

BLOOD FOR BLOOD

BOOK TWO OF THE DISC CHRONICLES

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CHAPTER ONE

RAT TAIL PUSHED HIS WHEELBARROW OVER THE DRY, cracking earth, the wheel squeaking rhythmically as he avoided cacti and short sand dunes. The sun warmed his leather beanie—which he'd retrofitted into a balaclava with scratch pieces of fabric stitched from ear to ear—but the wind was starting to pick up. There was a sharp chill to the air, a sign that the cold season had arrived. The nights were bitter these days, and he intended to finish his work long before the sun surrendered to the horizon.

His wheelbarrow was already half-full of rebar, bolts, and undamaged cinder blocks. A good haul so far. He reached a pile of rubble. To an untrained eye, it would look like nothing more than a trash heap caked with sand. He set the wheelbarrow down next to it and unslung the square shovel strapped across his back. After a quick adjustment of his worn leather gloves, he gripped the shovel and jabbed it at the base of something that poked out from the pile like an arm jutting from a stack of corpses. He unearthed the long coil of copper and added it to the wheelbarrow with satisfaction.

This was not trash, but that's what they called it—those people cowering in The Disc, sheltered snot wads who'd never been outside its walls. The women he paid for at Screws & Gears called him a dumpster diver. Little Rat Tail, burrowing in ancient garbage. But he, like most other Scavengers, took pride in what he did. Someday, it would make him a rich man.

If he could find something Thallium wanted for his collection, he might be able to make a leap toward retirement. Something shiny or a whole book. The Principal always paid for books in decent condition, extra if they had hard covers. And if Rat Tail found something to add to his majesty's machine collection, he'd get paid for sure. Maybe enough for a permanent room at Screws and the best of the women—Rivet with her brown pigtails and the little mole in the shape of a heart on her chin. For him. Just for him.

“Rat!”

Rat Tail hissed softly and turned—Frederick knelt on a slight rise with a scope pressed against his eye as if he thought himself a grand explorer. Beside him was a Keeper, his striped robe abandoned for more practical travel attire. Thallium had begun requiring his Scavengers to work under protection due to The Disc's current reputation in the Open. The Keeper had a rifle under his tan cloak, the barrel peeking out beneath the hem.

“We need to hurry through this corridor,” Frederick continued. He tossed the scope to the Keeper, who caught it and continued surveying. “I have to make a sweep of the grasslands before we cut west for Non. At this rate, we'll be stuck out here for an extra day and night. Onward with haste!”

Rat Tail just grunted in response. He liked working alone, a single man in the wide outlands. It was safer that way, no matter what Thallium thought. He could cast a drop cloth over his wheelbarrow and skitter under the lip of a boulder if

Marauders happened by. Partners were liabilities, and partners that didn't respect him were dead weight. He'd left them in crags and caves before, and once out in the sun with a leg pinned by a steel beam. He'd walked away from that one with regret. That steel would have bought him a month of dinners at the Storehouse.

But the Principal made his Scavengers go out in pairs now. "Increased accountability," he'd said. They'd drawn straws, and he'd ended up with the worst of them all—Frederick, with his stupid fox scarf and that khaki top hat with fur earflaps, both just begging for someone to steal them. Or destroy them. Either would make Rat happy.

Even though he was stuck with Frederick—something he planned to remedy soon for the sake of his own safety and sanity—it was better than being in The Disc right now. People there were starting to get twitchy. Strange how, for as long as Rat had been in the city, very few citizens had wanted to leave the safety of its walls, yet once the option to do so was taken away, everyone started craving the Open. It wasn't the Open itself they wanted, of course. When they could walk through the door, they didn't care to. But now that the door was sealed? They were trapped, and they felt like it. It was the *freedom* to leave that they wanted, even if they would never have the guts to actually go through the front gate.

