

"As brilliant as the finest stained glass." *Sinead O'Hart*

Exclusive
sneak
peek!

Glassheart

Through the glass, the magic is waiting...

KATHARINE
ORTON

Glassheart

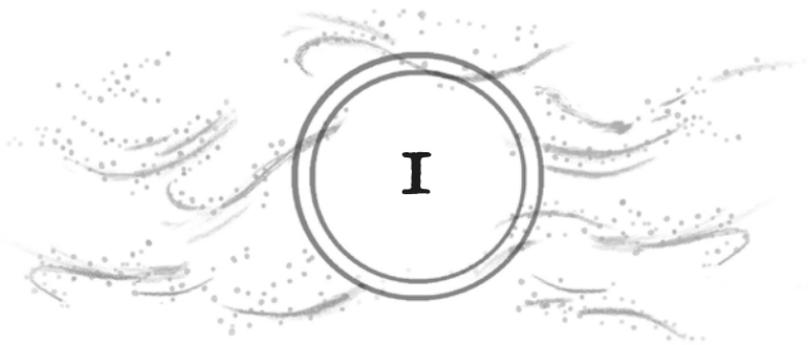


KATHARINE
ORTON



WALKER
BOOKS

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IN THE COLD, STILL HOURS OF NIGHT, WHEN shadows swathed the wildwoods and most people were in bed, footsteps creaked on the landing near Nona's door. She froze at her desk – pencil poised over her sketchbook, heart in mouth. Her wide, dark eyes glittered by the light of a faltering candle. This was what she'd been waiting for. The reason she'd stayed awake all this time. Yet the sound still chilled her blood. She held her breath. Listened.

A fox shrieked from the Wiltshire wilds beyond her window – its cry so human and eerie that it made Nona's skin prickle. There'd been foxes in London where she was born and had lived, of course, but there they were more likely to rattle the dustbins than to howl in that terrible, mournful way. That's not what she was listening for, though.

The floorboards creaked again. Closer this time.

Nona snuffed out the candle with quick fingertips. The wick hissed and sent up the sharp smell of sulphur. Putting out lights was ingrained in her from the Blitz. It had been her task, aged seven, to run around the flat with her brother, plunging it into darkness at the first notes of the air-raid siren; the hum of a bomber's engine. Even in the years since the war ended, dimming lights whenever she heard something strange or out of place was more of a reflex than ever. Now it included any sudden sound – the backfire of a motorbike; yelling voices.

Or footsteps.

The candle's glow had brought out the gold in Nona's wild brown hair. Now the moonlight picked out the silver of the slim scar that ran down the length of one cheek.

A slender shadow slipped under the crack below her bedroom door. It grew bigger. Sliding across the unvarnished boards from one side to the other. *Uncle Antoni, is that you?* she wanted to call out. But the words stuck fast in her throat, frozen there. She was almost certain it was him. *Almost*. And yet the tread sounded different somehow. Heavier. What if it was an intruder, come to rob their downstairs workshop? A shiver ran through her at the thought. The lead

and solder they kept down there, for the making of stained-glass windows, would fetch a good price on the black market.

Nona decided it was best to stay quiet. If she called out and it was Uncle Antoni, she might never discover why he'd been creeping around in the night so often lately.

The shadow withdrew across Nona's floor and the footsteps passed her room, heading towards the stairs. That meant the person must have come from Uncle's room just across the landing. So it had to be him. Didn't it? She channelled a slow, deep breath to calm her nerves. Besides, why would a thief be up *here*, where the lead and solder wasn't?

Nona tucked the pencil behind one ear, eased herself silently out of her chair and snuck towards the door. She was quick and light on her feet and knew where to tread to avoid making a noise. Of all the kids from her old building, she'd been the best at tag whenever they'd played it on the common. Practically unbeatable – aside from her brother, of course. But that cramped building in London, and all those kids, were gone now. Everyone was. Except for Nona.

