

The Adventure of the Counter-Culture Virus  
by Kevin Korell

Looking out through a broad window into the cheerless gray sky of nineteenth century London, I realized I hadn't turned off the simulator last night. How many days had it been – seven, eight? I really should quit this, I thought, tomorrow.

I stumbled to the mantel for the blue bottle, then settled into an armchair by the fire. At my right lay the syringe in its threadbare case. Two ounces today. I thrust the needle in without a twitch. Ahhhh...the beast in my head purred, its hunger sated, if only for a while.

Being a man took a bit of getting used to, but I loved this old chap. He knew the pain of a starved mind. What a dull substitute was life, when one could not engage the powers of reason. And it had been so long.

"A filthy habit, Holmes," said a voice. "It wounds me deeply to see you ruin yourself that way."

The good doctor had awakened. He entered the room and looked out the window.

"My dear Watson," I said with a suppressed smile. "Your concern for my well being never fails to delight me. Would you care to try some?"

Watson scowled. "As a man of medicine, not to mention your friend, I implore you: give it up. You've hardly stirred from that settee this past week."

"I need a case, Watson, a real case. What has Lestrade brought me lately? Murder? Stolen jewels? Misplaced royalty? Not a one. There isn't a criminal in all of London worthy of my skills now that Moriarty is gone. Ah, what a mind for crime!"

Watson paced before the window, stopped suddenly. "You may be in luck, Holmes. There's a man hanging about the door, hunting for the bell. What do you make of that uniform? Military, I presume?"

I walked to the window and looked out on Baker Street. The man in question was clothed all in green with shiny, black boots and a tan cap. A trimmed, red beard adorned his handsome face. Well, well. Things were looking up.

"I'd say he's a sergeant in the United States Army, Homeland Security Division. Married twice, divorced twice, with a five year old daughter and a seven handicap."

"Really, Holmes! You test my patience. How can you tell all that from one glance?"

It was cruel to tease the poor man so, but I enjoyed this little game. And he wasn't *really* being hurt.

"Observation, Watson. Nothing more."

The stranger found the bell at last, and Mrs. Hudson let him in. Presently, there was a knock at 221B. I opened the door.

Mrs. Hudson waddled in and handed me a large, yellow envelope with a red seal. "A gentleman, sir, calling for you. Very queer, if you ask me. Shall I tell him you're not at home?"

"No, thank you. I'll be down in a moment." I handed the envelope to Watson. "TOP SECRET" was printed above the seal.

The doctor eyed it curiously.

"Read it to me, will you Watson?"

He opened the envelope, and began without preamble:

This message to confirm an official request for assistance from CDC Epidemic Intelligence Service officer Kyla Reese (# 23-4564). Infectious, non-lethal outbreak in western states confirmed. Level 3 and spreading. Landing party to arrive at 0930. Drop all existing field research and report for briefing at CDC headquarters in Metro (Atlanta) without delay. Priority code 1A. Secure transfer ID-4563445.  
No response permissible.  
Casey Stanton, Special Operations

Watson turned the single page over. "There's a yellow square of paper stuck to the back. 'How about a drink on the way, sweetie? Walt.' I say Holmes, this is quite irregular."

I glanced at the clock on the mantle. 0900. Damn, only a half hour. "Well, what do you make of it?"

"Well, you're right about your man, but the rest is a complete mystery. I've never been to the States myself. A strange place by all accounts. What does it mean?"

"It means there's a case afoot, Watson. I must leave at once."

"I'll come with you. You're going to need a man with a revolver in America, if half of what I read is true."

I had to laugh at my friend's constant desire for action over reason. "I'm afraid your revolver will seem rather old fashioned where I'm going. No, I must insist. Goodbye, Watson. Have Mrs. Hudson hold my meals. I may be gone for a few days."

I felt for the button behind the mantle clock. In an instant, Watson was gone, the lovely brocade of Holmes's armchair was replaced by a ratty, harvest gold material, the velvet wallpaper was now a faded and peeling floral.

I took off the wrap-around shades and placed them on the armrest.

