

OF CIRCUITRY AND STARS

by Melissa Volker

My blood.

Red as cherries, and viscous as the oil that runs in the gutters, it puddles on the floor at my feet in the vague, impressionistic shape of a magnolia blossom. Like the paintings my mother would do and hang on walls of our minimal home.

At only twelve-years-old it should shock me, repulse me, panic me, but it doesn't. I've had injuries before -- shit happens when you're a kid that lives the shanty-town life along the Mississippi that I do -- but this is more than a scrape or a bruise. The blade cut deep, the flesh parting, splitting, and I watch the maw drain rivulets down my wrist, along my fingers, drops splashing like sparking neon lights on the ground.

It should be excruciating, and while it had been for a moment, I remind myself of the reason for it and check the pain. Dull it. Or try to, and realized I can.

I had made the cut because while I was almost certain, I needed proof. While I had always thought they were just stories to taunt other kids, to frighten the unruly ones, I had recently begun to wonder and needed to verify.

And while the obvious muscle and bone, and warm, pulsing, crimson flow suggests otherwise, my release of the pain, quiet detachment and objective witness to both the wound and my parents chaotic swirling around me confirms it:

I am not human.

Standing on the banks of the Mississippi, I don't even feel the rain anymore. It's just *there*. Like the air. Or the trash.

Even as far away as it is, the pulsing neon lights of Alluvium across the river cast their garish glow into the murky night skies like a muddy halo, and I stare at the scar on my arm, thinking about that night just six short months ago.

Bio-gens are supposed to be make-believe. Stories of bio-mechanical engineered life that kids use to torment one another or particularly authoritarian parents use to frighten their offspring. They are supposed to be imaginary black market, bio-generated, artificial life forms created to grow, develop, and look exactly human, but with molecular computers and organic mechanics embedded within real, living tissue. They are the boogymen no one wants to imagine being real because it means you look human, you feel human, you grow and age like you are human, but in the end -- you were manufactured. And the stories went that if a bio-gen became self-aware -- realized they were not human -- they'd be terminated because they could possibly evolve beyond humans with their computational potential and become a threat to the "natural order". I remember being one of the kids who taunted others with the idea that their parents were bio-gens and would murder them in their sleep.

I wasn't always the best kid. I wasn't horrible. I was good kid -- *am* a good kid. But, well, I didn't know why then, but I just never felt a part of it all somehow.

But it turns out they weren't so much "just stories" as something no one wanted to think about. The truth of it. I mean, mucking around with the idea of life, creation, manufacturing humans that had the very real potential of becoming something more...of evolving beyond natural humanity? Yeah, people would rather not entertain that thought so it got nixed by those in charge. Making it legal I mean. Ignore it and it doesn't exist, right? Turn it into a nightmare story to scare unruly children.

Except ignoring it doesn't change the fact that it *does* exist, and it doesn't go away. It just goes underground.

And I always knew something was off about me. I always felt different somehow. I understood things, I could do things, and I didn't understand the wailing and flailing that happened when one of my peers got stung by a bee, or fell on some rusty junk when we played hide-and-seek through the back alleys around Algiers Point. Add in overly-protective parents and I now realize it was out of fear of being discovered.

So here I am. A verified bio-gen pre-teen runaway trying to figure what that means. Am I human? Machine? Freaking plant? Or some Frankenstonian freak-show hybrid of all three? And where do I belong now? I can't move through the human world -- it's too hard to pretend and frankly, I don't want to -- and if there are other bio-gens around, I don't know how many or where.

There must be way to find out. Hack my own brain, or something. Like some kind of hive mind thing? I don't know. I'm tired.

The water below the bank is dark, rank, the current moving laboriously through the night. I kick a rock with the toe of my boot and it tumbles down the ravine, vanishing into the water with a muffled '*plunk*'. I pick up a piece of scrap metal and focus my attention on the muscles of

my fingers, my arms; I sense the tendons and their biomechanical connections, the organic and electronic electrons that pulse through them to my molecular computer brain and I make an adjustment. Squeezing my fingers together I crush the scrap in my fist like the recycling compressors down river. I toss the resulting metallic ball into the river after the rock.