Once at her bedroom door, Nona timed the opening of it with the steady thud and creak of footfall. She peered into the dimly lit hallway. Moonlight

shone through the small, curtainless window above the stairs, made from a hotchpotch of glass offcuts. It cast the bare floorboards in reds, blues and greens. Even though Uncle Antoni had thrown it together from scraps, it was still beautiful. As if he couldn't help but be a master craftsman, even when using the broken bits that other people threw away.

The light shifted. A figure slid beneath the colours. The sudden movement lodged the seed of a cry in Nona's throat, but it was Uncle all right. The rich shades glided over his skin, his clothes, before he came out the other side just at the foot of the stairs. He turned a corner, and was out of sight.

Even from the way he walked, all hunched over, Nona could tell he wasn't his usual, breezy self. He could only be in the grip of a dream ... couldn't he?

For as long as Nona had lived with Uncle Antoni, he'd been a terrible sleeper. It was the only time he talked about the war: during nightmares in sleep-laced Polish – his mother tongue – that were loud enough to wake Nona from her own. He'd been known to sleepwalk too, in his bumbling kind of way. Once she'd caught him downstairs in his nightgown, trying to eat a candle. She'd taken it out of his hands and sent him back upstairs to bed. But this? It wasn't the same. He strode with a purpose. A direction.

As if he'd been called – and had no choice but to go.

The thought made her skin prickle. The night before last she was sure she'd heard him speaking to someone. But they lived alone. Just him and Nona.

Her heart pounded as she edged onto the landing. She couldn't get left behind. She couldn't risk him seeing her either. If he did she might never find out what was going on. "Here we go, then," she said to herself, rubbing the goose pimpled skin of one arm. She started down the stairs, treading in unusual places on the boards in the hope of avoiding the creaky spots.

The darkness deepened at the foot of the stairs. The sharp, warm smell of linseed oil flooded Nona's senses. Everything smelled of the thick, golden oil down here, because it was the main ingredient in the cement for their stained-glass window making, to keep the mixture nice and runny. It was one of those scents that seeped into everything and lingered – even and especially on a person's skin.

Outside the wind picked up – moaning through the nearby woods and causing thuds and whistles in the old, draughty house. A flood of coolness stroked the back of Nona's neck as she squinted into the dark, but her eyes hadn't adjusted yet. She couldn't see her uncle now. At all.

Until a lamp flicked on in the tiny, cluttered

painting room – a dozen paces across the length of the workshop. Her uncle was inside it. Already. Any minute he would shut the door. Then Nona wouldn't find out what he was up to.

“Nooo. No, no, no,” she moaned to herself. She'd never make it in time.

Nona set her jaw. She wasn't about to give up yet.

Keeping close to the wall, she made a dash through the dark, straight for the tiny room. The wind moaned again – and the house whistled as if in reply – the sounds flooding her ears as she sprinted. Uncle Antoni shuffled away from the desk lamp he'd lit and turned towards the door. Towards her. She froze on tiptoes, bent at the waist, her arms thrust out for balance. But he stared straight through her, unseeing, and pushed the door slowly to. Nona let out her breath and surged forwards again. The door was closing. The light from inside was soon nothing more than a sliver. Nona reached it the second the light winked out.

She clawed at the jamb but it slipped out of her fingers. The last segment slotted into its frame with a clunk. The key turned in the lock. That was that. She was too late.

Nona clenched her fists and threw back her head in a silent howl of frustration. Then she crouched

down, hugged her knees and thought. She tried not to focus on the darkness around her. Or how frightening Uncle's blank expression had been, how ill – almost trancelike – he'd looked. Or the fact that, if anything happened to him, she'd be completely alone again.

He was the only one who would take her in after the bomb destroyed her home and everyone in it. People in the village had grown tired of giving homes to dirt-ridden children from London by then, what with the earlier wave of evacuees. But Antoni Pilecki did. Perhaps it was his need for an apprentice that had driven him to take in the seven-year-old, as he'd casually told the nosier villagers. Or maybe the real truth was because he knew what it was like to be somewhere new and among strangers. Or because he too had lost everything in the war. His family. His homeland. Later, his ability to fight, when his injury put him out of the air force for good.

