

CHAPTER

1

NIL
AFTER NOON

Paulo blinked, slowly, his consciousness returning in crisp frames filled with color and scent and sound.

He stood alone on the black rock platform. The acrid smell of death filled the air, accompanied by the distant crackle of flames. Above him, the sun burned like smokeless fire, still high noon. But over the carving, the gate was gone. Skye was gone.

His chance to leave was gone.

Reality set in, stark and devastating.

I failed, he thought.

A cry ripped from his throat like the wail of an injured animal. He dropped to his hands and knees on the harsh black rock, landing so hard that pebbles raked his palms, drawing blood, but he was too consumed by his growing terror and overwhelming bewilderment to care. How had he missed the gate? He'd waved to Skye, grateful she'd made it, knowing he was last and that the timing felt right—the completion of a circle begun three months before, the end of a cycle begun years before he or Skye were ever born. Only he'd hesitated, for reasons that he couldn't explain. For reasons he couldn't *remember*.

He'd lost time, mysterious minutes stolen by an invisible entity.

And now he was alone on Nil.

An angry tear welled in his eye; he wiped it quickly, already pulling himself together, knowing he wasn't truly alone. There were lions and hyenas and pumas on the island too, and he was very aware that he did not sit on top of Nil's food chain. He coughed, then choked, tasting smoke and salt. The thick air billowing up from the meadow snapped him to attention like a hot slap to the face.

He needed to get away from the mountain. There was nothing for him here, not now.

Not for three more months, to be precise.

Paulo stood, and with one last look around the silent black platform, he stepped back. Then, even though there was no escape, he turned and began to run. Down the steps, past the fiery meadow.

Around him, the island burned.

The island let him go.

It would wait.

It was accustomed to waiting. Once it had waited for centuries. Time wrapped the island like an invisible sheath, fluid and constant, both armor and weapon.

The island was weakened but not broken.

The male kept running, through smoke and flames and blood as the island settled in to watch. And to wait. And above all, to renew.

And so it began, again. Only this time, the island would not show weakness.

Or mercy.

That era was over.

CHAPTER 2

SKYE

MAY 21, MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT

I'm not crazy. I'm not crazy. I'm not crazy.

I think I might be crazy. If I'm not already there, I'm definitely hovering on the brink.

Rives and I flew into Madrid yesterday afternoon. We landed eight hours ago, almost to the minute. I'm still acutely aware of *time*. Sometimes I think I should stop counting, stop noticing as each day vanishes into the past. But other times I think counting is my way of *remembering*, of reminding myself that time is fleeting, and precious, like life.

So I count.

It's been three weeks since we said a tearful farewell to Dex under a fiery Hawaiian sunset among friends, and almost nine weeks since we last touched the strange island of Nil. Nil, a place that still exists, a place where you have exactly 365 days to escape or you die.

Rives and I did it.

We escaped. We saved as many as we could, and we left Nil's ticking clock behind.

But something came with me through that final gate, something powerful; I feel it. It whispers to me in the nighttime darkness. It's a distant whisper, one I don't want to hear. One I can't block out.

One I fear is stronger than me.

My dreams began the night we got back. First I dreamed of raging fire, of choking smoke. Of blood-soaked hands and cruel smiles and the crushing pain of leaving a friend behind even though he was already gone. Other dreams focused on Paulo, a different friend, one who had inexplicably chosen to stay. I dreamed of him racing through fire and fear, only I never saw where he was running *to*, or what he was running *from*. I never saw what haunted his back—but something was there.

Just like I know something is *here*. In my dreams, in the dark.

Now I dream only of blackness: the sightless, yawning blackness found between gates, cold and consuming and frighteningly *endless*.

But not empty.

It's never empty.

Something lives in that blackness, writhing like invisible fog, something dark and chilling and *real*. It reaches for me, whispering without words, clawing at me with charcoal fingers; it invades my daydreams and haunts my nights, its grasp almost finding purchase in those moments my mind is dark, and unguarded.

I won't let it in.

But I can't shut it out.

I haven't told Rives. Then again, I think he knows. I see it in his eyes when he looks at me: the worry, the fear, and the love. The same love that pulls me back, the same love that keeps me sane. Because at that frightful moment when I'm trapped in the darkness—when I'm seconds away from breaking, a breath away from *slipping*—I reach for Rives. I always find him, or maybe he finds me. Either way, he brings me back.

