



Prologue

I'll tell you what this is not going to be. It won't be a sob story. It won't be a gut-wrenching tragedy, though there is that, for definite. It's not one of those stories where you watch me fall and fall and fall, though I do.

What can I say? I'm here today, aren't I?

I suppose my point in writing this is so that somehow, in all the mess that was made, I can put what happened to me, to us, to some use. See how I don't say the mess *I* made or *we* or *they* made or even *he* or *she* or *they* made. I say *was* made. Though nothing felt passive about it.

Who the hell am I talking to? Not the ravens. They've flown this world, though I do keep looking for Bow. Got to let her go.

I've written this for me.

Kai.

I.



It's summer now, though there was a time that felt like eternal winter. If you ever get sucked into Shadowlands remember: no matter how bleak, seasons change.

So here I am, sitting on our Green Hill, writing this...

There is a green hill far away without a city wall.

Strange how you think you're doing the writing then lines from songs bombard your mind and write into you.

*There is a green hill,
far away,
without a city wall.*

I sang this hymn once with Dad at Christmas, standing outside St Paul's Cathedral, listening to the choir practising. Dad was banging on about bringing me back there to sing one day. What was it he said? "Everyone has the right to raise their voice and hear it echoing round a place as awesome as St Paul's."

It still gives me shivers to hear our Green Hill song. I suppose it's because it's the first tune he played on his sax when I came back. It always gets me, the way it builds so predictably then creeps up on you and steals your heart

with the minor keys... Cuts me up every time.

Here's what I wish I could have told myself when I was wading through crap. You know those interviews where people say what they would have said to their teenage selves? I can't believe I still am one. An oversized teenager staying on for another year at sixth form while my mates all fly away. Anyway, *get over yourself, Kai*, as Orla says. Get on with it.

Well, if I could speak to me, how I was then, I'd tell myself to remember this green hill was always waiting for us. To look down on the past and see ourselves in the pools of light, shining like raven wings after rain.



That doesn't even sound like me! Why is it so hard to read back your own words? Like stripping stark bollock naked and walking up the street, your whole self out there, exposed, even though I'm the only one reading it, for now anyway. I leaf through the pages where I attempted to write some kind of ending for what happened – torn or scrubbed out because everything I wrote just felt so lame... Maybe that's what writing this has been all about – starting at the end with a lot of help from my friends, finding my way back, not to normal ... but back.

On our balcony behind me Dad's playing his sax again.

Something he's composing. My friends are celebrating getting their A levels and I'm here on our Greenlands hill by Sula's tree, waiting for them. How long can it take to pick up a few results? The answer comes back and slaps me in the face... In my case, no matter how fast I've tried to catch up, another year.

Nothing's what it looks like from the outside, is it? I've clocked this scene before; it's an old story. I suppose anywhere in the world it looks the same. Brothers and sisters at the point of breaking out. From where I'm sitting now it's all about an eighteen-year-old boy and his mates, setting out to leave the bit of turf they've made their own and fly in different directions.

Nothing mythical about this moment. But till now, if you'd told me I'd *ever* have it in my sights to even be sitting here, reading over my story, waiting for my mates and thinking this time next year I'll be down there, walking through the high railings of Ravenscroft with my own results, I would have said, "You're dreaming!"

They're taking ages.

I run my hands over the soft surface of my notebook that I've crammed full of our takes on what went on, pictures and words, nothing spared. All the shit we went through. This notebook, Orla's early birthday present to me... Her voice jogs me back. I could pick her tone out in any crowd.

Here she comes, leading the way, Om and Zak trailing

behind her, past the flattened earth where our Bothy used to be, past the old metal railings that lead out of Ravenscroft, the place they're leaving now forever.

Orla... Or-laaaaaaa, Or-leeeeeeee... I always want to sing her name like the first two notes of a love song. Old habits.

Zak, my first best mate who took all I threw at him and refused to give up on me.

And by their side walks Om. My newest friend and oldest soul brother. It feels like I've known him forever, like we knew each other in another life or something.

Watching them make their way up the Green Hill of our growing, I think I never really understood what Om tried to explain, why his family died defending the ancient buildings of Aleppo instead of running for their lives. But, when I think about how we're still battling to hold on to this triangle of Greenlands wood and our little bit of Rec, maybe I do start to get it. Saving a place isn't just about the land – it's about saving us too, our memories of home... I have to stop feeling sorry for myself and stay and fight for our Greenlands, for all of us. Like Om's family guarded their home. What's the big deal? I'm safe. No bombs are raining down on *my* head.

Get over yourself, Kai... Orla's right. It's time I do. Dig deep and keep fighting. This is something worth guarding.

"We did good." My friends' voices bring me back as

they tumble down beside me. They must have rehearsed this moment as I knew they would. Not to turn results day into a big deal.

Zak hands me an envelope. "Mum said to give this to you."

"What is it, a consolation prize?" I snap but Orla shoves me in the back.

"Didn't tell me what it was, just said make sure you get it."

Zak shrugs.

"Thanks." Maybe one day we'll shrug off all the awkwardness between us. I put the envelope in my pocket.

Om's portfolio is tucked under his arm and he thrusts it at me. "Here! I packed away my exhibition. This is for you."

I shake my head. "No, Om, man. It's too much. I can't take this."

But he grabs my face and holds it in his hands, like his aunt does to him. "No argument. It is my gift."

Orla lets out a sob behind him. "We said to keep it light, Om!"

I want to say something but there's too much and too many words between us. I don't know what comes over

me but I spring on Zak and wrestle him to

the ground like we haven't done

since we were kids.

Just sparring, at least I can't *feel* any anger left in us as we roll down our Green Hill.

We're sprawled out on the grass now, cloud surfing like we used to. Om takes his phone from his pocket, insisting on a group selfie. He's obsessed. Like he thinks he'll lose everything if it's not recorded. I get that. He almost did.

"You're sure about giving me all this art, Om? If you change your mind..."

"I am done with this." He waves it away as if it's nothing. "Zak, Orla... Get in the picture! Close, closer," he orders.

We're all squeezed together, just about fitting in the frame. Here we are, caught in time forever. Me, Orla, Om and Zak gathered round Sula's tree. In this moment it's all laughter, though if you do look close and closer through the shafts of light, you might just make out the rainbow spirits of ink-black wings.

Om's not happy with the shot and we all know he won't let us go till he is.

Finally.

"This is honest shot! Looking for the future," Om announces, showing us ourselves peering out of the photo, squinting into the sunshine, our bodies casting long shadows...

Just then Orla's mum and Om's aunt call from their balconies, eager to celebrate their results.

And trailing off, one by one, they leave me to it.

I pick up the notebook, turning to the beginning again, but realize something's missing... A dedication. Who knows when or if the wounds will heal enough to let my mates read this whole thing. Truth is I'm struggling myself to get through, but if they do ever read it the least I can do is write them a dedication. If I can just find words strong enough, loyal enough, kind enough, brave enough to hold what my mates have done for me. I turn the pages and find the place I left off reading.

See ourselves in the pools of light, shining like raven wings after rain...

That is how it feels turning way, way back to when we were kids. Like walking in pools of light.