God, what a headache. Kyla, I thought, you're a naughty girl. A week straight. That's a new record. Watson would hate me.

I rubbed my eyes. Everything in the cabin was impossibly vivid, the colors exploding like fireworks. My enhanced peripheral vision and depth perception knocked any concept of real-space to pieces. It was like wearing the worst bifocals imaginable. I've never gotten used to coming out of hypersense. If I didn't sober up by the time Walter arrived, I'd be in for one hell of a flight.

I crawled into the bathroom and fumbled with two bottles. I could hardly read the labels. Slow down, Kyla. The wrong bottle and you're back in la-la land. That's something Holmes never had to worry about.

I swallowed a pill to neutralize all the sensory enhancers in my brain. After years of development, you'd think they'd have real VR by now, but no, you still had to wear the headset and take the little red pills. Sony claimed next year, but I'd heard that before.

I looked in the mirror. Was that my hair? Nothing a quick shower wouldn't fix. I turned on the faucet and ran my head under cold water.

The kitchen was filthy. I certainly could've used a real Mrs. Hudson. I made myself some coffee and turned on my tablet, the only piece of tech in the otherwise sparse cabin. I had to keep it hooked into the Holmes simulator. If I missed a top priority message, they'd chain me to a desk in Metro and never let me go.

The Inbox had two messages. I deleted the smaller one. "Sweetie"! What arrogance. God knows what Watson thought of me now. The other contained security code checks.

Hmm...Atlanta. Something big this time. Casey hadn't called me since the Malaria-B scare in the Village. Thank God – for a case, not an outbreak.

I didn't mind being an on-call agent. The CDC let me do whatever I wanted, most of the time, and the pay was pretty good. If it weren't for the boredom in between, it'd be just about perfect. Relationships, mortgages, chat-rooms, dating? God, it was all so awfully dull. At least I had Holmes. Pathetic, but I did plan on ridding myself of that thing...soon.

The four-seater chopper, no official markings, landed on the shore of my little lake at 0930 generating enough wind to blow the roof off. Damned nuisance, but they were fast. Sgt. Walter P. Flannigan stepped out, his few strands of red hair rising in the updraft.

"Hi, sugar. Ready to go?" He held out his arm to me.

"Sure. Any idea what this is about?" I asked in my sweetest voice.

"Not a clue. I'm just your faithful pilot. Watch yourself."

I strapped in and prepared for the jump. I counted: one...two...three...*WHAM!* and the chopper was high above northern Wisconsin. We must've pulled two gees for almost a minute. I jerked up against the straps as we leveled off and headed south.

"Why the rough ride, cowboy?" I scolded playfully. "You in a hurry?"

"I thought we could stop in Madison. I know a great little place. Very relaxed. Very friendly. Very private."

What a wolf. No wonder he was divorced.

"Sorry, Walt. Priority 1A means no delays. Besides, you should be ashamed of yourself. I'm half your age."

"You are not! I checked."

"You're going to have to learn how to lie if you want that drink."

We hit the edge of Metro outside Lexington. From then on it was nothing but cityscape all the way to the coast, north and south. Metro gave me the jumps – too many people. The official census listed 500 million, but it was probably much higher. God, I loved old London. It felt so...vacant. I turned off my visor and slept for an hour.

We hit the no-fly zone five miles west of Atlanta. Two choppers checked our clearance and escorted us to an unassuming building on a windswept hill. HQ didn't look that big from the outside – a mere six stories – but as the CDC had grown, they'd built down instead of up. An entire city spread beneath the hill with a maze of apartments, restaurants, shops, labs, offices, and over 50,000 people. Each basement had sub-basements and sub-sub-basements. God knows what they had on the lowest levels.

We touched down on the helipad at 1235. My boss, Casey Stanton, waited for us. She was small with a deceptive smile and the soul of a samurai warrior. In a bureaucracy as big as this, you were either a shark or shark food. I was glad she was on my side.

She climbed in carrying a briefcase and a white paper bag. "Let's go, Sergeant."

The chopper lurched into the air.

Casey smiled. "Hungry, dear?" She handed me the bag.