Every time.

I'm not crazy.

~~I'm not crazy.~~

My name is Skye Bracken, and this is the truth.

CHAPTER 3

RIVES

MAY 28, ALMOST MIDNIGHT

Look around. Pay attention.

Notice what others ignore.

My dad's classic advice, advice I painfully honed during my 365 days on Nil. Advice locked in my head for life, advice now second nature. Advice I couldn't stop following if I tried.

I took it all in: the shadows beneath Skye's eyes dulling her skin like bruises, the way she anxiously tugged on her raw diamond necklace when she thought no one was looking.

But I was always looking.

And when it came to Skye, I noticed *everything*, especially the problem she seemed hell-bent on ignoring.

It was the elephant in the room, big enough to screw with her sleep. Regardless of where we crashed, Skye tossed and turned, her nights restless and full of dreams. Her days weren't much better. More than once in the past few weeks I'd caught her completely zoned out, her eyes unfocused and distant. I didn't ask where her head was; I didn't need to.

It was Nil-related. It had to be.

And it seriously pissed me off.

The island had already taken enough, from both of us. We'd served our time, paid our dues. We'd survived. We were *done*.

Forcing myself to relax, I pulled Skye close, feeling her cheek press against my chest. *She's safe*, I reminded myself. *We're safe. And we're together.*

She actually seemed asleep. Steady breathing, lips closed but soft.

I slowed my breathing to match hers. Moments like these made me feel invincible, like we were invincible. Nil wouldn't steal another minute from us. Nil was my past.

Skye was my future.

Is she?

The amused whisper sliced through my head like broken glass, cruel and cutting. I froze, willing myself to chill out, grounding myself in the *now* until the flash of memory passed.

An instant later, Skye cried out, her spine twisting. "Rives!" Her whisper was choked. Her whole body shook; her skin had turned ice cold.

I held her close. "I'm here," I whispered, gently stroking her hair, willing her trembling to stop. "It's okay. Just a dream."

"Rives," she said again, her voice full of relief. But her heart still raced, like mine. We lay like that for a long time. Me, stroking her hair, Skye, fighting to let go of her demons.

When we'd left Nil ten weeks ago, I thought we'd won.

Now I wasn't so sure.

CHAPTER

4

NIL
AFTER NOON

This one was strong.

He came from a land of ice, but his spirit was made of fire. He fought valiantly to stay conscious as he traveled between worlds, clinging to awareness up to the very limit of fracture, much like another human who had come before: that one a female, a descendant of a visitor from an earlier time. Only where she had truly been familiar—her flesh, her blood—this one was new. Nothing about this human felt familiar except his innate strength; it touched every part of him, a current running so powerfully through his being that the island had sensed it through the fibers of space, of time . . . making him the right choice. The necessary choice. It had nearly exhausted all of the island's fading strength to reach him, to call him, but he had answered.

He would do well.

He would need to.

The island watched as he rolled out of the gate and spilled onto the black sand. The island waited as he stirred and blinked, as he raised one hand to block the bright sun. Fear lanced through his heart with the fierce light. For an instant, he stopped breathing.

And then he sat up.

Slowly, his muscles on high alert like his senses, all fog cleared from

his consciousness with one deep inhale. He breathed, steady and calming, lowering his heart rate by will, an impressive show of strength as he gazed around.

His body turned slightly north, he stood, looking toward the place where others once gathered. His thoughts were clear, organized. Most centered on people he had left behind, on statements he wished he had made, but a few thoughts lodged here, concerning his own safety and well-being.

He was not afraid.

His swift and selfless reaction pleased the island. The island needed this one, like it had needed the one before. But then, it had failed.

It would not fail again.

The price was too great.

Hafthor stood in a semi-crouch, unaware anyone—or anything—was watching him. To his left, the ocean stretched without end into a cerulean sky; he found no hint of Icelandic gray among the rich blue. Over the water, the sun shone brightly, free of clouds, its rays warming his bare shoulders, the salty breeze brushing his skin without bite. He wiggled his toes. Beneath his feet, the coarse black sand churned cool under the top layer of warmth. To his right, lush palm trees stretched tall, surrounded by spindly trees he'd never before seen. Clumps of shrubs huddled against the sand line, forming the island's first line of defense.

