

## **Web of Wyrd**

*(Part 2 of 4)*

### ***Path of Choices***

*By Pete Planisek*

By the time she finally finished encoding the messages, Norill's entire body ached. The small window and overcast day afforded her precious little light to work with and both the knowledge of more lost friends and the Nazi's unwelcome interest in her weighed heavily on her mind. She took a moment to massage the bridge of her nose, temporarily relieving some of the sinus pressure there. Her attention was drawn to the window by the sudden sound of raindrops pelting against the glass. She stared absently as the drops traced lazy patterns down the dirty pane.

What if the war had never happened? Norill summoned images of the life she would have if the Nazis had never come. Instead of fostering further resentment, the images provided her with a goal, with hope. One day the Nazis would be gone and her dreams would be reality. It would be, that was, if she lived to see it. Her task completed, and suddenly feeling quite lonely, Norill descended back to the brighter ambiance of the front room and Vinni.

"Finished," Norill announced as she stretched her shoulder muscles to loosen them. "Oh. I'll be late getting this to the newspaper."

"They'll manage. Haktor was quite upset when he left," Vinni noted. "I do worry about him doing something foolish."

“He’s too smart for that,” Norill said as she straightened her blonde hair. “He’s been doing this longer than any of us and survived. He’s not about to do something rash now.”

“Perhaps,” Vinni responded noncommittally.

“Is there anything else you need before I go?”

Vinni pondered the question for a handful of seconds.

“If Gerertz is serious about the lessons we’d better have more sheet music on hand, particularly German and Austrian composers,” she decided.

“I’ll see what the shop has,” Norill assured her before taking her leave.

“Take my umbrella,” Vinni bid her student as the young woman departed. “No sense getting all wet.”

“Thanks, Vinni. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

The walk down to the bookshop proved rather cumbersome as Norill’s heels slipped on the wet stones of the street and she attempted to balance the umbrella and load of precious papers she carried. The struggle grew worse when her right heel unexpectedly lodged itself into a gap between two stones.

“Can I help you, Norill?” a familiar voice behind her suddenly asked.

Norill half turned.

“I think I can manage,” she hastily stated as she attempted to force the heel free while maintaining her grip on the both the umbrella and papers.

Wordlessly, Sigdis approached, bent down and pulled upward on Norill's entrapped heel, eventually freeing it.

"Thank you," Norill mechanically said as she hurriedly leaned over to retrieve several papers that had jostled themselves loose from her grasp.

As the women completed picking up the papers their eyes met for the first time. They'd grown up on the same street and been friends before the war, quite close during their school years. Now the unspoken plea in Sigdis's eyes for some kind of connection or understanding frightened Norill.

"I haven't seen you in forever. How have you been?" Sigdis asked, seizing this unexpected opportunity to talk to her former friend.

"Fine. I'm fine. Thank you for your help," Norill offered a tight smile, fighting the impulse to grab the papers from Sigdis's hand.

"Your family is well?" Sigdis continued hopefully as they stood.

"Yes, yes, we're all quite well," Norill assured her, knowing she was going nowhere until she could regain all of her papers.

Despite the fact that the papers appeared to be nothing more than sheet music, the fact that Sigdis held them caused Norill's pulse to involuntarily quicken. This young woman's choices, and those of her family, sickened Norill. Ever since the invasion they'd publically supported both the Nazi occupiers and the policies of the Norwegian puppet government under Vidkun Quisling. They'd welcomed Nazis into their tavern, where Sigdis had worked since she was a teenager. Undoubtedly that's where she'd become involved with the Nazi officer to whom

she was now openly his mistress. In Norill's eyes, Sigdis and her family represented the worst of the occupation. They were collaborators and traitors; feared, loathed, and mistrusted. They'd reputedly even provided the Nazis with the names of several Jewish community members who had not been seen in some time.

These choices afforded Sidgis and her family all types of special freedoms and resources denied to most Norwegian citizens under the Nazi occupation. It also, for the time being, protected them from direct reprisals. But outside the Nazi sphere of influence they were pariahs, fallen people, who most community members viewed as beyond redemption. To have been seen even talking to Sidgis like this was sure to elicit Norill's censure.

