

Seekers of Vengeance
by Brandon M. Dennis

I was so sick of this world. Yes I, Arnie, one of the most respected individuals at my college, hated it all. It wasn't just one thing that bothered me about society. I hated the hypocrisy I saw in everything; the media, my college professors (and now colleagues), societies definition of morality, the bigot's bias of "diversity". People are too proud to be honest, too proud to be accepting, too proud to settle minuscule differences. People live only to expand their egos, not to care for each other and explore this world we were placed in but to compete, contend, fight, bicker, boast their differences and scorn other's "flaws". But my biggest annoyance was with the accusers. I think you know the type. People who whine and complain about the flaws and defects in a certain people or society, but fail to see their own flaws and defects first. Yes, I would be among this category. Hypocrites would be what we are called. I get frustrated and annoyed with other people and the things they do and say that seem so obviously biased, intolerant, and hypocritical. Yet then again I am sure that I do just as many silly and intolerant things.

That is why I needed a break. I just had to get away from it all, from the college, the people I knew, the society I lived in and most of all, myself. So after I earned my doctorate, I left my life for quite some time. I packed a bag with just the things that I would need to survive, and walked. I walked for days upon days, not really knowing where I was going and not really caring. I walked down roads, over mountains, across boundaries and swam across rivers. When I saw a wood that looked particularly thick, I dove into it. When I saw a lake that looked particularly deep, I waded through it. When I saw a hill or mountain that looked particularly high, I climbed it. I didn't care where I was going, just as long as I *was* going.

But after a while I got tired. I needed to rest. One day as I was walking, I chanced upon the clearest river that I had ever seen. It was as if I was looking at flowing crystal; it was not green like the algae infested waters near my home. It was not brown like the silt filled lakes I was so accustomed to. It ran from the top of a white-peaked mountain, so clear that I could see every stone and animal that made its home there. What a beautiful place, so serene, calm and quiet. The perfect place to make a temporary home.

I looked around until I found a nice place to set up camp. A little nook of trees had grown together so as to make a little wall, and their branches were so entwined that a roof formed over the wall. It needed a some work, but it definitely had potential. I spent the next few days building my shelter. I took a canvas tent out of my bag and lined the roof and walls to make them watertight. I then hung a screen from the roof so that it enveloped everything below it. No, it wouldn't hold heat, but it would keep the bugs out! I made a pit for my fire and pit for my trash and other waste products. I made tools for myself and javelins for catching beautiful red fish from that pure, clean river. I made snares and traps, and caught many tasty critters during my time there.

I was there for a week or so, resting, letting my body heal after all the punishment I put it through. Soon, however, I began to notice some of my things wind up missing. One day it was the skin of an animal I had just killed, another day it was a pot of food cooking over the fire, and another day it was my axe. Animals can't grasp axes.

So that night I laid a trap. I cooked up a big pot of stew and set it on the fire. I lingered near the fire for a while, glancing into the woods and waiting for the sun to set. When it did I crept towards my shelter, squatted on the tips of my toes with a flashlight in my hand and waited.

Nothing. I wasn't surprised. The bird never appears when you are looking for it; the flower only blooms when you look away. I sighed and stood up.

Suddenly I heard a shuffling sound to my left. I quickly squatted down again, making my body as small as possible. I could not see a thing in the dark, but there was definitely something near me, something crawling on all fours. Images flew through my mind at that moment; wolf, cougar, mountain lion, wolverine, lynx... and I was scared. But I held my breath and didn't move a muscle. The thing was crawling. Ever so slowly. It was crawling right towards my fire. I squinted in the darkness towards the flames and soon the bushes near the fire began to rustle. A figure crawled out of the brush, but it was still to dark for me to get a good glimpse of it. It was near my food now, and I sure as hell was not going to lose another meal. With a yell I leapt from my concealment and flashed my light right at the being.

