

THE THREE MAGIC STONES

The Nimbus brothers

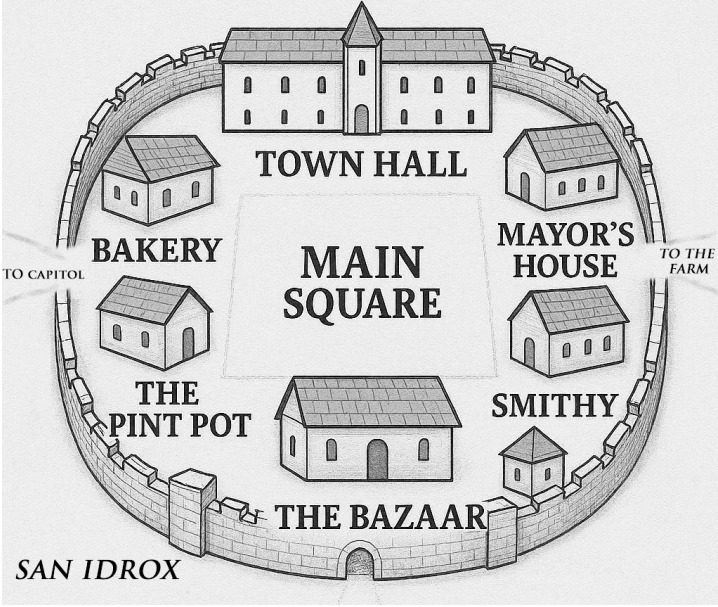
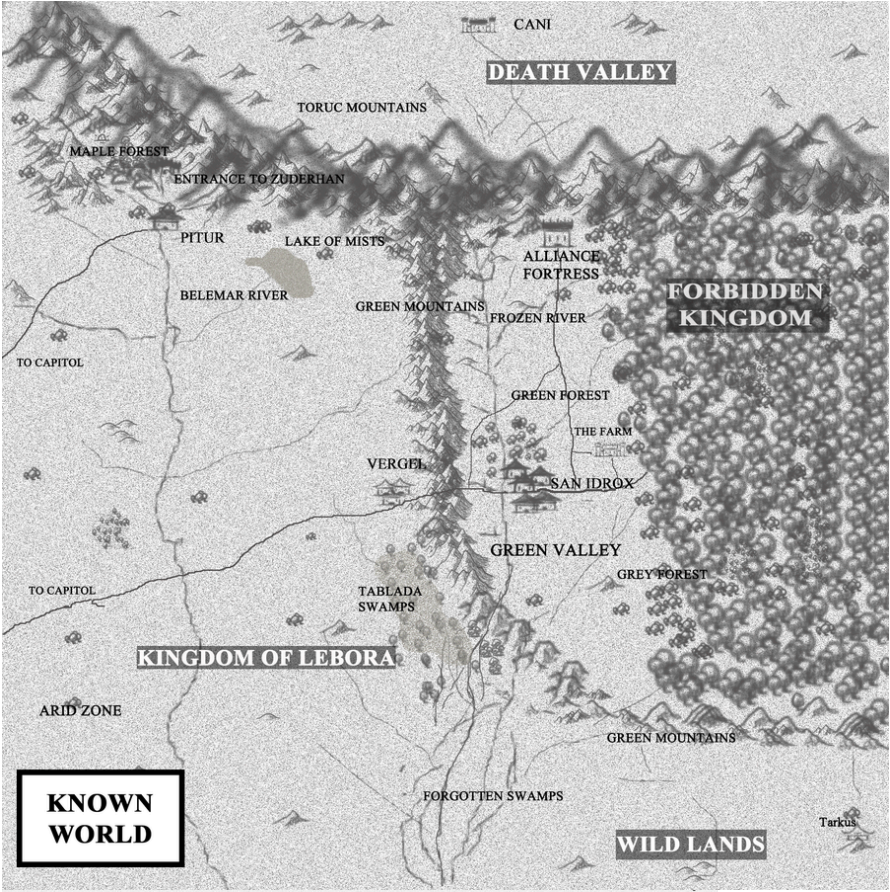


