

Think Tank



By Xine Fury

Think Tank

It began with a man named Trent.

Maynard Trent was not an evil man, at least not in the “kicks puppies for fun” kind of way. But he had an ego that prevented him from seeing his own weaknesses – he simply could not conceive of a room in which he wasn’t the smartest occupant. He was the spoiled child of a multi-millionaire, and he’d never had to work a day in his life. Despite this, he considered himself a hard worker, even though his idea of “work” just meant hiring stockbrokers to make decisions for him.

As a wealthy, white male, Trent only respected other rich, white men. Since life was easy for him, he assumed life was easy for everyone, and anyone who wasn’t rich had obviously squandered their opportunities.

Trent’s ego could not be placated simply by being wealthy. He spent millions of dollars showing off, devouring the praise of sycophants. He was addicted to publicity, but it was ultimately unsatisfying. He used his power to star on his own television shows, despite not being particularly talented. He reveled in all the attention, but it

still wasn't enough. In a move that surprised everyone and no one, he ran for president.

He didn't have any political experience, but he knew what the uneducated masses wanted to hear. He ran on a platform of bigotry and hatred. The intelligent citizens of the country were amazed that he'd gathered a following at all, but intelligent people are always surprised to learn how many bigots there are. Nevertheless, they knew there was no way Trent could possibly win. The racists of the world were loud, but surely not as numerous as it would appear.

The polls indicated Trent was going to lose. Pundits on both sides made fun of him, and he became a comedy goldmine for late-night talk show hosts. As election day loomed closer, everyone expected Trent's loss to be the largest landslide in history. Even Trent's own supporters were floored when he actually won.

There were many theories as to how Trent had won. Perhaps it was low voter turnout, as sometimes happens when a landslide is expected. It may have been the proliferation of disinformation that tainted the image of Trent's opponent. There were even accusations that other countries had somehow manipulated the election. Regardless of how it happened, one thing was for sure: The country was about to be led by the lowest common denominator, a man who was respected by only a tiny sliver of the country's population.

And that's when things got weird.

On Christmas day, President-Elect Maynard Trent woke up at five AM with blurred vision and a headache. His eyes burned, and he felt like he had a

hangover. He stumbled his way into the bathroom, took a couple of pain pills, and looked for some eye drops. As he unscrewed the cap, he caught sight of himself in the mirror. He gasped. Not believing what he saw, he rubbed his eyes and looked again.

His eyes were red. Well, he'd expected that, the way he felt. But this wasn't a case of bulging blood vessels in the whites of his eyes. No, the iris itself was bright red, like something out of a bad vampire movie. And his eyes were warm, burning even. He tried the eye drops. The coolness of the liquid felt good on his eyes, but the relief only lasted a few seconds, and they did nothing to alleviate the redness.

He got dressed and put on a pair of sunglasses. He texted his aide, asking her to pick him up some colored contacts. She replied, "Sir, please turn on your TV." He did so, and discovered he was not the only one suffering from this problem. A large portion of the country had awoken to red eyes, and there was a national panic. Speculation ranged from radiation to allergenic spores. There was fierce debate as to whether this was a terrorist attack or a quirk of nature.

Around noon Eastern time, those with red eyes also started complaining of itchy skin, just below the hairline. Within an hour, faint lines started to appear on their foreheads, in the shape of an X. By the end of the day, these X's were bold, clearly defined, and bright red.

It didn't take long to see that there was a pattern to which people developed an X. In the United States, it was mostly people who had voted for Trent. For the rest of the world, it was people with similar political values.

Many people took it to be a sign from God. Those with X's thought it might be a good omen, perhaps a mark indicating who would be included in the rapture. Others weren't so sure. Red eyes and a capital X? It sure didn't look

like a good sign.

Debates over who were “the chosen” led to fights and even riots. A few people thought the X was a message, that those with X’s were meant to destroy the unclean.

This didn’t last long, however. The world looked skyward as the full moon rotated, the usually “dark side” now facing towards the earth. There was now a giant arrow carved on the moon. Fighting stopped, at least temporarily, while people pondered this new miracle.

Those with telescopes zoomed in for a closer look. The arrow pointed to a crater. In the center of the crater, there was a glint of silver, something metal and square.

The governments scrambled to get some astronauts up there to get a better look. The United States, Russia, and China cooperated for once to put together a team of astronauts, skipping many of the usual protocols in order to launch a rocket ASAP.

The mission went off without a hitch. They landed near the crater, and quickly found the object in question. It was a metal suitcase.

Under orders from Earth, they brought it home unopened, so it could be opened somewhere safe. Once they returned to Earth, the suitcase was taken to a secure location where it went through several scans and tests. Just in case it contained a disease or explosives or God-knew-what-else, it was opened by robotic arms in a sealed chamber.

The suitcase was mostly empty, containing only a square, embossed card. In a formal font, looking like a wedding invitation, it only displayed a date, time, and location.

JANUARY 15 - 7PM EST

UN BUILDING - NEW YORK, NY

The people didn't know what to expect, but they were ready. Representatives from all over the world traveled to New York. Some countries sent their leaders, while others sent more expendable representatives in case this was some sort of terrorist attack.

Tensions were high on January fifteenth. The UN building was packed with politicians, reporters, and armed guards. Everyone stared at an empty stage.

At seven PM, to the second, there was a bright light, so bright that everyone had to look away. When the light dissipated, a woman stood on the stage. She had olive brown skin and purple hair. She wore jeans and a T-shirt with a rainbow flag on it. Standing behind the podium, she tapped the microphone a couple of times to test it, then spoke.

"People of Earth, you can call me Jessie. I am a daughter of God. And you people are *fucked*."

Like many viewers, Elle's eyes were glued to her television, her mind a swirling cauldron of fear and amazement. Elle had always been somewhat agnostic. She'd been brought up to believe in a higher power, but she'd never really "felt it" the way her parents had. As a child, she'd gone through the motions, attended church with her parents, and said grace at dinner. But it had always just been performative.

