

## CYBERSPACE INVADER

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Yolanda's mum opened the door, squinting in the afternoon sun. Strands of her hair clung to her forehead and the make-up underneath her eyes was smudged. When she saw Jane a huge smile filled her face.

"Hi Jane," she said, "It's so good to see you!"

Jane smiled back. It had only been a couple of weeks since she'd last popped round. "Hi, is Yolanda in? She hasn't been out to play in a while."

"No, she hasn't," Yolanda's mum said, her smile and her shoulders drooping at the same time. "She has been too busy working on her school project."

What school project? They didn't have any projects at the moment. Jane forced another smile as she stepped through the doorway. She didn't want to drop Yolanda in it, but she could tell that something fishy was going on.

Her mum knocked gently on Yolanda's door. "Hi sweetie," she said, as though worried about disturbing her.

"NO MUM!" came a sharp voice from inside. "I HAVE TOLD YOU THAT I'M BUSY!"

"But Jane's here to see you, love." Her eyes widened and she bit her bottom lip nervously as she waited for a response. Jane couldn't believe that Yolanda was treating her mum like that. No wonder the poor lady looked so tired.

There was a loud tut on the other side of the door. "Okaaaay," she said, as though she was doing Jane the favour. "She can come in, but not for long. I'm really busy."

Yolanda opened the door by about twenty centimetres, which was just about enough for Jane to squeeze through. Yolanda's mum tried to poke her head around to have a look in, but Yolanda quickly pushed the door shut in her face.

Jane suddenly felt a bit weird. Yolanda was supposed to be one of her best friends, but she certainly wasn't acting like it. She'd barely spoken to her at school over the past

few weeks, always being one of the last to arrive and the first to leave. She'd missed all of their choir practises and spent every break time in the library. And now this.

"Hi Yolanda," Jane said, "what have you been up to? I feel like I've barely seen you."

Yolanda bit her bottom lip and looked down at the floor. "Oh, you know, I've ... been busy," she said.

"Doing what?"

"Making something."

"For school?" Jane asked.

Yolanda tugged at a strand of hair. "Nah," she said, "It's just something for me."

Jane looked around the room for the first time and her mouth dropped open in surprise. Yolanda's bedroom, which was usually spotless, was a jumble of tools and random metal components. The bed was set up like a workbench, with rows of spanners, screwdrivers and little containers full of nuts and bolts covering the turquoise bedsheets. Piles of metal strips, cogs and levers were scattered around the carpet like mole hills. But the craziest thing was the machine that was humming and whirring away next to Yolanda's desk.

"Woah!" Jane said, before she could stop herself. "What on earth is that?"

She said 'what on Earth' because that thing did not look like anything from this planet. It was the strangest looking device Jane had ever seen. The base was only narrow but it got wider towards the top, completely defying gravity. It was nearly as tall as Jane and there were cogs and pistons moving back and forwards, presumably to stop it from falling over.

"Did you make that?" Jane asked, trying to keep the surprise out of her voice. "It's ...it's...incredible!"

Yolanda smiled for the first time. "Thanks," she said, tilting her head to one side. "I've been working on it for nearly three weeks."

"Where did you get all this stuff from?" Jane asked, her hand making a sweeping gesture to take in all the bits and pieces that now filled Yolanda's large bedroom.

"Some of it came from around the house and the garage," she said, looking slightly guilty. "But I had to order quite a lot online."

“How did you know how to build it?” Jane asked. At school Yolanda was not exactly the hands-on type. When they’d had to build cardboard houses it took her hours to get her roof to stay on. Their teacher, Mr Brundish, had to show her how to use a glue-gun four times. “Did you get the plans off the Internet?”

“Sort of,” Yolanda said, looking down at her feet again. “I got told how to build it by a friend.”

Something weird was definitely going on. Jane knew all of Yolanda’s friends and most of them were able to build a toy car or a horse stable out of lego. But metal work? With proper tools? Not a chance.

“Who was it?”

“No one you know.”

“Who then?”

“Just someone I met online.”

“Online? Like ... in a chat room?”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah?”

“He told me how to build it.”

“He?”

“Yeah, he.”

“How old is he?”

“I don’t know. He didn’t say.”

“And he gave you the plans?”

“Not really. He just told me how to do it.”

Jane couldn’t actually believe what she was hearing. After listening to Mr Brundish prattle on for hours about cyber-safety and not communicating with strangers, here was Yolanda getting instructions off a complete and total stranger.

