

Jethro

P.W.F. Alons

PALCON
Maarn

Jethro

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First edition December, 2019

Cover design and layout

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Printed by

Brave New Books, Amsterdam

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NORTH
PAINESFORD
FALLS

GREAT
RIVER

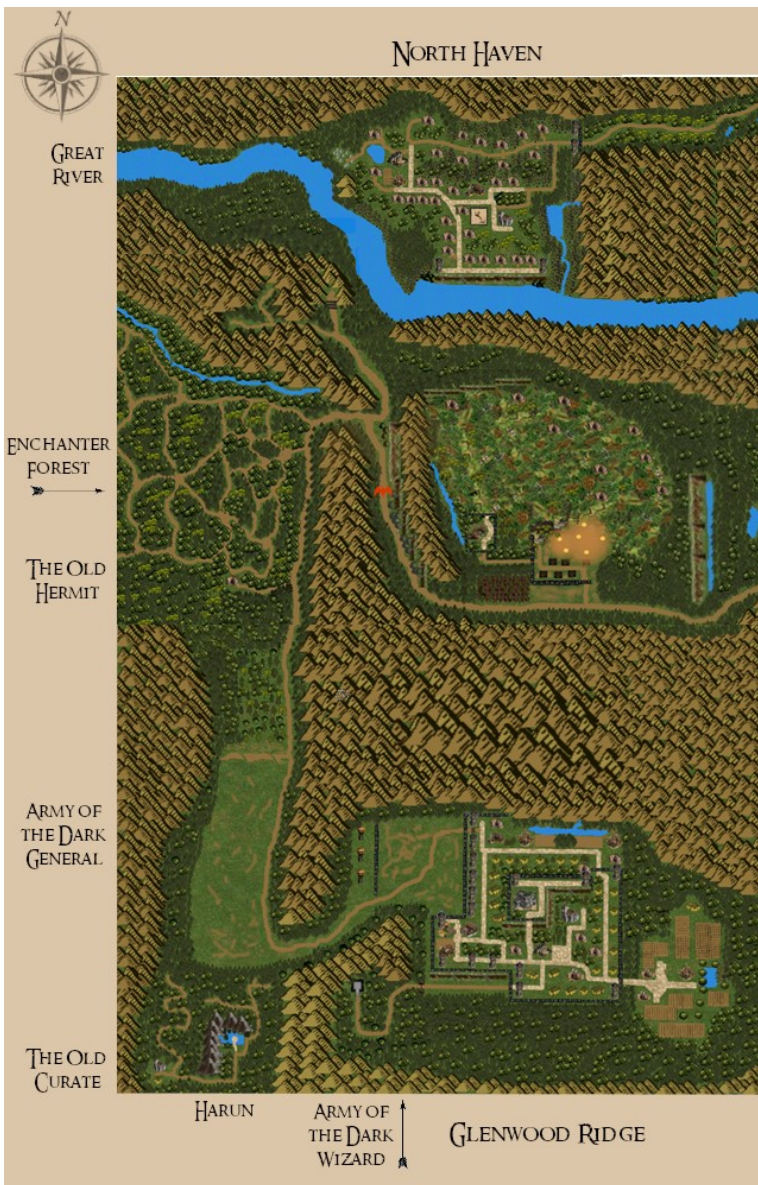
THE ENCHANTED FOREST
THE FRIENDLY
SAGE

CHARMWOOD FOREST
GREAT
FALLS

EASTERN PARK







Prologue

He walked down the slope slowly under a white flag, as he was asked to come and negotiate about the terms of surrender. At his left and right side a few of his loyal paladins were walking. A cold wind blew across the valley. At least it felt that way, even though it was summer. He wondered what kind of terms he was going to hear. The prospects were not good given the enemy's reputation, which had preceded him. He wondered if all precautions that were taken inside the city would be adequate to withstand a siege long enough. 'Long enough for what?' he thought. For what he could only hope it would arrive in time.

