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opening extract from

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CHAPTER 1



Chess Tuesday had been stealing all morning. So had her brothers, Box and Splinter, but they had gone to a different part of the city. Splinter had said it was better that way. He had said that Chess wasn't safe to be with at the moment; not if she was being watched. She was thinking about this when she felt a push to her chest that knocked her backwards and onto the pavement, still holding the bag she'd been carrying.

'Shove off, street rat,' said a man who leant over her. By his overall she guessed that he worked in one of the shops she'd been passing.

I was shoving off, thought Chess. I was minding my own business. But she didn't say anything. She stayed crouching on the pavement.

She was kicked in the small of her back. It hurt and she twisted her neck to look behind and saw a woman holding a little girl by the hand and glaring. 'Go on,' the woman sneered. 'Shift, you filthy piece of rubbish.'

People were stopping to see what was happening.

This is too much attention, too many people watching,

thought Chess. Somebody kicked her right arm, just above the elbow.

She was frightened. Box or Splinter would have known what to do but she remained squatting on the floor, clutching the bag. A gobbet of spit hit her under her right eye. She wanted to strike back, to pick up bricks from the gutter and smash the shop windows but that would only have drawn more attention.

A needle of fear stabbed her chest. She didn't want the hunters to come.

Chess sprang to her feet as quickly as she could and ran away from the knot of people. They shouted after her but she did not look back.

'You must never look back,' Splinter had once told her. 'Not when you're running away.' She darted into a side street and up a fire escape, along a wall and down into a back alley. Then she headed for the wharf.

The wharf was a ramshackle heap of docks and warehouses that crouched on the riverbank beneath the city. Here, black tongues of water lapped at slime green quays and slid into dank tunnels where boats and barges had long since ceased to dock. Shrouded in mist and stinking of filth it was a place for tramps and bag ladies, for meths drinkers and drug addicts, for thieves and murderers.

This was where things came when they had nowhere else to go; when they had sunk below the jagged spread of the city and slipped through the sprawling slums of the Pit. The shifting mud banks and sluice gates draped with weed became the final resting place for bicycle wheels, bottles, mangled

prams and the swollen dead, washed up by the dark waters of the river.

The wharf was also a place for street rats; the children with no homes, no families and no fear about stealing today what they would never get tomorrow. Hundreds of them hid here in gangs, slipping out of the tunnels and up into the noise and wealth of the city to steal what they could before vanishing back into the dark, wet places below.

In this world of rotting wood and crumbling brick where time was measured by the slow slap of water, they were safe. Safe from rain, safe from snow, safe from the hateful stares of honest city dwellers but most of all, safe from the hunters.

The hunters came with black boots, death's head badges, dogs and stun sticks to track and trap the street rats. They came whenever an infestation of rats had been located. They were part of the police, but a special part. They had their own detention units and unusual methods of interrogation. A street rat who was caught by the hunters knew that he or she would never see the wharf again. And nobody would see them again. The hunters were very efficient.

Box was better at fighting than any of the others in his gang and Splinter was cleverer so they had won for themselves a deep ledge built inside one of the tunnels. The lip of the ledge jutted out over the broad quayside and there was a recess at the rear where empty wooden barrels and boxes had been stacked, heaped with rust-stained ropes. The ledge was as smelly and gloomy and filthy as the rest of the wharf but because it was reached by a gantry about thirty feet above the water it was much drier. Here they lived with Chess and

it was here that they would meet to consider the morning's takings.

Chess was the last to return. She was out of breath because she hadn't stopped running. Sweat prickled under her clothes. Even though the day was hot she wore a purple pullover. It was full of holes and so misshapen that the neck was almost as wide as the shoulders, and the sleeves hung down to her knees unless she kept rolling them up. Underneath she wore a T-shirt that had once been white but now was perfectly grey. Her jeans were torn over the knees and frayed at the ankles and had been for months. They were stiff with dirt. Her chestnut hair was thick and curly and had stuck flat to her forehead.

Her eyes were as brown as her hair and very big and she kept them on the cobbles over which her bare feet slapped. Some of the street rats watched her pass, eyes lingering on the bag that she was carrying. She wasn't frightened by the other gangs but she was frightened of what Splinter would do if she didn't have anything to show for the morning graft. She gripped the plastic bag more tightly.

