churchill*

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I

Berlin, November 9, 1938

Elsa's voice faltered on the final note of her song. Two men in black trench coats had entered Das Karussell, prowling like panthers through the tables at the back of the nightclub. Applause drifted towards the stage but it soon died when the patrons noticed the men in their midst. The manager, Helga Gartner, waved her hand. Play on, she gestured. Pianist Siggy Katzmann tinkled the keys. Elsa Fischer composed herself, cleared her throat and with a shy smile began, *A Night in May*.

The younger of the two men, tall and athletic, his blond hair swept back, sides shaved in a buzz-cut, wandered through the sparse weeknight crowd, singled out a couple and asked for their papers. The other man, much older, broad-shouldered with a hardened frown, took off his leather coat and settled on a stool at the bar near the club's entrance.

At the end of the bar's long polished counter, a young man in his early twenties emerged from the cellar through a small door. Johann, the bartender, carried a heavy crate of beer bottles. The sleeves of his white shirt hugged his bulging biceps.

"His papers, Helga?" Inspector Oberrisch asked.

Helga stepped between her new bartender and the Gestapo inspector's gaze, hands on hips. She turned, whispered into the young man's ear and he retreated to the cellar.

"Pilsner, *ja*?" She pulled the tap in front of Oberrisch. "Another recruit, Klaus?" She nodded in the direction of the tall blond agent. "How many more agents does the State Police need?"

"My nephew, Heinz Bremer. My sister asked if I could find him a job." Oberrisch took a notepad from his trench coat and glanced around the room.

"Put that away, Klaus. Take the night off for a change."

"You're always grousing about something, Helga."

"Grousing keeps my costs down. Grousing keeps me in business."

"The Gestapo's patronage keeps you in business." Oberrisch sipped his beer. "My notebook keeps you in business. Don't ever forget that."

The front door of the club opened with a rattle. The noise startled Helga. Four men wearing brown uniforms and Nazi armbands stormed in. "What are they doing in my club? Get them out of here!"

Oberrisch rose from his stool, placed his hand on the chest of the lead stormtrooper and ushered the group back to the narrow foyer. "Everything is under control," he said. "Just stay here at the door. Be quiet and let no one leave or enter, *ja*? Not until he arrives, understand?"

Oberrisch straightened his tie, returned to the bar and surveyed the crowd. The patrons had dismissed the presence of the Gestapo and SA stormtroopers as routine, a fact of daily life in Germany. The patrons returned to their hushed conversations and to the singing of Elsa Fischer, an eighteen-year-old as young and as vibrant as they were.

Johann returned from the cellar with an armful of wine bottles. Oberrisch stopped writing in his notebook and looked up. A scowl grew on his face. His eyes squinted. "Papers, Helga."

"Fetch that bottle of schnapps, Johann," Helga said. "With my regrets, inspector, I have a nightclub to run." She cast her eye towards a table where an elderly man was sitting alone. "Pour a glass for Herr Doktor Franz at Table Two."

"His papers, Helga?"

She ignored the inspector again. Johann took the bottle of schnapps to the gentleman at Table Two.

"There's no profit in staying open on a weeknight, Klaus," she said. "So why do I? Just look around this club and you'll see the reason. It's for the young people. The ones who work late at the Reich Ministries making sure Goebbels' latest propaganda is ready for the morning. And what do these young men and women, the pride of Germany, want after a long, hard day working for the Reich? I'll tell you what they want. An out-of-the-way place to enjoy a drink, to listen to some music and to settle their nerves. They want a place where they can exchange a kiss without being judged as to who they're kissing. That's all."

Helga reached for another bottle of schnapps, poured two shots and pushed one towards Oberrisch. "Don't you remember when we were their age? It's not really that long ago."

Oberrisch wrote in his notebook, head down.

"We were no different," she continued. "That's why I keep the club open on weeknights. They make me feel young all over again even if you've forgotten what being young means. In turn, I make them feel welcome. I try to make them feel safe. And then you and your junior Klaus barge in."

"Heinz. His name is Heinz."