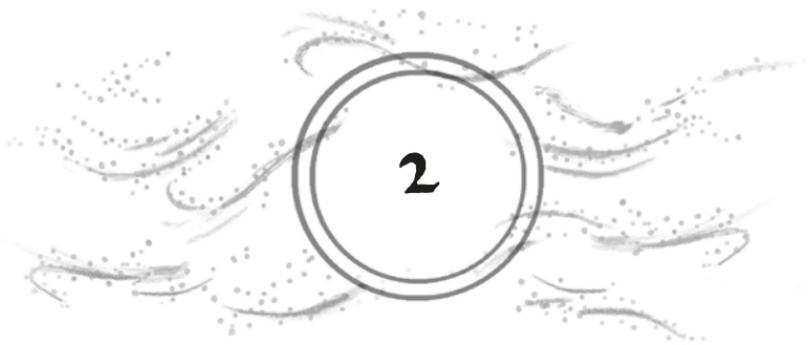
They weren't related, but it didn't matter. There is companionship in loss, and theirs made them as good as family. Nona was eleven now – they'd been inseparable for the last four years. And if Antoni ever decided to return to Poland? Then they would go together, no question. Although that was unlikely, Nona knew. The country had been carved up by the victors of the war: Poland's own allies, including

Britain. A betrayal Nona knew by the twist of his lips any time it came up that he felt bitterly. She could read him now, from the smallest flinch to the ghost of a wink – just as he could read her.

Beyond the door came more shuffling: her uncle moving around. And then his voice – usually warm and calm, now low and dark. Mumbled. Yet apparently in conversation. “Of course. We leave as soon as possible,” she managed to catch. The rest was too hard to hear.

Nona’s stomach flipped. Who could he possibly be speaking to? There wasn’t another soul who lived in the house.





2

DID UNCLE ANTONI HAVE A TELEPHONE IN THERE, one that Nona didn't know about? Or a wireless?

With one ear pressed against the thick wooden door, Nona listened in. Still she couldn't make out what he was saying. Wait. Was that another voice replying to Uncle Antoni? A woman's, soft, smooth and singsong? Nona shuddered. There was something unusual – almost hypnotic – about that other voice. It came in waves – first near, then far. If only she could hear what they were saying. Or at least see inside...

Nona felt her way around the door and found the keyhole. The key blocked it from the other side, but it had a halo of light around it. The lock was old and loose. Perhaps she could nudge the key out somehow and get a glimpse of what was going on...

The pencil she'd tucked behind her ear could be the answer. There ought to be room to fit the sharpened end into the lock and give the butt of that key a good poke. Deftly, she slipped it in and jabbed – hard. The pencil tip made a snapping noise, but the key gave way. It clattered to the floor, on the other side of the door.

The voices stopped.

Nona withdrew the pencil quickly and bit her lip. She had two instincts, both forged in the Blitz: to run, and to hide. Right now she wanted to do both. She hesitated – pulled in opposite directions by curiosity and fear. Seconds passed. No one came to the door. Perhaps – *perhaps* – she'd got away with it.

Guilt twanged inside her. Should she even be listening in at all? This was clearly something Uncle wanted to keep private. There were few things he wouldn't tell her if she asked – and he usually had a good reason when he didn't. Maybe she ought to just trust him this time, as normal?

No. It had gone on long enough. Working on plans in secret. Talking behind locked doors. Not drinking his tea. Nona was his apprentice. She did his paperwork. No job ought to be kept secret from her. He never locked doors. And he always – *always* – drank his tea...

Nona peered through the lock with one eye – and bit her lip so she didn't yell with triumph. Her plan had worked. With a bit of shifting from side to side, Nona could see most of the room.

