

"A tale that sparkles with frosty magic." *Thomas Taylor*

EXCLUSIVE
SNEAK PEEK!

Nevertell

A world of magic is only a whisper away...

KATHARINE
ORTON

Nevertell



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WALKER
BOOKS

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An exclusive extract from *Nevertell* ...



Fourteen

A FIFTH HOWL JOINED THE CHORUS. IT WAS THE hunting pack.

“Quick!” said Lina, recovering fastest. “Run!”

The mine with its snow-covered entrances was far behind them now, but the snow underfoot was still unpredictable. Last night’s storm had sculpted a new landscape over the old: a false floor laced with tricks and traps. Sometimes it held up against the pounding of their feet. Other times their legs plunged right through it up to the knee.

The howls got louder at a shocking speed. Now Lina could hear the beasts snarling and panting right behind them. She risked stumbling to glance over her shoulder. Nothing. For miles. Nothing but her own breath.

It couldn’t be.



The creatures were so close that Lina could hear their claws tearing up sod and snow. But they were nowhere to be seen. It didn't make any sense. There was only one explanation: that Old Gleb's stories – about the ghost hounds – were true.

She pushed the panic down into her stomach, as far from her thoughts as possible. She could hear the hounds gaining on them. At this rate, they'd be caught in moments. She had to *think*.

Lina glanced left. There, a sheer ridge dropped away into who-knew-what? A bed of sharp rocks? A ravine? There was nothing else for it.

“This way!” Lina grabbed Bogdan's coat sleeve and dragged him with her. She leaped without hesitating, and so did he. They plunged straight over the edge.

Her stomach lurched. Her feet pedalled air. She sailed above trees. Snow. Rocks.

Then she dropped. Bogdan did too. The ground rounded up to meet them like the curl of a giant's tongue. They crashed down its slope – steep, but cushioned with pine needles and snow. Lina lost her grip on Bogdan as they tumbled and slid. Space opened up between them in a yawn. A sharp rock scraped Lina's palm, drawing blood.

She didn't have time to dwell on the pain. She

was still falling fast. The slope – mottled brown with scratchy twigs and needles – was levelling out, but not fast enough. A pine forest loomed up ahead at speed. Saplings slapped against her limbs, slowing her fall. Lina took one in the stomach.

The others came leaping after them. Lina heard their cries as they fell through the same hazards. The slope. The rocks. The saplings.

Finally at a stop, Lina lay in a ball, trying to draw breath. It wouldn't come. Her head swam. She had to breathe. She had to.

The stone on her necklace, which had been red-hot against her skin, subsided to its steady warmth. It was calming, the heat travelling inwards towards her heart. Its pounding slowed. She managed to pull some air inside her, and as she did, the tightness in her throat gave way a little. Then a little more. She focused for as long as she could on breathing. Just to make sure she had it right before she checked around.

Her sack, once full of vegetables, now hung on the branch of a lone tree high up on the slope, like a white flag. Their food littered the ground. Near by, Bogdan moaned and then raised his head. A gash in his hairline trickled blood.

The baying of the ghost hounds had faded away.

Lina sighed with relief. “You OK, Bogey?” Her wobbly voice surprised her.

Bogdan touched the cut on his head with an unsteady hand, testing its wetness, and studied the blood on his fingers. “Um. Think so.” All around, the others were groaning and picking themselves up and checking themselves for injuries too.

Old Gleb limped over. He was staring at her.

The relief of their escape made Lina snappy. She screwed up her face into a scowl – because if she didn’t, she thought she might cry. “What is it now, old man?”

He stretched his mouth into a big, wide, toothy grin. His lip was split but, other than that and the limp, he looked unharmed. “Kid! Do you know what you’ve done?”

Alexei and Vadim stalked over then too. Alexei was clutching his arm at a funny angle against his body. It looked bad – perhaps even broken. Both of them wore dark expressions.

Not Old Gleb, though. He leaped forwards and ruffled Lina’s hair. “You’ve saved us, that’s what. From the ghost hounds. From whatever *thing* is using them to come after us. Who knows – maybe it’s even Baba Yaga herself. My child, you must be our lucky star.”