At the other end of the valley the commander of the enemy was waiting for him. He muttered a disparaging remark about the person approaching him to his aides, who were standing by his side and grinned in anticipation of what was going to happen. The dark commander looked once more in the direction of the men that were approaching, and he smiled sardonically.



PART 1

THE LETTER

"Dear Jethro,

I wish I had good news to send you, but unfortunately it looks like things are changing for the worse. We are threatened by a fierce shadow from the south. We do not know the precise nature of this evil shadow nor its strength. But we do know that other cities have already fallen under its attacks. When you receive this letter, our capital may already be under siege or even worse. I urgently ask you to muster up whatever forces you can find, and hurry to come to our aid. All I can hope for is that you will at least be in time to stop this shadow, and prevent it to spread beyond our region and all the way up to your beautiful home town.

Sincerely yours,

King Cydon"

Chapter 1

The Mission

It was after dark in North Painesford Falls and rain was pouring steadily from the sky. For a while the steady tapping of the rain was the only sound that could be heard in the quiet corner of the town near the mountains where Jethro's house was. Then the mud-muffled drum of hoofbeats announced the coming of a horse rider from the mountains trying to find his way into town. He slowed his pace when reaching Jethro's house.

'Ah, here it is,' he mumbled to himself. 'I better keep quiet and let them folks sleep well. Let's drop the letter and hope it leads to something good. Wish that bloody rain will stop soon.'

The rider gently put a letter in Jethro's mailbox, turned his horse and drove slowly out of town again. He broke into a full trot when reaching the mountains, and soon enough the soft pounding of the hoofbeats faded in the night leaving the tapping of the rain once again the only sound to be heard. Later that night the rain stopped and the crow of a rooster announced the start of a new day.

When Jethro woke up that morning, his eyes immediately fell on the letter lying on his doormat. He wasn't used to getting letters, so he picked it up and read it with great interest. But the startling content of the letter left him totally flabbergasted.

'What on earth? ... What is this all about?' he thought. 'And why is it sent to me? I better go and see Mayor Joseph about this!'

Without bothering about breakfast he got dressed as quickly as he could and left the house.

Jethro lived on his own in North Painesford Falls, a secure and friendly village on the outskirts of King Cydon's Realm, well protected by mountains and stone walls. He was a young swordsman who was raised by Mayor Joseph and his wife, and on the early summer day the letter reached him he was quite a few days past his twenty-first birthday. He usually got around practicing with his good friends, having a beer every now and then, and there were quite a few young women who were looking at him with enthusiasm. But apart from that, he started to feel some urge for something to happen that could make life more interesting.

It surely happened more than once that he left his house without breakfast, and Alyssa, a young woman who lived next door, always seemed to notice when that happened. The same this morning, and she quickly stepped outside.

'Good morning, Jethro,' she said. 'It looks like it's going to be a beautiful day. Don't you need something to eat?'

'No! No! Thanks a lot, Alyssa, but not this time!' Jethro hastened to say. 'I really have to go and see Mayor Joseph about some urgent matter. See you later.'

Jethro turned towards the castle where Mayor Joseph resided, and set out at a brisk pace. The guard at the south bridge towards the castle greeted Jethro friendly.

'Hi, Jethro! Going to see the mayor? Ah, I see you are carrying a letter. I hope it is good news. Good luck!'

Mayor Joseph, who saw from far the worried mood Jethro was in, met him at the castle's gate.

'Good morning, Jethro. What brings you here? You look worried. Anything wrong?'

'Good morning, Mayor. I got this strange letter this morning and I wonder what you make of it.'

When Mayor Joseph read the letter, the look in his eyes became serious.

'No wonder you are startled, Jethro. This is a frightening

message with a frightful call for help.'

Jethro nodded. 'But why is it sent to me? I'm just a decent swordsman and have always taken my military training seriously, but I am surely not some great hero or what.'

Mayor Joseph started to laugh. 'Ha, ha, he took his training seriously. Quite so, you are our champion. Well Jethro, apparently the rumours about your military skills are more widespread than you know.'

