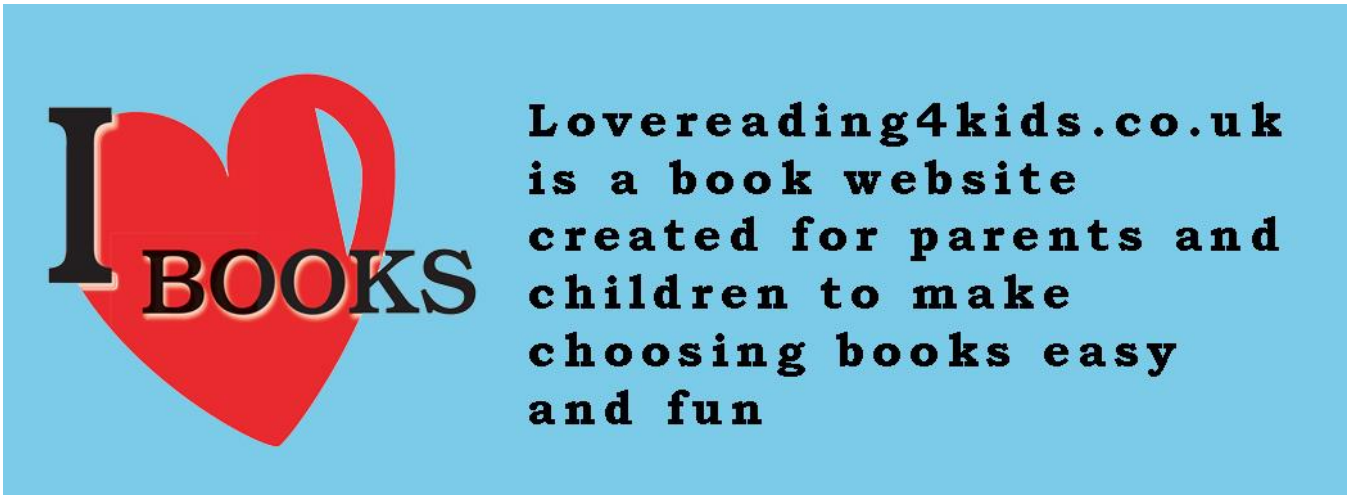


Opening extract from

The Hawkweed Prophecy

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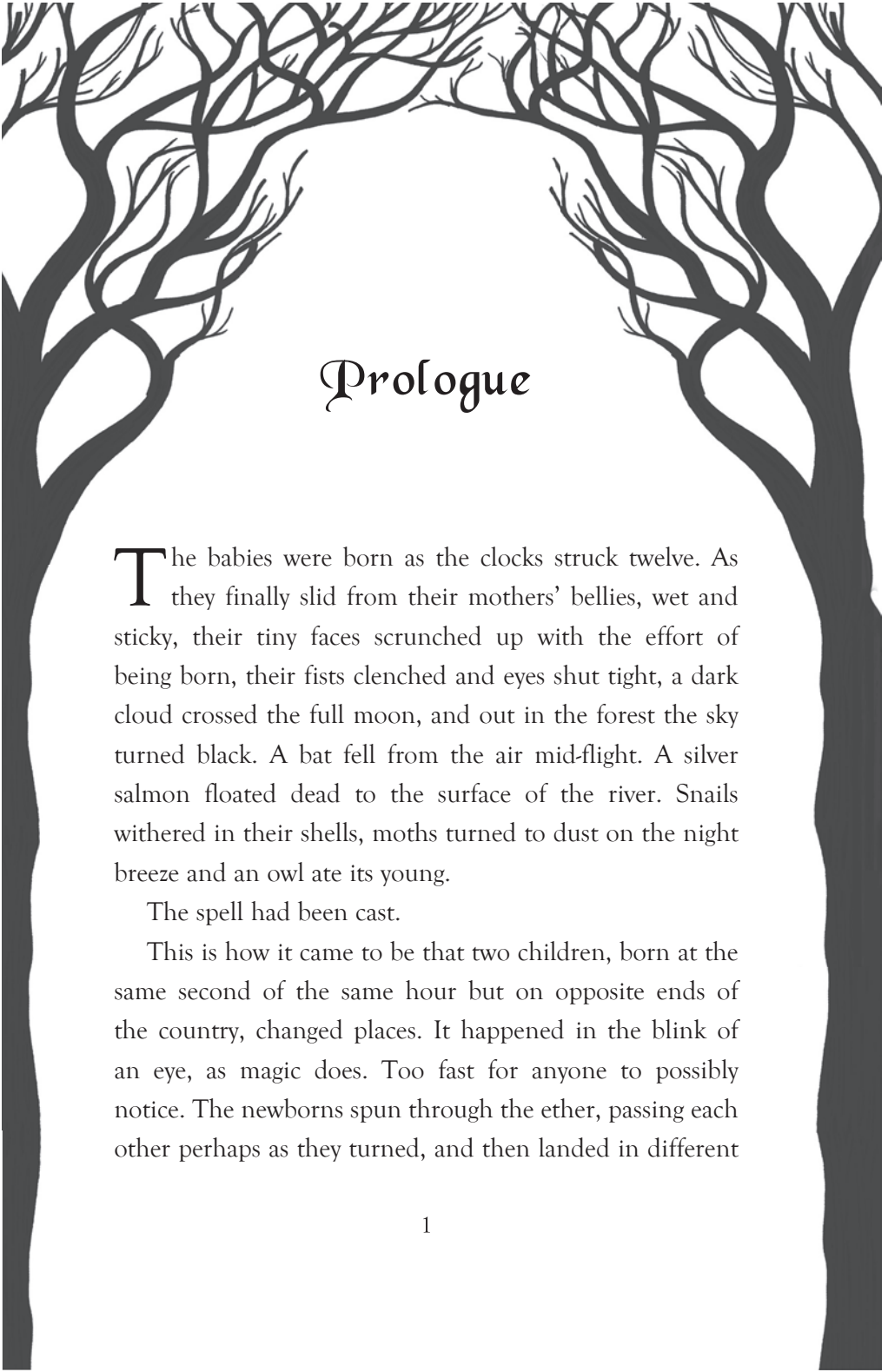
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Prologue

