

Science Fiction

Embracing- The-New

By Benjamin Rosenbaum



fictionwise

Excellence in eBooks

Embracing-The-New
by Benjamin Rosenbaum

Fictionwise

www.Fictionwise.com

Copyright ©2004 by Benjamin Rosenbaum

First published in Asimov's Science Fiction,
January 2004

NOTICE: This ebook is licensed to the original purchaser only. Duplication or distribution to any person via email, floppy disk, network, print out, or any other means is a violation of International copyright law and subjects the violator to severe fines and/or imprisonment. This notice overrides the Adobe Reader permissions which are erroneous. This book cannot be legally lent or given to others.

This ebook is displayed using 100% recycled electrons.



Distributed by Fictionwise.com

The sun blazed, the wagon creaked and shuddered. Vru crouched near the master's canopy, his fur dripping with sweat. His Ghennungs crawled through his fur, seeking shade. Whenever one uprooted itself from his body, breaking their connection, he felt the sudden loss of memories, like a limb being torn away.

Not for the first time, Vru was forced to consider his poverty. He had only five Ghennungs. Three had been with him from birth; another had been his father's first; and the oldest had belonged to both his father and his grandfather. Once, when both of the older Ghennungs pulled their fangs out of him to shuffle across his belly, sixty years of memory—working stone, making love to his grandmother and his mother, worrying over apprenticeships and duels—were gone, and he had the strange and giddy feeling of knowing only his body's own twenty years.

"Vile day," Khancriterquee said. The ancient godcarver, sprawled on a pile of furs under the canopy, gestured with a claw. "Vile sun. Boy! There's cooling oil in the crimson flask. Smear some on me, and mind you don't spill any."

Vru found the oil and smeared it across his master's ancient flesh. Khancriterquee was bloated; in patches, his fur was gone. He stank like dead beasts rotting in the sun. Vru's holding-hands shuddered to touch him. The master was dying, and when he died, Vru's certain place in the world would be gone.

Around Khancriterquee's neck, as around Vru's, Delighting-In-Beauty hung from a leather cord: the plump, smooth,

laughing goddess, twenty-seven tiny Ghennungs dancing upon her, carved in hard gray stone. Khancriterquee had carved both copies. How strange, that the goddess of beauty would create herself through his ugly, bloated flesh!

Khancriterquee's bloodshot eyes twitched open. "You are not a godcarver," he croaked.

Vru held still. What had he done wrong? The master was vain—had he noticed Vru's disgust? Would Khancriterquee send him back to his father's house in disgrace, to herd fallowswine, to never marry—hoping, when his body was decrepit, to find some nephew who would take pity on him and accept a few of his memories?

"Do you know why we have won these territories?" the master asked. Pushing aside the curtains, he gestured over the wagon's side at the blasted red crags around them.

"We defeat the Godless in battle because the gods favor us, master," Vru recited.

Khancriterquee snorted. "It is not that the gods favor us. It is that we favor the gods."

Vru did not understand, and bent to massage the master's flesh. Khancriterquee pushed Vru's holding-hands away with a claw and, wheezing, sat up. He stared at Vru with disgust.

Vru realized that he was clicking his claws together, and forced himself to stop. The master watched him—remembering Vru's every twitch into the Ghennungs the journeymen would soon carry.

Vru pulled himself erect. "Master, there is something I have never understood."

Khancriterquee's eyes glittered with interest, or suspicion. "Ask," he said.

"How can the Godless really be godless?"

The master frowned.

"I mean, how can someone without a god not go mad when he takes new Ghennungs?" Vru remembered the day he had taken Delighting-In-Beauty as his goddess, to be the organizing devotion of his life. As the doctors had gently separated the Ghennungs from his father's cooling corpse in the Great Hall below, he had wanted to cling to childhood, wanted to wait before choosing a god. But the priest had lectured him sternly—for without a god, a person would just be a shifting collection of memories. The allegiances, desires, and opinions of his various Ghennungs would be at war, and he would be buffeted like a rowboat in a hundred-year's storm.

"Ah, my apprentice is ambitious," Khancriterquee whispered. "The master is old and weak. Perhaps the apprentice should attend the high military councils in my stead. Perhaps he should learn the secrets of our war against the Godless—"

"Master, I meant no—"

"The Godless do not trade Ghennungs," Khancriterquee said.

"What?"

"Perhaps at a very young age they do," Khancriterquee said, waving his holding-hands, "or to trade certain very specific skills only, without other memories, using some kind of mutilated Ghennungs. We are not certain. But in general,

when they die"—he paused, watching Vru's reaction—"their Ghennungs are destroyed. That is why we win the battles. Their greatest soldier is only as old as his body."

Vru suddenly felt sick; bitter, stinging fluids from his stomach sputtered into his throat. The Godless intentionally murdered themselves when their bodies died!