"That's what I said. A junior Klaus. If you want a name to put in your notebook, I suggest you get hers." Helga pointed her shot glass to a table partially obscured by a row of potted ferns. A sultry young woman with short blond hair in a wavy coif sat across from an older man. His stuffy shirt, dark necktie and bland jacket suggested he was a civil servant.

Helga downed the schnapps in one gulp. "She comes into the club a lot. Each time in the company of a different male companion. If anyone's name should be in your notebook, Klaus, it's hers. And look at him, he should know better. A department head from the mayor's office? In here with that ... that *slut*? He should be at home with his wife and children."

The woman wore bright red lipstick, a jade-green dress and had eyes like blue crystal. She drank from a near-empty champagne glass with the speed of a ravenous hummingbird. The woman giggled at the civil servant's nervous joke. His fingers pulled on the tight collar of his shirt, his eyes darted about the club, moving from the Gestapo men to the SA stormtroopers guarding the way out.

Oberrisch reached into his jacket and pulled out a thick wad of money. He passed a twenty Reich mark bill across the counter. "Another bottle of champagne for his table, Helga. Tell him it's on the house. Tell them they make you feel young again or whatever words you want to shovel their way."

Helga pushed the note back. "I'm not condoning her kind of business in here."

"She works for me, which means she works for the Reich and for our Führer." Oberrisch grabbed Helga's wrist and thrust the money into her palm, closing her fingers over the bill. "You will do as I say, Helga. Magda is doing her job as a loyal German, helping uncover another traitor. You are a loyal German, aren't you? Give them another bottle of champagne."

Helga winced. "You and your informants, Klaus. You're like red wine stains on a dark carpet. You hope we'll walk right by you without noticing you're there. Your brownshirts patrol Berlin's streets like escaped lions. Those thugs don't belong anywhere near my club. I want them out of here."

"The SA keeps the streets clean."

"Tell that to the women who have to wash the blood off our pavements each morning."

"Watch your tongue. If I didn't know you as well as I do, I'd have Bremer arrest you. And perhaps he should. Young Heinz needs to practice what we've taught him." Oberrisch stiffened and glared at Helga. "Do you have his papers, or not?"

The bartender returned to the bar and was restocking wine. "Champagne, Johann, for Table Seven."

"Yes, Fräulein Gartner."

Johann picked up a bottle of French champagne and as he walked to the end of the bar, he brushed by Klaus Oberrisch. A spark jumped from Johann's arm to the Gestapo inspector's wrist. The inspector glanced at his watch, and then tapped the dial several times. He looked up at the clock above the bar. "Strange, my watch has stopped. And it looks like the clock above the bar has stopped too. What time do you have?"

"Perhaps if your other Gestapo men paid for their beer and schnapps once in awhile, I might be able to afford to have things fixed around here."

"I asked for the time, Helga, not a lecture on your accounts." Oberrisch produced a silver coin from his pocket and rolled it across the counter. "Besides, paying you has never stopped you from complaining. I don't know anyone who grouches as much as you do."

"Tell that to your guests in the cells at Number Eight."

"Careful, Helga."

"You wanted the time, *ja*? It must be at least ten o'clock. Herr Doktor Franz doesn't come in here much before that."

"That late? They will be here soon and we haven't finished. I need to see his papers, Helga."

"*Who* will be here soon?"

Oberrisch gestured to Heinz Bremer who was watching the elderly gentleman at Table Two with suspicion. The inspector had a brief word with Bremer and they walked over to the brownshirts at the door. Bremer and two of the stormtroopers departed in a hurry.

The inspector returned to the bar, eyed Johann as he gathered empty glasses, and said, "I hope for your sake, Fräulein Gartner, that he has papers. Because if you don't produce them this very instant, I will have you arrested."

Helga's face lost its sternness and confidence. She reached below the bar and produced a small metal box, taking out several passport-sized documents. She slapped them on the counter.

"These are his, and those are mine. Each with new stamps to employ a foreign worker, approved by the Reich Ministry of Labor."

Oberrisch glanced at Helga's permit and set it aside. "Still greasing that weasel at the Labor Ministry? The one who comes in here to feel *safe*? The one who would stamp a dead dog's paw if it paid him well enough? He's a homosexual, you know. His time, like the rest of his kind, is short. In a few days, the degenerate will be gone and both of us will have to find another weakling to bribe inside the Labor Ministry."