Chess slowed to a walk but even when a cluster of bigger, older rats unfolded themselves from the innards of a burnt-out car they had scavenged, and turned to grin at her and say hello, she kept her eyes down and said nothing in reply. She was Splinter's sister: of course they were nice to her.

There were more than a hundred street rats in her brothers' gang but the only person that Chess looked for as she edged her way into the tunnel where they lived was Gemma. She had some chocolate for Gemma but she couldn't see her.

Chess stepped over legs and pushed round bands of squatting children. She walked past Pacer, Hex, Lynch and Jerky. They were her brothers' friends, which meant that her brothers didn't fight and argue with them as much as they fought and argued with everybody else. She heard them greet her and she mumbled a reply but she didn't look up until she came to the iron ladder that led to the ledge. Up there, above all the other street rats, were Box and Splinter.

Chess climbed the ladder and found her brothers inspecting their loot. Splinter, tall and thin, was holding up a ring. He studied it in the flickering light that was reflected from the river water and shimmered on the arched roof. He wore narrow, black trousers and a tatty, long-tailed morning coat that he had recovered from a bin. It was lined with pockets that he had sewn in himself. These contained a variety of useful items; string, matches, marbles, skeleton keys, a switchblade, a pencil. His long white hair was spiky with grime. He had pale blue eyes and sharp cheek bones.

'Good work, Box,' he said quietly. 'Did anyone see you?'

'Don't think so,' said Box, who sat with his legs dangling over the ledge. He wore ragged woollen trousers that were held up by braces and a blue and white striped T-shirt that was ripped. He was shorter than Splinter and stouter. His hair was black and tightly curled. Splinter called him 'fly head' because of his hair; he said it looked like a heap of squashed flies.

Chess dropped her plastic bag by Splinter's bare feet and sat down next to Box. Her legs dangled beside his, the air cool on their skin. They hadn't worn shoes for years and the soles of their feet had grown leathery and horn hard.

Splinter lifted the bag and looked inside, scowling. 'Chocolates,' he muttered, 'and bread rolls. And two apples. What use are two apples?' His hard voice reverberated against the tunnel walls.

Chess said nothing but dug her nails into the skin of her palms until the sharpness blotted out Splinter's glare.

'More use than one,' said Box. 'And anyway, Splinter, food's food.' Box stood up and rummaged in the plastic bag.

'All you ever do is stuff your mash. It's like you're half-boy, half-pig,' said Splinter.

'Yeah, well, you're all cretin,' replied Box, spitting on an apple and rubbing it on his grimy trousers.

'That makes me a hell of a lot cleverer than you. Pig boy.'

Chess said nothing. Eyes wide, she watched the pools of light shifting on the arches above her. She liked this. It was bright and clean and lifted her up from the ledge and the tunnel. It washed bad thoughts away.

She could hear her brothers arguing. As usual. Almost the first sound she could remember was the sound of her brothers arguing. The first sound that she could remember was a voice singing. Sometimes she could actually remember the words. The singing made her feel the same way as the light dancing above her now.

Nobody had sung to her after she and her brothers had been deposited at the orphanage. So, probably, the song was her mother's. She liked to think that.

Chess was three years old when she had been left at the Elms Orphanage. When they had found her at the door she was clutching a chess piece and so they had called her Chess. That was how they named children at the Elms. Box, who

was carrying a wooden box, was called Box and Splinter, who was crying because his finger had been pierced by a splinter from the rough edge of the box was called Splinter. And because they had been left at the doorstep on a Tuesday, they were all called Tuesday.

Chess was eleven now and her brothers were both fourteen. The brothers were twins although they looked very different from one another. Even though they were older her brothers had no memories of life before the orphanage. They had tried to think of things that had happened to them before they were six but they couldn't remember anything. Their memories seemed to start at the Elms. Nobody had told them why they had been taken there and nobody had cared about what was done to them whilst they lived there. Splinter had said it was a bad place for children; that was why they had run away. Afterwards, nobody had tried to find them. So they had come to this place at the bottom of the city.

'A newspaper,' said Splinter with derision, pulling a newspaper from the plastic bag. 'What do you want with this, Chess? You can't even read.'

