

From Part 1: Turning Pretty

Is it not good to make society full of beautiful people?

--Yang Yuan, quoted in *The New York Times*

New Pretty Town

The early summer sky was the color of cat vomit.

Of course, Tally thought, you'd have to feed your cat only salmon-flavored cat food for a while, to get the pinks right. The scudding clouds did look a bit fishy, rippled into scales by a high-altitude wind. As the light faded, deep blue gaps of night peered through like an upside-down ocean, bottomless and cold.

Any other summer, a sunset like this would have been beautiful. But nothing had been beautiful since Peris turned pretty. Losing your best friend sucks, even if it's only for three months and two days.

Tally Youngblood was waiting for darkness.

She could see New Pretty Town through her open window. The party towers were already lit up, and snakes of burning torches marked flickering pathways through the pleasure gardens. A few hot-air balloons pulled at their tethers against the darkening pink sky, their passengers shooting safety fireworks at other balloons and passing parasailers. Laughter and music skipped across the water like rocks thrown with just the right spin, their edges just as sharp against Tally's nerves.

Around the outskirts of the city, cut off from town by the black oval of the river, everything was in darkness. Everyone ugly was in bed by now.

Tally took off her interface ring and said, "Good night."

"Sweet dreams, Tally," said the room.

She chewed up a toothbrush pill, punched her pillows, and shoved an old portable heater -- one that produced about as much warmth as a sleeping, Tally-size human being -- under the covers.

Then she crawled out the window.

Outside, with the night finally turning coal black above her head, Tally instantly felt better. Maybe this was a stupid plan, but anything was better than another night awake in bed feeling sorry for herself. On the familiar leafy path down to the water's edge, it was easy to imagine Peris stealing silently behind her, stifling laughter, ready for a night of spying on the new pretties. Together. She and Peris had figured out how to trick the house minder back when they were twelve, when the three-month difference in their ages seemed like it would never matter.

"Best friends for life," Tally muttered, fingering the tiny scar on her right palm.

The water glistened through the trees, and she could hear the wavelets of a passing river skimmer's wake slapping at the shore. She ducked, hiding in the reeds. Summer was always the best time for spying expeditions. The grass was high, it was never cold, and you didn't have to stay awake through school the next day.

Of course, Peris could sleep as late as he wanted now. Just one of the advantages of being pretty.

The old bridge stretched massively across the water, its huge iron frame as black as the sky. It had been built so long ago that it held up its own weight, without any support from hoverstruts. A million years from now, when the rest of the city had crumbled, the bridge would probably remain like a fossilized bone.

Unlike the other bridges into New Pretty Town, the old bridge

couldn't talk -- or report trespassers, more importantly. But even silent, the bridge had always seemed very wise to Tally, as quietly knowing as some ancient tree.

Her eyes were fully adjusted to the darkness now, and it took only seconds to find the fishing line tied to its usual rock. She yanked it, and heard the splash of the rope tumbling from where it had been hidden among the bridge supports. She kept pulling until the invisible fishing line turned into wet, knotted cord. The other end was still tied to the iron framework of the bridge. Tally pulled the rope taut and lashed it to the usual tree.

She had to duck into the grass once more as another river skimmer passed. The people dancing on its deck didn't spot the rope stretched from bridge to shore. They never did. New pretties were always having too much fun to notice little things out of place.

When the skimmer's lights had faded, Tally tested the rope with her whole weight. One time it had pulled loose from the tree, and both she and Peris had swung downward, then up and out over the middle of the river before falling off, tumbling into the cold water. She smiled at the memory, realizing she would rather be on that expedition -- soaking wet in the cold with Peris -- than dry and warm tonight, but alone.

Hanging upside down, hands and knees clutching the knots along the rope, Tally pulled herself up into the dark framework of the bridge, then stole through its iron skeleton and across to New Pretty Town.

She knew where Peris lived from the one message he had bothered to send since turning pretty. Peris hadn't given an address, but Tally knew the trick for decoding the random-looking numbers at the bottom of a ping. They led to someplace called Garbo Mansion in the hilly part of town.

Getting there was going to be tricky. In their expeditions, Tally

and Peris had always stuck to the waterfront, where vegetation and the dark backdrop of Uglyville made it easy to hide. But now Tally was headed into the center of the island, where floats and revelers populated the bright streets all night. Brand-new pretties like Peris always lived where the fun was most frantic.

