

A humorously mundane, tragically hopeful sci-fi anthology.

1 — A Visual History

In Aioni Wentrav's hand was a Rgeplixian data disk, manufactured way back in the fourteenth century (give-or-take with time dilation). A big, orange plastic slab that looked like the malformed child of a floppy disk and a cassette tape. She had managed to fish out the decrepit medium's reader. But this was only the beginning. From there, the reuquan had to scour the Grand University Archives in search of a Rgeplixian parallel connector. Of course, modern computers didn't supply enough power, so she had to grab a Rgeplixian parallel power hub, which hosted a slightly less ancient Plumexian connector. This, in turn was plugged into another Rgeplixian adapter, which then plugged into a Omerlite standard port Aioni found in the Reuquanian archives for some reason, which was then taken to another Rgeplixian adapter that connected to a standard wrentzeri port, which led to three random adapters in the daisy chain that she didn't even know the origins of (likely some proprietary Gonsh connectors). This got her to a Gonsh STANDARD-16 port that took up so much power that she had tracked down with another power hub with a Terran IDE port connected to an IDE-to-USB adapter that was connected to a USB to Council-standard Z-KON adapter. The latter one would've been redundant had it not been for a long story that essentially boiled down to *the one USB port on Aioni's datapad: 0; Her wrentzer lab partner trying to insert a flash drive the wrong side up: 1.*

With the "Frankenstein's Monster" of cables (as a human passerby remarked) next to her complete, Aioni flicked her view to the screen of the datapad. To a human bystander, it would look like Aioni had two white pupils looking into the screen. Reuquans have what are called psuedopupils in their compound eyes, which are a spot that represents where they are looking. It was an interesting fact Aioni overheard in last term's biology class. It also meant some human teachers in the middle school teacher exchange program thought she was rolling her eyes when motion on the ceiling caught her attention.

Aioni fired up the datapad, twisted her lower-right wrist around the biometric scanner, and touched *Files* the moment the tablet showed its home screen. With any luck, no matter how little luck it was, the datapad would find and install the correct drivers to make the monstrosity work, even if that meant having to fire up multiple layers of nested virtual machines to properly emulate what the hardware expected.

Fortunately, luck was on Aioni's side that day, given that after a loud *THUNK* from the disk reader, an entry for "NO NAME" appeared on the drive selection screen, causing

the orangeish-red, moth-like student to flutter her folded wings in excitement. She'd installed Ancient Rgeplis file codecs onto the system beforehand. She was the kind of nerd who would go looking for insanely weird and decrepit filesystems to view one thing.

Aioni was doing this for a Feion studies class, all about the Rgeplis' former home planet of Feior. Her travels brought her here hoping to find something interesting to make a report on. Since it was a required social core course required to get her computer science degree, she might as well explore old Feion programs. Who knows, maybe she'd find some gems in the disk. A word processor or an encyclopedia, or maybe even some old games she could analyze the themes of for some political reasoning. She was even willing to analyze what words the word processor on the drive found correct if it came down to it, even if she couldn't read the words themselves. Anything on this drive could be analyzed to death, beyond anything the authors ever intended. It was about looking smart enough to get a good grade in the class this close to finals.

Aioni touched the unnamed drive's entry with her lower-left hand, leaving her upper-left hand free to fidget with her antenna, a sensory stimulation technique that produced both touch and sound sensations.

On the root of the disk was a bunch of random garbage in archaic ancient Inthlian. There was no organization of any kind on this disk. No folders, no file extensions, not even sorting in the lexicographical order of Inthlian, Feion's main language. Not that Aioni could even read the glyphs.

Reuquans don't write in big bold letters because it's cool. Having compound eyes means they have a lower resolution in their vision, the closest human analog being cranking up the FoV slider in a game to and expecting to be able to read the signs ingame. The reuquans' scripts all account for this. Their simple and easy to grasp letters combined with extremely large typefaces (paper was warred over the moment it was invented by large tribes throughout the early-industrial Reuqua era) let those with poor vision quality read just as well as anyone else. Unfortunately, massive and complex scripts such as Chinese, Bamum, and Inthlian posed a problem for any reuquan wishing to decipher them. Visual AR translators were a must when reading cramped text. Fortunately, on a datapad, Aioni's savior was a couple taps away in a submenu. The perplexing logograms literally split and morphed into the blocky letters she learned in basics school back on Reuqua Neo with a fluid and smooth animation that always caused her wings to shake in excitement.

