



BLACK
ROSE

ARLO Z. GRAVES

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SAMPLE CHAPTER

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CHAPTER I

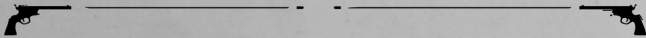
Two types of men wear spurs. One for broncos or to keep a green horse in line. The other wears his spurs because they're loud.

The man in black walks down the center aisle of the train car. A scattering of passengers read or watch the blinding wash of Nevada barrel past the windows. They glance to the man, then back to their business. They recognize the eight-pointed star on his belt and try to ignore him.

The man's leather duster whispers against the seats as he walks. A strong nose, a square jaw, dark hair, and skin tanned deep by the sun. His eyes glint in the shadow of his wide-brimmed hat. The corner of his mouth creases as if he holds a stone of sour alum on his tongue.

One or two people slide closer to the windows as he passes them by.

The man in black keeps walking, each step italicized by the musical chime of his spurs. The far end of the train car knows he'll be there soon.



Geist Warden Gabriel Valasquez boarded the train after it left the station, following the scent of silver. He pauses, now mid-car, to observe the breakneck pace of the train, as the chalky glare of the landscape flashes by. Wind buffets the train car, rocking it. He glances back toward the engine. It has been twenty-four years since Bucephalus Awakened, and riding on trains still sets Gabriel on edge. He wonders how many trips

BLACK ROSE

this train has left before it needs to be put down. He wonders how well the engineers keep count.

At the very end of the car, a young man huddles in his seat. He faces a door overlooking the retreating tracks, watching Joshua trees vanish into the distance. Little more than a boy with a scruff of sand hair and sweating pink cheeks, he keeps his eyes focused forward as the jingle of Gabriel's spurs approach.

The sour scowl deepens the lines beside Gabriel's mouth. He does not smell the silver so much as taste it when in proximity. He traces his tongue over his teeth, tasting the nearness of silver like a pit viper tastes the body heat of a mouse.

"This seat taken?" asks Gabriel, sliding in and resting the toe of his boot on the wall before the boy can answer.

"No sir," mutters the boy.

"Where you headed?" asks Gabriel.

"Home." The boy swallows, and Gabriel can hear his tongue sticking inside his mouth.

Gabriel observes the boy's worn, rumpled clothes, dust baked into the fibers despite a recent washing—he can smell the lye soap. Healing scabs on his hands and bruised wrists, a physical confrontation. And, most pressing, most forward facing: the heavy, acrid taste of silver.

The way the boy sits, hunched a little, left forearm tucked to his vest, Gabriel estimates the wound to be in the meat of the shoulder. Not in the bone or nerve-dense underarm. How long since the initial infection?

Slung against Gabriel's side, Malice, his Remington shotgun, settles in her harness; a subtle warning to be careful. Be alert. Do not underestimate the boy. The silver changes a man.

"Home is? Where?" prompts Gabriel, hoping for a glance from the boy.

"Moapa Valley," replies the boy. He slides his eyes sideways to Gabriel.

A glint sparks in the boy's pale eyes, a momentary snag of light. Someone who does not know what to look for would never see it. Gabriel

ARLO Z. GRAVES

knows exactly what to look for. He estimates the Fading infection is no more than a week old, but untreated. The boy's infection stems from a small portion of silver, likely a scratch.

But if the Fading was an accident, why hide? Why forego treatment? Perhaps the boy could not afford the price. The Fading can be slowed but not stopped, and it comes with a lifetime of treatments.

There are also the bounties. Untreated Faded rack up a pretty penny. The little bit of silver in his blood puts a price on the boy's head, and there is no guarantee he'll get brought in by a Geist Warden. Even then, a Geist Warden won't be a promise of safety. Not everyone can tell the degree of a Fading infection as well as Gabriel.

Gabriel...

Gabriel's thoughts fragment at the sound of his name. His posture stiffens and he glances over his shoulder. The sparse passengers attend to their own business, deliberately looking anywhere other than at him or the boy.

