

MARTA RANDALL

A Scarab in the City of Time



SKULK IN a forgotten alley while they scurry by outside, searching for me. Whippety-whip, they dive around corners with unaccustomed haste, and they have all donned worried faces for the occasion. Even the robo-cops look worried, and look well; were there stones in this City they would turn them all. But they won't find me, not me, no. When their programmed darkness falls I move from the alley, slyly insert myself in their streets and avenues, slink through the park to the City Offices and scrawl "I am a scarab in the City of Time" over the windows of the mayor's office. I use a spray of heat-sensitive liquid crystals; my graffito will be pretty tomorrow as the wind and fake sunlight shift it through the spectrum. Then I sneak to an outlying residential section where I've not been before, eluding robo-cops on my way, and steal food from an unlocked house for my night's meals. I wouldn't steal from citizens if I could help it, but my thumbprint isn't registered, isn't legal tender in the City of Time. So I burgle and the Association of Merchants grows rich because of me, as locks and bars appear on doors and windows throughout the City. I'm good for the economy of the City of Time, I am.

I'm a sociologist. I'm not supposed to be doing any of this.

When morning comes they cluster before the City Offices, gesticulating, muttering, shifting, frightened. I watch them from a tree in the park, am tempted to mingle with them, sip

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the sweet nectar of their dismay. No, no, not yet. I remain hidden as the mayor appears on the steps of the building, glares at my beautiful sign. Workers are trying to remove it, but there's a bonding agent in my paint and the colors shift mockingly under their clumsy hands. The mayor reassures the people, calming them with the dignity of her silver hair and smooth hands, and they begin to disperse. I'm tired. The pseudo-sun is far too bright today, a faint wind rustles the leaves around me. When noon comes I slip from my perch, move easily under the eaves and edges of bushes to the Repairs Center, sneak into a storage room and curl down on a pile of cables to sleep.



The City is hard on the eyes, from the outside. Its hemisphere rises from a lush plain, catches the light of the sun and reflects it back harshly at the resurrected earth. Time has silted soil high around the City, but it's probable that the City doesn't know, or care to know. When we returned to colonize Terra we tried to make contact with the City, sent waves of everything we could manage at the impervious dome, received nothing in reply. Years passed and we built our own cities, clean and open to the fresh winds; sailed our ships and floated through the skies, tilled the soil, farmed the seas. Occasionally threw more junk at the City and argued about it. Some held that the City was dead, a gigantic mausoleum; some that it was inhabited by inbred freaks and monsters; some that it was merely the same City our ancestors had left behind as they fled from a poisoned planet. But no one knew, until I dug down beyond the City's deepest foundations, through the bedrock and up into the City. And I can't get out again.



I awaken at nightfall, as the dome of the City turns dark and the stars come on, and spend some time on the roof of the Repairs Center watching the sky and plotting new mischief. Those stars, those stars—no one has seen the original of these dome-printed constellations in two thousand years, yet here they shine in mimicry of the true sky. I tighten the straps of my pack, slip from the building, through the dim streets. The robo-cops hunt for me while the good citizens of the City sleep. And the bad citizens? There are none in the City of Time, none except me, me, and I only by default. Tiers of buildings loom over my head, tapering to the arch of the dome; cascades of plants spill over the walls and display fragrant, flagrant blossoms; most of the doors are locked, the windows closed tight, the citizenry unquiet in their quiet beds. I move to the museum and inside, pad softly through the dark to the echoing Hall of Animals. Hundreds, thousands of them here, some preserved carcasses, some simply statues of those beasts that were extinct by the time the City locked its dome against the poisoned world. I holograph each exhibit carefully, setting the receptors with delicacy, with art, and when I am finished I move through the hall and append notes in liquid script to the signboards: “This animal survives, outside.” “This animal is now twice as big and looks like an elephant (see Exhibit 4659).” “This animal now flies.” “This animal now breathes air.” And, in huge block letters on the face of the museum, “HERE THERE BE DRAGONS.” As I finish, the street explodes into a commotion of light and noise, scores of robo-cops and citizens pour from the cross streets and buildings. Have I tripped an alarm? Possibly,

probably, someone has monkeyed with the wiring, created an alarm in this uneventful City. The scarab is the mother of invention. Someone sees me clinging to the face of the museum and sets up a cry in counterpoint to the larger one. In my initial surprise I almost drop the paint, then finish the last swing of the “S” before swinging myself down to the roof of the portico, scamper along the protruding tops of the columns and slither down to an open window. I run through the museum, not stopping to stuff the paint into my pack, up one shaft and down another, followed by the hue and cry behind me. I halt for a bare moment to pop the cube from a holoprojector and stuff another in its place, flick on the machine, and when I am two corridors away I hear the howling populace come to a sudden halt as they face the new projection. And so they should. I took it just before invading their sealed City, setting my receptors about the rim of the hills surrounding the plain on which the City sits. They are seeing their City from the wrong side, from Out, and as it is now. Perhaps they do not know what it is, but the surprise of its presence gives me time to flee through another corridor, out into a dawn-lit empty street and away.