"Still taking lessons with Vinni?"

"Yes."

"I see. Well, it was good seeing you," Sidgis smiled bravely as she held out Norill's papers.

As she reached for them Norill was caught off guard by Sidgis suddenly pulling her close.

"I never had a choice," her fallen friend declared as she leaned in and hugged Norill, who stood stock still.

Sidgis pulled back, gazed apologetically one last time upon Norill before backing away and disappearing up a side street. Dazed by her encounter, Norill numbly wandered down the remaining hill to the main town square near the harbor and into the bookshop.

“I didn’t think you were ever going to get here,” Tekla fussed, as she got down from a step stool.

Norill smiled. Tekla was close to forty but her diminutive size and youthful features often made her seem much younger. She also tended to talk rapidly and even before the war was a bit of a nervous wreck.

“Mr. Erickson kept asking me if you were coming in and I kept telling him I didn’t know and he kept asking so I’m glad you’re here so he’ll stop asking,” Tekla quickly explained. “Oh my, I hadn’t even noticed it was raining again. So much rain this summer. Much more rain than we normally get, but you know I kinda like the rain. It’s not so bad once you get used to it. Now you need to finish re-shelving the back part of the fiction section. Mr. Erickson said the cookbooks can wait ... and hey, where are you going?”

“The water closet. I’ll be right back,” Norill promised.

The book shop was partially housed in what had once been someone’s home. To that end, an old laundry chute still existed in the back hallway near the restroom. Norill extracted a blend of pages with braille notation and sheet music from her stacks of paper and dropped them into the chute. Relieved to have made her delivery she exhaled a sigh before extracting herself from her coat and setting about her regular duties at the book shop.

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“Just a minute,” the voice on the other side of the door announced in response to Norill’s knock.

“Did you save me some lunch this time?” Norill asked.

“All these years and you still expect me to make you lunch?” her brother joked as he opened the door. “And on such a nice day.”

Norill hugged her older brother.

“I suppose since it’s your birthday I’ll let you off the hook and buy you lunch,” she offered.

“What about dinner? Kador just called and wants me to meet him and the others along the waterfront for some games and a drink.”

“Oh I see. Too good for lunch with your little sister. All right, dinner it is but I’m giving you your gift now.”

“It never seems to do me any good when I argue with you. Come in,” Rejor invited as he backed away from the door. “That sun sure feels nice.”

“Are you playing cards again?” Norill inquired as she entered and he closed the door behind her.

“Probably but I think they resent playing with my deck. Bet they think I’m cheating. Must be why they keep trying to get me to play bocce. Say, you’re in a good mood,” her brother noted. “Did your Nazi admirer fail to show up again?”

“Second Tuesday in a row,” she gushed. “Hopefully they shipped him off somewhere else.”

Haktor had made some preliminary arrangements for her to leave and visit fake relatives if needed but Gerntz’s repeated absences were making such considerations less likely.

“And even better according to the latest messages it sounds like the Allies are moving again in Italy.”

“I’ll look forward to reading more tomorrow when I go back to the newspaper.” Rejor replied. “Except for making my delivery they gave me the day off.”

“You deserve it.”

They paused a moment.

“Speaking of reading, I was having some problems with one of your braille codes the other day,” he stated but made no attempts to sit down, clearly wanting to keep their visit brief.

“Sorry I had to prepare more sheet music for Vinni and I was in a hurry to leave in case that Nazi showed up for his lessons,” Norill admitted.

“This guy’s sure got you spooked. I taught you better than that. I figured it out but you can’t get sloppy. I don’t want to ever risk having you come to the newspaper or to bring any materials here,” Rajor told her.

It was Rajor who’d taught her both braille and the coding system they used. His “newspaper” was actually an illegal publication, produced and printed in secret, which kept the public informed about what was really happening in the war much to the consternation of the Nazi propagand machine and Quisling’s manipulations of the public. The paper also filtered and shared communications from listening outposts like the cell Norill was involved in. It was so invaluable that even Norill wasn’t sure where Rajor’s operation was; only that she was to use the chute in the book shop to deliver materials to him.