Gabriel... whispers the voice on the nape of his neck, raising the hairs there. The voice inflects his name like his father used to, the way no one has said it since he took his vows as Geist Warden. *Gabriel...*

It is the silver speaking, he knows. But silver only speaks if it borrows soul...

Sweat breaks out on Gabriel's palms, down his back, even as a chill falls over him like a downdraft.

Gabriel Valasquez... whispers the silver.

The bright passenger car feels dim now, a cloud passing over the sun. Silver is given voice by the soul of an Awakened machine. In this case, an Awakened revolver. The best of them. The worst of them.

Gabriel's fingers brush the pistol grips of Malice beneath his coat. The sawed-off shotgun feels warm to his touch, letting him know she is ready, always ready.

Only one gun shoots silver. A revolver. A Colt .45.

BLACK ROSE

Gabriel still remembers her. After twenty-four years, has Gabriel finally found her trail?

“Where were you?” Gabriel asks the boy with the pink, sweating cheeks. “Where did you catch the Fading?”

A hitch of breath, pupils shrinking. “I’m not infected, Sir. Mister Warden.”

Gabriel turns his head just enough to meet the boy’s eye. The boy’s hands squeeze the rough fabric of his trousers and sweat beads on his scruffy upper lip.

Gabriel shifts his position just enough that the dark sheen of Malice’s grips catches the light from the desert. Not that the boy could miss Spite, Grudge, and Sin, each revolver prominent in their holsters. “Next station’s coming up, not too far now. We’re not going to make a scene. We’re going to get off the train and walk together to the Sheriff’s office.”

The boy’s hands tighten. Gabriel can feel his body radiating panicked heat.

“The Fading isn’t a crime. But if you don’t get help for it, it could become as much awfully quick. We’ll get the registry paperwork taken care of. The Sheriff will get you to a doctor. You’re not alone. Lot of folks out here catching the Fading recently. Silver’s been...aggressive.”

The boy says nothing, eyes fixed on the door and the tracks falling away behind the speeding train. Gabriel watches the glaring desert swallow them.

“You don’t want to ignore it,” Gabriel continues. “The silver eats away at you, chews up your soul. Saw a man led to execution once, foaming at the mouth like a rabid dog.” Gabriel remembers the man’s metallic eyes in the midday sun. They had locked on Gabriel’s for a moment, a glint of recognition. Then the blade of the axe fell, and blood spurted over the courtyard of the Church. “Sometimes the course of the illness is slow, sometimes it isn’t. It’s not a hand you want to gamble.”

Spite, the Smith and Wesson Model 3 on Gabriel’s left thigh, clicks.

ARLO Z. GRAVES

The smallest of motions, a single tick of her cylinder. All the warning Gabriel needs to catch the thrust of the knife for his ribs.

One motion stops the stab, a second disarms the boy and pockets the puny knife.

“Don’t,” whispers Gabriel. He can see the desperate gleam in the boy’s eyes and knows he didn’t hear the warning.

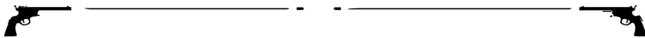
Gabriel lets go. He has no reason to hold the boy, a kid half his age, half his size, no other weapons to speak of or the guns would have let him know. Malice always knows if there are other guns about to come into play.

But Gabriel should have given more credence to the animal desperation in the kid’s eyes, the narrow fear of a steer at slaughter. Because when he lets go, the boy bolts.

Charging from his seat, the boy hits the door shoulder first. A small splintering follows, and a blast of freezing wind from the desert. He tries to jump, but silver or not, the speed of the train snaps his legs out from under him.

Gabriel steps to the door. Bracing a hand on the frame, he holds his hat against the gusts and watches the boy’s body bounce over the steel tracks. The taste of silver vanishes from his mouth.

Gasps, and a small scream or two, come from the passengers. Gabriel pulls the door closed. Giving the door a last look and a weary sigh, he turns and walks the long, narrow path to the engine, spurs jangling all the way.