Most files were just scientific papers of sorts. Something about magnets and reactions to experiments with genetic code. Another file was a primitive biosimulator program that

crashed the instant it opened. But the file that caught Aioni's eye was a file titled LXNPLVID. A video file. How exciting.

A lower-left index finger furiously jabbed the screen, whose stand collapsed with a loud thump. Aioni scanned the room embarrassed. Her lower-right arm hoisted a brownish-yellow duffel bag and let it quietly slide onto the table while her left arms set the pad back upright. The upper-right hand yanked the cordlock upwards then joined its lower sibling in tandemly prying the canvas lip apart. It extracted a brownish-yellow contraption that Aioni placed on the bridge on her forehead between her antennae, with two prongy bits lightly clipped around each appendage. She shoved the Z-KON cable dangling from the device into the one remaining Z-KON port, just in time for the video to begin playing.

The device's prongs rattled the reuquan's antennae at varying frequencies, interpreted as auditory stimuli, interpreted as some kind of music she'd never heard of, but was most certain she would never want to hear again.

They weren't the best pair or rattlers she'd ever bought. These were cheap antenna rattlers, which, like cheap human headphones, are hastily thrown together in some brandless factory to make a quick buck. She cheaped out and bought a pair online after she left her Hi-Fi ones back on her homeworld. The notion of forgetting something on another planet is a concept you would never think too much about as a pre-spacer, but it makes perfect sense once you give it an ounce of brainpower.

Aioni placed her lower-left hand on the screen and flicked it upward. Instantly, Wentravish script hung suspended a good dozen centimeters above the datapad screen, roughly translating to "Captions On." A huff in frustration echoed through the Grand Archives. No matter how many times she configured this blasted hologram to be projected onto a table, it would always throw itself into the air. She had a script to fix it sent to her by a wrentzer in her game dev club, but that broke on the next update, and Aioni wasn't too keen on giving low-level access to any scripts made by people who don't know to stop applying pressure to a USB drive if it isn't going in. So, she grabbed the hologram and slammed it on the table with a cathartic thud.

Already, the video was a good seven seconds in as Aioni was doing her impromptu configuration. She flicked the screen to reset the video, able to give it her undivided attention (with the exception of the music).

Onscreen, an orange-and-green amphibian with frills all over his face like a beard was hanging suspended in the air as he began to speak.

“Greetings, shareholders!” he announced in a baritone voice that once served to not be smothered by the ocean his kind lived in, but now simply betrayed any logical looks of the aquatic alien. “We have exciting news to announce at Jakxch Corp! Something that will get all you space fans out waiting to best the corals!” He gestured a typical Feion greeting before continuing. “Rgepliskind has always dreamed about exploring what’s beyond our planet. Unfortunately, the body of the rgeplis is ill-equipped to be tasked with such exciting ventures.”

Without any kind of warning, the screen flashed footage of a severely-discolored rgeplis being carried away, something any rgeplis would register as one who died. If Aioni had such knowledge, she would be simultaneously disgusted and fascinated the sheer irreverence Feions showed their own dead kin.

“We are water-breathers. We are squishy. We get sick when cold, and space is cold. Our short and stubby limbs are horrible for space travel. Analysis shows we are the worst species of any on our planet to approach the issue of space once intelligence is taken out of the equation.”

The rgeplis paused, presumably to allow the audience wallow in their own despair or wish in futility for space to be warmer.

“Greetings from Ilikxcha! My name is Dr. Noushla! And on behalf of Jakxch Corp and the Republic of Feior, I am proud to announce the solution that will finally get our frills around the stars!”

His webbed four-digit hands on the end of six stubby legs subtly waved to the side to retain the alien’s upright orientation.

“At Jakxch Corp, we strive to bypass the limitations of the rgeplis body by creating designated species with specified purposes. You most likely own a odoplankton or tube eel.” Images of a plankton with a stinger on the end used as a theft deterrent and a long eel with stiff, brush-like frills joined the businessman.