Alexei slapped Old Gleb's hand out of Lina's hair. "Old fool," he roared at him. "You're not here to make *friends* with them."

Vadim's glare sucked the wind out of Alexei, and he said no more. Lina had never seen anyone of Alexei's size look so small, so suddenly.





Fifteen

THE TREES LOOMED TALL, AND SEEMED TO CROWD in from all angles. The snow hadn't reached the floor in the denser parts of the forest, and shadows shouldered together. It smelled different, even right at the edge of the wood. A mixture of the pines' sap and a cold, earthy dampness. A jumble of growth and decay.

Some of the trees had ribbons and coloured scraps tied around their trunks. Muddy white, yellows and greens. Some were tied to their branches too, where they swayed a little on the breeze. Further in, symbols had been painted directly onto the bark. They looked like eyes. Signs that others had been there before them. Travelling reindeer or horse herders, perhaps, or people from a nearby village.

"Spirit trees," said Gleb. He gestured at the ribbons, the painted symbols. "Shamans have been

here, see? This place connects the worlds – ours to the *other* realms.”

“I’m sick of hearing your fairy tales,” muttered Alexei. He stalked away from them, tore one of the sacred ribbons off a tree and wrapped it awkwardly around his battered arm, struggling with his other hand and his teeth.

Lina scowled at him. To whoever put them there, those ribbons meant something important.

Alexei seemed shaken after the fall, and not just because of his arm. They all were. There was something unsettling about this place, as if the whole forest was holding its breath and watching them. Lina knew Alexei felt it too – however much he pretended he didn’t.

Lina looked about. As far as she could tell, they were in a basin. There was no way back out – at least not the way they’d come. That meant they’d need to move extra quickly if they were going to reach the meeting point before dark.

“Hey, leader,” she said to Vadim. “We’ll just have to look for a way around this ledge and back up to the top. Maybe if we go far enough we can loop back on ourselves and—”

“Don’t be an idiot,” growled Alexei, from over by the trees. He grimaced as he clutched his bandaged

arm. “There’s no way we’re getting back up there.”

Lina blinked back tears as it dawned on her what this meant. She vowed to make her voice stronger than she felt, however. “Come on. We don’t have time for this. We’ve got to get a move on. Mamochka will be waiting for us.”

Vadim turned to Lina with narrowed eyes, this time without the usual smirk. He was deadly serious. “Alexei is right – there is no way back.”

“No. Mamochka trusted you. We can’t abandon her. She did her bit for us, didn’t she? That means we stick to what you agreed and we—”

“Did you really believe Katya would make it out after us?” said Vadim in his acid tone. “Let’s face it, her chances were non-existent, even with her luck. I didn’t expect her to escape, and I doubt she did either – not really. Why do you think she promised us a reward from your grandmother? It was so we’d still take you to her, even if Katya wasn’t there to make sure of it. The meeting point was just a half-hearted fantasy. Her first priority was always you, and she made that clear.”

“No,” Lina said again. If anyone could manage it, against the odds, Katya could. That’s what Bogey had said... Lina turned to Bogdan. He frowned, and looked away.

She turned her back on Vadim. On all of them. The tears were bubbling up now, forcing their way free.

She wouldn't accept it.

With a burst of energy that surprised even her, Lina set off marching back towards the slope. She'd get to the meeting place. She'd do it. She'd *show* them. And if her mother didn't come, she'd just march right back to the camp. She'd get her out. Somehow.

Lina's tears made a blur of the trees, the ribbons. She batted branches out of her way and clambered upwards. The slope steepened sharply. The steeper it became, the more the ground crumbled under her feet. It wasn't long until her foot slipped. She couldn't cling on, and she slid all the way back down on her hands and knees, bashing into the odd hard rock on the way.

Lina came to a stop at the foot of the towering slope and looked up. She'd barely managed to get a quarter of the way up before she'd fallen. There really was no way back. It was hopeless.

A mocking laugh pealed out from somewhere behind her – Vadim's. Lina got to her feet stiffly, and dusted herself off, but didn't turn around yet. Her cheeks burned. She felt feverish with upset, the way she would do after a long cry as a child. Her hands shook. She wanted to kick something. Preferably Vadim. And yet she could see the truth now.