A dwarf! A wretched dark elf, gnome, little person, a demon from the hills! A mischievous trickster, killer and thief! He was trying to steal my food! I ran towards the

squat being with a mighty roar, swinging my flashlight as if it were a flail. The little guy looked at me and squealed, then dashed off into the woods. I gave chase, mad as a hornet, angry as a wolverine. To think that the wretch was rummaging through *my* camp! The nimble critter dashed this way and that, through a fern and around a pine, over a patch of ivy and under a large bush. But I was strong and fast, rested and energized, and after a long game of cat and mouse, I pounced on the fellow and pinned him to the ground.

“Hah! Got you, you little thief!” I cried, and pressed hard on his shoulders.

“Ow! Stop! That hurts!” cried the little man... but wait a minute. He didn’t sound like a little man at all. His voice was high, melodic, and vibrant. Confused, I shone my light in the face of the phantom dwarf.

It was just a boy. A boy in tatters, roaming the forests in the middle of no where.

“Get off me you meanie! Help! Help!” cried the boy, and soon I heard violent sounds all around me. I stood to my feet, scared, and the boy dashed away. Soon I found myself surrounded by a dozen men, all with large clubs or crude spears. One of them held a flaming torch.

“What is this?” he said, looking at me utterly confused. “Are you a Grencher?”

“A what?” I asked, more confused than he.

“No, he can’t be a Grencher,” said another man with a cruel looking club. “He doesn’t have their piggish noses and cow eyes.” The men encircling me laughed, but I was not in on the joke.

“Well then, what could he be?” asked the man with the torch, and the fellows around me started to discuss where I could have possibly come from. After a while of being thus detained, I became frustrated.

“Look,” I said, “I don’t know where you folks came from but I would just like to go back to my camp and eat my supper, if you don’t mind.”

“Oh, he does live in these forests after all,” said the man with the cruel club.

“Fiorman will want to hear of this.” The man with the torch turned to me.

“Would you mind coming with us? We would love to introduce you to our leader.” At least they asked me. They could have grabbed me, tied me up and dragged me away. Besides, I had thought that I was the only one in these woods. The existence of

others intrigued me greatly and, being the inquisitive mind that I am, I just had to learn why they were here.

“Sure, I’ll meet him, just for a bit though,” I said, and the man smiled.

“Ah, good! Follow me stranger.” Yes, it was impulsive. And I was letting my dinner burn. But curiosity has always been the foremost activity on the human mind.

The no-longer-wary men led me through the thick bushes. The boy that I had chased soon emerged from the woods and followed the men, eyeing me curiously.

“Sorry I was rough with you lad,” I apologized. The boy just grinned.

“My name is Jenkins! What is yours?”

“Arnie. Did you enjoy my food?” Little Jenkins nodded and I laughed. The men seemed to know exactly where they were going, and soon we came upon a well worn trail, so broad that it could have served as a road. And indeed it did.

“This is called Ore Road,” explained the man with the torch. He pointed towards the west. “It leads to the base of yonder mountain. We have a crude mine there that just started to yield us copper and tin. We should be able to make bronze tools very shortly, which will make our work much easier.” He led us east on Ore Road for what seemed like miles. Soon I saw lights between the trees and the smells of meat cooking. We emerged from the woods and much to my surprise, I found myself in a small town. The road ran right through the town, and the place was filled with people. To my left was a large fire pit, and a handful of men were cooking whole deer. They waved and shouted to us as we walked by and seemed very pleased to see me. As we walked along I heard the sound of a river nearby (probably the same one I was camped at) and a little trail split off from the road towards it. Near the road was a man with a flute and crude drum, and many young men and women were dancing lively to his music. The street was lined with canvas tents and makeshift shelters, much nicer than my own but all somewhat temporary. People leaned out of their tent flaps or rickety doors to wave at us and welcome us, all apparently genuinely happy to see us.

At the end of the small street was a more elegant edifice. It was made out of felled logs instead of branches and twigs. It had a door on leather hinges, and this door was open. The man with the torch led me inside while the rest of the men went to their tents and shelters. The place was small, but large enough to hold about a dozen men. There

was a large flat rock in the center of the shelter with a few men and women sitting around it, talking casually. As we approached one of the men noticed us and stood up.