Then his tone became serious again. 'It may be a coincidence, but I just received a report that some bandits have been seen in our region. If that has anything to do with the content of this letter I do not know. Be that as it may, if you answer to this call, you are in for a long and perilous mission, Jethro. And to be honest, I wouldn't know anyone better than you to do it. You have been chosen, and that must have a good reason. Keep that in mind, when things get rough. It may encourage you. You know what, just go around town and see if you can indeed muster up some help to undertake this mission. See your friends, go to the blacksmith. And if you feel you are ready, just go and see to where it all leads you. I will support you with whatever I can.'

Chapter 2

True friends

Jethro left the castle pensively through the east gate towards the town centre. The always somewhat dour guard at the end of the east bridge was slightly taken by surprise when he heard Jethro's footsteps behind him. He quickly turned around and snapped: 'Who goes there?' But when he saw Jethro, he continued more friendly: 'Oh, it's you. Have a nice day.'

Some of his passing fellow-villagers greeted Jethro in a friendly manner, saying 'Hi Jethro, how are you doing?' or 'Hey Jethro! What a beautiful day!' Jethro nodded back kindly in reaction, but hardly noticed what they said. He turned right and walked past the fenced-off pasture where the local shepherd kept his sheep. At the end of the lane he turned left towards the house of the shepherd. The young woman that lived on the corner of the lane and had her eye on Jethro seized the opportunity to call out to him when he passed: 'Marry me, Jethro!' But Jethro shook his head with a smile.

The shepherd stood in front of his house apparently undecided about what to do. He noticed the severe look on Jethro's face and said: 'Hey Jethro, you look worried. What's eating you?'

'Oh, well...,' Jethro responded. 'It looks like I have to leave town for quite a while.'

'Oh my, nothing dangerous I hope!' The shepherd hesitated a moment waiting for a reaction from Jethro, and then continued: 'Well, I want to take my sheep out, but my dog Phylax has wandered off again. He often does that, but this time he hasn't returned yet.'

Jethro was immediately brought down to earth. 'Hey, I'm

sorry for you. Is there anything I can do?' he asked.

'Well, if you manage to find him and bring him back, I'll ask my brother the blacksmith to arrange a useful reward for you on your long journey.'

'I'll see what I can do' said Jethro and continued down the road towards the church. His mind drifted off again. The priest, who noticed his state of mind, tried to cheer him up. 'God bless you, my son! And remember; never forget to listen to your heart!'

'Thank you, Reverend,' said Jethro. 'And I'll keep that in mind,' he thought to himself.

Jethro decided to walk around a little longer before he would see his friends for their usual morning training. He turned to the east wall of the town and walked past the guard towers there. At the end he turned left and continued along the quiet north wall where the road had houses on both sides. His thoughts went out to his three friends. How would they take it when he told them about the letter he received? They were his best friends. With Harald he had a special bond. As kids they had played a lot together, and both had entered the Latin school on the same day. Jethro had always felt a bit like an orphan, even though Mayor Joseph and his wife had been very caring and good foster parents to him. When he was very young, he had once asked them about his real parents, but they had said that it was very difficult for them to talk about it. They had promised him that they would tell him all about his parents later, when the time was right and he was old enough to understand. Ever since, he had believed they had died under very tragic circumstances, and had never asked again.

Harald had lost both his parents when he was seven years old. His father was a local forester, who had been tragically killed by lightning while working in the forest. It had been

a very hot summer day and an unexpected, treacherous thunderstorm had completely surprised him. Later that year, his mother was struck by a disease that no one knew how to cure, and she had died only six months later. Harald and his sister Gwendolen were fostered by the miller and his wife, who had been very good to them. Ever since, Harald and Jethro had been close friends, who did lots of things together and always stimulated each other in fair competition.

John and Fredric were twin brothers and the only two children of a rather wealthy merchant, who was traveling a lot. John, the eldest, had had already since childhood a great interest in the use of military siege equipment. Fredric had shown a great liking for tracking and science. Just like Jethro and Harald, both had gone to the Latin school, where they were taught by the local priest and occasionally by a traveling monk. There they had decided to take the same military training, and so all four of them had become excellent swordsmen and true friends.