He peered more closely at the foliage. A kangaroo regarded him with curiosity, arms high and still. Like the animal, Hafthor didn't move; instead he stared at a spot just past the kangaroo. A few meters inside the tree line, something linear stood out: a makeshift shelter, a triangular shape too symmetrical to be natural. He moved toward the trees, still on the sand but close enough to startle the kangaroo. The animal hopped away, retreating into the tangle of green.

Upon inspection, the shelter appeared old. Abandoned.

Unwelcoming.

No, he thought.

He would not hide, not here. Not until he understood where he was and why he was here. He would seek help, and this shelter offered none. He had nothing—and no one—but himself, but it was enough. *As long as you know who you are, you can never be lost*, his father would say. He touched the tattoo on his shoulder, summoning courage.

I am Hafþór, he thought. He had no one to rely on but himself—and so he would.

Dropping his hand, he backed away from the shelter and carefully looked around.

In the distance, a black cliff rose toward the sky. It matched the cliff at his back, the pair bracketing the beach where he stood.

He scrutinized the cliff to the north, arms crossed but relaxed.

Then, like the barest brush of a silken feather, Hafthor felt a gentle push at his back, the island breeze urging him forward. He didn't know he was being guided, or that it drained the island's precious reserves to do so.

North, he thought. *I will go north.*

And so he did.

Farther north, at the edge of Nil City, Paulo stood before the Wall, feeling very much alone. There was no one else in the City, just ghosts. He stared at the names belonging to people who had once cared for him, who had kept him alive and safe when he couldn't care for himself. Names like Skye, and Rives, and Dex. He stared at Skye's name, grateful for her friendship, saddened that he'd let her down, even though he still didn't understand why. Slowly, he raised his knife and methodically carved a check. One for Skye, then one for Rives. Then another check, and another. Jillian. Brittney. Zane. One mark at a time, he completed the story of the people who had been here before him, of people he'd outlasted, people with seasons served fully and people with seasons cut short. He saved Dex's cross for last. That mark would not be forgotten, or forgiven.

On his life, he vowed it would not happen again.

He would not let the island take another.

He stepped back, satisfied. Before him, a few spaces glared back, still empty, spaces he'd chosen not to fill because they belonged to people he'd never met, with fates he didn't know. A few names seemed conspicuously absent: names like Rika, and Maaka. If their names were here, Paulo would have given them a check, for he knew their fate. He knew they'd survived. But they'd chosen to make their way alone, to not join the City, and Paulo would honor their choice.

His choice would be different.

He walked over to the last name, Brittney, no longer seeing her name or her check; he was intent on the empty space below. A blank slate, a new chapter. Lifting his knife to the Wall, Paulo carefully carved five letters: *P-A-U-L-O*.

The time to survive alone was over.

The ghost of a smile crossed his lips because right now, he was alone. He was a City of one—and possibly an island of one as well. Oddly enough, in the weeks since Skye had left, Paulo hadn't seen another living person; he'd only seen animals. Wild animals falling out of equally wild gates, docile animals falling prey to the deadly. He had the strangest sense the island was waiting . . . for something, perhaps even someone. Or perhaps Skye's theory had been correct: that without people, the island's strength was compromised. Weakened.

But he was here.

So life continued. The *island* continued, and with its existence came the cold truth: Paulo would not be alone for long. It was only a matter of time. For all he knew, he already had company.

Turning away from the Wall, Paulo faced the City, then looked back at Mount Nil.

I am here, he thought, standing still, and straight. *I am no longer afraid. When the time comes, I will meet those you send and we will fight.*

That is my choice.

And then he got to work.

CHAPTER 5

NIL
NOON

Each noon brought the promise of fresh blood and pride and power. The island's appetite had grown insatiable. Once it had sampled the incredible might of life and death on a grand scale, and it thirsted to do so again. It ached for more; it needed it.

And it would have it, soon.

Today's prize would be tomorrow's power.

Coated in blood that was not her own, this female radiated vitality and fury in equal amounts, the electrica coursing through her body so ferociously that the gate required minimal strength to open; the island simply used hers.

Took it, used it, reveled in it.

Delicious.

She didn't cower when the gate took her; instead she reflexively lifted her knife with one blood-splattered hand, thrusting the wet blade toward the iridescent wall as it rushed to devour her. Her slashing movement had been instinctive, her natural response being to save herself, even if it meant harming others.

The warm blood coating her weapon testified to that.

