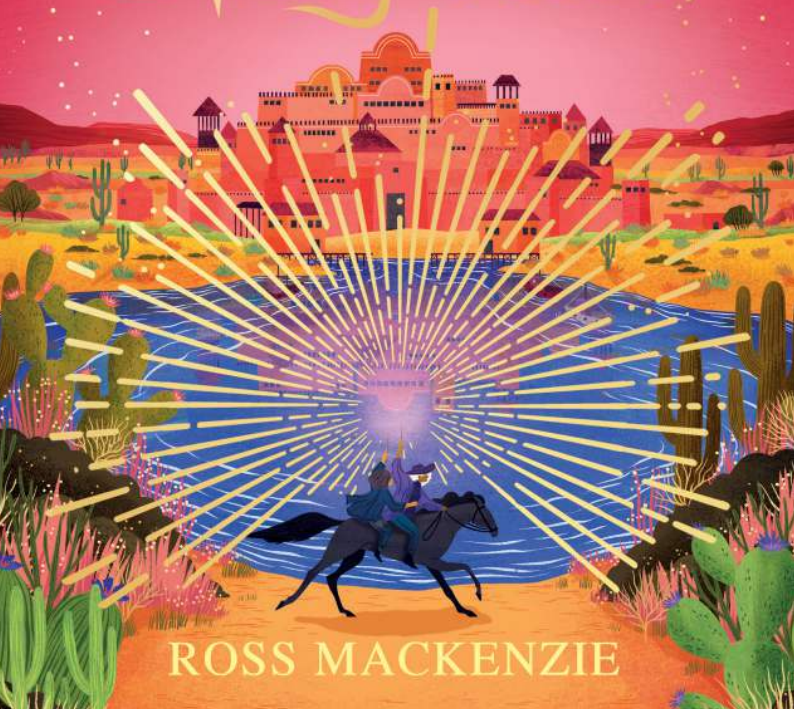


EXCLUSIVE SNEAK PEEK!

# FEAST OF THE EVERNIGHT



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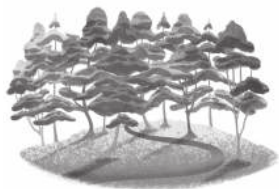
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## MONSTERS

Sam Hushby's gun glistened silver in the light of the moon as he rode his horse along the rocky path from the city of Lake End to the Veil.

His new partner was waiting, just as the orders had said. Sam saw her from a fair distance, ghostly smoke drifting from the cigar in her mouth. When he drew closer, he heard her mutter a curse. By the time he pulled up alongside her she was shaking her head at the sight of him.

She sat high on an ironheart, a huge metal horse, and he could hear the whirr-click of its enchanted clockwork heart. They said that it could run for ever, the horse and the clockwork.

'Well look at you, boy,' she said, flicking the glowing butt of her cigar to the ground. 'All shined up like a new penny. How long you been outta the academy? A week?'

Sam tried to hide the flush in his cheeks. He knew he looked like the textbook rookie, perched on his flesh-and-blood horse; there were no scratches on his gun or his blade,

no scuffs on his leather boots. The leather of his long coat was stiff and it creaked as he rode.

‘Three days,’ he mumbled. ‘Arrived on the sunset steamer.’ He snuck a glance at her. She was beautiful, in an angry kind of way. She shook her head again, tucked a curl of hair back behind her ear.

‘What’s your name again? Hushby?’

‘Yeah. Sam Hushby.’

‘Well, Sam, I’m Annalise. Annalise Franco. Now listen up: I didn’t sign up to become a babysitter, you hear me? If I had wanted to be a nanny, I’d have gone to work for a rich northern family in King’s Haven, like my mama wanted. You do as I say, and only as I say, and we’ll get along just fine.’

Sam’s face flushed. ‘I ain’t a child. And you can’t be more’n twenty years old yourself.’

Annalise leaned forward in her saddle. ‘I’m a deputy, third class. I’m your senior. And I’ve fired my gun at something with a heartbeat. Can you say that? You will address me as ma’am. Clear?’

