

Web of Wyrd

(Part 3 of 4)

Agents of the Fifth Column

By Pete Planisek

Norill jumped down and gasped for air as she and Tekla were overcome by a haze of dust that wafted down upon them from the top of the shelf.

“I’ve got to get some water,” Tekla managed as she lurched away from Norill who was still coughing. Norill wiped her tearing eyes with her sleeve and wordlessly accepted the second glass of water Tekla returned with a few minutes later.

“That was a bad one,” the short woman noted as she fully regained her breath.

“I hate when he makes us clean these stacks back here,” Norill said as Tekla nodded in commiseration.

“He’s the tall one, shouldn’t he be back here doing this?”

Tekla had barely finished uttering her complaint when the shop’s owner, Mr. Erickson, suddenly rounded the corner. Moments after his abrupt appearance, he began to sneeze uncontrollably until he retrieved a handkerchief to cover his mouth and nose.

“Look at this. It’ll take until doomsday to clear all this dust out of here,” he bluntly asserted as his sharp eyes fixed on the mass of dust roiling through a nearby spot of light. “Get some of these windows opened.”

“They’re painted shut,” Tekla reminded him before withering under Mr. Erickson’s annoyed gaze and returning to her dusting.

“You have a phone call,” the shop owner informed Norill.

“Do you know who it is?” she asked, wondering if the British commando from the café last night could be foolish or desperate enough to call her.

“Your mother,” Mr. Erickson told her as he lowered the obscuring piece of cloth from his face. “She’s quite upset. Use the phone up front.”

Norill hastened to the shop’s checkout counter, darted behind it, and grabbed the phone’s receiver.

“Mother are you there? What’s wrong?”

At first all she heard was the sound of breathing and muffled voices in the background.

“Norill, they’re taking it. They’re taking it all,” her mother’s trembling voice said before the line went dead.

“Hello? Mother?”

“What is it? What’s going on?” Tekla asked. “Do you need help?”

For a moment, Norill said nothing before stammering, “I need your bike.”

“It’s parked out front,” Tekla declared, nervously wringing her hands, anxious to gain some insight into her friend’s plight.

She would gain none as Norill stiffened upon noticing Mr. Erickson making his way back toward them. She could not afford to be detained. Her tension eased momentarily as he was forced to pause, detained by a customer. Norill pivoted her attention back to Tekla.

“A man reserved a copy of *Enemy of the People* last night. I’ve set aside a copy for him behind the front counter. If he comes for it tell him I’ll be back.”

Without uttering another word, Norill grabbed her handbag, left the shop, retrieved Tekla’s bicycle and began to pedal. Her family’s farm was several kilometers outside of town. She only paused once before leaving town, witnessing a sight that momentarily brought both her mind and motions to an abrupt halt. There stood Haktor talking with Sigdis as Nazi soldiers lingered nearby. Realizing the folly of such an agape reaction in public, she suppressed the discord within and resumed her rhythmic motions.

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Unwilling to allow any manifestation of weakness, Norill fought to suppress the urge to massage the muscles in her arms that had been strained by the soldiers’ harsh grip. Instead she tacitly crossed her arms. She’d been seized immediately upon her arrival and now languished pensively along the side of the road as the guards radioed their superiors regarding her presence.

Her family’s farm was at once neither near nor far from town. This was a land blessed with a richness of herbs and wildflowers, a rolling blend of both grassland and mighty stands of timber; a place where the sunlight held memories of searching for wild berries and the sound of murmuring streams. But the incongruous nature of the scene before her drove home harsh realities. The normally tranquil environment of her childhood home was abuzz with all manner of mechanized monsters and uniformed men who projected wariness, menace, and a coldness

this place never knew even in the cruelest of winters. And this was a sight now playing out daily across her occupied homeland in any number of places; in homes, farms, and villages just like hers.

“Come,” one of her guards suddenly bid as he replaced the radio receiver on its cradle.

Norill hesitated a moment to retrieve Tekla’s bike then slowly walked the remainder of her journey flanked closely by uniformed intruders she would gladly see destroyed.

Each progressive step she took revealed new, unwelcome truths. Numerous eyes followed her as her measured pace brought her ever closer to home. A nest of vipers would have been less unnerving. All was noise and motion as motor engines roared, orders were shouted, and gun-wielding soldiers moved hurriedly to follow them. Both the modest home, barn, and supply buildings had been turned inside out. Nazi vehicles brimmed with familiar items, crops, and supplies stolen from the farm. In fact, items were even now being tossed out of the open windows of the house. Norill’s agitation rose. Right now none of this mattered, only her mother’s fate.