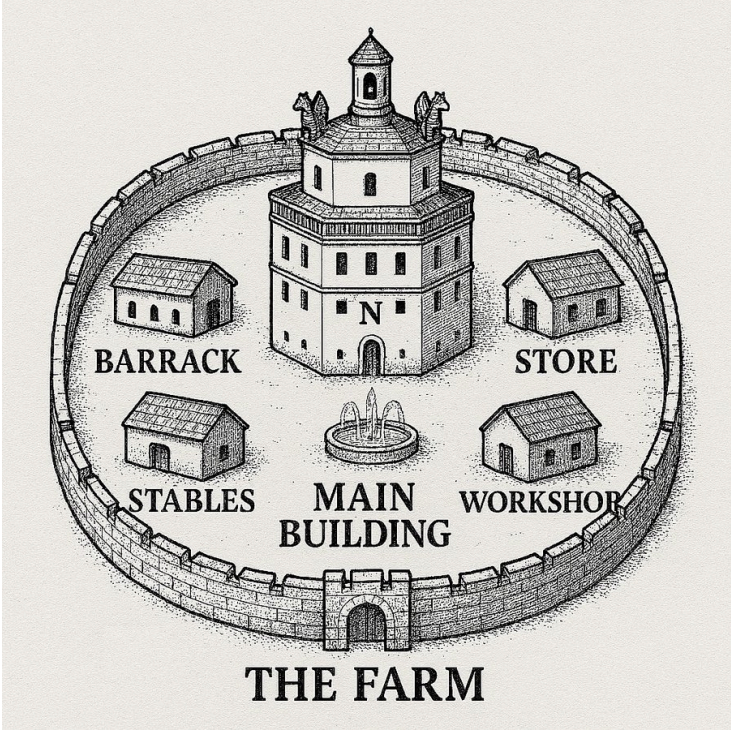
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Translation: James Peel

To my sisters, Celi and Charo, for instilling in me a love of reading
and for the work carried out in this book.





PART ONE: THE AWAKENING

1. Beyond Green Valley

It was a normal winter's morning. Dawn had broken and a light breeze was stirring, its warm air helping to melt the newly fallen snow on the path, when suddenly a thundering sound filled the valley, waking the inhabitants of the small town of San Idrox and every living being in the Green Forest. The dogs barked in fear, the horses pulled free of their tethers and bolted through the streets, the birds flew in large flocks in different directions, suddenly changing course with no clear reason or sense. The children cried at the tops of their voices while their shaken mothers tried to soothe them, and their fathers armed themselves against an unknown enemy. The terrible rumbling didn't seem to be coming from Green Valley itself, but from many leagues north in the distant Toruc Mountains.

Within five minutes the entire population of San Idrox had come together in the middle of the Main Square. The crowd drowned out what a sheriff, who had climbed up on a large marble fountain decorated with intricate, elaborate engravings, was shouting to the terrified masses. But among the hubbub, one voice was raised loud and clear.

“We have a big fight ahead of us.”

It was Lunk, a veteran soldier who had fought bravely at the Final Battle. Lunk was respected and admired by a large section of the town, while his forthright personality had also won him some critics. Men, women and children often gathered in the town's inn, The Pint Pot, to hear the weathered soldier tell tales of what was known as the Army of the Three Races.

It was said in the town that Lunk didn't have an important role in the battle, but he had experienced it close-up. When the fight started, the veteran had been assigned to one of the units at the rear. Although the allied forces were inferior in number, the intervention of these units was not needed because of how the battle played out. After the victory, the small number of remaining enemy troops dispersed, creating terror in the whole area. The units which hadn't participated in the initial clash were assigned to hunt or kill the monstrous enemies who had made up the hostile troops. Two months after the battle, the Canianos, as the monsters who had formed the enemy army were known, had been captured or eliminated. Only a small group managed to flee through a secret passageway in the Toruc Mountains and take refuge in Cani, the city where they were born. This secret passageway was finally discovered by the elf explorers. The allied

troops destroyed the fearsome city and its inhabitants. After that, with the help of the dwarves, they sealed the passageway for good, thus preventing the terrible man-dogs from returning. With permanent peace established, Lunk returned to his home town, having fought in several skirmishes and hand-to-hand combats with the fearsome monsters.

