

18th July 1993

“Is this how it *always* begins?”, thought Wulf, as yet another hearty pat on the back from a well-wishing, but ludicrously distant relative sent him lurching forward into a table full of berries. It seemed odd: here he was, about to embark on a complete circumnavigation of Albia, right around the rim of the world and back again, and all his family wanted to do was kiss, cuddle, pat and pummel him into an exhausted heap. What better way is there to start the most perilous and terrifying Journey of your life?!

Wulf was just about to elaborate on this observation to the aforementioned distant relative, when a sudden hush fell among the guests, rising moments later through murmurs of approval into a crescendo of approbation, directed towards the elevator shaft. People politely drew back, opening a path through which a startled and clearly very nervous young girl could be seen emerging from the elevator that lead from the surface above, down into Wulf's family's burrow. This was Mimir, Wulf's betrothed, and his fellow Journeyer.

Neither Wulf nor Mimir had elder siblings, so they had never witnessed a Journeyfeast before, and knew little of what was expected of them. So far, Mimir was of the opinion that the feast was more of an ordeal than the Journey itself could ever be, and to emerge from an elevator into a sea of expectant and unfamiliar faces had only confirmed this view. Only when she caught sight of Wulf, did her worried frown give way to a little, trembling smile.

Wulf, for his part, was relieved at last to have the company of a fellow victim. He took Mimir's smile to mean something along the lines of “Well, here we are then. What do we do now?”, and held out his hand to her. Any deeper meaning that might have lain in those upturned, dewy eyes was totally lost on him, since he was only a boy, and had not yet discovered what girls are for (oddly enough, girls have never been in any doubt about this question, and yet, even after a lifetime, many of them profess that they still don't quite know what boys are for). The actual reason for the Journey, really, was that it was a *rite de passage*, a time when boys became men, and girls blossomed into women (at least, it usually turned out that way round, much to everyone's relief). This was the *actual* reason for the Journey, of course; the generally *stated* reason, however, was a little more complex.

The first thing you have to understand, is that the Nornir do not live on a world like ours. Albia is one of a class of non-spherical planets; in fact it is coin-shaped. The gravitational consequence of this (and I won't bore you now with the maths — work it out for yourself, if you wish) is that all Albian life clings to the rim of the coin, rather as we would do if you took our world and cut it into thin slices. Life on Albia is therefore predominantly concerned with only two directions: east and west stretch right around the rim, while north and south merely refer to the short trip from face to face. Given only two directions of importance, it is inevitable that one will come to be considered good, and the other bad. Since the Albian sun appears to move eastwards around the planet, east won the toss, and became “Dextra”, the direction of light, while west became “Sinister” and the direction of darkness.

Smart creatures like the Nornir, soon had a whole mythology derived from observations such as these, and they came to think of themselves as the Albian incarnation of their sun. As the sun journeyed round from west to east, so time flowed in a circle: day followed day; new life followed old life, and the Nornir came to regard the concept of a circular journey to be an important element

in this progression from start to end and back again. In no time at all, historically speaking, the Nornir had come to think of a journey as a necessary part of growing up, and endless generations of norns embarked on an eastward circumnavigation. In fact, the practice became so ingrained into Nornir culture, that no-one ever dared to stop (save for the people of Niflheim, of whom more later), and they came to believe that if the Journey wasn't accomplished, then time itself would grind to a halt, or start to go backwards, or maybe even *sideways*! With this to drive them, the Journeys continued, even into latter days, when life on Albia is not so safe and cosy as it once was, and when a journey of that magnitude poses a very real risk that you will never make it home.

..... Albia, Norns and Journeying.....

... they leave & go to find Nabel...

Nabel was the local wizard. In actual fact, the Nornir were an old, established race, who had more or less got the hang of life by now, and so didn't really have much use for wizards. Thus, Nabel was the one norn in the village who couldn't claim to have something more important to be getting on with, when the call went out for a wise adult to accompany Wulf and Mimir on their Journey. Happily for them, Nabel was, in truth, very wise indeed.

Nabel's wisdom, and his penchant for wizardry, had come about largely because of a minor but irritating handicap that he'd been born with. People who are born left-handed, or slightly deaf, or with a lousy memory, are not seriously disadvantaged compared to those with no arms, or a debilitating disease. However, their little oddity often means that they don't quite fit into the solidly right-handed, clear-hearing, well-remembering world around them, and they have to find their own solutions to problems that other people don't even know exist. This can lead to a rather cock-eyed view of the world, and a different way of looking at things is frequently all that wisdom consists of — ask Albert Einstein. This, in a way, is how Nabel became wise. It is certainly why he chose the solitary life of a wizard. Nabel's little handicap was that his name was not really Nabel at all, but Annabel. This is no bad thing in itself — Annabel is a perfectly fine name, with a good precedent far back in Nornir history, but it was, well, a bit girlish really. What careers were open to a male norn called Annabel? “Annabel the Mighty Swordsman” didn't really ring true, nor did “Annabel the Fearless Chieftain”. Life, for a young Annabel, was a continuous exercise in finding ingenious ways to avoid being bullied. In the end, “Annabel the Pretty Despondent” asked his friends to shorten his name to “Nabel” (well, alright, he *paid* them to do it) and sloped off to live beyond the village, out of insulting range.

Besides wisdom, Nabel's great virtue was his age. He was old, now, and therefore wise. He was old, and therefore reliable. He was also old, and therefore expendable, and so it was that he became chosen to guide our youthful pair on their hazardous Journey.

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