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Specials

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CRASHING A BASH

The six hoverboards slipped among the trees with the lightning grace of playing cards thrown flat and spinning. The riders ducked and weaved among ice-heavy branches, laughing, knees bent and arms outstretched. In their wake glowed a crystal rain, tiny icicles shaken from the pine needles to fall behind, aflame with moonlight.

Tally felt everything with an icy clarity: the brittle, freezing wind across her bare hands, the shifting gravities that pressed her feet against the hoverboard. She breathed in the forest, tendrils of pine coating her throat and tongue, thick as syrup.

The cold air seemed to make sounds crisper: The loose tail of her dorm jacket cracked like a wind-whipped flag, her grippy shoes squeaked against the hoverboard surface with every turn. Fausto was pumping dance music straight through her skintenna, but that was silent to the world outside. Over its frantic beat Tally heard every twitch of her new monofilament-sheathed muscles.

She squinted against the cold, eyes watering, but the

tears made her vision even sharper. Icicles whipped past in glittering streaks, and moonlight silvered the world, like an old, colorless movie come flickering to life.

That was the thing about being a Cutter: *Everything* was icy now, as if the world were opening her skin.

Shay swooped in beside Tally, their fingers brushing for a moment, and flashed a smile. Tally tried to return it, but something shifted in her stomach as she looked at Shay's face. The five Cutters were undercover tonight, black irises hidden under dull-eyed contacts, cruel-pretty jaws softened by smart-plastic masks. They had turned themselves into uglies because they were crashing a bash in Cleopatra Park.

For Tally's brain, it was way too soon to be playing dress-up. She'd only been special a couple of months, but when she looked at Shay she expected to see her best friend's new and marvelous cruel beauty, not tonight's ugly disguise.

Tally angled her board sideways to avoid an ice-laden branch, breaking contact. She concentrated on the glittering world, on twisting her body to slip the board among the trees. The rush of cold air helped her refocus on her surroundings rather than the missing feeling inside herself—the one that came from the fact that Zane wasn't here with the rest of them.

"One party-load of uglies up ahead." Shay's words cut through the music, caught by a chip in her jaw and carried through the skintenna network, whisper-close. "You sure you're ready for this, Tally-wa?"

Tally took a deep breath, drinking in the brain-clearing cold. Her nerves still tingled, but it would be totally random to back out now. "Don't worry, Boss. This is going to be icy."

"Should be. It is a party, after all," Shay said. "Let's be happy little uglies."

A few of the Cutters chuckled, glancing at each other's fake faces. Tally became aware again of her own millimeters-thick mask: plastic bumps and lumps that made her face zitted and flawed, covering the gorgeously spinning web of flash tattoos. Uneven dental caps blunted her razor-sharp teeth, and even her tattooed hands were sprayed with fake skin.

A glance in the mirror had shown Tally how she looked: just like an ugly. Ungainly, crook-nosed, with baby-fat cheeks, and an impatient expression—impatient for her next birthday, the bubblehead operation, and a trip across the river. Another random fifteen-year-old, in other words.

This was Tally's first trick since turning special. She'd expected to be ready for anything now—all those operations had filled her with icy new muscles and reflexes tweaked to snakelike speed. And then she'd spent two months training in the Cutters' camp, living in the wild with little sleep and no provisions.

But one look in the mirror had shaken her confidence.

It didn't help that they'd come into town through the Crumblyville burbs, flying over endless rows of darkened

houses, all the same. The random tedium of the place she'd grown up in gave her a sticky feeling along the inside of her arms, which wasn't helped by the feel of the recyclable dorm uniform against her sensitive new skin. The manicured trees of the greenbelt seemed to press in around Tally, as if the city were trying to grind her down to averageness again. She liked being special, being outside and icy and *better*, and couldn't wait to get back to the wild and strip this ugly mask from her face.

Tally clenched her fists and listened to the skintenna network. Fausto's music and the noises of the others washed over her—the soft sounds of breathing, the wind against their faces. She imagined their heartbeats at the very edge of hearing, as if the Cutters' growing excitement were echoing in her bones.

"Split up," Shay said as the lights of the bash grew close. "Don't want to look too cliquey."

The Cutters' formation drifted apart. Tally stayed with Fausto and Shay, while Tachs and Ho broke off toward the top of Cleopatra Park. Fausto adjusted his soundbox and the music faded, leaving only rushing wind and the distant rumble of the bash.

Tally took another nervous breath, and the crowd's scent flashed through her—ugly sweat and spilled alcohol. The party's dance system didn't use skintennas; it blasted music crudely through the air, scattering sound waves into a thousand reflections among the trees. Uglies were always noisy.

