Keep the Faith

Lawrence Watt-Evans

Jomo Li-Sanch frowned at his superior, then immediately thought better of it and struggled to assume an air of calm rationality.

“But, your Eminence,” he said, “if we allow this...this person to accompany our mission, this unbeliever, isn’t it likely to confuse the Naxians, and to dilute our message?”

Her Eminence sighed. “Jomo,” she said, “haven’t you been paying any attention at all?”

Taken aback, Jomo began, “Of course I...”

“The Planetary Coordinator,” the bishop said, speaking over his protest, “does not believe religions should proselytize.”

“I know that, your Eminence...”

“Most particularly,” the bishop continued, “he doesn’t care for our religion, since we make a point of proselytizing vigorously. He is not at all happy that our church happened to arise on his planet, out of all the thousands upon thousands in the galaxy, and he really doesn’t want it to spread. Tigannir is far away from the galactic mainstream, off all the regular trade routes, and the Coordinator likes it that way. He doesn’t want us bringing his planet into regular contact with others.” She sighed. “I sometimes think the gods made their revelation here on Tigannir just to make things difficult for us.”

“Yes, but...”

“The fact that the Coordinator has forbidden us to proselytize means we cannot get launch clearance from the civil authorities for any ship owned by the Church.”

“I know...”

“That means we can only send out our missionaries to other worlds by using ships owned by other people, people the Coordinator will permit off-planet.”

“Yes, I know...” Jomo repeated desperately.

“This man Eksher is such a person. He has agreed to carry you. He has agreed to carry you. It isn’t a matter of us allowing anything.”

“Yes, but your Eminence, couldn’t we have found some more dignified transportation? This Eksher, he’s...well, he’s...” Jomo groped for a word, and at last came up with, “He’s unsavory.”

Bishop Shar Terry-deLin stared at her subordinate for a long moment. “Jomo,” she said at last, “you obviously don’t understand. We have been trying for the past eight years to find someone willing to carry our missionaries to the Naxians. Anyone. Naturally, we started with the more prestigious travelers—explorers, scientists, diplomats, traders. They all turned us down. No one cared to offend the Coordinator—or to risk offending the aliens we sought to reach. This Eksher is the first, and so far the only, person willing to oblige us, and to get even someone like him to agree we’ve had to provide all the financing for his entire trading voyage. We are, to all intents and purposes, simply partners in his commercial enterprise, selling these ancient entertainments of his. You are ostensibly going along only to guard the Church’s investment—that’s how we’re getting you past planetary security. This is the first chance we’ve had to spread our gospel off this one planet and out to the others of the Six Races, Jomo, and I had thought you were the right person to carry it—but I may have erred.”

“No, Eminence!” Jomo burst out. “I’m ready to carry the word! I apologize for my effrontery; please, pardon me!”

“Of course,” she said, her tone magnanimous. “I understand how your enthusiasm for the faith could bring you to expect better for it. Eksher is all we have, however, and tomorrow you will board his ship, and carry our faith to new worlds.”

Jomo bowed his head in acknowledgment. The bishop waved a hand in dismissal, and he turned to go.

She watched him depart, and a frown crossed her own face.

Eksher was unsavory. And Jomo was young and idealistic. She hoped there wouldn’t be problems as a result.

The word had to be spread, though—the tenets of the faith made it absolutely necessary that it be brought to all the Six Races. So far, the universe had conspired to prevent that—as she had mentioned, Bishop Terry-deLin put that down to the gods testing the faith of their followers, as the Church’s gospel said they must. And for an emissary to the Naxians, to beings who could read emotion, who could be better than a young idealist, his total devotion to his beliefs written all over his face?

It was a shame that the only transportation the Church of the Great Test could arrange for Jomo was with a third-rate hustler, out to sell cheap entertainments to aliens who didn’t know any better.

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“Nice little ship,” Arren Eksher remarked, as he verified the course read-out. “Smart, too. You’ll see.”