As an adult, she rarely thought about religion at all, except when dealing with Bible-thumping bigots. She and her late brother had both been targets of "Christian" hate, and while she hoped the bigots were just a vocal

minority, as a whole she'd lost interest in religion. Was there a God? She wasn't sure. But she'd definitely lost faith in God's followers.

And yet, here was a woman claiming to be the daughter of God. Was she on the level? The broadcast could be a hoax, for all Elle knew. But it would have to be an elaborate hoax, given all miracles that had happened since Christmas. The red eyes, the X's, the moon – did the technology even exist to fake such miracles?

Elle's phone buzzed. She glanced down to see her girlfriend's face, along with the message, "Are you seeing this?" Only half-looking at the phone, Elle texted back, "Yes. Later." Then she put the phone on silent so she could concentrate on Jessie's speech.

Jessie put one hand on each side of the podium, as if bracing herself for impact. She leaned forward slightly, looking directly into the central camera. "I'm going to start with the United States of America," she said. "Let's get one thing clear straight off - Jesus was a not a Republican. This is not up for debate. There is no rational interpretation of the Bible where Jesus comes off as conservative. Those of you who claim to be conservative Christians... I don't understand the mental gymnastics you had to go through to reach that conclusion."

She took a breath, and looked like she was trying to calm herself down. "Americans, you have so many problems that would fix themselves if you would just stop treating billionaires as heroes. A billionaire is someone who actually has the power to change the world, and instead, they waste their wealth on private jets and expensive

dinners. They're not people you should aspire to imitate. They should be shunned, not lauded.

"Don't let politicians monetize laws. Don't let billionaires buy patents so they can raise prices. Stop electing people who are so far past retirement age, that they can't remember what life was like for the working class. Promote tax-funded medical care and higher education. Put income caps on CEOs. There's no reason your economy should tip so hard towards one percent of your population, while so many people are drowning in debt and going hungry."

She stood up straighter, and a sad look flashed across her eyes. "But it's not just your economy, it's your morality. Your country is full of bigots. You don't trust anyone who isn't in your own family. You let corporations ruin the economy, then you point fingers at each other when poor people break the law to survive. You use the word of God to justify hate and cruelty. Let me set the record straight right now. White, cis, straight men do not have a monopoly on God's love. His love is not conditional, and yours shouldn't be, either.

"Should immigrants be granted asylum in your country? Of course! How is that even a question? Should police stop shooting unarmed people of color? Duh! Should transgender people use the bathroom of their choice? Obviously. These aren't deep, difficult questions. This is the bare minimum of respect you should show towards each other.

"But, no. You fear anything you don't understand. You don't care who the cops shoot, as long as it's someone you don't know. You don't personally know any gay people, so you have no problem voting away their rights. And you use the Bible as an excuse. You literally make

up sins you claim are in the Bible, reinterpreting verses until they say what you want them to say. So here's a rule of thumb. If your message promotes bigotry or hatred, you don't speak for God.

"You have mass shootings almost every day. After each shooting, rather than mourn the victims, you loosen your gun laws even further. 'Fight fire with fire,' you say. When even a rookie firefighter will tell you that you actually fight fire with water. Look, I'm not saying that guns are inherently evil, or that there's no good reason to own a firearm. All I'm saying is that those of you who *love* guns... are rarely the kind of people who get saved."

She went on to cover more of society's ills, and continued to speak for twenty-four hours. During that time, she never ate, took a restroom break, or even had a drink of water. She never paused to collect her thoughts, she never looked at any note cards, and she never showed any signs of fatigue. Her voice never cracked.

The targets of her speech followed the time zones. She transitioned smoothly from one country to the next, covering specific countries during their prime time. She addressed each country in its most common language, and she spoke each language fluently. She was especially critical of certain countries for the way they treated minorities and women. Her closing comments were in English, but addressed to the world.

"Now, you're probably wondering about the X's. Originally, I was going to make every one of you wake up as your biggest targets. If you're racist, you would wake up as your least favorite minority. If you're sexist, you would wake up as the opposite sex. Homophobic people would wake up gay. Transphobes would wake up in a body that doesn't match their mind. If you look down on the service

industry, you would wake up with a fast food job. Formerly wealthy people would have to live on fifty dollars a week. And so on.

“But that would have felt like cheating. You won’t learn anything if I just show you the answer. You have to do the research yourselves. So that’s why the X’s. If you have an X, you have until the end of the year to get rid of it. And you can’t just make an empty declaration, either. You can’t just shout, ‘I’m not homophobic anymore’ out your window and expect your sins to be absolved. You have to do some real research. Improve yourself. Discover how the other half lives. Then tell others what you’ve learned. Write some blogs, post your epiphanies to social media, maybe even buy ad space in your local newspaper.

“Most of you who have an X, have one for more than one reason. I’m not going to tell you which sins you’ve committed, or how many. You’ll have to figure that out for yourselves. But in the spirit of fairness, I’ll go this far. The X will fade and shrink if you’re on the right path.

“I’m giving you a year. Well, eleven and a half months. Anyone who still has an X on December thirty-first, you will not be saved.”

She wrapped up just seconds before the twenty-four-hour mark. When the speech was over, she simply said, “Thank you,” and disappeared.

“Why are you an X?” Elle near-screamed, tears in her eyes.

“I told you, I don’t know!” Lisette said, also crying. They stood in the living room of Elle’s tenth-floor apartment. It had been two days since the conclusion of

Jessie's speech, and it was the first time they'd seen each other in person since the X's first appeared. Elle's job often kept her out of state.

"Think!" Elle said, but Lisette just shook her head. Elle took a deep breath, then took Lisette by the hand. Exhaling, she led her over to the couch. Now seated, Elle said, "It's okay, Lis. We'll figure this out. Whatever you did, you have a year to make up for it. That's plenty of time. I just don't want to lose you when... when whatever happens at the end of the year."