“These are just two of our ever-growing catalog of products. Our understanding of genetics and organic life has innovated and improved the lives of many rgeplis. However, our ventures have involved very simple organisms. Up until now.”

Blackness consumed the screen. The horrid music returned with a burning vengeance. Jakxch Corp. frequently composed their own music, psychologically crafted to be stuck in the head of any rgeplis that heard it. But like all rgeplis music when heard by another species, it sounds like someone carpet-bombed the bass track and nothing else.

A dim light flicked back on to reveal a small creature. The light curved around the model as it breathed and twirled around in a hypnotic fashion, almost dancing. First it's medium-sized body was shown off. A camera caught a four-digit hand in the view of it's blubbery body. A slab of flesh connected the long arms down to the waist as the view panned to get a view of it's equally stubby legs and equally webbed feet compared to an rgeplis. A tail with a weird ring at the end capped off the body.

Suddenly, all the water vanished from the room, leaving the shadowy figure on the ground, standing unfazed. "I am the first breathless creature," a disembodied feminine voice (which meant only slightly higher pitched) bragged.

The camera cut to a rock, which organism's hand snatched with utmost speed. Another cut went to the creature's mouth, as the rock flew in slo-mo directly into it.

"I am the first geovore," boasted the voice-over again.

Another jump cut. The camera was positioned right below the figure, but any identifying features were drowned out by an extremely bright light, suspended in the waterless room.

A cut revealed a mesmerizing purplish black and gold pattern with a bunch of circles flowing into it, pulling it upward.

"I am the first electrosolar sailor," she aloofly announced.

The camera flashed over to face the figure head-on, finally revealing to the world its rgeplis-like head with an elongated snout, that gave Terrans the impression of a beak and the overall impression of an anthropomorphic manta ray.

"I am the first intelligent artificial species," the voice said proudly. "I am the first space-habitable species," she appended with the exact same timbre and tone.

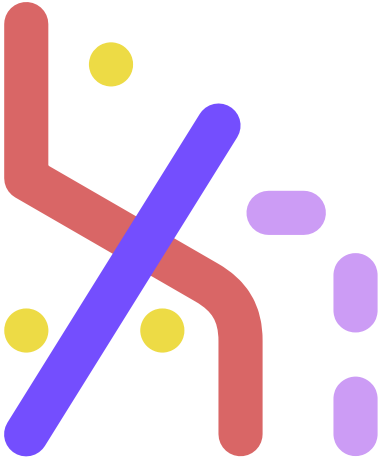
"I—" the voice paused as the figure showed off the dark-purples of their eyes for the first time ever, before the screen went black and the music finally stopped (*praise be to Reuq*, thought Aioni).

"—am the first lexinpol."

The light slowly faded back to the doctor Aioni saw before, with a proud smile on his face. "As you can see, Jakxch Corp. intends on heading the new rgeplixian space initiative. Our intent is to use the lexinpols as natural astronauts that can thrive in space, living on meteorites, maintaining our colonies, and preparing a viable future for space travel, and perhaps alien life. I'm not gonna sugarcoat this anymore. Now that you see

just the sheer power of our innovation, we recommend you continue backing our company. I've put way too much work into this, and I want to see the lexinpols succeed. Thank you for all you have put into this company."

With that, a fade to white with a company logo appeared and the datapad's focus was booted back to the file manager.



Aioni's antennae perked up and twitched with excitement. *This was perfect!* she giddily thought to herself. *I found the reveal of the lexinpols' creation! Where it all started.* The crazy, unreadable files, the excessive amount of adapters, and the relentless search for an ancient slab of plastic was all worth it for this. There was nothing left to do.

She copied the disk onto the main drive, disconnected the amalgamation from her datapad, and yanked, disk out of its drive. Finally, the datapad and rattlers went back into the duffel bag, closed snug and tight. When the reuquan stood up to organize the cables and head out, she felt a smooth surface brushing up against her wings.

A purplish-black figure at the height of her neck-fluff-concealed shoulders stood there, mouth agape, and hands positioned away from his body.

