



Redstone Science Fiction #17 Cover

Cover Layout by Michael Ray

Redstone Science Fiction #17, October 2011

Editor's Note

[Michael Ray](#)

Fiction

[iTime](#)

by Ferrett Steinmetz

[How We Fall](#)

by Andrew Knighton

Editor's Note – October 2011

By Michael Ray

Welcome back! This month we have two outstanding short stories to share with you.

When we read [iTime](#) by Ferrett Steinmetz, we knew right away that we were going to be publishing it. Paul Clemmons, our publisher, has a ridiculous ‘no time travel’ stance (that we consistently ignore) and even he loved this one. What if you had a personal time travel device with a ‘limited range’? How would you use it to improve your life? Would it really? This is an excellent story that you will be glad you read. When you’re done, you may need to go back in time and read it again, just to be sure.

Our second story, [How We Fall](#) by Andrew Knighton, takes on two science fiction & fantasy concepts that you don’t usually see together: angels and military/mech SF. He deftly creates a very human dilemma that elevates the story and challenges the reader. Not to be missed.

We had a great time over the summer with our Identity Crisis Contest and working with Sarah Einstein. We want to again thank Sarah for her hard work on the RSF summer contests. You can find her online on twitter [@SarahEMC2](#) and at <http://hilltrash.wordpress.com>

Paul and I, along with Cassondra & Mary Ann, were able to attend Con*Stellation in Huntsville, Alabama. A couple of us got to actually meet our contest winner, Cheryl Rydbom, who is as charming in person as her story, “The Jenny,” was on paper.

We are bereft of non-fiction, which will happen now and again, but with us as with Shakespeare, the play’s the thing.

Your friend,
Michael Ray

iTime

by Ferrett Steinmetz

I'd say that my roommate Rochelle had to have the latest in technology, but that would be incorrect. Rochelle had to have the most *expensive* thing, and the *trendiest* thing, but it barely mattered what her accessories did so long as they didn't clash with her cheerleader's outfit. When she got a personal biometric scanner, I wanted to use the data to generate a customized probiotic treatment to optimize the bacteria in her lower intestine; she used it to send scans of her boobs to cute boys.

As assigned dorm mates, all we had in common was our love of hardware. That was why I was the first person who got to see her new iTime. It was made of white enameled metal, shaped like an old stopwatch, smooth as an egg except for the plug-timer on top and the recessed nav-wheel on the front.

"You *got* one?" I asked. "Isn't there a waiting list?"

"Daddy paid four hundred thousand on eBay for an unbonded four-hour model," she said, puffing out her chest. "He said it was worth it to get me something that was guaranteed to bring up my grades. I begged him for the eight-hour version, but he didn't want to clean out my college savings."

I reached out to touch it; it flickered away underneath my fingertips like a hologram.

"Oh, that's the safety feature!" Rochelle squeed, clapping her hands in joy. "The salesman said it was bonded to my personal timeline; it doesn't really exist for anyone but me. Otherwise, you could do all sorts of nasty things to me if you found it."

"Like what?"

"I dunno. He tried to explain, and I got bored. But ask me that question tomorrow, and I can rewind time back four hours to before you asked me, and everything would happen again just the way it did before I rewound. Except that this time, I'd read all the instruction manuals and stuff before I got here – so when we finally re-met and you asked me what things the iTime could do, I'd *know*."

I rolled my eyes; Rochelle always treated her toys like they were ancient Elvish magic. "So why not rewind back now and show off?"

"I signed the service contract an hour ago. They won't activate it until it's too late for me to go back and unsign it. But think of how wonderful it'll be for you! No more bugging you for my Chemistry answers – when I go to class tomorrow, I'll be ready for any quiz. If I don't know the answers, I'll just rewind back an hour and look them all up before I get there! Straight As, here I come!"

“Rochelle, using the iTime to get great grades is like hiring an infinite series of typewriting monkeys to write your term papers. Why not get a *real* education by reverse-engineering that proprietary hardware?”

Her eyes went wide with horror. “You can’t be serious! At the shop? They told me about this kid who hacked the iTime and wound up frozen in an infinite loop. Now he’s like a ghost; he doesn’t even know he’s trapped. You can’t mess with this stuff, Claire.”