The babies were born as the clocks struck twelve. As they finally slid from their mothers' bellies, wet and sticky, their tiny faces scrunched up with the effort of being born, their fists clenched and eyes shut tight, a dark cloud crossed the full moon, and out in the forest the sky turned black. A bat fell from the air mid-flight. A silver salmon floated dead to the surface of the river. Snails withered in their shells, moths turned to dust on the night breeze and an owl ate its young.

The spell had been cast.

This is how it came to be that two children, born at the same second of the same hour but on opposite ends of the country, changed places. It happened in the blink of an eye, as magic does. Too fast for anyone to possibly notice. The newborns spun through the ether, passing each other perhaps as they turned, and then landed in different

arms being handed to a different mother.

And when the two mothers – one at home on an old, sagging mattress, the other in a sterile hospital delivery room – first set eyes on those babies, they simply had no idea that it was not their own flesh and blood they were putting to their breast. They gazed at their bloodied, wrinkled infants and saw perfection. Miraculously, they recognised features and family traits that existed only in their imaginations.

'She has my mother's nose!'

'My sister's chin!'

'Your smile!'

A whole winter they'd been waiting patiently to see their child, and now they savoured every detail. The bond had been made many months before. The love was already there. There was no chance of suspicion or doubt.

The witch, Raven Hawkweed, knew this. She'd been brewing and scheming and summoning every wicked thought and fear and feeling from deep inside her since the day her younger sister, Charlock, had told the coven that she was expecting a daughter. Until that day, Charlock had been cursed with boys.

No witch from their coven had sons. Not now, not ever. They stilled those babes in their wombs with a poison. The few that survived until birthing day were so weak and feeble that more than a few hours in the brightness

and noise of life proved too much for them to bear. They closed their eyes and slipped back into the familiar darkness until they breathed no more.

But this time it was a girl growing inside Charlock.

Charlock had trembled as she told Raven. She had tugged on Raven's sleeve, steering her away from the others. Her eyes were bright and her cheeks so red that Raven had put a hand to Charlock's forehead.

'You look sick. Are you tired?' Raven fretted, as she pulled down the skin beneath Charlock's eyes to peer into them.

'I'm well, Raven. I'm more than well.' Charlock's voice was almost breathless.

'Stick out your tongue,' Raven commanded.

Charlock opened her mouth to reply and Raven's fingers instantly pulled out her sister's tongue to examine it. Her eyes narrowed. Her forehead wrinkled.

'You're pregnant?'

Charlock nodded.

With a slight shake of the head, Raven turned away. 'I'll prepare the mixture.'

'No ... no poison.' Charlock had spoken so softly, almost a whisper, and yet the words thundered in Raven's head. She stopped in her tracks, her whole being focusing on Charlock's next words. 'Not this time.'

