Special Purpose

by Greg Stolze

Heesh woke up in her nest. She liked to think of herself as a little bird in a nest, safe and warm, though sometimes she thought of herself as a sad little bird who'd lost her mother. Not today though! Today they were finally going to find out if her Special Purpose was right. If it was, grandma would be happy, and then everyone would be happy. If it wasn't the doctor would have to go away forever, Heesh figured, but that didn't bother her much because she didn't like the doctor and no one else seemed to like her either.

Heesh's nest was a pile of blankets on three mattresses, which was more than anyone else in the whole Community. Her favorite pillow, which her mom had given her before going away forever, was pink and had stains on it that smelled bad now. Not like pee or sweat... it was a chemical smell, like a fresh-fired electric gun or a hot frying pan.

She got up and went to the bathroom, half-consciously hoping that there wouldn't be anything gross in there... and there wasn't!

Sometimes her daddy brought in men to scrub the bathroom, they used rags and vinegar and baking soda that made everything scratchy. He'd

had one in two days ago, a man who'd cried while cleaning and when Heesh asked him why he was sad he just looked at her with wide, frightened eyes. She figured he was goofy.

When she came out, she decided to put on fresh clothes. She knew grandma would pull her close and sometimes that was OK, but sometimes grandma would sniff her and say "Pee yew! You stink like a boar's nest! Brick, don't you make this girl clean herself? I don't want my granddaughter to be a dirty bird!"

She got dressed and brushed her teeth with the same white powder they used to clean the bathroom, though it didn't foam in her mouth the way it did when it hit the vinegar. Her science tutor had tried to explain why that happened, but she hadn't really understood. The part where it filled a balloon with gas was neat though.

As she left her bedroom she heard tittering and realized that her dad had a skank. Heesh sighed.

"You must be Heesh!" the skank said. "Brick told me so much about you!" She was in the kitchen, poking around their cupboards, looking through their food, her patchy blonde hair tied up and braided around ribbons to make it look longer and more full. It was disheveled, and kind of dented where she'd slept on it. She was barefoot, and her tight dress had a lot of wrinkles and a hole in the armpit. Her skin was the color of mayonnaise. She smiled, a big and stupid grin that didn't reach her eyes or even the grey bags under them.

"Hit the road, skank," Heesh said.

The woman moved quick, like a nightmare. Instantly, she was squatting right up in Heesh's face, breath sour, hissing "Where you learn to talk like that?" with her bony hands gripping Heesh's biceps.

"From my daddy!" Heesh yelled, this time.

Hearing a groan and the sounds of movement, both of them turned. Heesh watched as her father emerged from his bedroom, joints popping as he stretched, wearing only sweatpants, a smear of lipstick still matting the hair between his nipples.

Heesh glanced away from him when the hands left her arms and—like an eyeblink!—the mayonnaise woman had changed. Her posture had gone all curvy, knee casually bent in, hip shot, finger twirling her hair and smiling like all she wanted was to make Brick's dreams come true. She'd gone into skank overdrive.

"What's going on here?" Brick asked, and for just a moment, Heesh considered retreating. If her dad liked this one—if he liked her—Heesh could get in big trouble for sassing her. But she thought about grandma, and her Special Purpose, and she doubled down.

"Oh Brick," the woman said, voice all tickles and honey.

"I told your whore to get out of our house!" Heesh said, not letting her finish.

Brick looked between them, and maybe it was the woman's eyetic glare before she conjured a look of astonishment that decided him. He jerked a finger towards the door. "You heard the princess," he said.

The skank's nostrils flared, but she gave a game little giggle and waved a finger as she wiggled her way back to his bedroom for her shoes. "Oh you," she said. "I should know not to get between a man and his daughter." From behind Brick's back, she glared poison at Heesh, but her voice was playfully warm as she said, "You stay sweet, Heesh."

Brick laughed as Heesh glared back.

"Hey," he said, as the woman made her way to the door. "You're a good sport." He pulled a scratchy recycled plastic bag, about palm sized, from a drawer in the cabinet under their widescreen. He pressed it into her hand, and she smirked and kissed his cheek on the way out.

Heesh watched the whole thing. It figured. She was goofy. Most skanks were.

"She was rummaging in our food," Heesh said.

"Rummaging, huh?"

"Like a dirty rat."

"I guess you didn't like her?"

"Why do you bring them home, daddy?"

"Ah... you'll understand when you're older."

"How much older?" she asked.

"At least eleven," he muttered, pouring loose coffee into the maker. It was plugged into a generator, which he cranked until the handle was just a blur.

