

“Let me get this straight. Your name is Cindy, and you think I’m your friend. You’re from California. Today’s your birthday, December 27, 1999, and you think that you’ve been transported to a parallel universe via sketchy email?” Other-Janice asked me with an uneasy tone.

I guess she skipped over the part about me being unemployed. I went to college majoring as a cybersecurity student, mostly to pacify my parents, but eventually got a job making clothes. Until they found out that I had been stealing money from the cash register, and so they gave me two options: Admit that I was stealing and keep my job or deny it and get fired. You can guess what I chose. So, there I was on my birthday at a web cafe checking emails.

“Well, yes. The last thing that I remember was clicking on a file and accidentally opening a browser that started glitching and next thing you know I end up here!” I said anxiously.

Other-Janice carried an emotion similar to uncertainty. Just a few minutes ago I had mistaken her for the *real* Janice, my ex-friend who had recently dumped me because I’m “selfish”. God, I can’t do this anymore. My head is spinning.

I got up in a rush and opened the blinds, the billboard that had usually been covered with advertisements outside the *real* Janice’s home was plastered with red spray paint, “Cyberstrickers know the bug’s extent. Our days are numbered.”. I let out a whimper and whirled around to face Other-Janice.

“Cyberstrickers? Bug? How long has this been up there?” I asked.

She responded, “Since ‘98. I’m surprised you’ve never heard of them. With the new millennium approaching, computers are going to reset to ‘00’ assuming they all record the year using the last two digits.”. A wave of familiarity rushes over me as I realize that this was like the

‘y2k phenomena’ that I remember the *real* Janice had been messaging me about. My poor Nokia was vibrating nonstop ever since she watched that Leonard Nimoy documentary.

“.... The bug is pretty much going to destroy everything since all the computers are ill-equipped for transition,” she said, “...but the cyberstrickers are just reporters who are trying to help us...” ending the explanation very unconvincingly.

So why are your days numbered? If these ‘cyberstrickers’ are trying to help you, why can’t they just get rid of the bug? It was really obvious that she was hiding something, maybe I should press on?

Wait. Why am I so invested in a world that clearly isn’t the one I belong in, in a world where Janice doesn’t know who I am, in a world where the bug is literally causing an entire world to end?

I need to get back home and figure out how to get that ‘portal’ to open again. Wow, it would be helpful if I actually went to my computer classes in college. I looked around the room, trying to look for another portal of sorts, but remembered that it opened through an email. *If only I had a computer.*

Other-Janice looked down at her shoes and back at me, “Listen, I didn’t want to tell you this before, but the cyberstrickers are the biggest source of media around here. Everyone believes everything they say, and it’s kind of difficult to find like-minded people who don’t hang on to every lie they tell. I know something bad is going to happen and I know the cyberstrickers have something to do with it.”.

She pulled out a badge and cleared her throat. “My name is Janice Toole and I’m an anti-cyberstriker. Since you are the only one who doesn’t listen to the Cyberstrickers and are

unfamiliar with this ‘world’, I can trust you to help me find the ringleader and stop whatever they are plotting. In return, I can help you find a way back.”.

I cannot believe this is happening right now. My best friend from another world as a whistleblower and scheming? A strange combination for a person who I know as prissy and uptight.

Whatever! I’ll do anything just to get back home.

“I’m in”, I said reluctantly.

“Good, there’s someone else I would like you to meet”, she takes my hand and leads me down a flimsy floorboard, revealing a smaller staircase that reaches down to the basement. Squinting, I was able to see a guy sitting awkwardly and waving. “Cindy, meet Bogg. He’s an ex-Cyberstriker who escaped from the headquarters who also happens to be on the run”.

“Yeah, and who also happened to be the local weatherman back in my universe. I knew you looked familiar”, I said without skipping a beat, “Bogg Revoire! Nice to meet you.”