Jomo made a noncommittal noise.

“Cost a good bit getting it fixed up after that last run I did, but you people covered all that.”

Jomo grimaced at the thought of all the precious Church funds that had been wasted on this man’s ship.

Eksher grinned. “You preachers do all right for yourselves, I guess.”

Jomo shrugged.

“Not a bad racket. Maybe I should give it a try, hey?”

Jomo didn’t dignify that with any response at all. Eksher glanced at him.

“You don’t think much of me, do you?” the older man said, leaning back in his seat. The chair whirred softly as it shifted shape.

“No,” Jomo stated, “I don’t.”

“You might want to be a little more pleasant, all the same,” Eksher suggested, stretching his long, bony arms over his head and cracking his knuckles loudly. “We’re going to be stuck with each other for awhile; it’s a good long boost yet before we can jump, and then we’ll need to cruise in to Carter-Carter IV, and then I expect the snakes’ll keep us together once we get there, at least at first. We’ll be seeing a lot of each other. No need to make it any harder than it’s got to be.”

Jomo grimaced again. “I’ll try,” he said.

“Good boy,” Eksher replied, grinning.

Jomo saw, with a sudden shock, that Eksher’s teeth were yellow. He’d never seen such a thing in an Erthuma.

“I think I’ll go to my cabin,” he said, rising.

Eksher smirked at him.

“Sleep tight,” he said.

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For the first three days on board the Cinema Queen Jomo said as little as possible to Eksher. He sometimes found himself staring at the older man with a sort of fascination, and whenever he caught himself doing it he would quickly turn away.

When it was Eksher who caught him at it the salesman would grin broadly, then burst out laughing at Jomo’s blushing confusion.

Still, Jomo would stare.

Arren Eksher was the tallest Erthuma Jomo had ever seen—at least two hundred ten centimeters—and the thinnest, as well. Even through the blue shipsuit, Jomo could count the other man’s ribs. Eksher’s elbows and knees were bony knobs, and the dark brown skin was stretched tight across his skull, making him look even older than he really was in his present cycle. His head was unevenly bald—the remaining hair was not in a simple ring or a graceful curve, but in irregular patches above each ear. He somehow contrived to always have what looked like a five-day growth of beard; Jomo eventually concluded that that scraggly mess was all the beard Eksher could grow, and that he didn’t bother to shave.

He was unsanitary, too. His breath was bad, and even with his mouth closed his odor was very noticeable.

Jomo marvelled that any intelligent being could be so heedless in caring for himself.

Maybe, the young missionary thought, he just didn’t have a good reason to take care of himself. Maybe, if he knew the true purpose of his life...

At the next meal, he began, “Have you ever thought about why we’re here?”

Eksher looked up from his bowl, and a broad smile spread across his face, making it look more skull-like than ever.

“Boy,” he said, “don’t try to tell me your fairy tales. I heard the whole outline from that bishop of yours, and I don’t buy it for a minute. Save it for the Naxians on Carter-Carter IV.”

“But surely,” Jomo insisted, “you must see that all the Six Races must have a purpose, must have been chosen for something—why else would only six species have interstellar travel, out of the hundreds that have evolved intelligence?”

“I don’t see anything of the kind, kid,” Eksher replied brusquely. “I don’t see any reason not to think it’s just one more coincidence in a universe that’s full of them.”

“But...”

Eksher cut him off. “Listen, Jomo,” he said, “I don’t care what you sell the Naxians, but don’t try to sell it to me. I’m not interested.”

“I’m not trying to sell you anything,” Jomo protested.

“Don’t be silly,” Eksher replied. “Of course you are. Now, stop it.”

“But it’s the truth, it’s the destiny of the Erthumoi...”

“Look, boy, I haven’t tried to sell you any of my goods, have I? So do me a favor and forget about selling me yours!”

“You’re just selling cheap entertainment; I’m trying to give you the truth!”