Just before the north gate of the town Jethro turned left into a narrow alley between two houses that led to the market-place. There it was the usual morning hustle and bustle of the trade that was so important for his prosperous home town. For a while he listened to the cries of the local vendors.

'I've got apples, pears, coffee, olives, olive oil, sheep and goat milk, sheep and goat cheeses, fresh mushrooms, eggs, artisan loaves, sprouts, microgreens. You name it; I sell it to you for a fair price.'

'Hammers, nails, pliers, turn screws, wheels, spare parts, accessories. Anything you need for a good price or trade.'

Jethro moved on to the corner of the square where the lumberyard and blacksmith were. The lumberman walked out of the yard towards him and said: 'If you need

something to build, Jethro; you know I have the best planks, shelves, and beams in town. Just take a look and see for yourself.'

'I'm afraid I won't need anything for quite some time, Joe,' Jethro answered. 'But you'll be the first I will go to as soon as need be.'

The lumberman smiled appreciatively and walked back into the yard. Jethro turned to the blacksmith and went inside. He found the blacksmith hanging up ready-to-use horse-shoeing.

'Good morning, Jethro,' said the blacksmith. 'How are you today?'

Jethro smiled. 'Same to you, blacksmith, and I'm fine,' he answered. 'My friends and I need to have our swords and other weaponry checked out. Do you have time for that? Mayor Joseph will pay for it.'

The blacksmith thought for a moment and said: 'I can still do it today, if needed.'

'No, tomorrow will be fine,' Jethro answered. 'And thanks ahead. See you tomorrow.' The blacksmith nodded shortly and turned back to his work.

'Now it's time to see my friends,' Jethro thought. 'I kept them waiting for me too long already.' He left the marketplace and soon enough its noises faded behind him. And while he turned past the north gate towards the street where the stable and barracks were, he felt as if those noises were fading inside his very mind as well; as if he had already said goodbye to North Painesford Falls forever.

When Jethro approached the barracks, he found his friends waiting for him.

'Hey Jethro, what's up today? What kept you so long? Did something happen?' they cried.

Jethro sighed. 'Hi, guys! I'm afraid I have to leave town for a long and perilous mission.'

Harald didn't hesitate for a second. 'Seriously! You don't expect us to let you go alone, do you?'

John and Fredric joined him. 'No, if we can be of any use to you, we will definitely go with you,' they said in unison.

Although he had not expected otherwise, Jethro heaved a sigh of relief. 'Okay, that's settled then. Let's go for a walk outside town and into the fields. There I will tell you all there is to know about it.'

Chapter 3

A broken cart and a lost dog

While they were walking outside the gate towards the fields north of town, richly covered with wheat and maize, Jethro had read the letter to his friends. He told them what Mayor Joseph had said about it and that afterwards he had been walking around town wondering what was best to do. After that, they had all been silent for quite a while, caught up in their own thoughts. But in fact their thoughts went all roughly in the same direction. How could they find more trained men to follow them on their quest?

When they walked through the fields, they could hear a farm hand grumble: 'Work! Work! Work!' Another one seemed to agree: 'Yeah! Work! Work! Work!'

A lumberman working at the edge of the surrounding woods apparently overheard them and sneered back 'Hah... it's chopping trees all day that is real work!'

A little further a young female farm hand showed a more positive mood. She waved to the men, and called: 'Want to help me, guys? Do you have some time for that?'

'Another time, Wendy!' Harald called back to his sister.

When they passed the mill, the miller greeted them with a smile and said: 'I suppose you didn't come looking for a job here, do you?'

They greeted him kindly and shook their heads.

A long way further, they approached the largest logging camp in the vicinity of the town. The owner, who saw them coming, invited them in.

'You look tired, fellows. Care for a cup of tea and something to eat?' The men accepted gratefully and sat down at a small camp fire. While the owner made tea and prepared some sandwiches, the men were considering their options.

