

Hexborn by A.M. Manay

Chapter 1 Excerpt

The dust betrayed them. At the end of a long, dry summer in the Teeth, the hooves of their horses stirred up a cloud that billowed like smoke as they traversed the pass. Shiloh made out a flash of blue that she reckoned must be Lord Blackmine's crest. The Lord of the Teeth's men flew a banner with a white horse on a blue field.

Not that we see it much, given his lordship's lack of interest in defending his lands and his folk.

The spots of red up in front she supposed might be Silas Hatch's household livery: a golden hatchet on blood crimson.

At least the man embraces his infamy.

She'd been packed for weeks, waiting. She could have run. That is what Brother Edmund had urged her to do, from his deathbed . . . Edmund, who had put her in mortal peril long before he'd learned to love her like a daughter.

He had let Shiloh read all his letters to the City, the ones in which he'd begged the Hatchet to find a place for her at the Royal Academy. He had extolled Shiloh's virtue and her gifts at length, hopeful that his favorite old pupil would have mercy on his beloved young one. But at the last, Edmund's fear for her safety had overcome his hopes for her future, and he'd urged the girl to fly away before Hatch's men came stomping up their mountains.

She had considered it. As she'd wept into Edmund's blankets after he'd finally breathed his last, she'd considered it. As she'd watched his wands crumble to dust as they died with him, she'd considered it. As she'd prepared him for burial, as she'd put him in the ground, as she had waited for weeks . . .

And, yet, here she stood, waiting patiently for an infamous, ruthless stranger to spirit her away.

As she watched the cloud of dust move ever closer to her home, she considered her choice one last time. Her options were limited. No other village would ever accept a hexborn stranger, and a bastard foundling at that. Her own had only tolerated her because they'd feared to cross Edmund and her father, and because her skills had made her useful. She was surprised they hadn't tried to drive her out of town since her men had died.

If not a village, then where? Living as a hermit in the woods lacked appeal, not least because her ill health turned every winter into mortal combat. Besides, the Feralfolk were not exactly fond of her. She would be easily caught if she ventured any further west, closer to the City. She had not the money to go abroad, to Estany.

Thus, she waited, and she hoped that all of her work, and all Edmund's plotting, had not been in vain. She wondered how the soldiers would react if her village failed to produce her.

Not well, she thought.

It would serve them right.

Before Hatch and his men entered the village of Smoke Valley, there they were: a half-dozen charred skulls on pikes at the edge of the road leading down from the pass, a warning to outlaws to steer clear of

the settlement. He squinted and held out a gloved hand as if feeling for heat. A muscle in his face twitched.

“Looks like they’re holding their own against the Feralfolk,” Perce observed. The men grunted with approval after they traced superstitious circles on their foreheads.

“She, not they. Magic killed them all,” Hatch countered grimly, before prodding his horse to continue past the macabre display. He heard retching behind him and turned to find Wilar, the young priest sent to replace Edmun, vomiting into the brush.

Hatch shook his head. *These high country folk are going to walk all over him. Let’s hope he doesn’t pass out the first time he sees one of them chop the head from a chicken.*

“A little girl from the Teeth, all by her lonesome, killed six grown men?” Perce asked skeptically. “A girl who hasn’t even been to the Academy yet? Isn’t it more likely this Brother Edmun did them in?”

Hatch fixed his sharp eyes upon his companion. “That is possible, but as poor as his health has been these last years, I find it unlikely. The rumors all say the girl killed them. As to the child’s education, Brother Edmun was the finest sorcerer at the Royal Academy for decades before the war started. He was the youngest headmaster ever appointed. She’ll know more walking through the door than many of our most gifted noblemen know when they finish their studies. You underestimate her at your peril.”

Perce held up his hands in surrender. “Yes, Uncle. It’s just . . . it’s a lot to believe. A hexborn kid that he found in the woods grows up and kills grown Feralfolk without even having a wand to use?”

“She might have used one of his. Stranger things have happened,” Hatch replied. “And my source in South Lake has proved reliable in the past. Evidently, the Feralfolk had just killed her father when the . . . incident . . . occurred. That is certainly plausible motivation.

“You’re not old enough to have been in the war. I saw grieving wizards slaughter entire companies of men after losing a beloved companion on the battlefield; some of them were barely older than this foundling. Power comes in unlikely packages, and rage can unlock any box you try to hide it in.”