“I know. I know. I’ll pay more attention,” she promised.

“You mentioned a present?” he finally reminded her after an awkward silence.

Norill retrieved a fair size tin from her bag.

“Smell,” she directed, removing the lid.

He smiled.

“How did you manage to get this much sugar?” Rajor wondered aloud.

“You have your secrets and I have mine. War rationing be damned. Happy birthday,” she said taking her brother’s hand and squeezing it.

Rajor had grown more distant since the outbreak of the war and Norill worried that the stress of running the paper was making him harsher.

“Thank you.”

“I’ll let you get on with your day then. Dinner tonight?”

“I’ll meet you at the café by your book shop around six,” he agreed.

“Can I tell mom to meet us?”

Rajor hesitated as he opened the door.

“If you like,” he conceded, as one of his fingers tapped against the sugar tin.

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Although she heard the front door bell jingle Norill didn’t stir, engrossed completely in a book she’d stumbled upon. Mr. Erickson would disapprove but he’d left early and Tekla was too

absorbed with sorting the stockroom to notice her minor indiscretion. She rarely felt this relaxed and oftentimes customers wandered off into the far corners of the store in search of whatever literary prize they sought without ever acknowledging a greeting from whoever was behind the sales counter.

“Guten tag, Norill, yes?”

The fingers that had been absentmindedly twisting a strand of her hair froze and her heart quickened as Norill’s eyes rose from the book and gazed into those of the Nazi soldier, Gerntz. The silent exchange felt endless as her emotions and thoughts surged in several directions at once.

“What are you reading?” he finally asked, breaking the stalemate.

Norill straightened herself on her stool behind the counter, closed the book, and set it aside facedown.

“May I help you?” she coolly inquired.

“You may,” Gerntz replied, undeterred. “I should like to find more sheet music for my next lesson tomorrow.”

A host of questions flooded Norill’s mind but she kept them to herself. To ask would only invite further conversation with this man and that was to be avoided at all costs. She pointed in the direction of the sheet music.

“Could you please show me?”

Almost as if she was dreaming, Norill slowly stood, self-consciously smoothed the front of her skirt, and walked him toward the back of the shop to the music. Every nerve in her body seemed to vibrate. And with each step further away from the front windows her fears grew more pronounced. She half expected his friends to appear any moment.

“Here,” she softly announced when they at last reached the shelved pile of sheet music.

She brushed past him, intent on escaping to the front of the book store but suddenly found herself restrained. The presence of his hand on her wrist was fleeting and far from harsh but she drew her arm back toward her body as if she’d been shocked. They were so close she couldn’t help but inhale the scent of his aftershave.

“I would appreciate you selecting some moderate level material for me.”

His blue eyes afforded her no refuge. She turned from them and attempted to concentrate on locating music.

She could sense his gaze upon her as he studied her form and every motion she made. A part of her wanted to flee but she dare not try. Norill retreated inward, filling her head with music as she worked. If she didn’t, his closeness, the burning awareness of her isolation, and the knowledge that had passed between their eyes would overwhelm her.

“Your friend thinks very highly of you,” Gerntz remarked as she pulled several sheets from the stack.

“Mrs. Naess is a generous woman,” Norill at last responded.

Eight selections should be more than adequate.

“Undoubtedly but I speak of Fräulein Sidgis Karlsen,” he clarified.

Norill lost her purchase on the sheet music she’d pulled as a door near them unexpectedly opened.

“Oh dear, sorry Norill. I should have called out first. This always seems to happen, it’s like we have our own traditions in this shop. My, I could have spent another six hours working in that stockroom and it would still be a disaster. Here I’ll get those it’s the least I can do,” Tekla declared as she snatched up the scattered sheet music.

“Finish up for me,” Norill bid as she retreated further back into the shop without looking back to see Tekla’s reaction when she turned around and discovered Gerntz, whom she had yet to notice standing behind her.

Norill was angry as she turned the lock on the door to the water closet. She hated the Nazis. She hated collaborators and Sigdis for talking about her. And she especially hated Gerntz. Norill glared at her reflection. Fleeing here made her feel weak and more than anything she hated that he’d made her feel controlled and weak.