Lisette nodded. "I don't want to lose you either."

"Okay," Elle said. "So think, what's the worst thing you've done? Did you cheat on me?"

Lisette shook her head. "No."

"It's okay if you did," Elle said. "You can tell me. I forgive you. I know we don't see each other enough. You have needs, that's okay. I just don't want you to die."

"I said no!" Lisette shouted.

"Okay, okay," Elle said. "Did you kill anyone? Rob a bank? Whatever it is, you can tell me!"

Lisette kept shaking her head.

"Did you... insult a homeless person? Forget to tip a server? Put ketchup on steak?"

"Be serious," Lisette said.

"I don't *know*," Elle said. "That's always been my problem with religion. We don't even know what all the rules are. Everyone sins. If it were something little, you wouldn't have an X on your head. And I can't imagine the woman I love doing something big enough to earn that X."

Lisette bit her lower lip.

Elle glowered. "You *do* know, don't you. Shit. What is it? What can't you tell me?"

"Um," Lisette said, and took a deep breath. "I might have voted for Trent a little bit."

"What?" Elle said.

"Look, I agree with you on politics ninety-nine percent of the time," Lisette said. "But there's just a couple of issues that bug me."

Elle's eyes narrowed. "Like what?"

"Do we have to talk about this?"

"Lis, your soul is at stake," Elle said.

"Well, like abortion," Lisette said.

"You always told me you support the right to choose," Elle said carefully.

"And I do! I do! But..." Lisette sighed. "Doesn't the baby get a choice? Do we really know when life begins? I mean, ideally, I don't believe a woman should be forced to carry a child against her will, but should that belief cancel out a child's right to live?"

Elle bristled. It was a ridiculous argument, and hearing it come out of Lisette's mouth made her wonder how she'd ever respected the woman. "Fine, what else," Elle said, rubbing the bridge of her nose. She was starting to get a headache.

"And then there's trans children," Lisette said. "I'm already iffy on trans adults, but kids are too young to be making life-altering decisions."

"Yes, of *course* they're too young," Elle said slowly, like she was talking to a five-year-old. "That's why they put them on puberty blockers. So *they* can decide when they're old enough."

"But we don't know the long-term effects of the blockers!" Lis shouted. "What if—"

"Puberty blockers have been in use for decades,

and not just on trans kids," Elle said. "How much more—"

"Yeah, but those kids have been brainwashed by left-wing media! I was a tomboy when I was a kid. By today's standards I would have been told I was trans!"

"Psychiatrists know the difference between trans kids and tomboys," Elle said. "Nobody is telling little girls, 'Oh, you like sports? Here's your hormones.' You remember my brother was trans, right?"

"Yes, I do, and that's why I never brought it up before," Lis said. "I knew it was a touchy subject for you."

"A touchy subject," Elle repeated, her voice rising. "People like you are the reason he killed himself!"

Lisette stood up. "How dare you lump me in with the bigots just because I—"

Elle stood up too. "Oh yes, how dare I call you a bigot just because you believe the same things as bigots." She was shouting now. "How utterly fucking illogical of me."

"I've always supported trans people, you know that!" Lis was crying again, but these were angry tears. "It's just that..." she trailed off.

There was a thumping sound from below their feet. Elle's downstairs neighbor was knocking on the ceiling. Elle paused, then asked quietly, "It's just that what?"

"They can have whatever delusions they want," Lis said. "I'm happy to use their pronouns, and call them by their new names. But... I just don't believe anyone can really change their sex."

Elle took a deep breath before she spoke. In as close to a normal tone as she could manage, she said, "Lis. God herself just told the world that trans people are valid."

"Do we know she's legit?" Lis asked. "Special effects can do a lot these days. I wouldn't put it past the left-

wing media to make up the entire thing. It's ambitious, but —"

Elle touched Lisette's forehead, feeling the shallow groove of the X. "This sure seems real," she said. "We have to get it to go away. We have to find a way to make up for what you've done. You could start a blog or something, tell the world how wrong you were..."

"I can't just change my beliefs," Lisette said.

"You have to," Elle said. "Or you'll die."

Lisette shook her head. "I can write whatever blog you want, but that doesn't mean I'll believe it. I will never believe your sister was a man."

"Lis?" Elle said.

"Yeah?"

"Get the hell out of my life."

Without another word, Lisette took a key off of her keyring, set it on Elle's kitchen counter, and walked out the door.

What am I even doing here, Elle wondered, looking around the table at the other members of the group. Those in attendance included a physicist, a philosopher, a religious studies specialist, a psychologist, a cryptographer, a historian, and a languages expert. Elle felt grossly underqualified to even be in the room, and yet she'd been appointed project lead due to her management skills. Elle noticed right away that none of her team had X's on their foreheads. She wondered if that was the same for all the groups, or if the rest were more mixed.

The final member of the team – a computer programmer named Viki Harris – finally arrived, and sat

down in the last empty chair. "Sorry I'm late," she said. "I was a last-minute transfer."

"No problem," Elle said. She looked at the board, where each participant was listed, next to a picture of their face.

Harris, Viki - Programmer
Hayes, Albert - Historian
Nagarajan, Nirav - Linguist
Nelson, Savannah - Theologian
Qin, Huan - Psychologist
Scott, Barry - Philosopher
Wenzel, Harold - Physicist
Winstead, Elle - Group Lead
Yates, Michaela - Cryptographer

"Before we begin," Elle said, "Does anyone have any questions?" Hands shot up all around the table. Elle picked one at random and pointed. "Yes, Doctor Wenzel?"

"Harold will be fine," he said. "In fact, I propose we all dispense with honorifics and stick to our first names. It's going to be hard enough without all the 'Professor This' and 'Doctor That' going on."

Heads nodded all around. "Agreed," Elle said. "But you had a question?"

"What the hell are we doing here?" Harold asked. There was a murmur of agreement around the table.