My parents. They were artists -- both the traditional and the technological kind. We lived along the river across from the Quarter in a neighborhood of colorful, cobbled together bungalows with other like-minded anti-authoritarian, free-thinking, throwbacks. It's not that they didn't embrace the rampant excess of technology available -- shit, I'm proof of that -- it's just that they yearned to bring back a balance. They built greenhouses and grew real food to balance out the synth stuff, read real, paper books and created beautiful art full of color and life and promise, sometimes amplified by tiny holograms or small bits of tech. It was their rebellion against the rising tide of grit and violence and pollution of neon and chaos in places like the slimy silt pit across the river.

We were a small community of people who wanted a different kind of life.

The night I sliced my arm to prove my theory, they explained that they had been unable to conceive and so resorted to the black market medical outposts in Alluvium. It wasn't cheap and they not only used nearly all they had, they risked their own lives by dealing in information bartering. In short, I cost them a lot. They lived their lives keeping off the grid as much as possible and out of the systems, but risked it all to have me.

In a few months they came home from an "extended trip to my grandparents" further north with a beautiful, blond-haired, green-eyed girl.

When I left I headed further down river, away from the point toward the heart of Algiers. It's grittier here, poorer. But from what I can see, people leave each other alone. I considered

trying to head over the bridge to the Quarter where there's supposed to be a pretty thriving community and chances for jobs, but I wanted to stay close, but not too close to home. Wanted to keep an eye on my parents because I don't think they are safe.

I did some research when I first left and think the black market medics have orderlies keep tabs on bio-gen families in case -- well, in case of something like this happening. Like their own underground police force. Someone like me could lead the real authorities right back to them, and shut them down.

But because our community preferred to keep to itself and not call attention to themselves, I don't think anyone reported it when I ran away. I know my parents didn't because of the danger to all of us. And in the chaotic, overcrowded, tangle of New Orleans, I don't think they expected anyone to find me. While I've stayed vigilant, now after six months I wonder if I can let it go.

The rain is picking up so I yank my sleeve back down over the scar and flip the hood of my sweatshirt up over my buzz cut. I ditched the long blonde curls as soon as I went into hiding.

A boot scuff on the muddy ground behind me clamps down on all my muscles, but within seconds I know it's Luceous.

"Hey, Stanzi," he mumbles as he comes up behind me. "Been looking for you. I scored a couple of burgers from Dom's." He hands me a grease stained wrapper.

I take it from him, careful to keep from making physical contact. Since I've been toying with controlling my neural maps I've discovered I can get faint images and signals from others through skin contact. Not sure how that works exactly, but I imagine it might be an extension of the way I can keep a kind of emotional contact with my parents since their DNA was used in my creation. I don't understand it, but I figure I don't need to. Luceous doesn't know, of course, he

just thinks I don't like to be touched. But that's fine. He's five years older than I am and I think he considers me a little sister. He's been on his own since his family got caught in the middle of one of the many skirmishes almost always raging around here. He's also the reason I have a place to stay. Although, as I learn to maximize the generated portions of my makeup I'm thinking it might be time to hack ourselves into better digs than the shanties along the river.

Pretty sure I could do that at this point.

Luceous haphazardly braids his crazy mane of black hair to keep it from falling into the mess of food in the paper wrapper, and we perch along the barrier wall along the ravine beneath a corrugated overhang. I try to ignore the rather putrid aroma that hovers around the river and take bite of the burger, the juices dripping down my chin, bits falling back into the opened wrapper on my lap. It's a hot, rich, flavorful treat. "Mmm. Thanks, Luceous. Dom must have owed you one." I peek at him from behind my hood.

"Oh, Dom owes me more than one. I try to space them out." He hikes up his sleeve and scans his credit chip. Smiling, he shows me the results. I don't have a credit chip. It's one of the technologies my parents shunned. I had to do it the old fashioned way -- with a holocard.

"Is that so? What'd you do for him?"