The city was locked down, trade shut off. The farms had harvested what they could and stored it for winter, but it wouldn't be enough. Without trade in the cold season, people would starve. That was a fact, and it spread through bars and alleys like an icy whisper, breath from the ghosts of people who'd be dead come spring. Already, theft and street violence were picking up. There was talk of going outside and taking chances there, of elaborate plans with rope and pulley systems to get over the wall or slowly digging underneath it after night-

fall. They were still fantasies, but they wouldn't be for much longer, and people were going to die as traitors for attempting to violate the Principal's lockdown.

Nobody was allowed in or out, not even Resource Seekers. But that was good for Rat. Thallium still let some Scavengers out, those who had brought him something valuable in the past, and he was one of them, along with Frederick. The Principal even gave them keycards to let them come and go from The Disc through an underground entrance near the Main House, a door that a privileged few knew about. Each Scavenger pair just had one keycard to share and were sworn to keep its existence a secret. Nowadays, people would kill for that card.

He took a break from moving refuse to pat the keycard through his shirt where it hung against his chest. He'd have to take care of Frederick before nightfall when the keycard was supposed to change hands. Too risky to act without the key around his neck. Fully ignoring Frederick's request to hurry up, Rat resumed his work.

Rat believed that it was a shame to waste crises, and he would make good use of this one. The Principal had a weapon—his Keepers-turned-goons had said so when they had too much Yellow Fever at the bar. He was going to use this weapon to become ruler of this whole stinking scab of a desert. Cheers! Rat wanted a piece of that, and if he stayed on Thallium's good side, he just might get it. Little Rat, with his tiny nose and crooked teeth, bald head at thirty—he'd be a king.

He heaved a section of drywall off the pile with his shovel, and it thudded on the ground. After the dust settled, something glittered on its surface. He leaned his shovel against the wheelbarrow and fell to his knees to pick up a delicate silver bangle, thin and remarkably unbent.

Two red-orange stones were set on either side of a larger blue stone in the middle that was veined with gold. He blew on

them to remove some of the dust. His breath caught—turquoise *and* coral. Perfect condition. It might not buy him retirement, but it would buy him Rivet's exclusive attention for a week straight.

Frederick's approaching footsteps crunched through the rubble behind Rat. "Time's up! Pack it away. We need to get moving."

Rat kept his back to Frederick and slowly reached for the folding knife in his breast pocket. "I don't take orders from you, de Bourgh."

"Oh come on, friend! I'm running behind. Just need to make up for some lost time, that's all."

As Rat turned to face him, he held the bracelet up high to distract Frederick as he moved the knife down to his hip. The Keeper was still surveying the horizon, distracted, clueless.

Frederick's eyes grew large. He took a loupe from the pocket of his pants and held it up to the bracelet. "Magnificent piece! That turquoise—powder blue with a gold matrix. Rare indeed!"

Rat flipped open his knife, careful to avoid touching the paralytic coating the blade. "Too bad the coral's faded," he said as he raised the knife for a swipe at the exposed flesh of Frederick's hand. But before he could strike, something hit the back of his knees hard. He went down shouting and flipped onto his back to face his assailant.

A woman stood there, holding his shovel aloft, her full, tanned chest taking in the sun. She moved the shovel to one hand and tugged her dusty scarf off her face with the other to reveal teeth like shards of dirty glass and wild, dark hair.

Rat Tail could hear the sounds of a scuffle behind them where the Keeper had been, but he was too terrified of the woman to take his eyes off of her. He expected to hear a rifle

shot. But nothing. Only a thud as something heavy hit the dirt, then the whistle of the wind.

“Please,” cried Rat Tail. “I’m just a Scavenger. A shit-sifter.”

To Rat’s surprise, she ignored him and addressed Frederick, “You’re late.”

“I apologize,” Frederick replied. “I’ve been saddled with the irksome burden sprawled on the ground before you, as well as Thallium’s babysitter. Believe me, I did try to reach our meeting point on time.”

Rat sat up, outrage driving him to action. “You were going to betray me, de Bourgh? Sell me as a slave? We were partners!”