‘Yes, ma’am.’

She gave him another appraising look. ‘You look frightened half to death, Hushby. Well, don’t worry – you ain’t gonna see too much action out here. Not the sort you’re frightened of anyway.’

‘But it’s the Veil,’ said Sam. ‘I’ve heard . . .’

‘You’ve heard the same stories every recruit’s heard,’ said Annalise. ‘You’ve heard the war of the Old Gods ended

here, right? That the Veil Forest sits on that ancient final battleground.’ Her voice grew quiet and slow and deliberate. ‘You’ve heard the trees grew up from the bones of the fallen, and that their whispering dead voices call out to all sorts of night creatures. You’ve heard the place is a-teemin’ with monsters . . .’ She gave a sudden, loud clap, and Sam almost fell off his horse, making Annalise snort with laughter and cry out, ‘Ha! Well, if that’s true, those monsters must be awful shy, because I ain’t ever seen none of ’em. As far as I’m concerned, the only thing we need to look out for on this trail is bandits. The trees make perfect cover for thieves.’

Before them, the Veil was silent and dark, and the breeze coming from the forest seemed like the breath of a living thing.

‘Come on,’ said Annalise. ‘We’d best get movin’.’

The edge of the forest was darker than the night and stretched as far as the eye could see, running alongside Giant’s Foot Lake, which itself was so huge it reached beyond the horizon. Out in that vast darkness, Sam saw the flickering lamps on fishing boats.

The rangers rode in silence for a time, Sam listening to the click and whirr of the gears and cogs and machinery inside the shining body of Annalise’s ironheart. The border of the Veil was marked by the white-hot flames of dragon-breath lamps. The warm breeze carried a sweet, damp scent from the thick forest.

‘How long you been a southern ranger?’ Sam asked.

‘Since I was fifteen.’

‘You like it?’

She laughed. ‘Most of the time, yeah – when I’m not chasing shadows out here.’

Sam found himself glancing to his right, into the thick black tangle of branches and trunks and thorns. ‘You said you’ve shot your gun at living things?’

Annalise shrugged. ‘The occasional wolf. Shot a bear once – a real beast, he was too. Came a-chargin’ out the shadows like an angry demon. I barely had time to—’ Without warning, she stopped, listening intently.

Deep in the trees, something cracked.

Sam’s eyes grew wide. ‘What was that? Bandits?’

‘Simmer down. Bandits work farther up the trail, away from the city. Probably just a fox caught the scent of your dirty diaper and came to investigate, is all.’

Another snap. This one closer.

Sam made to reach for his gun, but Annalise held up a hand.

‘No. There’s always the chance it’s kids messin’ around. Last thing we need is a rookie planting bullets in some nitwit who’s entered the forest on a stupid dare. You stay here. If I need you, I’ll call you.’

She climbed down effortlessly from the great metal horse, dropping six feet to the ground and landing with barely a sound. Then she walked towards the edge of the forest.

‘Hey!’ she called. ‘Southern rangers. Is there someone in the forest?’

The sound of a snapping branch from somewhere else now, in the nearby thicket.

Sam shifted in his saddle. His heart was a wet hammer in his throat. He considered that maybe he should’ve just stayed in King’s Haven and joined his dad’s crab-fishing crew, like his parents had wanted.

Annalise’s hand was hovering over the grip of her gun. She crept from the rocky trail into the first shadows of the forest. ‘Stop messin’ around, whoever’s in there. Step into the open.’

The night was suddenly filled with a creaking groan, and several loud cracks. A tree toppled over, falling to the ground with a rushing crash, so near Annalise that she had to dive out of the way. She picked herself up, shaken and panting, and this time she did draw her gun.

‘I think maybe I could use that help after all, rookie.’

Sam scrambled from his horse, half fell to the ground and made towards her, unholstering his gun with shaking hands.

‘Wait! Annalise . . . ma’am . . . wait!’

But she had already moved deeper into the Veil, disappearing among the shadowy trees and vines and tangles of thorns.

