

## PROLOGUE: REMEMBERING OLD BOB

Well, over four months have passed since I became *the* Intermediary Person (not just the Intermediary Person to the Intermediary Person) for the retelling of Bernie Smith's adventures on the weird and deadly world of Persus. Yep, I'm sad to report that the original Intermediary Person, Old Bob, finally met his spirit guide. (He'd always believed it would be a large white rabbit, and who was I to contradict him?) So here I am, performing the task that the crusty old fellow had done so well. But first, some catching up.

For the first three months after Bernie's last "transmission" or whatever the heck you want to call it, Old Bob's heretofore blazing laptop remained silent, even though he hardly ever skipped a night sitting outside his rustic cabin in the California mountain town of Idyllwild and gazing up at the stars. I drove up from Orange County most every weekend to check in with him, and I called him a whole bunch of times, while my buddy, Eli Greene, editor of the Idyllwild *Screamer*, filled in the gaps.

It happened on this one particular Wednesday. Eli looked in on Old Bob and found him sitting in his ancient La-Z-Boy chair, head tilted toward the ceiling, mouth agape. He had followed the white rabbit to the World Beyond.

A large chunk of Idyllwild's populace turned out for their favorite storyteller's funeral a couple of days later. No family; the old guy didn't have as much as a distant niece or nephew. But to my surprise he *did* have a lawyer: Henry Q. Fulcrum, Esq., who appeared even older than Old Bob, if that were possible. He had come up the mountain from Hemet, and he seemed real eager for us to talk, which we did as soon as the interment finished up.

"A couple of months ago Bob revised his will," Fulcrum began. "He must've thought the world of you, young man, because he left you the majority of his estate."

Wow, shocker. But aside from his ancient cabin and its equally antiquated contents, what kind of "estate" could Old Bob have?

I posed that question to Henry Q. Fulcrum, who assured me that I had gotten it right about the cabin. Then, he looked around furtively at the lingering crowd before leaning over (he almost toppled) and whispering a number in my ear.

Now it was *me* who almost toppled. Why? *Because I had just become freaking rich!*

Okay, seriously well off at the very least. "How did he...?" I stammered. "I mean—"

"We can discuss that later," the lawyer interrupted. "There are, of course, stipulations."

Oh, of course. Stipulations. "You mean there are strings attached, right?" My balloon started to deflate.

He pulled out an envelope from an inside jacket pocket. "This note is for you. He had me read it a few times. Makes no sense to me, but he said you'd understand."

He left me alone with the note, which got right to the point. And definitely in the words of Old Bob:

*Hey boy, if you're reading this, then I sorta passed on so's I can visit with the big guy in the sky—or the pointy-tailed sumbitch below,*

*who knows? Yeah, you can have all that dough, which I sorta saved up during so many dang years, but ya gotta do something for me. I think you sorta know what it is anyways. You gotta take down Bernie Smith's story, whenever he starts tellin' it again. I sorta know he will. Wish I could find out if he and that pretty gal of his got to that godawful place, and if they found her daddy and such. But I'll sorta rest better knowin' you're on the job. Use that newfangled typewriter...uh, laptop of mine, which seems to be connected to Bernie or something. It's sorta yours now anyways. Oh, and maybe when you've got the whole story you can stop by the cemetery and read it to me. You can do that, boy...right?*

Yeah, I told myself, I can do that...though I wasn't quite sure about the last part. Besides, I *really* did want to know what happened to Bernie after he and Thanna Dora left Byabeer, and while a small part of me thought that the answer might never come, this new turn of events raised my optimism level.

I said goodbye to Henry Q. Fulcrum, Esq., after inviting him to check in on me anytime he wanted. (In the middle of the night, when I'm sitting in the woods with a blazing laptop? I doubt he'd show up. What do you think?) In short order I happily quit my worker-bee day job, became self-employed, rented out my condo in Orange County and moved back up to Idyllwild (my parents loved that), taking up residence in Old Bob's cabin (with some extensive remodeling on the agenda). Three nights after the storyteller's funeral I sat at the base of the same boulder where I first saw him months ago, inputting at robotic speed the last of Bernie's narrative, my fingers poised above the keyboard.

One month later, sitting in the exact same position, I began to feel really stupid.

One month and one night later some unseen force took control of my fingers, and the continuing story of Bernard Ungerplatz Smith, late of Tasselville, Iowa, and Thanna

Dora, the incomparable Nodorro hill woman of Persus, poured into Old Bob's laptop, which was now definitely blazing.

No shit.

## CHAPTER ONE: THE NOT-SO-BORING ROAD BACK

**B**ernie Smith here, alive and kicking. Well, alive anyway. I pretty much feel like an idiot for “beaming” these thoughts into the ether, thinking that somewhere on Earth someone is actually getting the message. But what the heck, chronicling my life on Persus keeps me grounded, so what do I have to lose?