Raven felt Charlock's smile. She could feel the warmth

of it on her back and she knew what it meant.

'It's a girl?'

'It is.'

The certainty hit Raven like a blow. A blow so hard that her teeth bit into her lip and she tasted blood. She pretended to busy herself at the washing tub. A drop of blood fell and mingled with the dirty water.

'A *girl*, Raven. At last. I wanted to tell you first. I knew how happy you'd be.'

Her sister had always been a simpleton but, for the first time ever, Raven hated her for it.

'You are happy, aren't you?' Charlock asked.

Raven wiped the blood from her mouth onto her hand as she turned. 'How could I not be?'

Charlock beamed. 'I know – it's a surprise. But think, you'll have a niece and Sorrel will have a cousin.'

Spells were whirring inside Raven's head, the kind that bubble with rage and desperation, and she had to use her breath to quell them. This was her sister. The sister she had cared for since she was born, to whom she had sung and told stories and taught to read. The sister who was so much softer than she, so weak that the edges of life knocked and bruised her – and it had been Raven's job to mop up the tears. The tiny heartbeat of a niece she could hate, but not her sister. She loved Charlock, perhaps more than herself.

But not more than Sorrel.

Sorrel was five. A tall girl, all bones and angles, the spitting image of her mother – and Raven's only child. Having endured pregnancy and birth once, Raven had determined never to try it again. One daughter was enough for her. Sorrel was all she needed.

From behind, mother and daughter were often mistaken for each other. Sorrel had inherited Raven's crooked walk and hunched shoulders. They had the same long hair too, which they plaited down their backs each night and again every morning. When they walked, the plaits swung behind them like tails. Sorrel liked to chew hers, but the ends collected in her throat and it took Raven's strongest brew to disintegrate the ball of hair that gathered there. Both wished their colouring was bold and dark like the witches in storybooks. But their hair was the dull grey-brown of mice fur, not black as coal, so it was only by length that they could distinguish it.

When her daughter was but a babe, Raven had presumed that Sorrel would stand out, that everyone would be stunned by her talent and ability. It hadn't taken long for Raven to realise that Sorrel's powers were not much more than ordinary. Taking a big gulp, she had swallowed the rancid disappointment, let it cramp in her stomach and then vomited it into the compost heap by the old oak tree. As soon as she straightened, she decided to take matters into

her own hands. What nature had denied her, nurture would supply. Sorrel would have to *learn* to be brilliant.

For Raven's daughter was destined for greatness.

Or so the prophecy told.

It was centuries before that the die had been cast and the prophecy made – back in the day when witches flitted through the sky on whittled, wooden brooms and boiled their potions in heavy iron pots; and when, if discovered, they were burnt at the stake on bonfires, or tied to chairs and drowned in lakes and rivers. The coven that had the revelation was a hunted, persecuted bunch of spinsters and widows. But under the cover of darkness, out in the thick of the trees, together they decreed that the Hawkweed sisters, in three hundred and three years hence, would deliver a queen who would govern all of her kind.

The bones of those witches now lay lost in the earth under thorny brambles and hedges, their skulls full of sand under the water, their burnt ashes long since swept to the corners of the land ... but their words lived on. The Hawkweed prediction passed from generation to generation until Raven and Charlock, as little girls at their mother's feet, heard it for themselves.

One of their daughters would be queen.

Raven could still remember the thrill that had shivered through her when she first learnt of the prophecy. The pulse pumped in her wrists and neck and the blood flooded

through her veins. She was only six but suddenly she felt taller, older. Never before had she looked forward or back, but had just been content to exist in the present. Now, suddenly, her future was mapped out before her and she already saw, far in the distance, signs with directions for her to read. Charlock had been too young to fully understand their mother's words. She had looked at Raven with questioning eyes, wanting her older sister to explain, just as she had explained that cobwebs come from spiders, feathers from birds and honey from bees. But this time Raven didn't want to help Charlock. She didn't want to discuss what their mother had told them. She didn't ever want to talk about it. Her hopes and fears stirred inside her with the same steady rhythm with which her mother stirred her bubbling pots. She couldn't let them splash and spill.

As the two sisters grew, Charlock overtaking Raven in height but not in speed of mind or skill, Raven brushed off Charlock's questions just as she might crumbs from the table.

'Will she wear a crown?'

'Who?' asked Raven, pretending not to know what her sister was talking about.

'Our daughter.'