I sighed. How could you tell someone so terrified by technology that iCorp made up those horror stories to discourage competition? I’d dissected her old cell phones to show her how easily her technology could be reduced to simple circuitry and if/then loops... But no one cared, not even my fellow physics students.

“But it’s not just the grades, Claire,” Rochelle said, cuddling the iTime to her chest as though it were her most beautiful child. “The iTime is my ticket to *S-Prit Descalier*.”

“What?”

“Claire, come on – haven’t you seen the commercials?”

“You know I don’t watch TV.”

“There’s this commercial where there a mean old guy says, ‘If you were my wife, I’d put poison in your coffee.’ And this poor girl doesn’t know what to say, and everyone laughs at her, and it makes me cry every time. But as she’s driving home, the perfect answer comes to her... So she rewinds back to just after the guy insulted her and says, ‘If you were my husband, I’d be happy to *drink* the poison!’ And then everyone laughs at the mean old man, and the words tell you that the iTime gives you *S-Prit Descalier*.”

“I *need* *S-Prit Descalier*, Claire. I’m tired of saying stupid things. If there’s a boy I like, I can just keep rewinding the conversation until I can say all the things that make him think I’m adorable. Hookups galore!”

“I guess,” I said. But given that ‘making awkward morning small talk with her himbo pickup of the week’ had become a weekend ritual, I wondered how many more hookups she needed.

“Still, maybe you should read the manual now.”

“Nope! My new slogan’s ‘Read it when I need it,’” she said proudly. “Just like the ads.”

“I bet,” I said. “Mind if *I* read the manual, though?”

“I keep forgetting what a little Sally Student you are, Claire,” she said fondly, reaching out to stroke my cheek; I blushed with the unexpected intimacy of it. “It’s almost like you like books better than people. But if you truly can’t resist, it’s in the bag in the hallway. But no tinkering with my iTime – oh, wait! You can’t even touch it! Oh, it’s *so* awesome!”

She flounced off, calling all her friends to tell them about the iTime party at our place tonight, where she would unveil the new and mistake-free Rochelle. That meant our apartment would be crawling with sorority sisters, eager to trade gossip and drink wine coolers.

I had to leave. I couldn't stand the blank looks her friends gave me whenever I tried to explain how cool nano-spin batteries were; they nodded politely, and then helpfully suggested that my eyes would be really pretty with some peach eyeshadow. Their misguided attempts to socialize me just left me feeling like I'd made some disastrous choice I didn't quite understand.

On my way out to the library, I fished the manual out of the black plastic bag. On the side, in neat white Helvetica letters, it said, "*Esprit D'Escalier*" – French for *Staircase Wit*, the clever retort you think about on the staircase days after it's too late to say anything.

I suspected that it would take more than infinite time to grant Rochelle wit. But maybe she could look it up somewhere.

* * *

For the next week, Rochelle annoyed the hell out of me with her omniscience. We'd watch some comedy on TV and I'd ask, "Who *is* that actor?" and she'd rattle off a list of all the movies he'd been in.

"Would you stop that?" I snapped. "You didn't know that. You just rewind back to before the show started."

"I didn't," she said with perfect innocence. "I just spend a lot of time looking stuff up lately. Isn't that what *you'd* do with an iTime?"

I couldn't argue; I'd always told her she needed to do more research. But later, I had the unsettling feeling that she'd rewind that conversation over and over again until she'd found a way to shut me up.

Then she disappeared. I saw traces of Rochelle – clouds of steam in the bathroom, piles of dirty laundry in her room, sounds of sex in the middle of the night – but even when I burst into her room to confront her, she was nowhere to be found.

I wondered whether she had been there when I burst in the first time. Had I been rewind away?

The thought that she could control my actions made my skin crawl; I wanted, *needed* my own iTime. I knew I could build one, if I only understood the basic principles – I'd once built a crude cell phone out of old circuits and open-source software, then hacked into a signal on Verizon's service. Of course, I didn't have anyone I wanted to talk to, but the point was that it worked.

But though the hacking communities were berserk with theories on the iTime, no one had hard data; not only was the iTime technology locked down tighter than Coca-Cola's formula, it cost thousands to get one. Plus, the personal bonding very conveniently made it so that the only

person who could do research on it was the person it affected. You needed a very rich, very bold genius to reverse-engineer it, and no one had volunteered.

All my searches turned up nothing but annoying soft social stories. The President had an eight-hour model, they said, and what would that mean for the next election? Useless. I wanted hard data.

