ETERNITY

VIRUS WARS

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Windtree
Press

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Cover Art by Christy Keerins

http://coveredbyclkeerins.com

Windtree Press

http://windtreepress.com

Publishing History

First Print and Digital Edition: May 2011

2nd Print and Digital Edition: April 2018

Published in the United States of America

ISBN EBOOK: 978-1-944973-87-2

ISBN PRINT: 978-1-947983-51-9

Created with Vellum

For Kim Campbell.
You were there in the beginning.

A pilgrim of Eternity, whose fame
Over his living head like heaven is bent,
An early but enduring monument,
Came veiling all the lightnings of his song
In sorrow.
—Percy Bysshe Shelley

1

Rohin stood motionless, his eyes fixed on the platform and the funeral pyre directly behind it. Blowers fanned the flames to drive the stench away from the plaza. Resolute, he swallowed the bile rising in his throat. Until he accepted his part in these fiery protests, the demons from his past would continue to haunt him.

To one side a man and a woman removed their long robes and assistants lovingly poured oil onto their bodies. A plaintive, solo flute played a pastoral piece that merged the boundaries of joy and melancholy as the two nude protesters mounted the stairs on either side of the platform. They stepped slowly, but in unison, walking lightly, presenting a ghostly, slow-motion ballet. When both reached the top stair of the upper platform, they simultaneously turned toward the uncaring crowd and clasped hands.

"I ask death for us all!" the protesters proclaimed together. "For each of us a beginning and an end."

Rohin wiped his hand across his brow as nervous sweat beaded. He was no longer sure he could stand and watch. Was it true? Did they really prefer death? How could a discovery meant to lift up mankind be so detested? Mesmerized by their voices, the din of the

crowd faded from his consciousness as every nerve in his body screamed "Stop!"

Two others wearing immaculate white robes moved somberly to each end of the platform, their hoods purposefully drawn close to obscure their identity. Acting as one in thought and motion they lit the pyre. The nude protesters neither flinched nor turned as the flames rose behind them. Rohin winced at the hiss and crackle of the flames.

"I beg each of you to join me." The protesters continued their exhortation in unison. "It is only through death that we can save our world! There is no change without death." They swayed in place, not yet moving any closer to the flame. A drum beat their words into a rhythm. "Die with me! Die with me! Together ... Together ...Together." Their feet stomped more brutally as their bodies writhed with frenzy. The drum beats thundered. The pulsating dance moved them in ever smaller concentric circles. A crowd of white-robed individuals gathered near the platform, shedding their cloaks to join the dancers. Now twelve of them writhed and chanted until they matched the volume of the drum. "Burn...Burn like the Phoenix. Burn...Burn."

Their words tore through Rohin's heart, imprinting his mind, drawing him closer. "Die with me," he whispered to himself as his feet stomped to the beat.

Yes, death would be preferable to this life. He hadn't found much meaning in the past two hundred years, and he wasn't sure the struggle was worth it anymore. His body swayed and his feet moved closer to the stage, keeping the cadence which called him forward. Hands reached for him and clawed at his shirt, ripping it from him. Other hands reached for his pants, shredding it into long strips. The chanting grew louder and closer, calling him forward.

Someone grabbed him from behind, "No! No more will go today." He turned to protest. White robes pulled him toward the light. Confused, Rohin shook his head and struggled to cast off everyone who clawed at him. He dropped to the ground and the hands moved away in search of another acolyte.

The drum's beat quickened and the protesters on stage wove their

arms and bodies together until they seemed to be one. "Transform ... transform us ... transform," their chant continued. The newcomers shed their clothes as they joined the turbulence of the dance. Assistants rushed to pour oil on their now nude bodies. Sunlight danced off their skins, making it appear as if an aura of light surrounded all of them.

The cadence reached a frenzy and the sound of rolling thunder drowned their voices until only the thumps of the dance could be heard. Rohin closed his eyes, unable to watch their destruction.

All sound stopped. A deafening silence, broken only by the crackling flames, drew his eyes back to the entwined bodies. Unmoving, they stood facing the flames like statues in hell.

In one fluid movement, the twelve nude bodies surged forward like a wave crashing upon the shore, hurling themselves off the platform onto the flaming pyre. The drums picked up again, but not in time to cover the screams of agony as the fire engulfed them.