Her uncle and the other voice mumbled to one another again – more quietly this time. Nona saw Uncle Antoni, surrounded by shelves cluttered with brushes and powdered paints. Perfect faces rendered on pieces of glass stared back at her from the angled painting table in various stages of completion: Uncle's work, and none in the world more beautiful. It wasn't just Nona who thought so either. People sought his skill from all over the country, to restore church windows destroyed in the war. That's what they did now – together.

The illustrated eyes glittered in such a lifelike way it made Nona feel watched. The back of her neck prickled. But besides her uncle and those painted stares, there was no one else to be seen. No telephone or wireless either. Nothing that could have made the sound of that other voice. She strained to see every corner of the room. Surely the owner of the voice must be somewhere, made by something...

A movement at the corner of Nona's eye drew her attention back to the glass faces. She'd been wrong, she realized. Not all of them were painted on. One of

them shifted, moved. It was a *reflection*. Of a woman with honey-coloured hair. A woman who wasn't there. Nona's whole body turned icy cold. She scanned the room again wildly. It wasn't possible – there had to be someone making that reflection. But there wasn't.

Nona's stomach turned. Everything inside her screamed that she was being watched.

With dread, Nona's eye returned to the reflection. The woman stared out of the glass, straight at her – as if she could see Nona through the solid wood door – and smiled. Her eyes gleamed. For long seconds, Nona couldn't move or breathe. She could barely do anything except stare back into those eyes.

Then the woman tipped her head and moved. A curl of hair, an embroidered sleeve, flashed across each of the glass pieces. She *had* to be coming for the door.

Nona turned on her heel and pelted for the stairs. She rushed up them, no longer worried about being heard. When she got to the landing, she dived through her bedroom door and shut it tight.

She sat with her back against the door, panting. Her head thrummed with dizzying blood. It couldn't have been real. It just *couldn't*.

Then again, it was hardly the first time she'd seen things that others didn't. People who were there one minute and disappeared the next. Animals

with human-looking eyes that stopped to watch her. Strange trails of lights glinting in the woods at the back of their home, like pinpricks of dancing dust weaving through the trees – as if leading somewhere. Yet they would usually end at stones or trees and go no further. She didn't dwell on any of this – and she certainly never told anyone. It wouldn't do to admit these things. She knew that. How the village gossips would use such information didn't bear thinking about. They saw her as an outsider as it was.

Nona waited: until Uncle's footsteps – still oddly heavy – clumped across the landing, pausing outside Nona's door. She held her breath, watching his shifting shadow on the floorboards around her. Would he come in? Laugh, and explain it was all a big misunderstanding? Instead his shadow slipped away. Uncle carried on to his room.

There his to-ing and fro-ing reverberated through the walls, joining with the other sounds of the house: the creaks, the whistle of draughts. Would he ever go to sleep? And could the strange woman still be there, lurking around downstairs?

What stuck in Nona's mind was how familiar the woman had looked. And the way she'd smiled at Nona through the door ... it was as if she knew her. Who was she? The questions swirled inside Nona

like a whirlwind. An image flashed through her panicked mind, just as it always did when she was overwhelmed: her old home in London. A thousand glass shards frozen in the air around her, glinting like jewels. Their curtains in shreds. That feeling, that she was inside a box about to be crushed. The smell of burning.

It was her one and only memory of the night the bomb hit. She'd relived it a hundred times. She couldn't stand to relive it again now.

Nona leaped up and crossed the floor. She snatched a small object from its usual place propped against her windowpane and clutched it to her chest. Soon, the thundering of her pulse, her breathing, began to slow, and she opened her hands to peek at the object.

Inside was a piece of rounded, pinkish-red glass. Typical, Nona thought, that some children would have a doll or a teddy for comfort, while she had this. A half-heart in shape, its edges were smoothed with age, its one sharp point filed off for her by Uncle Antoni. It was thick in some places, thinner in others, which Nona knew meant it was likely to have been hand-rolled rather than made by machine. That and its colour made it even more special. Pink and red glass got its colour from the most precious metal of all: gold.