“Halt,” a crisp, authoritarian voice behind them commanded, bringing Norill and her armed companions to an abrupt cessation.

“*Spricht sie Deutsch?*” the officer asked the guards as he approached, studying Norill for any shred of information he could gather from her appearance.

“*Sie hat keener gesprochen,*” one of the men reported.

The officer nodded, switching effortlessly to Norwegian.

“I understand you live here, Miss?”

“Haugen. And my mother lives here. I have rooms in town. What brings you to our farm?” Norill inquired, matching his tone.

“Why the war, naturally.” His smile only added to his insulting tone as he needlessly pulled at the cuffs of his gloves before proceeding. “I believe this document should clarify our purpose.”

The narrow-faced man withdrew an envelope from his jacket, which he then offered to the helpless woman for inspection. Both Norill’s breathing and her heart grew heavier as she read but there was no mistaking her father’s signature on the document. Challenging its validity with the officer before her was pointless, especially as it was plain how much he was relishing her shock. She would not give him the satisfaction of protesting.

“Where is my mother?” Norill asked quietly as she returned the document to the smug man.

“You may come back this afternoon for her,” the officer declared as he clicked his heels and politely inclined his head in mock respect.

Norill’s eyes waivered across the front of the house, seeking any sign of her mother’s presence but for some reason they fixed on an open window where the curtains blew outward, carried by the winds. Rough hands were again clasping her, directing her motions in the opposite direction from her mind’s will. She stiffened, attempted to stay in place.

“Conduct Miss Haugen back to town. Send an escort this afternoon when we’re ready,” the unsympathetic officer ordered his guards before directing his parting affront to Norill. “Your family’s sacrifice to the war effort is greatly appreciated. Good day.”

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Another metallic ping sounded off behind Norill as her bicycle's tire rim again came into contact with the car's trunk. This time the clash of metal beckoned Norill from her anguished reverie. They were over half way back to town and she could not afford to be seen arriving in a Nazi staff car, much less return to the bookstore and risk leading the Germans directly to the commandos.

"I'm going to be sick. Stop the car. Stop the car!" she insisted as a familiar sight loomed into view as they rounded a bend in the road.

Apparently her remaining guard was unwilling to test her claim while they were in the car and ordered the driver to pull over. Norill struggled past the guard and within seconds of exiting the vehicle wrenched on the churchyard fence and her clothing. She ignored the men's derisive laughter at her temporary incapacity. It was better that they believe her to be feeble.

They lit cigarettes but made no move to offer assistance.

"I should like to remain at the church," Norill finally requested. The guard's quick eyes surveyed both her and the modest church, which was surrounded inside the fence by clusters of steepled grave markers. His cool eyes returned to hers as he motioned for her to return to the staff car.

"May I be of assistance?" a voice suddenly asked from over the fence.

The middle aged clergyman lowered his gloved hands as the Nazi guard relaxed the posture of his gun. The men conversed out of earshot for several minutes before the guard retrieved Tekla's bicycle from the car's trunk, and tossed it to the ground as the clergyman

offered the Nazi a proper salute. The car's tires momentarily shrouded Norill in a cloud of dust before departing.

"You're fortunate I was out gardening. They insist you remain here until they return for you," the clergyman explained as he stooped to help Norill to her feet.

She silently nodded but refused to meet the man's eye. Grateful as she was she needed to think, not endure his curiosity.

Norill drew Tekla's abused bicycle inside the fence, and then followed her benefactor into the back of the church where she accepted the water he offered her. The man retreated outside to continue his work and Norill's body settled heavily onto one of the pews.

Her mind should have been focused on finding answers. What should she do? But instead her thoughts were filled by the silence of the structure, becoming one with it as the shadows slowly changed position in accordance with the sunlight flowing through both the windows and open entryway.

Norill's connection to church had always been tenuous. She possessed a dim memory of this being different prior to Rejor's blindness in childhood but that was a lifetime ago. Now even Norway's Church could offer little in the way of solace as Quisling and his Nazi masters claimed it for their own nefarious purposes. Another piece of Norway captured, co-opted, beset by willing agents of the fifth column¹. The longer the occupation continued the more numerous the ranks of the corrupted grew. Trust was becoming a deadly commodity.