And in the middle of all my investigation, my Chemistry 101 professor sought me out.

“I know that Rochelle’s been very sick,” she said, thrusting a folder into my hands. “Would you mind bringing her her homework assignments?”

“Yeah, sure,” I said, going along with the lie out of inertia. “She’s our home-grown Marie Curie, you know. She probably got sick doing experiments with uranium salts.”

The professor drew back, offended. “Claire, I’d expected better of you.”

I felt that familiar squirm in my belly. “What?”

“A girl turns herself around like that, becoming the best Chemistry student in the class, and all *you* can do is mock her. Are you that jealous of your competition, Claire?”

“I’m sorry,” I stammered, scurrying off down the hallway. Why hadn’t I anticipated this? Thanks to her iTime, Rochelle was finding better things to do during class hours, and she *still* had the time to crib perfect homework from someone.

I left a note for her: “Dear Rochelle: Your homework is due and I don’t want to lie for you anymore.”

I turned around to discover an envelope on the kitchen table, containing her completed homework and a note: “Here’s my homework,” it said. “I wish I could make you a better liar.”

The handwriting was close to Rochelle’s, but not quite the writing I knew.

The next morning, I woke up to find Rochelle waiting patiently on a chair in my bedroom. The smooth skin around her eyes was crinkled with the first signs of crow’s feet – and even though she had on her trademark cheerleader skirt, it looked foolish on a woman in her late twenties.

“Look,” she said, her voice hoarse from too many cigarettes. “I’ve tried to do this conversation right, I really have. But you’re impossible, so let’s get this over with.”

“Rochelle,” I said, flabbergasted. “You’re…”

“I’m *fine*,” she insisted. “Every conversation I have is perfect now. Everyone loves me, ‘cause I know just what to say to make them happy. There’s nothing wrong with that, Claire. And so what if I look mature for my age? Isn’t that a good thing?”

“Didn’t you read the manual? It – “

“Yes, yes,” she snapped. “Would you stop talking about the damn manual? You’re like a bad videogame, you know that? Every time I talk to you, you say the exact same thing – manual, manual, manual. You’re *scripted*.”

“So what do I say?”

“You still have to live the time through, Rochelle,” she quoted in a passable imitation of me. “You give me these big complicated lectures on personal timelines versus external timelines, and even when I look it up I don’t know what the heck you’re talking about. But believe me, I *get* it. I *live* it. Every time I rewind, the rest of the world goes back to what it was doing four hours ago. But me? I still lived through those four rewound hours. I keep aging four hours, over and over again.”

“Christ, Rochelle, you’re one time-jump away from menopause,” I said. “You have to – ”

“I’m not addicted.” She brandished the iTime at me like it was a weapon. “I just want to look good, that’s all, and there’s nothing wrong with being prepared for every conversation. Like this one. I know everything you’ll say, Claire; you can’t shock me.”

Just to prove her wrong, I grabbed a book off the shelf and flung it at her. She caught it in mid-air.

“You do that a lot, too,” she said, putting it down on my desk. “Look, you’re just trying to be a dear, but I have a good life. I sleep with anyone I want, and I never get carded at the clubs. Every night, I find beautiful strangers, and by the end of the evening they *adore* me. A perfect life takes time, Claire. Why can’t you accept that?”

There was something about her desperation that made it feel false – but when did talking change anyone’s mind anyway?

“Do what you have to,” I sighed.

She stroked my cheek again. “I knew you’d come around,” she smiled, and I wondered how many times she’d rewind this conversation to make it work for her. I wanted my own iTime to make it work for me.

* * *

Rochelle was gracious enough to avoid me after that. I think she realized how unsettling it was, seeing her; I’d catch a glimpse of a stranger’s face in my living room and think *oh, the cleaning lady’s here*, and the middle-aged woman in a cheerleader’s outfit would flash me a young Rochelle smile.

I spent my time in the library. That meant I was endlessly bumping into people I sorta-knew, hanging my head and muttering “Hey, chief” because I could never remember anyone’s name.

My fellow students found ways to make small talk with each other. They chatted, forming friendships out of nothing at all... But whenever I tried it, all I got were tight-lipped grins and quick excuses.

“Wow,” they’d say, pointing to the cover of Time magazine. “Is it just me, or does the President look really old this week?”