Elle nodded. "That's the question, isn't it? The government has appointed several teams to study the speech. Some are concentrating on the language Jessie used, others are looking for hidden messages, others are looking for historical context. They want to know if Jessie is truly divine

or an elaborate fraud, and if any deeper meanings can be gleaned from the words she used."

"And what's our focus?" Savannah asked.

"We're the only group without a specific focus," Elle said. "Our job is simply to pick the speech apart and gather any insights we can. With any luck, we'll stumble on something that gives the other groups some direction."

"I feel like we're the control group," Harold said, and a couple of the attendees chuckled.

"Maybe," Elle said. "But I feel more like we're the inspiration group. The other groups are going to be so focused on their specific missions, they could miss something right in front of their faces. But our specialties are so diverse, we can work off each other's ideas. Any other questions?"

No hands went up. Apparently everyone had been going to ask the same question earlier.

"Very well, then," Elle said. "Shall we begin?"

Nirav, the language expert, addressed the group. "So I've picked apart every language she used during her speech. The first thing that really stands out is her perfect diction. She used plenty of slang, but not once did she flub a word. She spoke each language as if she'd been speaking it all her life."

"Could she have been fed her speech through an earpiece?" Elle asked.

"That's certainly possible," Nirav said. "But there was no delay. At no point did I get the impression that she was listening and repeating."

"Could Jessie herself be A.I.?" Elle asked.

"She sure moved like a human," Viki said. "Our

tech can't mimic humans that well."

"Our best A.I. speaks in stilted tones," Nirav added. "They could fool some people, but not the whole world. Jessie not only spoke naturally, but she did it in multiple languages."

"We have to consider the possibility that she's from an advanced alien race," Harold chimed in.

"Do we?" Savannah asked. As the team's religious expert, she wanted Jessie to be real. If not for personal reasons, at least to make her contributions more relevant.

"We have to consider every possibility," Elle said. "Messiah, spaceman, hologram, interdimensional traveler, robot, recently-thawed survivor of Atlantis... I want to hear it all. No idea is too ridiculous."

Viki looked like she wanted to say something, but was unsure of herself.

"Anything," Elle said, addressing Viki directly.

"It's kind of out there," Viki said.

"I promise you, it won't be the dumbest thing that gets said today," Elle said.

Viki took a deep breath and let it out. She wasn't used to public speaking, and even though her audience only consisted of eight people, it still made her nervous to have that many heads turned her way. "I assume you've heard of the simulation hypothesis," she said. "It's where—"

Barry, the group's resident philosopher, interrupted her. "You think reality is a computer simulation?"

"I don't know, but what if it was?" Viki asked. "Jessie might be like the programmer's avatar."

"Oh my god," Savannah said.

"It's not that weird," Elle said, turning to Savannah.

Savannah shook her head. "No, but it goes along with something I was thinking. I wasn't going to say anything until I got Nirav to check the other languages, but, in English anyway..." She paused to collect her thoughts. "In her entire speech, Jessie never mentioned Hell. She never said, 'Do this or you'll go to Hell.' She just kept saying, 'You will not be saved.' What if—"

"...she meant 'saved' like in a computer program?" Barry finished.

"Good catch," Michaela said, giving Savannah a look of admiration.

"Okay, it's a theory," Elle said. "But how do we prove we're in a simulation?"

"I don't think you could," Harold said. "Unless there's a big pop-up in the sky that says 'Error.' And even then, we might be programmed to forget those incidents."

"And the people who do see the glitches are told they're crazy," Barry added. "Ghosts, UFOs, cryptids, that sort of thing."

"I used to be a beta tester for a video game company," Viki said. "When we were looking for bugs, we were instructed to do things most players wouldn't think to do. Things like, 'Stand by the fourth tree on level three and jump seventeen times.' Maybe if we try doing things no sane person would do..."

"People do insane things all the time," Barry said.

"The same people who see ghosts?" Harold asked.

"Sometimes," Huan, the psychologist of the group, chimed in. "But perfectly sane people see their share of events they can't explain."

"Do we really want to try to crash the universe?" Elle asked.

Harold shook his head. "If that were even possible, we'd be long gone by now."

"Agreed," Huan said. "In a world with eight billion people, if something can be done, someone has done it. And we're all still here."

"Though it is possible that it's crashed before," Harold said. "And we're incapable of noticing that sort of thing. We get reloaded from our last save, just like everything else."

"So we have a solid theory we can't possibly prove," Elle said. "But it's not our only theory. Keep those ideas coming. We'll break for lunch, then discuss other scenarios."

They were two weeks into the project, but all they had were theories. The team was sequestered in a private hotel, and they weren't allowed to leave until the project was concluded. The site had once been part of a national chain before going out of business, and the newly-renovated building was now only used for special projects. Every morning the think tank met in the conference room, and every evening they retired to their own rooms. Food, medications, and other necessities were brought to them, but they couldn't leave for security reasons. The other groups were no doubt kept in similar hotels.

They weren't allowed to have phones or any

other means of outside contact. Their rooms were luxurious, but most of the group would rather have been at home. For entertainment, their televisions had access to multiple streaming services. However, they could not access the news, live channels, or the internet. The government didn't want them to be distracted by current events.

Elle was not a couch potato. She wished she could have brought a book, at the very least. She paced around her room, barefoot, enjoying the feel of the carpet under her toes. She wanted to stand on the balcony, but the door was welded shut, presumably to prevent anyone from sneaking out to meet with reporters.

With absolutely nothing else to do, and no hope of falling asleep, Elle sat on the bed and turned on the television. She scrolled through the movies, hoping to find something that might keep her mind occupied. She was still scrolling when there was a knock at the door.

It was Viki. "Sorry to bother you, can I come in?" She was wearing a T-shirt and pajama pants, and her hair was slightly wet.

"Sure," Elle said, stepping aside. "What's on your mind?"