'I can,' she said defensively. 'A bit.'

He tossed the paper into the air and the pages fluttered apart like birds before drifting absently down to the water. One page floated back to the ledge and Splinter clutched it, casting his eyes over the headline. He read aloud, 'MORE CHILDREN VANISH.' Then he scrunched the sheet of paper into a ball which he threw into the air. 'Nice children, I suppose.'

'Bad things can happen to nice children,' said Chess.

'Bad things happen to bad children,' said Splinter, 'but nobody speaks about that. Nobody cares.' He coughed sharply and spat, pausing to watch the fleck of phlegm trace the same arc as the ball of newspaper before hitting the water below, silently.

'Nice shot, Splinter,' said Box with a thoughtful nod.

'Anything can happen to us and it doesn't matter,' continued Splinter, still looking down at the water, 'but the moment anything bad happens to a jack, it's big news. It matters.'

Splinter never said anything good about the jacks but Chess wasn't so sure. She thought it must be hard to go to school, to always follow rules, to have to get a job, to look after money. But, then again, people like that couldn't slip through crowds like oil, couldn't spirit up walls as silent as fog, didn't know how to claw their way out of corners or how to use drains to vanish when danger came near. They were soft; if they were hurt, they cried. And they hated street rats.

Splinter turned round, quickly. 'Were you followed?'

Chess shrugged her thin shoulders. 'Don't think so,' she said.

'She's just paranoid,' said Box.

'I'm not,' protested Chess. 'Someone's been watching me for days and I've seen hunters and they've seen me and they haven't tried to catch me.'

'Well that doesn't make sense,' said Box, starting to eat the second apple. 'Hunters hunt us and catch us. That's what they're there for.' He crunched apple flesh noisily.

'Unless,' considered Splinter, 'they have been following

her so they can find us.' He turned on Box. 'You shouldn't have burnt that police station down, Box.'

'You shouldn't have robbed that post office, Splinter,' retorted Box through a mouth full of apple.

'Perhaps it's me they're after,' said Chess softly.

'Why would they want *you*?' sneered Splinter.

Chess shrugged again. 'Someone has been watching me. Or something.' She was definite about that.

Box crunched the apple and Splinter put the ring inside one of his pockets before disappearing into the shadows at the back of the ledge. Chess looked at the grey crescents of dirt beneath her toenails and wished that Splinter would believe her. She knew that someone or something had been watching her for weeks. There had been signs; footfalls close behind, a strange reflection in a shop window, a figure slipping into a doorway as she approached. She hadn't always been able to see who or what it was but she could tell that she was being watched in the same way that a wild animal can.

But this morning had been different. It was different because no one had been watching her. What had happened outside the shop didn't count. It wasn't very nice but it was what happened to street rats. What unsettled Chess was that the watching had stopped.

It has stopped, thought Chess, because enough has been seen. Which meant that something was going to happen.

It was midday; a busy time in the city but the quietest time at the wharf. Street rats were sleeping or talking quietly, repairing clothes, cleaning tools. Somebody had lit a fire and put a tyre on it to burn. It smelt better than the river stink.

Box had stretched out on the ledge and was snoring. Even the look-outs positioned just inside the mouth of the tunnel were nodding sleepily in the heavy calm of the afternoon.

It had been hot for days and mists had been steaming over the river, draping the wharf in humid clouds until the brick walls had been dripping wet. Autumn had been sweltering. But today the sky was the colour of soot and the morning air had been sweet with the smell of approaching rain. Chess lay on her back and watched the light patterns fade and glow overhead. She felt drowsy but she could not relax enough to sleep.

She had noticed before how you can become aware of a sound without ever noticing when it started. Now she realized that she could hear a thumping, whirring noise. It was deep and shrill at the same time and it was constant although it had been faint at first. Chess sat up and turned her head to try to hear better. It seemed to come out of the air rather than from any place in particular and it seemed to be coming nearer because it was getting louder.

Warning cries from the look-outs pierced the slumbering gloom of the wharf. Children, some no older than five or six appeared from the shadows of the tunnel to find out what was happening. They slid down ropes, jumped from mounds of old boxes and slithered out of cracks in the walls. In seconds the tunnel was full of them. They were quiet at first, listening to the noise that was coming closer.