Oberrisch picked up the bartender's passport. He examined every page and stamp in detail, the quality of the watermarks. "It looks genuine enough. If this is a forgery, it's a very good one. In Berlin, Swedish passports are usually found on Jews trying to leave Germany, not on foreigners wanting to stay. He's not Jewish, is he?"

"Look at him, Klaus. He's more Aryan than you are. His hair couldn't be more blond, his eyes more blue."

Oberrisch examined the Swedish passport again. "What's he doing here? In Berlin?"

"Why don't you ask him yourself? His German isn't bad. Just a bit wooden. He's learned some odd phrases."

"Odd?"

"Well, old-fashioned. As if he learned his German by reading literature from the last century. I guess he had a bad teacher in Sweden. I keep correcting him. He learns incredibly fast for a foreigner. He's a smart young man."

"And virile."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I've known you for a long time, Helga. Are you paying him like the others with just room and board? You've always had your ways to get what you wanted when you needed it. And you need a real man to help you run this place, not a boy."

"I've told you before, Klaus, what you need is a good Nazi wife, a frau with strong arms and wide hips. Like those on the Party posters with braids wrapped in a bun, a white blouse and a flowery Bavarian frock. Someone dumb and willing."

Oberrisch turned away from her. "Young man," he barked. "Step over here, please. Routine documents check. Fräulein Gartner must have told you about me. It's my job to keep clubs like this from being contaminated by the wrong kind of people. What is your purpose in Germany, Herr...," Oberrisch looked down at the passport, "... Nilsson. Johann Nilsson?"

"I'm here to learn, to study."

"A student? In a nightclub?" Oberrisch chuckled. "Well, yes. I guess you will learn a lot of things in a place like this. But I don't see a student visa in your passport."

"The world is my school, sir."

"The world is your school? And this nightclub is your lecture hall?" Oberrisch let out a belly laugh loud enough to turn nearby heads. "You said he was clever, Helga. You didn't say he was a comedian. What are you here to study?"

"Mankind and his society. His science. His arts. Human psychology. The geography of earth. Its animals and plants. Many things, and all things."

"Much of what you may have learned is being rewritten. The Nazi Party is challenging conventional thinking."

"That's what I've heard and read. I understand German scientists have discovered a species of sub-humans. This discovery sounds very exciting. I'm interested in learning more about these new creatures. I've come to Germany to further my research into human genetics. The instinct for

the preservation of one's own species is the primary cause that leads to the formation of human communities."

Oberrisch grunted. "What is that nonsense? Is that the genetics they teach you in Sweden?"

"No. That was written here," Johann replied. "In Germany. By one of your most famous scholars."

"And Herr Oberrisch," a deep voice said from behind the Gestapo man, "if you were a student of *Mein Kampf*, as you should be, and as it appears this young man certainly is, you would know he's quoting the Führer."

Oberrisch looked over his shoulder. "Commander von Kamptz!" He jumped off his stool, clicked his heels and raised his arm in a stiff salute. "Heil Hitler!"

Conversations in Das Karussell went silent. Elsa's voice trailed off and Siggy stopped playing. Patrons rose to their feet. 'Heil Hitler!' rang throughout the room.

The door to the club rattled open. Heinz Bremer entered. Three more SS officers marched in behind him, their shiny black boots clomping on the hardwood floor. The SA brownshirts stood aside and saluted. Bremer led the officers to a table close to the stage.

"Music! Please keep playing. Please, enjoy," SS-Commander von Kamptz announced. His smile was broad and white as if it had been painted on his sour face by an approved Nazi artist.

Elsa gestured to Siggy to resume the song he was playing before the interruption. When they finished, her face was flush. A lump formed in Elsa's throat. Her voice croaking, she struggled to thank the crowd for their applause. She acknowledged the club's new guests with a coy smile, turned to take a drink of water from a glass behind the piano, and whispered to Siggy, "What's going on? Why are the SS here?"

Siggy Katzmann squinted through the glare of the hot stage lights. His face turned pale. He reached for a handkerchief in the pocket of his jacket and wiped his brow.