A helmeted shadow suddenly hovered before her, backlit in the church's entryway.

¹ Employing agents to subvert a nation's unity from within by misinformation, espionage, and other subterfuge.

“Come,” the familiar, unwelcome voice of her guard ordered.

Norill lingered a moment under the oppressive presence of the guard’s shadow. Inwardly, she feared the next moments to come as the doubts and fears of her imagination attempted to anticipate the unknown reality that waited. Her eyes were drawn to the stains of sickness left on her dress. Maybe she was weak.

She stirred as the impatient shadow did and together they exited the church. There was no trace of the gardening clergyman other than several freshly planted beds of flowers that now graced the fence line. Tekla’s bicycle had apparently already been loaded into one of the two Nazi staff cars that idled along the side of the road. She was conducted to the first car but to Norill’s surprise when the door opened it was the sight of the Nazi officer from the farm who greeted her.

“Miss Haugen. Here for confession, perhaps?”

Norill could not suppress her emotions in time.

“Where is my mother?” she desperately asked.

“In the rear car,” the officer absently gestured. “Tell me, what do you know of the downed Allied glider we located on her property?”

The man’s eyes bore into Norill. Her gaze was drawn to the death’s head emblem on the front of his cap. Her mouth felt dry as she truthfully responded.

“Nothing.”

The officer made no move to break his intense visual interrogation.

“Your mother claims the same excuse. I wonder how it is that a glaring oversight is possible, especially as there is suggestive evidence that they sheltered in the barn.”

“Where did it crash? How far from the house?” Norill challenged.

A disquieting smile spread across the officer’s face.

“I’m releasing your mother into your custody, Miss Haugen. For how long is up to you for I will have the truth. Obtain it for me or rest assured I will.”

“How can I clear her name if you’re already convinced she’s guilty?” Norill demanded as the officer sat back down in the car.

“Your driver has instructions to return you to town. When you have something tell him and he will contact me.”

The guard pulled Norill back from the car, which pulled away seconds later. She wordlessly followed the man to the second car and offered no protests as he opened the door.

As promised, her mother was there. The older woman made no effort to look at her daughter as she sat down. A lone suitcase sat between them. The car sank slightly lower as the guard assumed the seat next to the driver and forcibly shut the door. For a moment the only sound was that of the idling engine.

“Where am I to drive you, Norill?”

Her heart sank lower. Of course he was here. She closed her eyes and clenched her jaw as she bitterly answered.

“Take us to Mrs. Naess please, Gerntz.”

*

The return journey was interminable. Norill longed to break her shared silence with her mother but she dare not as the Nazi staff car slowly wove through town in pursuit of its ultimate destination. Had Gerntz been instructed to parade them past as many judgmental eyes as possible or was this his own twisted torment? There'd been no need to drive into the very heart of town but here they were for all to see. Still she barely allowed herself to take notice of the stares and condescending looks of those they drove slowly past. She didn't even respond to Gerntz's stolen glances at her as he talked to the guard or adjusted the rearview mirror.

Norill was lost to memory. In it, she was drowning, just as she was now. What would her mother tell her about the Allied glider and its crew? The ice had broken and had her father not reacted quickly she'd have slide beneath the ice forever. The image of the watery void consumed her, as it had since that day. The water was something to fear. So transfixed had she become by the black leather of the seat in front of her that she failed at first to notice their arrival at Vinni's house.

Coming here was a risk, but less it seemed than having Gerntz take Norill to the rooms she rented here in town or to the bookshop. Vinni she could trust. The all but forgotten image of Haktor speaking with Sigdis suddenly returned as the door next to her mother was opened by Gerntz. The Nazi helped the older woman out of the car before leaning in to retrieve her suitcase. Norill met his eye.

“If either of you attempt to leave town you will be shot,” he plainly stated.

Norill solemnly nodded once before looking away. The deadly earnestness of his tone afforded her no illusions regarding his warning. As he withdrew the guard opened Norill's door and

motioned her out. Tekla's bicycle was propped near the steps to Vinni's front door and beside it, her mother, flanked by Gerntz, who carried her suitcase, waited for her. Who had he been before the war? The thought flashed through Norill's mind quickly but nonetheless caught her off guard. She buried it as she knocked and awaited Vinni.