Luceous wipes his mouth on the sleeve of his flak jacket and stares out across the river. "We should go." He tips his head toward the muddy, neon lights, LED boards and sweeping spotlights across the river.

Not answering me, apparently. That's okay. We all have secrets.

"Are you kidding?" I reply with a mouthful of sandwich. I'm hungrier than I thought and realize I haven't eaten all day. Bio-gens need to eat. Processing power depletes us fast. "I've

heard the stories over there. It's a hot mess." I finish my sandwich and toss the wrapper into a trash barrel a few feet away. It drops cleanly in, a perfect throw.

"Maybe it's hot mess, but I bet it's freaking cool as hell, too."

I shrug. It doesn't matter. We'd need the toll to get across the bridge. I had it once. I've thought about it a bunch of times since -- I'm thinking I could figure something out short of strong-arming my way over. But, while it might (emphasis on *might*) be a place to disappear into the grimy chaos, I still feel I need to keep an eye on my folks.

"Seriously, Stanzi. We'd probably be able to put something together that's a better life than this, you know?"

"Are you kidding? In the land of pulse blasts, nightly gang warfare and those creepy robotic sex dens? No thanks." I shove my hands in the pockets of my hoodie.

"S'matter, scared?" he nudges his shoulder against mine.

I keep my eye on the flickering colors of light across the river. "Yeah, not gonna work."

"Wait...how do you know all that goes on there if you've never been. You haven't just heard stories, have you?"

"I never said I'd never been there. You just said we should go." I'm about to say something else, something about how it's little more than a greasy sleezefest over there, and the Quarter would be a better option, but I'm struck by an intense, buzzing pulse in my head. Like a snapping crackle of energy it surges behind my eyes and I flinch, my teeth gritting together.

My gut squeezes and I catch my breath as I feel my mother flooded with panic. My father -- voices, movement, anger.

Something is wrong.

"Stanzi? What is it? Was it the burger? I'll kill Dom if he gave us shit -- "

I wave him away, pulling my shoulders up near my ears, trying to get a handle on the sensory influx. "I gotta go Luceous. I'll see you at home."

Without waiting I lurch over the metal barrier between the river bank and the road and take off into the dark. I slide once across a pile of sludge made slick in the rain, but right myself quickly. If I push it, if I funnel all my power on motion, I can make it there in a couple of minutes. The only things I have to watch for are the drones. Usually they keep to Alluvium, where they are needed most -- really, it's a shit hole -- but sometimes a few will drift over. I don't know if it's on purpose or a misfire. Either one is equally possible. Sometimes they glide over the river like they are coming here to die. Like some weird, cyber-dna code telling them it's the drone graveyard. Not that I care. I learned to hack and repurpose them into something useful. And barter-worthy. Luceous and I do pretty well with it, actually. It's just not something we can count on.

A few houses away I skid to a halt and duck behind a fence. The tension has been steadily rising as I made my way, the sparks behind my eyes growing more intense. I try to tap into that part of my -- wiring? -- and tone it down but I haven't figured out that kind of finesse yet. Once I've opened that pathway, it's open. I'm not good at dialing degrees.

I slip behind some adjacent buildings and try to make my way closer. I'm aware of being caught myself, and so keep my hoodie up, and my body low and in the shadows. Laser trip wires would be anywhere along with other makeshift home protections. It might be a simple bungalow town, but when that's all you've got, when you've worked to bring back a little of life-before-the-war kind of living, you protect it like it's a castle.

My stomach is threatening to flip inside out and I suddenly collapse to the ground as the sensation of constriction around my neck steals my breath.

My father.

I'm close now, so I steel myself and leap to make a run toward the house. I can hear the voices now -- angry, afraid -- some demanding, my parents pleading. I'm in the last sprint when suddenly I hear two, short pulse blasts ahead of me, and a squealing, high-pitched whine inside my head.

"Oomph!" My breath is forced from my lungs, my muscles seize, and I crumble to the ground, the connection with my parents violently severed. They are gone. Like...*gone*. And now, as I lay frozen, stopped by a neural interceptor, they will come for me, too.