Rohin doubled-over in revulsion as the stench of burning flesh reached him. On his hands and knees he vomited until his stomach emptied all it held and spasmed over a string of dry retches. Once there was nothing left in his stomach, he forced himself to watch until the fiery end.

When the screams ended, the drums stopped and the flute returned with the same pastoral tune that had started the ceremony.

The hooded assistants stood on the platform and signed their final words in silence, the translation captioned above them on a screen. *Death is only change. We transform the world as we arise from the ashes of this life.* They bowed and retreated, disappearing as a crowd surged around them.

It had been much worse than he'd imagined. The stories he'd heard in the hives always belittled the protest, made it out to be more like a child's game. But it wasn't a game at all.

A gruff voice followed behind him, shouting "That's him. Get him!"

Without looking to see who shouted, Rohin instinctively ran in

the opposite direction. He weaved between potted trees in the square, then ducked down an alley to catch his breath.

His pursuers converged on him, forcing him to spin into them as they closed. In a surge of terror, Rohin turned, kicking and punching at anything that moved. He left two of them on the ground and a third still on his feet, but staggering.

A blinding light engulfed him, followed by a broadening shadow, leaving him in conscious darkness. Rohin bit his lip to keep from crying out as he flailed his arms to defend from more attackers. Stinging numbness started at his toes and worked painfully through his limbs to his brain. The final convulsion struck him to the ground, where he struggled to maintain some semblance of consciousness.

"Don't move, or the next charge will break you," a woman's voice spoke harshly above him.

"Eternity," he groaned, noting the blurred insignia over the woman's breast pocket. No. Not again. He turned to his stomach and stretched his arms out, clawing at the earth in frustration, trying to get some purchase to push himself up.

A woman's voice babbled without meaning while he lay prone, his chin on his arm. The blindness had passed, but he could only see and hear through a veil of fog.

His eyes focused, then unfocused. The tall grass wavered in and out. In and out. A pair of thin trousered legs became clear, then fuzzy. He rolled onto his back and tried to lift the veil to look further.

"He's useless in this state," the woman said to some unseen assistant. "Put him out, then get him into the ambul."

The slight prick of the hypo pressed his bare arm, followed by soothing warmth. Finally, he surrendered to the darkness.

Rohin awoke lying on his back. A flat, hard, cold surface tremored beneath him. A second later he recognized the low, steady sound of a hover. His legs and arms ached. He tried to move them, but they were held—ankles, knees and wrists pressed tightly to the platform. He

threw all his strength against whatever pinioned them but they remained immovable. The effort exhausted him and he slipped back into unconsciousness.

When he woke a second time he was still lying on his back; but the surface under him had become softer and motionless. He listened for a sound and recoiled when labored breathing came from somewhere in the darkness. Heavy footsteps trudged toward him, then a bright light glared into his eyes as a surgical mask bent toward him and nodded. He struggled against his restraints. Then he felt the pressure against his arm again.

"TDs?" Rohin whispered. The masked person nodded slightly and the pressure released. Rohin closed his eyes in resignation as the soothing warmth of the truth drugs diminished his fear. And any capacity to rebel.

2

Her eyes aching, Miki Yokoyama looked up from the terminal and sat up straight, stretching her tired back. A thunderstorm brewed to the southwest. Bruise-black clouds silhouetted a forest of giant pines outside her window, while distant lightning rippled along the horizon. The static in the air played on her nerves with a lingering tension. She was so close to finally figuring this out, but it always stayed just out of reach.

Miki bent again to the screen and scrutinized an enhancement of the gamma microscope output. Even after all this time, this virus left her in awe. In the world of viruses, the Eternity virus was a giant: about ten times the diameter and twenty-five times the mass of the virus that caused polio in the early twentieth century. The size and complexity of the Eternity virus defied traditional methods of examination, so scientists used computer enhancement to analyze the structure and simulate the features they couldn't detect.

She hit repeat and once more the simulation engaged. The virus attached itself to the cell and dissolved a hole through the cell wall—allowing its nucleic acid to seep in and steal the cell's energy—forcing it to make virus protein and nucleic acid for the production of progeny. For what seemed like the thousandth time, she noted which

type of cells accepted this virus; particularly which small part of the cell membrane—a receptor patch—fit it exactly.

For the past seventy years, she'd been trying to create a counter-virus, with a null-protein, to stop it. Why was it so hard? She'd been successful with many other viruses in the past, but this one was different and she was running out of time.

The vidcomm buzzed, jarring her concentration. She slammed her hand on the bench in frustration. "Damn!" she muttered to herself. "Can't they leave me alone?"