I had forgotten to eat. How many times had that happened on a case? I grabbed a sandwich and munched eagerly. "So, are you going to tell me what's going on, or do I have to beg?"

She gave me a tablet. "We tried to keep it out of the papers, not that that ever works. I've got a mole in my department somewhere."

The screen showed today's *Metro Star*. On the cover was a video of a man about 40 with unkempt hair and a week-old beard. He wore an expensive gray suit and played the bongos. The

headline read, "Hippie Virus Strikes Village."

"The press is having a field day," said Casey. "About a week ago, we got a call from a General Hart at an Air Force base east of Laramie, Wyoming. He was worried. Laramie's a small city – less than 3 million – but the streets were deserted. Shopping malls, office parks, hospitals, factories, gas stations – all empty. No cars on the road. Nobody at work. Everybody staying home or strolling the parks or just hanging out on street corners. Kids too."

"It sounds like a hoax," I interrupted. "What were they doing?"

"Chanting."

I burst out laughing. Casey's frown stopped me. "Chanting? You mean...."

"Yes, chanting. 'Omm' and the like. Singing too, and playing guitars and drums all hours of the day and night, like in that old movie, what was it called?"

"*Woodstock*?"

"That's it. It must have been awful. Anyway, General Hart contacted the Army, and they contacted Homeland Security, and they contacted us."

I fidgeted. "Sounds wonderful."

"We evacuated Cheyenne. The National Guard has the whole area quarantined. It looked like we had it stopped, when two days ago, half of Denver failed to show up to work. And this morning, police found one-thousand people naked in Golden Gate Park. Retail sales are down and the whole economy is on the verge of collapsing."

Wow. The Village. The West Coast's answer to Metro. Only 400 mil, but growing fast. Expatriates from Metro were moving west by the millions, lured by claims of good jobs, open land, and engineered weather. They usually found the slums of southern California waiting to swallow them. A highly contagious outbreak in the Village would surely spread to Metro. God, what a disaster. You can't quarantine a billion people. "Anything to go on?"

"At first we thought it was a natural. We've seen behavior modifying viruses before, though nothing this severe. Then, we received this by snail-mail. No fingerprints, untraceable."

Casey passed me a postcard. It had, "Wyoming, Land of Adventure" printed across a picturesque mountainscape. I turned it over.

Ms. Stanton,

You don't know me, though you have crossed my path many times before. Your agents have hampered my plans at every turn, but this time, the game is mine. A virus of my own design has been loosed upon the unsuspecting, though not undeserving, public.

So that you do not doubt my claim, the cities, in order of infection, will be Denver, San Francisco, Phoenix, Albuquerque, Las Vegas, and Seattle. Metro will follow if I am hindered.

You stand in the way not merely of an individual, but of natural law, the full extent of which you, with all your cleverness, have been unable to realize. It cannot be stopped.

Moriarty

"My God," I whispered. "It's finally happened, hasn't it?"

I didn't need to tell Casey what "it" was. After the bio-terrorism attacks of '09 caught the CDC unaware, we took over a big chunk of Homeland Security and nano-technology became top priority. It was hard to imagine, but before immune-enhancing robots, viruses actually killed people. Up until now, no one had developed a robotic virus that could beat our seek-and-destroy v-bots.

"At first I thought it was a joke," said Casey. "Then came Denver. He missed Laramie, so maybe he's not as clever as he thinks."

"So, what do you want from me?" I barely controlled my excitement.

"The same thing I always want. Find the source of disease, how it's spread, and what will stop it. Simple enough?"

I smiled. "What about Moriarty?"

"Don't worry about him. That's the HSD's job. A mobile hot lab will be waiting for you in Colorado. That's the nearest we can drop you. Here's your EPI1 which gives you full authority to investigate the epidemic as you see fit. Show it to anybody who asks too many questions. Take my tablet. You'll have a 24/7 link to our labs in Atlanta. Use it."

We touched down at Greeley Airport on the northern edge of Denver at 1545. Walter gave me a wink and whisked Casey away. I poked around the hangar and finally found it, the ultimate in mobile virus detection and control.