A very nasty thought crossed her mind.

“You didn’t give him your address, did you?”

Yolanda looked down at the carpet again.

“Mmm,” she said quietly, “but only so he could post some of the components to me.”

This was beginning to sound fishier than Sea World. Jane glanced out of the window to see if there were any strangers lurking around. There was a guy walking a large Alsatian and a few parked cars, but nothing too out-of-the-ordinary.

“What are you building anyway?” Jane asked, trying to steer the conversation in a less creepy direction.

Her efforts crashed into a brick wall.

“I don’t know,” Yolanda said, raising her shoulders up to her ears.

“YOU DON’T KNOW?” Jane asked, unable to keep the shock from her voice. “You’ve spent all that time working on this device and you don’t even know what it does?”

Yolanda stared down at the carpet, clearly not wanting to make eye-contact. A ping came from her computer and she took advantage of the distraction, rushing over to read the new message. Jane followed her and read over Yolanda’s shoulder.

‘Why it no working? You need fix.’

“Where’s he from?” Jane asked. “His English isn’t great.”

“No, he’s just learning. He’s from Stergak.”

Stergak? Jane had never even heard of it. Although saying that, she was pretty rubbish at geography. There were quite a few countries she’d never heard of. It sounded like it might be in Eastern Europe.

The computer pinged again.

‘Check piston screw it tight.’

Yolanda picked up a set of spanners and pulled the third one from the left out of its case. She held it up in front of her face, as though checking her reflection, then started fiddling with the machine.

“It was loose!” she said after a few moments. “How did he know?”

She put the spanner back into its home and stared at Jane, as if only just remembering she was there.

“Look, Jane,” she said. “I’m gonna try this again, but please stay quite, okay. I’ve promised him that no one else knows about it, so I don’t want him to find out that you’re here.”

Jane’s stomach felt like a pressure cooker and she all she wanted to do was rush out the door and get as far away from this whole crazy situation as she could. But she

nodded her head anyway. Yolanda clearly wasn't thinking straight and someone had to look out for her.

Yolanda flicked a switch that looked like it had come from a kettle and the pistons and cogs started to speed up. The outer layer of the machine stayed perfectly still, balancing on its narrow base, but the insides began to spin faster and faster. The rhythmic hum intensified and an eerie green glow filled the room. What the hell was that thing?

"It's working!" Yolanda said, interlocking her fingers and smiling from ear to ear.

Jane put her hand in her pocket and carefully fished out her phone. Holding it down by her waist, she tapped the camera app on her lock-screen and flicked it onto video. She then pointed it at Yolanda's back and pressed record, trying to capture the machine at the same time.

Yolanda was too busy turning dials and checking gauges to notice. When the noise reached deafening levels Jane glanced at the door, wondering what Yolanda's poor mother must be thinking.

Yolanda didn't seem to care. She grabbed hold of a handle on either side of the machine, as though she was giving it a bear-hug. The green glow was emanating from a slit right in front of her eyes and must have been blinding. Jane really hoped that there was no permanent damage.

Through the screen of her phone all Jane could see was the sickly green light and a Yolanda-shaped silhouette. There was a sudden flash and a sound like a space rocket being struck by lightning in the middle of take-off. Yolanda's body jerked and then tensed up. All of a sudden the light and noise stopped, as if someone had flicked the off-switch.

Yolanda stood frozen for a second, then took her hands from the machine and brought them up to her face, studying them on both sides as though seeing them for the first time.

"Qeegag ag googah!" she said, which was clearly no language Jane had ever heard before.

Yolanda's arms dropped back down to her sides and she turned around awkwardly. Her neck was craning forwards and her tongue was poking out of her mouth

as though she was trying to taste the air. When she saw Jane standing there in the middle of the room, pointing the camera phone right at her, she froze and her eyes widened.

“Who you?” she said. At least that’s what Jane thought she said. She was quite hard to understand with her tongue still poking out of her mouth.

Every hair on Jane’s body stood to attention and her stomach felt like she was on a roller-coaster. Jane didn’t know what had happened to Yolanda but that was definitely not her. Sure, it was her body, but her mind had been taken over. And the way she was standing, with her arms dangling loosely at her side and her head jutting forwards, did not look at all human.

“I’m Jane,” Jane said, taking a step back and holding her phone out in front of her as though it were a shield.

“Jane? Yeth—Yolly7 tellth me oth you. Why you are here?”