She stomped to the terminal wall. Fingers poised above the keypad, she consciously calmed herself and schooled her features into bland professionalism before answering.

Thunder rumbled through the heavy air. The vidcomm buzzed again.

Miki hit the code converter simultaneously with the privacy augment switch. Only a few selected people knew her location; and even fewer knew the type of research she pursued.

Secured deep in the Mt. Hood wilderness, the Ager stronghold provided a safe refuge. It was one of the few places Eternity hadn't completely mapped or penetrated with their spies, but she could sense the lapping of the tide. Eternity was winning.

The decoded signal came through and a three-dimensional image of a beautiful blonde woman with shoulder length hair filled the screen. She immediately recognized her best friend, Anna. The locator indicated she was calling from Vivan Square.

"Miki?" Anna queried excitedly.

She secured the privacy lock before allowing the transmission of her image to be acknowledged back to Anna.

"Yes, there you are," Anna said. "You won't believe this . . . Rohin's showed up."

"What? Are you sure? I figured Eternity killed him long ago."

"I saw him with my own eyes. He hasn't changed much, a little thinner perhaps, but it was undoubtedly him. He was leaving the Anniversary protest when one of Eternity's goons beamed him and carried him into the I2 building."

"Did you follow him?" Miki asked. The Interrogation and Identification building was a nightmare. Miki wouldn't wish that on anyone, even her enemy.

"I couldn't get into the interrogation room, though I'm sure they used TDs on him." Anna shuddered as she spoke. "You know what happens to anyone going in there."

"I have a good number of questions for him myself," Miki replied derisively. "I wonder what Eternity wants with him after all these years?"

"Do you think they're prepping him for something special?" Anna asked. More than the usual strain marred her face.

"Anything's possible with Chawla. The question is *who* is he working for, and should we go after him?"

"Well, I hate to see anyone go through I2," Anna hedged. "But it's pretty risky for us to do a recovery project. I'm not sure he's worth it."

Miki was inclined to agree, but she wanted information more than anything else. "Damn it!" She shook her head, angry with her own conclusions. "We've got to get him. Maybe he knows something about the virus that can help us. He stayed on the Eternity project longer than either of us."

She clenched her teeth. Rohin Chawla was the last thing she needed right now. She turned back to Anna. "Crap – it would have been better for everyone if he was dead."

Anna smiled. "Maybe dead is what we should make him."

Miki frowned, thinking of the risk. "If he's somehow working for Eternity, I'll kill him myself. But right now, we don't really have a choice. Meet me at rendezvous H15 in one hour."

Miki signed off, quickly linked her terminal with the sat array and called her hover. She secured her terminal and rushed out of the building, voicing commands to the building's computer security.

In a matter of moments, her hover arrived outside the door and she climbed in, sitting stiffly upright as it rose straight up 100 meters then arced over the western flank of the mountain on its trajectory toward Vivan Square.

Rohin Chawla. A name out of the past come back to haunt her.

It was in 2050 that Miki, Anna, and Rohin had met in Antarctica on a research project. They were all young, promising biomed grad students serving a pre-employment internship with the leading biomed manufacturer in the world. In spite of the hardships of six months in Antarctica, it was the type of internship that could provide dream opportunities for their professional futures.

Their research project, funded by the World Health Organization, had been to determine if deep ice core samples could yield information on ancient diseases—viruses that had suddenly seemed to disappear. If any were found, WHO hoped to gain new insights into current disease processes that may have mutated from previous viruses. Little did the small research team know that their discovery would change the world, the economy, the balance of power, and every life on the planet.

When she, Anna, and Rohin were all one team it had seemed so wonderful—looking for cures to save the world. Then it quickly fell apart. Eternity Inc. took control and Rohin Chawla suddenly disappeared.

She had loved him fiercely, and his disappearance was a betrayal she would never forgive. She shook her head as if it would clear any lingering feelings for him. What was wrong with her? After all he'd done, how could she even consider there would be an ounce of regret? No. She would not let him under her skin again, even if he could help them. Even more important, she had to make sure he wasn't going to interfere with her project now.

The hover slowed, coming to a stop one hundred meters above the H15 coordinate. Miki queried the computer for close scan. Satisfied her approach hadn't set off any alarms with Eternity security, she parked at the public air lot, quickly stepped out the door onto the grav platform and descended to the ground.