But this piece was dear to Nona for another reason. It had once been a part of her old home – fixed into a Victorian upper window panel. She used to love how its glow would track across the room as the sun crossed the sky each day, falling first across the tablecloth, then the armchair, settling on her mother’s face.

Everything else had been destroyed. Everyone killed – including her mother and brother. But that’s what you could expect from a direct hit in an air raid. It was a miracle Nona had survived at all. In fact, no one could really explain how.

This piece of glass had been in her hand when the wardens came. In her shock she must have picked it up, though she had no recollection of doing that. Or of any of it at all.

Even now, the details were hazy. The doctor who’d put the stitches in the cut on her cheek had called it “shock”. Muttered that her memories would return in time, and she’d likely wish they hadn’t. But they never had.

Nona turned the piece of glass over in her hands, felt its half-heart shape, rubbed its cool surface with her thumb. She wished she understood why all this had brought her right back to that night in the Blitz.

Although the sharp edges of most glass filled

Nona with terror, this piece never failed to soothe her. Tiredness washed over her as she turned it. At a certain angle you could see a tiny crack inside the glass. One that hadn't yet reached the edges, but was a weakness nonetheless. It would eventually break the piece in two, Nona knew. The more she turned it, the warmer it felt, and the more that warmth moved through her fingers and up into her bones. When she closed her eyes she could see its reddish-pink glow on the inside of her eyelids, as if standing once again under its light.

From the glow emerged shapes. Images. The woman she'd seen in Uncle's painting room – the way she'd looked right at Nona and smiled. A glimpse of a long road, and trees rushing past. Then a great expanse of wild, rolling land. A flash of something dark beyond it that made her momentarily catch her breath.

It wasn't unusual for Nona to see things when she held the glass. In fact, she'd come to expect it. With the half-heart still clutched in her hand, Nona's exhausted mind crossed over the threshold into sleep, carrying the visions with it. There she saw the woman again, inside an unfamiliar place: a temple perhaps, or a church.

And there was something else. *Someone* else. Like sensing the weather turn, Nona felt her dreams

grow thick and heavy with threat. Though she fought against it, her mind was drawn out into the wilds, onto the rolling hills she'd seen earlier. A chilling darkness gathered like storm clouds, wrapping itself around a figure. A man, it looked like, but with a stag's head – whom she could just make out on the horizon.





3

NONA WOKE TO FIND UNCLE ANTONI SHAKING HER, his face drawn. Light flooded the room, though dark shadows clung beneath her uncle's wide eyes. Silent fright bled into every part of Nona's body. This was Uncle, no one to be afraid of. But by the look on his face something must be drastically wrong. Nona reached out and gripped his arms tight.

"Uncle! What is it?"

As soon as she met his gaze his shoulders relaxed. "We have to leave," he said. His voice was calm – it didn't match his eyes. Had he slept at all? What time was it?

"What?" gasped Nona. "Leave? To go where?" She looked all around. "*Now?*" Judging by the light streaming through the windows she must have seriously overslept.

Uncle nodded. Nona's heart sank. She didn't want to go anywhere – all journeys put Nona on edge, raised bad memories – yet there was no question of her staying here without him. Wherever one of them went, so did the other. It was their pact.

“We've got some windows to install for a job, Jenny Wren,” he replied simply. “In Dartmoor. It'll just be a short trip.” Jenny Wren was what he often called her, even though her name was Nona – because, he said, she was small, fast and worked hard, like the bird.

“How long?” Nona asked, bemused. But he just told her to pack a bag with clothes and anything she might need for a short stay, then stood and left the room without another word.

Nona was stunned. Was this something to do with the woman from last night? She'd heard Uncle talk about leaving as soon as possible. But what, exactly, had she seen? A woman who wasn't there – who had no doubt been the one who'd spoken to her uncle in soft, hypnotic murmurs. And then there'd been her nightmares... Nona picked up the half-heart where it had fallen into her lap. She should've known better than to sleep near it. Doing so always gave her the strangest dreams. Though she hadn't expected anything quite as strange – and frightening – as the stag-headed man.