"Siggy, what's wrong?"

"We can't play *My Golden Baby*," he gulped. "Not now."

"Why not?"

"It's too jazzy. Too negro. They're SS. That's not acceptable. That's the head of the Schutzpolizei at the bar. Commander von Kamptz. And do you see the one in the spectacles at the table? Don't you know who he is?"

"I've been in Berlin less than four weeks. I don't know anybody. Not anybody important."

"His armband," Siggy whispered. "Can't you tell by his armband? And by the way the other two are fawning over him?"

Elsa peered at the table, forcing a smile. Two black-and-silver uniformed officers flanked a slight, bespectacled man with a paintbrush mustache. His Nazi armband had three white stripes.

"Who is he? The lights in my face are so bright I can't tell."

"Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler. Head of the entire SS."

She turned her head away and gasped. "*Mein Gott*, Siggy. *Himmler*? Here?"

Elsa took another sip of water. "All right," she whispered. "How about... oh, *mein Gott*, let me think...how about *My Little Green Cactus*? It's a jolly tune. Surely it isn't banned?"

"*Ja, sehr gut*, Elsa. But we need to take a break after this."

"We're supposed to play two more songs before our next break. Helga will be furious."

"We need to take a break." Siggy mopped a bead of sweat that trickled down his cheek. He keyed the introduction to *My Little Green Cactus*. "Sing," he said.

Elsa cleared her throat. The melody of the popular song bounced easily from her tongue; its light and meaningless words perfect for a fresh-faced innocent to sing in a room whose atmosphere had tensed. The young people in the crowd soon joined in the chorus.

Helga introduced herself to Himmler and his aides, took their order and returned to the SS table with a tray holding three glasses of the finest French cognac she owned. Himmler sniffed his glass and looked pleased at her selection. Elsa's voice had recovered, soaring like a bell, the pleats of her yellow chiffon dress swaying in time with the music. Himmler tapped the table with the palm of his hand, sipped his cognac and smiled to his aides.

Happy that the Reichsführer was happy, Helga nodded her approval to Elsa for the choice of song and returned to the bar. Johann was in the middle of a deep conversation with SS-Commander von Kamptz.

"So you've been to Tibet?" the commander asked.

"Yes. I lived there. Many, many years ago. In Lhasa."

"The Reichsführer, the one sitting at the table over there, has just commissioned an expedition to Tibet. They left in August to study the origins of the Aryan race."

"I studied the people of the region when I was there."

"It's too bad Himmler's expedition has already left. I'm sure they could have used a person of your experience. It is such a remote part of the world and so hard to get into. Sweden sent an expedition to Tibet?"

"No, I traveled there independently."

"You're so young to have traveled so far afield at your age. Very admirable. Perhaps there would be another chance for you to join a similar SS expedition in the future. South America or Africa perhaps."

"I have been to both continents, many times."

"That's incredible. Were your parents diplomats?"

"The ones who created me have allowed me the freedom to do as I wish."

"So you're not close to your parents? That's a pity. But I understand. Many young people are searching to find their place in the world. Searching for purpose. We should talk about the SS and the opportunities it provides young men like you. We can be the family you never had."

"Excuse me, Commander," Helga said. "If I had known I would have to entertain special guests tonight, I would have called in my other staff." She approached Johann and started to lead him away. "I do apologize but I need help from Johann to serve the tables."

"You will have to manage without him." Oberrisch grabbed her arm. "Commander von Kamptz has become quite interested in your young Swede." Oberrisch pulled Helga aside.

"I can't afford to have any more of my staff arrested or, heaven forbid, recruited," she complained.

"Resettlement, Helga. Not arrests. We resettle undesirables. Like your communist friends."

"I have no communist friends."

"That's true. You don't any more. When the commander is finished with Nilsson, I'll let you know. Until then, you have customers to serve, *ja*? Like the one at Table Two who has been so patient."

"You leave Doktor Franz alone."

"And why should I do that?"

"Because I said so." Helga huffed and took the bottle of schnapps from the counter.