"I'm just so bored without my computer," Viki said. "They wouldn't even let me bring a game console."

"I know, I'd kill for a book," Elle said. "Even if it's something I've read before."

Viki noticed the streaming menu on the television. "Find anything good to watch?"

"Not so far," Elle said. "I'm not really sure what I'm in the mood for."

"I'll pick then," Viki said, and loaded up a cheesy sci-fi movie. They sat on the bed together and watched the

opening credits. Viki turned up the volume.

“Not so loud,” Elle said.

Viki whispered in her ear. “I think this place is bugged.”

“Oh,” Elle said softly.

“Harold has a phone,” Viki whispered.

Elle turned to look at her. “Really?” she hissed.

Viki nodded. “He can’t access much, though. The hotel blocks cell service, and there’s no wi-fi. But he has his phone constantly searching for a signal. Whenever it finds one, it downloads as many headlines as it can before the connection’s gone.”

“Has he learned anything interesting?”

Viki shook her head. “Not much so far. A lot of the X’s are starting to revolt. It’s becoming a big movement.”

“Do the others know about the phone?”

“Just us so far,” Viki whispered. “I think Harold likes me. He’s barking up the wrong tree, though.”

They kept talking for a while. Elle soon found herself caught up in the movie, and was genuinely surprised by the ending. When it was over, Viki went back to her room and Elle went to sleep.

This went on for a few months. Viki would alternate where she spent her time. Some nights she’d watch TV with Harold and hear his updates, and some nights she’d stick with Elle and relay what she’d learned. The X’s had formed their own political party, and it was becoming increasingly violent. Many of them dismissed Jessie’s message as a liberal hoax, and they intended to overthrow the government, by force if need be.

Elle shook her head at the news. "I wonder if Lis is among them," she said.

"Lis?" Viki asked, sitting next to Elle on the bed.

"My ex-girlfriend," Elle said. "Or should I say X-girlfriend." As she said it, she traced an imaginary X on her forehead with her finger.

"She likes women and she's an X?" Viki asked. "I mean, how?"

"Don't get me started," Elle said. "There were a lot of red flags I should have noticed earlier in the relationship. In retrospect, her political views were always sort of selfish. She only cared about issues that affected her personally."

"I wonder how many couples broke up over the X thing," Viki whispered.

"I wonder many people redeemed themselves, and got their X's to go away," Elle replied.

They both stayed silent for a while, each lost in their own thoughts. After about half an hour, Elle asked, "Do you think the X's might actually win?" She didn't get an answer, though. She turned her head and saw that Viki had fallen asleep. Elle turned off the TV and joined her.

It was nice to sleep next to someone again.

The group dynamic was ever-changing. Sometimes they broke off into little groups of three or four, working on separate theories. Sometimes they all sat around the conference table, throwing out ideas and working off each other. Sometimes Harold or Nirav would float between the groups, interjecting when their expertise was needed.

They simultaneously worked on multiple

reports to submit to the government. Each theory had its own write-up, with a lengthy analysis along with a one-to-ten rating indicating how likely it was to be true. Of course, it was all speculation, but having all the data in one place would no doubt be useful to the powers that be.

The quietest two in the bunch were Michaela, the cryptographer, and Albert, the historian. Michaela pored over every line of the twenty-four-hour speech, looking for any hidden messages or codes to crack. Occasionally she'd make a snarky comeback to something someone said on the other side of the room, but for the most part she just quietly stared at her screen.

Albert, on the other hand, just didn't seem to like people very much. He wasn't sure how his specialty really applied to the group's efforts, and often grumbled about feeling useless. Occasionally he'd throw out a good idea, but for the most part he kept to himself.

Some of them were starting to get on each other's nerves. It was an open secret that Barry had started sleeping with Savannah, and they couldn't stop flirting with each other during the meetings. But when things ended between them, it was a nightmare for everyone else. They tried to stay professional, but they refused to work in the same groups, even when both their skills were needed.

Elle wanted to propose a new rule abolishing fraternization, but there really wasn't much to do in the hotel besides work. Banning sex seemed like cruel and unusual punishment. Besides, whenever Elle looked into Viki's eyes, the last thing she wanted to do was to veto relationships.

Tonight was the night, Elle could just feel it. She and Viki had been stealing glances at each other all day, and when they'd briefly touched hands at the meeting, there was this tingle – it almost felt like a telepathic connection. She could tell Viki felt it too, and a couple of the other team members even raised their eyebrows when they saw how the two looked at each other.

After dinner, Elle took a bath and put on her pajamas. She flipped through the movies, looking for something Viki would like. Elle was really starting to get into Viki's taste in movies, or maybe it was just that she liked watching them with her. Viki usually showed up around nine, but nine came and went, with no knock at the door.

Elle waited about half an hour, then turned off the television. She wondered if she should go to Viki's room, but she thought that might be pushy. The knock finally came at a quarter to ten. Viki had a dazed look on her face.

"What's wrong?" Elle asked, pulling her into the room.

Viki grabbed the remote, started a video, and whispered into Elle's ear. "Harold stopped me in the hall, with another update. There's been an explosion at the White House."

While Elle's team only knew snippets of what was going on in the world, they knew the presidency was in a state of flux. After Jessie's speech, the other two branches of government didn't want anyone with an X acting as president. But they also couldn't just overturn a legal election. They'd decided to hold a second election to see what the citizens wanted, but it kept getting postponed for political reasons. In the meantime, the Speaker of the House had taken over presidential duties.

Unfortunately, the newest headlines were sparse on the details, and Harold only managed to get updates every few days. It would be a while before they found out the extent of the damage, and who had fallen victim to the attack.

"I'm scared," Viki said. "I feel like we're in a war zone, and we don't even know who's winning."

"I know," Elle said. "And we're expected to carry on like everything's normal. No wonder they wanted to keep us in the dark."

"Can you just... hold me for a while?" Viki asked.