Nona did as her uncle had asked and packed some

things – including the half-heart. It was a little piece of home – of comfort – which she wrapped in hankies and tucked safely in her pocket.

Her head thumped as she stepped out into the slicing air and towards the van where Uncle waited. It was packed full of glass and window-making materials. For an instant she hesitated, desperate to stay. Yet she couldn't – not after what she'd seen last night. She'd never feel safe, even if she was allowed to stay in the house alone. Which she wasn't. And what of their pact?

From somewhere nearby an owl up late shrieked a warning cry, sending chills through her. Nona climbed into the van, and they set off.



Far beyond the tangle of trees that lined the winding road, Nona caught a glimpse of moorland. She drank it in through the passenger seat window: the delicious ebb and flow and roll of the landscape, the distant dips brim full with mist. The sight should have filled her with wonder. Yet all she could feel was dread. Hadn't she seen glimpses of this last night – in her muddled dreams? Would she see the woman again too? And what about that stag-headed figure – the one wearing storm clouds like a cloak? The thought of it chilled Nona's bones.

They travelled in silence for hours. Down the country lanes of Wiltshire and out onto the grey stretch of endless roadways that had brought them to where they were now: an unfamiliar landscape that grew wilder and more ragged by the second. It had been afternoon already by the time Uncle woke her – her late night must have taken its toll – and the day felt like it was racing away from her untethered. Around her, everything felt like it was closing in: the narrowing road. The looming trees. The heavy sky.

A flash of something caught her eye on the horizon: the dark shape of a man. She whipped round to look closer. Instead Nona caught her own reflection in the window of the van, and hid from it instinctively behind her hair – allowing the brown strands to fall across her cheeks, her scar. She hated to see it because it reminded her of the way others always stared. She scowled in frustration. It wasn't all there was to her, yet it was all so many people cared to see.

Still, the odd silhouette she thought she'd glimpsed wasn't there. Her skin prickled. There was that feeling again from last night: of being watched.

Worse, since last night's events, Uncle's strange behaviour was getting stranger. Should she ask him about what she'd seen last night, straight out? Could she? It would mean admitting to spying on him. Nona

felt like she would explode unless she confronted him about the reflection in the glass. But his strange, brooding silence – so unlike him – unnerved her. So she kept quiet.

Nona squeezed her coat pocket, to remind herself of the half-heart glass inside. She studied Uncle Antoni. He looked vacant, hunched over the wheel, his eyes drilling ahead as if all he could think about was their destination. A stab of panic left her heart thumping. What if he got worse out here in the middle of nowhere and she needed to find help? He was the only person Nona had left in the world. If anything happened to him...

“Uncle?” Nona tested. Her voice came out hoarse and quiet. When he didn’t respond she spoke up. “*Uncle?*”

This time he gave a start. “Yes, Jenny Wren?” Though he smiled, his eyes bulged when he glanced at her, like someone who’d woken far too early from sleep.

“Where exactly are we going again?” Nona said, relieved that he’d at least replied.

“Oh, you know... A place in...” He gestured one-handed to their surroundings but couldn’t seem to keep his train of thought going.

“Dartmoor?”

“Yes! Precisely.” Uncle Antoni hesitated before

he went on, and when he spoke he did it slowly, as if the words were hard to form. The details difficult to remember. “It’s a small village. Abandoned, as far as I know. The church was hit during the war by a German plane that went off course. Looking for Plymouth, I think.”

This was progress. Now to see if Nona could keep him talking. Bring back a little of the Uncle Antoni she knew, and get a proper grip on their situation. “Dartmoor is huge, Uncle,” she said. “I don’t want us to get lost, and sunset’s not far off. Maybe if you show me on the map...” They went over a rise in the road too fast. Nona’s stomach lurched. The sheets of glass, stacked and secured with leather straps in the back of the van, slammed against the side. The thought of glass smashing terrified her. It reminded her too much of the Blitz. Of that night.