It was a modified GMC hovercraft: industrial frame and lifters, advanced navigation and tracking – the works. >From the outside it looked like a used Winnebago. It even had a Good Sam sticker. I had to admit, the R&D boys occasionally got it right.

The standard virus isolation equipment was inside: hot suits, respirators, incubators, computer analyzers, and a decontamination booth. In back was the sterile containment unit with an autoclave to maintain negative pressure. They'd come a long way since the gloves-through-a-sheet-of-plastic days. Once you got used to the robotic hands, you could do brain surgery in there.

With a puff of water vapor and a low growl, the hydrogen turbines fired, lifting me off the pavement. In moments, I was heading north on Highway 85.

Cheyenne was dead. I was accustomed to silence up at the cabin, but there was something unsettling about an empty city. I turned on the radio. New cases had turned up in Phoenix, Albuquerque, and Las Vegas. The Village was in chaos. Denver was under strict quarantine. Police around the country were detaining anyone arriving from Wyoming or Colorado. The ACLU had gone ballistic.

Everybody and their crazy uncle had an explanation. The Religious Right claimed it was the will of God, punishing man for the sins of a modern "Sodom and Gomorrah," meaning the Village and Metro. Environmentalists called it an evolutionary mutation. UFO nuts were convinced it was a virus sent by some alien race trying to enslave the world. Every doomsday cult of more than three people claimed responsibility and threatened to infect Metro unless their demands were met. On top of it all, the dollar was falling against the euro. God, what a mess.

I headed west into Laramie. Just out of town, I hit a roadblock of tanks and anti-aircraft guns. The Army certainly wasn't fooling around. A man in full body armor approached. I handed him my EPI1. It might as well have been an upside-down road map.

"Sorry, miss. I have to ask you to step out of your vehicle. General Hart's orders."

God, I hated bureaucracy. This guy wouldn't have saved his own mother without written orders and three forms of ID from the old bag.

"Look, these orders are *signed* by General Hart."

He looked at the EPI1, to the temporary barracks, and back to me.

It was time for the big guns. "Are you telling me you're going to hinder a CDC officer in a national emergency? Do you know what will happen if General Hart finds out?" I grabbed the

papers and accelerated. Let them come and get me.

The first thing I had to do was find Patient One. If I could trace the outbreak to its source, I'd be halfway home. I headed downtown. What a sight. I've been at a Ground Zero before, but never like this. As far as I could see, there were people sitting around campfires, singing, smoking, climbing trees, lounging on the grass, and running naked through the fountains. I parked the van on the U of W campus and dressed in a white cootie-suit. I hated the things because they made me look like a bug-eyed alien which tended to scare the willies out of people.

I swallowed hard and stepped outside.

Most people ignored me. An old man with hair down to his waist actually gave me a hug. "A messenger from the stars," he exclaimed. "Spreading peace and love on the intergalactic cruise." He cackled and ran off.

I grabbed a young girl with starry eyes. "Who's in charge here?"

"Charge?"

This wouldn't be easy. "Your leader."

A blank stare.

"Uh, your guru."

Her face lit up. "The Chosen is over there." She pointed to a ring of people who were waving their arms in a kind of spiritual trance. An elderly gentleman in a flowing robe sat in the center.

I ran to him. "What's going on here?"

He seemed not to hear.

I shook him. "Who are you?"

His eyes went wide. "I am the Chosen One. Are you ready to give yourself to the mysteries of the cosmos, dear child?"

"Who were you *before* you were the Chosen One?"

"There is no before. There is no after. There is only now."

I reached into his robe and pulled out a wallet. Dr. Morris Greenwald, General Practitioner. I filled a syringe with an adrenaline-penethol mix and stuck his forearm. The old man bolted upright, eyes bulging. He looked at me and frowned. "Is the hour of judgment upon us?"

"Do you remember last week? Did you receive any unusual patients?"

"Yes.... Yes, I remember. There were several. Then, I was...happy, so happy."

"Who was the first?" I had to shake him to regain his attention.

"Oh, well, a colleague of mine. Hugo Winston. He works at the research center in Denver. His wife brought him in. Had no appetite, no ambition at all. Wouldn't even take a shower."