Charlock was yet to comprehend what Raven had grasped immediately – that it could no longer be 'we' or 'us' or 'our'. The ropey knots of sisterhood had been unravelled and lay

in coils around them, ready to trip them up.

'Will she have a castle?'

Under her breath, Raven muttered a spell and Charlock started to sneeze – once, twice, thrice. Raven handed her a cloth to wipe her nose. 'Mother says you have to forage this evening,' she lied. 'But wash your hands after picking the nightshade,' she added, to soften the falsehood.

'Aren't you going to come with me?' asked Charlock in a voice scratched with disappointment.

'I have to study.'

'You're always studying,' Charlock complained, turning away to mask her hurt.

It was true that Raven had turned from a wild, ungovernable child into the most industrious student. The coven was always remarking on her hard work. She had by far surpassed the other girls in her knowledge of plants and poisons, spells and curses. She read every book and text that she could get her hands on, turning the pages well into the night. She drew diagrams of insects and reptiles, learning through her own experiments which eye of which newt and which leg of toad would most enhance her spells. She knew which berry made your stomach ache so bad that your bowels broke and emptied themselves down your legs, and which caused rashes that itched and burned for days. There were weeds that made your eyes redden and water; toadstools that made the hair fall from your head; and

snake venom that would take so long to kill you that you'd wish for someone to put you out of your writhing misery.

The more Raven learnt, the less popular she became with the rest of the young sisters. More often than not, her success in lessons showed up their failings. She always had the right answer, and the other girls would roll their eyes and mumble curses that she would have to block and spin back at them. Without intention, Raven became a loner. She found herself an outcast from the circle of friends who laughed and played tricks and gossiped wickedly about the coven. Only Charlock wanted to spend time with her, and Charlock was the last person that Raven wanted for company. For all Raven's studies were for one purpose: to ensure her daughter would become queen. And to ensure that she herself became so strong and powerful that she could guarantee it. Without arousing any suspicion, Raven knew she must eliminate all other contenders. Killing Charlock would be the most obvious solution but, despite it all, she still felt a deep and ceaseless love for her sibling. Besides, murder was the way of the chaffs – the common people – crude and without magic. This was not the sisters' way and Raven was determined to be the best of witches – the mother of a queen no less. She would concoct a spell that would astound any witch with its power and complexity. For witches judged not the act but the method.

So Raven dedicated her youth to finding the magic that would stop Charlock giving birth to a girl. And it had worked. A drop of tincture measured to the exact millilitre and warmed to just the right degree, then slipped into Charlock's tea, together with the right curse incanted at the desired second when the moon was at its slightest slither, and all of Charlock's babies became boys.

But then the sickness struck. It came one winter when the ground was hard as stone and the grass crunched and crackled with a frost so cruel that the worms froze like sticks then snapped in two. The coven told themselves that it had been sent by the South, retaliation for a slight made against the eldest of that clan. For thirteen days, they were plagued. Boils oozed with pus and blood trickled from their ears. Then it was over as suddenly as it began. Not a scab or a scar to prove it had even happened. Every woman and girl was just as they had been, as if they had never been sick at all.

Apart from Charlock.

She was pregnant – and this time it was a girl.

The rest of the coven celebrated the news. As with every prospective daughter, they lay Charlock down on the wooden slats and, with her bare belly exposed, formed a circle around her. They bent their heads over her, young and aged, handsome and ugly, all united by the same purpose.

Raven held the ring, suspended from a string, inches from Charlock's womb. The ring, though centuries old, had been polished so it shone like new. It was the wedding ring of some hapless peasant girl who had thought to cheat a grey-haired, toothless peddler woman and who had paid for it with her fingers.

The witches started to chant. The whisper became a murmur, became a din. The faces stopped smiling and were now distorted by their fierce intensity. The sets of eyes were like opaque glass, the mouths gaping open like wounds.

Then the ring began to move. Only slightly. First this way. Then that. Backwards and forwards, as if undecided. Charlock shut her eyes. Her body was tense with anticipation. The chanting was now a deafening percussion. 'A GIRL! A GIRL! A GIRL!'

Raven hoped against hope. She said the words but willed them with all her might to be a falsehood. Then the ring seemed to make up its mind and it spun. Slowly at first. Then faster and faster till you could hardly see it spiral it was so quick. Suddenly the thread snapped. The ring dropped, landing on Charlock's belly, scalding her, hot as fire. The chanting stopped immediately. The room was silent. Raven's mind and body hardened, both as still as stone.

Charlock opened her eyes and smiled.

