

# **THE GUEST RITES**

**By ROBERT SILVERBERG**

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*Carthule was not the Earthman's  
god, but Carthule protected him  
while he was a guest in the temple—even  
if he tore the temple down!*

It was time for the after-meal meditation. Marik, First Priest of Carthule, finished his frugal meal and went outside to sit in the mid-day breeze and watch the sands blowing gently over the bare flat plains. The problem of the Revelation occupied his reveries: why had Carthule, in His infinite wisdom, waited so long to reveal to His people that they were not alone in the universe?

Marik looked up at the glowing dot behind the gray wall of the sky. That, he knew, was the Sun. And there were other planets, some inhabited, some not. Carthule was not alone; He was one of nine. And His people had never suspected the truth until the flaming ships of the third planet—Earth, was it?—had broken through the skies, and the small white people had told them of the other worlds.

The problem was one which the greatest theologians of the time—in whose number Marik, without pride, deemed himself—had discussed at great length, never coming to a solution. Marik and Polla San, of the neighboring temple, had finally concluded that Carthule moved in ways too complex for His mortal people to understand.

Marik lowered his gaze from the sky and looked out across the dry expanse of desert. He could make out, dimly, Polla San's temple

far across the sands. Polla San was due to visit him shortly, he recalled. Or was it the other way around? Marik frowned; he was getting old, and soon would have to relinquish his duties to one of the younger acolytes and spend his remaining decades sitting dreaming in the afternoon.

Calmly Marik settled into the semi-somnolence of the after-meal meditation, fixing his gaze on the far-off temple of Polla San but turning his vision inward. The sand blew in widening circles, until it seemed to Marik that there was a small, dark figure wandering out in the desert. Sleepily he watched the circlings of the small figure as it pursued a crazy path through the desert.

Then perception broke through his meditation and he realized something was in the desert that had no business there. Carefully he lifted the transparent nictitating lid that protected his eyes from the sand and focussed sharply on the figure in the desert.



It was an Earthman! Lost in the desert, apparently. Marik, somewhat annoyed at this interruption of his meditation, rang for Kenra Sarg.

The young acolyte appeared immediately. Marik nodded. "Look out there," he said.

Kenra Sarg turned and stared. After a moment he turned back to Marik.

"That's an Earthman lost out there! We'd better bring him in here before he gets buried by the sand. What do you say, Father?"

"Of course, Kenra Sarg, of course. Bring him here."

The younger priest bowed and trotted out to the desert. Marik watched him as he ran. He was tall and powerful, and his skin was

deep blue, almost purple. His powerful thigh muscles clenched and unclenched as he ran. *He reminds me of my younger self*, Marik thought, as he watched Kenra Sarg pound effortlessly over the sand. *He will be a fine successor when I am ready to go.*

He sank back into reverie, hoping for some repose before Kenra Sarg returned with the Earthman.

He was small, even smaller than the other Earthmen Marik had seen, and his mouth worked curiously and constantly. His face had been dried by the desert. He shook sand from his hair, his eyes, his ears.

"I thought I was finished that time," he said, looking up into Marik's eyes. The Earthman's eyes were bright and hard, and Marik found the contact unpleasant.

"You are safe here," Marik said. "This is the Temple of Carthule."

"I've heard of you people," the Earthman said. "Understand you're a sort of hotel and religion combined."

"Not exactly," Marik said. "But the strongest tenet of our faith is that the Guest Rite is inviolable. Our greatest joy is giving sanctuary to wanderers. You are welcome here so long as you care to stay."

The little Earthman nodded his head. "Sounds fine with me. But I won't trouble you long. I was just passing through this region on my way back to New Chicago—I mean Corolla—when I got lost in your desert. Dropped my compass in the sand and couldn't find my way after that."

"Yes," Marik said. "It is very difficult."

"You're telling me! It would not be so bad if you had stars here on Venus—Carthule, I mean—but you don't, and so there's no way to get your direction. I could have died out there before I found my way back to Corolla. I'm shipping back to Earth," he said. "I can't wait to get back. No disrespect meant, of course," he added cautiously.

Marik looked down at the Earthman. *I'll never get used to their pale skins*, he thought. *And they talk so much*. "Yes," he said. "I know many of your people find our planet a difficult one to live on. We are better adapted for such life than you."

"Sure," the Earthman said. "Say, could I get some rest now? I'm pretty well shot after that tour of your desert."

"Certainly," said Marik. "Kenra Sarg, will you show our guest to one of our rooms? Feel free to stay as long as you care to," he said to the Earthman. "Carthule's generosity is unbounded."

"Oh, don't worry about that," the Earthman said. "I'm not going to stay for long. Just a day or so to recover my bearings, so to speak, and once I'm in traveling shape again I'm heading straight for Corolla." Kenra Sarg led him away, and he followed, still talking.

Marik looked briefly up at the sky, but Carthule made no answer. For some reason Marik felt suspicious of this Earthman, and as he moved toward the room of prayer to perform the service customary upon the arrival of one seeking sanctuary, he uttered a small, silent plea to Carthule to keep his mind free of groundless hatreds.

When Marik finished his devotion before the great purple figure of Carthule, he kissed the blazing eye of the statue as was his private custom, humbled himself before the altar, and turned to leave.

"I waited till you were through, Marik," said a tall figure in priestly robes who had been standing at the door. "I didn't want to interrupt your service."

"Polla San! Why have you come here now? I expected you next month!"

Marik looked anxiously at his fellow priest. He knew well that the old priest of the neighboring temple left his books and his meditations infrequently, and never came to visit Marik without first sending notice.

"Serious business," said Polla San. Marik noticed for the first time that the other was wearing the gold band. It was a sign of deep sorrow.

"Tell me outside," Marik said. "This is not the room for it."

"This is of His realm," Polla San said. "Listen: not long ago one of the Earthmen arrived at my temple. He said he was on his way to Corolla, and was looking for shelter and a place to sleep before crossing the desert. Of course, we welcomed him and, since we had no more beds, I gave him my room and slept on the floor in the mealroom. Last night he left, hurriedly, without telling anyone. When I found my room empty, I concluded he had gone, and I went to the room of prayer to offer my wish that Carthule protect him on his journey. I bowed before the statue, even as you did now—and when I looked up I saw that the eye had been stolen!"

"No!" Marik said. He turned and looked at his own statue of Carthule. In the center of the forehead burned the irreplaceable stone that had been set there century upon century before—a great red stone with secret fires burning in its heart. He tried to picture

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