

# PIANO CONCERTO FOR NEW HANDS

*Time for a change.*

BY ANDREA KRIZ

My fingers shake with the effort of pincering the CD. One wrong move, I know, and I'll snap it in two. Slowly, jerkily, I lower it into the player, press it into place and close the lid. No sooner do I do so than my arm thumps back to the covers. Sweat pours down my face. Willing that hunk of metal to move again seems more daunting than climbing Olympus Mons.

*"Even in that condition, you're signing on for another tour?"*

"There's still fighting on Titan, I'm told," I pant. "Don't worry. After some training, these will feel just like my own."

*"I'm not talking about your arms, Cygnus."*

"I'm not like you, Halla." I force a smile. "Even if my records have been wiped. I'll never be a real human.

Piloting's the only life I have — I'm trapped."

*"You're not trapped."*

A nurse opens the door. She drops a bunch of white lilies into a vase, taking in the scene out of the corner of her eye. The charred CD player I'm holding in one hand. My other hand groping for the headphones, finally grasping — only for them to slip through my fingers and clatter to the floor. In one fluid motion, she scoops them up and nestles the buds into my ears.

"You're making progress," she says soothingly.

I close my eyes.

*"Who were you talking to?"*

Whenever a member of our mech squadron was killed, Halla would do this, mouthing her goodbyes. I didn't even know what this beat-up, orange piece of oldtech was back then. I waited until she'd fallen asleep and dug it out of her locker, pulling on the headphones upside down. Maybe I was expecting some of those crazy Earth drugs I'd heard about. I don't know.

*"Oh, you want to listen, too?"*

I tried to hear it. But I could never understand those tears that rolled down her face. I read and reread the back of the case. *Ravel. Piano Concerto for the Left Hand.* What did we have to do with a pianist who lost his arm centuries ago? Synthetics like me were biologically incapable of emotion, after all. My previous commander had often told me. And, true to his word, I felt nothing when he died. Even when the engineers determined that we



ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

*much to live for. So many people ... waiting for you ..."*

*"That's right. I've had such a beautiful life, Cygnus. But you. I want you ..."*

I spasm, my knees digging into my forehead. My fists, my entire body curls upon itself.

*"How can I have a beautiful life?"* I whimper. *"When I ended so many ..."*

The piano thunders. I see Halla as I did last. Her head in my lap, blood trickling from her mouth. My palms seared against the twisted wreckage above us. Even as every movement skewered shrapnel into my arms, even as they numbed, I kept clawing upwards. Ignoring the thawing ice pouring in around us. Ignoring the fact that even if I forced my way out of the cockpit, I'd meet enemy fire, I couldn't possibly drag her with me.

*"You've gotta promise me, Cyg. I'm leaving you all my CDs."*

*"How can I listen to music?"* I sob. *"I killed them. Synths just like me."*

*"Cygnus. You're always looking up at those stars, aren't you? I can't do this numbers business. That's what I'm calling you."*

*"They must've wanted names ... they must've had people they loved too ..."*

*"The war's over, Cygnus."*

I feel her through the drumbeat.

*You're not trapped. Not trapped.*

Slowly, painfully, breathing like the physical therapist instructed me to, I manage to unclench my fists. I can almost see my reflection in their smooth, silver palms. They'd paint them to hide the joints, a rep from the bionics company told me, with plastic just like skin, sculpt every scar and callus into its former place. But maybe I don't want it that way.

These are new hands.

Hands that haven't been trained to kill.

These could be a rocketeer's hands. A cargo-ship driver's. A painter's hands ...

*"Halla,"* I whisper.

I set the tablet down on my bedside table, my grip firm. The last notes of the concerto fade into a victory march, a final chord.

*"I think I'll learn to play piano instead."* ■

crashed because of my shortcomings, when they threw me in a hangar to await incineration. I didn't believe in afterlife. But if I did — it'd be that squadron who landed, butterfly-like, on that dead rock of a colony. The commander who stepped down, haloed in light, said her co-pilot had been gravely wounded, that she'd take anybody, anything, instead.

*"I'm Halla."*

*"I'm a failure."*

Her thumb ran over the serial number under my eye. Crossed out. Condemned.

*"I don't care about any of that. But it must've been so, so hard for you."*

I don't understand. I can't understand. Good synths fight for Earth, get human status. Bad synths fight for separatists, get torched. Why do I keep hearing her voice? I'm only going back where I belong. I reach for the table and knock over the vase. The nurse hurries over and rights the flowers. She settles the tablet into my lap.

*"That boy in the synthetic ward you asked me about,"* she whispers before replacing my earbud. *"The one wounded in your last bombing run. He passed away."*

The door shuts. Her steps echo down the hall. Should I call her back? I wonder. In my chest, an ache I've never felt before. No. No more thinking. With a swipe of my eyes, I

open the re-enlistment contract, lean in for the signature scan. The strings swell.

*"Why? You have so*

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