"Now I will tell you why you are not a godcarver, if the ambitious apprentice has time to listen," Khancriterquee said. He tapped the Delighting-In-Beauty around Vru's neck with his claw. "Carving copies, so that the people will not forget their gods, and stay sane, is nothing. It is time for you to carve a new god, as I did when I carved Fearless-In-Justice, as my grandfather did with Delighting-In-Beauty." He lay back on the furs and closed his eyes. "It will be a monument, to be unveiled at The Festival of Hrsh. You will use this new green stone."

Vru watched in silence as the master slept. He could hear his own heart beating.

None of Khancriterquee's journeymen had been allowed to create a god, not even Turmca. Why let an apprentice? To embarrass and spite the journeymen—to punish their eager impatience for Khancriterquee's death? Or did the master think Vru had that much talent?

* * * *

The Bereft worked in the new mines, carving the green stone from the cliff face. Their fur had been shaved, because of the heat. Many of them had bloody claws, torn by the stone. Vru tried to look away. He had rarely seen so many

Bereft. Their bodies were muscular, powerful ... and naked of Ghennungs. It was horrible, yet there was something about those empty expanses of skin that called to him, like a field of untrodden snow.

The green stone glittered, embedded in the gray rock. Khancriterquee had been yelling at the foreman all day. Why use the idiot Bereft? They understood enough to be useful in the older mines, with the older gray stone. But this wonderful new green stone, in which so much detail would be possible—the perfect stone for gods, won from the Godless—was difficult to extract, and they were incapable of learning to do it. They had ruined every large piece so far.

"They are useless! Useless!" Khancriterquee screamed at the foreman. "Why could you not get real people?"

"It's mining," said the foreman stubbornly. "Real people won't do this work, holy one."

"Vru! Useless boy! Standing around like one of the Bereft yourself!" Hatred glittered in the master's eyes. "Bring that one to me," he said, motioning to a great Bereft body working dully in the nearby stone, cracking precious nodes of it into two with every swipe of its claws.

Vru led it to the master. It was docile; he only had to touch it lightly with his claws, on its strange, bare flesh. The Bereft panted softly as it walked. Its claws were torn, and it looked hungry. Vru wanted to embrace its mighty body in his holding-hands, murmur words of comfort in its ear—insane, stupid thoughts, which he tried to ignore.

"Bend its head over to me," Khancriterquee croaked.

Vru pushed it down to kneel by his master. Was the master going to whisper something to it? How could that help?

As the foreman stood nearby, dancing angrily from one foot to another, Khancriterquee slid his ancient claws against the soft fur of the Bereft's neck. The Bereft stared solemnly, fearfully, back. Straining and grunting, Khancriterquee closed his claws, tearing through the skin. The Bereft jerked, shuddered, and let out a piercing scream; the foreman, cursing, rushed forward; and then there was a snap and the head of the Bereft rolled from its body, which collapsed onto the ground. Blood poured onto Khancriterquee.

"Are you mad?" yelled the foreman, forgetting himself. Then terror came over his face and he dropped to the ground, burying his face in the dust. "Holiness, please..." he moaned.

The master chuckled, pleased perhaps that his body's old claws were still capable of killing. He clacked them together. The blood was black. Then he scowled. "Bring me some real people to work this mine," he said. "These abominations are worse than useless."

Vru vomited onto the dust.

"You need whole stone for your monument!" the master said. "Stupid boy. Now clean me."

* * * *

The green stone was a miracle. On a calm blue day a month later, with whorls of fog skating across the ground and drifting into the sky, Vru stood in the sculpting pit of Khancriterquee's compound, before the monolith brought

Embracing-The-New
by Benjamin Rosenbaum

from the mines. Carving it was like a dream of power; it sang under his claws and under the hammer and file in his holding-hands.

For the last weeks he had returned to the dormitory only for the evening meal and to sleep. This work was altogether different from the work of making copies of the gods. Khancriterquee had been right; until now, Vru had never been a godcarver, only a copyist. Now, a new god was taking shape beneath his claws.

When Vru looked at the new god, he felt like he had a thousand Ghennungs, with memories as old as the Ghennungs of the Oracle. He would never, himself, poor castle-builder's ninth son, dare to sculpt anything so shocking and so true. It was a god working through him, he knew, but not *Delighting-In-Beauty*; a new god, a god only he knew, was using his claws to birth itself into the green stone.

The god, he had decided, was called *Embracing-the-New*. It was a terrible and wonderful statue. In it, a person naked of Ghennungs, like one of the Bereft or a banished criminal, stooped to touch a Ghennung upon the ground with his claw: gently, a caress. Vru knew that in the next moment, the person would take up the Ghennung in his holding-hands and bring it to his chest; the Ghennung would sink its fangs into him, finding blood and nerves; and the sweet rush of memories would burn into the person's consciousness: the first thoughts, the new identity.