Heesh tried to work the jenny sometimes. She was barely able to move the handle at all, but her daddy was the strongest man in the world. It was his Special Purpose.

"Is that before or after I get to drink coffee?" she asked.

"Ugh, girl, it's kinda early," he said. He got out a loaf of bread and cut it, spreading half with preserves from a mason jar. "Bread an' jam?"

"Can I have danish?" she asked.

"You're so spoiled," he muttered, grinning. He put three pastries on her plate and she hid one right away in her skirt pocket, while he was fiddling some more with the coffee machine. She had the second torn in half when he came back, sniffing his drink. "Whoa, slow down! Your grandma would kill me if I let you choke to death."

"Sorry daddy."

"Where do you put it all?" he asked, looping a finger around her skinny arm. "You know she wants you to bulk up, winter's on its way."

Heesh just shrugged and ate.

While he was cleaning the coffee machine she hid the last danish and said, "Daddy, if I had it as my birthday and Christmas present both, could mom come back?"

He sighed, and his head dropped forward.

"Heesh, baby," he said.

"C'mon!" she whined. "You always say you'll get me anything I want!"

"Your mom's not a 'thing' part of anything..."

"You said whatever I want!"

He came to the table and squatted so he was looking in her eyes.

"Heesh, sweets, listen. You know I love you. I do. I would do anything for you. Let me finish." He held up a finger in front of her mouth as she opened it. "I have some dark stuff with your mom, but I would let that go and work it out if I thought that could happen. But you know Old Bijou? Your grandma's do-anything hand?"

Heesh leaned back, eyes narrowing, but she nodded. Old Bijou was a serious grown-up. Not as serious as grandma, but possibly more serious than Brick.

"If your mom comes back here," Brick said, "Old Mrs. Bijou is probably going to take that little black gun of hers and shoot her right in the heart. Throw her body in the bay for the fish." He shook his head. "Like I said, I ain't too happy with her, but I don't want that, and I know for sure you don't. Right?"

"Right," Heesh whispered.

"So I think for now it's better for your mom to just stay in Eugene, right?"

"Okay daddy."

"Hey, don't be sad!" He folded her in his arms, and held her carefully. She pressed against him, his chest feeling as solid as a thick wooden door. "Today's the day, right? You excited?" "Yeah," she muttered.

"Mm, uh huh, you sound just thrilled to death," he said, shaking his head as he stepped away. She brushed at the front of her dress, where a tiny trace of dried lipstick had transferred. She was going to have to wet a cloth and dab that off, she could tell.

"Daddy? Is Hoy your Mrs. Bijou? Your do-anything hand?"

He laughed. "I guess you could say that. Sure."

"When do I get a do-anything hand?"

"Ugh, so many questions!"

She grinned. "Is it before or after I drink coffee and learn why you bring home women?"

###

Heesh had home-school after breakfast. A lot of the kids she knew went to public school, but grandma said that the cops might grab Heesh if she left the Community.

"They'd call it 'protective custody' or some such stupid thing, but they'd just snatch you away, put you in some stranger's house and try to use you to pry me out so they could take me away forever." She shook her head, visibly disgusted at such devious maneuvers. "And if they found out about your Special Purpose?" She made a yanking

gesture and a revolting sound. Heesh hugged herself.

"Why do the cops want you so bad, grandma?"

"Because I don't do what they tell me," she replied, frowning.

"Is it because of your Special Purpose?"

"That's what keeps me free," she said.

If there was a type of woman who was the farthest opposite from 'skank,' it was grandma. Heesh didn't exactly want to grow up like her, but assumed she would. A Special Purpose of her own seemed to be part and parcel of that future. Another part was being smart.

"Honey, it's better to be lucky than smart," Grandma said, "But best of all is to be lucky and smart. And you can't choose to be lucky. But if you don't choose to be smart... you'll end up dumb."

"And goofy," Heesh said.

"Yeah. Dumb people end up goofy," Grandma said, giving her a hug.

Part of getting smart apparently involved listening to Mr. Gadwoll talk about the past, about 'history.' It was Heesh's least favorite subject, after science, math and psychology. Mrs. Hennig taught her mathematics, which she sometimes called 'accounting' by mistake. Mr. Cole

taught her science, and grandma taught her psychology, which mostly was lessons about how to make people stupid, how to take things from stupid people, and how to keep stupid people from acting on how stupid they were.