“Where do you suppose she even came from?” Perce asked.

“There are a number of possibilities. She was born in the last days of the war. Many of the monks and nuns drafted into the fighting broke their vows in those days. Of those who bore children from such illicit unions, some abandoned or killed them in the hopes of hiding their guilt. Some ran off and became Feralfolk along with their offspring,” Silas explained patiently.

“It is fortunate that the girl was found by someone interested in proving his loyalty. Had she been raised a Feral, or spirited out of the country by the king’s enemies, she could have become a significant problem for the realm. A weapon like that, in hostile hands,” Silas concluded, “could be devastating.”

“Do you think she’ll come quietly, Uncle Silas?”

“I think the chances are good. Edmun claims that she is as devout and patriotic a lass as could be found anywhere. Even if that is an exaggeration, if she were not clever, Edmun would not have bothered with her. He never was an easy man to impress. I doubt he gentled with age,” Silas opined.

“And if she seems like a threat, once we have her in hand?” his nephew asked.

Silas turned his intimidating gaze upon Perce once again. “Then we shall fulfill our duty to kingdom and crown. Why do you suppose King Rischar sent me to handle this myself?”

For an object of near universal fear and loathing, Shiloh found Silas Hatch to be rather unremarkable in appearance. Average in height and build, he was blessed with unblemished skin of warm bronze and a

full head of curly, dark hair. His eyes were his most striking feature; green and sharp, they gave the impression of missing nothing. His clothing, all black as befit a barrister, was well-made and showed no signs of wear. His boots looked fine enough to provoke envy in a lord. The king's patronage was, evidently, lucrative.

The king's man was accompanied by about three dozen soldiers, a nervous young priest in robes of brown, and a young man dressed in City clothes. Shiloh assumed he was another courtier or an assistant of some sort. He had a pampered air about him, and a rather punchable face, she thought.

"My name is Silas Hatch. I am here, in the service of the king, to collect a girl named Shiloh Teethborn," the king's man cried, projecting his voice to be heard by the entire crowd.

Shiloh had thought she'd been prepared to hear those words, but her breath still caught anxiously at the sound of them. Hatch's voice was deep as a mineshaft and promised twice the danger.

The townsfolk gathered in the square said nothing, even surrounded as they were by dozens of armed men. They might have spit and cast signs every time Shiloh walked by, and called her a freak under their breaths on the daily, but she was *their* freak, and they weren't going to rat her out to some rich courtier from the City if they could help it.

"The girl will not be harmed," Hatch assured them, seemingly misreading their spiteful reluctance as actual concern. "She has been offered a place at the Royal Academy of Mages. It is a tremendous honor to be thus invited into royal service."

Still, they said nothing.

"If we cannot locate her, I will order these men to start burning down houses after they tear them apart looking for her," Hatch warned, changing tack. "I would rather not be forced to do you harm."

"That won't be necessary, my lord. I am ready to go," Shiloh replied, stepping out of a shadow next to the Temple, her bag on her shoulder. Her neighbors all traced circles on their foreheads. Their relief at her timely appearance on this particular occasion was, nevertheless, obvious.

Hatch eyed her appraisingly, lingering on her hood. "I am not a lord. I am but a simple barrister, blessed to be in the king's service," he replied before demanding, "Show me your eyes."

She obeyed, stepping into the light and pushing back her hood to reveal the unnaturally colored eyes that were one of the hallmarks of her condition. She squinted in the bright sunlight, her pink irises glowing. Finally, he nodded, seemingly satisfied as to her identity.

"Good. We shall leave immediately. I want to make our last camp before dark."

His gaze fell upon the steel hook that served as Shiloh's left hand.

"First, I shall need to take your weapon," he added.

"Well, master barrister, this isn't a weapon. It's my hand," she calmly replied.

"Nevertheless," Hatch countered, implacable, but his eyes betrayed some sympathy.

Shiloh pressed her lips together until they nearly disappeared. Wordlessly, she turned and began stalking off toward the trees.

"Where do you think you're going?" Hatch demanded.

Shiloh wheeled on him with a glare that could have cut his throat. "I don't know how they behave in the City, but here in the hills, a woman does not disrobe in public. I will return presently. You need not fear."

She straightened her back, lifted her chin, and strode quickly away. A few of the townspeople snickered.

"If you run, they will be punished, and so will you be," Hatch warned loudly. She made no reply.

