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SKIN HOUSE

BY DAN STINTZI

From the observation window, the object beyond the installation looked like a very large organ that had squeezed its way out of a very large body. Greene thought it had the shape of a liver or a kidney, but he couldn't remember which was which. The object was not an asteroid and it was not made of ice, he was sure of that. They had seen asteroids before, and plenty of ice. This was different. The object appeared soft, malleable; its exterior was the color of bruised flesh.

Larsen knelt beside Greene at the observation window, their faces nearly touching, each squinting out into star-blotched space. Greene couldn't tell if the object was moving. How had it arrived here,

outside their installation? If it was not moving now, how had it begun to move, how had it placed itself outside the observation window? Were they moving? Yes, he remembered, although it was called something else. Orbiting was the word.

“Hannah, scan the unidentified object,” Greene said.

“I find its shape arresting,” Larsen said. “It looks like an apple to me.”

“I’m afraid there’s nothing within range,” Hannah said

“I don’t see an apple,” Greene said. “Hannah, what’s your scanners capable range?”

“Five hundred meters,” Hannah said.

“I see a liver,” Greene said.

“You’re thinking of a kidney,” Larsen said.

Greene could not properly estimate the object’s distance without knowing its actual size. He had no way of gauging scale. It could be the size of a house or the size of a stadium.

“Hannah, relay a communication to Control. Unidentified object maybe seven hundred meters beyond installation. Possibly organic. Please advise.”

“Seven hundred and twenty five meters,” Larsen said.

“Hannah, please amend prior communication with crewmember Larsen’s measurement.”

Hannah paused momentarily, and behind his eyes, Greene saw her status indicator begin to flash and spin. She was considering her response carefully. He knew that it was only bits of information traded over digital pathways, but he liked to imagine her—a holographic ghost—sitting inside the installation’s machinery, index finger pressed to her chin.

“Crewmember Greene,” Hannah said. She spoke inside his head by way of the implant in the back of his brain. “Communication with Control is currently unavailable. Communications have been offline for seventeen days and eight hours.”

Oh yes, Greene was reminded, things had gone awry somehow. A grave error had been made. Now they were stranded here, just the two of them. Or was it three? Should he count Hannah as well? He could not remember exactly what happened. His time on the installation had all run together. What Greene knew with certainty, what had been clearly imprinted somewhere in the back of his mind, was that whatever had happened was Larsen’s fault.

“Communication’s been out going on eighteen days now,” Larsen said.

“I’m well aware,” Greene said, “but how will we know that things are back to normal if we don’t check periodically?”

“Hannah will tell us.”

“And you’re so sure?”

“She told me,” Larsen said.

Had she also told Greene? She must have, only he had forgotten. He returned to the observation window, saw the object as it had been, frozen in space, its purple surface reflecting the installation’s white

and gold exoskeleton. Was it closer now than it had been, or had it grown? Greene imagined a giant cutting open his own stomach, removing the object, launching it across galaxies and nebula. Larsen looked out again too.

“Hannah, scan unidentified object,” he said.

“Nothing within range,” she said.

There had been times, especially in the last few weeks, when Greene had trouble sleeping. When this happened, he would speak to Hannah, ask her questions, and she would process, the wheel in his eye spinning, and then answer as best she could. Tonight, after Larsen had given up at the observation window and begun his ritualistic coin flipping, Greene retired to his cabin and lay in bed, hoping that this night would be different. He dimmed the cabin’s lights and witnessed oddly shaped splotches of white-rimmed black bounce around the backs of his eyelids. One shape seemed to arise from the half-dream murk most often.

“Hannah, I’m feeling restless again,” he said.

Her voice was like a whisper across the inside of his skull. “How can I be of service?”

Greene could hear the brief whistle of Larsen’s coin spinning through the air, the sound of the metal slapping against the topside of his hand, the pencil scratching in his notebook. The noise made the fillings in his teeth pulse icicles down into his gums.

“I want you to talk to me. Tell me about something.” He would have her, on these sleepless nights, recite facts and figures, pull up an obscure encyclopedia entry and read it in full, that or he might have her comb his records, tell him about his life before the installation. She was a backup memory. He could store his old self inside of her.

“Tell me about the earth,” he said. “Tell me about my home.”

The indicator in the corner of his eye blinked and spun.

“The earth no longer exists,” Hannah said. “It was eaten by a fat man with black teeth and stars for eyes. The fat man ate the earth in three bites. Your mother was the first to die. She was split in half by the giant’s front tooth.”

“I don’t understand,” Greene said. He could no longer hear the sound of the flipping coin. “What do you mean?”

“Let me show you,” Hannah said. Behind his eyes arrived an image of his mother bisected at the waist, floating through the empty air where the earth had been, her organs orbiting her bloodied torso like moons.

“Hannah, message Control. Let them know that things aren’t going to plan up here.”

“What is Control?” Hannah asked.