"Had he done anything or gone anywhere unusual? Please, Doctor, this is important."

"No, I don't think so. He did say something about a seminar."

"What kind of seminar?"

"Well, he was a virologist. I suppose a virology seminar."

Virologist.... Alarm bells rang in my head. Moriarty? A virologist? God, not another postal case.

"What did you do with him?"

"Well, he seemed fine to me, so I sent him to a specialist in Denver."

Ah ha, the missing link. Why does the medical system always seem to help spread these

things?

“Where was the seminar?” But the doctor was back in happy-land.

I turned on the tablet. A search for a Hugo Winston turned up a dozen names, but only one virologist. Let’s see, moved to Laramie from the Village three years ago. Wife, two children. Suspected liberal sympathizer. Homeland Security had a complete list of contacts, purchases, movements, library transactions, and Web usage for the past 15 years. I punched in a query to cross-reference anyone flagged as Watch, Suspicious, or Suspect. Several names came up: an old college buddy, a war protester currently in prison, and a nephew in counter-culture theater in Minneapolis flagged as “radical.” Not much to go on.

I got Winston’s address and was soon parked before a modest, deserted rambler on the edge of Medicine Bow National Forest. A large outbuilding sat behind the house. It was locked.

I had some explosives in the van, but couldn’t risk it. There might’ve been virus tanks and God knows what else in there. I contacted my boss on video.

“Point the tablet’s laserport at the lock,” said Casey. “Now type, ‘BIGBANG’.”

I hit the keys. “Nothing happened.”

“It’s a pinpoint e-bomb, a million-watt pulse of microwaves. Disrupts electric fields. Officially, this thing doesn’t exist.”

“What thing?” I asked, opening the door.

It was dark inside. I switched to infrared. Winston lay in a corner dead, but still warm. I turned on the lights and looked around. There was an antique tractor and a rust-blue convertible, but not a scrap of bio-tech gear. Damn! I’d have to solve this one the hard way.

I dragged the body to the van and got him through the air lock. I depressurized the lab and refilled it with bottled air. Into the decon unit, a green light, and I was clean. I dropped the suit into the incinerator and set to work.

I drew a sample of blood and separated the red blood cells from the serum. The analyzer whirred. Some prescription narcotics appeared, but nothing suspicious. Cell count was within spec. His v-bots had the latest upgrades and security patches. Hormone levels were fine. I ran a virus scan. Every known infectious disease ever encountered by the CDC had a reagent that would precipitate out if it found a match. I waited, drumming impatiently on the panel. Not a single hit. I punched up the fluorescing microscope. Nothing. Definitely something new. Maybe they’d name it after me.

I took a tissue sample. Pathogens, negative. Abnormal bacteria level, negative.

Microbial, gene-mutation, cancerous cells all negative. I widened the scan. Again, nothing.

The radio was reporting new cases throughout the west. The first case in Metro had just turned up in Atlanta.

What was I missing? I searched the dead man’s pockets and found a room service bill for #226, Northumberland Hotel, in Casper, WY. On the back was a note in pencil. “Dinner, Sat. 10:30. JH.” I ran a query linking virologists and Casper. Seven matches, arriving eight to ten days ago from San Francisco, Phoenix, Albuquerque, Las Vegas, Seattle, and Atlanta. Looks like I’d found my smoking gun.

One of the guests was Dr. Julian Harlow, my professor of nano-technology and a sort of mentor when I was nothing but a poor bio-tech student. I hadn’t thought of him in years. He had been a little strange, but he was the one who’d introduced me to Holmes. We used to read to each other in the days before VR. He was a pretty smart guy. Back when nano-bots were only a dream, he had predicted a future of “laboratory terrorism.” Looks like he’d been right after all.

I punched him up on the tablet. Let’s see, resigned his chair a few years ago. Considered

the leading expert on nano-immune systems. Hired recently by the CDC's former director who had been pushing a controversial world-wide inoculation program. The program was cancelled when the director was found dead in his car on the rough side of Atlanta. Professor Harlow returned to private research at his Wyoming lab.