“When meeting a strange animal, stay quiet until you know where the teeth are,” they had told me; when I entered the belly of the City of Time I remembered, moved through shadows. Watched from vantage points as the citizens lived their lives before me, whispered notes into my ‘corder, took holographs, invaded their library at night with my screens and read their journals and books, lists and agglomerations. Snuck into their City Offices and recorded their records and

records of records until my cubes were filled and most of my food gone, and then I tried to go home. But the robo-techs had found and filled my miniature hell-mouth, sealed it over and sealed my digging tools in it. I searched the City for another way home, delved in corners and edges and ragged remnants, and found nothing. Not a crack nor a leak, door nor window. Nothing. How large a City is, when you search for one small scarab-hole. Nothing. I looked about me at the strange, pale people, I opened my ears to the archaic rhythms of their speech, I sniffed the ancient odors of their air and I wept, homesick, from the tops of trees in the park by the City Offices. When they came looking for me I fled. Stole my food from unlocked houses, stole my sleep in small snatches in small places, lived miserably, yearning for the fresh sweet scents of home. Until it came to me that the only way I could go home was if everyone went home, if the City grated open its rusted doors and let the clean air blow in. I considered this, lurking in odd nooks and corners. I couldn't walk into the mayor's office and say, "Hey, listen, lady. The world's all fresh and clean and lovely outside, and it's time to take a walk in sunlight." People who say that are heretics. They dispose of them. It says so in their books, it is recorded in the records of their courts, their preachers bellow it from the pulpits of their temples. I don't want to die, I don't want to be a martyr. I simply want to go home again, to my children, my husband, the stones and rafters of my home, the voices of my students. So I pound in the night on the gates of the City, and hope that those behind me will hear.



I'm hungry. No food on tonight's expedition, just some water I poured into my wetpouch on the run, from a fountain by the Wheel of Fate. The streets around the Repairs Center are swarming with people up and about, in full hue and cry, and I search for a new place. Here, a church, deserted and dim. I scuttle inside, up to the lofts, through undisturbed dust beneath the eaves, and curl myself into a tight ball behind a filthy window. Feed my hungry belly on nightmares and wait for another dusk. Sleep. Sleep.

Dirty windows? Are their purifiers breaking down, their life supports whimpering to a halt after all this time? Dust?

How pale these people are! Fair pink skins and light brown or yellow hair, light eyes; they look like illustrations from a history book. When they locked themselves up in their unhatched egg there were still races in the world, people simplistically divided into preposterous colors; the people of the City were "white" ones, fair of skin, straight of nose and hair, lords of the globe for a time until they grew frightened and hid. The rest of humanity poured out into the galaxy and soon the ridiculous distinctions were lost, for in space and on new worlds people are people, valued for their simple humanity amid environments alien beyond description. The books of the City tell of the battles fought, of the expulsion of the black vermin and yellow lice. If I showed my brown face and epicanthic eyes, my bush of light brown hair, they would stopper my mouth with death before I had a chance to speak. I peer at them from the grimed church window, shake my head, tiptoe to the vestry to steal bread and wine from sacramental silver.

How long does it take for a two-thousand-year-old egg to rot?

They hold a service below me for the expulsion of the demon. A wise conclusion: I obviously could not have come from Out, and I am not one of them. They've checked themselves, most carefully; they are, each of them, finger-printed, foot-printed, voice-printed, retina-printed, lip-printed, brainwave-printed, holographed, measured and metered from the moment of their metered births. They're all present and accounted for, and so I am a demon, a ghost amok in the City of Time. I make a note to add that to the sign on the City Offices, and watch the archaic stars appear. Stars. Floating through ancient skies.

When the prank comes to me it is so obvious, so clear, so simple that I laugh aloud, and the congregation below me freezes in fear. I laugh again, pure joy, and hide in a forgotten closet until they stop looking and flee superstitiously from the building. I follow them out, across the City to the vault of controls. I've picked the locks here before and I do it again now, slip inside, lock the door behind me and consider the panels on the wall. Here, and here, linked to this, and here the main nexus, here the central time control. Then I sit and open my mind to memories, recall the clearest, purest night of resurrected Terra I have seen, and I program the skies of the City of Time, jumping their heavens two thousand years forward in the space of half an hour. I add to the moon the smudge of Jump I, I put our latest comet in the sky. What else? Of course, the weather satellites, all five in stately, if not entirely accurate, orbit through the heavens. The computer is not programmed to let me add a starship, or I would do

that too. There. There must be stargazers in the City of Time, people who will look above them and see my altered cosmos, will wonder, speculate, go take a look. They will. They *must*. I lock the door behind me and go to write graffiti on the walls of the static City.

Why has their birthrate declined? The City was built to accommodate twice as many as it now encloses—such an empty City now!