Silas Hatch waited for the girl to return, his eyes never leaving the spot where she'd crossed into the forest. He was not a man to take chances. He didn't want anything even resembling a weapon on her person, just in case she decided that she liked him about as much as she liked Feralfolk.

He looked over the crowd of villagers. Typical of the Teeth, the child's neighbors were a sullen and suspicious bunch, most of the children lacking shoes, along with a fair number of the adults. Prosperity in the rest of the kingdom of Bryn never quite managed to make it up into the mountains.

It doesn't help that Lord Blackmine has barely set foot above a thousand feet of elevation since King Rischar made him Lord of the Teeth.

It was hard for him to picture Edmun living in this sad place. After all, the priest had been a royal bastard, one of old King Jerroh's many illegitimate spawn. He'd grown up serving at court, surrounded by wealth and education, rising by virtue of his genius to become headmaster of the Academy. Then the war had come . . .

Silas knew that Edmun had been lucky he'd even kept his head, probably because no one had been brave enough to climb the Teeth to take it . . . But to think of him here, with only one student to occupy his brilliant mind, spending his final years literally out in the cold, leading peasants in worship and mediating disputes between shepherds . . . It was appalling.

Silas was curious about the girl who had earned his old mentor's respect. Elder and Babe above, they'd all been terrified of him in their school days. During the war, Silas had thought the man might've been made of stone. And yet, it seemed he had adored this girl, if his letters could be trusted.

Silas felt a twinge of pity. Whether it was for Edmun or for the girl, he couldn't say.

I do hope I won't have to kill her.

Muttering curses, covering her humiliated tears with whispered words of rage, Shiloh's hand shook as she undid the hooks holding her jacket closed beneath her heavy cloak. Cold weather came early to the Teeth, and she was accordingly dressed for a winter journey. Beneath her quilted leather jacket was a sweater of wool, and beneath that a tunic of embroidered linen that fell to her knees. They did not wear corsets in the Teeth; corsets were a vanity for the irreligious of the flatlands.

Her skirt was calf-length, as was the mountain custom, the better to keep it out of the snow and mud. She wore wool leggings beneath, attached to a garter, and knee-high boots. Her boots were starting to look worn, but they were sturdy and whole and would make it through the winter.

Everything she wore was dark in color: warm browns, deep greens, rich blues. Only small children were permitted rowdy reds, yellows, and pastels. No one dressed in purple, of course. The only thing she wore that caught the light was the hook that served as her left hand.

A curl of pale pink hair fell in front of her eyes, and she tucked it impatiently back behind her ear. Like all the women she knew, she covered her hair year-round when outside the home, most often with a hood, but sometimes with a scarf in warm weather.

The leather straps that held her prosthesis buckled beneath her sweater and over her linen, looped beneath the opposite arm, and crossed her upper back before moving down her half-formed left arm, which ended a few inches below the elbow. Her father had taken great pride in crafting her false limbs as

she'd grown, experimenting with different materials and different shapes of hooks, always seeking beauty and improvement. She smiled through her tears, thinking of him.

Shiloh wiped her running nose and then pulled back on her sweater and jacket. She folded the left sleeves and used her teeth to place a long pin to hold them neatly in place, so they wouldn't drag along, empty and forlorn. She pulled her warm cloak back around her, as if its bulk could protect her from feeling small, and she walked back to the man who held her life in his hands.

She shoved her hook toward Hatch, looking determinedly past his left ear. Her eyes were dry; her expression revealed nothing, but she could not hide the red nose that betrayed her earlier tears.

Hatch cleared his throat. "I will take care with it," he assured her. "Do you have any other weapons?" he asked.

Shiloh bent down to pull a knife from her boot and handed it over. A sling and a bag of round pebbles followed from her pocket. Then came a set of knitting needles and a small roll of wool yarn. Laughter rippled through the crowd.

"Is your terror of me now alleviated, Master?" she asked softly. She heard chuckles behind her back.

"You ought to learn to mind your tongue," one of the men retorted, "before I decide to tan your hide. Maybe you ought to concentrate on praying that Master Hatch doesn't lock you in the High Tower for the rest of your miserable life."