Heesh had disliked History so much that she'd asked Brick to get her a classmate and the very next day, Brenda had been there too. Brenda Reeve had been going to Consolidated Elementary Two, where most kids from the Community went, but something had happened and now her mom didn't want Brenda going back. Heesh had asked Brenda why that was, using psychology, and Brenda had said she didn't know. Because of the psychology, Heesh was pretty sure Brenda meant it. Maybe her mom (who was goofy) just didn't want to have to bother with getting Brenda ready each morning. Sometimes Brenda showed up at History with her hair uncombed and wearing the same clothes from the day before, all bed-wrinkled like one of Brick's skanks.

"All right, um, class," Mr. Gadwell said. "Who can tell me one of the causes for heavy weather?"

They were quiet for a bit. He sighed.

"All the... gas?" Brenda said.

"Right! Can you expand on what you mean by that?"

"Um... back then, there was lots of gasoline? And everybody had it? So everyone drove everywhere?"

"Good!"

Heesh got fed up with Brenda's hesitant string of answers-phrased-asquestions. "They had lots of trains, and airplanes were everywhere, big ones the size of busses, and you could get all kinds of different fruits and foods and they made lots of good things to eat in factories and sent them everywhere on the trains and airplanes," she said, smugly looking down her nose at Brenda.

"Very good! Part of the issue with food in the Twentieth Century was the close connection between oil, farming, and the environment," he said, turning to a stretch of wall that had been covered over in wallboard and painted with a slate-like paint. He wrote on it with something that wasn't really chalk, but they called it chalk. It was cheese-green and didn't stick well, but Mr. Gadwoll made do.

As he was explaining the military impact on oil states and how that related to farming and pollution, Heesh gave Brenda the two danishes she'd hidden at breakfast. They were made with apple-sugar, brought in from the farms out past the hills. Brenda's goofy mom couldn't afford sugar to cook with, and Brenda was crazy for sweets.

"Now, what happened that upset this whole process?" he asked.

"The Phage," Heesh said, still looking at Brenda, who was chewing.

"Good. Brenda, what can you tell me about the Petrophage?"

"Um... it showed up in, like, China?"

"Good."

"And it ate... all the gasoline?"

"That's right," Mr. Gadwoll said encouragingly, not looking at Heesh.

Heesh knew he wasn't looking at her on purpose, that this was psychology, that he knew she'd get tired of Brenda's questions again and say something smart because she was smart.

"It didn't just eat gasoline, it ate plastics too," Heesh said, "And it turned it all into tro, and all the tro got into the oceans and killed a bunch of fish and it got in the ground and made it hard for plants to grow, and also animals ate it and choked or got sick or died."

"Very good, Heesh. I'll be sure to tell your grandma that you were paying attention!" Mr. Gadwoll was sweating a little at the thought of Heesh's grandma, even though the days were getting cooler.

"Why didn't the governments do anything about it?" Brenda asked.

"Well," Mr. Gadwoll said, "They tried, but they were too reliant on gasoline. By the time the Salvation Germ resupplied us with gas, the disruption to harvest schedules had created political unrest throughout Africa and Central America."

"But how come getting rid of all the gas didn't fix the heavy weather?" Heesh demanded.

Mr. Gadwoll looked thoughtful, and Heesh had to suppress a smirk of triumph.

"Suppose there's an earthquake," he started.

"Like the ones in the midwest along the New Madrid line, that were extra-bad because the fracking had put all this water in the earth-plates and water can't be compressed?" Heesh said. She'd learned about water being incompressible from Mr. Cole.

"Er, all right, suppose there's a thunderstorm," Mr. Gadwoll said, wiping his forehead. "It's raining really hard, and there's a crack in the wall, so all this water runs into your house and collects in the basement. Got it?"

The girls nodded.

"When the rain stops, it doesn't make your basement dry," he said. "Similarly, it wasn't enough to just stop the damage."

"Didn't people know it was happening?" Brenda asked. "My uncle said people knew it was happening but these two evil billionaires hypnotized everyone into thinking it wasn't."

"Well, a lot of people knew, but it was very hard to get anything done."

"How come?" Heesh demanded. "Back then they had all kinds of stuff, they could put things in space and they had all the Internet they wanted, 24 hours a day! Their phones always worked, how could they not know all this stuff? They could make movies and TV shows and tell everything to everyone!"

Mr. Gadwoll sighed again.
"These are complicated questions.
The government was run by people who were only thinking about getting re-elected, so they weren't making long term plans."

Heesh rolled her eyes. Her grandma and Mrs. Bijou had strong opinions about government and its ability to get things done, as did most in their generation.

"What about the billionaires?"
Brenda asked. Like sweets, she had an insatiable appetite for stories of the old time billionaires, who put diamonds on dog collars, and bought entire islands to throw parties, and paid airplanes to fly in roller-coaster loops so they could experience weightlessness.