"Oh!" Aioni blurted, "sorry about that!"

The lexinpol didn't respond. Instead, his eyes gazed down at a purplish-black spot on their white belly. A spot that, while mangled over the generations and generations of mutations, bore the logo shown on screen.

"That's what this is?" the engineered sapient whispered in utter existential shock. Aioni, too unnerved to grab her duffel and leave, stood right where she was. The lexinpol beside her, like most of his species, was fully aware of their past. They were organisms meant to explore the stars, designed in the eyes of their mortal gods, the rgeplis. A mere product in a catalog of other organic products. They had long since accepted this as a given part of their life, and had long-transcended what they were. They became essential to the galactic community *they* brought together.

But seeing the logo of the company that designed you? Willed your very species into being in a flashy commercial that would make Apple's marketing team froth at the mouth? Even a millennium and some change later, it was terrifying.

To Aioni, watching this walking, talking being being so viscerally reminded he was nothing more than a living space probe was like watching a kid who knew Santa wasn't real being jostled awake by you exchanging their dismembered tooth for a ten-cent piece beneath their pillow. She sharply inhaled through her rebreather implant before telling the lexinpol "you're okay. I know it's tough," which made about as much difference as a quarter as opposed to a dime would've made.

Thoughts were racing through the lexinpol's mind that blocked out the reuquan's attempt at comfort. *Who? Why did they do this? Why couldn't they have made robots instead? Why make things that could age and die? Was it for the laughs? For inefficiency? Because our inventors (I can't believe I can describe them as that) had thrown so much money at the government they ensnared they'd gladly pay a contract no matter how expensive?*

Oh, lord, anything but that! Please, please, please tell me I'm not the product of profiteering!

"Do you need anything?" Aioni asked as gently as her squeaky voice could muster.

The lexinpol switched from staring at the logo on his body to staring at Aioni, who extended an unsteady hand in his direction.

"N-n-no," he croaked, "I-I'm fine."

Despite having a lung solely for talking, deep breaths still comforted him. He was making progress. Fifteen cents worth of progress was still positive progress.

"It's a lot to take in."

"It is. It's like—um—seeing a beautiful garden on the surface of Reuqua."

Aioni would've blinked if she had eyelids. While not as tragic as the lexinpol's history, the reuquans looked back at their original homeworld, consumed by its own sun going supernova. The reuquans were a species that for the past two centuries was adrift in a giant fleet of spaceships at lightspeed. Only fifteen years ago did they finally find a new planet to inhabit and terraform into a self-sustaining ecosystem. Aioni was five years old at the time. Furthermore, it just so happened the perfect match was shared a system with another planet with thousands alien species. A notable one in particular was species that called themselves "humans."

The humans enthusiastically aided the reuquans, even ceding the planet the lipedepteroids requested. Some believe it was the undeniable cuteness of a reuquan that drove the Terrans to give up the planet they so fantasized about colonizing themselves. Some say it was mere altruism that drove their decision. Either way, even though Aioni had a new home, there was something she missed about the old homeworld she never got to see. A sort of nostalgia for a time she never experienced.

“Yeah, pretty much,” she concluded.

“What’s the video for?” the lexinpol interrogated.

Aioni chuckled nervously. “It’s for Feion studies. I’m taking it as my social sciences class.”

He seemed satisfied with that answer because he then asked “what’s your major?”

“CS.”

“Oh!” the ray remarked. “I’m also taking CS! Ummm... Terran or Federation?”

“Terran.”

The most species the former Galactic Federation had ever had was nine. Most of the species that had computers, seven of them, had been around long enough that the Federation assimilated their computing systems into their conglomerate. One of the two remaining species leeches off the rgeplis’ and the other was a plantoid species called yt’nek that while they had the theory leading up to computers down, had created something so alien it broke the definition of a computer.

Terran computers were different from the Federation’s in ways that would take whole doctorate papers to explain. To the layperson, they still both used 0s and 1s, still had the ability read and write data, and most computers bought on Earth supported both Federation and Terran computing standards. But the advanced reasons were why the CS field on Earth was split into Terran Computer Science and Council Computer Science. Universities had mapped out a plan to eventually merge the fields depending on how the science evolved—but that would take some time. And arguing. Lots of arguing.