Vru looked down at his holding-hands; they were shaking. He did not feel tired; he felt like singing. But it had been

twenty-nine hours since he had rested. He could not risk a mistake.

He pulled a cloth over the god, and walked up the trail towards the dormitory. As he left the sculpting pit, the embrace of the god faded, and weariness crept through his limbs. He could barely keep his claws up.

As he passed through the empty spring pavilion, a shadow moved ahead of him. He stopped. From the darkness, he heard ragged breathing.

"Who's there?" he said.

Turmca the journeyman stepped out into the daylight.

Vru relaxed. "You frightened me, Turmca!" he said. Even as he spoke, he noticed that Turmca was not wearing Delighting-In-Beauty around his neck, but Fearless-In-Justice, the soldier god. "Why are you—?"

The journeyman took a shuddering step towards him. His eyes were strange, vacant. Was he drunk? "How are you, Vru?" he asked. "How is your *work*?" Turmca's claws snapped together, and he jerked as if surprised at his own movement.

"Are you well, Turmca?" Vru asked, taking a step backwards.

"How kind of you to ask," said Turmca, taking uneven steps forward. Vru moved backwards into the pavilion's yard. Turmca was smaller than Vru, but well fed, with muscles from years of godcarving.

"I wanted to ask you," Vru said, "Turmca, when the master, ah, passes away, would you, have you considered taking me on? I would be grateful if—"

Turmca barked out loud, shuddering laughter. He bent over, put his claws against his eyes, and his body shook. Then he looked up at Vru.

"They all go to you," Turmca said.

Vru blinked.

"Khancriterquee said so to the Master Singer. I overheard. You will bear all his Ghennungs. He does not want his memories weakened and dispersed among the journeymen, or rather, he says, that is not what Delighting-In-Beauty wants."

"Turmca, that's insane. I don't have the talent..."

Turmca's claws snapped open. They gleamed, newly cleaned and sharpened. "Talent! You fool! He doesn't choose you for your talent! He chooses you because of your five feeble Ghennungs and your weak, malleable nature. He wants to live on as himself, that's all! Your memories will be no trouble to him!"

Turmca's right foot slid back, and his holding-hands came in to cover the Ghennungs on his chest. Vru had seen that stance before, when his brother Viruarg was drilling. It was a soldier's stance.

"Turmca—"

Vru leapt backwards as Turmca struck, but too slow—the points of a claw opened gashes in his side. Vru had not fought since he was a child playing thakka in a dirt field. He bent low and then lunged forward, checking Turmca's claws and trying to slam his body into him. But Turmca spun away, and his holding-hands darted out to smack against Vru's ear fronds.

Vru's legs gave way and he collapsed to the ground, pain washing through him.

Turmca wasn't fighting like an amateur: he must have borrowed or rented Ghennungs from a soldier. He wasn't drunk. His glazed look was that of one who has not integrated his Ghennungs, who has a battle in his soul. But he was united enough in his desire to kill Vru.

"Get up, Vru," barked Turmca, and it was a soldier's voice, the voice of a follower of Fearless-in-Justice, who wanted a kill with honor. And then in a gentler voice, the voice of the journeyman instructing a young apprentice: "I'll make this quick."

Vru felt exhaustion flooding through him, singing in his muscles. If he cried out for help, he knew Turmca would kill him and be gone before help came. He heard Turmca's feet scuffing cautiously toward where he lay on the sand. Goddess, help me, he prayed.

But it was not Delighting-In-Beauty who helped him—it must have been the new god, Embracing-The-New, who wanted to be carved, for he did something that Vru could not, would never do. Embracing-The-New picked Vru's body up and flung it at Turmca, and Vru's claw lashed out and severed the cord that held Fearless-In-Justice around Turmca's neck. Turmca, godless, screamed. Vru grabbed the god as it fell and threw it into the darkness of the pavilion. Turmca's claws reached for Vru, but his body turned and lurched after his god. Vru ran to the master's compound.

* * * *

Embracing-The-New
by Benjamin Rosenbaum

Vru returned from a week of fasting on the day of the Festival of Hrsh. He was weak, but he felt purified, ready for his task. When Embracing-the-New was unveiled, he would finally win honor for his family.

He sat on the stage, next to Khancriterqueen. In front of them stood the monument, hidden by a cloth. Vru longed to see Embracing-The-New, but he could not, until the god was revealed. Suddenly he wondered what the people would see. A Bereft or a criminal as a god, reaching for a forbidden Ghennung! If the god had not carved it through his hands, he would be appalled himself. He trembled—what if they did not see the hand of the god? What if he had carved heresy? He tried to focus on Delighting-In-Beauty, to let her center him as a potter centers clay upon the wheel. But his head swam with images. The strong and lovely Bereft who had worked the green stone; the bloody head, rolling in the dust of the mine pit. The Godless and their strange, evil customs. He imagined the Bereft of his statue, reaching out to greet them. He sat stiffly, his head full of strange thoughts, until it was time.

