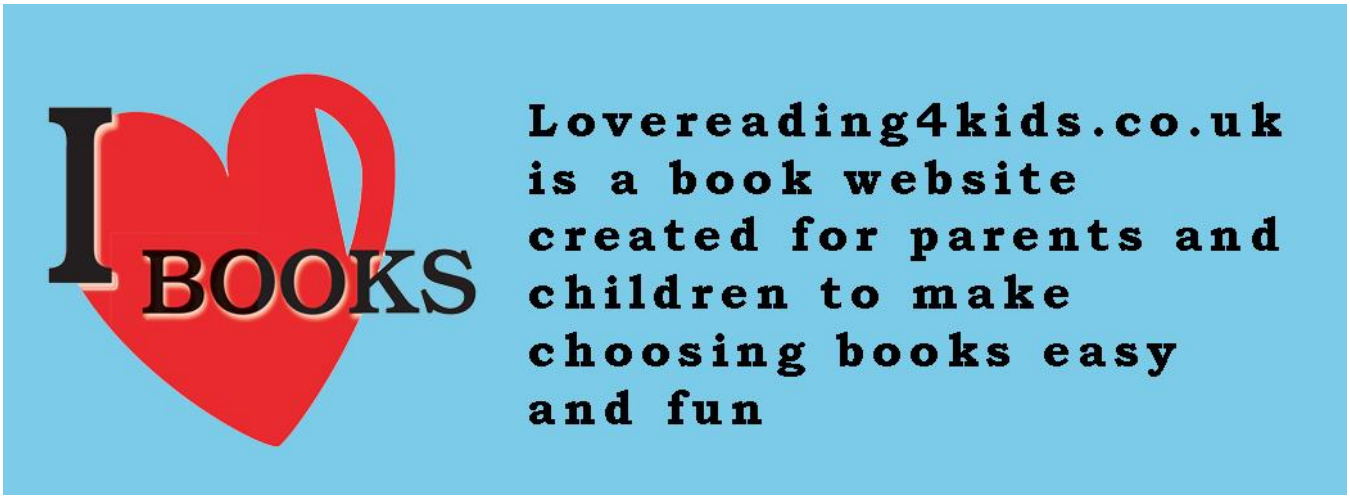



Opening extract from

# The Hawkweed Legacy

Written by

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# Prologue

She had been sleeping for months now, stirring only rarely to nibble on nuts and seeds. During her hibernation, she had hardly woken from the dreams that had drifted her so far from the darkness of the hole in which she lay. But today she felt a shift in the temperature and a warmth on her back. It was spring.

The woman uncurled her drowsy limbs and crawled out from the roots of the tree. The colours were so vivid they hurt her eyes. She blinked, struggling to adjust to the light of day. When she had taken to her earthy bed, it had been winter and nature had slumbered with her, suspending all production. But now she could see grasses growing green and tall, and yellow daffodils summoning the sun. The beginnings of blue bathed the sky. The blackthorns blossomed white and she knew that the cherry trees would follow soon with their pinks. The woman stretched her arms up high, then wide, relishing the space,

lifting herself up on to her tiptoes and tilting her face to the vast expanse above. She breathed in the fresh air, long and deep, exhaling the dank soil scent of the burrow that had entered her lungs and lodged there.

Betony was her name – this she could remember, though nothing else of her younger life. She sensed she had not been born here. She imagined some place far afield, another darker wood, but she could not picture any family there. Someone must have taught her the words that came to her lips and the knowledge that filled her mind. How to forage and plant, to store and cook, to survive. She hadn't always been alone, that was for sure. Yet for seventeen years, she had lived this way. On the banks of rivers, in the thickets, pulling her barrow of seeds and cuttings, avoiding the people who stared at her and kept their distance.

The lake was cold, its waters refreshing to drink but bracing to wash with. Betony shivered, her skin prickling as she stepped into the shallows. A speckled fish slid silently around her, its scales slippery on her skin.

'Hello, old friend,' she croaked, sounding like the toads who were leaping on to lily pads to watch through bulbous eyes.

Then, from the lake, appeared another familiar face, this time with black nose, long teeth and whiskers. It rolled on to its back and waited for her to tickle its tummy.

'Otter,' she smiled, reaching out a hand to stroke its silken fur. 'Now let me bathe, for I must stink.'