“Uncle?” she said when he still didn’t reply.

“Hmm?”

“The map?”

Uncle Antoni scowled. “What does it matter where we’re going?” he snapped. “Just trust me, will you? You don’t need to know every little thing.”

Heat rose in the back of Nona’s neck, and her eyes prickled. He never usually kept secrets from her. The only thing her uncle refused to talk about was the

war, besides the bare basics. His escape from Poland after it was invaded, then his time in the Royal Air Force before his injury; the shrapnel that buried itself dangerously close to his spine. Even though, going on his medals, he was a war hero. *It's in the past*, he'd say. *Best left there.*

He said the same any time Nona tried to talk about what had happened to her too. Or how much she missed her mother, and her brother, Amos.

Was it in the past, though? Because most days Nona could feel the war's presence, hanging around her like thick, suffocating smoke. So much that she could smell its scent – of burning. Unease swelled in Nona like bad weather. She had that feeling again of being watched, but it was worse: as if they were being stalked. Shadows moved in the distance, at the edges of her vision, but she refused to look. They would only disappear if she tried.

A flurry of rain landed against the windscreen. It made a sound like the drumming of bony fingers and sent her nerves rattling further. That woman she'd seen last night... Was she real? What did she have to do with all this?

“Nona?” She jumped at her uncle's voice, the warm touch of his hand on her shoulder. His scowl was gone, replaced with worry lines on his forehead.

“I’m sorry I got angry,” he said. “It was uncalled for. You were only trying to help.”

Nona sighed with relief. The strange look in his eyes was gone. This was the person she knew. He shook his head and brought his other hand back to the steering wheel. “I don’t know what’s the matter with me,” he muttered. He sounded frustrated, but this time it was with himself. “Am I catching a cold or something, or is this just what it’s like to get old?”

Nona chuckled – he was hardly old – but she studied him curiously. Didn’t he remember anything about last night?

“Have I told you any of the legends of Dartmoor?” Uncle Antoni went on. Nona shook her head. She couldn’t stop herself from smiling. His knowledge of folklore was almost as boundless as his knowledge of glass. “No, Uncle.”

“What? Not even the one about the bottomless lake? Or the witch who sends mists to trick weary travellers? Or even the *haaairy* hands that appear on people’s steering wheels to send them off the *roooooad*?” He reached over to tickle her with his calloused, lead-stained fingers. Nona shrieked with laughter and batted them away.

The van swerved on the damp, uneven road. Uncle Antoni grabbed the wheel to steady it. The brakes

screached and the wheels juddered, refusing to grip. They overcorrected and veered the other way. Nona's shoulder bashed against the side window as the glass sheets thumped and rattled in the back again. Uncle Antoni grappled with the wheel. The tyres gripped. Finally. Uncle Antoni managed to steer the van straight again.

Nona let out the breath she'd been holding in. She glanced at Uncle Antoni, wide-eyed, and he grimaced – part-relief, part-apology – before concentrating on driving.

The daylight was fading now, as Nona had predicted. And fast. The road was getting narrower still, bumpier, and deeper set inside the moors. The way ahead, and all around, had become concealed with bends and scrub, with more trees towering over them, crooked as the hands of fairy-tale crones, and with rotting, moss-covered walls to the sides. The rain was really coming down.

“Who's given us this job, Uncle?” This time, Nona hoped, she might actually get a proper answer out of him. Even so, her voice was quiet. Tentative. The dread had come back.

He scowled, and for one terrible second Nona thought he would snap at her again – but now it was confusion instead of anger. “Don't you know?”

“No! You haven’t told me. Or shown me any of the paperwork. I keep asking, but—”

“*Really?*” He chuckled with an air of disbelief and shook his head. “I thought I’d left it all with you. Honestly. I feel all muddled, ever since... Ever since...” Nona could almost see the thoughts slipping away from him – sucked through the tiny open gap at the top of the driver’s side window that made the air whistle past. It was the look in his eyes, growing ever distant. “Never matter,” he said eventually.

