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JOHN GIUNTA 56

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!

THE GUEST RITES

by ROBERT SILVERBERG

Illustrated by GIUNTA

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 the eye not there, and could not. The eye was the heart of the Temple.

"Our Earthman had stolen the eye," Polla San said. "But he is still in our power. He left so hurriedly that he forgot this." He reached into his robe and took out a small metallic object.

"His compass," Polla San said. "Without this, he cannot cross the desert. He is still out there somewhere. Come: let your acolytes and mine search the

desert for him, regain the eye, and give him the death he deserves."

Marik sank to his knees before the statue. "No," he said.

"No?" Polla San put his hand on the other's shoulder. "We are within our rights. The Earthmen will agree with us; he has committed a sacrilege and we must punish him for it. Why be afraid?"

"It's not that," Marik said. "He richly deserves death. But he is not in the desert. He is here."

"Here?"

"I saw him wandering out there and sent Kenra Sarg to bring him in. He is asleep in one of our guest rooms now. I was just performing the Guest Rite for him when you came."

Polla San sank to his knees alongside Marik. "This is serious, Marik. If he is a guest of yours, he is inviolate. He will sleep here in the home of Carthule after having committed the greatest of desecrations, and we must serve him and feed him and shelter him. It's not right, Marik!"

Marik turned in amazement. "You're not questioning the Word, are you? The Guest Rite is inviolable. As long as he is our guest, we cannot harm him. To punish him for his act would be a greater violation than the act itself."

"But can we let this Earthman remain a guest of Carthule, Marik? Let him sleep down there with the eye in his pocket, and not do a thing about it! He could flaunt the jewel under our noses and we'd have to nod our heads and offer him more food."

"The way of Carthule is the right way," Marik said. "The Guest Rite is inviolable. We will continue to treat this Earthman as we would Carthule Himself."

"But what can I do, Marik? My temple is no longer a temple without the eye!"

"Carthule will show us the way, Polla San. Suppose we pray."

THE FOLLOWING morning the Earthman, after a hearty meal, stretched himself luxuriously and looked out across the desert.

"I guess I'll be moving along," he said to Marik. "I'm in fine shape now, thanks."

"I am glad you found your stay restful," Marik said, concealing his feelings for the desecrator. "Carthule is ever-providing."

The Earthman began to move idly up and down the mealroom, examining the ancient furnishings. "That reminds me," he said. "You wouldn't have a compass to lend me, would you?"

"A compass?" Marik let a puzzled frown cross his forehead. "What may a compass

be?" he asked in just the right tone of ignorance.

The Earthman glanced at him impatiently. "You know," he said, gesturing with his hands. "It's a sort of a little metal box with a magnetic pointer. You must have seen them."

"No," Marik said. "Out here we rarely have guests from your world. I have not seen any compasses."

"Don't you use them yourselves—or something equivalent, I mean? A compass is for traveling. It tells you what direction you're going in."

Marik smiled. "We of Carthule have no need of such things, friend. We need no external guides here."

The Earthman worried a tangled wisp of hair. "Nothing at all? How do you find your way around in the desert?"

"We know how to travel," said Polla San quietly, emerging from his reverie.

"But—how can I get back to Corolla without a compass? I'll just get lost again!" The Earthman looked anxiously from one impassive blue face to another.

"Carthule will help you, friend," Marik said. "Carthule helps all who love Him."

It seemed to Marik that the Earthman paled a little.

"Maybe you could lend me a guide," he said. "I can pay well. Maybe you could let me have

that big fellow who brought me in from the desert? He could just show me the way to Corolla and then come right back."

"Our acolytes have no time for such journeys," Marik said. "We are busy here all the day long."

"But all you do is pray—I mean—" he broke off, realizing he had insulted his hosts. He turned and stared out at the shifting sands.

"You will have to set out alone," Polla San said.

"Can't you let me have anyone? Just a kitchen boy?" His hard little eyes flicked from one priest to the other. "Anyone at all? Otherwise I'm stuck here for good!"

"Carthule will guide you," Marik said.

The Earthman stared angrily at the tall priests. "I'm beginning to think you want me to get lost again," he said. "You talk about Carthule, and charity, but because I'm an Earthman you won't help me. But I'll show you. I'll get back to Corolla. And you'll pay for this when I do!"

He ran out. Marik and Polla, sitting quietly, exchanged glances.

"We are moving in the right direction," Polla San said. "But I think you would be wise to guard your room of prayer lest he seek to add to his collection."

"No fear of that," Marik said. "We'll see him again."

THE EARTHMAN disappeared later that morning. Kenra Sarg reported that he had set out, alone, in the general direction of Corolla, after fruitlessly attempting to bribe one of the kitchen boys to accompany him. He had offered them fabulous sums, but they had laughed at him.

