Helping your children choose books they will love

I ♥ reading

Lovereading4kids.co.uk is a book website created for parents and children to make choosing books easy and fun

Opening extract from

Wereworld: Shadow of the Hawk

Written by

Curtis Jobling

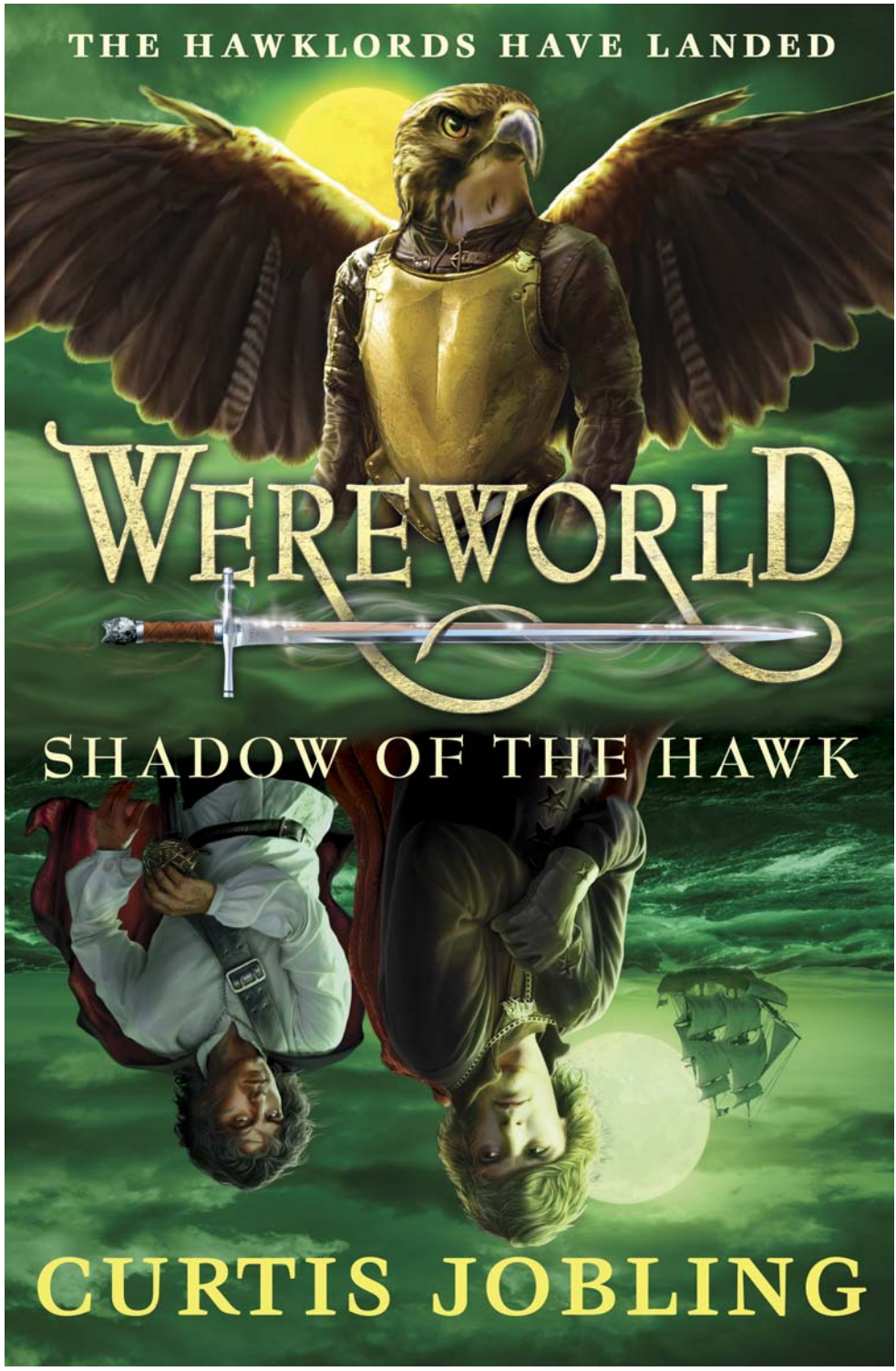
Published by

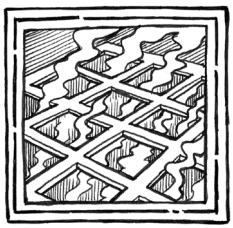
Puffin Books

All Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk


THE HAWKLORDS HAVE LANDED
WEREWORLD
SHADOW OF THE HAWK
CURTIS JOBLING



3

The Black Staircase

The drivers cracked their whips, urging the procession of wagons and horses onwards and away from the curving cliff edge. The wagon wheels found their way into the ancient ruts worn into the dark rock road by centuries of traffic. To the people of the island the circling road was known as the Black Staircase, running all the way from the harbour below, through the city, around the mountainous island.