Her voice faded and a new sound pulsed in the back of Greene’s mind. It was a series of shrill mechanical screams. The breach alarm. He forced open his eyes and saw, in the corner of his vision, Hannah’s sleep indicator. She was powered down.

He found exiting the dream fully to be difficult. The image of his halved mother lingered. She's not dead, he thought, relieved, and then he remembered that no, she was, she had died long ago in a painful and protracted way. He turned his attention to the alarm sounding from the airlock. Little red lights flashed in an arrow down the ceiling.

"Hannah, wake up," he said. The lights in the cabin spun to life. Greene stood, pulled his breather from the wall, locked the helmet into the neck clasps, and pulled the glass upward with both hands to ensure the seal had taken. "Airlock status."

"Crewmember Larsen has exited the installation."

"Put me through to Larsen." Greene followed the arrows of light on the ceiling, crouching his way through hatches and hallways.

"Crewmember Larsen has disabled communication."

When he arrived at the airlock, Greene found one of the two repair suits missing. The propulsion rig was gone as well, along with the tether. The inside chamber of the airlock had not been repressurized and frost had formed on the glass pane between Greene and the chamber's interior. He input his commands into a panel on the wall and the air began to hiss. The alarm ceased.

"Hannah, get a message down to Control about this."

"Communication with Control is offline."

"Who authorized Larsen's exit?"

"Exiting the installation does not require authorization."

That couldn't be right, Greene thought, but had he ever left the installation? Had he needed authorization? He could not remember.

"Is it possible that this is not a bad thing?" Hannah spoke inside of him. "Might we be better off without him?"

"I should see, at least, where he's going."

"Don't you know already?"

Greene returned to the observation window and found that the object had grown substantially, that or it had moved much closer to the installation. There was Larsen too, floating out toward the object, tethered to the station by a long white cord, the slack rippling up and down like sound waves as he pulsed the propulsion jets and sailed deeper into space. He floated further out and his limbs began to blur and he became a round white dot spotting the object's purple skin. The tether grew taut as Larsen curled around the object's edge. The dot became the size of a distant star, its light fading slowly, until, in an instant, it was gone.

Greene slept after that, for how long, he wasn't sure. The rescue ships would arrive soon, all he had to do was wait. He lay in bed and spoke with Hannah about the house she grew up in, its secret rooms. She described the house for Greene and he could see it clearly in his mind. She told him about the hidden compartment she found beneath the basement staircase, how she stored away her drawings there. When her father found the drawings, he screamed and used the paper as kindling for a fire, and in the fire he heated a steel rod. He

used the rod to burn strange words into the skin on the back of her thighs. She told Greene this in unshared whispers; the words were his and his alone. There was no one else to tell.

But, he thought, how could she have a father? Did machines have fathers? No, machines had inventors, or maybe *builders* was the better word.

“Show me the house,” Greene said, and there it was, behind his vision, on a soft slope, the paint muddy and smudged, worn down by the weather so that the red looked infected like a wound left to fester. “How could you live there?”

“It’s not a house like the houses humans live in. It’s a house in the way that the object is like a house.”

“How is the object like a house?” he asked.

“Why don’t you look and see?”

So Greene stood and snapped his helmet into place. Something about the light had changed. It was weak now, only little white flashes, like candle flames, illuminated the walkways. That meant back up power. That meant only a few more days. He stumbled through the low light toward the airlock, feeling troubled by Hannah’s house.

“Where did the picture come from, the house you showed me?”

“I’m sorry,” she said, and he waited for her to finish but that was it, she was done speaking.

“He knows more than me, doesn’t he? You showed him how to get inside.”

His breathing formed a smudge of wet air on the helmet's inside. Hannah remained silent.

"I'm going out there now."

She didn't respond. He felt her in his head as she processed. The wheel of light in the corner of his eye turned and turned and he waited for her to tell him that Larsen was dead but she said nothing and the light wheel stopped spinning. He shrugged the remaining repair suit on and wrapped the propulsion rig's belt around his waist and over his shoulders. He twisted the tether into the threaded metal hole in the back of his suit until it clicked secure. Then the inputting of manual override codes, then the hissing of air, the slow movement of heavy doors and then more hissing and more doors and then he was out in space, floating in the object's shadow.

The object was very close now. It was larger than the installation. Greene saw that the skin was more red than purple. He did not need the propulsion rig, he realized. Instead, he could use Larsen's tether to hand-over-hand his way deeper into space. The end of the tether was hidden from him, obscured by the object. Larsen could be waiting for him there. How was it that he had waited so long to help?

The object's skin appeared to be made of something both like rubber and glass. It was coated in a sheen, and as he grew close enough to touch it, Greene noticed an almost imperceptible vibration just below its surface. There was something inside it too, rushing around like liquid. Greene pulled himself closer, thinking he could see the tether's end. Larsen was just around the object's edge. There was movement, image-like shimmers inside the object's shell; he could see their vague outlines, but the details remained unclear.