I mentioned last time that Thanna Dora, Grajj Dor and I departed Byabeer to thunderous applause and raised voices from thousands of happy, freedom-loving Wannamakers. And if that didn’t impress my erstwhile roommate and buddy (it did), we were accompanied by Dunn Kow and Hayya Kowa. The king and queen rode proudly in front of their most loyal soldiers—the guys Dunn Kow and I freed from their interminable captivity in that Cell of the Rebels Without a Clue.

The day before, shortly after the wedding ceremony, Dunn Kow had offered his sword arm, and those of his troops, to journey with us into Harmel and look for Thanna Dora’s dad. “As I told you before, Bernie Dor,” he said, “there is no limit to the debt we owe you.”

I graciously refused, re-emphasizing that he and Hayya Kowa had a kingdom to rebuild. Besides, a large force would be way more noticeable. Afterward Donil Duk told me that earlier, when the king proposed this mission to his troops, two of them threw up and a third pissed his pants. Harmel had that effect on people, you know? Still, they all would’ve come.

Anyway, our royal escort rode with us for a couple of miles, where we stopped just past a collection of small cottages. We voiced our farewells and swore that, if we survived our insane journey, we would return to Byabeer to stay. (Although I wasn’t sure if Bernie *Kow* or Bernie *Duk* had the right ring to it.)

Joyous Wannamakers continued to choke the Byabeer road, offering us food, drink, and anything else we needed from their still meager larders. Quite a few women had something else in mind for Grajj Dor and me, which probably would’ve pissed off Thanna Dora, had it not been for all of the slaving males and the lewd suggestions they made to my incomparable hill beauty. We kindly turned down all requests, at the same time wishing we could get outta Dodge a whole lot quicker.

Thyl, the larger sun, neared the horizon as we left the last of the villages within Byabeer’s official sphere behind us. With the road now all but deserted we urged our gryts to greater speed—not *that* great, considering Grajj Dor’s awkwardness atop his mount. Even so, we covered a goodly number of miles before finally pulling off the road about an hour before the setting of Ikra.

With Wydar and the other gryts munching contentedly on some nearby foliage, we laid out a spread from the copious provisions given to us by our erstwhile grateful hosts. Not exactly the “sacred provender” of the Luuzurs, but satisfying enough, considering that we hadn’t eaten all day. Given how busy we’d been since Grajj Dor had arrived with his bombshell news, we hadn’t found the time to talk about much else. Now, he related some other things that caused us a few raised eyebrows.

“The Nodorro village is not the same one that turned its back on you, Bernie. Prior to the arrival of the Wannamaker patrol informing us that we would no longer be subjected to the demands of Heevit Upp and his Dhufoid raiders, the Bearers of Wisdom—your *doddering old fools*, cousin—decided that we should accept our punishment. They...they began *selecting* those who would be sacrificed when those brutes returned.”

“No!” Thanna Dora cried. “Even the children?”

“Yes, even them.”

I shook my head. “Those cowardly bastards! So what did the people do?”

“Very little, at first. You know our ways.”

“Unfortunately,” I muttered.

“But before long, rumblings began. ‘Why should we do this? Why should we sacrifice our people?’ One man alone asked these questions. He had—what do you call it, Bernie?—*testiculos*, that was it. He was Mohr Dor, the father of my beloved Andra Dora.”

Thanna Dora nodded. “Good for him. And others agreed?”

“Oh yes. Next it was Clozda Dor, father of Matta Dor. He kept repeating how the three of us showed great courage in resisting the Dhufoids the last time they came. Together, he and Mohr Dor slowly won over some of the people, though many still listened to the Bearers of Wisdom.

“Then, the Wannamaker patrol came with the excellent news. This convinced the people that the Bearers were *full of shit*—your colorful words, Bernie. They would have seen many Nodorros sacrificed! Invoking an ancient law, Mohr Dor banished the doddering old fools from the village. I assumed they would try to find a place with one of the other hill villages.” He smiled. “Can you imagine them having to perform actual labor?”

Thanna Dora suddenly smacked herself upside the head. I think she saw little birdies for a few seconds. Shaking it off she exclaimed, “Where are my wits? All this time, cousin, I did not ask how my mother reacted to the news that her husband still lived.”

“I...do not know.” Grajj Dor shook his head sadly. “Perhaps she accompanied Uvvin Dor. Once I heard that the two of you still lived I got here as quickly as I could, thanks to Donil Duk.”

My bride scowled. “Therma Dora has been a servant to Uvvin Dor for so long, she does not know anything else.”

I kissed her on the forehead. “People can surprise you, my love. Let’s wait and see.”

“All right,” she replied...rather unconvincingly, I must say.