It takes a train at speed well over a mile to stop, so Gabriel hops off long before, catching himself in a run. His coat casts an endless shadow down the tracks as the frigid winter sun dims on the dusty horizon. The bells on his spurs send a flock of crows spinning into the sky. Reaching the boy, he takes a knee.

Removing his hat, Gabriel props it against a track and turns the boy’s face. His eyes flick open, reflective and metallic now. Even with legs

BLACK ROSE

jutting like snapped twigs and a spine twisted, the silver holds tight to the boy's soul, pinning life into the broken body.

Had the Fading been allowed to spread, the silver might wrench the bones and skin and meat back into their places and the body might simply walk away. Whole, but hollow. Back to its family in the Moapa Valley. The doctors do not yet agree if the uncontrolled Fading can spread through the air, by touch, or even from person to person. They do agree however, that it is not worth the risk.

Gabriel holds the boy's face, so he has little choice but to meet his eyes. A bubble of blood oozes from his lips.

"Why did you jump?" asks Gabriel, even though it doesn't matter at this point.

"Can't afford..." slurs the boy. The focus fades from his eyes. "My family...can't afford it..."

"Where did you get shot?" asks Gabriel.

A wet gurgle as the boy draws breath. "Montgomery Mine..."

A stillness falls around them and the katydids go silent. There is still gold in the mine, gold for the taking. But there is also silver. Most men, idiot enough to try to take it, do not come out again, infected or otherwise.

"In Hell, it's Hell," rasps the boy.

"Hell?"

"Rhyolite..." Blood trickles from the boy's nose. "The Wraith...shot me."

A stillness drags its damp fingers up Gabriel's spine. Word had reached Gabriel of the Wraith of Rhyolite.

The boy's eyes flicker, the shine of life draining from them with the blood in the dust. One hand reaches for Gabriel. For a moment, a metallic gloss coats his fingertips. They lengthen to claws before the silver begins to flake away. "You won't believe me, you won't believe me... It knew my name... It called my name..." The boy jerks once and goes still.

ARLO Z. GRAVES

Opening the boy's shirt, Gabriel finds metallic scabs covering the gunshot wound on his shoulder. He watches as the silver liquifies and trickles out of the wound, back into the earth. The sharp taste of it burns his tongue and the ghost of his own name slips past on the wind.

Gabriel.

Gabriel.

The Warden pulls citrine rosary beads out of his collar. They belonged to Margarita once, a gift for her First Communion. When Gabriel holds each bead in his fingers, he imagines they remember her touch.

“Padre nuestro que estás en los cielos, santificado sea tu nombre, venga tu reyno, hagase tu voluntad, así en la tierra como en el cielo...”

Gabriel's lips recite the prayers as his mind walks the long road to Rhyolite. They say a Wraith haunts Rhyolite. Perhaps it does. Wraith or not, something in the town shot the boy for his trespass. Gabriel knows what shot the boy, who shot him.

The gun that shot him can kill Bucephalus. After twenty-four years, that pistol alone can put the rogue train down.

Gabriel means to pray for the boy, but all he can think of is vengeance. One step closer to vengeance. He will kill Bucephalus. At last, he will kill that monster.

Gabriel will go to Rhyolite; that will be his next stop. Rhyolite, the town that drowned in the silver tide.

Reaching out, Gabriel closes the boy's empty eyes. “I believe you,” he says.

**Step into an Old West where machines come to life and
deadly silver terrorizes the land.**

A West of legends, legacies, and lies.

The Awakening of the rogue train, Bucephalus, took Gabriel's father and sister, and left him infected with silver, an illness that can be controlled but not cured. Gabriel lives for vengeance, but his time is running out.

A chance encounter in the Nevada desert sets Gabriel on the trail of the legendary Colt .45 Buntline Special, the Black Rose. Only silver can kill Bucephalus, and only the Black Rose shoots silver. Gabriel will take the Black Rose for himself, one way or another, and have his revenge.

But the Black Rose has other ideas...



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