Eksher didn’t bother to argue any more; he picked up his bowl, turned his back, and marched into his cabin, leaving Jomo to eat alone in the common room.

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They had been back in normal space for slightly more than six hours when the ship announced, “I have an incoming message that purports to come from the planetary authorities of Carter-Carter IV. I have no way of verifying the authenticity of such authority for non-Erthumoi governments, however.”

Both men had been lounging in the common room, not speaking. Eksher had been doing something with his personal computer; Jomo had simply been thinking. Now, they both looked up.

“That’s all right,” Eksher said, dropping his computer on his lap. “Put it on the screen.”

The ship obeyed; the image of a Naxian appeared, larger than life, on the port bulkhead.

Until that moment, Jomo hadn’t known exactly where the main cabin screen was. Now he stared, fascinated, at the alien.

The creature was snakelike, but Jomo could not be sure of its size from the image on the screen. He knew that adult Naxians generally ranged from two to four meters in length, but he was unable to judge where in that range this one fell. The background, composed entirely of brightly-colored and incomprehensible machinery, provided no clues.

The Naxian itself was brightly colored, as well; its face was black streaked with gold, its sinuous body mostly a deep red, with stripes of yellow slashing at intervals diagonally across its flanks. Its manipulating members were not visible.

“I am Infrared Ovoid,” it announced—Jomo had no idea what its quasi-sex was at the moment, so he was forced to think of it as “it.” “I am the Inspector of Incoming Vessels for the Shared Purpose of Carter-Carter IV. In order to negotiate further I must accept the identity of your vessel and all its occupants.”

“Queenie,” Eksher asked the ship, “is it speaking Turic, or are you using the simultrans?”

“The Naxian is speaking the local Naxian dialect. I am providing the output of the ship’s simultrans, rather than the audio portion of the original transmission. Would you prefer the original?”

“No, that’s fine,” Eksher said. “I was just wondering why the snake’s being so long-winded. Tell it who we are.”

“Yes, sir.”

A moment later the ophidian image spoke again, and this time Jomo saw that the words that came from the screen did not match the movements of the narrow mouth.

“Welcome to the Shared Purpose, Jomo Li-Sanch and Arren Eksher. Arren Eksher, we understand your purpose in coming hither is to barter goods. This is entirely acceptable if the goods themselves are acceptable within the Shared Purpose, and the goods must be inspected to determine acceptability. I will come aboard your ship to make the determination. If the determination is favorable, you will be free to do as you will on Carter-Carter IV.”

The translation, Jomo noticed, lasted easily two or three seconds longer than the Naxian’s original speech; the simultrans was using longer words in the interests of making the translation as exact as possible.

“Thank you,” Eksher said, nodding polite acknowledgement.

The trader could read nothing at all in the Naxian’s face, and had no idea what the creature thought of him, while he knew that the Naxian, with the uncanny ability of its kind, could sense his slightest emotion. He therefore tried very hard to remain calm, cheerful, and optimistic.

“Jomo Li-Sanch,” Infrared Ovoid said, “I am distressed because I do not understand your purpose in coming here. Our language appears to have no equivalents for the words your shipboard thinking machine uses to describe your occupation and intent. You must attempt to explain yourself better.”

“I’ve come to bring you the truth,” Jomo said eagerly.

The Naxian stared out of the screen at him for a long, silent moment before asking, “You are a carrier of news?”

“In a way, yes,” Jomo agreed, nodding.

“But is not important news carried as easily by modulated neutrinos as by yourself?”

“Not this news. I’m here to teach your people about the one true faith, the beliefs that can give your lives meaning.”

The silent stare lasted considerably longer this time; Eksher began to fidget uneasily.

“You are sincere,” Infrared Ovoid said at last. “There is no nervousness or deception in you.”

“Of course not!” Jomo said. “I’ve found the true path; I don’t need to doubt any more.”

The Inspector of Incoming Vessels stared for another second or two, then announced, “I must board your ship, to inspect Arren Eksher’s merchandise and to question Jomo Li-Sanch more closely. Attain an appropriate trajectory.”