Yolly7? Oh yeah...that was the username that Yolanda always used.

Jane had to do something, but she had no idea what. All she knew was that someone—or something—had just hijacked her friend’s body. And if she didn’t get her back right now, she was pretty sure that no one else would be able to.

“The leaders sent me,” Jane said, trying to buy herself some time to come up with a plan. “So that they could track your progress through my transmission device.” Jane nodded towards her phone.

“Leaderth?” Yolanda said, her voice was high pitched, her face scrunched up, and her tongue was still protruding from her mouth. She didn’t look very happy at all. “Yolly7 broke promith. Thi thed tell no one.”

“No one?” Jane said, trying to sound as surprised as she could. “But the whole planet knows. We’ve all been watching your progress to see if you would succeed.”

Yolanda bent forwards, her head shaking frantically like a dog trying to dry itself. Her arms swung by her side like pendulums and a big trail of saliva dripped onto the carpet. Yolanda would have died if she could see herself now.

“You planet know we ith coming?” she said to the floor, punctuating the question with another dollop of dribble.

Jane nodded. “Yeth!”

There was a ping from the computer but Yolanda or whatever it was in her body—did not seem to notice or care.

Jane glanced over at the screen.

'Jane? I was tricked. Now in alien body. You have to help me!'

So her suspicions were correct. An alien had invaded Yolanda's body. And Jane was the only one who knew about it.

"Would you like to meet the others now?" Jane asked, pointing towards the door. She had no idea what else to do, so she just had to keep the bluff going for as long as she could. "They are very excited that you are finally here." The computer pinged again, so Jane just looked at her phone as if she was reading something.

"They want to know when we can begin the evacuation!"

"Evacu-ation...the removal of persons or things from an endangered area," she said, as if reading from a dictionary.

Jane glanced up at the new message on the computer screen. 'Are you there? I've been so stupid. Please help me!'

I am trying, Yolanda, Jane thought. I'm doing everything I can.

The Yolanda-invader was now shaking from head-to-toe. Her legs were wobbling so much that it looked like she might fall over at any moment. As far as Jane could tell, this was how the aliens showed their emotions. And if she had to guess, she'd say this one was rather angry.

Keeping the phone in her right hand trained on the intruder, Jane stretched her left hand towards the keyboard.

'tyrn macinwe om noqw' she typed quickly, hoping that Yolanda would understand what she meant.

The doorbell rang downstairs and Jane had to suppress a smile.

"Ah, that will be them here now," she said. "Humans are ready for the evacuation."

The invader looked around the room frantically, as if trying to find another way out. Just at that moment the machine began to speed up again. She turned to look at it and her body stopped shaking.

Jane couldn't believe her plan was working. If you could even call it a plan. She'd had no idea what she was going to say until the words came pouring out of her mouth.

"I mutht dethroy mathine!" the invader said, quickly looking around the room for something.

What? Wait...no!

She picked up a Barbie doll and started thumping its head against the machine that was now spinning away at full speed.

“No!” Jane said quickly, “Don’t destroy it. Earthlings need it to escape.”

Jane positioned herself between the doll and the machine, hoping not to be beaten to death with something as lame as a Barbie doll. That would be such an embarrassing way to go.

A thought hit her before the Barbie doll did.

“Actually, it is fine if you destroy that one,” Jane said. “Go ahead.” She stepped aside, giving the invader full access to the whirring machine. “It’s the one at the other end that we really need to protect!”

Yolanda’s face scrunched up and she shook her head vigorously.

“Mutht warn all Thergkians!” she said, and she reached around and grabbed the handles on either side of the machine. The volume hit a crescendo as green light illuminated her face.

Jane took a few steps back as the room flashed green and the piercing metal sound filled her ears.

Yolanda’s body tensed again, then her shoulders slumped and her tongue slipped back into her mouth. She looked around the room and saw Jane standing there, her phone still pointing at her.

“Jane! You did it!” she said and she threw herself towards her friend. Jane lowered the phone for the first time in what seems like a hundred years, but the record timer said it was only 4 and a half minutes.

She pressed the stop button and hugged Yolanda back.

“I’m so glad you’re okay!” Jane said, as her friend clung to her neck, tears trickling down her cheeks.

“But I’ve been so stupid,” Yolanda sobbed. “We have to destroy that machine before they find a way back.”

“Yes,” Jane said. “And after that we’ll post this video on Youtube...I’ve got a feeling it’s going to go viral!”