It was only forty meters to the rendezvous point. She advanced from one cover position to the next, taking advantage of trees, bushes, and the sides of other buildings. She scanned the avenue in both directions, thankful for the dark, clouded sky obscuring the moon. The thunder and lightning of the storm seemed to stalk her. She

looked up and shook her head. She hoped the churning clouds were not an omen of things to come.

Reaching the rendezvous point, she glanced toward a low-slung, elliptical-shaped one story building. It looked non-descript, not at all imposing. However, the bland facade of I2 did not reassure her. Miki was well aware of the types of interrogation practiced inside.

She surveyed the area for Anna. Where was she? Miki checked her timer. Four minutes until the agreed meet. Damn. Couldn't Anna be early just once? Miki stood across the street, a tall bush blocking any view of her from the building. Alert, she marked each second as it passed. When the time was up, she swore to herself angrily. She didn't like to be kept waiting, it was too dangerous. She and Anna had learned to be very precise whenever they met outside the Ager stronghold. Being caught loitering outside the I2 was not her idea of fun.

A red and white ambul appeared to the south, about fifty meters away. It came in close to the ground, then descended the last few meters to stop across the street, blocking her view of the entryway. She knew exactly what would happen. Ambuls were used to take seriously ill or wounded Eternity personnel to the hospital for treatment.

Because of the Eternity virus, in the past 200 years very few people actually died of illness. Most genetic diseases had been resolved in utero through gene splicing. Ambuls were usually a sign of a *planned death.*

She knew the drill. The attendants would enter the building and come out with an unconscious victim to surreptitiously take to the hospital. No one would be suspicious. Somewhere along the way the body would disappear and all record of the ambul's being at this location would be erased.

"Tarful," she swore in Frenger. "Where is Anna?" Miki rechecked her timer. Anna was now six minutes late.

True to form, one attendant immediately headed toward the building as the other opened the back end of the ambul and retrieved the gurney. Just then the sky opened up and a driving rain

drenched everything in its path. Her soaked jumpsuit clung to every curve of her body and her dripping wet hair obscured her vision.

She quickly twisted her hair into a braid and capped it with a band. "Tarful! Can't I catch a break?" She looked down the street and saw no one approaching. Perhaps she could use the downpour as a good reason to run toward the building, pretending to take cover from the rain under the overhang.

She ran toward the overhang and the door to the building swung open. A security guard stepped out, leveling a dark cylindrical object straight at her.

"No loitering. Move along," he barked when she came within three meters of the door.

She came to a complete stop just outside the overhang. Only government security personnel were allowed to carry beamers; she had no defense against one.

Thunder boomed overhead and a streak of lightning illuminated the avenue. At the same time, someone leaped from a cluster of bushes at a ninety-degree angle to the guard. The shooter aimed at his torso and a white energy beam enveloped him. He slumped to the ground.

Anna pulled the guard around the side of the building, motioning for Miki to take cover in the bushes. Moments later Anna joined her, her breath ragged.

"Where the hell were you, and how did you get a beamer?" Miki whispered.

Before Anna could answer, the front doors of the building opened wide and the two attendants backed out, rolling a gurney toward the street. Miki recognized Rohin's pale face above the blankets.

"We have to move now. Once they get him inside the ambul, you take the driver and I'll take the other one," Miki instructed. "Then you get Chawla out of here."

Anna nodded.

Squatting behind the bush, Miki's leg shook with anticipation. She never took her eyes of the attendants as they loaded the body

into the back. The door to the ambul slammed shut and she yelled as she sprung toward the attendant at the back door.

Miki delivered a powerful punch to the chest, shoving him back against the door, knocking the breath out of him and sending him sprawling to the side. She couldn't see how Anna fared. She heard the sound of scraping metal against the other side of the vehicle and turned to look. The attendant on her side rose, but she delivered a swift knife-hand chop to the left temple, followed by a well placed heel to his stomach. The man immediately lost consciousness. She didn't know if she had killed him or not, but he was definitely out cold. She carefully rounded the side to see if Anna needed assistance.

Anna bent over the unmoving body of the second attendant. Her beamer was no longer in sight.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" Miki asked. "Get Chawla out of here. Now! After you've secured him, strip the ambul memory and send it on a remote crash."

"But Miki, what are . . ."

"Just do it!" she commanded and backed away to the other side of the avenue.

Without looking back, Anna climbed into the ambul and closed the door. It rose straight up into the thundering sky and moved off.