The island had wisely left the other human behind, closing the gate with force, preserving its power, and hers. Once it had allowed two

humans through simultaneously, but the split in focus between the two had been disastrous. The island could not transfer both, and had lost immense amounts of energy attempting to do so, but the true cost of that unfortunate transfer had been the loss of both prizes. Both humans had been lost between, and with them, their electria: power the island craved. Power the island needed. That day, the island had learned the necessity of restraint, and the power of balance: one gate, one human. One transfer at a time.

The island would not make the same mistake twice.

It had learned that from the humans too. Mistakes were not to be repeated. They were to be prevented. And remedied.

And this female would be key to correcting the island's last mistake.

This one was lethal. Angry.

Absolutely perfect.

Even when she lost feeling in her physical form as she traveled between worlds, this one fought the transfer with all she had left, revealing a depth of resilience and resistance greater than anticipated, a welcome surprise.

Better still, in the crucial seconds during transfer—in those precious moments when her unconscious mind lay raw and exposed—the island discovered that she would fight until her time's end, honing the innate strength she already possessed. And the island would let her. The island would provide ample opportunities for growth, and would force her to become as powerful as she could possibly be—but it mattered little, because in those same precious moments, the island had already chosen her fate.

The fight would be delightful.

Time to wake.

Carmen woke, instantly on guard.

She hopped to a crouch, feeling naked without her knife. Then again, she was naked, which made the loss of her only means of protection that

much worse. Around her, tunnels of water snaked through the rock; the ocean crashed close enough to hear even though she couldn't see it.

What in the world? she thought.

Still crouched, she turned slowly, feeling the cool sea breeze brush her skin, the constant stickiness of Colombia conspicuously absent. She completed a full rotation, absorbing her quiet surroundings, the lack of people, of anything remotely familiar. In the distance she was fairly certain a zebra stood at attention, watching something. Maybe her.

She'd never seen a zebra before, except in books. She'd never been to a zoo. She'd never needed to go; her father had simply brought the animals to her. A petting zoo, he'd called it.

She had no interest in petting a zebra.

And if it threatened her, she'd kill it.

Where am I? she wondered, taking stock of her surroundings carefully. A spike of fear reared its head; she crushed it instantly, without hesitation. She had no time for fear, or the vulnerability it brought.

Standing slowly, Carmen backtracked, replaying the last memories she had.

Ice.

Heat.

Pain.

Not all the pain was hers. At that, she smiled.

The last thing she clearly remembered was surprising Carlos, an older boy who thought himself more attractive than he was in every sense of the word. He'd thought he'd surprise *her*. He'd thought he'd corner her in private, and teach her a lesson. He hadn't liked her repeated refusals, and he'd liked her mockery even less. But he hadn't expected her skill, or her speed. And there was no way he could have known that her father had trained her himself—to *protect* herself—especially from boys like Carlos who refused to take no for an answer. In the end, it was Carlos who'd learned a lesson. The slice down his cheek would leave a scar.

She had been the stronger one when it counted most.

Father would be proud, she thought, lifting her chin. Only he wasn't here, and she'd no idea where here was.

But there was one thing she knew in the depths of her soul: she was Carmen Medina, youngest daughter of Juan Felipe Medina, the owner of the largest construction company in Bogota and a self-made man who'd risen to wealth and power one smart move at a time. She had his genes, his ruthlessness, his cunning.

She might be alone here, but she wasn't afraid.

She wanted answers. She wanted clothes. But more than anything else, she wanted a weapon.

A weapon, the female wanted. The island would see that she found one.

It had let her acclimate long enough.

Summoning heat and air, the island pushed at the female's back. The island wanted blood, and when it was time, this female would spill it.

Until then, the island would play elsewhere.

Turning inward, the island reached for the seam. The island found it easily, focusing on the invisible wedge left behind, a weak point preventing the seam from closing completely, a remnant of the past that had grown over time. With calculated precision, the island leaned on the wedge, widening the rift between worlds: a razor-thin gap that should not be open, not now. Not after the crucial hour.

But it was. Open and unguarded.

Under the island's pressure, the seam expanded a mere fraction. The surge of power rolled through the island in a delicious ripple. Through the seam, the island sought the one who had escaped, one it had desperately wanted to keep: the female, Skye. If it couldn't have her, it would break her.

It was almost time.

CHAPTER 6

SKYE

JUNE 2, LATE MORNING

Holy crap. *The darkness*. It's gaining strength, feeding itself, pulling power from a place I can't see, from I place I haven't dared look.