“Who hired us, Uncle?” She couldn’t keep the frustration out of her voice. But Uncle Antoni appeared not to hear her. He had his gaze fixed ahead again. Everything looked darker and glistened with the slick of rain: the trees, the drystone walls, the road. Some of the tall grass had been weighed down, bent and flattened against itself.

Desperation swelled in Nona’s chest and burst out of her mouth before she could stop it. “Let’s go back,” she said. “This whole thing is wrong. Everything about it. Something’s happened to you, something ... unnatural. If you need help, where will we go to get it, out here? What’ll I do? I saw you last night, talking to that woman. Who is she? Has she got something to do with this? Tell me!”

Uncle Antoni didn’t reply. He was gone from her

again, even though he sat right beside her. Nona chewed her lip and turned to the window so she didn't have to look at him. She tried to take deep, calming breaths. She had finally blurted out what was bothering her – only to be ignored.

Alongside them, where part of the wall fell away to nothing, Nona glimpsed a small cottage. Then another stone-walled home, further on, amid an endless sea of mist and moor, rising and falling. She felt miniscule. Overwhelmed.

Uncle Antoni slammed on the brakes. The force of it hurled them forwards, and then back into their seats again when the van stopped, dead. Nona had just enough time to glimpse the hare sitting tall in the middle of the road, its long ears pricked and its eyes trained on them, before it bounded away into the brush. It had looked straight at her, it seemed to Nona. As if it had been expecting them all along.

Only now did Nona spot the church up in front: a ruin with empty windows and half a sagging roof. Surely this wasn't the right place. It was a wreck! Far beyond anything that a set of new windows could do for it. Uncle Antoni slumped back in his seat, but still didn't take his eyes off the road. When he spoke, it was as if in a dream.

“We're here,” he said.

Q&A with KATHARINE ORTON

What is *Glassheart* about?

Glassheart is about a girl called Nona who travels around with her uncle after World War Two, repairing stained glass windows in places that have been bombed in the Blitz. This work takes them to a strange, lonely church in Dartmoor, where Nona soon realises her uncle has been bewitched. Soon she's totally entangled with the world of magic and spirits, and must figure out a way to stop the terrible dark force that's coming...

What's your inspiration behind the story?

Partly it came from working with glass myself, alongside other glass artists, teachers, tradespeople and more – even a former monk who taught me how to engrave! And partly from all the amazing folktales that Dartmoor is so rich in. And, of course, there were my grandparents' personal experiences of the war, which got me really thinking in all sorts of ways about how people might have coped with the things they'd seen and been through.

How did you create and develop your characters?

For Nona, I found an image. It was a beautiful, old black-and-white photograph of a girl half hidden behind her hair, and I thought she had sad eyes.

I asked myself questions about who she could be and what her life might have been like, and from there I slowly started to imagine and build her character. Others sprang to life of their own accord – like Castor, who kept piping up to throw curveballs into the plot (with me, the writer, trying to play catch-up). It seems he was always destined for great mischievousness.

Why did you choose Dartmoor as the setting for the book?

Dartmoor is such a wild, magical place, filled to the brim with folktales. Early last year I went walking there and it totally captured my imagination.

What are your top writing tips for budding authors?

There's so much I could say, about finding yourself an agent and always looking out for writing organisations, opportunities and schemes set up to help along the way, but most importantly:

- 1 – Put aside any doubts about your abilities and just write. It's the best practice.
- 2 – Be kind to yourself, and if you can't do that, talk to a friend who can be.
- 3 – Always keep going. You can do it!



After gaining an English degree and an MA in creative writing, KATHARINE ORTON worked for Barefoot Books in Bath before leaving to focus on her writing and her young family. She signed with her agent after taking part in the brilliant WoMentoring Project. Katharine's debut, *Nevertell*, was published in 2019 to critical acclaim; *Glassheart* is her second novel. She currently lives in Bristol.



Read the full story
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