The otter flipped and dived under the water as she began to splash herself – her legs, her face, under her arms, her belly. Her hands lingered there. This was where she felt it most – the emptiness. Not in her heart or her mind but in her middle. She felt a tear upon her cheek. Then another. She didn't know why she was crying. She just knew she had good reason. For her tears refused to be forgotten. As they hit the water, they turned to stony beads of white that fell and glinted from the riverbed below.



# Poppy

As a bird, there had been little thought, just instinct. No yesterdays and no tomorrows. No prophecies from the past. No visions of the future. Just the present. And it was liberating – existing in the moment, this second and only this. Poppy Hawkweed had transformed into a swallow to seek freedom and, up there, in the endless skies, she had found it.

Her tiny wings had carried her thousands of miles, so much further than her human legs had ever taken her. No map – just the setting sun and the night stars and the earth's pull. No company – the other swallows had left in the autumn while the weather was still mild. Without her magic speeding her on, protecting her, she would have failed. She was certain of that. First the bitter cold of winter, then the blistering heat of the desert to contend with, as well as the constant threat of hungry predators and thunderous storms. Poppy was amazed that, each year, so many birds survived.

Their migration felt far more marvellous than anything she might conjure.

The further she had flown, the more the endeavour had taken over all her mind and all her body. The world was vast and she a mere puny ball of feathers, knocked by gusts and tossed by gales and yet still flying on. So many people below – chaffs or witches, she could not tell. They looked the same from up high. So many forests, rivers, mountains, fields, so many homes to stop and live in. But Poppy had kept on going to where the other swallows had finished their journey some weeks before. Here, in Africa.

Beyond the smudge of cities and smatterings of smaller towns stretched a seemingly boundless area of sloping hills and plains where animals, large and small, roamed wild. This land was unscarred by fences or electricity pylons, roads or rail tracks. There was hardly any trace of man at all. Zebras were bending their necks to sun-bleached grass. Beyond them, a vast herd of wildebeest ran, dust rising from their hooves like smoke. And in the distance, a river curved like a reel of ribbon dropped from above.

Weak with exhaustion, Poppy began her descent. For a moment, she felt she might tumble. *I can't die now*, she thought. *I've come so far. And I don't know who I am yet.* Then a breeze, warm and welcoming, came to usher her in, carrying her downwards to meet this new earth.



The African insects tasted rich and spicy and Poppy feasted on them. Then she slept and in her dreams she became human again, with ridiculously long limbs and stubby nails, and strangely bare skin with no feathers to adorn it. Poppy writhed with the pain of this transformation, her nerve endings screaming out their protest at the assault as every vein and sinew was twisted, ripped and elongated out of all proportion.

As her body squirmed, her mind turned with it, back to the past, back to the memories she had flown miles to forget. She was Poppy Hooper again, the baby who'd been swapped for another, the child who had grown up in the wrong home with the wrong mother, the girl who'd never fitted in. Then, in her delirium, she saw Ember, sweet Ember, who had grown up in her place, in the coven in the forest, part of the Northern clan. The sky above Ember turned black, the earth froze to white and there stood Raven Hawkweed, their aunt, their enemy. She had cast the spell to swap them. Her pointed face became a beak, above it beady eyes. Poppy cried out in her sleep and Raven's body crumpled to the snow, a corpse that couldn't hurt them any more. Into the forest Poppy drifted, through the trees, until the ground sloped sharply downwards to a dell. There was Ember smiling at her, welcoming her in. At her side was Leo, his eyes dark with desire, his skin like gold. He didn't know that he had witch blood in his veins. He didn't know that Poppy loved him back. She had left him with Ember,

to have a better life, away from witchcraft, away from her.

Poppy's body curled into a ball. The witches said she was a queen but she didn't know how to be that. And she wasn't a chaff any more. Nor a daughter, or a girlfriend, or a friend. *Who am I?* thundered the question in her head.

When Poppy awoke, she saw a boy squatting down on the red earth. He was staring at her, the whites of his eyes and his teeth shining like stars from the night of his skin. She tried to speak but no voice emerged. The boy reached out and she flinched away from him, but it was the feathers scattered around her that he was after. He grabbed a handful and ran. Poppy watched him disappear through the yellow grasses into the haze where the light shimmered in the heat. It was only after he was gone that she realised she was naked. Too tired to care, she shut her eyes and hoped that rest might ease her aching bones.

'Dumela.' The word rumbled low in Poppy's ears. 'Dumela.' It came again.

Something prodded her gently in her side. She lifted her lids just a fraction to glance at it. A dark, gnarled stick, held by a withered, crooked hand. She raised her eyes further. Above her stood a tiny woman with a white nest of hair upon a head kept aloft by a neck coiled with wooden beads. The woman smiled so wide that it filled her whole face.