They knew I was nearby. I'm sure now there is some kind of marker in me; something encoded into my makeup. It was stupid of me to not think of that earlier.

I lay stunned, unmoving, stuck on my back staring up at the night sky, the clouds that had lingered for the last several days finally parting and revealing a deep firmament littered with sparkling lights. People think the night sky is black. But it's not. It's one of the things about me that's always been different -- I can see subtle shades of blues and greens swirled through with misty gasses and the shining points of more stars than any real human could ever imagine seeing. The light of stars long-since dead, the light of those exploding as I watch, the light of others just coming into being. The entirety of life splayed out for viewing -- if you have the eyes with which to see.

Maybe there's a place for me in the stars.

My parents used to talk about how all of humanity is made of stars. "From stars we came and to stars will go."

But what does that mean for me -- the one of stars and circuits, metals and fabricated amalgamations and algorithms? They could never answer that.

Maybe it was better this way. Just decommission me. I don't know where I belong anyway.

"Stanzi -- let's go..."

There's a sharp sting in my left thigh and within seconds I can move. Instincts and reflex fling me immediately on my feet, ready to square off, and I find Luceous, his tall, husky figure crouched and skulking. His gaze darts into the shadows and I watch as his pupils dilate behind me and to my right.

"Luceous -- what -- "

"Now!" he hisses, grabbing my arm and half dragging me through back streets and under debris in back yards. We run, hand in hand, heading south toward the boulevard that led to the bridge. He dodges stray drones and pulse traps as though he knows they are there before we reach them. We don't stop until we reached the wharf beneath the bridge.

My lungs are dry and raspy and it takes me a moment to catch my breath. After evading a holo-guard at the edge of the wharf and slipping into the shadows, I slide down the wall of a shipping container to the ground and drop my head to my knees.

"Shit, Luceous. What the hell?" I rub my leg. It's sore where he -- whatever he did there.
"What did you do to me? What the hell happened?"

I slip my hood back off my head and rub my hand across the stubble on my head. I take a deep breath and focus on quieting my heart. My breath. Only then do I realize how quiet it is. Inside. The connection is broken.

My parents are gone.

I clench my fists and press them to my eyes. My head aches from whatever pulse was used to take me down. When I look up to Luceous, he's sitting across from me on the ground. I search his eyes -- they are sad, full, angry, comforting.

"I'm so sorry, Stanzi," he finally whispers.

Somewhere down the river a boat horn sounds. The baritone wail echoes into the sky and I notice behind Luceous's head the bottom edge of the sky holds a faint, pale yellow glow.

Sunrise.

Tipping my head straight up I take in the smattering of stars across the depth above before they begin to disappear in the coming light. We have to take cover before daylight. I'm now a wanted fugitive.

"I know you have about a million questions -- " Luceous starts to reach for me, but I retreat, banging my elbow into the shipping container.

I jump to my feet and step toward him, feeling my cheeks flush, knowing my eyes glow. "Who the fuck are you? How did you know to follow me?"

He raises his hands to try and calm me and I smack them away and point to my leg. "What did you do to me? What did you inject me with?"

Luceous takes a step back and lowers his hands. His gaze follows. When he looks up again his face is open, relaxed. I can see that his pulse is slow, his breathing quiet.

"Stanzi, I'm a friend. The answer to all your questions is the same."

"Which is?"

"The injection neutralizes the pulse that interrupts your neuro system, and disables the marker they used to find you -- scrambles the signal.

"And I knew to follow you, had the injection ready because..."

Suddenly, I knew before he spoke the words.

"...Because I'm a bio-gen."

My breath escapes my lungs and I cannot find words. The synapses left quiet at my parents death flood with something else now. I swallow and turn a tight circle, ducking once as the holo-guard makes another pass. "I..." I try. "How did you know about me?"

He smiles and part of my wants to hit him while another part wants to hug him.

"Well, that's a complicated question. I found out about the *fact* of you a few months ago."

"That's when we met..." I'm wary now, accessing my alert centers.