From her training, Tally knew that she could close her eyes and use the merest echoes to navigate the forest blind, like a bat following its own chirps. But she needed her special vision tonight. Shay had spies in Uglyville, and they'd heard that outsiders were crashing the party—New Smokies giving out nanos and stirring up trouble.

That's why the Cutters were here: This was a Special Circumstance.

The three landed just outside the strobing lights of the hoverglobes, jumping off onto the forest's floor of pine needles, which crackled with frost. Shay sent their boards up into the treetops to wait, then fixed Tally with an amused stare. "You smell nervous."

Tally shrugged, uncomfortable in her ugly-dorm uniform. Shay could always smell what you were feeling. "Maybe so, Boss."

Here at the party's edge, a sticky bit of memory reminded her how she always felt arriving at a bash. Even as a beautiful bubblehead, Tally had hated the trickle of nerves that visited whenever crowds pressed in around her, the heat of so many bodies, the weight of their eyes upon her. Now her mask felt clingy and strange, a barrier separating her from the world. Very unspecial. Her cheeks flashed hot for a second beneath plastic, like a rush of shame.

Shay reached out to squeeze her hand. "Don't worry, Tally-wa."

"They're only uglies," Fausto's whisper sliced through the air. "And we're right here with you." His hand rested on Tally's shoulder, gently pushing her forward.

Tally nodded, hearing the others' slow, calm breaths through the skintenna link. It was just like Shay had promised: The Cutters were connected, an unbreakable clique. She would never be alone again, even when it felt like something was missing inside her. Even when she felt the lack of Zane like head-spinning panic.

She plunged through the branches, following Shay into the flashing lights.

Tally's memories were perfect now, not like when she'd been a bubblehead, confused and muddled all the time. She remembered what a big deal Spring Bash was for uglies. The approach of spring meant longer days for tricks and hoverboarding, and lots more outdoor parties to come.

But as she and Fausto followed Shay through the crowd, Tally felt none of the energy she remembered from last year. The bash seemed so tame, so listless and random. The uglies just stood around, so shy and self-conscious that anyone actually dancing looked like they were trying too hard. They all seemed flat and artificial, like party extras on a video wall, waiting for the real people to arrive.

Still, it was true what Shay liked to say: Uglies weren't as clueless as bubbleheads. The crowd parted easily, everyone sliding out of her way. However zitty and uneven their

faces, the uglies' eyes were sharp, full of nervous stabs of awareness. They were smart enough to sense that the three Cutters were different. No one stared for too long at Tally or realized what she was behind her smart-plastic mask, but bodies moved aside at her lightest touch, shivers playing across their shoulders as she passed, as if the uglies sensed something dangerous in the air.

It was easy seeing the thoughts ripple across their faces. Tally could watch the jealousies and hatreds, rivalry and attraction, all of it written on their expressions and in the way they moved. Now that she was special, everything was laid out clearly, like looking down on a forest path from above.

She found herself smiling, finally relaxing and ready for the hunt. Spotting party-crashers was going to be simple.

Tally scanned the crowd, searching for anyone who seemed out of place: a little too confident, overmuscled, and suntanned from living in the wild. She knew what Smokies looked like.

Last fall, back in ugly days, Shay had run away into the wild to escape the bubblehead operation. Tally had followed to bring her back, and they'd both wound up living in the Old Smoke for a few long weeks. Scrabbling like an animal had been pure torture, but her memories came in handy now. Smokies had an arrogance about them; they thought they were better than people in the city.

It took Tally just seconds to spot Ho and Tachs across

the crowded field. They stood out like a pair of cats gliding through a waddling flock of ducks.

"You think we're too obvious, Boss?" she whispered, letting the network carry her words.

"Obvious how?"

"They all look so clueless. We look . . . special."

"We *are* special." Shay looked back at Tally over her shoulder, a grin playing on her face.

"But I thought we were supposed to be in disguise."

"Doesn't mean we can't have *fun*!" Shay suddenly darted away through the crowd.

Fausto reached out and touched Tally's shoulder. "Watch and learn."

He'd been special longer than she had. The Cutters were a brand-new part of Special Circumstances, but Tally's operation had taken the longest. She'd done a lot of very average things in her past, and it had taken a while for the doctors to strip away all the built-up guilt and shame. Random leftover emotions could leave your brain muddled, which wasn't very special. Power came from icy clarity, from knowing exactly what you were, from cutting.

So Tally hung back with Fausto, watching and learning.

Shay grabbed a boy at random, yanking him away from the girl he was talking to. His drink sloshed onto the ground as he started to pull away in protest, but then he caught Shay's gaze.

Shay wasn't as ugly as the rest of them, Tally noticed,

the violet highlights in her eyes still visible even through her ugly disguise. They glittered like a predator's in the strobe lights as she pulled the boy closer, brushing against him, a flex of muscles gliding down her body like a flick through a rope.