'Dumela,' she said. Poppy blinked and the woman translated for her in stilted English. 'He-llo.'

Next to her the boy, her visitor from earlier, nodded his head in greeting. 'You are bird girl, yes?' encouraged the boy. 'You are shaman?'

'I ... I don't know.'

'Witch?' asked the old lady, the smile remaining just as broad.

Poppy blinked. She didn't want to answer this. She didn't want to think of it. Luckily, the boy spoke again.

'You must come with us,' he said.

He handed Poppy a piece of cloth and her cheeks burned as she once again realised her nakedness. Awkward and slow in her cumbersomely human form, Poppy got to her knees and tried to dress herself. It was then that she noticed the stone wrapped tightly to her ankle. So long had it been tied there, through all weather, across whole continents, that she no longer felt its touch. The stone had become a part of her, just as Leo had.

'It's the heart stone,' he had told her, and for a moment, Poppy let herself remember how his voice had turned soft and shy and how his cheeks had flushed as he watched for her reaction to his gift.

Poppy pulled the tunic down to cover herself.

'Thank you,' she muttered without looking at him.

'You must come with us,' the boy repeated. 'We must keep you safe.'

'From whom?' she asked instantly, her eyes scanning the landscape.

In the distance, she saw a herd of zebras grazing and a group of giraffes nibbling at treetops. There was not another human being in sight.

'You are witch,' the woman smiled, holding out her hand, helping Poppy to her feet. 'We wait many days for you.' Then she handed Poppy her stick and Poppy leant on it gratefully. 'You feel better soon.'



Their dwelling was circular, like a clay anthill rounding out of the earth itself. On the top was a small chimney; beneath it, in the centre of the room, a fire. For Poppy, it was like sitting in an oven, her flesh slowly baking. The sweat dribbled from her hair down the sides of her cheeks like warm rain and ran in sticky rivulets from under her arms. The boy gave her cup after cup of an acrid tea to drink. The liquid flowed in and out of her. The air was smoky and she was desperate to make a dash for the door and the freshness of outside, but the ache in her muscles and joints was easing, and the old lady simply kept nodding for her to drink some more.

It was only in the evening, when the sun was sinking, that Poppy was allowed out. As she got up, she realised with a sudden surge of joy that she no longer felt any pain from her transformation. She was as light on her feet as the impalas springing through the bush beyond. The boy brought her an earthenware bowl of stew. Poppy

ate ravenously, unaware until now of quite how hungry she was.

'Slowly,' the boy told her, gesturing with his hand, and Poppy began to chew each mouthful, savouring the flavours.

'What's your name?' she asked him between bites.

'Teko,' he told her.

'I'm Poppy.' She scraped the last of the gravy from her bowl, then put it down next to her. Ants, bigger than any she'd seen before, immediately started scaling the sides.

'Your grandmother – is she ... what did you call it ... a shaman?'

Teko gestured with his hands. 'Hmnn, she is more medicine-maker. And she is my mother's grandmother.'

Poppy felt her eyes widen. 'Your great-grandmother?'

'Yes, she is great,' smiled Teko. 'She is a hundred years old.'

'Where is your mother?'

'She is in the city. My father too. Where is yours?'

Poppy drew a circle in the dust with her toe. She tried hard not to picture Charlock's face and the worry that she knew would feature there. As she answered, she quickly rubbed out the circle with toes streaked brown. 'She's far. Across the seas.'

'You have run away from home?' Teko asked.

Poppy stared into the setting sun, liking how it made everything blur. 'I don't really have a home.'

In the glimmering light, Poppy saw the shape of Ember

and missed her friend so badly that she had to take a breath to steady herself. Teko looked at her, then offered her a fruit she didn't recognise.

'You are here now,' he said and Poppy nodded and felt the relief radiate out of her and mingle with the sun's rays.

'I'm here,' she echoed and the shape of Ember faded.

Poppy bit into the fruit and the juices ran down her arms.

'Mma says you are great too,' Teko told her. 'A great shaman. A queen.'

Poppy felt the smile leave her face. 'She said that?'

'She said we must look after you.'

'Keep me safe?' Poppy remembered. Teko nodded. 'Safe from whom?'

'We do not know. Mma can only feel the danger.'

Poppy shrugged. 'Well, I'm used to danger. And I'm not a queen. Not any more.'