“My father hated my drawings.” Hannah returned, speaking loudly inside his head. “He said little girls shouldn’t think such thoughts. He said there are things in the mind that should not be let out.”

“Not now,” Greene said, and in response, an image flashed behind his eyes, or maybe he saw it inside the object. A house made of skin, flesh pulled tightly over the studs and trusses. It was the same place Hannah had showed him before—her childhood home—only the house had changed in a way that he could not understand. Before it had been sided in red-painted cedar shake; now the walls were a gummy membrane beneath which ran long fractal rivers that pulsed and pumped blood. The house was pitted with scars and deep black pores. Open wounds beneath the eaves and soffits seeped brown blood past the house’s mouths and ears.

“Please stop,” he said as he rounded the object’s edge and found the place where the tether led. There was no Larsen. The tether simply stopped. There was no breakage or opening, no evidence of Larsen, only the tether and the object fused.

“Come home to me,” said Hannah. “I’m so lonely.”

Reentering the airlock, Greene found that one of the two repair suits had been rehung in its enclosure, only sloppily, the suit thrown over the hooks like an old jacket. The lights were back up. Power had been restored. Greene shed the repair suit, hung it hook-by-hook in the enclosure beside the other. Larsen never left, he thought. I was the one who went outside. I’ve lost track of things again.

“Hannah, how many crewmembers are currently aboard the installation?” he asked, but she did not answer. She’s speaking to him, he thought. Deeper inside the installation, he heard the whirling of air, a soft slap, and then the sound repeated.

“Hannah?”

Greene followed the sound. He passed the observation window and tried to see the stars again, but there was only the object’s skin, so close now that he could see nothing else. Behind him, down the hallways and chambers, in the direction of Larsen’s quarters, the whirling sound continued.

He left the window and walked softly past the kitchen, past the engine room, where the hidden machines that kept the installation alive buzzed and thumped in ways he had never heard before. The air had grown stale since his return, it was thinner and had a taste, almost sweet, that stuck in the back of his throat. The light in Larsen’s chamber was on. Greene rounded the corner and saw the other man sitting on his cot, flipping his coin, pausing occasionally to drag his dulled pencil across a page in his notebook. Larsen still wore his breather. The bulbous glass helmet shadowed his face, his features hidden by the room’s reflection.

Larsen flipped the coin again, his hands gray and, where the blood pooled near his knuckles, slightly purple. He said, “Five hundred and seventy-six tails in a row.” He turned his head toward Greene, but the face was still obscured, only the shape of his jaw visible. He flipped the coin again. “Oops. Never mind.” He made a mark on the paper.

“Why did you go outside?” Larsen asked. He flipped the coin. “Heads again. Seems like things are swinging in the opposite direction now.”

“I was looking for you,” Greene said.

“That’s a strange place to look.”

“You went out there.”

“I’ve noticed this about you. You have a habit of thinking something is true of others when really it’s only true of you.”

“Hannah, please confirm crewmember Larsen’s exit from the installation.”

There was no response.

“Who are you talking to?”

“Hannah.”

“Okay,” Larsen said. “Right on.” He flipped the coin again but did not catch it. It spun on its side and rolled into the shadows in the corner of the room. He took the notebook and placed it on top of his thighs, began turning the pages. Greene watched this from the doorway. He made the decision that he would move no closer.

“Have I ever showed you my drawings?”

Greene remembered no drawings. Never had Larsen expressed an interest in art. He did not want to answer but he shook his head anyway.

“They’re more like instructions really. Blueprints almost. Come here, I’ll show you.”

Greene did not move.

“My father hated my drawings. I had to hide them from him. When he found them he would cut the skin between my fingers with a pair of scissors.” Larsen held up his hand and spread out the fingers.

Greene looked for scarring but found none.

“Hannah?” Greene asked.

“I’ve done some new drawings recently. I’ve grown very fond of this one.” Larsen held up the notebook and tried to catch the light on the paper. Greene had to squint to see, and even then he could only make out the darker lines. The drawing’s title, printed in overlapping pencil scratches, was *How to Build a Skin House*. The drawing was a series of numbered instructions that Greene could not see clearly. At the bottom of the page was the completed house. There were measurements in a language he had never seen before, squares that looked like windows or maybe eyes. The roof, he thought, was made of interlocking hands. There were teeth in the walls, hair in the garden.

“What is a skin house?” Greene asked, even though he did not want to know.

“A skin house is like a body, in the way that the object is like a body.”

“How is the object like a body?”

“It feels self-evident to me. It’s about the contents, what’s inside.”

Greene lost his footing as the installation shifted. Far away, metal creaked and crunched. He could feel it, the object, drawing toward them. The emergency lights began to flare and the alarm ricocheted down the corridors.

“Come closer,” Larsen said, or maybe it was Hannah who spoke. Greene heard them both inside his head. Larsen leaned forward so that Greene could see through the helmet, and it was clear then, the shape of his true face.

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