“I don’t follow politics,” I’d say. “All we ever do is vote for the guy who looks like he can drink the most beer.”

I’d feel the air congeal as everything lapsed into an itchy silence. After a few moments, they shifted to another seat. But what was I supposed to say? Why should *I* care if the President had fresh wrinkles?

I kept my eyes on my laptop, researching time theory. A forty-something woman in a too-short skirt sidled up next to me and asked if I had any breath mints.

It was Rochelle, of course. And I had the breath mints, of course; she wouldn’t have asked if I didn’t have them. She glided away without a word, sashaying towards a jock in a J. Crew shirt.

Shortly after that, rumors of the Mad Cougar began circulating on campus. There were so many people talking about it in the library that it was hard to concentrate on my research. According to the legend, there was this crazy old lady who was so charming she could talk anyone into bed – a fifty-year-old woman with a smokin’ body and an irresistible charm. Guys fell in love with her so hard that they were mad to find her the next morning. But all you got was one perfect night with the Mad Cougar; after that, she vanished.

Rochelle had honed love to a science. I searched the blogs and found her conquests gushing about what a perfect night it was, how the Mad Cougar had been so mindblowing in bed that they *had* to see her again. They took out ads on Craigslist, asking “WHERE ARE YOU?”

Some said she was a ghost. I knew better. I left notes, explaining that it was time to give it up – but though I heard the door slam, I never caught up with Rochelle herself. The clothes in her room changed from T-shirts and blouses into much primmer sweaters; the jewelry hanging off her mirror changed from charm bracelets and gold hoops to respectable silver necklaces and pearl earrings.

“I hope Rochelle is okay,” my chemistry teacher said. “Her grandmother explained the situation to me. Will she be back this semester?”

“Oh, yes,” I said. “She’ll be back more times than you can imagine.”

I needed to talk to Rochelle – to beg her for iTime schematics, to ask her to stop leaving me to clean up her crazy lies. But most importantly, I wanted to find out what the hell she was saying to these boys to make them so lovestruck. Yet she was nowhere to be found.

I came back home to find Rochelle, her gray hair combed dutifully into a bun. The only reason I knew it was her was her eyes, which had the same sadness she'd contained for weeks now; everything else had sagged into an old lady's face. She smelled of sachets, and wore a flattering outfit that was still scandalous for a woman her age, but tame by Rochelle's standards. And she looked brittle, like an old porcelain statue.

"I'm off it," she said, thoughtfully rubbing the case of the iTime with arthritic fingers. "You were right, Claire."

I couldn't stop looking at her. "It's been seven weeks, Rochelle. We're not even halfway through the semester."

"I've found Mister Right, Claire. A retired college professor I met at one of the senior dances. And... I don't need to use the iTime with him, much."

"What are you gonna talk about with a retiree, Rochelle? Your love of shuffleboard?"

"It's not like that, Claire. He's really sweet, and I think... I think I missed out on a lot of good people I could have stayed with, if I'd just tried to be me. But that's hard. Really hard."

"I guess," I said. But I understood. The one thing we had in common is that we both hated being us.

"I can't live like this," she explained, looking off in the distance, sounding so wistful it made me shiver. "Last week, I saw this beautiful boy at the club – this broad-shouldered, long-haired dancer who was gorgeous in every way, but far too young for me. And I was jealous, because he was looking for someone with such an intensity, scanning the crowd to find someone he'd met before, someone he loved – and then I realized it was *me*."

"To him, we'd slept together two weeks ago; to me, it was thirty years. Do you know how weird that is? To have someone desperately in love with you look right at you and not even *know* you?"

"Of course not," I snapped. "You know that."

"I haven't rewind this conversation, so I don't. I have to get used to not knowing how things are going to turn out. But... I think if I was as smart as you are, Claire, I could have done it. Without being..." She looked down at the veins on her hands. "But I had to rewind a conversation forty or fifty times to find the perfect moment. I'd spend days trying to fit in. It was hard work..."

I shook my head; she was so old and so stressed, I was worried she might have a heart attack. "Well, you worked so hard you're already at retirement age," I joked.

"I'm only nineteen," she protested. And for no reason, seeing this well-kept, geriatric woman claiming to be a teenager scared me more than anything else.

“You need to file a missing persons’ report for me,” Rochelle said. “I know you’re honest, Claire – but you’re so awkward, they’ll believe you. My Dad’ll think I winked out of existence thanks to some glitch, and he’ll sue the hell out of iTime... But that’s better than seeing his little girl older than he is. Isn’t it?”