"Hello Vinni, may Mother and I come in for a short time?" Norill calmly asked when the blind musician answered her summons.

Vinni hesitated a moment, clearly distracted.

"I ... didn't forget an appointment did I, Norill?" she asked, sensing the presence of others.

"No, Vinni," Norill struggled to keep her voice from trembling. "Gerntz is here to drop off Mother's bag and then he'll be leaving."

"I see. Give me a moment, won't you," said Vinni as she closed the door.

"Do you wish me to drive you to the bookshop later?" Gerntz asked.

"No," Norill managed without turning to face him but inclining her head wordlessly toward Tekla's bicycle just as the door swung open.

"Hello Norill, Mrs. Haugen," Sidgis cordially greeted them as she finished putting on her gloves. "Nice that it isn't raining today, yes? Excuse me."

"Indeed," Norill breathed in disbelief as she stepped aside to allow Sidgis to pass, who nodded politely to Gerntz.

“Thank you again for the tea, Mrs. Naess,” Sidgis called as she waved farewell to Vinni who’d reappeared in the doorway.

Vinni offered a short wave.

“Always nice when former students visit,” she commented as she moved to allow the others inside. “I’ll get you both some tea as well.”

Gerntz placed the suitcase just inside the door before closing it behind the women. For a moment the only sounds were the ticking of a clock and that of water being drawn in the kitchen.

Norill wrapped her arms around her mother. Their embrace was comforting, reassuring.

“Are you all right?” Norill finally asked.

“Why do you know that Nazi?” her mother responded, her tone rife with suspicion.

“He comes here for lessons from Vinni,” Norill incredulously countered, folding her arms. “Nothing more.”

Unconvinced, Norill’s mother sat down and retrieved her cigarettes and matches. The tea kettle began whistling as she exhaled a measure of smoke from her first cigarette in hours.

“And will you turn me back over to your friend?” her mother demanded as she flung a spent match into the ash tray on the coffee table. “That SS officer who stole my farm would certainly be impressed.”

Why was her mother picking this fight?

“If you have so little faith in me why did you call?”

“As if Rejor would have come,” her mother harshly noted.

“I don’t know which of you is worse about that. You know he would have come,” Norill affirmed as she settled in a chair across from her mother.

The older woman looked away from her daughter. Despite her anger, Norill could recognize the vulnerability and fear etched on her mother’s features.

“Sidgis’ presence here does not inspire confidence,” the woman admitted to her child.

“No ... it doesn’t,” Norill agreed as she rose to join Vinni in the kitchen.

“Do you need a hand?” Norill asked Vinni as she opened the kitchen door.

The question caused the other woman to lose her purchase on the mug in her hand, which shattered upon the floor.

“Don’t move,” Norill ordered as she surveyed where the fragments had landed.

“Dammit. So clumsy. Was that the blue one?” Vinni inquired as she nervously wrung her hands together.

“I’m afraid so,” Norill observed as she stooped and began to pick up the shards. “Sorry that I startled you.”

“Yes,” Vinni absently remarked. “Tell me, is there much to clean up?”

“It’ll only take a minute,” her younger friend assured her. “Mother’s farm has been taken by the Nazi’s for the greater glory of the Third Reich. I need to talk to Rejor. Would you mind if she stays here a few hours while I make arrangements?”

“Dear. No, no of course not,” Vinni replied. “Poor woman.”

“Is Haktor here?” Norill casually probed.

“What? No. I mean, I’ve not seen him since this morning. He wasn’t here long,” Vinni added.

“Hhhmm. Well, I think I’ve got the last of it,” Norill declared as she regained her feet.

“It’s safe for you to move now. Did he mention any communiqués needing translated?”

Vinni crossed the room to retrieve the tea tray she’d been assembling.

“I think we’re one cup short. And we’ll need the sugar cubes,” she decided.

Norill moved to gather the final items and placed them on the tray.

“Vinni. Did Haktor mention translations?” Norill repeated.

The old music teacher paused a moment in reflection.

“No, not that I recall but you can go and check if he left anything,” she suggested as she prepared to pick up the tea tray.

“Are you all right, Vinni?” Norill queried as she studied her obviously troubled mentor.

Her friend paused and lowered her head a moment before raising it and stating, “Don’t ask me about Sigdis. It’s my business.”

“Are we compromised?”