A sour taste filled her mouth. The taste of a lie, she realised, and she took another bite of the fruit, hoping the sweetness might soften it.



The next morning, Poppy walked with Teko to fetch water from the lake. They passed a herd of antelope, their horns rising so elegantly from their pointed heads. She stopped to take in the view, relishing how utterly different it was to any of the towns she'd lived in with their thousands of

inhabitants, and to the darkness of the forest where the coven were.

'I love it here,' she said suddenly, noting afterwards how unlike her it was to keep her feelings so unchecked.

'That's good,' said Teko, his face lighting up with pleasure.

When they bent down at the water's edge, Teko showed her how to tilt the jugs to fill them. Further in some elephants were wading and she could feel the weight of them in the ripple of the water against her hands.

'Leo,' said Teko suddenly. 'Does this mean lion?'

Poppy paused for a second, then carried on filling the jug. 'It can do,' she replied.

'You spoke of this lion in your sleep.'

Poppy winced. 'Did I?' she murmured. 'I'm sorry.'

Teko took the water jug from her and placed it next to his. 'Come with me,' he said, grabbing her hand so she couldn't refuse.

They walked for some time through grasses that came to their waists and then up a steep hillside. After a while, Teko's hand became a comfort. There was none of the sensation or sparks she'd had with Leo, just warmth.

Suddenly, Teko crouched down, pulling Poppy with him. Keeping low, they crawled up the lip of the hill until they reached the top. Poppy stared out in amazement across a valley that seemed to hold all of creation within it. There were too many different animals and birds to count. Teko

pointed to a baobab tree. Beneath it, a huge lion, crowned with a sunflower mane, sat surveying his domain. The carcass of a zebra was laid out before him like an offering to a king. Poppy gasped and Teko put a finger to his lips. The lion turned his head in their direction, his eyes searching, before he became bored and yawned lazily with a gaping jaw and giant tongue. Teko looked at Poppy and grinned.

'Leo,' he said. And Poppy smiled back, the tears pricking behind her eyes.

'Thank you,' she mouthed.

The lion dipped his head to his meal and Teko tugged at Poppy's arm to leave but she shook her head. Riveted, she watched the lion feed. If she really concentrated, she could hear its teeth crunching into bone, masticating on muscle. Then she glimpsed the zebra's eye staring expressionless back at her and, into her mind, another image stole. Another eye, green this time, with a black dot above the pupil. It was her own eye, blank and lifeless but within her own pale face, her hair splayed out on a bed of blue. Not blue, bluebells, Poppy realised. And then the vision vanished. The face she had seen wasn't old and wrinkled. It was young. It was her face now.

'Poppy?' came Teko's voice. 'We should go, yes?'

'Just a second,' Poppy mumbled, unable to look at him.

She shut her eyes and took a deep breath. It was just an imagining, nothing more. A morbid, teenage notion. But she had experienced a vision once before – a brief glimpse

into the future – and that had come true. Ember and Leo hand in hand. A couple. Even now it hurt to think of it. But this … surely this must be different?

'I'm sorry,' Teko whispered, breaking the silence. 'I thought you will like him.'

'I did,' Poppy said, turning her face to look at him. 'I do.' She tried to smile. 'I don't know what came over me. It's silly.'

'You were frightened,' Teko told her innocently.

As she remembered the danger that he and Mma had warned of, her body started shaking and nothing could stop it. Not the walk back, not Mma's tea, not even sleep.



Poppy woke the next morning to Mma's ancient hand on her shoulder. She knew from Mma's expression that something had happened. She moved fast, hurrying outside. There, golden against the reds of the sunrise, were the cats. Lions, cheetahs, leopards and caracals, padding back and forth, their heavy paws soft upon the dusty dirt, come in their prides – come to visit her. *Cats*, she thought, like the ones she'd left back home. The same shaped head, soft fur, triangular nose and whiskers. The same striking eyes and padded paws and nails. Only these creatures were so much greater and more magnificent. Poppy felt like dropping to her knees at such an awesome sight. Instead, she nodded her head slowly, formally, in acknowledgement. All at once,

her trembling stopped. She felt the magic flutter within her, then fly through her body and out through her fingers and toes. She turned to Teko and Mma.

'Witch.' She smiled proudly and held up her hands to show them the power sparkling from them.

'You *are* a queen,' Teko whispered.

'I'm just me,' she said, but for the first time the word 'queen' didn't scare her.

'Still we must protect you,' Mma cautioned, glancing at Teko.

Poppy shook her head. 'There's no need. I can look after myself. I always have.'