We finished our meal and talked some more, Grajj Dor eager to hear about our experiences firsthand. When Ikra finally touched the horizon the two of them dropped off to sleep like they’d been smacked in the head with a 2 x 4. Not being a native Persusian, it took me a couple of minutes longer.

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Gryts being relatively tireless, we covered a considerable number of miles the next morning. The remote farming villages and lake towns of Wannamaker began to appear, but aside from an occasional traveler offering us a curt nod or wave, our passing went ignored by these hard-working folks. No longer under the thumb of Heevit Upp and the Dhufoids, it appeared to be business as usual.

Around midday a Wannamaker patrol approached us from the east. I spotted their leader: Ruhba Duk, one of the survivors from the dank dungeon room, the very same Cell of the Rebels Without a Clue. All of the king’s soldiers recognized Thanna Dora and me, so guess what, more adulation. The two of us shook our heads and turned a few different shades, while Grajj Dor laughed his ass off.

Ruhba Duk pulled up alongside Wydar as the cheers subsided, and we shook hands in the Wannamaker way, sort of like what the Masons did, only even more complicated. Took me forever to learn it. I introduced him to Grajj Dor.

“It is good to see all of you,” the officer said. “But where might you be going?”

“We are headed to...” Thanna Dora gave me her version of a stink eye. “...uh, to the hill country to visit with family.”

She got it right. Why tell him our real destination and get into a long discussion? He’ll find out when he gets back to Byabeer.

“Oh, of course,” Ruhba Duk said. “But you should be warned.”

“About what?”

“There are still Dhufoids afoot that have not gotten the message of what happened in Byabeer. This patrol has destroyed quite a few of them in barely seven days, as they refuse to be taken alive and will fight to the death.” His lower lip protruded as he indicated a body bag draped over one of the gryts. “Orinj Duk lost his life, poor fellow.”

“Sorry to hear that. We’ll be careful.”

“We can take care of ourselves,” Thanna Dora added.

Ruhba Duk cracked a half-smile. “Yes, I am aware of that.”

We bade farewell to the Wannamaker patrol, their cheers once again rising to the heavens as we faded into the east.

A couple of hours later Ruhba Duk’s warning bore fruit...or at least two godawful smelly Dhufoid bodies. Apparently these guys had not yet partaken of their once-a-year bath. They approached us slowly, broad grins of brown, broken teeth on their faces, their dusty, snarling gryts about a yard apart. We reined our mounts to a stop.

“Ho, look at this!” the one of the left bellowed.

“The girl is ours,” the one on the right grunted. “We are in a kindly mood and will spare the two of you. Woman, come here!”

I motioned for Grajj Dor to keep his mouth shut and then nodded at Thanna Dora. Her head down, both hands in the pockets of her vest, she rode demurely toward the Dhufoids, her gryt stopping between the two of them.

Twenty-five seconds later Grajj Dor and I held our noses as we withdrew the two nasty knives wielded by my bride from their respective throats. We smacked their gryts on their hind ends, and they darted down the road with their dead and soon-to-be-decaying masters in tow.

“Make sure you wash off every bit of that blood,” Thanna Dora said. “I do not want to soil my garment.”

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Assuming I estimated properly, this would be our last night on the Byabeer road before leaving it and angling toward the erstwhile Dhufoid outpost then past it to the hill country. Given Ruhba Duk’s warning, and our first Dhufoid doe-see-doe, we decided to post a guard in two-hour shifts during the short Persusian night. Grajj Dor took the first one, which began while Ikra still floated through the heavens.

Thanna Dora and I lie supine on a patch of oddly colored purplish grass, silently gazing up at the small fading sun. After a while I glanced over at her, where I noticed a rather thoughtful expression on her face.

“A bushel of eebe fruits for your thoughts, my love,” I said.

“What?” Her head snapped toward me. “Oh, I understand. I was just thinking about Skreen Dor. Is it truly possible that my father still lives? Could he have survived all this time in Har... In that horrid place? And even if he has, what would he be like? You heard what my cousin said about Paddio Dor. Looking aged, babbling like a crazed thing. If...if my father... Oh Bernie!”

She sobbed softly as I held her and kissed her face about a thousand times. “Our immediate goal, my love, is to survive Harmmel and find him. Whatever may have happened to him, seeing you will undoubtedly be one awesome cure.”

“Oh, my beloved Bernie!” she cried. “You are right. I will not bring it up anymore.”

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The night passed uneventfully, and within half an hour we got back on the road again.

A couple of hours later we reined our gryts to a stop as nine Dhufoids, all on foot, blocked the road. No, wait—they all sort of melded together, and when I took another inventory I counted ten. Jeez! And with a breeze coming from the east, you do *not* want to know what they smelled like. Bearing rather large weaponry, chortling evil chortles, they advanced slowly toward us.

“I do not like the look of this,” Grajj Dor muttered, by way of understatement.