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“Erthumoi generally watch these on a VR set,” Eksher said as he selected a disk, “but of course, you Naxians don’t have VRs yet. At least, not here on Carter-Carter IV. If you’re interested in these stories, I’m sure I can arrange for VR sets to be imported and adapted for your use.”

Infrared Ovoid flicked the tip of its tail in acknowledgment; something rattled in the pack strapped to its midsection. “What is a VR set?” it asked.

Now that the Naxian was present in the flesh Jomo and Eksher could hear both its own rustling, squeaking voice and the words from the simultrans.

“Virtual reality,” Eksher explained eagerly. “A device fits over the user’s head, with screens over each eye and speakers over each ear, so that the sound and image are reproduced in full three- dimensional fidelity.” He slipped the disk into the slot and stepped back.

Three sets of eyes, two Erthumoi and one Naxian, turned toward the screen as images appeared.

“This is a recording,” Infrared Ovoid said.

“Yes, exactly,” Eksher replied. “It’s a recorded fiction. A story, for entertainment.”

“We tell stories,” the Naxian said, its eyes fixed on the screen. “To our young, so that they might learn.”

“Erthumoi do that, too,” Eksher said. “But we have these more complex stories, with sound and image, for adults as well.”

“It is a recording of Erthumoi,” Infrared Ovoid pointed out, as a man and a woman spoke on the screen, the simultrans instantly converting their words into the hisses and whispers of Naxians.

“Naturally,” Eksher said. “This one was made for Erthumoi. But let me show you what we can do.” He touched a switch, and the man and woman vanished, replaced by Naxians. “Computer simulations,” he said. “The computer has been programmed with Erthumoi-Naxian equivalents, and substitutes the Naxian analog for each image of an Erthuma.”

The three of them watched in silence for a moment, Jomo staring at the bizarre image of two Naxians wandering the streets of nineteenth-century London.

“Transform them back to Erthumoi, please,” Infrared Ovoid said at last.

Eksher obliged. “What do you think?” he asked.

“I wish to observe more,” the Naxian said.

Eksher started to smile, and then remembered that the Naxian could see the insincerity. Instead he shrugged, and let the disk play on.

“This is unpleasant,” the Naxian said a moment later. “The smaller Erthuma’s words say she fears for her life, but she is not afraid.”

Startled, Jomo said, “She isn’t?” He had been caught up in the story—an old one, involving a monster stalking the streets of England, back before Erthumoi had space travel. The woman certainly looked terrified to him.

“No. She is bored and mildly irritated.”

Eksher turned to stare at the Naxian.

Oblivious to the trader’s gaze, its eyes still on the screen, Infrared Ovoid asked, “Is the female dead?”

“You mean the actress who played the part?” Eksher asked. “Yes, I’m sure she is. This recording is over a thousand years old.”

“I understand,” the Naxian said.

Jomo and Eksher glanced at each other. Jomo wasn’t sure about Eksher, but he knew he didn’t understand.

“Stop the recording,” Infrared Ovoid said.

Eksher obeyed. He and the Naxian turned to face each other. Eksher tried to put on a disarming smile, then thought better of it.

“I believe you did not think through the consequences of your species’ limitations,” Infrared Ovoid said. Its reproving tone was plain even through the simultrans.

“It’s not so much our limitations,” Eksher said, “as your people’s unique abilities.”

“I acknowledge the correction,” the Inspector of Incoming Vessels said.

“What’s going on?” Jomo asked.

The Naxian turned its attention to the missionary.

“Your companion did not consider the nature of these stories he sought to sell us,” it said.

“You mean that they’re about Erthumoi, instead of Naxians? I know people like stories about their own kind, but I thought the computer simulations...”

“No,” Infrared Ovoid interrupted. “The simulations do not matter.”

“Is it the setting, then? I know that those ancient times were very different...”