After that, he didn't look away again, even as he handed off his beer to the random girl, who looked on open-mouthed. The ugly boy placed his hands on Shay's shoulders, his body starting to follow her movements.

People were watching them now.

"I don't remember this part of the plan," Tally said softly.

Fausto laughed. "Specials don't need plans. Not sticky ones, anyway." He stood close behind Tally, his arms around her waist. She felt his breath on the back of her neck, and a tingle started moving through her body.

Tally pulled away. Cutters touched one another all the time, but she wasn't used to that part of being a Special. It made her feel even stranger that Zane hadn't joined them yet.

Through the skintenna network, Tally could hear Shay whispering to the boy. Her breathing deepened, though Shay could run a klick in two minutes without breaking a sweat. A sharp, unshaven sound sliced through the network when she brushed her cheek against the boy's, and Fausto chuckled when Tally flinched.

"Relax, Tally-wa," he said, rubbing her shoulders. "She knows what she's doing."

That much was obvious: Shay's dance was spreading, sucking in the people around her. Until now, the party had been a nervous bubble hovering in the air, and she'd popped its surface tension, releasing something icy inside. The crowd started to pair off, arms wrapping around each other, moving faster. Whoever was crewing the music must have noticed—the volume went higher, the bass deeper, the hoverglobes overhead pulsing from blackness to blinding radiance. The crowd had started jumping up and down with the beat.

Tally felt her heart accelerate, amazed at how effortlessly Shay had brought them all along. The bash was changing, flipping inside out, and all because of Shay. This wasn't like their stupid tricks in ugly days—sneaking across the river or stealing bungee jackets—this was *magic*.

Special magic.

So what if she was wearing an ugly face? Like Shay always said in training, the bubbleheads had it all wrong: It didn't matter what you looked like. It was how you carried yourself, how you *saw* yourself. Strength and reflexes were only part of it—Shay simply *knew* that she was special, and so she was. Everyone else was just wallpaper, a blurred background of listless chatter, until Shay lit them up with her own private spotlight.

"Come on," Fausto whispered, pulling Tally away from the thickening crowd. They retreated toward the party's edge, sliding unseen past the eyes locked on Shay and her random boy. "You go that way. Stay sharp."

Tally nodded, hearing the other Cutters whisper as they spread out across the party. Suddenly, this all made sense. . . .

The bash had been too dead, too flat to cover the Specials or their prey. But now the crowd's arms were up, waving back and forth with the beat. Plastic cups flew through the air, everything a storm of movement. If the Smokies were planning to crash the party, this moment was what they'd been waiting for.

Moving was tricky now. Tally made her way through a swarm of young girls—practically littlies—all dancing together with eyes closed. The glitter sprayed across their uneven skin flashed in the hoverglobes' pulsing light, and they didn't shiver as Tally pushed through them; her special aura had been drowned out by the party's new energy, by Shay's dance-magic.

The ugly little bodies bouncing against hers reminded Tally how much she had changed inside. Her new bones were made from aircraft ceramics, light as bamboo and hard as diamonds. Her muscles were sheathed whips of self-repairing monofilament. The uglies felt soft and unsubstantial against her, like stuffed toys come to life, boisterous but unthreatening.

A ping sounded inside her head as Fausto boosted the skintenna network's range, and snatches of noise drifted through her ears: screams from a girl dancing next to Tachs, a rumbling beat from where Ho stood close to the speakers, and under it all the distracting things Shay was whispering

in her random boy's ear. It was like being five people at once, as if Tally's consciousness were smeared across the party, sucking in its energy in a blend of noise and light.

She took a deep breath and headed toward the edge of the clearing, seeking the darkness outside the hoverglobes' light. She could watch better from out there, keep better hold of her clarity.

As she moved, Tally found it was easier to dance, going with the crowd's motion rather than forcing a path through it. She allowed herself to be pushed randomly through the throng, like when she let high wind currents guide her hoverboard, imagining herself a bird of prey.

Closing her eyes, Tally drank the bash in through her other senses. Maybe this was what being special was *really* all about: dancing along with the rest of them, while feeling like the only real person in the crowd. . . .

Suddenly, hairs stiffened on the back of Tally's neck, her nostrils flaring. A scent, distinct from the human sweat and spilled beer, sent her mind reeling back to ugly days, to running away, to the first time she'd been alone out in the wild.

She smelled *smoke*—the clinging reek of a campfire.

Her eyes opened. City uglies didn't burn trees, or even torches; they weren't allowed to. The party's only light came from the strobing hoverglobes and the half-risen moon.

The scent must have come from somewhere Outside.

Tally moved in widening circles, casting her eyes over the crowd, trying to find the source of the smell.