Nothing could be seen through the mist.

'Box!' hissed Chess. 'Box, wake up,' and she gave his ankles a kick.

He woke at once, eyes squinting. 'Helicopters!' he said

and beneath the approaching screech and hum there was another sound, distant at first but also coming closer. Dogs.

Splinter appeared back at the lip of the ledge. 'Hunters,' he shouted and there was an explosion of activity as a hundred or more street rats started stuffing their belongings into bags and sacks and then scrambling to the tunnel opening to try to get out before the hunters could trap them. There were cries and yells mixing with the screaming of the helicopters, and a splash when one of the rats lost his footing in the panic and fell into the water.

'We'll never get out,' Box shouted.

The whine of engines and thump of rotor blades made Chess's ribs vibrate. She couldn't see the helicopters yet but from the roar of noise and the way that the water was churning and swelling, they must have been hovering just out beyond the tunnel openings.

It was chaos below the ledge. There were more street rats than there was space on the slippery stones of the quays and with so many of them jammed tightly together and pushing nobody was able to move forwards. There was a lot of shouting. Two small boys were sitting on the floor at the back of the crowd and Chess could see that they were crying although it was too noisy to hear them. Nobody noticed them except Chess. She looked for Gemma but couldn't see her amongst the jostling bodies.

As Chess and Box watched, the rats surged backwards. Some stumbled to the floor and some were barged into the river as they swarmed over one another. Then they saw what had made them retreat. Charging out of the mist came a troop of hunters, batons raining down, breaking bones and

spilling blood. Their black uniforms and helmets drove into the tunnel in a wedge and at their sides came dogs, unchained and savage.

'There are loads of them,' said Box. 'They must have blocked the docks and walks.' He puffed out his cheeks. 'This is massive.'

Chess said nothing because there was nothing to say. She stood above the mayhem lamely and watched as forty or fifty hunters ploughed into the children and deeper into the tunnel. At their rear came a commander, flanked by two lieutenants. He wore a throat-mike and was talking into this. The black lenses of his glasses tilted up at intervals as he scanned the walkways and alcoves on the tunnel walls.

The tunnel was filling with hunters and the rats were being forced back. Children screamed, dogs snarled. When all the hunters were inside a thick net dropped down the mouth of the tunnel like a portcullis, preventing any escape.

Had Chess been on the opposite bank of the river, and had there been no mist, she would have seen the same thing happening at each of the tunnels along the wharf. She would have seen a legion of hunters, some armed with rifles, packing the quaysides and pouring into the arches and she would have seen the nets unfurling from the helicopters that hovered over the wharf like a swarm of locusts. Every entrance to every tunnel was sealed by the nets. Every rat was trapped.

'We've had it,' said Box to Chess. Chess was silent.

A black gloved hand was pointing up at her. It was the commander and he was looking straight at her. His two lieutenants also turned their impenetrably darkened glasses

towards her. The commander spoke into his throat-mike. Five hunters turned back from those pushing into the tunnel and halted in front of him. He spoke to them sharply, giving orders. Three of them ran to the foot of the ladder that would take them up to the ledge where Chess was standing. The other two unslung their rifles.

All the time that Box and Chess had been watching the rout, Splinter had been busy in the shadows behind them.

'Follow me,' he shouted.

'Where?' shouted Box, watching the hunters.

'You'll see.'

Box hesitated and then hurried to where the gantry joined the side of the ledge. The platform was chained to a pair of iron posts that were firm in the stone. He looked for a way to loosen it so that the platform would collapse and the hunters would not be able to reach them. Already there were two of them climbing up the ladder.

Box gave the chain a yank. The platform swung sideways but was secure.

Chess saw one of the hunters who had stayed by the commander raise his rifle to his shoulder and drop his head to the stock, taking aim. The barrel was trained on Box. She ran to Box, shouting his name. As she grabbed his shoulders she saw the commander place his hand on top of the rifle muzzle and push it towards the floor.

'Let's follow Splinter,' she urged Box.

'Where to?' he asked.

'I don't know. Come on.'

They ran to the back of the ledge to find boxes strewn about the floor and barrels upended. Where they had been

stacked there was a low portal in the wall and Splinter was on his haunches on the other side, beckoning them on.