Miki stood across the street from the building, huddled behind a tree, estimating her position. She shivered as the breeze played icy fingers across her damp skin. She nervously tapped her timer's commlink, sending a signal to her hover to leave the parking area and pick her up. Moments later, the hover braked with a whoosh of air in the street behind her.

She listened for running steps, then checked up and down the street for Eternity agents. Seeing no one she ran. She reached for the door and the distinct white light of an energy beam illuminated a broad circle on the handle, missing her only by centimeters and sending a teeth-clenching shock throughout her body. Lightning smashed into the street behind her, echoing the beamer's retort and the explosion of electricity deafened her.

For a moment, she thought she'd been struck. Then fire crackled.

She didn't dare turn to look. The lightning stroke terrified her even more than the beamers. She seemed caught between nature's fury and the unknown assailant.

A deep bass yell sent her running as the assailant rounded the hover. Her breath grating, she ran in a serpentine pattern toward the blaze. Feet pounded behind her, growing closer with each step.

Miki took cover near another tree and turned briefly to determine the distance between them. He was directly behind her and coming fast. Her heart pounded the terror of her mind.

Lightning struck again; the explosion knocked both of them to the ground and sent the beamer skating toward Miki. She reached for it, closing her fingers tight around the cylinder as she rolled to her feet. The assailant slammed into her, his callused hands grabbed her wrist and twisted it like a bottle cap. He trapped her against the tree trunk with his full body weight against her and the beamer fell from her hand. He kicked it out of her reach.

"No!" Miki shouted, and with all her strength she delivered a knee to his groin. He huffed an involuntary "Oof" as she connected.

He released her briefly and she grabbed for his neck, but he blocked her and grabbed her throat, pressing thumbs against her windpipe.

She let loose an X-block, dislodging his hands, then recoiled to smash her knuckle into his Adam's apple. His head jerked back. Miki followed with a powerful punch to his solar plexus, doubling him over in pain. Then she struck him on the back of the head with the heel of her hand, collapsing him flat on the ground. He put his hands to the ground and tried to lever himself up like a tripod, but she delivered a kick to his knee, then dropped to her haunches and swept his legs out from under him. He fell, smashing hard against the ground. His head hit with the sound of shattering bone.

She waited a breathless moment, expecting him to come back at her one more time. Smell. Sweat. Fear. Blood. Dirt. There was no movement. Gasping for air, she dropped next to him and felt for a pulse. Nothing. He was dead.

Sweat dripped down her back and under her arms. Blood spatters and the smell of salt on her skin washed away in the rain.

As the adrenaline drained from her, she noticed the man seemed very young—twenty-five, maybe thirty. Would his mother cry or even know of his death? For a moment disgust made her stomach clench. Though she had killed before, she still hated it.

A siren in the background warned her Eternity fire engines were responding to the lightning strikes. She had to hurry.

As her automatic survival instinct took over, her actions seemed more and more surreal. She dragged the body over to the blaze and rolled it into the fire. Then she returned to find any other bodies left from the battle. There should be four assailants—two drivers, one guard, and the person she had just killed. Anna had disposed of one. That meant there were two more corpses somewhere.

Finding one more body with the head snapped back and eyes rolled up, she dragged him quickly into the fire. Siren wails grew louder and her breath quickened in response. She did a brief reconnaissance of the area, looking for the fourth body, but couldn't find him. Time was growing too short. She gave up and staggered back to the hover.

Forcing herself to get in and close the door, she set the coordinates. Her breath sliced through her throat like a knife. The hover lifted directly overhead and followed the same trajectory as the ambul had earlier. She set it on autopilot and sank into the seat. Fear and questions assailed her.

Had it been too easy? She was certain the building was monitored. She'd expected more agents to come at them. Wasn't it convenient no one else was on the street to witness the fight or the fire? Was it possible Eternity was one step ahead of them or had they just gotten lucky? Mentally and physically exhausted, she shook uncontrollably. What if she was being set up? What if Anna was right and Rohin was still working with Eternity? Tears coursed down her cheeks at the possibility.

She was so tired. Tired of running. Tired of hiding. Tired of fighting Eternity and the damnable virus she'd helped to create. She

wanted just to lie down on the street and let the rain wash over her, absolving her of responsibility. But. . . there was always a but . . . too many people were counting on her. To the Agers, the entire future of humanity depended on her and her counter-virus to return the world to sanity.