The woman spat at him with a skillful shot to his cheek. She scooped up his pocketknife from where it had landed on the ground and sniffed at it. “Reaper jasmine. Potent reduction too.” She bent down and held the knife close to his neck. “Who’d you hire to coat this for you? Because I know you don’t have the balls or brains to do it yourself.”

He tried to wet his mouth with enough saliva to speak, but it had gone dry. The sickeningly sweet smell of the paralytic met his nose. “Please, I don’t have anything valuable.”

“I disagree.” She set the shovel down to grip the thin chain around his neck with rock-hard, icy fingers and yanked. The square keycard attached to the chain came out of the top of his shirt. His only way back into the city.

“That’s scrap metal. It’s worthless!” He couldn’t stop from ending his plea with a squeak of panic.

She tucked the card into her bust. “Worthless? I’ve been watching you and all of your nasty habits out here. I’ll tell you what’s worthless.” She switched her grip on the knife as if to slash his throat.

“Survivor!” called a masculine voice behind Rat Tail. He looked over his shoulder and there, not six feet from him, was a

Marauder. A tall one covered in honor scars. Beyond him, the Keeper lay still, his neck bent sharply to one side, dead eyes open as if to show he should have seen this coming.

“Please God, no!” Rat scrambled in the dirt, kicking up a cloud of dust with his effort until he backed up against the rubble pile in which he’d found the bangle. The bangle! He still clutched it in his hand. “Here!” He held the jewelry up. “Take it and leave! I’m begging you!”

The Marauder’s gaze cut straight to Rat’s core as he approached. Scars crawled across his brow, down his temple, even under his eyes. They were everywhere. The dirt crunched beneath his skin boots when he squatted across from Rat. He took the bangle from his palm, pinching it between two of his big fingers as if it were a single hair. He tossed it to the woman.

“Do you have to?” Frederick asked tentatively.

Rat Tail didn’t understand the question, but then realized it wasn’t directed at him.

The woman closed the knife and pocketed it with the bangle. “Yes,” she replied as she grabbed the shovel from the ground on her way to the Marauder’s side. She wasn’t much taller standing than he was squatting in the dirt.

“But you got what you needed. He’s going to die out here anyway,” protested Frederick.

“Don’t be so sure,” she replied with a sneer that displayed her horrible teeth. “It’s slick little ones like him that always find a way to slither on. We can’t risk him reporting us to The Disc, card or no card.”

Frederick started, “But I—”

“Go for a walk, Freddy. This won’t take long,” said the woman.

Frederick looked like he was going to puke but did as she said and headed toward the hill he’d been scouting from earlier.

Once Frederick was gone, the Marauder hesitated to move,

and Rat Tail thought he saw pity in his eyes. Hope started to well up in Rat's chest, urging him to speak. "You wouldn't hurt an unarmed man. It's not honorable, right?" He hesitantly pointed a skinny finger at the Marauder's scars.

That brought a chuckle from the Marauder's chest, and the humanness of the sound eased some of the tension in Rat's muscles. "Haven't had any honor for years now."

"Enough. Back up," said the woman. She hoisted the shovel overhead and positioned it for a downward swing at Rat's face.

Rat Tail braced himself as his bladder let go.

"Wait," said the Marauder. He stood and took the shovel from the woman.

"Yes! Thank you!" squealed Rat.

The Marauder spoke to the woman, "This is beneath you."

Cold wind rustled the scarf wrapped around her neck and sent chills along Rat's exposed skin. "Just because I don't wear the markings doesn't mean I haven't done the killing," she said. "Nothing's beneath me."

"It doesn't have to be that way anymore. I'm here now." He squeezed her elbow.

Rat Tail started to stand. "Thank you, thank you, sir. I'll just go—"

Before he could finish, the Marauder choked up on the shovel, spun gracefully, and with one swift strike against the back of his head, everything went dark for Rat Tail.