Well, it was time to pay my old mentor a little visit. Maybe he could tell me something about this Winston character. I headed back to Cheyenne, then north on Highway 25. My tablet buzzed – a top priority message, no return address. I read it and froze:

Ms. Kyla Reese,

It has been an intellectual treat to see the way in which you have grappled with this affair, and I say, unaffectedly, that I would be grieved to take any extreme measure, but the situation is becoming an impossible one. You must drop it, Ms. Reese.

I am quite sure that a woman of your intelligence will see that there can be but one outcome to this affair. You have worked things in such a fashion that we have only one resource left. This is not danger, this is inevitable destruction.

I know every move of your game. It has been a duel between you and me. You hope to beat me. I tell you that you will never beat me. You must stand clear, Ms. Reese, or be trodden under foot. If you are clever enough to bring destruction upon me, rest assured that I shall do as much to you.

Moriarty

The text was from *The Final Problem* just before Moriarty murdered Holmes. God, what had I gotten myself into? I contacted Walter.

He was as cheerful as ever. "Hi, sweetie. Change your mind about that drink?"

"Can it, Walt. Listen, can you pick me up at Natrona County Airport? I'm in over my head on this one."

"I'll be there in half an hour. Over and out."

I buzzed Casey and gave her an update: murder of Winston, seminar participants as probable contagion sources, and Moriarty's message.

"Look, Kyla. You're an investigator, not a Marine. Wait for backup."

"Sorry, boss, time's running out. Besides, I'll have Walt with me."

"That's why I'm worried."

I hit the airport at 1930. A mob awaited – half the reporters in the Central Rockies had beat me here. Damn, they moved fast. Someone at HQ was filthy rich tonight. I readied myself for battle and stepped out of the van.

"What do you think of Reverend Sun Moon's claim that he's Moriarty?"

"Is it true Moriarty is demanding \$100 billion or he'll enslave the entire world?"

"President Wilson is calling this an act of bio-terrorists. Is Moriarty the ringleader?"

"Where will this madman strike next?"

Like wolves pursuing a kill, they pressed close, shoving cameras and microphones in my face. I gritted my teeth. A chopper hovered overhead and a familiar voice boomed over the crowd.

"This is Sergeant Walter P. Flannigan of the Homeland Security Department. This airport is under official quarantine. Please return to the terminal immediately."

Two Jeeps pulled up and MPs led the disgruntled crowd away. Walt landed and hopped

out smiling.

“Thanks.” I gave him a kiss on the cheek.

I contacted Professor Harlow on video. He looked surprised, though pleased to hear from me. He said he would help in any way he could, and to come at once to his lab at Deadman's Butte just north of Arminto.

The light was failing as we approached. Walter switched our visors to infrared. The latent heat of the mountain was a block of solid white. I adjusted the sensitivity. “There it is,” I said into the comm.

Walter brought us in close. Tall pines camouflaged a bank of south-facing windows set into the hillside. They would have been invisible to the naked eye, even if we had flown right over them. Walter set us down and pulled out a laser rifle. “Just in case,” he winked.

Outside it was quiet, the windows dark. The professor was waiting at a glass door that appeared to be the only entrance. He had a thick head of gray hair pulled back into a ponytail. Despite his age, he gave the impression of boyish delight.

“Kyla, I am so happy you called. Please, come to my laboratory. I’m just finishing an experiment.”

We descended several flights of stairs and entered a wide, curving hallway.

The professor paused before a heavily shielded door. “Would you be so kind as to wait outside?” he asked Walter. “I’d like to speak to Kyla in private.”

Walt shrugged and left to have a look around.

The door shut with a magnetic hum as Professor Harlow took my hand and led me into a large chamber ringed by instrument panels of all shapes and sizes. Giant tanks of liquid nitrogen and oxygen filled the room. A VR-microscope stood to one side.

The professor sat before an expansive control panel. “This used to be a top secret research lab back in the First Cold War,” he said proudly. “There’s even an old-fashioned particle accelerator carved into the rock. Cost a fortune to retrofit, but it was worth it.”

“Looks like you’ve done very well for yourself.”