I considered the matter. It was a little cruel to her folks, but maybe it was better than the truth. “It’s pretty fucked up,” I said. “But this whole thing is fucked up squared. I have no idea what works.”

She smiled. “I do,” she said, pushing herself out of the chair with an audible *oof*. She hobbled over to the door. “I’m going to lead a good life with my husband now. There is a happily ever after without the iTime, you know. You just have to adjust.”

* * *

Three weeks later, I got a registered letter in the mail and a small box from a law firm that I’d never heard of. I opened it up and found that I’d been named by Cynthia Cresselhorn as the sole beneficiary of her will.

The box held the iTime. Cynthia, who had killed herself a week after she was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s, had a listed age of seventy-five.

There was a personal note to me, in a crabbed, shaky hand that still had little hearts drawn over the Is.

Claire, it said, Michael kept asking me questions about why I didn’t remember where I was when the Challenger exploded, and I had to have answers. Plus, I said all these stupid things that started arguments, and I hated to see him mad, so... I used it. Just little bits here and there, but enough. And then I got so much older he started asking questions and I had to go elsewhere.

Now I’ve been diagnosed with Alzheimer’s.

I’ll be stumbling and looking dumb to everyone. You know that’s my worst nightmare, Claire. So I’m going to take these sleeping pills. But it’s been a good life. I got everything I wanted...

Well, almost. I tried a million times to be your best friend, Claire. No matter what I said, it was always awkward between us. But you were always truthful, even when it hurt.

It turns out the iTime commitment is in objective time, so it’ll be active until the end of the month. I’ve transferred my remaining time to you; my security code is 11111.

I hope reverse-engineering the iTime brings you peace. If anyone needs it... It’s you.

Love,

Rochelle

I opened the box. There, the white enameling worn down into gray patches, the covering on the nav-wheel completely rubbed off, was the iTime.

I reached out to touch it, and felt the long-delayed satisfaction of wrapping my fingers around an iTime of my very own. The metal was warm. A hidden screen with missing pixels flickered on: “Rochelle Thibodeaux timeline: COMPLETE.” Then there was a tingle in my palm and the display changed: “New user detected. Enter security code to bond to new timeline?”

I looked at it. This was my future. I could make millions by reverse-engineering its hardware. I imagined myself, famous, standing before a crowd of reporters, asking me questions, and...

What would I say?

Rochelle’s words came echoing back: *No matter what I said, it was always awkward between us.* Rochelle wasn’t the brightest bulb on Broadway, Lord knows, but she’d devoted her whole life to making friends. How many rewinds had she wasted on me? Trying to crack the secret of my friendship, and yet never managing?

The iTime felt like a dead weight in my hand. Even if I broke open its secrets, I’d still be alone. I’d be famous, sure, but Rochelle had just confirmed that a thousand iterations of conversations with me never led to friendship, or warmth, or happiness.

I cradled the iTime in my palm, rubbing my fingertips across its tarnished casing.

With the iTime, every conversation could be a hypothesis: *What should I say now?* I’d approach it scientifically; varying my tone, changing my sentence content, documenting the results. And I’d always have access to the control sample, because the original, untainted data was just a rewind away. I could find my own friends, ask them what they wanted, and experiment savagely until I discovered the methodology to win their hearts.

If it took Rochelle fifty tries on average to map out a conversation, how many would it take me? Less, certainly.

I booted up my laptop and created a database: *person, attempted response, reaction, rewind_time.* Simple. Easy. Controllable.

I’d learn how to be happy, and *then* I’d hack the iTime. It chimed as I synchronized it to my timeline.

This wouldn’t take long.

The End

Ferrett Steinmetz wrote for twenty years, but wasn’t much good at it. Then he attended the 2008 Clarion Writers’ Workshop and was reborn. Since then he’s published seventeen stories in places ranging from Asimov’s to Beneath Ceaseless Skies to this extremely fine joint right here, which he’s proud to be in. He lives in Cleveland with his wife, a well-worn copy of Rock Band,

and a friendly ghost. Visit his site at www.theferrett.com (two Rs, two Ts) to see his latest blatherings on politics, polyamory, and puns.