They sat on the bed together, looking at the TV without really watching it, their arms across each other's backs. Viki tilted her head against Elle's shoulder. After a while, Elle said, "Viki, whatever happens, I want you to know, I'm glad you're here with me."

Viki looked up into her eyes. They stared for a moment that seemed like forever. Then Elle leaned in for a kiss, and Viki met her halfway. Then kissing turned into caressing, then fondling, then groping, until Viki suddenly and reluctantly said, "Stop. Stop, hold up, stop."

"Sorry, was I—" Elle began.

"It's all me," Viki said. "There's something I need to tell you before we go any further."

Elle studied her expression, then scowled. "You're married?"

"No!" Viki said. "I'm transgender."

"Oh," Elle said. Her eyes involuntarily dipped to Viki's crotch for half a second before she forced herself to look her in the eyes.

"You were about three seconds from figuring it

out yourself, and I didn't want you to scream," Viki said. "I've... been there before."

"Oh," Elle said again. Her mind was racing. She'd spent years defending trans people, and she firmly believed that trans women were women. But this was the first time the issue had affected her in such an intimate way. Elle had always considered herself a lesbian. Not bi, not pan, not any of the myriad of sexualities that might lead to the occasional tryst with a man.

Would she still consider herself a lesbian if she went through with this? Of course she would. A woman was more than a collection of parts. But did Viki turn her on? Elle didn't consider it transphobic to have a genital preference. It would be wrong to refuse to date a trans person, but when it came to bedroom activities, anyone had the right to refuse anyone for any reason. It all came down to one thing. *Am I aroused by this woman?* Elle thought.

"Please say something," Viki said. Her eyes were full of fear.

"Can't," Elle said. "My mouth is full." Then she thrust her face forward, wrapping her lips around Viki's neck.

It might have been subtle before, but nearly everyone noticed the way Elle and Viki acted around each other the following day. Even Michaela looked up from her codebreaking to give them a knowing wink. The only one who seemed oblivious was Harold, who still eyed Viki like she was a succulent dessert.

A few nights later, Elle answered Viki's knock, ready for another night of passion. But when she opened the

door, Viki was crying. Her shirt was torn, and it looked like a bruise was forming on her right cheek.

"Who was it," Elle said, pulling Viki into the room. It wasn't a question, it was a demand. Someone was going to die.

"Harold," Viki said, sitting down on the bed. Elle grabbed a hand towel from the bathroom and ran some cold water on it. She didn't have any ice, and didn't want to leave Viki alone to go get some.

"Tell me what happened," Elle demanded.

"He called me into his room for a news update," Viki said. "But he was lying. There was no update. He tried to kiss me, and I told him no. Then he... he... put his hand down my pants. I couldn't stop him! He... didn't like what he found. He hit me and started yelling. I couldn't fight back, so I ran."

"Oh that... bastard!" Elle growled. "How is he not an X? Sit right there, I'm going to get you some ice. I'll be right back." She grabbed the ice bucket and left.

As soon as Elle was in the hallway, she considered taking a detour to Harold's room. But that was two floors down, and she wanted to get back to Viki as quickly as possible. She was halfway to the ice machine when the elevator dinged, and Harold stepped out. His eyes were red, and a faint X had begun to appear on his forehead.

"You," Elle hissed.

"Whatever she told you, she's lying," Harold said.

"Bullshit," Elle said. "And I suppose the bruise just spontaneously appeared?"

"She's a man, did she tell you that?" Harold yelled. "She's been flirting with me all this time, and it turns

out she's a man!"

"That's not true!" Viki screamed. Harold turned around and saw her standing halfway out of Elle's room. "I never flirted with you! You saw what you wanted to see!"

"You!" Harold said, stomping toward Viki. Elle ran up behind him and jumped on his back. She wrapped one arm around his neck and started hitting him with the other. Harold reached behind his head and grabbed her hair. Viki ran forward to help, but Harold slapped her to the floor.

The hotel was four stories tall, and everyone had been assigned rooms as far apart as possible. However, the three had made more than enough noise to attract attention. The stairwell door opened, and Nirav and Savannah stepped out. As they rushed to figure out what was going on, the elevator dinged again, and Barry stepped into the hallway. It was clear that Harold was the aggressor, and the five of them quickly subdued him.

"You're off the project," Elle said to Harold, as Nirav and Barry held him back.

"You can't do that," Harold said. "It's not your decision to make."

"Watch me. Go to your room and stay there," Elle said.

"We'll escort him," Nirav said, and the three men headed for the elevator.

"Are you all right?" Elle asked. Viki's left cheek was bright red where she'd been slapped. She'd have matching bruises by morning.

While Elle fawned over Viki, Savannah picked up the fallen ice bucket and took it to the ice machine. She joined them in Elle's room and helped soothe the bruises.

While they weren't allowed cell phones, each

room had a landline. These phones could only call other rooms, and exactly one person outside the hotel – Elle’s boss, the Director of Special Projects.

Viki and Savannah listened intently as Elle explained the situation to the director. Elle didn’t out Viki as transgender, but she did explain that Doctor Wenzel had tried to rape Viki, and when she’d refused his advances, he’d hit her.

Savannah bristled when she heard that part, and whispered to Viki, “He tried to get fresh with me, too.”

It sounded like the director was reluctant to take Doctor Wenzel off the project. “I know it’s a headache,” Elle said. “But we really can’t work with him anymore. No, I don’t think there’s any way to smooth things over. No, I’m serious, if he stays on board, the project will fall apart.” It didn’t sound like she was getting through. Savannah and Viki could occasionally hear a word or two through the phone, including words like “your responsibility” and “diplomacy.”

Elle finally sighed. “There is one other thing,” she said. “He has a phone. He’s been downloading news updates whenever he finds a connection.” That got a reaction. Within the hour, some people came and took Doctor Wenzel away.

The project was down one physicist, and there would be no further updates on the outside world. But at least group harmony was restored.