“So have you, my dear. You may be surprised to hear it, but I’ve been following your career identifying more lethal pathogens than any other agent at the CDC. That’s quite an accomplishment. I am always pleased when one of my students makes something of herself. Now, what brings you to me? This Moriarty business, I assume? Looks like you’ve met your match this time.”

Same old Harlow. “Do you know Hugo Winston?”

“Vaguely. I had to leave the seminar early, an emergency back home. I never did get a chance to speak to him. Why do you ask?”

“He’s dead.”

“A spider in the center of its web. A thousand radiations, and he knows well every quiver of each of them,” the doctor quoted.

Where had I heard that line before? Of course! Holmes, describing the “Napoleon of Crime,” Moriarty. Wait a minute.... I punched a query into my tablet. Oh my God....

“Do you remember *The Adventure of the Noble Bachelor?*” I asked.

“Yes,” said Harlow. “Holmes tracked the villain from a discarded hotel bill.”

“Like this, Professor Harlow?” I pulled out the crumpled receipt. “Or should I say ‘Moriarty’? Winston paid for dinner in Room 226 the night before you left. Room 226 was yours. That seminar was your idea, wasn’t it? A handpicked collection of scientists from around

the world who by their very work are above suspicion. You murdered Winston when you realized I was on to him, but you forgot to search his pockets.”

There was a knock on the door.

“Most impressive, my dear Kyla. Perhaps I underestimated your talents. Still, you are too late to stop me.”

“But why? You’ve dedicated your life to fighting disease. We wouldn’t even have v-bots if it wasn’t for you.”

“Yes, and where is my long-deserved fortune and fame? These young VR-punks that call themselves scientists have never even heard of me.”

“Is that why you did it? Revenge?”

“I am not a madman,” said the Professor, “despite what you think. I saw a glorious day for humanity, free of disease at last. But what happened? Overpopulation, planetary destruction. Now, humans are the virus, a self-replicating intruder, bent on destroying our host. I began to realize that I had been on the wrong track all along. Disease is not our enemy. No, it is our insatiable ambition that will be our downfall. Nature would have corrected our mistake eventually, but my solution is faster: eliminate greed, desire, cruelty – the cornerstones of civilization – and make everyone happy. Isn’t that what people have always wanted?”

The pounding grew louder.

“You are insane!” I shouted.

“Join me, Kyla. You would be a great help to me. Think of the possibilities! Together we can cure all of man’s faults. No one could stop us.” He picked up something from the desk and walked toward me.

The lab door ripped from its hinges with a loud crash.

Walter stood in the doorway. “Not another step!” he shouted, aiming his rifle at the professor’s chest. “Hands in the air. You’re under arrest.”

Professor Harlow raised his arms. In his right hand he held a small glass vial.

“If you shoot, I drop it. You won’t care one bit about capturing me then. In fact, you’ll help me willingly.”

“Julian,” I pleaded, “give yourself up. Please. You need our help.”

“Really, Kyla. You disappoint me. It is you who need *my* help.”

He threw the vial into the air and dived for the control panel, hitting a large red button. Walter fired, but nothing happened. The lights went dead, the controls black. I reached for the vial but missed it in the dark. It shattered on the cement floor.

Damn it, he must’ve had his own e-bomb. As the microwaves dispersed, the lights and the lab equipment came back on-line. Professor Harlow was gone.

“Find him!” I barked at Walter, who leapt out the door at a run.

Was the professor bluffing? I doubted it. How long did I have before his virus took effect? No way to tell, but I bet it wasn’t long.

I looked around the lab. There were no vats of pathogens, toxic chemicals, or virus incubators. Nothing I would expect from someone who had just infected an entire planet. What was he up to? I was starting to get light-headed. I felt pretty damned good, actually, and I was having a hard time concentrating. This thing acted fast.

I ran to the VR-scope and switched it on. I’d used an old-fashioned electron microscope back in college, but never anything like this. I punched up Casey on the tablet and gave her a quick briefing.

“I’ll send you to R&D,” she said. I caught myself braiding my hair and stopped.

“E-lab. Sanjay speaking,” came a voice in a sing-song accent.