“No. That could be fixed, I am sure. The problem is more basic.”

“The Naxians can read emotion, kid,” Eksher explained. “They can tell that the actors are faking.”

“Correct,” Infrared Ovoid agreed. “At first I thought the disparity between the spoken emotions and the actual emotions was deliberate, though I found it very uncomfortable to watch. I thought perhaps it was part of some subtle tension, but then I remembered that your species is hheu, emotion-blind, and I realized it was not intentional, that you could not see it.”

Jomo looked at the blank screen. “No,” he agreed. “I couldn’t see it.”

“Sometimes we can,” Eksher said. “When we do, we call that bad acting. But by our standards, the acting in that recording was very good indeed.”

“To me, the disparity was clear,” the Naxian said, and Jomo thought it would have shrugged, had it had shoulders. “And more, because the Erthumoi depicted in this recording are dead, a certain resonance is lacking. It...I doubt I can explain it in translatable terms.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Eksher said, falling into a chair. “I get the point.” He sat down, making no effort to hide his disappointment.

“Damn it,” he said. “I feel like an idiot.”

“I see no harm to adult observers in these recordings,” Infrared Ovoid said, in an attempt at conciliation. “You are free to bring them to Carter-Carter IV, though they must be kept away from our young, who might draw inappropriate conclusions. However, I see no value in them, and I would expect them to be of no interest to anyone on Carter-Carter IV except anthropologists at the Communion of Wisdom of the Shared Purpose.”

“The State University, I suppose that is,” Eksher muttered.

“That is an approximately equivalent term, yes,” the Naxian agreed, flexing its tail.

“It’s better than nothing, anyway,” Eksher acknowledged. “And at least I didn’t pay for the trip here myself.”

“I regret that you are disappointed,” Infrared Ovoid said.

“Me, too,” Eksher muttered.

Jomo found himself feeling sorry for the tall man. Here he’d come up with what must have seemed like a brilliant scheme to make money, selling cheap old entertainments to a species that had never seen them before, only to have it fall apart because of an overlooked detail.

That was what came of a concern with material wealth, of course, Jomo told himself. Eventual disappointment was inevitable.

As if reading his mind, the Naxian turned to the younger Erthuma. “And you,” it said, “what is this news that you say you carry?”

Jomo felt a warm welling of pride and joy as he exclaimed, “The best news you’ve ever heard! We know what people are for, now—we’ve found the purpose of intelligence. It’s the Seventh Race; they created us, and selected us, for a reason, and we’re on the verge of achieving that goal!”

Agitated, the Naxian extruded its manipulative members and waved the blood-red finger-fringes.

“You are sincere,” it said, and even through the simultrans Jomo and Eksher could hear the wonder in its voice. “Tell me more. I will record it.” It brought the tip of its tail around and did something with the pack it carried.

Jomo threw Eksher a triumphant grin, and set out to explain the Revelation of the Prophet d’Chakko, and what it meant for all starfaring intelligences.

Eksher stood to one side, watching silently.

“...the Seventh Race is not just another evolved species, but the gods themselves, who created our entire continuum so as to have a laboratory for their experiments. They created all the thousands of intelligent species in our galaxy, guiding their evolution, and then selected the six best and gave them the gift of hyperdrive,” Jomo proclaimed. “The gods live in hyperspace, you see— after all, could mere mortals ever have discovered such a thing without divine intervention? Could beings like the Samians or the Cephallonians, who barely have working technologies at all, have built starships without guidance from somewhere? And why just the Six? Because...”

Eksher was no Naxian, but he had a salesman’s practical knowledge of customer psychology, and even across the species boundary he could see Infrared Ovoid growing steadily more puzzled as it listened to the doctrines of the Church of the Great Test. Jomo propounded them with fervor, oblivious to the confusion of his audience, lost in the beauties of his beliefs.