"Yes it is. I know. As for identifying -- well, It's something you can learn. To recognize another of us. I can teach you. And I can take you someplace safe."

Safe

I haven't felt that since I bartered to leave my long blonde curls in a burn bin. No trace left behind. I'm not sure I know what it means anymore.

I can feel the whirring and spinning of my system taking this in, minor adjustments to mood, knowledge, belief, awareness.

Luceous is a bio-gen.

I am an orphan.

That hits hard and I find myself on the ground again in front of the metal container. The sky is turning pale blue along the horizon in front of me, while behind, across the river, the inky blackness still hangs on. It is that magical moment when it is both night and day. Both and neither.

Kind of like Luceous and me. Human and not human. Both and neither.

And now both orphans as well.

"Wait -- " I shoot my gaze to his. "Your parents weren't killed in a gang war, were they?"

His gaze grows distant a moment and he looks past me, into the remaining night along the western horizon. "Not exactly. It was a small war, sort of gangs, but it wasn't crossfire. It was a faction trying to fight for the rights and inclusion of bio-gen. But the world doesn't want us. Although they might not have a choice for long..."

There is a lot of information coming at me and even my advanced genetic biometric brain is having difficulty processing it all.

"What do you mean? And I still don't know how you knew about me."

He comes to sit beside me, both of us now facing the rising sun. It is orange and mustard with little swirls peach and blue. We really do need to move soon.

"I knew because we've been hacked into the black market lab forever now and it's a way to keep tabs on bio-gens. For us, it's to keep them safe and rescue them if necessary."

"Us?" I close my eyes and activate my ocular shades, tinting my corneas a dusky gray. When I open my eyes again, the glare of the sunrise is dimmed.

"Well, that's the answer to the rest of your question. There's a lot of us, Stanzi. More than humans -- those who know we are more than myth -- know. Before you and I were born they were working to integrate and to gather together. Across the bridge, in Lafayette Square is a safe-house. From there, once you are confirmed found, they permanently scramble your marker and we head to the Alluvium and the center of the bio-gen movement -- "

"There's a movement?"

"More like family. A big, inclusive, understanding family. Change is coming, Stanzi. They've just been waiting for the right time."

Family

Something else I haven't felt since the buzz cut and hoodie became my personae and the night was my best friend. Actually, I'm not sure I ever really felt it. While my parents loved me, and I had a home, my sense of -- otherness -- has always kept me skirting the edges of belonging. It's been a shadow that follows me, covers me, prevents me from stepping into the light. Keeps me from the feeling of *family*.

I can't imagine it. A community of others like me. Others who will understand how I feel and why. A place where I can breathe and be still; where I can, finally, let down my guard. Even for a while.

With that thought I realize just how tired I am.

"Wait." I have a realization. "That's why you mentioned going to EastyTown. You were hoping I'd just agree and go."

"Pretty much," Luceous replies.

I look at him. "But we have to get across the bridge." I check my credit and show him. "Do *you* have toll?"

A sly, superior smile slides across his face. "Don't need it. The night Guardsman is a bio-gen. Arlen. It's a free pass across."

"Huh. She's a bio-gen..." I lean my head back against the wall of the container feeling the metal rub against my scalp. It's growing warm in the encroaching sun so I unzip my hoodie and stretch out my legs. There's an ease that spills over me and I wonder if this is what it means to feel relaxed. Six months on the run and I have forgotten what that is. Or I turned it off without realizing it because -- survival.

"I said there's a lot of us. And you can learn to identify others. It's one of the many things bio-naturals don't like. Makes them nervous, you know?" He laughs quietly and glances at his hands. "If they only knew...what we are capable of."

There's an ominous tone in his voice, but I don't focus on that. I have too many questions.

"*Bio-naturals*?" I ask, already knowing the answer.

"It's our word for ordinary humans. Because in the end, Stanzi, we're just as human, but in a different way. Humanity has already changed -- *humanity* is bio-naturals and bio-gens. They just don't see it -- yet."

I rub my eyes, then run my hands along the back of my neck. I cross my legs and lean my elbows on my knees. This was all very -- revolutionary.