When they heard Lunk's words, the crowd fell into a tense silence.

"Who will we be fighting, you crazy old man?" asked the sheriff, still standing on the fountain.

"Cromo," said Lunk calmly, with his usual frown.

Some in the crowd shrank back from the old soldier as if the name he had uttered would bring its bearer into being before them. After a few seconds of astonishment, everyone there started giving their opinions all at once. Some said that it was impossible, dismissing what the veteran soldier said and calling him senile, while others took Lunk's words seriously and said with certainty that the fearsome wizard was the cause of everything.

After several desperate attempts and much pushing, the sheriff got down from the fountain and stood before the veteran soldier.

"That black wizard was defeated and killed in the Final Battle. You know that better than anyone because you were there," said the sheriff. "And his followers were killed or expelled forever too. That threat disappeared long ago for us."

In San Idrox there was no military force, but they did have about twenty men who were responsible for keeping order and security. These sheriffs of the town hall usually spent most of their days looking for lost livestock or identifying the owners of animals found grazing on other people's land. The town's children used to make fun of them, calling them shepherds.

"Yes, I was there," said Lunk. "But nobody ever found the wizard's body."

"Maybe his body was totally destroyed," the town's baker plucked up the courage to suggest.

"Yes, that's right," the sheriff agreed vehemently. "It was totally destroyed and the only Canianos who survived are on the other side of the Toruc Mountains, being watched by the king's troops."

He jumped back on the fountain, took a deep breath in, and addressed the crowd at full volume.

"By order of the mayor let it be known that the rumbling sound this morning is nothing to worry about, as it is due to thunder from a nearby

storm, the sound of which was enhanced by the echo from the mountains surrounding our valley. Another possible cause is that the blacksmith's forge has exploded again, but that is still to be checked."

"No forge of mine has exploded," said the blacksmith indignantly. "Besides, last time it was a manufacturing fault and nothing to do with me."

There was some muffled laughter behind the blacksmith's back among those present.

"Thunder? That's impossible," said the baker. "We all know the the rumble of a storm and that was nothing like it."

"I'm not going to question the wisdom of our mayor," said the sheriff. "Anyway, tomorrow at midday there will be a meeting at the town hall where the mayor will listen to everyone."

The sheriff got down from the fountain and headed for the town hall, ignoring the angry townsfolk who were bombarding him with hundreds of questions. Lunk considered the matter settled too, and headed for The Pint Pot to have his usual mug of ale, and to take advantage of the opportunity to tell his old stories now that everyone's interest in hearing his tales had been piqued.

Little by little, the Main Square started to clear. The inhabitants of San Idrox returned home to continue their daily chores, although each of them harboured a feeling of unease.

San Idrox was a small town in the north east of the kingdom of Lebor, whose capital city was Capitol, City of Kings. The town was situated in what was known as Green Valley, nestled between two mountain ranges, the high Toruc Mountains to the north and the Green Mountains to the south and west. San Idrox had a history dating back five hundred years. The town was now set on what used to be a meadow on the border of the Grey Forest, which was very different to how it was now. In those days, the three races which made up the Known World were continually at loggerheads. The dwarves, after several conflicts with elves and humans for control of the Toruc Mountains, had withdrawn to the depths of Zuderhan and were preparing a large army to send to the surface, although in truth it is not known whether this large army was to be sent to fight the elves or the humans, both being hated in equal measure. Perhaps that is why they never emerged from their caves.

Meanwhile, relations between elves and humans were even worse. The subject of the discord occurred in the Grey Forest, in whose depths lay the Forbidden Kingdom of the elves. The cause of the conflict was an old lord, a friend of the king of Leborá called Quetal. This lord was a big fan of deer hunting, and during one of his forays, ignoring the warnings of his guides and hunting companions, he followed an injured deer deep into the Grey Forest, where quite by chance he came across the kingdom of the elves, who immediately captured him.

After the capture of Quetal, realising the misfortune of the human who had unintentionally and unwittingly stumbled upon his kingdom, the king of the elves was faced with a dilemma: whether to comply with the law which was to kill any stranger found on the road to the Forbidden City or to release the foreigner and thus put his own people in danger. Elvish law is very strict, as it forbids foreigners from entering its kingdom without the permission of its monarch, or from merely having knowledge of the way there, both being crimes punishable by death.