'The letter asks you urgently to muster up whatever forces you can find,' said Harald. 'Well, we don't have a facility to train archers, and though we have a stable and some horses, we have neither the skills nor the equipment to create useful horsemen, like knights or paladins.'

'Even training citizens to become good swordsmen would take us much too long considering the urgency expressed in the letter,' added John.

Jethro agreed with a sigh. 'I guess we have no other option than to recruit them on our journey,' he said.

When they discussed their options a little further with the camp owner, he agreed with them.

'Listen,' he said, 'I can give you some gold, if you help me get my lumber into town, but I'm afraid that is all I can do for you.'

'Thank you for your offer and the food, sir,' said Jethro, 'but we would rather investigate the surroundings a little further now.' They shook hands with the lumberman and turned back towards the town following the road north of town eastwards.

The road north of town was abundantly used by trade carts carrying food and other supplies in and out of town, but now it was quiet. And so they were taken a bit by surprise, when just after a bend in the road they saw a trade cart that had lost a wheel and as a consequence half of its cargo. The rider, who they knew as Carl, sat aside with a disgruntled face.

'Typically me,' he said, before they could ask anything; 'to get a broken wheel and lose half my cargo, when I'm almost home.' Then his face brightened up.

'Hey, the wheel is still intact and I got all the means to fix it. Just can't do it on my own. Could you please help me?' Jethro smiled. 'Oh well, I guess we can spare the time. Okay guys, let's do it.'

They took some more cargo of the slanting cart and lifted the cart for Carl to put the wheel back in place. When the wheel was neatly tight in place again, they helped Carl to load up the cart again. Carl was utterly relieved. 'Thanks a lot, guys! Is there anything I can do for you?'

Jethro told Carl about their oncoming journey sparing the details that might make him worried. 'In that case,' Carl continued, 'here are some spare medical supplies I have. I always carry enough of them with me, because you never know what happens on long trade routes. They may come in handy on your long journey as well. And if you ever need a ride, just ask me. I better go now and deliver my supplies before it gets too late.' He waved his hand and drove off towards town.

Further down the road the men passed a market hall that was merely put there for merchants to bring their carts with supplies in a safe place when caught by nightfall, sudden thunderstorms or other bad weather. It was a place where one could safely store things to pick it up later. Just south of it was a sign that read:

West: Eastern Park
East: Charmwood Forest

'It's getting a little late,' Jethro said, 'but we have still time to pay a visit to Eastern Park. Not that I expect to find much of value there, but there is a ruin of an old temple there, and you never know.'

Eastern Park was a long stretch of green trees and grass located on a slightly elevated plateau between a mountain range on the east side and the town's east wall on the west side. It was separated from the east wall by a moat that prevented people from climbing the wall from the park side. On the south end of the park were the ruins of an old

temple and from there a steep cliff rose up to an even higher plateau and mountains to the south. As a consequence, the entrance on the north side was the only entrance to the park for pedestrians.

The park was well maintained with a pond in the centre and a long oval path stretching from north to south. Near the pond was a statue of the founder of the town, Lord Painesford, who had discovered the great falls northeast of town and then had decided to build the castle that now since long served as the residence of the town's mayor.

When they entered the park, Jethro and his friends found much to their surprise the path to the left blocked by a wild boar. 'How on earth did that one get into the park,' John wondered. They decided to leave the boar alone and took the path to the right along the moat and east wall. When they were well past the pond and statue, they heard the faint sound of a dog barking somewhere in the distance.

'I wonder,' said Jethro, and he hurried toward the ruins ahead. In a fairly deep and long but narrow crevice in the remains of the temple a black and white dog was clearly trapped and barking anxiously to get out again.

'Hey doggie, you must be Phylax,' Jethro spoke in a soothing voice. 'Come, I'll bring you back to your boss'. The dog started to wag its tail and answered with a much happier yelp.

'It's Jeffrey's dog,' Jethro said to the others. 'He told me Phylax had not returned.'

'Maybe he was surprised and chased in there by that boar,' suggested Fredric. 'If John and I get in, we can lift him out, and then Harald and you can pull us out again.'