The priest was calling him. He jerked out of his seat, stumbled across the stage. All around, the audience strained forward. A few people hushed children, then all was still. He reached up and pulled the cloth from Embracing-The-New, and a cry went up from the crowd.

But it was not Embracing-The-New.

The form was the same; it was his own block of green stone that he had lovingly carved. But into the figure's flesh were carved the distinct bulges of Ghennungs: seventeen

Ghennungs, a new number for a new god. And the reaching claw was not caressing a fallen Ghennung; it was crushing a tiny Godless soldier with his claws aflame.

In the stone were the bold, smooth strokes of the master's hand.

The people applauded. Vru turned to look at Khancriterqueen.

The master's jaws were drawn up into a satisfied, indulgent smirk. I added that which you forgot, his eyes said. It was not bad work, but the message was not correct. I corrected it.

What does it matter, Vru imagined Khancriterqueen saying. What does it matter? He gazed at Vru smugly. You have proved yourself worthy of me. Soon this body will collapse, and you will carry my Ghennungs. All my memories, all my power. We will be one person. And then we will carve as Delighting-In-Beauty guides our hand.

Vru could smell, faintly, the decaying odor of Khancriterqueen's skin from where he stood. The master was dying, but the master would not die. He would not even change much. Vru knew his five weak Ghennungs would be no match for Khancriterqueen's sixteen, his own memories dim whispers in a roaring. Some would perhaps be weeded out, for twenty-one is too many for even a young body to carry. Something might remain: Vru's industriousness, perhaps, his love of textures in the stone. But when he thought of Khancriterqueen cutting off the head of the Bereft in the mines, it would be sixteen loud voices of satisfaction, perhaps three of weak dismay.

He should be happy. His god was Delighting-In-Beauty. Why should he not rejoice that the greatest godcarver of the Godly would work with his muscles, his claws, creating grandeur? What did it matter if his memories were dissipated? He remembered seeing himself as a mewling baby in his Mother's holding-hands: a ninth, unwanted son. He remembered stroking his Mother's brow as she held the infant. "There will be no inheritance for him," she had said. "We will find something," he had said. "Perhaps the priesthood. He will have one of my Ghennungs." "Two," Mother had said. He had scowled down at the crying, wan baby and thought, two? For this scrawny fish?

Vru endured the applause and shuffled back to sit beside Khancriterquee. The stench was overpowering.

This scrawny fish will never make a soldier, his father had thought.

I would rather be Godless, Vru realized. I would rather die once, and then fully, than become Khancriterquee.

* * * *

"Let the verdict of the Oracle be pronounced for all to hear," said the crier. "The crime is treason, heresy, and attempted desertion to the enemy. The body is not at fault, and will be spared, but is unfit to bear memory. Let it be banished to the wilds. Generous is the Oracle."

They held him, but Vru would not struggle. He was limp and sweaty. He looked at his chest; how strange not to see Delighting-In-Beauty there. He felt like a child again.

Embracing-The-New
by Benjamin Rosenbaum

He kept seeing the false Embracing-The-New, as he had left it, with its Ghennungs broken off. Had he killed a god? But it was a false god, a monstrosity!

The doctors teased a Ghennung from his flesh. He watched as it burned in the brazier, twitching. A strange, hissing scream came from it. Fear filled his guts like a balloon expanding. They took another Ghennung, the one that had been his grandfather's. What had his grandmother looked like? He could only remember her old. How sad, how sad. She had surely been beautiful young. Hadn't he often said so?

They took another. He needed a god, a god to center him. But he could not think of Delighting-In-Beauty. He had betrayed her. He thought of Embracing-The-New, the real Embracing-The-New, the figure bereft, reaching for hope. Yes, he thought. They took another Ghennung. It blackened and twisted in the fire. Vru, he thought. My name is Vru. They reached for the last Ghennung. Embracing-The-New, he thought, the body of green stone. Remember.

The beast stood in the courtyard. The wind was cool, the forest smelled like spring. There would be hunting there. Others were holding him. They smelled like his clan, so he did not attack. They let him go.

He looked around. There was one horrible old one who stank, who looked angry, or sad. The others brandished claws, shouted. He hissed back and brandished his claws. But there were too many to fight. He ran.

He headed for the forest. It smelled like spring. There would be hunting there.

—THE END—

Embracing-The-New
by Benjamin Rosenbaum

** This story is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-NoDerivs license, which means you are free to redistribute it, non-commercially, without alteration, and with proper attribution. For details see creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/ **

If you are connected to the Internet, take a moment to rate this eBook by going back to your bookshelf at www.fictionwise.com.