“Lonny!” he exclaimed warmly and gave the man with the torch a hug. “How did the hunt go?”

“Fairly well, we caught three stags and a few rabbits, enough to last the community a few days. But we caught something else that I know you will find much more interesting.” Lonny turned to me, grinned, and walked out of the room. The man with the warm greeting approached me swiftly and took my hand.

“Ah, another visitor from the outside, welcome! My name is Fiorman and I am the leader of this small village. What brings you here?” That was the question I wanted to ask him, but one of us had to go first.

“I have a camp a few miles west of here, by the river. I came from the city a couple of weeks ago just to get away from it all,” I explained, and I proceeded to tell him of all my motives for leaving society and the adventures I had since then. The whole while my host Fiorman grinned from ear to ear, nodded whenever I said something he found particularly interesting and then laughed when I had finished.

“Ah, good, good, I know your plight all too well. Come, I want to show you something.” Fiorman motioned for me to follow and he led me outside. We walked back down the street at a slow pace.

“You see all these people?” he said, motioning towards the people who were cooking, chopping wood, playing, dancing, building and repairing. “These are not *my* people, nor is this *my* kingdom. I came to these woods two years ago, much in the same way you did. I was sick of society, sick of the hypocrisy prevalent in everything. I was sick of the ‘scientists’ and ‘professors’, those people who claim to be the open minded realists, discoverers of truth and shunners of ignorance, yet are just as afraid of change and of being wrong as any other person. I was sick of those people who claimed to be tolerant, accepting, enlightened, yet force their beliefs just as violently and self righteously as those people whom they shun.” We headed down the small trail towards the river. “I was just tired of the dishonesty.”

I nodded. We had reached the river and Fiorman inhaled deeply, then sighed.

“But I was not alone; no, there were others like me who had seen what I had seen and recognized what I recognized. They came here in droves, hundreds of them, a dozen arriving a week, seeking for a way out, a relief from everything they were oppressed by. I accepted them all and together we developed this small, humble community. No one was turned away, regardless of their beliefs. We are one organism.”

I was quite impressed. I had no idea that there were other people who thought as I did, and I never dreamed that these people would form their own society. This was exactly what I was looking for. Everyone was so kind, so accepting, and they demanded nothing. Everyone here wanted to work and wanted to help each other simply because they cared. I could hardly believe that there wasn't a single selfish soul here, not a single person who lived on pride, who thrived on ego, who strove to point out differences instead of similarities, who made categories and defined everything instead of opening their arms and defining nothing but, as far as I could see, there wasn't. I no longer wanted to be a vagabond, a roamer, a member of nothing, an outcast from society. I wanted to be a part of something, a thing new and fresh and full of honesty and vitality.

I was about to turn to Fiorman and tell him these things that had excited me when I noticed some oddly placed stones near the river. Frowning in thought, I walked over to the stones. Fiorman sighed and followed. In a clearing, marked off by fallen logs, stood many long stones turned up on their ends. I counted them. Fifty-seven.

“What are these?” I asked curiously, but Fiorman was quiet. I examined the upturned stones closer to find crude engravings on them. Bess, Jonathan, Mitchell... each stone had a name.

“They are graves,” said Fiorman solemnly. I was stunned.

“Graves? You mean... each of these stones represents a person?” Fiorman nodded. I didn't know what to say. I turned and looked at Fiorman shocked.

“How? Why?”

Fiorman spat.

“It's those damned Grenchers! They used to be part of us; yes, long ago. But they betrayed me! They wanted to make rules, rules and guidelines defining how to live life. They wanted to bring back customs and traditions from their old societies, hah! That was the reason we left!” Fiorman was red with rage. He clenched his fists, flashing his white

knuckles. “They were too good to be loyal, those backstabbing bastards! They went and left us, taking half of our supplies, led by the miscreant named Grencher. I regret the day I ever let him into my camp! They run things differently over there, across the river. They have old customs and wicked rights. They are filth, a shame to anyone who has ever had grievances with our old society!” Fiorman was breathing heavily and glanced at the graves again. The veins in his head bulged but he tried to calm himself.