I started to giggle. “Hi, Jay. Can you teach me to use a VR-scope in one minute?”

Silence. “Ah, let’s see. How can I say this delicately? No. Not a chance.”

“You’re going to have to try.”

“Anything for you, Kyla. Link me in with your tablet and put on the glasses.”

I strapped on the wrap-around shades. I could see Sanjay typing obscure codes into a compiler of some kind.

“Now, put a finger in the specimen tray. You’ll feel a little prick.”

I was swimming. Red blood cells floated past like squashed water balloons.

“Okay, you’re in an artery now. Use the joystick to move around. There’s a zoom dial at your thumb. Twist the stick to rotate.”

A joystick! How primitive. I grabbed the stick and lurched wildly out of control.

“Easy! You’re oversteering.”

God, this was fun. “Can you show me one of our v-bots?” I asked.

Sanjay typed a command. “Okay, they’ll appear blue now.”

I saw a blue dot swimming around and zoomed in. I laughed as a sperm-like robot filled the screen.

“What’s so funny?”

I only laughed harder, because I didn’t know. This whole thing wasn’t making much sense. What was the point? I could be outside, watching the stars, singing. No, I had to fight this! I bit my lip until I tasted blood. I had a hunch. “Can I see what happens when this thing meets a virus?”

“Sure. I’m reading a growing number of reoviruses. They’re usually harmless. Let me push one in its path.”

A spiked gray ball appeared in the distance. The v-bot wiggled its tail madly, ramming the virus. The protein shell shattered, exposing a black, writhing, shrimp-like object. Tiny robotic arms ringed a wide opening at one end.

“That’s no reovirus,” said Sanjay.

A flood of T-cells erupted from the v-bot. They swarmed the intruder, but as they neared the virus, the arms shoved the cells inside its “mouth,” devouring them all. A stew of proteins and enzymes emerged from the opposite end, repairing the damaged envelope and forming complex molecules that floated away in the blood stream. The v-bot swam off, apparently satisfied.

“What just happened?” I asked.

“The virus was reported destroyed. Incredible! I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“What were all those compounds it gave off?”

“Hold on. Looks like three agonists, mostly synthetics, and a whole slew of antagonists.”

“Can you put that into English?”

“Agonists stimulate receptors in the brain, firing synapses. Antagonists block the synapses from firing. It’s old-tech. All behavior-modifying drugs selectively block and stimulate receptors to control brain activity. Marijuana and opium are natural agonists, not to mention all the synthetics.”

Everything clicked into place. “Sanjay, what exactly will these things do to me?”

“They could do anything! I’d have to run tests, but I think you found your virus.”

“Can you stop it?”

“Sure, now that I know what to look for. I’ll have to reprogram our v-bots. Looks like an

all-nighter for the boys in R&D. Hey, Kyla?”

“Yes?”

“Ah, how about dinner when this is all over? I know a great—”

“Maybe. Talk to you later, okay?”

I removed the shades and slumped in my chair. I felt good, peaceful, happy even. I could've just sat there doing nothing.

Walter burst into the room. “He got away. That blast did something to my chopper. Looks like we’re stuck here until reinforcements arrive.”

“We’ll just have to find something to do until then,” I said playfully.

Walter opened a bottle of wine and smiled. “Found this upstairs. Care for a drink?”

I tapped my pipe into the ashtray and put my feet on the ottoman. I drew on the pipe and exhaled a cloud of blue smoke. “And that was the end of it, Watson. The next day we dispersed the new v-bots over all affected areas. Everyone woke up with a mild hangover and resumed their normal lives without incident. Most went right back to work, or shopping, or whatever they were doing when the epidemic struck. Civilization saved from the brink once again, it seems.”

“I say, Holmes, it’s altogether too fantastic. It will make a wonderful addition to my book. Let me finish my notes. What happened next?”

“I was a minor celebrity for about a week. Then, the press moved on to new scandals and disasters. They never found Moriarty, by the way. He’s too clever for that. I’m almost glad. Life has been rather dull at 221B lately, eh Watson?”

“Quite so, Holmes, quite so. More sherry?”