Tally had memorized the map, but if she made one wrong turn, she was toast. Without her interface ring, she was invisible to vehicles. They'd just run her down like she was nothing.

Of course, Tally *was* nothing here.

Worse, she was ugly. But she hoped Peris wouldn't see it that way. Wouldn't see her that way.

Tally had no idea what would happen if she got caught. This wasn't like being busted for "forgetting" her ring, skipping classes, or tricking the house into playing her music louder than allowed. Everyone did that kind of stuff, and everyone got busted for it. But she and Peris had always been very careful about not getting caught on these expeditions. Crossing the river was serious business.

It was too late to worry now, though. What could they do to her, anyway? In three months she'd be a pretty herself.

Tally crept along the river until she reached a pleasure garden, and slipped into the darkness beneath a row of weeping willows. Under their cover she made her way alongside a path lit by little guttering flames.

A pretty couple wandered down the path. Tally froze, but they were clueless, too busy staring into each other's eyes to see her crouching in the darkness. Tally silently watched them pass, getting that warm feeling she always got from looking at a pretty face. Even when she and Peris used to spy on them from the shadows, giggling at all the stupid things the pretties said and did, they couldn't resist staring. There was something magic in

their large and perfect eyes, something that made you want to pay attention to whatever they said, to protect them from any danger, to make them happy. They were so...pretty.

The two disappeared around the next bend, and Tally shook her head to clear the mushy thoughts away. She wasn't here to gawk. She was an infiltrator, a sneak, an ugly. And she had a mission.

The garden stretched up into town, winding like a black river through the bright party towers and houses. After a few more minutes of creeping, she startled a couple hidden among the trees (it was a *pleasure* garden, after all), but in the darkness they couldn't see her face, and only teased her as she mumbled an apology and slipped away. She hadn't seen too much of them, either, just a tangle of perfect legs and arms.

Finally, the garden ended, a few blocks from where Peris lived.

Tally peered out from behind a curtain of hanging vines. This was farther than she and Peris had ever been together, and as far as her planning had taken her. There was no way to hide herself in the busy, well-lit streets. She put her fingers up to her face, felt the wide nose and thin lips, the too-high forehead and tangled mass of frizzy hair. One step out of the underbrush and she'd be spotted. Her face seemed to burn as the light touched it. What was she doing here? She should be back in the darkness of Uglyville, awaiting her turn.

But she had to see Peris, had to talk to him. She wasn't quite sure why, exactly, except that she was sick of imagining a thousand conversations with him every night before she fell asleep. They'd spent every day together since they were littlies, and now...nothing. Maybe if they could just talk for a few minutes, her brain would stop talking to imaginary Peris. Three minutes might be enough to hold her for three months.

Tally looked up and down the street, checking for side yards to

slink through, dark doorways to hide in. She felt like a rock climber facing a sheer cliff, searching for cracks and handholds.

The traffic began to clear a little, and she waited, rubbing the scar on her right palm. Finally, Tally sighed and whispered, "Best friends forever," and took a step forward into the light.

An explosion of sound came from her right, and she leaped back into the darkness, stumbling among the vines, coming down hard on her knees in the soft earth, certain for a few seconds that she'd been caught.

But the cacophony organized itself into a throbbing rhythm. It was a drum machine making its lumbering way down the street. Wide as a house, it shimmered with the movement of its dozens of mechanical arms, bashing away at every size of drum. Behind it trailed a growing bunch of revelers, dancing along with the beat, drinking and throwing their empty bottles to shatter against the huge, impervious machine.

Tally smiled. The revelers were wearing masks.

The machine was lobbing the masks out the back, trying to coax more followers into the impromptu parade: devil faces and horrible clowns, green monsters and gray aliens with big oval eyes, cats and dogs and cows, faces with crooked smiles or huge noses.

The procession passed slowly, and Tally pulled herself back into the vegetation. A few of the revelers passed close enough that the sickly sweetness from their bottles filled her nose. A minute later, when the machine had trundled half a block farther, Tally jumped out and snatched up a discarded mask from the street. The plastic was soft in her hand, still warm from having been stamped into shape inside the machine a few seconds before.

Before she pressed it against her face, Tally realized that it was the same color as the cat-vomit pink of the sunset, with a long

snout and two pink little ears. Smart adhesive flexed against her skin as the mask settled onto her face.

Tally pushed her way through the drunken dancers, out the other side of the procession, and ran down a side street toward Garbo Mansion, wearing the face of a pig.

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