“Interesting,” the lexinpol remarked. “I’m doing Fed—er Council. They can never seem to make up their mind on what to call it.”

The two of them chuckled.

“I’m Orvin, by the way,” Orvin introduced himself.

“Aioni Wentrav.”

“All one name?”

“No; I’m from the Wentrav tribe. We’re a very tribal species, and take pride in their tribal identity. It is traditional in reuquanian to put your tribe’s name after your own.”

“Ah. Cool!”

Orvin put on a slightly embarrassed expression while looked around the archives. Towering pillars supported a fusion of contemporary and gothic architecture, holding a galaxy’s worth of records and whatever else species had decided to contribute. A truly breathtaking sight.

Aioni began undoing the mess of cables on the table. Separating each and every one and stashing them to the side.

“I’ve been on Vinroel for my whole life. I took the first opportunity to study abroad on Earth, and I don’t regret it,” Orvin reflected, watching Aioni’s four hands nimbly separating the connectors in awe.

“Yeah,” Aioni lamented. “It’s exciting, but, so... exhausting at times.”

“So much has changed for your species. You have a new planet now, you contacted aliens, and you’re adapting like everyone else,” the lexinpol noted in a comforting tone.

Aioni looked at Orvin and corrected his projection. “It’s not about reuquans overall. I’m glad we have a new planet to exist on. I’m glad I don’t have to manage oxygen levels like my parents did on our vessel. I was talking about just being on Earth. I have to have this loud rebreather running in my throat to filter out my natural carbon monoxide exhalation, I need to have chloroform bottles to drink, which are heavily regulated, and water-based organisms’ food just doesn’t play well with me.”

“Aren’t you folks based on chloroform instead of water?” Orvin inquired.

“Yeah. Which means it’s really, really hot to me here. Everyone’s nice in my town, but it’s probably the wettest, most miserable place ever. I have to wear this suit with little thermal regulation whenever I go outside just so I don’t get burned by the rain,” Aioni brooded further.

“Where are you?”

“Seattle, Washington. It’s in the west of North America.”

“Wow,” Orvin said. “Isn’t that like, across an ocean from here?”

“Yep. The CORE was pretty fast. It took me about two hours to get here. Where are we again?”

“London in England. I’m studying in Glasgow. It’s not too far away from here. I considered riding the CORE, but it’s too expensive for such a short distance.”

Aioni finalized her organizing of the cords and started walking to the return. Orvin stopped her with one final question, “why is your planet named after your species? I mean, most sapients didn’t even realize space is a thing until long after they name themselves.”

“Well, our species and planet in the primary language was named after Reuq, the spirit of life we all connect to. We are people of the spirit, and our planet is exists because of the spirit.”

“So, is Reuq like, your god?” Orvin asked. “Do you have other gods?”

“Some tribes do, some don’t. But Reuq, at least how I see it, is like, the universe itself.”

“Huh. I should do some research on that.” Orvin began to turn away, but then suddenly turned back. “Oh!” he said. “Do you want to exchange profiles? It’d be nice to have someone to talk to that wasn’t a human. And could help me with my CS studies.”

Aioni obliged. She extracted her phone from her pocket and touched it against Orvin’s when he did the same. A green check appeared and a picture of the lexinpol showed up on the reuquan’s phone.

“I suppose I’ll see you around!” Orvin concluded, walking away towards the reuquan section

“You too! I do have some questions about the Commonwealth of Feior!” Aioni yelled.

“Sure thing!”

Aioni exchanged a smile with the other alien, and the two parted ways.

Life on Earth was tough for someone with an incompatible biology, on top of the usual culture shock of being a foreigner. But it seemed like plenty of people had questions about the reuquans, as much as she did about, well, everyone else.

Maybe she could talk to Orvin when she was curious about what life was like outside the Sol System the reuquans now cohabited with humans. Or maybe they could expand their horizons together.

It wasn't romantic—and neither were counting on it being (sorry to have gotten your hopes up)—but in a world where on average every person out of one hundred was a different species from a different planet, it was nice to know you had friends to help you along that journey.