“They killed them, my friends, my friends. They took their clubs and stones and murdered my family!” He cursed and kicked a nearby tree. Then he laughed. “But oh, I got them back, I got my revenge! For every one of my people that they killed, I killed two of theirs! They can’t rebel against me and get off that easily!” He laughed again, a guttural laugh. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing.

“*Your* people? You just said that they were not yours. You said this was an organism!” Fiorman looked startled for a moment, then met my eyes.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean that they were *my* people. I just used that in passing...” I groaned, holding my head in frustration. I looked again at the fifty-seven stone people.

“All these deaths... all these deaths over a difference of opinion! Do you not realize you are acting the same way the society you so hate acts? You are no different from the people you came from!” Fiorman held up his hand in explanation.

“No, you don’t understand, it is not the same thing. This is about betrayal. This warrants war and yes, it even warrants death. I will fight those traitors until every one of them is dead!” I spun around.

“What if I had made my camp on the other side of the river, and stumbled upon the Grenchers instead of you? Would I be one of them too? Would you have stayed your hand if we had fought in battle? Why is that side of the river any different from this side?” Fiorman shook his head.

“You aren’t listening to me, you don’t understand...” he said, but then he stopped. Screams. Lonny came charging down the path.

“Fiorman! Quickly! The hog-eyed Grenchers are attacking! Mallory’s house is aflame and they trampled little Jenkins to death!” Fiorman howled in rage.

“You see!” he cried, grabbing me by my shirt with tears in his eyes. “They are animals! They killed my boy, my boy!” It didn’t click with me. Things like that never do.

“You can end all of this right now Fiorman!” I yelled. “Just call to them, stop this fight, sue for peace!” But Fiorman was long gone.

“It’s too late for peace,” the man wept, “far, far too late. We can never be friends again, things have escalated too far. To arms!” he cried, and Lonny ran through the town yelling for the men to assemble.

“Grab your spears! Grab your hammers! Pick up stones! Death to the Grenchers, back-stabbers, child-killers!” Fiorman turned to me, a wild anxiety in his eyes.

“You will help me, yes? You will fight with me; I have a spear for you, a fine weapon, barbed, sure to make many a gruesome mark in the foul hides of those Grenchers!” I shook my head earnestly.

“This is not what I was seeking, this is everything that I left! You are all hypocrites, and I am your king!” With that I turned towards the river and ran. I followed it west, without ever looking back. I heard screams and wails, but this was not my fight.

I came upon a group of churlish looking men crossing the river and they spotted me. In a strange accent, wholly foreign to anything I had ever heard, they yelled at me, uttering things like “Fiormeans” and “warmongers” and “friend-killers”. They chased me when they got to my side of the river, and I ran as fast as I could.

“No!” I yelled, “I am not a Fiormean!” but they either didn’t hear me or they didn’t listen. Long they chased me, but I outran them, charging deep into the forest, hoping and praying to be eaten by some wild animal rather than massacred by these bloodthirsty Grenchers. And so I left the Fiormeans and Grenchers far behind, retreating back to the things I once knew.

I am a teacher now at the university that I graduated from. I teach Medieval and Ancient History, and I enjoy my job. I wear a suit, talk in a manner prescribed, and do whatever I am told. I am not content with society by any means. I still have the same gripes and recognize the same flaws I always have. But if I learned one thing it is this; all of man is the same. There is no perfect place, there is no Utopia. The things that fuel dishonesty, bigotry and hypocrisy in this society are the same as in any other. Mankind is the same, has always been the same and will always be the same. We haven’t evolved.

We haven't become enlightened. We are primeval egos, clingers to pride, seekers of vengeance, and no matter what tie we wear or what mantra we chant, we always will be.