"That is sufficient, Perce," Hatch scolded the young man, his tone and eyes both ice cold. He glanced at the now muttering villagers. "Let's get moving. Captain Pike, you may start setting up your garrison on the edge of town. Brother Wilar, the village of Smoke Valley is now yours to govern. Their loyalty to lord, crown, and the Holy Family is now your responsibility. The king is counting on you both."

The captain nodded smartly. The priest squared his narrow shoulders and tried to look resolute.

"A garrison? We'd be glad of some protection from the Feralfolk; Gods know we've lost souls to them enough, but our town is too poor to house and feed a whole garrison," a village elder protested. "Winter is on the way. There's been a drought. A few men, sure, but three dozen? We'll starve."

Hatch shook his head almost sympathetically. "The orders come from the Earl of Blackmine and from your king. It is out of my hands." The villagers shuffled anxiously, eying the men and grabbing hold of their daughters.

"You may wish to buy some furs from them before we leave, sir," Shiloh advised softly. "It's going to snow tomorrow, and none of you look to be dressed for it."

"Are ya daft, girlie?" one of the guards asked. "It's barely autumn."

Shiloh held Hatch's eyes but said nothing more. If he chose not to believe her, it was his funeral.

Hatch sighed. "All right, Miss Teethborn, tell me with whom I must haggle."

Hatch knelt to help Shiloh mount his horse. She didn't weigh more than a bundle of twigs. At least she had decent shoes, and her skirt was loose enough to accommodate her riding astride. Her father had been a smith with a reputation for skill and fair dealing, according to one of his sources. She'd have been more financially comfortable than her neighbors, he supposed.

He could feel her tension when he swung his leg over to settle behind her. *Frightened and brave.* To his surprise, she didn't turn around once as they left her home behind them. Perhaps she had already said her goodbyes. Perhaps there was no one left to whom she would wish to say them.

Silas thought back to the day he'd left his own home behind, headed for the City. He'd been thrilled to leave the monastery to make his fortune at court. He'd felt some fear as well, of course, and some shame for his poverty. But watching that dock fade into the distance had been one of the happiest moments of his life.

A drop of water fell onto one of Hatch's leather gloves. He looked up, searching for clouds in the clear blue sky, then realized that the splash had been a silent tear from his passenger. He considered offering some words of comfort, but he decided that she might not welcome such an acknowledgment. She didn't strike him as the kind of girl who would wish to show weakness to a stranger. Perhaps she hadn't yet realized that tears could be a woman's weapon.

She remained silent as they made their way. Whether this was Edmun's influence, her own turn of mind, or pain at her departure, Silas could not say. He wondered how she would adapt to the girls at court, with their ceaseless chatter and ringing laughter.

Of course, they may well not deign to speak to her. If she is lucky, she'll be novel enough to gain a little popularity, at least among the bastards and the lesser gentry. The lords know courtiers are prone to boredom, having so little actual work to do.

He did not imagine that the king's new wife would be interested in having an Unclean maid in waiting, and one unskilled in the entertainments of court at that.

We'll have to find something for her to do when she isn't at study. Perhaps one of the tutors can use her help with something. She is probably a diligent worker, given how demanding a master Edmun always was. The library can always use some tending, or the Temple, or the gardens. Assuming she is physically strong enough for such work.

Now, her health or lack thereof . . . that was a topic of great interest to Hatch. As a student of dark magic, and a creature with a naturally morbid temperament, he had read a great deal about the effect a mother's curses could have on an unborn child. He'd had occasion, over the years, to examine a few such unfortunate children; unhappily, they had already died before he'd gotten his hands on them.

The autopsies had proved less enlightening than he had hoped. Two of them had been born dead, or so the mothers had plausibly claimed at trial. The third had obviously been strangled in the family's unsuccessful effort to hide his birth. They'd hanged the mother at a crossroads, as he recalled.

He'd only met a live one once, during his years abroad, where they were not so fussy about such accidents. The girl's parents had been disinclined to allow him to examine the child in detail, alas. All of the specimens had shared hair and eyes of bright colors along with significant anatomical abnormalities. The live one had also possessed an accumulation of scars.

Hatch had pressed Edmun for details about Shiloh's condition, to little avail. The priest had admitted that the child had suffered from bouts of affliction from time to time, illnesses whose symptoms matched the results of certain hexes that had been popular during the war. However, Edmun had offered little beyond the fact that the girl had come close to death on more than one occasion.

She should present a fascinating case study, when the time comes.

Assuming, of course, that no misfortune intervenes.