"Billionaires were goofy," Heesh muttered.

"Not all of them!" Brenda cried, turning, her color rising. Heesh met her with a flat gaze and held it until Brenda said "Although, the ones who were, were extra-goofy."

"The moneyed class was often, um, absorbed with the protection of their wealth," Mr. Gadwoll said. "Just as politicians were going from election to election, pursuing short-term success, businesses went by quarterly profits, trying to make money as quickly and surely as possible, instead of taking a long view."

"Whose job was it think about the future, then?"

"Nobody, really," Mr. Gadwoll sighed. "Oh, there was a deep state of bureaucrats and experts, but the people didn't trust them and the elected officials limited their power severely in order to maintain their own influence."

"...huh?" Brenda said.

"Sorry, sorry," Mr. Gadwoll said. "I went a little far there. But look, you remember the stock market crash and the Great Depression, right? From last month?"

The girls nodded.

"That was a stock bubble, where everyone thought that investments would just keep getting more and more and more valuable, and then they didn't. Right? Then early in this century, the same thing

happened with real estate. People believed it would just be worth more and more, forever."

Again, the students assented. It had been a long, hard struggle for him to explain bubble economies to them, since they had little experience of things increasing in value or, indeed, keeping it. Heesh had eventually gotten some help from Mrs. Hennig.

"Well, everyone also thought that governments would continue to be able to provide more and more security, and infrastructure, and solve more problems. They thought science and technology would keep fixing things and making discoveries and improving everyone's life. But eventually, those bubbles popped too."

#

After History, while Brenda was eating the second danish, Heesh explained the idea of a do-anything hand.

"So, like, if I needed someone to go with me to do something, my do-anything hand would go. Or if someone was in a fight with me, my hand would help me fight them. You know?"

"Like your dad and Mr. Hoy?"

"Yeah."

"I don't think I could beat someone up the way Mr. Hoy does."

"Well, I didn't ask you to be my do-anything, now did I?"

Brenda looked down at her shoes, which were made from old nylon rope melted into soles and straps. The shoemaker had tied some old ribbons around the upper—Hello Kitty faces and some fluorescent pink and yellow candy stripes—but they were starting to fray and come loose.

"I'd just be really scared," Brenda said.

Heesh relented. "Maybe we could fix that."

"How? Like with one of those Special Purposes? Do they make one that makes you not be afraid?"

"Sure," Heesh replied, though she had no idea. "You got enough money, they can do anything."

###

After math class and lunch, she had her appointment with grandma and the doctor. They met on the rooftop, which was grandma's. Really, there wasn't much in the Community that wasn't hers if she wanted it. Then again, there wasn't much in the Community that was worth wanting. The roof, though, lots of people wished they could access it, from scrappers with tinked solar cells to home farmers with pots of soil and carefully hoarded seeds for cucumbers, tomatoes, rosemary and basil plants.

Grandma recognized that these things were valuable to Community (and her), so she permitted them to operate on her roofs, along with rain collection devices and signal relays so that they didn't have to always rely on the city grid, or Cortez Newswerks' network, both of which grandma insisted were 'compromised,' which meant 'spied on.' But even with all that demand for space, she insisted on having a patch that went all the way across the flat top of the tallest structure. She'd hired the best of the upcyclers to level it off and put in pretty matching aquamarine tiles. Carpenters built a table and benches and a chaise lounge. Grandma liked to come up there and look out over the Community, over the wall of upturned cars that had gone up during the first riots and had never come down, watching people coming and going and gazing out over Tacoma in the distance. As she got older and fatter, she made the trip up the stairs less often, but she did it today. As always, Mrs. Bijou followed her up, carrying a cushion for grandma's chaise lounge.

The doctor gave Heesh the willies, though psychology kept her from showing it. She felt better when she saw her dad standing on the rooftop, leaning on a receiver and gazing out at storm clouds to the west.

"Here's my lil' princess!" he said, turning and swaying. Heesh frowned. It wasn't common for him to be goofy this early in the day. Then she saw the bottle in his left hand. Not just beer from Canje or someone's homepressed wine, it was black-tagged clear glass, which meant ethanol.

"Jesus, you drink your lunch?" Grandma asked as she shuffled over to take her seat, which groaned at her bulk. She was, by far, the fattest person in the Community. Few who lived there ate enough to feel full, let alone to become obese.

"There were things and stuff," Brick said, giving his mother a meaningful glance. Mrs. Bijou shook her head, not quite scornfully. Heesh didn't think Old Bijou would do that outside grandma's presence, but she wasn't sure.