Bogg started to explain that during his time as a Cyberstriker, a hidden crime ring was constantly working in the backrooms of the headquarters. To sneak into the headquarters, you must be a cyberstriker, which is only possible with a disguise. He pulled out a photo of a mask and business attire; I nodded along and assured him that I could make disguises in time, I might be unemployed in my universe, but I’ve got skills!

I spent two hours working on the disguises while Bogg started to read up on parallel universes. “So, you came from a completely different universe where Janice is your best friend

who works a regular office job, I am a popular weatherman, and you were an unemployed seamstress? I wonder who your equivalent would be”, Bogg said, thinking out loud.

At first, I was confused. Equivalent? But I slowly realized that if there was a parallel universe Janice and Bogg, there must be a parallel universe me.

Huh. Freaky.

Since I’m only helping them out until New Year’s Eve in four days, I might not even meet mine. It was also really nerve-racking since there were only four days left to sneak into the backrooms, snatch documents, and negotiate with the Cyberstrikers’ leader.

This entire situation is so weird, I mean, the y2k bug back home was pretty much handled through updates and thorough examination. If anything were to happen in my universe, it’d be pretty small. At least, that’s what I’d like to believe.

Four more days.

As the next morning rolled around, Other-Janice and I got ready to wear our disguises and hopefully slip in and out of the backrooms. Other-Bogg can’t join us because he’s afraid of getting recognized and Janice doesn’t want to risk losing him either.

We headed out of the studio apartment and into a nearby alley. We put on our masks and got out two name tags that Other-Bogg was able to swipe while escaping.

We put them on and headed into the nearest autobus where anxious citizens sat and bombarded questions like, “You two are Cyberstrikers, aren’t you?” and “I’ve already purchased twenty gallons of water and one flame thrower. Since you reporters know all about that bug, all our supplies should be enough, right?”.

It really got me thinking about how much trust these people had in the newscasters and TV personalities that are probably just using them for some wicked plan. In three days. Three days and three people. And one's out of this world. *Literally*.

We finally got off at our stop. A towering skyscraper with a light-blueish tint to its glass windows and the sun behind it illuminating the roof and giving it a natural, warmish glow contrasting with the icy and artificial interior.

As soon as we entered the building, we saw reporters and journalists swarm around in cubicles and to our left we saw cameras and lights pointed directly at TV Hosts. Everyone there was wearing masks and the same uniform I managed to replicate. I noticed an elevator and motioned Janice to go in it. Bogg told us that there were seven floors in the building and they usually present y2k news and global updates on the top floor. Apparently, there was a hidden room near the top floor's bathrooms.

We reached the seventh floor and used our name tags to find our cubicles. I sat down at my disguise's desk and prayed that the people whose nametags that Bogg swiped never show up. I ruffled through some papers left on the desk and read, "...The president has agreed to not start a separate committee designated to mitigate the bug but rather leave it to us: the Cyberstrickers... The only thing we have left to do is suggest civilians to supply food, hold off on trips, and buy weapons.... You have no reason not to trust us, we're the media for God sakes!".

Thankfully, Other-Janice's disguise sat in the cubicle next to mine and I told her it was time to investigate the bathrooms. She shook her head no and mouthed the words, "No, not yet. Wait five minutes!". But I couldn't wait any longer. They are doing something to make the bug stronger, so the faster we get this done, the faster I can go home!

I got up quickly and headed to the bathroom. I noticed a small-sized mirror hanging on the wall and a flyer right next to it. I tried removing both, but with no luck. I tried the hand-dryer and toilets, too. Nothing. I was about to give up but not until I decided to take off my mask and wash my face, I realized there was a faulty tile next to the stall. Opening it, I felt a hand grab me.

“Come on! We have no time left to waste. We’re designing the virus, in two days, we just need to send it out to the public by New Year’s Eve,” they continued. I cleared my throat and asked, “What virus? And why do we need to create one if all the computers are already not y2k-compliant? I mean, you know the president decided not to mitigate it, so aren’t we already screwed?”.