Sam reached the fallen tree, scouted around. Saw nothing but the gloom of the night forest. ‘Ma’am? Where are you?’

There was no answer. Sam cursed under his breath and took a few steps forward. ‘Ranger? I’ve entered the Veil. Give me a signal to let me know you’re all right!’

Blackness cloaked everything, coiled around him, squeezed him.

Cold fingers caressed his neck, and he gasped and spun around, gun drawn, to find that it had only been a hanging branch.

‘Stop there!’ That was Annalise. Was she talking to *Sam*?

‘Ma’am? Ranger?’

‘I said stop! Don’t come any closer!’

‘Annalise!’

‘Sam?’

A gunshot sent him diving for cover. Then another, and another.

After that, silence.

Sam used a tree to drag himself up with one hand, the other still pointing the gun. His eyes flicked from one shadow to the next. He felt that he was trapped in every nightmare he’d ever had, that if he could only force himself to wake up, he’d be back in his warm bed in King’s Haven.

He moved forward, staying low, darting from tree to tree. Here and there, the moonlight made it through the thick canopy of foliage and shattered in diamond splinters on the forest floor. The air was still as death, heavy with the earthy smells of the forest. And . . . something else.

Sam sniffed.

Blood. There was no mistaking it, that coppery smell. A strange sound began to drift into his ears; it was a wet sound, like slurping, or *sucking* . . .

Sam Hushby took a deep breath, and stepped out from behind the tree.

What he saw would haunt his thoughts for the rest of his life.

Annalise was sprawled on the floor, arms and legs splayed awkwardly. Her face lay in one of those splinters of fallen moonlight, deep brown eyes wide with shock, expression halfway between surprise and terror. She was dead. One side of her neck was ripped wide open. A hunched figure kneeled over her body. It was drinking her blood.

Later, Sam would not remember how long he stood and watched this gruesome sight. He was completely frozen with fear and horror. And then a spark flared in his heart, caught light, and he remembered that he was a southern ranger, and that he had a duty. He raised his gun, and his hand was shaking not only because he was frightened, but because he was angry.

‘Stay very still,’ he said, and he was amazed to find that his voice was strong and calm, ‘and I won’t shoot.’

At his words, the hunched creature stopped feeding. It went very still, the way some animals will go still when they feel that they are in grave danger.

‘Now, I don’t know if you can understand me,’ Sam

went on, trying not to look at Annalise's face, 'but if you can, I want you to stand up very slowly and raise your hands. If you have a weapon, I want you to leave it on the ground.'

The thing did not move.

'Did you hear me?'

It turned its head.

An involuntary scream burst from Sam's throat.

A pale face stared at him from beneath a ragged black hood and a greasy curtain of dark hair. The face – that of a nightmarish young man – looked unfinished, puffy, like dough. The eyes were sunken, and the lips and surrounding waxy skin glistened with smears of fresh blood from Annalise's throat. The young man – not quite a boy, thought Sam – stood up in a slow, lumbering movement. Yet when he lunged, he moved with such quickness that Sam took a panicked step back and missed with a wild pistol shot.

The creature was upon Sam before he could regroup; it took Sam down with shocking force, knocking the gun from his hand, and began scratching and tearing at Sam's face with long, filthy fingernails. Frightened, desperate sounds escaped Sam's mouth, and he fought and kicked and pushed the creature off. He reached for his gun, grabbed it, fired, this time missing by just a whisker. The creature hissed at him and spun away, and Sam fired again, but the thing was lost to the forest shadows.

Sam shambled through the trees, stumbling back out to the trail, his breath coming in heaving gasps. He could taste

his own blood, metallic as it ran from the deep scratches the attacker had left on his face. Sam's thoughts were a spinning blur. He rushed to his horse, hoisted himself into the saddle, and rode off towards the city as fast as he could manage.

An hour later, after Sam had raised the alarm and led a group of fellow rangers back to the forest, they found Annalise's ironheart standing on the trail. When they entered the Veil, however, Annalise's body was gone. The only sign she had been there at all was a spattering of blood on some rocks near the spot where she had been lying.

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