Drew pushed his face against the bamboo bars, looking down the cliff as the wagon he travelled in drove ever higher. There were six of them in the jail wagon, each equally miserable. No doubt Drew's fellow slaves had been picked up by Kesslar on his travels, and each bore the scars of the journey. Battered and beaten, the men were weary with exhaustion and the long time spent in the hold of the slave ship. The Goatlord Kesslar travelled at the front of the procession in a

sumptuous caravan, his ill-gotten gains of blood, flesh and bone following miserably behind.

The Black Staircase had risen from the docks through the strange city, past bazaars and merchants' stalls, before winding through the town houses higher up. Far below in the harbour Drew spied the *Banshee*, bobbing lazily in the crystal clear water, her cargo delivered.

At the highest point of the Black Staircase there was no sign of vegetation, the slopes of the mountain were covered with rocks and boulders as dark as jet. The road levelled out briefly as they reached the summit, turning in toward the mountain's centre. Here the wagons passed through a tall, white gate-house. Lightly armoured guards stood to either side, inspecting the carts and their slaves as they trundled past. The people of the island reminded Drew of Djogo, Kesslar's captain, tall and rangy with dark, leathery skin. *Perhaps this is where the brute hails from?*

The wagons were moving downhill now into a bowl-shaped valley that marked the mountain's summit, a palace sitting at its centre. An outer wall curved round the grand palace structure, echoing the concentric circles of the Black Staircase. Terracotta rooftops dipped in towards its centre, the courtyard beyond not yet visible on the approach. Towers thrust up from the outer wall towards the clouds, their brickwork an ornate tapestry of black and white banded marble. The heat was oppressive; Drew felt it roll over him in waves. Occasional jets of steam broke through fissures in the ground on either side of the road, and hot gases belched violently from the earth. He held his hand to his mouth, gagging at a familiar scent in the air.

Drew's mind flew back to Hector's communing with the dead. He blanched as he thought back to his dear friend's dabbling in necromancy, speaking with the souls of the departed. The Boarlord had used a foul-smelling yellow powder, tracing out warding symbols and binding circles as part of the ritual. Despite the heat, Drew shivered. He remembered the undead playthings of Vankaskan in Cape Gala, and how it had cost him his hand. With a manacle fastened tight around his hand and a crowd of monsters hungry for his flesh, the choice between life and death had been a torturous one to make. When he closed his eyes, he could imagine the hand was still connected, could feel the flexing of ghostly fingertips. It was going to take some getting used to. Drew stared at his wrist, fully healed now, a scarred stump of flesh and bone. He sniffed at the air once again.

'Brimstone,' he said, as much to himself as to anyone who might listen.

'That's right,' said another slave, leaning against the bars on the opposite side of the wagon. 'Sulphur. What else would you expect from a volcano?'

'Welcome to Scoria!'

If the heat outdoors was stifling, inside the palace it was unbearable. Guards had led the shackled slaves into the colossal building, past crowds of onlookers into a huge, circular hall. Stone tables ringed the room, littered with food from the previous night's feasting. Flies buzzed over discarded pieces of meat, adding to the grim atmosphere. Torches burned along the wall, while a large metal grille covered the centre of the

chamber, riveted in place to the polished basalt floor. A steady flow of steam emerged through the grating, turning the chamber into a sauna. A metal brazier, stacked with red-hot coals, stood beside the grille, long-handled brands buried deep within the glowing embers. Drew winced as he spied it, imagining what they might be used for.