The elderly gentleman at Table Two was a man in his seventies. He was wearing a red silk cravat, with white shirt and blue blazer. An Iron Cross medal was pinned to his lapel. His cheeks

were ruddy and his thick white hair and handlebar mustache were plumed like the feathers of a swan.

"Elsa's far too young for you," Helga said as she poured him a glass of schnapps.

"Where do you find such larks?"

"I don't, Herr Doktor. They find me."

Heinz Bremer arrived at the doctor's table. "Your papers, please."

"Why do you need to see my papers, young man?"

"Papers, *bitte*. I ask the questions."

"You don't know who you're talking to, do you?" Helga protested. "Doktor Franz is a decorated war hero. He was pulling wounded soldiers out of the trenches while you were still suckling at your mother's breast."

"That was then, Fräulein Gartner," Bremer replied. "This is now. This is a new Germany, a better Germany. A Germany that isn't ashamed of its past. Our Führer no longer wants us to celebrate this gentleman's defeats as if they were victories."

"You despicable little—" Helga bit her tongue.

Oberriech saw the heated exchange. He excused himself from the conversation between von Kamptz and Johann Nilsson, crossed the room and put a hand on Bremer's shoulder. "Discretion, Heinz. We don't want to make a scene. Don't worry, I can vouch for the Doktor." Oberriech took his protégé to one side, "Magda is leaving. It's time."

The civil servant from the mayor's office was slipping a mink stole over the shoulders of the sultry woman in the jade-green dress. Her seductive grin was accompanied by a gentle touch of her hand on the man's cheek. The pair passed between the two brown-shirted goons guarding the door and left the club.

"Follow them, Heinz. You know what to do."

Bremer slunk out of Das Karussell. The pair of brownshirts followed.

Oberriech returned to Table Two. "There, Helga. Satisfied? The lions are back on the street where they belong. Now come. I would like to reminisce with you and the Doktor. Please, I would like you to join us."

"I have work to do and, as you say, patrons to keep happy."

"Sit, Helga."

Her face turned sour. "But Himmler and his officers?"

"They are happy. Their glasses are not empty."

Helga gestured to Johann. More Cognac, she mouthed, pointing to the SS table. Johann excused himself from von Kamptz and picked up the cognac bottle.

"Now sit, Helga, before I drag you off your feet."

She took the chair next to Doktor Franz, her fingers twirling the pearl necklace around her neck as if she was fondling a rosary. "What's this about, Klaus?"

"I want to dispel some unsubstantiated rumors. The gossip that has followed the good Doktor into his old age. I need your help to restore our war hero's unblemished image in the community. I know you want that." Oberriech turned to Doktor Franz. "Your wife died several years ago. In Leipzig, I believe?"

"It was tuberculosis," the old man said.

"Very sad. And then she was cremated. You wouldn't happen to still have her ashes, would you?"

"What kind of question is that?" Helga asked. "Can't you see how upsetting his wife's death is?"

"Funny, I don't see any concern on his face, Fräulein Gartner. And I think I might know why. Could we still find the presence of arsenic in the ashes of a cremated body, Herr Doktor? If we could test those ashes?"

"My wife was Austrian. At the request of her family, her ashes were spread out on the Danube," Franz replied. "At a riverside park where she spent so many good times in her youth."

"How sweet. How fitting. And how convenient."

"Is that why you came here tonight, Klaus?" Helga protested. "To dishonor a war hero, an innocent old man? With vile rumors? Innuendo, that's all it is. You should be quashing these stories, not propagating them."

"There was a singer in this club after the Great War," Oberrisch said, unfazed. "A singer with a young daughter in her teens. I would think about the same age as Helga was in 1920."

Oberrisch leered at Helga.

She turned her head away.

"Those were bad times in Germany," he continued. "Especially hard for a young mother. Unmarried, I'm told."

The notes of Elsa's next song floated over the table.

"Where is this singer now, Herr Doktor? You were seen in her company so many times. Were you helping to support her and her daughter? A wealthy man like you, so kind and generous, owning both an apothecary and a nightclub...yes, Helga I know Das Karussell is not really yours."

"I don't know what you're talking about," the doctor replied. His fingers fidgeted with his mustache.

