

A Scarab in the City of Time

by Marta Randall

I 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 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 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 heaves it back 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