The man who addressed the slaves rose from a tall marble chair. He was wearing no more than a loincloth, gold jewellery and a wide, slick smile. Three similarly garbed figures stood behind his throne, cloaked in shadow and steam. There wasn't a trace of hair on the speaker's body – the man didn't even have eyebrows, giving his face a permanently surprised look. His oiled skin glistened in the torchlight, reflecting different colours in the glow of the flames. Drew squinted, convinced his eyes were playing tricks on him. The man's flesh seemed to shimmer, first grey and then green, with a brief flash of blue before darkening once more.

Count Kesslar finally appeared from the rear of the group of slaves, accompanied by the Werehawk Shah, and made his way directly to the almost-naked man. Djogo stood beside Drew, his one good eye fixed upon the young Wolflord. Kesslar and the bald, barely-dressed man embraced, shaking hands heartily and laughing all the while.

'My dear Kesslar,' said the man in the loincloth. 'By the Wyrms, you've brought the enchanting Lady Shah with you, too! How is the Goat treating you, my lady?' He licked his lips, reaching a hand towards her. She backed away a step.

'Well enough,' she said pointedly. 'I trust you have kept *your* end of our bargain, Ignus?'

The bald man nodded, stroking his fingers over his smooth, oily chest. 'Like family, Shah. Like family.'

Drew didn't understand a word of what they were discussing, but paid attention nonetheless. He needed to return to Lyssia, to his friends and his people, so any information he could glean might hasten his escape. Shah was a strange one, staying close to Kesslar at all times. *Odd*, thought Drew, *considering the dark looks she always throws him*. He had his suspicions about her. The Werehawk had been the one who'd rescued him from certain death at the hands of the Catlords and carried him through the air, out of Cape Gala, bloodied and broken, only for him to wake up as Kesslar's prisoner. The notion made his head spin.

Ignus turned to Kesslar, pulling his eyes away from Shah. 'I feared you weren't returning. I was ready to send your remaining stock into the arena to celebrate your demise!'

'I wouldn't make it that easy for you, Ignus,' said the Goatlord. 'I need every one of those souls in the Furnace, especially our brother therians. I've brought them a *true* champion to fight!'

'Really?' said Ignus, walking toward the crowd of slaves. 'Bring them forward so I may better see.'

The guards lowered their spears, jabbing at the slaves, forcing them to walk across the metal grille. Drew grimaced at the feel of hot iron against his feet, but he pushed the pain to the back of his mind. All those hours training to be a warrior under the watchful eye of Manfred back in Buck House, were standing the young Wolflord in good stead.

He walked forward and stood before the man in the loincloth.

'So you're Kesslar's prize specimen, then?' said Ignus. Drew

turned, looking back to the others who all struggled, stumbling, none daring to cross the hot metal floor. He stared back at Ignus, getting a good look at their oily host.

Ignus was maybe into his eighth decade. His neck looked deformed, strangely long, and he had a wide mouth with reed thin lips that seemed to stretch almost back to his ears. His eyes were bulbous, pale and honey coloured with misshapen pupils.

Ignus peered down at Drew's arm. Djogo had clapped his stump in a smaller, tighter iron, just to ensure he couldn't slip his handless arm from the manacle.

'He has only one hand, Kesslar,' Ignus said dismissively. 'Damaged goods. You really expect me to buy this one from you? This boy probably can't even wipe his own rear; he's not fit for purpose, let alone my ludus. I only take the *best* in my gladiatorial school.'

Drew's ears pricked up at mention of Ignus's ludus: *A gladiatorial school*, he wondered. *Is this connected to the Furnace that Kesslar and his cronies keep mentioning?*

'I'd be careful what you say, Ignus,' said the Goatlord, stroking his short, forked beard. 'There's more than one weapon a therian can use in battle, as well you know. This one bites!'

Ignus chortled. 'Go on then, Kesslar. Tell me what beast you've brought to Scoria, and I'll tell you what he's worth.'

'No, Ignus,' said Kesslar, wandering over to one of the tables and picking up a rotten piece of meat. He batted the flies away and collapsed into a marble chair, tearing into the rancid hunk with splintered yellow teeth. 'You guess what he is and I'll tell you what you're going to pay me.'

Ignus glanced at his companions who hovered behind his throne. The three other men were also bald, bug-eyed and smooth-skinned, no doubt, Drew thought, relatives of the ugly fellow. Ignus returned his gaze to Drew, looking him up and down, standing back to better judge him.

'From Lyssia?'