“...now, after so long, the gods have seen that we are ready for the next step, and have begun to reveal themselves to us through their artifacts. Why is it that the Locrians have been exploring the galaxy for three hundred thousand years, and the first Seventh Race artifact was only discovered a decade ago—yet we’ve found a dozen more since then? Because the artifacts weren’t there until a decade ago, when the gods began to transfer them from hyperspace to our own lower reality, as an intelligence test, to see if we can...”

The Inspector of Incoming Vessels was beginning to move from confusion into annoyance, Eksher was sure, though he could not have said how he knew. Perhaps there was more of the Naxian talent in Erthumoi—some Erthumoi, anyway—than anyone realized.

“Wait,” Infrared Ovoid said at last.

Jomo’s speech slowed to a stop. “Yes?” he asked. “Is there some point that wasn’t clear?”

“What you say makes a superficially acceptable pattern, but I do not find it to be wholly reasonable. How do you come to know these things?”

“The Truth was revealed telepathically to the Prophet d’Chakko, seventeen years ago.”

“Erthumoi are not telepathic.”

“Not ordinarily, no,” Jomo agreed. “But the gods are.”

“Are you the Prophet d’Chakko?”

“No, of course not!” Jomo answered, shocked. “I’m a humble missionary!”

“Have you met the Prophet d’Chakko and spoken with it?”

“Her,” Jomo corrected. “No, I was never blessed with a chance to meet her, and she died two years ago. But we carry on in her name...”

“How do you know these things, then?”

“I was taught them by the followers of the Prophet, of course,” Jomo explained. “And now I’ve come to teach them to you and your people, so that you can join with us in finding the way to the gods. All the Six Races must come to accept the Truth before the gods will allow us to approach them, you see. It was the report on Tonclif IV, where the cooperation of five disparate intelligences triggered one of the Holy Artifacts, that allowed the Prophet to receive the Revelation...”

“Stop,” Infrared Ovoid commanded. It turned to Eksher.

“Is what the young Erthuma says true?” it demanded.

Eksher blinked, then shrugged. “I don’t know,” he said. “I don’t believe it, myself, but I can’t prove it’s wrong.”

“He believes it very intensely. Speaking of it makes him happy.”

Eksher nodded. “Religion does that,” he said.

The Naxian stared at Eksher for a moment, then back at Jomo.

“I must consider this,” it said. It reached its tail up to turn off the recorder, then curved gracefully and slithered toward the airlock.

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Jomo and Eksher waited, Jomo with mounting impatience, Eksher with calm resignation.

“Why is it taking so long?” Jomo demanded.

Eksher shrugged, and watched one of his ancient entertainments play. He had found the very oldest in his collection, dating back almost two millennia, so old it was not only flat but colorless, and he was using the computer to vary it, adding color and substituting various other actors for the originals. Just now he had Harrison Ford, the oldest sim file on board, in the lead role, telling Cha k’Tor, “The troubles of two little people don’t amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world,” blithely ignoring the fact that k’Tor was born some three hundred years after the real Ford’s death.

“Pardon the interruption,” the ship said, “but the Inspector of Incoming Vessels wishes to speak with Captain Eksher.”

“With me?” Eksher looked up, startled, and waved the screen to blank silence. “Not the kid?”

“It-she specified Captain Arren Eksher.”

Mystified, Eksher looked at Jomo and shrugged again. “Put it on the screen,” he said.

The now-familiar image of the Naxian appeared; the full-depth transmission was startlingly real after the two-dimensional “Casablanca.”

“Polite formal greetings, Arren Eksher,” the Naxian said.

“Same to you, Infrared,” Eksher replied.

“I must speak to you privately,” Infrared Ovoid said.

Eksher glanced up. “If you don’t mind, kid...”

Unhappily, Jomo arose. “All right,” he said. “I’ll be in my bunk.”

When the door of the young man’s cabin had closed, Eksher turned back to the screen. “What is it?” he asked.

“Arren Eksher, I must inquire as to whether any evidence exists to support your shipmate’s theories other than that cited by him.”