Gerntz’s lack of attendance to his first two lesson provided Vinni the perfect excuse to refuse to teach him. Yet, apparently, she hadn’t. Could she have sent him here deliberately to look for sheet music, fostering Gerntz’s interest in her? The eyes of the reflection lost some of their fire. They changed again as a new, unpleasant thought entered her consciousness.

How did Gerntz know about her connection to Sigdis? Aside from their spontaneous encounter a few weeks previous, Norill hadn’t had any interactions with the other woman in quite some time. Could Sigdis have been following her? Worse still, had Gerntz been following

her that day, witnessed their meeting, and investigated her relation with Norill's former friend further?

Norill's blood was now ice. Why did Gerntz pursue her? He wanted something from her very badly. Did he intend to violate her? Force her into a relationship with him? Arrest and torture her and the other members of the resistance cell? Her mind recoiled at the horrible images set loose upon her frantic mind.

Reason fought back against these questions and phantoms. First thing in the morning she would insist that Haktor use his contacts to get her safely out of town, without raising suspicions. Leaving would protect her and the resistance. Unconsciously the reflection nodded back to her and Norill took a deep breath. She could hear the church bells outside calling the bottom of the hour. The sound recalled her thoughts to the present.

Soon it would be time to meet Rejor for dinner. She'd completely forgotten about telling their mother. The safest course was to go home. But then again she couldn't abandon Rejor on his birthday and there was no guarantee she'd be able to reach him by phone. She'd have to wait for him at the café.

"Everything all right?" Tekla asked when Norill at last re-emerged from the back.

"I think it was something from lunch," Norill lied. "Thank you for dealing with that ..."

"Jack-booted moron is what he is. Man doesn't know his Beethoven from his Mozart. Piano lessons, cultural experts, huh. And these Nazis want to conquer the world? Well, what can you expect from a witless goon anyway?" Tekla ranted. "I tell you Mrs. Naess is going to have her hands full."

Norill couldn't help but laugh at Tekla's tirade and soon they were both laughing uproariously.

"Did he say anything else?" Norill asked, hoping for another diatribe by Tekla.

The shorter woman collected herself before answering.

"Only that he liked the shop and would be back," Tekla rolled her eyes.

Suddenly Norill felt much more sober.

"Bad enough they're out there. Let's just hope we don't have this place crawling with Nazis next," Tekla shook her head as she turned the door sign to close the shop for the day, missing her co-worker's troubled expression.

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The spoon pinged against the ceramic cup as Norill rescued the saturated tea bag from the steaming contents it had created. Church bells chimed again. Where was Rejor?

Even though it was a fairly pleasant evening, there seemed to be few people out. If Rejor didn't arrive soon they'd have to worry about curfew. Norill drew her jacket closer and carefully raised the cup full of hot tea to her lips. As she did so her eyes scanned the square, fearful any moment Gerntz would reappear. Norill had strategically set herself at the outdoor table she considered least visible to the majority of the square. If only Tekla had been able to stay, at least she wouldn't be waiting here alone.

It happened so unexpectedly that for a moment all she did was blink. A man, whom she'd never set eyes on before, was suddenly seated across from her.

“You work in the book shop?” he asked with only a slight accent.

Norill mechanically nodded.

“My wife loves Ibsen,” he hastily declared.

“*“The strongest man in the world is he who stands most alone,”*” Norill responded after looking to verify that no one was close by.

“I love Shakespeare,” she added.

“*“So wise so young, they say, do never live long.”*” The man’s thick beard hid most of his face but his sharp eyes relaxed for just an instant.

“I’m sure the shop can help you at eight,” Norill took a sip of tea as the man vanished from her sight.

To the casual observer, she presented the demeanor of a woman happy for the simple pleasure of quietly finishing a cup of tea after a long day’s work. But Norill fought to keep the cup in her hand from shaking. Somewhere out there a group of British commandos needed her help. They needed her aid so desperately they’d risked sending someone to speak to her in public. Norill dropped money on the table and started her journey home, uncertain if she was truly capable of saving anyone—including herself.

*Story continues in Part 3*



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