Lina wiped her eyes. She may not be able to see a way to save her mother right at this moment. But she didn't have to accept she'd lost her either. She'd go on to Moscow and find her grandmother. Her grandmother would help save Katya. All those stories Lina's mother had told her, about how powerful her grandmother was... She may even have the ear of the Great Leader. One word to him, along with information from Lina about which camp Katya was in, was all it would take.

Perhaps *that* was why Katya had made Lina promise to find her grandmother? So that Lina wouldn't do anything stupid – and so she really *would* stand a chance of helping her mother if she got stuck behind? That had to be it. Of course.

Lina took a deep breath to steady herself. If there was *any* chance to set her mother free, it lay in Moscow, with her grandmother.

Back with the others, Lina found handfuls of clean snow to wash her scratched hand – and the cut on Bogdan's head. Bogdan flinched, making a kind of inward hiss at the coldness. “You OK, Lina?” he asked gently, when she'd finished.

Lina couldn't reply. She wanted to, but her throat felt squeezed by grief. What an idiot she'd been to believe her mother could escape too. Even if she'd

snuck out of the guard tower, Commandant Zima would've been waiting. He'd told her as much. And with Lina gone, they'd surely suspect Katya had been in on the plan.

Heart racing with thoughts of her mother, Lina rested her hand against a nearby tree and felt a surge of heat travel down her arm and tingle through her fingers. She gave a little jump as the bark creaked and something scratched her hand. Lina pulled it back, fast. Where her palm had rested, a tiny jut of branch had appeared, with a few fresh, minuscule pine needles poking out.

Lina glanced at Bogdan to see if he'd noticed, but he was crouched down, pressing more snow to the cut on his head.

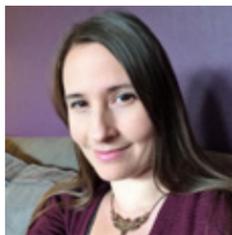
Lina turned back to the tree and the new bud. Strange. It had been the same feeling she'd had in the greenhouse whenever she touched the plants – but stronger. More concentrated. Had she imagined it? She held her breath and pressed her hand over the bark again. She focused on building the warmth, drawing it along her arm. When she pulled her hand back, there was no mistaking it – the branch was longer with yet more needles, bright green, fresh, and new.

How was it possible? What did it mean?



Read the full story
from 7th November 2019!





Q & A with the Author

If you could pitch the book in one line, how would you sum it up?

Best friends escape from a Soviet prison camp, only to be pursued across Siberia by a vengeful sorceress and her pack of shadow wolves.

What gave you the inspiration behind the story?