Meanwhile, the king of Leborá was very worried about the disappearance of his friend, so he sent several explorers to look for him, but with no success. Finally, through a wandering elf, he discovered that Quetal was being held prisoner in the kingdom of the elves, so he sent an urgent message to the elf king:

“Release your prisoner immediately or I will come and release him myself”.

The weeks passed, and these gave way to months, without the elf king, Gif, making a decision: whether to release the human and violate elvish law, or to kill him and provoke a war against the humans. Over that time, a great friendship was established between the king and the foreigner. Sometimes they would go hunting together, and on other occasions they would visit the marvels of the elf kingdom. The elf was a wonderful guide and the human was amazed by that world, which was so different from his own. The elf kingdom was a wonder of harmony between nature and the solemn elvish architecture. The trees and climbing plants grew in complete harmony with the elvish constructions, sometimes blending the natural and the artificial.

In the end, pressed by his people and after much reflection, King Gif made a decision: Quetal was to die at sunrise.

Therefore, at sunrise the monarch summoned his good friend. When the human came before the king, he ordered his subjects to leave them. Noticing the king's solemn and melancholic tone, Quetal sensed that he had made a decision about his fate. When the king asked him to follow him, Quetal allowed himself to be led meekly through the palace's sumptuous corridors. Soon they were out of these and had reached the royal gardens. They went through a maze of hedges and bushes, and came to a large stone courtyard with a crystalline spring bubbling up in the middle.

"This is the Spring of Life," said Gif ceremoniously. "According to elvish tradition, every elf should drink from these waters once in their lifetime so their spirit can be purified."

At that moment, two tall elves, with white tunics and faces hidden by masks made of oak leaves, came towards the human. They removed his elegant clothes, shaved his head and led him to the bank of the spring. There they made him kneel down and they submerged his head in the cold water. The noble human meekly allowed them to do all of this, resigned to his fate. It was impossible to oppose the will of King Gif; he would never escape from the kingdom and to try would only serve to insult and disrespect his friend.

"Get up, my friend," said King Gif, placing his hand on the human's wet head. "Quetal is dead. Your name is Quenzal, from now on you are an elf and you will remain in the depths of the Grey Forest until you die."

That is how Quetal died in the Forbidden Kingdom and Quenzal the elf was born. The elf king had followed the law, and at the same time kept a good friend beside him. After this, Gif ordered the human's clothes to be carefully wrapped and sent to the human king with a message:

"Quetal broke elvish law, may his human soul rest in peace."

King Leborá was furious when he read the message, and he sent for his army to assemble immediately. The human army, led by Jig Nimbus, left Capitol in a hurry with the order to invade and destroy the elf kingdom. When the troops reached the borders of the Grey Forest, their commander, a decorated and experienced officer, gave the order to set up camp, disobeying the orders he had been given. Jig was a prudent and fair man, who believed it was reckless to enter that unknown territory to avenge the death of a nobleman who had sought his own fate. His army could easily be

destroyed in that forest while they were looking for the Forbidden Kingdom, and his brave men would die futilely. So the human troops camped on the banks of a small stream, which was known as the Frozen River because its waters came from the snowmelt from the Toruc Mountains and their temperature was ice-cold, until the explorers had reconnoitered the area and located the elf kingdom.

During the time that their commander endeavoured to find the Forbidden Kingdom of the elves, his camp grew little by little as his task continued to be fruitless. A large brick building with numerous chimneys was created, where forges made arms and supplies for the army. The whole border of the Grey Forest was felled and cleared. Hundreds of bushels of grain were used for crops, because the army's provisions were running low due to the long wait for news regarding the location of their enemy. Numerous stores were also created for provisions and mills had to be made to grind the grain. All of this activity attracted a large number of merchants and travellers. They even built a tavern, The Pint Pot, where the soldiers and other various people quenched their thirst. Soon the camp started to turn into a small town which they called San Idrox.