Vinni turned her blank eyes to Norill but the harsh expression she wore silently rebuffed her protégé. She raised the tray and vacated the kitchen.

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It took Norill an extra twenty minutes to make her way back to the bookshop. Surely she must be under Nazi surveillance of some type. But her meager efforts of pausing and doubling back to expose her watchers proved fruitless. Her stomach rumbled with hunger, suddenly keenly aware of the paltry amount of food she'd eaten today. Norill's thoughts returned to the tense hour she'd spent with her mother and Vinni. They'd shared little conversation, each lost in their own problems.

Still Norill hated to leave. If possible she'd gladly forgo this trip but she needed to return Tekla's bicycle and ascertain if the commandos had attempted to contact her. She could not help but feel as if every soul she passed viewed her with suspicion. Halfway to her destination it began to mist and she took the opportunity to don a concealing scarf upon her head. The hunger pangs worsened as she pedaled and the stone surfaces grew slick, slowing her further. When at last she drew near her destination Norill decided to walk the last paces.

Unwilling to endure additional scrutiny in the town square, she opted to approach the bookshop from the rear. Built into a hillside, the exposed basement always made the shop look much larger than it actually was. Leaving the bicycle down here and making her way along the narrow staircase between the shop and the law office next door would afford her a more discreet route to the front door.

Norill halted her progress up the steps at the first landing. Why was the side door to the basement ajar? She hesitated before extending a gloved hand toward the door. It quietly swung further inward. Her eyes hurriedly scanned the basement entry but to no avail. She'd heard

Tekla describe the basement being laid out like a rat's maze with a host of passages and storage rooms to navigate.

“Norill?”

She jumped at the sound of Mr. Erickson's voice from the bottom of the staircase. He was red faced, his sleeves rolled up exposing his forearms, and bore a worn wrench in one hand and a piece of cloth in another.

“What are you doing out here?” he asked as he wearily began to ascend toward her.

“I ... I was ... bringing Tekla back her bicycle and ...”

“Tekla's not here. Went home some time ago,” Mr. Erickson remarked as he dabbed sweat from his forehead. “I've been in the sub-basement working on the boiler. Hades would be cooler than the shop right now and no repairmen are available until tomorrow.”

“Oh,” Norill intoned.

Erickson cleared his throat.

“Did you open that?” he inquired, motioning toward the door with his wrench.

“No,” she shook her head. “Mr. Erickson, would it be all right if I used the shop's phone? I need to speak to my brother.”

It took a moment for her words to fully register with her employer as his attention remained fixed upon the open door.

“I’d swear I locked that. Yes, but keep it brief,” he instructed as they entered the basement.

After making a point to lock the door behind them, Mr. Erickson led them both through the crowded warren to a staircase, which they quickly ascended into the back hallway near his office.

“Everything’s all right with your mother I trust?”

The shop was indeed stifling.

“It’s complicated.”

Norill hastily removed her head scarf and gloves.

“Should I use your phone or the one at the front counter?” she asked.

“Oh I should think ... good God. My shop!”

For a moment, both stared wordlessly at the disaster before them. Each waded in the opposite direction as they sought a path around numerous obstacles to the front of the bookshop.

“We have to call the police,” Mr. Erickson declared as he surveyed the ransacked mess of his business.

Norill continued her struggle to reach the front counter as her companion examined the forced front door.

“And you saw no one when you arrived?” he questioned as inadvertently knocked over a mass of books and swore loudly.

“I came in the same way you did,” she quickly reminded him as she flung curls from her left eye and at last reached for the phone.

“The register,” he uttered as he staggered toward the overturned device on the floor.

Norill took the opportunity to search for the copy of Ibsen she’d set aside for the commando but failed to locate it anywhere near the counter. But eyeing the ramshackle condition of the shop it could still be buried nearly anywhere.

“Blast!” cried Mr. Erickson as he beheld the empty register drawer. “I’d better go check the safe!”

Norill dialed the phone as the man frantically retreated to the back office. At least they wouldn’t have to dust anymore.

*

The smell of freshly brewed coffee recalled her to life. After opening her eyes, Norill lay silently studying the unfamiliar surroundings. She’d been so exhausted last night that it wasn’t until now that she fully realized the unforgiving nature of the mattress; however, the pillows and comforter were exceedingly plush. Groggily, she rose and resumed her clothing from the previous day before shuffling out into the main room.

