

Glassheart



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WALKER
BOOKS

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I

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.

