

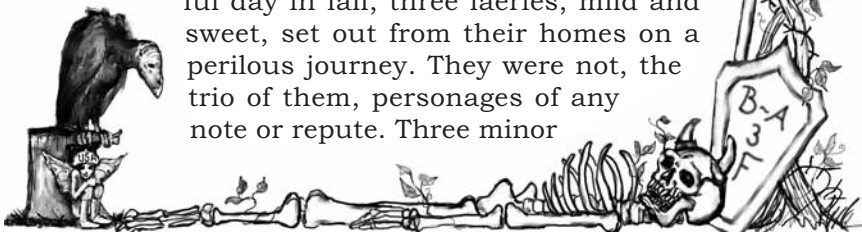
RETURN OF THE HERO

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THINGS WERE NOT GOING TO END WELL, AND EVERYONE knew it. That was why from the boundaries of the Northern forests, to the very edges of the Bitter Lake, there was not a loose seed or crumb to be found. Every table top had been licked clean and each turnip squeezed for the last drop of blood to be found within its purpled skin. Every ounce of food had been gathered, preserved, and hidden away—all gardens devastated, each rabbit skinned, skewered, and salted for the long and assuredly bloody winter to come.

Though the fighting had not yet broken out, it was only a matter of time. Of that, everyone in the Central Kingdoms was certain. Brevenwold, pirate king of the Scatterers was not about to give in to the demands of Trengar, the rogue leader of the Vast Meadow Riders. And neither of them was about to bow to an upstart such as Frin'ea, empress of the Western Cliffs. The trio hated each other, and, after decades of waiting, it appeared they were finally going to get their chance to go at one another. This time, war was coming, and no one was going to be able to stop it.

But that did not mean there were not those willing to try. And so it was that on one particularly fateful day in fall, three faeries, mild and sweet, set out from their homes on a perilous journey. They were not, the trio of them, personages of any note or repute. Three minor



shamans, they had only the shared idea that the upcoming slaughter could be avoided. If, that was, they could find one specific individual. With that thought in mind, they abandoned the safety of their hearths and ventured forth into the world of men.

Now, of course, as everyone knows, the faerie folk exist side by side with mankind, they just do a most excellent job of concealing the fact. Back after the first photographic images of them were captured during what mankind labeled “the Victorian Era,” it had taken a great deal of whimsical tomfoolery to convince the world the images were a hoax. Such could not have been accomplished without help from members of the human race.

The prevention of the coming conflict was just another such deed.

“Is this the place?”

“Looks like it,” answered the tallest of the shamans, “from what we were told.”

“Smells like it,” added the short one. “From what we were told, I mean.”

As unkind a comment as it was, none could argue with its correctness. They had been cautioned that the personage they meant to find was one gross of both body and habits—even for a human. Still, their self-imposed mission was to siderail the coming catastrophe, not pass judgment on this or that human being. Besides, as the female of the trio added, if not for the telltale aroma, they would not be so certain they had found their destination.

Thus armed with that particular tidbit of overwhelming logic, the three slid under the front door of 15 China Alley and began their search for the only person in all the world who might be able to put an end to the approaching, albeit localized, apocalypse.

Following the aroma of dried leaves, stale beer, Ben Gay, bar nuts, and a mixed Mexican platter that had apparently traveled the throat of its owner in both directions, the trio found themselves before the entrance to a fifth floor walk-up apartment that had seen far better days. The old door showed signs of repeated attack. Despite being made of steel, it was dinged, dented, and somewhat bent, as if struck repeatedly by many fists and more than a few blunt objects.

It also was heavily smeared with fingerprints around the area of its several locks, as if whomever had opened it had done so with hands coated with all manner of goos, greases, and gravies.