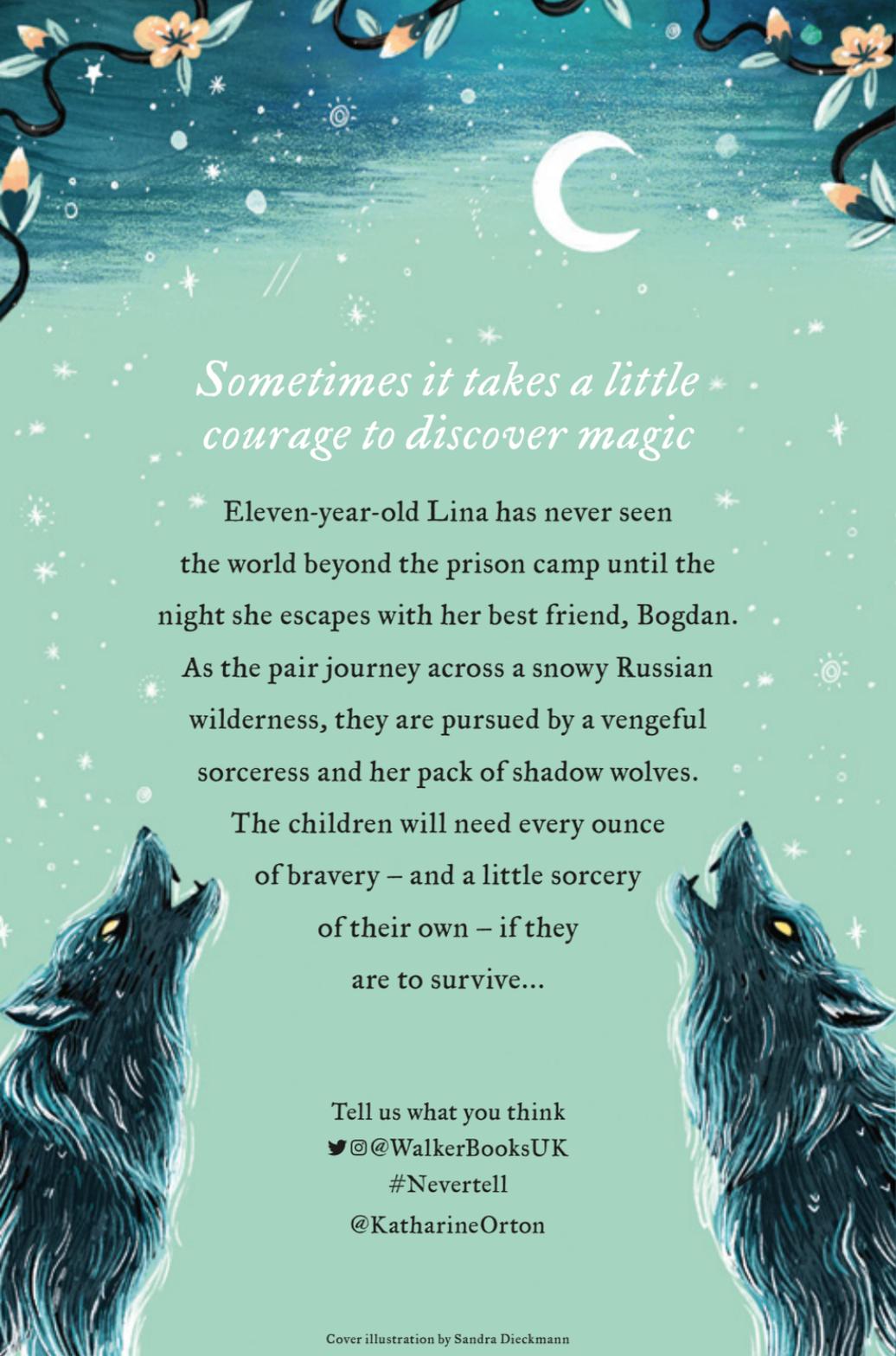
It feels like the story's been brewing inside me for years, piecing itself together bit by bit. But when I read a book called *Inside the Rainbow* and learned that fairy tales – the magical, fantastical kind that I love so much – were deemed unsuitable to be told to children in the Soviet Union, that was the true spark for *Nevertell*.

Why use Russia as a setting?

Slavic fairy tales are among my absolute favourite in the world. Wise, brave heroes and heroines, mystical beings, magical animal helpers ... and, of course, the indomitable Baba Yaga. So, it seemed only fitting to draw on such stories within that setting. I'm also a huge Russophile, and fascinated by the time period in which *Nevertell* is set.

Tell us a bit about your writing process.

My writing process involves a lot of self-coaxing. I'm often working for the promise of a biscuit, the irony being that when I really get into it I can sometimes forget to eat altogether. When it's just not happening, though, I like to switch from computer to notepad, which can be enough to get me going again. But if the words still aren't flowing, I don't beat myself up. When it comes to planning, I like to at least have an idea of where I want the plot to go – but find that too much planning can make my creative brain switch off. For me the only way sometimes is to take each step as it comes and solve problems as I go.



*Sometimes it takes a little
courage to discover magic*

Eleven-year-old Lina has never seen the world beyond the prison camp until the night she escapes with her best friend, Bogdan. As the pair journey across a snowy Russian wilderness, they are pursued by a vengeful sorceress and her pack of shadow wolves.

The children will need every ounce of bravery – and a little sorcery of their own – if they are to survive...

Tell us what you think
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