The Eye of Marik's Carthule was still in place, but one of the younger acolytes, who had been praying all morning, told Marik that the Earthman had furtively entered the room of prayer and had backed out upon seeing the priest at his devotions.

With the Earthman gone, Marik returned to the calm of his daily routine. The after-meal meditation was a pleasant one; he and Polla San sat facing the desert, contemplating the grandeur of Carthule and pondering the meaning of His ways, until they sank into a transcendent peace. As the night winds began to cool the desert, they fell into a discussion of the problem of evil.

Marik maintained that Carthule had created the Earthmen out of His infinite wisdom, better to show the virtue of His people by contrast; while Polla San, wandering on the very edge of orthodox theology, suggested

that the god whom the Earthman worshipped was actually independent of Carthule, representing the embodiment of evil as Carthule was the personification of good.

Marik refused to accept this, arguing that Carthule had created both His people and the Earthmen, or perhaps—as a concession to Polla San—that he had created the god of the Earthmen who, in turn, had created the Earthmen. The discussion went on through the night, while the night winds swirled the sand up around the temple, and they felt no need of sleep.

"Your theory denies the omnipotence of Carthule," Marik said, as the night winds began to lower in intensity. "If you postulate an evil force of as great power as the good, you deny the factors on which our morality—" Marik broke off, seeing that Polla San had slipped off into the near-sleep of a reverie.

He stood up, his long legs cramped after the afternoon and night of sitting, and walked up and down. The desert was settling into its morning calm after the tempestuous night. He stared out across it, thinking of the Earthman who had set out for Corolla with the priceless eye of Carthule in a pouch by his side.

There was a figure in the

distance, walking slowly and with great difficulty in widening circles, following a wild path to the temple. Marik lifted his nictitating lid to make sure his eyes were not playing him false.

Then, rather than awakening Kenra Sarg or Polla San, he did up his robe and went out in the desert to fetch the Earthman back himself.

HE HAD BEEN wandering all night, tossed by the night winds, eyes and ears and mouth choked with sand. He was still master enough of himself to throw an angry glare at Marik when the priest approached, but he suffered himself to be lifted like a child and carried back to the temple. The pouch was still hanging by his side, Marik noted.

"I see our friend has returned," Polla San said.

"Yes," Marik said. "Yesterday morning he departed without taking leave and lost his way again on the way to Corolla. After a night in the desert he found his way back to us and is once again looking for sanctuary. This is true, isn't it?" Marik said, looking down at the Earthman cradled in his arms.

The Earthman angrily spat out some sand.

"Carthule in His mercy has brought our wanderer back," Polla San said.

"I'll take him below," Marik

said. "His night in the desert has left him weak and sore, and he needs rest. But he will always find sanctuary here with Carthule. Carthule shows His generosity to the lowest of creatures."

Kenra Sarg appeared at the door. "I see our guest has returned," he said.

"Yes. He has come back to us." Marik handed the Earthman over to Kenra Sarg, despite an impotent look of rage from the huddled, battered little thief.

"Take him to the room he had, and let him rest. He has traveled, and he is weary. I will go to the room of prayer, and offer up the Guest Rite for him, for he is our guest again. For as long as he cares to stay."

Kenra Sarg nodded and carried the Earthman inside.

Marik turned to Polla San. "Carthule has treated us well. I always feel happy when we have a guest."

Polla San smiled. "He still has the eye, I hope."

"He still does. I don't think he got too far last night. I've never seen anyone quite so angry."

"He will never find his way to Corolla alone," Polla San said. "Not without this." He thoughtfully fondled the compass in his hand.

"If my acolytes were not all so busy, I would allow one to guide him," Marik said, smiling.

"But I can spare none, and I enjoy offering our hospitality. He is our guest, and we must do all in our power to make his stay enjoyable. Perhaps he will never want to leave."

"No," Polla San said, standing up and flexing his legs. "He will leave often, and silently. Perhaps he will take your statue's eye as well, to put in the pouch by his side. But he will return, as he did yesterday."

"He will return," Marik said. "Again and again. He will never find his way across the desert to Corolla, and eventually he will stay here as our permanent guest. And one day he shall die, if not

sooner than later—these Earthmen are a short-lived breed—and we will recover the eyes, which will still be in the pouch by his side."

"It is wonderful to have a guest," Polla San said.

"It is," Marik said. "He shall live here with the eyes by his side, and one day he will die and we can recover our treasures from him. He can never get far with them. We can wait. He has but a few decades left, while Carthule has all eternity. Come," he said.

Together they went to the room of prayer to offer the service of the Guest Rites.

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