Kesslar nodded, devouring the meat.

'The north, I'd say. A Ramlord?'

Kesslar spat on the ground. The spittle hit the metal grille, sizzling where it landed.

'The next Ram I see I'll fleece and gut. I've had all I can stomach from my pathetic cousins.'

'A Wereboar then?'

'Too much brawn,' laughed Kesslar. 'Look at his physique. He's built for the kill.'

'Some kind of Doglord?'

'Bigger.'

'A Bearlord!' exclaimed Ignus, clapping his hands together triumphantly. 'Have you brought me a Bearlord?'

'You were closer with dog . . .'

Ignus turned slowly, looking at Drew with a fresh, inquisitive gaze. He stepped closer, their faces inches apart. Ignus's bulbous eyes narrowed and his thin lips peeled back, his foul breath washing over Drew.

'Wolf?'

Kesslar began a slow handclap from the marble chair.

Ignus spun round. 'I don't believe you!' he hissed. 'The Wolves are dead. Wergar was the last, the Lion made sure of that!'

'He missed one of them in his eagerness to put them to the sword!'

'You're lying!'

'He's telling the truth,' snapped Shah. 'You could take the silver collar off and see for yourself, if you're so confident.'

Djogo reached into a pouch at his hip, withdrawing a short hammer and flat-headed chisel, used by the captain to remove his slaves' collars. He held them out toward Ignus. The Lord of Scoria shook his head, sneering at the tall slaver.

'I see you're still making use of this beast,' he said to Kesslar.

'Djogo? Of course. One of the finest deals we ever made.'

'He's not bitten your hand yet as he did mine?'

'No, he's been dutiful to the last.'

Ignus puffed his chest out, oiled skin rippling as he suddenly grew in size. Djogo, for all his height, took a faltering step back as Ignus towered over him. He was threatening to change, intimidating Djogo, keeping the beast in check. *Interesting*, thought Drew. *Another therianthrope – but what kind?*

'I should have fed you to the volcano when I had the chance,' said Ignus. He dismissed the slaver with a shove, sending Djogo stumbling backwards.

'If you break him, you pay for him,' joked Kesslar. Shah kept her attention fixed on Drew, as Ignus rounded on him once more.

'Your master says you're a Werewolf?'

'He's not my master,' said Drew, after a long pause.

Ignus laughed. 'Very confident for one who is destined for the Furnace, aren't you?'

'If I knew what the Furnace was I might tremble for you.'

'You'll tremble soon enough,' said Ignus. He looked Drew over again like a piece of meat, licking his lips. The swollen eyes blinked quickly. He called back to Kesslar.

'How much then?'

'Remember what you paid for Stamm? Double it!'

Ignus spluttered. 'You're not serious?'

'Oh I am, Ignus. You wouldn't *believe* the lengths I've gone to, bringing this Werelord to Scoria. He's the most wanted therian in Lyssia, Bast too, no doubt, now the Catlords are after him. He's the last of the Grey Wolves – disputed heir to the throne of Westland!'

Kesslar rose and joined Ignus. He offered an open palm to the Lord of Scoria. Ignus moved to take it, snatching at thin air as Kesslar withdrew it for a moment. He stroked his short beard, nodding to himself and giving Drew a sly look.

'Twice Stamm's fee? No, I'm cheating myself.' He held out his hand once more. 'Make it *three* times, and we have a deal!'

Ignus took the Goatlord's palm and shook it firmly. 'You'll cheat me out of house and home, Kesslar, if I'm not careful.'

The slave trader grinned as one of Ignus's guards walked to the brazier of coals. Two more took hold of Drew by his shoulders, holding him in a tight grip as the guard stoked the embers.

'You'll need the silver one for the Wolf,' said Ignus, as the man withdrew a metal poker from the coals. Drew recognized the glowing silver symbol on the end of the device, a triangle within a circle; the same as the one Djogo bore on his shoulder. His rage rose, the thought of these villains scarring his

flesh – the last of the Grey Wolves and rightful king of Westland – almost bringing on the change. To shapeshift now, with a collar about his throat, would prove fatal. He struggled as the guard advanced. A punch to his stomach from one of the soldiers sent him wheezing to the metal-grilled floor as the men held him still and the brand seared his flesh.

Drew's scream could be heard far below in the harbour.