How We Fall

by Andrew Knighton

The air was electric with her presence. Sergeant Grund's exposed hands and face tingled with it and it sparked like tiny blue flares from the frayed remnants of his parachute harness. She sat on an upturned crate, legs curled up beneath her, a simple white dress falling to the floor like something from a classical painting, her wings folded in behind leaving a halo of silvery feathers around the perfect curls of her brown hair. She was slim as a spring flower, but her presence filled the abandoned factory.

There was a click. A few meters away from the girl, Brok sat lean and dark, disassembling and reassembling his rifle, wiping down parts, counting bullets, blowing imagined dust from the crevices of the firing mechanism, coldly indifferent as small blue sparks flew from the pieces. His pistol lay ready at his side. Grund shifted his weight, the crate creaking beneath him. Sure enough, Brok's hand whipped out for the gun.

"Jesus, sarge, no need to scare me."

Grund snorted. Nothing scared Brok except missing a pay cheque, but you couldn't knock the guy's reflexes, and that counted for more than his motives.

Grund walked over to the broken outlet pipe that sank like a well into the concrete floor. His footsteps echoed back to him as he approached, pausing to peer into the still darkness beyond the pipe's jagged edge. Fragments of green scum floated across the surface of oil-tinged water.

"He ain't coming back," Brok said, examining a clip of hollow points.

"Maybe," Grund said. "We said an hour."

Brok glanced at his watch. "Two minutes. Then he ain't coming back."

The girl raised her head, looked at Grund with a soulful stare that stirred more than his heart. "He will be back," she said. "I have seen it."

"Course you have, love," Grund said, trying not to sound too harsh. The girl was a wild card, an unexpected element in a mission already running into trouble. He wanted to keep her calm while he worked out what she was, why she was here.

He strode over to the wall, checked the explosive charges along its edge.

"You think they know what this place was?" he asked.

Brok shrugged. "I don't care, and the mechs can't."

There was a slosh and a hand appeared over the broken edge of the pipe. Grund strode over and grabbed Private Levit's arm, pulling him up onto dry ground. Levit stood, dripping water thick with dirt and chemicals, took the breather from his mouth and the goggles from his eyes. Even covered in filth and camo fatigues he looked the part of a soldier, with the strong, wholesome build of a young man raised on rugby and long hill walks. In any other war, any other combat zone, Levit would have been wearing stars and ordering the rest of them around. But things were different in The Grid. Everything was different.

"There is a way," he said, his accent clear as cut crystal. "Nearly a mile south east, the pipe comes out onto a reservoir. No mechs around that I could see. From there we'd have a clear run to the extraction site."

He put the goggles and breather down. He'd barely even looked at Grund as he gave his report, and now he walked over to the girl, concerning radiating from his chiselled face.

"How are you?" he asked, crouching in front of her.

She smiled, a smile like sunshine and heaven's blessing. "I'm well," she said. "And you, my brave boy?" She reached out a hand, stroked his dirty face, and he beamed.

Brok muttered something filthy and chambered a round.

"What did you say?" Levit asked. There was steel beneath his manners. Grund checked his holster was open. This was the moment he'd been waiting for, the moment he'd feared.

"I said she's a crazy bitch, and so are you." Brok rose. He'd put the gun down, but his hand was on his knife. It was the sort of sturdy, sharp instrument of pain Grund had seen on the belts of hundreds of ex-mercs, a memento of their old days, prizing gems from temples and gold teeth from prisoners. There was no doubting the purity of Brok's motives.

Levit glared at Brok. "Take it back," he demanded.

"You crazy?" Brok said. "You think that's a real angel? She's nothing from heaven, just a bundle of cosmetic genetic tricks, a head full of over-priced drugs and hands that have never done a day's work."

"I know where the angels come from," Levit said. "But God moves in mysterious ways. Father Ishmael teaches that the angels are as much his creation as if he had cast them from clay with his own two hands. Just because they can be explained doesn't mean they aren't a miracle, or that their message isn't real."

"You believe this, sarge?" Brok flicked a derisory gesture at Levit.

Grund was all too ready to believe. Not in angels or messages from above, but in the influence of Father Ishmael Jones and the Church of the Rising Time. Trust an ex-Jesuit to turn an upper class fashion into a middle class cult.

“I’m not judging,” he said. “What matters is what we do now.”

Levit glared at Brok. “You’re going to want to leave her, aren’t you?” he said.