But when I woke from my last nightmare, I *knew*: I need to confront the darkness, *now*, before it's too late. Because as the darkness grows stronger, I'm growing weaker, probably because I don't sleep—at least not well. Sleep is a full-on war, waged in the dark. Waged *with* the dark. Something has to give, and I don't want it to be me.

If the darkness wins, I'll lose.

I'll lose *me*.

I'll be gone, lost to the infinite blackness, to the darkness *between*—like Sy, like others I never met. Now I know that the Wall wasn't always true. That a check didn't always mean that person made it back, or made it *through*; it just meant that person caught a gate. Sy was proof of that.

So many things we thought were true on Nil were wrong, or at least not completely right.

But me, I'm still desperate for the truth. About Nil's past, about why Paulo stayed. About what lives in the darkness. Maybe my curiosity is genetic, like my recklessness, because now I can't help wondering what

will happen if I turn *toward* the dark, rather than away from it. Maybe if I reach into the darkness on my terms, maybe I'll see what's calling me, and why. And then I can beat whatever it is, because I'll finally know what I'm up against.

Part of me knows that's insane, like lock-me-up-in-a-padded-room crazy.

But the other part of me thinks it might work. Even better, I'll make my stand during the day. Confronting the darkness in daylight seems safer than a meeting held in the dark. The light will be *my* edge, my weapon. So today, when the sun rises, I'm going to face the dark. Maybe I'll even figure out what it wants. Because the darkness wants something; I just don't know what.

It wants you, my subconscious hisses.

No. I play my own devil's advocate. *But maybe it wants something from me.*

The distinction seems critical, like the answers. Knowledge brought more than power; it offered freedom—at least it had on Nil.

The only thing holding me back is fear. And not just any fear, one in particular: I fear I created it, that the darkness actually comes from within me, born of the void created by Dex's death. That the darkness is a manifestation of guilt. *That it's all in my head.*

I fear that if I look into the darkness, I'll see me.

But the calm, resilient part of my mind reassures me I'm sane, and the fierce part of my soul—the part that helped me survive Nil—agrees. Somehow I'm certain that the darkness of my dreams is real: that it's foreign and lethal and not to be ignored. *That it's a remnant of Nil.* One I brought back with me, a shadow of that last gate.

So maybe, in the end, I just need to acknowledge it and say good-bye. Because if I'm the one who brought it back, then I need to be the one to let it go.

I have a plan. It involves a nap. And it's happening today.

As soon as Rives leaves for Marseilles to see friends, I'll banish the darkness for good. End of story.

I feel better already.

My name is Skye Bracken, and this is the truth that will set me free.

Two hours later, I knew I'd made a terrible mistake.

The darkness poured in just as I knew it would, a greedy blackness writhing with life and invisible whispers, begging me to come closer. I crept to the edge, sensing the invisible line, taking the utmost care not to cross it with any shred of myself. All I could see was black. Endless, terrifying black.

Before I could look deeper, I felt the line bend.

The darkness surged with victory, reaching for me with sinewy claws, spilling across in roiling ribbons of sentient blackness—and the instant the darkness breached the line, the whispers turned deafening. I lurched away, too slow, too late. The darkness brushed my shoulder with icy fingers and the profound depth of it was shocking.

I *felt* it.

The whole of it. The essence of it. The *want*.

It wanted *me*.

The darkness held me in place, binding me with invisible ties. I screamed for Rives, but the darkness absorbed the sound; it devoured my desperation, my plea, *everything*—even the timbre of my voice, as though all were a preview of the full course of me.

A pinprick of light flared.

I was the bug under the microscope, caught between the light and the dark, a microscopic speck in time and space and something much greater than me. I could still feel the line, still feel the edge of me. I could almost see that crucial boundary, reflected in the wisp of light.

The light pulsed, once; the chorus of voices converged into a single clear tone: desperate, and unquestionably human.

I leaned closer, trying to see—and abruptly, the line thinned. The darkness snarled, the light faded, and I had a moment of complete clarity that if I fully crossed that line, *I would not come back*.

Like I'd flipped a switch, I fought with all I had, lashing out with muscles and bone and blood and *will*. I broke free; I woke up. I lay alone on the bed in the sun-filled flat, covered in a thin sheen of sweat. Still shaking, still wanting.

Now that I'm awake, why do I still feel it?