'I never knew about this,' yelled Box.

'Why do you think I wanted the ledge?' came the reply. 'We were always going to need an escape. We always will. Now come on.'

Stooping, Box and Chess ran through the opening and found themselves at the foot of an iron stairwell with a corridor that sloped down to the left of them.

'We have to get up the stairs, across the roof and down the fire escape on the far side.' Splinter was able to talk without shouting although the whirr of helicopter engines still filled the air. 'If we get to the bottom on the other side we're OK.'

'And if we don't?' asked Box.

Splinter didn't reply. He turned and charged up the stairs, two at a time and Box followed at his heels. Chess ran as fast as she could but there was flight upon flight to the warehouse roof. She gulped air and her lungs were tight as if they were being crushed. Her thighs were screaming hot and her feet were hard to lift. She heard Box yelling at her, encouraging her to go faster, but it was the ringing of boots on the iron steps below that made her forget about the pain and run harder.

'Get the girl,' snarled a voice behind her. 'Kill the others if you have to but get the girl. Alive.'

When she staggered to the top of the stairs, Box and Splinter were flinging themselves at a wooden door that led outside. It was dark in the stairwell but Chess could see light outlining the door. As she reached her brothers the door

smashed open and all of them tumbled out into daylight and driving rain.

'What did they shout?' grunted Splinter, splashing to his feet.

'I didn't hear,' gasped Chess, even though she had. There was no time for questions; no time for blame. The hunters were coming for her and she didn't know why.

The roof was wide and flat. The air was fresh and cold. They ran for the far side where an iron ladder vanished over the parapet.

They might have reached the ladder. They might have made it to the bottom. But before they had run halfway across the roof a helicopter swooped in low and three hunters dropped from it, blocking their way, rifles ready.

Splinter halted. Chess and Box stopped beside him. 'They really want us,' said Box as the helicopter hovered overhead and the hunters closed in.

Splinter considered his options. He had none.

Box slipped a hand into his trouser pocket and grasped the lock knife that he always kept there. It wasn't easy to work the blade open but he did so slowly, without cutting his fingers. The hunters from the helicopter faced them, rifles at their shoulders, barrels steady and levelled at the children. Rain dripped from the black rifle muzzles.

Marching from the door behind came the commander and his two lieutenants. They walked round to face the children. The commander was not much taller then Chess. He had a lean and hungry face which he thrust so close that his hatchet of a nose was almost touching hers. His lips were pulled tightly against his teeth which she couldn't see but which

she sensed might have been longer then normal and very sharp. She didn't blink and she barely breathed. Rain spotted the black lenses of his glasses.

He is smelling me, Chess thought, and at the same time caught a sour stink of dog, although there were no dogs on the roof.

Then the commander stepped back. 'This is the girl,' he said. 'Now take them.'

As one of the lieutenants stepped forwards, Box lunged towards him, knife at throat height. This was unexpected and it was only because the hunter turned his shoulder at the last moment that the knife slashed air and not flesh. But the hunters were fast and well drilled. Before Box could regain his footing the other lieutenant had extended his stun stick and cracked it across Box's back.

There was a brilliant flash as the electricity discharged and then Box was on the floor, body wracked with pain. Even as he writhed at their feet, the lieutenant rammed his stun stick into Box's belly and sent another bolt of electricity into him. Chess shut her eyes and Splinter stared hard at the iron ladder that they hadn't been fast enough to reach. All the time the commander kept his hidden eyes on Chess.

The helicopter descended to the roof, rocking slightly and making web patterns on the rain-lashed concrete. Chess and Splinter's thin arms were manacled and they were frogmarched into it. Then two hunters seized Box's arms and legs and they carried him to the open door through which they slung him. He landed with a thud on the floor beside the others and lay there, whimpering.

The commander and the lieutenant who had used the

stun stick climbed into the cockpit beside the pilot. Three hunters sat in the cargo hold with Chess, Box and Splinter, stun sticks drawn and faces rigid.

'Enjoy the daylight, rats,' the commander shouted to them. 'You won't see much more of it.' Then he spoke to the pilot.

The helicopter rose, tipped forwards and plunged into the driving rain.