Before Brok could answer a clang echoed around the factory. All three men stood, weapons drawn, listening for the regular rhythm of mech footsteps.

Grund could feel his heart pounding in his chest. No matter how long he spent behind enemy lines, he never got used to it. It was worse when the place used to be their own. The Grid, this sprawling mess of factories and processing plants, of highways and data cores, it had all been part of the Union. A month ago this building had echoed to the sound of presses stamping out ammo casings, the bubble of chemical vats. Now it was deserted, empty except for them and their fears.

Brok was the first to lower his weapon. “Metal ceiling,” he said. “Probably just a bird.”

He looked at Levit and his gun inched back up.

“Stand down,” Grund said. “Both of you.”

The two privates backed away from each another, weapons lowered, fingers still on triggers. Outside, the pounding of distant artillery was joined by the sound of small arms fire – the snap and bang of Union firearms, the sizzle of mech lasers. A man screamed, or maybe it was a crow.

Grund looked over at the barricaded door. Given what they’d left outside, there was no leaving that way. Not unless they wanted their legs blown off.

“I ain’t for leaving her,” Brok said. “That kind of body modification’s expensive. Some kid on the grid’s got it, sure as shit she’s linked to someone important. Wife of an exec, daughter of a senator, something like that. We take her, we’ll be well rewarded.”

“Is money all you think about?” Levit looked shocked. His own idealism made it hard for him to see others’ motives. It was part of why Grund was the sergeant. He knew men’s minds, knew how to motivate the pure hearted kid and the bitter old mercenary.

Brok shrugged. “What else is there?”

“Honour. Sacrifice. Patriotism.” Levit made the words sound like a prayer, an appeal to something greater. Grund didn’t believe in higher powers, not even the ones Brok cared about.

“There is something more than this,” the girl said, gazing at Brok. “A better purpose you can live for, if you let it into your heart.”

She held out her hand towards him, the corners of her eyes welling with tears. Were they for a lost soul she hoped to see redeemed, or for fear of the horror outside the door? Grund couldn’t tell. He knew men’s minds, but the way she held herself, the way her face stayed so simple and open, he couldn’t read that.

“Those aren’t the things that make the world work,” Brok said. “Only way you get anywhere in this world is cash. Ain’t that right, sarge?”

Grund shrugged and went to check the charges again. He needed time to think, to work his way through what was going on with the girl and his men. But time was the one thing he didn’t have. The gunfire was getting closer, the artillery not far behind it.

“It doesn’t matter why you want to rescue her,” he said. “Question is, how would you do it? There’s four of us, three breathers, and only one way out.”

Levit looked around the factory, seeking a solution. Grund had spent the past hour exploring it, and he knew there were no answers there. No way to pierce the walls that wouldn’t bring them down. No way up through the ceiling that wouldn’t leave them exposed to snipers, and the mechs made damned good snipers. No back doors, no hidden tunnels, no air shafts wide enough to take a man. Nothing but that water-filled pipe.

“There’s a way to get her out,” Brok said, a wicked grin twitching the edge of his mouth. “We take her dead.” He paused for Levit’s shocked gasp and the girl’s sad frown. “People pay more for rescues, but they’ll pay for a body to bury too.”

“No!” Levit moved between Brok and the girl. “We’re not resorting to murder.”

“What do you think we do every day?” Grund said, adjusting the detonator in a lump explosive. Brok sniggered and Levit looked shocked, just like always.

“That’s different,” he said. “Not all killing is murder. This is war. There has to be a way. We can... We can...” He glanced around, eyes settling on his own breather, still dirty from his crawl through the pipe. “We can share the breathers. Pass them around so that no-one’s without air too long.”

Brok sniggered again. “How are you going to manage that in a sewage pipe?” he said. “One behind another, shoulders tight between the sides. We won’t be turning round, never mind passing equipment around.”

“It could work,” Levit said, a hint of desperation in his voice. “We could tie a string to them, and, and...”

Grund placed a steady hand on the young man’s shoulder, steered him over to one of the packing crates. “He’s right, Eli,” he said, keeping his voice soft. “It wouldn’t work. Not moving quickly, not in those tight spaces. You know it.”

Levit’s shoulders slumped. He nodded. “I just want to...”