Tekla sat at a table looking out the front window, down upon the street with a steaming mug in her hands. She half turned, obviously sensing Norill’s approach more than actually realizing how close she was.

“Oh, oh, you’re up. I figured you’d be sleeping another hour or more. Did I wake you? Oh, I’m so sorry I woke you. After yesterday you should probably sleep for a week. You know I

have a friend who claims she slept once for three days. Do you believe that? Three days! Which of course I maintain is simply impossible ... coffee?" Tekla finally inquired noticing her friend's stuporous gaze at the mug in her hands.

Norill nodded before sitting down at the nearby table as Tekla bustled into the kitchen. She returned with an array of breakfast items.

"I couldn't sleep so I cooked," Tekla explained. "Go ahead, plenty more. I'll go get that coffee. Sugar?"

They shared a quiet but pleasant meal. After such sparse meals the previous day, Tekla's offerings were both a sumptuous and welcome change of pace.

"Aren't you having more?" Norill asked the other woman who'd set aside a lone piece of toast.

Tekla took a long sip of her coffee before answering.

"Never been big on breakfast but figured you could use it this morning after last night's troubles. Mr. Erickson phoned a little bit ago. Says the radiator is still broken. He wants us back tomorrow though to start cleaning up."

Norill sighed but offered no further comment. Tekla pressed on.

"Strange the bookshop being ransacked like that. You'd think someone would have seen something. Thank you so much for bringing my bicycle back last night. Think your mother got settled all right?"

"I'm sure she did," Norill wearily smiled, which seemed to please her friend.

“Good that Mrs. Naess had that spare key of yours,” she offered.

Norill’s thoughts returned to the strained conversation she’d had over the phone with her brother last night. He’d all but refused to allow their mother to stay with him, even though his lodgings were much bigger than Norill’s. Angry and tired, she’d stopped by Tekla’s simply to drop off the bicycle but after the trying conversation with Rejor and a short talk with Vinni about giving the spare key to Norill’s rooms, she’d acceded to Tekla’s offer to stay.

“Would you mind if I stayed here for a few days? Just until I can get my mother settled into something more permanent,” Norill inquired as she poured herself more coffee.

“Of course,” Tekla beamed.

“Thank you,” Norill said softly.

Her gaze grew momentarily distant as they myriad of problems she faced preyed upon her mind.

“May I ask you something?” Tekla hesitantly posed.

Norill looked to her and waited.

“I’ve only met your brother on a few occasions but he’s always been quite affable. Why is he so reticent toward your mother? Surely you must have told him about the Nazi’s stealing her home?”

Norill shook her head.

“They’ve been acrimonious for almost as long as I can remember. Rejor was always closer to our father but he blames her for his blindness. Now the war and my father’s fate have strained their relationship even more. His refusal last night doesn’t surprise me but it does hurt.”

Tekla opened her mouth, and then closed it before standing to clear the dishes.

“I shouldn’t have pried,” she acknowledged as she worked.

“On the contrary, it feels good to talk to someone about it all,” Norill reassured her as she too stood and began to help clean off the table.

Not used to such compliments, Tekla paused a moment before carrying an armload of dishes into the kitchen. Norill could not fail to notice the smile that graced Tekla’s face as she did so.

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She was alone in the house. Haktor was still missing and whatever was bothering Vinni kept her distant. Their conversations the last few days were always short and tense, as if she was shielding Norill from something. Still, pretenses needed to be maintained, as did their secret transmitting operations, so the two women coexisted as best they could. Both Rejor and their mother remained distant but she hoped to see both of them tomorrow. She longed to restore some sense of unity among her family.

Norill settled upon the piano bench and for a time absently played a variety of songs. What was Vinni out doing right now? Where was Haktor? She frequently pause her playing, convinced she’d heard someone at the door but each time the tranquility of the empty house remained undisturbed. Distracted, her thoughts turned to another mystery.

She’d set her belongings next to the piano when she arrived. Norill glanced at the front door again before reaching down to retrieve the object of her musings. Tekla had given it to her less than twenty four hours earlier but she’d been able to draw few concrete conclusions about its

true significance. Its revelation was thanks largely to a casual conversation they'd had after a demanding day of reorganizing the bookshop.

"I almost forgot. You mentioned a man who'd reserved a copy of Ibsen the other day was expected at the store," Tekla had begun, capturing Norill's attention immediately. "I meant to tell you that a gentleman did come in and pick it up but one was returned less than an hour later."