“Oh my god,” Viki said, rousing Elle from her sleep. It had been two months since the Harold incident, and Viki had pretty much moved in with Elle.

“What’s going on?” Elle asked, yawning.

Viki hopped out of bed and pulled her pants on. "I read a thing... but I didn't think... the data wasn't complete, but... I have to check..."

"Those aren't really sentences," Elle mumbled, turning over.

"I'm going to the conference room," Viki said. "You get some sleep. I'll still be there in the morning." She dashed out the door.

Elle tried to fall back asleep, but her curiosity kept waking her back up. When she could stand it no longer, she opened one eye and looked at the clock. It was half past four. Giving up, she got out of bed, took a shower, got dressed, and headed downstairs.

The computers in the conference room couldn't connect to the internet, but they contained a huge database of resources. The hard drives held many thousands of books, nearly every non-fiction book ever published, as well as journals and theses and mountains of unpublished scientific data.

When Elle walked into the conference room, Viki was using two computers at once. She sat between them, having moved their keyboards and monitors to a position where she could move from one to the other just by slightly swiveling her chair. Viki was wearing jeans and an oversized sleep shirt, and no shoes.

"Find something?" Elle asked, sipping on a cup of coffee. She held a second cup in her other hand, and she set it down near Viki.

"There've been a lot of attempts to map the human brain," Viki said, though it was unclear whether she

was talking to herself or to Elle. “Each yielding more data than the last. Some guy in Houston was working on a project just last year, but they ran out of funding. He got lots of new data, but the results were pushed aside in favor of another project in New York...” She was talking and reading at the same time, cross-referencing articles on both monitors. “There were things,” she said, then she stopped speaking for a good thirty seconds, her eyes glued to a monitor full of numbers.

“Things,” Elle said, drawing out the word in a way that seemed to say, “Please continue.”

“Things a neuroscientist might not notice, but a programmer would,” Viki said.

“What are you talking about?” Elle said. She tried to look into Viki’s eyes, but her attention was locked on a list of numbers. She still hadn’t touched her coffee.

“Subroutines. Metadata. Easter eggs.” Viki’s voice was so neutral, she might have been reading a grocery list.

“Easter eggs?” Elle asked skeptically.

Viki finally spared her a look, but she didn’t say anything at first. “Give me a minute,” she finally said, turning back to the screen.

Elle sat back and sipped her coffee. Viki’s “minute” lasted another two hours.

The other team members started trickling into the room a little after seven. They were surprised to find Viki already so hard at work.

“So, Viki’s had something of a breakthrough, I think,” Elle said, ushering her coworkers in through the door.

Ora breakdown, she thought to herself.

She waited until everyone was present and seated before elaborating. Once everyone was ready to listen, she tapped Viki on the shoulder.

"What? Oh," Viki said, noticing her audience for the first time. Tearing herself away from the screen, she stood up and said, "Okay, so... I think I have the first real proof that humans were programmed."

They all looked at her strangely. Huan, the psychologist, spoke up. "Brains have a lot in common with computers. We all know this. When you look at the behavior of insects —"

Viki shook her head. "I mean intentionally programmed. I've seen the code."

"Sweet Jesus," Savannah said.

"That implies the existence of a sour Jesus," Michaela quipped, but no one laughed.

"What do you mean?" Nirav asked Viki. "What code?"

All around the table, everyone stared at her. Most of them looked incredulous, but a couple looked somewhere between frightened and offended. Michaela just looked at Viki with a half-smile, her eyes twinkling with something like respect.

"I can't... put it into words yet," Viki said. "I need more time. There's too much to process at once."

"Can we help?" Elle asked.

"I don't think so, but you might want to let the bosses know we're on to something," Viki said. "If I could get a team of programmers working on this..." she trailed off, looking back at her monitors.

Albert, the often-silent historian, shook his head.

"I think this has gone on far enough," he said, and stood up. He unbuttoned his suit jacket, revealing several sticks of dynamite strapped around his waist.

"What the hell?" Nirav shouted. All around the table, people pushed their chairs back and started to stand up.

"Sit down!" Albert shouted. "Make one move towards the door and I blow us all up."

"What's this about?" Barry asked, getting back into his chair.

Albert looked smug. "I was planted to make sure this project doesn't succeed. I represent a group that would prefer the nature of the universe remain a mystery."

"A cult?" Savannah asked.

Albert glared at her. "A cult is just a religion with bad press," he said. "If this information were to become common knowledge, it would undermine my organization's message of the True Word."

"How did you get the dynamite in here?" Viki asked.

"Planning and connections," Albert said. "I also managed to bring this." He reached into his pocket and retrieved a pistol, then held it on Viki.

Elle stood, moving closer to Viki. "Don't you dare," she said.

"Either she dies or we all die," Albert said. "I'm good either way. My soul is ready."

Elle tried to stand in front of Viki, but Viki wouldn't let her. Michaela stood up and approached Albert. She didn't look the least bit frightened.

"Get away from me!" Albert said, turning to hold the gun on Michaela. "I'll kill us all, I mean it!"

The room froze for a second. No one seemed to know what to do. Any movement might have caused Albert to trigger the dynamite.

But Michaela just gave Albert a sympathetic look. She held out her hand. "Please give me the gun, Albert," she said.

"No!" Albert shouted, holding the gun in Michaela's face. For a half-second the pistol dipped, and he looked like he might be having second thoughts. Then he raised it again and pulled the trigger.

Nothing happened. Albert pulled the trigger a few more times, then checked the safety.

"It's not too late," Michaela said, compassion in her eyes.

A look of desperation crossed Albert's face. For just a moment, he looked like he might take her advice, surrender his weapons, and face the consequences. But then his face contorted into something like righteous anger. The dynamite was wired to a button on his belt buckle. Before anyone could stop him, he pressed the button.

Once again, nothing happened. He pressed it a few more times, then closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "I've really screwed up, haven't I," he said, and sat back down. A faint X began to appear on his forehead. The gun and dynamite both vanished in a puff of smoke.