"Girl, you better not be drunk and goofed-up when you're your daddy's age," Grandma said, pulling her close. "When you going to bulk up, hm? Just keep getting taller."

"I warned you there might be metabolic side-effects," the doctor said. "All along, I..."

"If you say one more time that you advised against doing it to a pre-adolescent, my son there is going to break your arm over his leg like it's a stick a' firewood," Grandma told the doctor. "I'm not making a threat. I'm just explaining the consequences for actions."

The doctor swallowed and grimaced. Heesh looked at her with psychology and figured that not a lot of people talked to the doctor this

way. Most times grandma made a threat like that people would sweat or bluster, or at least touch their arm and cradle it a little. But the doctor just frowned, then came closer to Heesh, unsnapping her little black bag and pulling on some purple gloves.

"Can you unbutton this, please?" the doctor said, then started feeling around Heesh's stomach, where the Special Purpose was. "Does this hurt?"

"Nuh uh," Heesh said.

"You can tell her if it does, she's a doctor," Brick said. "We won't think any less of you."

"The incision has healed cleanly," the doctor said.

"But is it productive?" Grandma asked. "Heesh, has anything come out of it yet?"

Heesh shook her head. She couldn't tell grandma, but she hated the Special Purpose. It looked like a tiny second nose, sticking out of her belly next to the scar where they'd put it in. She could feel it under her skin, like the balloon that had filled with gas from the vinegar and baking soda, going from squishy and wrinkled to smooth and taut. It put pressure on her and made her feel like she had to go to the bathroom.

"Sometimes they just can't adapt to the digestion," the doctor said.

"Hey hon, sit here," Grandma said, patting a spot next to her as she pulled her own shirt up. Walking her fingers through folds of flab like pages in a book, she showed the end of her own Special Purpose, a three-fold pink thing that looked like a rat's nose. "Sometimes it helps to rub it a little, like this, or squeeze and pinch at the ends." As she demonstrated, brown matter started to extrude from it, looking exactly like poop. It wasn't though. No one ever took such good care of a turd: Mrs. Bijou instantly swept in with a small recycled plastic baa, expertly catchina it as she'd done hundreds or thousands of times before.

The brown matter pushed out of grandma's Special Purpose was a powerful narcotic, processed by a bioengineered gland installed under her skin fifteen years previously. That single coil, smelling like a dog's mouth, could be divided into ten doses like the one that had let Heesh watch, curious but in no pain and with no anxiety, while the doctor had cut open her belly. Far more often, it was mixed with flour or glue or whatever else was available and sold. That excretion was enough for a hundred 'nightlight' doses, the kind Brenda's mom used to get goofy, or about thirty 'smooths' like the ones Brick had given his skank to get her goofy. Grandma could push out three or four of those a day, as long as she got enough to eat.

"It's coming!" the doctor cried, and Heesh found herself blushing as

everyone turned to stare. The stuff dripping out of her Special Purpose's single, nostil-like hole was a thick liquid, oily yellow and semi-opaque, like dirty cooking oil. The doctor caught it in a test tube, and Heesh curled her lip as she continued to press the strange substance out of her body. It smelled like ozone and ammonia.

"It's functional!" the doctor said, triumphantly standing.

"Not until we test it," Grandma insisted. "Brick, you want to do the honors?"

Brick took the test tube and carefully lowered a cloth wad into it, until it had soaked up the fluid. He set it on the far edge of the roof and poured a line of liquor away from it until he was standing five paces back.

"Ready?" He lit the trail of alcohol and ran back to his mom as the blue flame raced along the bricks. When it hit the wet rag, there was a brilliant flash and a deafening crack.

"Doctor, you do good work!"
Grandma said, handing over the still warm plastic bag. "There's two more like this waiting for you downstairs, along with about a hundred people who'd lick 'em for you to ensure they're pure."

"A pleasure doing business with you," the doctor said, in a tone that made grandma laugh and laugh. When the doctor was gone, grandma gave Heesh another sweaty hug and said, "Well? What do you think? Fireworks, right out of your belly!"

"How come, grandma?" Heesh asked. "People pay all kinds of money for yours, but this..."

"People have to want mine," Grandma said, looking down on her and smiling. "But with me, we're limited to how much I can make. I won't be 'round forever, or it might give out some day. Bombs though..."

She looked out over the city, and her voice got far away. "They know you got a bomb, people pay you every day to not use it."

"Psychology," Heesh said.

"History too," Grandma replied.

Brick just laughed and took another deep drink.

-END-