"What do you mean one was returned?" Norill questioned.

"Well, the copy that was returned is not a version we sell," Tekla insisted as she walked to retrieve something from a drawer.

"Did you keep it?" Norill asked.

Tekla nodded as she reached into the drawer and retrieved the book.

"And that's not the oddest thing. Mr. Erickson heard me arguing with the man about refunding the money and came over. The two looked at each other and Mr. Erickson apologized and refunded the money without question. Less than an hour later the radiator broke. When I went into the back to say something to Mr. Erickson about the heat he was on the phone having a rather terse conversation. He hung up as soon as he saw me and told me that I was finished for the day and should go home. And then there are these markings in the book."

Different pages contained different circled letter and numbers, seemingly at random. Norill had pressed Tekla for a description of the man she'd dealt with, but based on her recollections it soon became clear that not only were two different books involved, but the transactions had been carried out by two different men. Similar looking to one another but

definitely different, just like the copies of the Ibsen book; and it was also clear that neither was the same man who'd made contact with her in the café. Since that initial encounter she'd seen no further sign of the commandos existence, none save possibly the marked copy of the Ibsen book she held in her hand. There must be a code in use but how was she to decipher it? Maybe Rejor or (if he ever turned up again) Haktor would know.

Suddenly there was a knock at the door, which almost immediately began to open. Startled, Norill hastily dropped the book back among her belongings crumpled on the floor. For a moment all she was aware of where the striking blue eyes staring into hers. Norill felt her breath seize in her chest as Gerntz stepped inside the house and slowly closed the door.

He silently studied her as Norill fought her urge to flee. If she did, he'd either catch her outright or bring the might of the Nazi occupiers to bear against both her and her family. With so much at stake Norill remained still at the piano, betraying only the faintest of trembles as Gerntz passed within an inch of her as he sought evidence of others in the house. Each heavy tread of his polished boots against the wooden floors sounded like thunder. Where was Vinni?

Gerntz was approaching her again, apparently satisfied they were alone. Had he followed her here and waited outside until he was all but certain she was alone? Time slowed and the familiar surroundings assumed a surreal quality as first he towered menacingly behind her before leaning down and rifling into her belongings. Norill tried not to think of the coded book. Was that what he was after? She kept her eyes fixed on the piano keys, too terrified to look anywhere else. If only she had a weapon.

She heard him stand and seconds later felt the rough skin of his hand on her right shoulder. Norill closed her eyes. She wanted to scream but could sense no utterance would come.

Her heart was beating so fast that it felt as if it filled the entirety of her chest. A lone finger traced across the top of her back as he moved and assumed the open portion of the bench beside her. Every nerve on the left side of her body seemed to come alive at once. Inches from her now, Norill decided it was finally too much to bear, but when she moved to flee Gerntz grabbed her waist and forced her back down upon the bench.

“Dammit, play something,” she heard him order but her mind struggled to make her body respond.

One of his hands released her as he fumbled for something. A sheet of music suddenly appeared against the stand above the keyboard.

“Play!”

Without thought her fingers moved into position and seconds later they began striking the keys as dictated by the notations in front of her. Norill’s foot worked the pedals.

“You’re playing too fast. Slow the tempo,” Gerntz instructed.

Norill nodded, grateful for once that her blonde curls now masked a portion of her face. She couldn’t look at him but she did obey. This composition was fairly new to her and to her surprise Gerntz kept placing new pages of it on the stand. The longer she played the more his clasp on her loosened until miraculously it was gone.

Norill’s breathing became more labored as she reached the more difficult portion of the work, in part because it was intended to be played by two people. Suddenly she saw Gerntz place his fingers in a starting position over the keyboard. His fingers hung there until the notations

dictated that he should join. He played flawlessly, even effortlessly, through the remainder of the piece.

As the dying tones from the last chord struck reverberated in the air, Norill at last looked to Gerntz. He was clearly not a novice musician as he'd claimed. Curiosity now replaced fear as the room again became still.

“I had to be sure,” Gerntz began. But though it was the same man, it was not Gerntz’s voice she was hearing. Both the language and the accent were different. “Listen to me very carefully. I’m an Allied spy and you are in great danger.”

Story concludes in Part 4



“Web of Wyrd (Part 3 of 4) – Agents of the Fifth Column” by Pete Planisek

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