“You mean, beyond d’Chakko’s telepathic message?”

“Yes.”

“None that I know of. This is religion he’s preaching, not science.”

“Arren Eksher,” Infrared Ovoid said unhappily, “I must inquire as to the sanity of your shipmate.”

Eksher stared, and then grinned broadly.

“You think he’s nuts?”

“After listening to his purported news, and playing the recording back for myself and several scholars of the Shared Purpose, I am convinced that he has accepted as indisputable fact a somewhat vague and illogical theory that has little or no evidence to support it. While we are not familiar with the thought processes of your species, among Naxians this would be considered a sign of poor psychological health.”

Eksher scratched at his beard. “I guess we Erthumoi are a bit looser in our thinking,” he said. “I’ve never heard religious faith considered a form of insanity.”

“This term you use—the translation we receive cannot be correct. What is it?”

“Religious faith?”

“Yes.”

Eksher considered that carefully before replying.

“I don’t really think I can explain it,” he said. “You’ve just seen a really prime example of it, though.”

“This phenomenon is normal among Erthumoi?”

“More or less,” Eksher agreed.

“It resembles the Cephallonian custom of constructing philosophical models,” Infrared Ovoid remarked, “but the emotional content is entirely different. A Cephallonian creates philosophical models as an intellectual exercise and modifies them endlessly, matching different variants against the available data, while your shipmate appears to find an intense personal satisfaction in knowing something that is probably not true, and is completely unconcerned with developing it further. In fact, he appears to believe it to be complete and all-inclusive and incapable of modification.”

Eksher shrugged. “Don’t look at me,” he said. “I’m an agnostic, myself. I don’t understand it, either.”

“Agnostic?”

“Ask the ship,” Eksher suggested.

“One without religious faith,” the ship explained.

“This faith, then, is something that some Erthumoi have, while others do not?”

“Right,” Eksher agreed. “Exactly right.”

Infrared Ovoid considered for a moment, then asked, “What is it that your shipmate wishes to do on Carter-Carter IV?”

Eksher chewed his lower lip, trying to decide whether there was any way to lie convincingly to a Naxian.

He decided there wasn’t.

“He wants to convince as many of your people as possible that his beliefs are true,” he said.

Infrared thought silently for several seconds before asking, “Why?”

“To share his joy,” Eksher replied.

The Naxian’s facial scales rippled. “I understand,” it-she said.

“I can’t honestly say I do,” Eksher muttered.

“We will allow Jomo Li-Sanch to land,” Infrared Ovoid announced.

Startled, Eksher asked, “You will?”

“Yes. We will allow him to speak freely to our people.”

“If you don’t mind my asking,” Eksher said, “why?”

“Because his intensity of belief is enjoyable to observe,” Infrared Ovoid replied. “Because we find his elaborate explanations, and the delight he takes in them, to be...” The Naxian, in an oddly Erthumoi gesture, groped for the right word.

“Charming?” Eksher suggested.

“Amusing,” Infrared Ovoid said.

“You mean funny?”

“Yes. Very much so.”

Eksher sat and considered for a long moment.

“If he finds out you think he’s funny, he’ll be hurt pretty bad,” he said at last.

“We are aware of that. We will endeavor not to let him find out. Such knowledge might also damage the entertainment value of his... preaching, is it?”

“Preaching, right,” Eksher said. He sat and stared at the Naxian’s image.

Infrared Ovoid stared back.

“So,” Eksher said at last, “that’s why you wanted to talk to me, and not him.”

“Yes,” it-she agreed. “That, and one more thing.”

“What one more thing?” Eksher asked warily.

“You are a dealer in entertainments, are you not?”

“Yeah,” Eksher admitted. “So?”

“So,” Infrared Ovoid said, its inhuman expression completely unreadable, “we will pay you well to find other such entertainments. The databanks of the Communion of Wisdom of the Shared Purpose list over two thousand active religions among your species...”