John and Fredric lowered themselves down into the crevice and lifted the dog up. When Jethro and Harald had helped them back up again, Jethro said visibly pleased: 'Well then, I guess we have done enough for one day. Let's go back into town and enjoy a decent meal and a good night sleep.'

I'll bring back Jeffrey's dog and inform Mayor Joseph about our findings so far. Let's meet again at the barracks tomorrow morning. Oh, and before I forget: bring all your weaponry to the blacksmith for a complete maintenance inspection and repair. Mayor Joseph will pay for that.'

Chapter 4

The Highlanders Town

The small town of the Highlanders was a friendly town inhabited by hard working people. Tucked away on a plateau in the mountains southeast of the Great River, it was the highest town in King Cydon's realm. Because of its location it was a bit hard to reach for traders. Therefore, the inhabitants of the town relied mainly on each other for the production of food and local craftwork. They were renowned for their export of certain traditionally produced goods like cheese and both traditional and innovative products from genuine craftwork like beautiful clocks and other curiosities. When the weather was good, the town was always buzzing with the shouts of local farm hands, craftsmen, and people seeking a moment of relaxation mixed with the sounds of animals on the local market and birds on the roof edges and in the many trees found in the town.

In spite of the relatively safe location of the town, its habitants were not negligent in the maintenance of their defensive structures and military training. The central part of the town on the highest part of the plateau, where a castle was built, was well protected by both natural cliffs and man-built walls with three gates guarded by eight watchtowers in total. The lower parts of the town around the centre were well protected by cliffs and mountains to the south and dense forests to the east and north where the river was. A strong gate guarded by two watchtowers separated the town on the south side from a beautiful valley enclosed by high mountains. A sufficiently large group of men often went down in the morning into the fields sloping down from behind the church on the northeast side of town towards the river to refine their skills in archery,

sword-fighting, and other weapons. And on days like that they would return only late in the afternoon, tired of all their exertion.

And so it was also, four days before the day that Jethro received his letter. It was a beautiful day and all men-at-arms were training in the fields near the river north. On the castle square the friendly conversations between the older men were mingled with the sounds of the forge and sledgehammer of the blacksmith, and in the lower parts the sounds of the craftsmen and farm hands at work were mixed with the singing of the birds in the trees. And in this peaceful setting the town was in no way prepared for the fierce shadow that was moving in towards the west gate of the town at noon.

No one in town even understood the danger they were in, when heavy battering rams busted the gate on the west side of the town centre. A flood of dark-dressed and masked warriors streamed into the town centre and they had not come to take prisoners. They immediately started to slay everyone in their sight; men, women, and children alike. The wave of evil warriors spread out over the lower parts of the town slicing, maiming, and impaling Highlanders wherever they found them. And as if this was not terrible enough by itself, they were accompanied by something even more frightening: a huge, chained and visibly tortured creature that was sending streams of fire in all directions setting people and buildings ablaze with intensely burning flames. Within fifteen minutes the friendly atmosphere of the town had changed into a horrific scene with bloodstained colours and dark smears of black smoke and dust everywhere. Only a few farm hands and their wives were able to escape the slaughter by fleeing into the valley south of town.

When their evil destruction was done to their satisfaction, the dark-dressed warriors and their horrible-looking

creature disappeared again in the direction they had come from. Apart from the sound of the burning fires the only other sound still to be heard was that of the birds in the distant trees. But in the town there was no one left alive to hear it.

Later that afternoon the men-at-arms returned from their training, and they were alarmed by the heavy clouds of smoke drifting over their town. When they walked past the church the extent of the havoc that was wreaked on their town exceeded their worst fears. The sight of the dead men, women and children, maimed, burned or impaled, the burning fires and the destruction of their homes filled their eyes with tears and their minds with despair. Some of them fell to the ground weeping and wailing, while others tore their clothes. All of them were filled with feelings of sorrow and grief. Feelings that after a while gradually changed into anger, hatred, and a fierce lust for revenge.