"Very well, Franz. I really want to put these ugly rumors to rest. I can do that if you will cooperate with me on a certain matter. Together, we can make your past of no further interest to the Gestapo. We have more important things to do these days."

"That's the best thing I've heard you say all night," Helga said.

Oberrisch smiled. "But there is *something* the State is very interested in. You sold the Berliner Apotheke to a Jew, didn't you?"

"He's a good pharmacist. Very competent. And he had the money. Why wouldn't I? His customers are happy. His prices are reasonable."

"This district may need to find a new pharmacist after tonight, Herr Doktor. And until a new one is found, the Ministry of Health would like you to come out of retirement. Just for a short while. To run things. For the people who need their medicine."

"I'm retired from that profession, and happily so."

"Are you saying you won't come to the Führer's aid? To the aid of the German people? At a time of need? You did so before and have the medals to prove it. This is no different. A different kind of war, that's all."

The old man downed his schnapps.

"How can I encourage you, Doktor? Perhaps if you do this for the Reich, you will see all these ugly, unsubstantiated rumors disappear. Just like that. And in a few short weeks, maybe a month, you can return to your retirement knowing you have served a generous Reich; a Reich with a Führer who has vowed to protect you in your old age. Just like you did for that singer and her daughter in their time of need, *ja*?"

"I will consider it."

"Good. Officer Bremer will come to you the day after tomorrow with the keys. There may be some cleaning up needed before we reopen the apothecary."

"Has it been sold?"

"Let's say, the Jew no longer wishes to be in the business. He has volunteered for resettlement to a place where he and his family will find a happier life. In fact, we will all be happier after tonight."

"What's so special about tonight?" Helga asked.

The answer from Inspector Oberrisch was not forthcoming. The music had abruptly stopped. Helga looked at the stage. Siggy Katzmann was not there. Elsa was leaning on the piano to steady herself. She looked frightened. Himmler and his SS officers looked uncomfortable. Their entertainment had ended suddenly. Siggy had taken an early break.

"*Mein Gott!* Not now," Helga said. "What is he thinking?"

Elsa disappeared behind the stage curtain.

"I must see what's wrong." Helga nearly knocked over the bottle of schnapps as she rose. "Please excuse me." She waltzed past the SS table in a flurry, opened the side curtain and scurried back stage where she found Elsa Fischer pacing the tight corridor outside the small dressing room.

"He's locked the door," she said when Helga arrived. "I can hear him rustling around in there. What's he doing?" The girl was shaking. "He said we had to take a break. Every time he looked in the direction of Himmler's table, I could see him getting more and more anxious."

"Stop crying. This isn't the first time he's done something like this," Helga muttered. "Siggy!" She banged on the door. "Siggy! Open this door!"

The door flung open in her face and she was pushed back against the wall. Siggy emerged holding a tatty suitcase bulging at its buckles.

"Where are you going? You can't leave. Not now. What are we supposed to do without you?"

"Sing a cappella!" Siggy shouted as he bolted through the stage door into the alley.

Elsa cried, "What are we going to do now?"

Helga put her arm around her.

"I can't go back there," Elsa sobbed. "What would I sing without a pianist?"

"Take a moment to compose yourself. Surely you know something. A ballad. A lullaby. *Oh Gott!* There must be something you can sing? We'll say he got sick. They'll understand. But you must sing, Elsa. You have to. We have such important guests."

"I don't care if it's the Führer in there! I just can't do it. I feel faint."

Helga held Elsa's hand. Tears streaked the girl's stage makeup; black mascara raced down her cheeks. "I'll get you a chair from the dressing room."

The tinkle of piano keys drifted into the corridor. A string of notes soared high into the air on silky wings then crashed in a crescendo like waves pounding on rocks.

Elsa stopped sobbing. Her mouth gaped open, her eyes wide. "It's Wagner. Fantasia in F sharp. But who? Who's playing it?"

"*Mein Gott!* Someone is playing for Himmler!" Helga rushed out of the corridor. She paused behind the stage curtain and peeked through. "You won't believe this, Elsa. It's Johann!"

"Johann?"

"Himmler is entranced. The whole nightclub is. I've never heard Wagner played like this before. With such precision ... and with such incredible passion. It's as if Johann helped Wagner write it."