Thanna Dora nodded. “It seems the Wannamakers may have underestimated the numbers of this scum still befouling their land.”

Another understatement, but no matter. Knowing that gryts did not fare well in combat situations, I told the others to dismount. We had plenty of weapons, courtesy of Dunn Kow, and now we had a chance to use them. We each chose a humongous broadsword and, separating ourselves from the gryts, we raced toward the putrescent mass.

One of the Dhufoids emerged from the pack with a sword that made ours look like steak knives and shuffled toward us. “I’ll take care of this scum,” he told the others. “No need for any of you—”

We didn’t catch his last words, because his head rolled to one side of the road, while the rest of him staggered toward the other side before toppling into the dust. Nice work, Grajj Dor!

The pack stood speechless for a few seconds, just enough time for us to wade in among them, blades whistling. Dhufoids, I had learned in Byabeer, were not cowards, but they weren’t the swiftest in close combat, and not even their combined body odor could deter us from laying them out left and right. Thanna Dora fought like a tigress, while Grajj Dor, who not all that long ago wouldn’t even lift a finger to repel an aging skodorg that wanted to bite his ass off, appeared to be having a ball.

Ten minutes later the road to Byabeer was choked with various heads, limbs, and snaking entrails, none belonging to us. I tried not to think about what these already stinking remains would smell like in a few hours.

Each of us bore various cuts, bruises, or other minor injuries. But what the heck, we had prevailed. Hoisting my sword skyward I shouted, “I got four!”

Thanna Dora and Grajj Dor looked at me like I was a nutjob. Guess they never saw Gimli and Legolas tallying dead Orcs and Uruk Hai at the battle for Helm’s Deep.

Okay, time to go. Taking only a few minutes to clean off our weapons, treat our wounds, and retrieve the gryts, we gave the large collection of body parts a wide berth and continued eastward.

A couple of hours before the setting of Thyl we came to the cutoff that led to the border of the hill country. No, we didn’t see an exit sign or a neon arrow to show the way, but you could tell this was it. Over time, travelers had erected cairns, or stone piles, for one reason or another along the first twenty-five yards. And even without them the path had been pounded flat by the passage of countless hooves. Who knows, maybe this could be some significant spiritual place, or maybe a burial site. Whatever. We left the Byabeer road for what I hoped would not be the last time.

Oh yeah, this path proved just as miserable as I remembered it. We rode slowly for an hour or so before deciding to stop. We were tired anyway, and a gash on my leg had started bleeding again. Thanna Dora treated it with a large dose of TLC, which amused her cousin no end.

“It must sadden you, Bernie, that Cusppa Dor is not around to tend to your needs,” he quipped.

“Okay pal, wipe that grin off your face!” I bellowed in mock anger. “I’ll take my bride over that old curmudgeon any day.”

Thanna Dora scowled. “You two act like a couple of children... Uh, Bernie?”

“Yeah?”

“What is a curmudgeon?”

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The next day, around mid-afternoon, we approached the border of Wannamaker—to be precise the camp formerly occupied by the Dhufoids. None of the hairy assholes anywhere in sight now, only a small patrol from Byabeer led by Kilda Kow, another refugee from the Cell of the Rebels Without a Clue. Needless to say, he appeared most happy to see me.

“Bernie Dor!” he exclaimed. “What brings you this way?”

I gave him the same story that I told Ruhba Duk, and we left it at that. He and his men had been hunting stray Dhufoids with a high degree of success. They had stopped at this outpost before heading back to Byabeer to see if the former occupants had left anything useful behind.

“Whatever we did find,” Kilda Kow said with a scowl, “was befouled by those hairy creatures. So now we are going to burn the place down.”

I nodded. “Good call.”

One of his men handed him a torch. He glanced up at Thanna Dora. “My lady, would you do the honors?”

My bride practically flew off her gyt. “With pleasure!”

The storage shack went up first, then the remnants of the scattered tents. A great way to get rid of the Dhufoids’ lingering aroma. Grajj Dor and I joined the patrol in cheering Thanna Dora’s energetic efforts.

“So it is done,” Kilda Kow said after the last of the flames had fizzled out. “Good travels, Bernie Dor. We will see you in Byabeer soon, yes?”

Well, later, if not sooner...or if at all. “Count on it.”

Thanna Dora climbed back up on her gyt, and with the Wannamaker patrol seeing us off with a rousing cheer, probably the last one we would receive on this journey, we departed the erstwhile Dhufoid outpost.

Yeah, I remembered this crummy plain that we now crossed: the boulders, the cracked earth, the ugly weeds, the wanna-be marijuana plants. But we forged on with purpose, and before the end of the day we spotted something ahead rising up from the ground, then another, and then more, and I gave silent thanks to the Earth Mother, or some such deity.

We had returned to the hill country.