Someone finally noticed the report from the robo-tech that found and sealed my way home, and someone else decided that the hole might have some connection with the haunting of their sealed City. A large group of them has come down to inspect it, while I inspect them. Hope springs eternal, yes, and perhaps one of them will come to the right conclusion. But no, they inspect the sealed hole, they argue at great length about it, stamping their feet on the plasteel floor. Perhaps they think that some small animal with laser teeth has sawed its way around their citadel, or that some anomalous tremor has produced this round aperture with fused sides. Whatever, whatever; they decide finally that the hell-mouth couldn't possibly have been made from the outside; no one lives out there, no one could live out there. They are very certain. After a while they leave and I emerge, howl in rage, kick at the floors and walls, tear at the impervious sides of the machines. The echoes of my disappointment rampage through the vault, activate some electronic curiosity in the robo-techs, and they come to investigate. But I am long gone, following the course of my despair up into the nub of the City.



They argue about it now. I listen to the mayor berate the police system over my unapprehended state, yet there is hesitation in her voice. I hear my pranks and myself denounced from pulpits while the congregation sits oddly silent. Young ones at the schools explode with oratory, wave their urgent hands skyward. I listen, strain my ears, want to rush to them yelling, “Yes, yes, you are almost right! Come, show me the doors, I’ll take you Out into clarity! Come!” But I remain hidden, eager, awake, hope boiling within me. Come, hurry, let me go home again!



They still argue, endlessly. I am impatient. It’s harvest time Out, the schools and shops are closed and the population pours forth to reap and celebrate. Home! Home! I program their night skies to blink at them, I paint pictures on fountain lips of harvests under round moons, of large cats prowling the yards of houses, calling to be fed and stroked; of giant lilies floating in the calm air of forests. Home! I consider poisoning their water, rerouting their waste system, flooding their streets, giving them twenty-hour nights and two-minute days. I could do it all, easily, from the depths of the service cores, from the corners of the control rooms, but I refrain. The City is unbearable enough to me by itself, without my self-made catastrophes. Home! Jora will be seven by now, Karleen twelve, my corn ripens on the hill and my students wait in classrooms, Petrel stalks the hillside and awaits my return. Home! I huddle in a corner of the park, weeping, until the universe shrinks to accommodate only my soul pain and

nothing more. Then, angered, I waken the rusting voice of the call system above the City Offices and bellow through the streets, “For God’s sake, walk into the light! The sun shines Out, there are trees and birds and water sweet as spring! Come Out! Come Out and home again!”



They’re opening the door. They found it, buried in a forgotten service area, behind piles of wire and cable, guarded by an ancient robo-cop. I watch, amazed, through the shards of plasti-glass in an abandoned storage room, my fingers at my mouth, teeth to nails, reverting to primitivism as the young people overpower the robo-cop by the airlock. They do it quite simply. Five of them lunge at the robot, grab, twist the paneled head until it pops off and rolls down the alley, trailing multicolored wires. The body, relieved of its burden, wanders in a melancholy way down the blind alley and stands bleeping aimlessly at the end of it, uncertain of where to turn. The young ones ignore the distressed machine, turn their attention to the great wheels and plates of the airlock door. Have they . . . yes, they’ve brought meters, and one of them applies the leads to a small, unobtrusive control box, reads the meter, shakes her head, shakes the meter, tries again, shrugs. More uncertainty, more discussion, then the robot-slayers grasp the great wheel of the door and strain at it. Two others join in, the last one watches uneasily at the entrance to the alley. Why didn’t they completely dismantle the robo-cop? Where’s the transmitter in the damned thing, anyway? It’s likely, possible, probable, certain that the mutilated beast is sending silent, roaring distress signals throughout the City, calling cops and more cops, bringing them rushing to the

door to freedom. I watch the young ones as they wrench and twist at the wheel, frightened, excited, defiant, sweaty, the age of my students. The wheel groans, turns, suddenly spins free, spilling the young ones over the polymer pavement. Quickly then, yes, they gather at the door, pry it open slowly, swinging it on its ancient hinges. Hurry! Hurry! From my higher vantage point I can see scurries in the distance, fast approaching, hurry! And the door stands open, they cluster at its mouth, waver, enter one after another. My God, the door's closing! Of course, an airlock, of course. I scramble from my perch, tear through the empty storage center, down to the alley. My pack falls to the floor behind me, my torn tunic catches on something and tears completely from me but I can't stop, mustn't, run, *run*, watching in agony as the door closes, closes, closes and suddenly I am inside, braking the force of my flight on their soft bodies, slumping against the far wall, panting, while they stand gaping at me. The door swings shut, clicks into place. Safe. Safe.

I catch my breath, gesture toward the next door. "Out," I gasp. "S'okay, clean, open."

But they're frightened of me, hair, skin, eyes, semi-nakedness. They huddle together, shivering slightly. I force the beating of my heart down, take a deep breath, tell them of my journey, my trials, my homesickness. Do they believe me? They cluster together, wide-eyed, silent. I've not bathed properly in five months, my hair bushes in lumps around my sun-starved face, my eyes are rimmed with weariness. Why should they believe this horrific apparition? I shrug, reach for the great wheel, yank. It does not budge to my pulling. I grasp it more tightly, desperately, pull again, sob, and then there are two hands, four, ten, sixteen pulling at the wheel

with me. It groans, shivers, turns ponderously, clicks free.
Together we pry the great door open.

And, over the piled dirt of centuries, the sunlight pours in.

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