Commander Nimbus, after three years on the border of the Grey Forest, had failed in his search for the Forbidden Kingdom. He had sent dozens of explorers to comb every corner of the forest, but none had found the slightest hint of the route which led to the kingdom of the elves. The king of Leborá, enraged by his commander's performance, sent him an ultimatum:

“Go into that damned forest with all your troops and tear it all down. Otherwise, it will be your head which falls”.

Jig knew that an incursion with all his troops would mean the end of his men. Because the elves had shown that, in their forest, they could attack them without the men even seeing them. Given the circumstances, commander Nimbus decided to change his strategy and he tried to arrange a meeting with the elf king. He gave each of his explorers a message for King Gif, which they should leave in clearly visible places inside the forest. Jig didn't know if this message would reach its intended recipient, and, if it did, whether the king and the elves would come to a meeting with him.

The day after these messages were sent, when he woke up in his tent, there was a thin scroll with his clothes. Surprised, he picked it up and

unrolled it. In fine letters, it read:

“We will meet in the Marmot Clearing, next to the large dried up tree. Come alone and unarmed.

Signed: Gif, king of the elves.”

Nimbus was very surprised that the elf should agree to meet him, and by the ease with which the message had been returned. They could have killed him if they had wanted to, because the messenger had slipped past the guard and got inside his tent while he was sleeping. He dressed in a hurry and, without informing his officers, sneaked out of the camp. The Marmot Clearing was a place not far from the settlement where Nimbus liked to go. He used to go there when he wanted to be alone and take refuge from the usual hustle and bustle of the camp. The fact that they had arranged to meet there meant that the elves were monitoring his every move, because not even his own men knew that place.

Jig didn't worry that it might be a trap for him, because his enemies had clearly already had multiple opportunities to capture him or kill him without his noticing the danger he was in. When he got to the clearing, he looked around him and saw a figure wrapped in a beautiful cloak waiting for him next to the large dried up tree. Jig couldn't believe that after so long looking for him, the elf king himself was standing there. For a moment he thought about taking out the knife he had hidden in his boot and satisfying his king's vengeful desires. But Jig was a man of honour and he would never commit such a treacherous act. Besides, before he could even touch his weapon, an arrow would most probably pierce his heart. The place would almost certainly be teeming with elvish bowmen watching everything he did.

“You've been looking for me to claim vengeance for three years,” said the king when Nimbus approached him. “What is it that you want from me now?”

“I want to put an end to this pointless feud,” the commander said with humility. “Even though my king has ordered me to attack your kingdom and kill every elf in it, it is not my wish that there should be a massacre and valuable lives on both sides be lost.”

“You are an honourable man, so I will listen to you,” the elf king answered. “What is your plan?”

“I just ask one thing, your majesty. Give me the body of Lord Quetal so it can be buried in his land.”

Gif fell silent for a few moments and looked thoughtful.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t give you Lord Quetal’s body.”

“In that case I’m afraid there’s nothing left to talk about,” Nimbus said bitterly.

Commander Nimbus turned round and was ready to walk away when the king ordered him:

“Wait - don’t be hasty.”

Jig wasn’t used to following orders, even those from his king. But something in the elf’s voice made him stop.

“I have something to show you,” Gif went on, with an enigmatic expression.

A hooded figure came out of the shadows. It walked heavily towards them. When it was a couple of paces away from commander Nimbus, it removed the hood and said in a deep voice:

“I am Quenzal the elf. No human is worth thousands of people dying for because of the stupidity of one man.”

Jig Nimbus was astonished when he saw the man’s face. He quickly understood what had happened. He returned to his camp with great satisfaction and ordered an urgent message be sent to Lebor. It read:

“Don’t worry about Lord Quetal; the crazy old man is still hunting.”

When these events became known, the army was disbanded and many of the soldiers decided to settle there. Commander Nimbus, after three long years, didn’t want to leave those lands, which had bewitched and enchanted him, so he stayed in the young town of San Idrox. Jig, as a senior officer, was rewarded with farming land and with the disbanded army’s large store. Soon, due to his great skills in business, he became one of the main traders in the region. Over time, dealings with the elves intensified, and San Idrox became the principal link between the two peoples and gained a reputation as a great trading centre.

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