Grund left him there, shot a warning look at Brok and waved the girl over. She uncurled herself from her perch and followed him as he strode down the silent lines, past mechanical hands grasping empty air, unlit welding torches and dusty conveyor belts, all the tools of a place that had made the most deadly of weapons. A place that still could.

The guns were growing louder. A jet roared past overhead.

Close up, the girl's presence was even more startling. Light shone from the buttons on Grund's shirt, flickered from the eyelets of his boots. He could feel his heart beating faster. She smelled like his mother's roses and the pines round his uncle's cabin, like his first girlfriend and his baby's head. She smelled like everything he loved and missed, and as she leaned close to him he felt the call of home. He yearned to take her there, away from all this bloodshed.

But that feeling was a lie, born of manipulative hormones and bio-electrical implants. A thing of artifice and deception. Wasn't it? She looked so like an angel, it would be easy to believe she was the product of God.

"Is there anything you're not telling me that could help?" Grund asked. "Something about your modifications, I mean. Like you can fly, or go without air, or you've got a distress chip embedded behind your ear."

She shook her head. "I have only what God gave me, and these poor wings have suffered from my fall. Only when I return to his grace will I soar again."

"Uhuh." Grund wasn't surprised, or really even disappointed. You had to have a hope before it could be dashed. "Never mind."

"Sergeant, don't you believe?" she asked. "You've promised to serve others, to protect them from the mechs, to give yourself to this horror that others might live. You're a good man. Don't you want to be saved yourself, not your body, not this mere dirt, but what lies inside?"

She touched his chest and his heart pounded even faster, the blood pumping in his veins so hard it drowned out the approaching violence. He stood, giving in to the temptation for a moment, dreaming of a greater good, a God who loved him and who he loved back, a salvation beyond bodies and dirt and torment. Electricity crackled around his buttons, little blue arcs crackling back and forth from the girl. Her head gave a strange little jerk.

Then he brushed her hand aside and strode back down the line.

"We need to leave," he said as he got back to the others. "It's getting too close to wait any longer."

There was more than one jet overhead now, and the bark of anti-aircraft fire. An explosion shook dust from the roof.

"Maybe we'll win," Levit said with unconvincing optimism. "Maybe our chaps will push them back. We'll be rescued, and—"

"It's not that sort of attack," Grund said. "They won't hold the ground. They can't. They're nothing more than a distraction for us, and the longer we wait the more men die." He pulled the remote detonator from his pocket, started checking the connections. "We need to leave."

The girl stepped out from between the machines, her face imploring, hand outstretched in another of those oil painting poses she struck so well. It was a look that said “I am innocence” or “I am wealth,” depending on which way the light fell on your eyes. It looked hollow to Grund. Mechanically perfect, an immaculate imitation in place of emotion.

“Please,” she implored, “don’t leave me.”

“I won’t,” Levit promised. “We’ll share the breathers. We’ll get you out safe.”

“It won’t work.” Brok’s anger peeled back the detachment he wore like armour. “We’ve still got work to do, and she’s a liability.”

Outside, there was a clang of metal footsteps, their steady rhythm closing in.

“I’m not leaving her,” Levit snapped. His gun was out again, Brok’s too, the two men circling each other, the air between them thick with menace.

“Not saying you have to,” Brok said. “But she ain’t coming breathing.”

“You bastard.”

A gunshot echoed round the factory. Grund let the jolt of it ease from his arm as he took in the others’ stares. The girl stood, sparks flying from the hole in her dress.

“Angel or not, didn’t you wonder how she survived all this?” Grund squeezed the trigger again and the girl’s head exploded, scattering fragments of wire and circuit board across the room. Her stiff, lifeless body toppled to the floor. He breathed a sigh of relief. If he’d been wrong, things could have got very messy.

“Shit.” Brok snorted with laughter. “So what, we were meant to lead her to our base, or...”

“My god.” Levit snatched up his breather. “We should go.”

The clanging grew faster, louder. Something smashed against the factory door.

“Too late.” Grund said as the door bent inwards, hinges squealing in protest, screws popping out. He held the detonator up, flipped the safety off the switch. “Far too late.”

The End

Andrew lives in Stockport, England, where he strives to escape adulthood by inventing stories and playing fancy dress. He’s had over thirty stories published in places such as Alt Hist, Murky Depths, OG’s Speculative Fiction and the Steampunk Reloaded anthology. You can find out more about what he’s been writing from his blog at andrewknighton.wordpress.com