"Shouldn't we find someplace safe until nightfall?" I ask. "When your Guardsman is on duty?"

Luceous pulls himself to standing and steps toward the corner of the container, glancing toward the bridge several hundred yards up river. A long, low shadow of its steel lattice falls across the muddy, copper water. I heard it was once almost blue and I try to picture it. But I can't. And I suspect it's an untruth anyway. They are spoken so much, so often and with such ease that in no time at all they are indistinguishable from the genuine thing.

"Nope. We can go now. I signaled the safe-house that we'd need day passage..."

I join him near the edge of the wharf, suddenly wondering what had happened to the holo-guard. "When? How?"

A breeze shoots through a cavern between containers kicking up litter and dirt. I turn away until it dies down and try to ignore the smell it carries from the river.

He looks down at me and taps his head. "Wifi. Sort of. Cell towers are everywhere. We are an amalgam of molecular chips and bio-wire synapses. You can learn to send a thought message as easy as sending a text. But not nearly as trackable." He smiles then, and I think it's the first time I've ever seen that. His full, total unabashed and slightly arrogant smile.

"The world is changing, Stanzi. Maybe -- maybe we're the next evolutionary step, you know?"

Those words tumble into me, ringing like tiny, musical bells. They spin through my wiring, trip across my audio sensors and slide into my heart. I feel it beat. Once. Twice. Three times -- all in quick succession.

The world is changing.

"What if the...bio-naturals...don't like that idea?" I ask. This vernacular was going to take some getting used to.

Again he only smiles, but that says more than any words he could have spoken.

Now I smile, too -- almost without thinking -- and it's a strange, welcoming feeling that sheds every last ounce of tension, fear and uncertainty from my body.

He nods toward the bridge where our safe passage awaits, and on the other side of the river -- a new life.

I glance past the edge of the container toward the western horizon, where the last bit of night hangs on in a thin, black line. There are stars in there, I know it. Even though even *I* cannot see them any longer. They are there -- shining, dying, exploding, being born.

Then I turn toward Luceous as he starts along the river trail toward the bridge and think that maybe -- just maybe -- I don't need a place in the stars; that there's a place for me here after all.

I look across the river and imagine life in the Quarter, the Gardens, the place of neon and chaos and people. Humans -- of all kinds. Together.

I catch up to Luceous and think -- maybe there's a place for *all* of us there.

And if not -- well -- as Luceous says, change is coming. I have wifi in my brain, control over my strength, the power to see the infinity of stars in the night sky. What *can't* we learn how to do?

What *aren't* we capable of?

A sudden, strong gust of wind blows up over the river and I look to the sky for the telltale clouds of another front moving in. There are none, just the pale blue sky marred here and there by dusty, polluted clouds. But they'll come. They always do. The blue will vanish beneath a thick mound of gray, and the rains will come.

It's inevitable.

That might be true of a lot of things now.

Luceous pauses and catches my eye. He has enabled his ocular shades but I can still see the pale blue behind them. "You okay?" he asks me.

I think about that a moment. Am I okay? I haven't considered it much since I stood with a bloody gash on my arm, watching the steady stream of bio-synthetic liquid puddle at my feet. I wasn't okay then. I wasn't okay when I left, or when my parents were killed.

Am I now? I might be. I smile and nod.

Luceous extends his hand and I take it, not worrying about any spontaneous exchange of information -- because he already knows me.

He knows me. That feels good.

Yes. Change is coming. Maybe more than even we can imagine. I feel it like the fluctuating rise of the sea that often threatens the levees around the city. I feel it flood through every synapse and vessel like overflow through tributaries. For the first time in my life, I am not alone, which makes me realize that for most of my life -- I *was*.

Change is coming.

We can be part of this world. We *are* a part of this world. We belong right here. Right now.

If there's not a place yet, we will make one. Even if, like the birth -- or death -- of a star, it comes in one, blasting, blinding, glorious explosion of fire.

We will make a place.

One humanity.

One world.

One.

Change is coming.