The Cyberstriker-hacker just scoffed and handed me a piece of paper. It looked like instructions for making and getting unauthorized access into weak software. I looked around and saw everyone working diligently. I kept reading the paper and it started to explain the virus. Its whole job is to exploit the bug and when it is put into the software, it attacks the y2k-sensitive technology and causes major data loss. After all, it's not like the computer can tell the difference between 1900 and 2000. *Guess the cybersecurity classes paid off.*

I folded the paper and kept it in my pocket. “C’mon! Everybody, we have three days to finish this before the Lead checks in,” another masked hacker yelled.

I needed to get out of here and tell Other-Janice. I got up and headed to the faulty-tile area, but someone again grabbed me and whispered, “Once you come in, you can never come out. Get used to it, newbie.”

I went back to the main area of the backroom and eyed the plans for building the virus. It’s a shame I can’t read code, but I do know that everyone was focused on entering “data-

oriented systems” and “modifying logs to make it seem like they were made in the past” so they can enter it and then “putting the malware in these systems”.

It also didn’t help that their Leader was going to check everything on the 31st. I wonder if there was a way I could distract the Leader, so he never checks in, and I’d have more time to sabotage the code. I’ve proven to be really good at messing things up, hence why I’m unemployed. Speaking of which, what *am* I going to do when I get back home? It’s not like I have a job!

Just then, I heard someone knocking on the door. “You guys here to help, too? Come in and start cracking open some logs,” one of the hackers said as they let in two more Cyberstrickers.

“Psst! It’s me, Janice!” Other-Janice whispered, “And this is Bogg. I figured you would find the backrooms, so I called Bogg, and we both decided to get you.”

I explained the hackers’ plans and Bogg started to add on, “Apparently these hackers have a leader, who also happens to be the Chief Executive of Cyberstriker News.

The reporters are all to save face and the real deal is these hackers.” I nodded in agreement, but I was curious. Only someone selfish enough to keep technology to themselves while others scramble for survival would want this.

“I have a plan. But the only way we can do it is on the 31st or else these other hackers will catch us before their plan goes into effect. We need to isolate all the systems, override the virus’s code, and update antivirus programs before they implement the malware,”

I whispered.

For the next three days we slept alongside the hackers in barracks and waited until New Years Eve to fix everything. At this point, I didn't really want to go back home. There was really no point in returning to a poor and friendless life. At least here I was *doing* something.

I quickly checked the time.

With only thirty minutes left, the hackers finished building the malware and went on a break. Other-Janice told me that she and Bog would override the code and download anti-virus software while the hackers are away. My job was to distract the hackers and the Leader. I sneaked out with the hackers but headed to the Leader's office. According to Other-Bogg, it's on the seventh floor and is the furthest left.

I followed his directions and held my breath. I looked at a nearby clock. Fifteen minutes until everything happens.

I knock on the door, awaiting the silence on the other side. A masked figure opens the door and beckons me inside. I gulp and the first thing I hear is, "Can you take off your mask? I'm aware the cyberstrickers admire anonymity, but I prefer face-to-face confrontation."

Our masks off, faces bare, and blood running cold.

The Leader is my doppelganger. Just like what Bogg said.

I should've known. We're both greedy in our own ways. The Leader for power and control through media and technological manipulation. Me for a life that I've failed to live up to.

You know, now that I think about it, the Leader has a great plan. Targeting the civilian's software instead of her own. Having everyone else scrambling, while she's living the high life.

What a way to start the new year.

So, why go home jobless when there's a perfect opportunity right in front of me?

After disposing of the Leader's, Other-Janice's, and Bogg's bodies, I put on the Leader's cloak and mask. The hackers, returning from their break, got back into business and injected the virus code into the software. Two minutes left. One more minute.

10, 9, 8, 7.....

Happy new year, and happy new life to me!