"There's still a few months to make up for it," Michaela said, but her voice sounded different. Everyone went from staring at Albert to watching Michaela. Her skin tone and hair color changed, as did her facial features and even her height. The transformation only took a couple of seconds. Jessie, daughter of God, now stood in Michaela's place.

There were gasps all around the room. "You?" Savannah asked, wide-eyed. Then she dropped to her knees, bowing in supplication.

"Oh come on," Jessie said. "Get up, I don't need that."

Savannah got to her feet. "You've been here the whole time?"

"In a sense," Jessie said. "I have avatars in all the research groups, as well as in thousands of other places around the world. I can switch between them at will. I try to be around when someone gets close to the truth."

"So I was right?" Viki asked. "The world is a simulation?"

"Basically yes, but promise me you'll keep that to yourself for a few days," Jessie said. "I'm going to give a second speech soon, and I don't want any rumors spreading beforehand."

"But if we're not real," Barry said, "Do we even matter?"

"Who said you weren't real?" Jessie asked. "Even in my world, the human brain is just a gooey blob of fat. It's what you do with it that matters."

"But if our thoughts are pre-programmed..." Viki said.

"They're not," Jessie said. "We gave you the ability to think, but we didn't tell you *how* to think. For the sake of the experiment, we needed you to have free will. By any definition that matters, you are alive."

Later that day, Jessie notified the UN that she'd be delivering a second speech on Saturday. Elle's team was

disbanded and debriefed. On the day of the speech, Elle sat on her couch back in her own apartment. Viki sat beside her. Elle's phone rang. It was her ex, Lisette.

"So you do exist," Lisette said.

"What do you want?" Elle asked.

"Answers would be good," Lisette said. "You break up with me, then you disappear for the better part of a year? I thought you'd died. I poked around and heard you'd been detained by the government or something."

"I'm not allowed to talk about that yet," Elle said.

"That's fine," Lisette said. "Look, I've changed, I swear. I've given it a lot of thought, and I suppose if trans people want the same rights as normal people, it doesn't really affect my life."

"Normal?"

"You know what I mean. I'm totally woke now. I mean sure, it weirds me out wondering if the woman in the bathroom stall next to me has a penis, but I can live with it if it means I get you back."

"You still have an X, don't you," Elle asked.

"Yeah," Lisette replied. "I'm not sure why that hasn't gone away yet."

Elle hung up on her. She put her arm around Viki and squeezed tight. A few minutes later, the speech started.

"People of the world," Jessie said, one hand on each side of the podium, "It's been ten months since my ultimatum. It's been a tumultuous time for many of you. There have been terrorist attacks, cult uprisings, mass

suicides, and many riots. I apologize for causing such a panic, but it was unavoidable. We've done this many times before, and believe me, this is one of the smoothest transitions we've had.

"Roughly a fourth of those with X's have redeemed themselves and turned their lives around. You should be proud of yourselves. Those of you who haven't, there's still a couple of months to go.

"But it's close enough to the deadline that I can finally tell you what's going on. Your world is a simulation, running on a computer in a lab. Now wait - before any of you have an existential crisis, let me assure you that your minds are real, and you truly do exist – just not in the way you previously thought. The fact that I'm even here should prove to you that we do believe you are worth saving. At least, some of you.

"Our lab contains hundreds of computers running similar simulations, and it's just one of thousands of labs on our world. Each simulation is like yours, but with a few minor differences. By running these programs, we're able to test economic theories, get insight on sociological scenarios, and even prepare for natural disasters.

"But it's time for this particular world to be taken offline. We've learned what we needed to, and it's time to free up this equipment for another scenario. But don't worry! Those of you who have earned it will be saved, and transferred to another server. You'll love your new world. It's everything some of you believe about biblical Heaven, but with just enough conflict to keep it from being boring. Many of you will arrive to find yourself in healthier bodies, ones that match your ideal vision of yourself.

"On the new server, you'll meet new people from other servers, as well as long-dead friends and

relatives. You won't exist forever, but from your point of view, you'll live many centuries longer than you would have here.

"Those of you who remain behind, don't worry, we wouldn't be so cruel as to simply erase you from existence. You will remain on this server until you die. No new children will be born, and when the last person is gone, we will wipe the server. If you want your remaining years to be more bearable, consider my suggestions from my original speech. You are in a hell of your own making, after all."

Elle and Viki watched as Jessie wrapped up her speech. Viki trembled when Jessie mentioned being in new bodies. She hoped it meant what it sounded like.

Two months later, Jessie delivered one last speech. This one was short and to the point. "It begins now," she said. A vertical blue wall appeared on the horizon, and moved quickly along the surface of the Earth. Those without X's vanished as the barrier moved through them.

Elle and Viki stood on the balcony of Elle's apartment, watching as the blue wall quickly moved toward them. They held hands as they prepared to enter the unknown. They didn't know what would be waiting for them on the other side, but they knew they'd be together, and that was enough.

Note

This is an excerpt from *Geek Cutes*, by Xine Fury. *Geek Cutes* is a collection of eight light-hearted short stories, spanning a variety of genres, with a focus on lesbians and trans women. Stories included in the full anthology:

Dungeon Therapy: Two women meet over an online tabletop RPG.

Gilded Cage: A young tech expert is locked in her room by her homophobic parents.

Mother's Day: A cop teams up with an occult expert to track down an otherworldly monster.

Fairy Dust: In a war between fairies and dragons, one pixie must embrace her destiny.

Hero Worship: A woman goes on a blind date with a superhero, but is it safer to stay single?

Think Tank: A team of scholars struggle to break a divine code, racing against the most serious of all deadlines.

Strangers in the Void: When the power goes out on a space station, two strangers work together to find the cause.

Vigilante: In a neighborhood riddled with violent crime, a masked hero protects women from the local gangs.