

CHAPTER 3: SCARS

Weeks from now, when all this is finally over, when I can finally stand to think back to my time on the island, this is what I'll remember. Dare and I are standing out on the platform at the top of the lighthouse, watching the sun sink towards the gray water of the Sound. In a half hour or so the big light will be switching on, shining out over the Atlantic, and the fall wind will get cooler, chasing us back downstairs. But for right now, we can just lean on the railing and look down over Ocracoke Village as it settles in for the evening, all shadow and silence.

Dare has let her blond hair get even longer than it was this summer, and she just took the braid out so it's hanging loose down her back. When a gust of wind hits us, it lifts strands of hair off her neck, and the light from the setting sun catches there, making them shine like a special effect you should have to wear special glasses to fully appreciate. For a second, I think she must be humming, using her bard power to put a spell on me. Then I realize that the only magic she's using is just being herself, being here with me right now.

She's so beautiful, I'm scared to move, to make a noise. I'm afraid that if I do anything to call attention to myself, the universe will notice and realize that I can't possibly be with her. Just when I'm sure our cosmic error in relationships is going to be corrected, and I'm going to be struck by lightning or magically transported to a world of ugly snake-people to be worshiped as their queen, Dare reaches over and grabs my hand, pulling me back to her.

She weaves her fingers between mine and gives them a squeeze. "Why are you being so quiet?"

I let her question hang between us for a moment. I'm pretty sure I don't want to admit my fear of a snake-people planet to Dare right now. It would probably kill the mood. "Just thinking."

"About if you're going to Baltimore or not?" she asks.

"No. That's a big fat not." I shake my head at the thought, then turn to look at her. "I was sorta thinking about you."

"About me?" Dare turns away from the railing to face me. Her mouth curls into a smirk. "Why are you thinking when you could be doing other things with me?"

"Now you've got my full attention." Her smirking mouth has my attention. And so do her smiling eyes. And so does her wild hair. And my attention moves me toward her like a gentle push in the back.

Dare, grinning now, holds out a hand to stop me from leaning in. "I meant things like talking. Although if you play your cards right, who knows? But we should really talk about Morgan and Baltimore."

I turn and put my weight back onto the railing. I look out over the quiet village, my home. Our home. "What's there to say? She wants me to move there and I want to stay here. Whether we take the short easy way or the long awkward way around it, I'm not leaving."

"But is it really going to be up to you? I mean, you're seventeen and she's the only family you've got." Dare reaches over and puts a hand on my shoulder. I can feel her warmth through the thin fabric of my t-shirt. "Even if my folks offer to be your legal guardians, the courts will probably side with her if she wants you to live with her."

"You make it sound like it's a done deal. Like I don't get a say in my own life. Do you want me

to move to Baltimore?" The words come out harder than I want. Hard and sharp.

Dare's fingers curl around my shoulder, gently like she might hold an injured bird to keep it from panicking and hurting itself more. "Gods, no! Addy, that's the last thing I want. Even thinking of you leaving makes me a little crazy. I just mean that we have to be ready for that scenario if we can't stop it from happening."

I shrug off her hand. Deep inside me, I can feel the creature coiling. I'm not sure if it's talking now or I am. "Are you sure you want to stop it? I mean, it's your senior year and I've already been suspended from school. I don't want your delinquent girlfriend messing up your plans for homecoming. And prom. And graduation."

Dare grabs my arm and turns me to face her. "If you don't stop, I'm seriously going to throw you off this lighthouse. Nemesis or not, I'll do it." She's still smiling, but her eyes have softened, hinting at her concern. "What's gotten into you anyway?"

I take a deep breath and sigh, trying to charm the serpent back to sleep. But when the words come out, they're still poisonous. "Reality. And I'm just waiting for it to get into you too. I mean, if we were on Broadway instead of Ocracoke, I could star in a mashup of 'Little Shop of Horrors' and 'Annie.' The tragic musical about an orphan girl who becomes a hideous monster. Or how about we co-star in 'Beauty and the Beast'? Want to guess how those roles would be cast?"

Dare shakes her head. "You seriously need to stop your mouth right now. Gods, I wish you could see yourself the way I see you."

"Yeah, I've been wondering if you should get your eyes checked. Because I've looked in the mirror plenty and what I see isn't pretty. And it definitely doesn't look like you."

Dare flashes me a hard glare, but her words still have a hint of laughter in them. "Oh, shut up with your crazy talk. Seriously."

I try to force a smile, but I'm pretty sure it doesn't take. This is crazy talk, but I can't seem to stop it. "You shut up. I mean, look at the cover of any glossy magazine or website trying to get the attention of 'Men, Ages 18 to 34' and you could see yourself there. You know I'm right about that."

Dare's stare hardens. She takes a step away from me and crosses her arms. "And you really think that's something I'd aspire to? Like I want to be some dude's click-bait or fap-bait or whatever?"

Her words throw me off balance, forcing me back to the railing. I whisper, "So gross."

"Yeah, gross." She takes a step toward me as her voice softens. "Don't you remember the nickname we came up with last summer for all those shallow, glossy people?"

"Four P?" I ask.

Dare nods. "Four P. Pretty plastic preppy people. And if you think for a second that I'm a Four P, or would ever want to be with a Four P, then we really do have a problem."

I shake my head, trying not to conjure up images of Dare being with anybody else. "Hell no. You're the exact opposite of Four P."

Dare smiles at that, reaching out to touch my shoulder again, steadying me. "You're the exact opposite, too. That's what I'm trying to get through to you. You are completely and utterly A."

I frown. “A what? I know you're not talking about my grades. Let me guess. A for asshole?”

“Gods, right now, sort of.” Her smile widens. “But no. That's not what I mean.”

“Annoying?” I ask.

“Only occasionally. But warmer.”

“All right?”

“Hmmm.” Dare's eyes narrow and then she gives a quick nod of approval. “Yeah, you're definitely all right, kid. But that's not it.”

“Kid? You're just a few months older than me.” I laugh. “Okay then: Alluring?”

She sweeps both arms out, like a game show model revealing the grand prize. “You have no idea. Obviously. Stupidly. But that's not what I mean.” Her eyes become more focused, her voice more intense. “A is for Adrastia Nix. You are so undeniably you. Even when you are driving me crazy. And that means you are undeniably amazing to me. Beyond stupid beauty standards and stupid body shamers and stupid click-bait.”

I think I've waited all my life to hear someone say that to me. And now I think I'm having trouble breathing. “You sure do talk pretty sometimes.”

“And you sure are pretty. That's what I'm trying to tell you. And pretty doesn't even come close.” Dare's voice hints at laughter again. She shakes her head, exasperated at her clueless girlfriend, I think. I hope. “You are stunning. I mean it. Sometimes I look at you and I'm flat-out stunned. I don't know how you don't get that.”

Now it's my turn to sound exasperated, or just plain frustrated. “Let me count the reasons. Crazy hair that will never do what it's told. Like for real in-need-of-obedience-training hair. Skin that's always about one minute from breaking out. And of course the zits will be right on my forehead. Or my nose. Or most likely both. A chest that mostly still hasn't gotten the news that I went through puberty years ago. Oh, and don't let me forget that I just might turn into a snake-monster at any moment.”

“Yes. All of that. It stuns me.” Dare reaches out and grabs my left wrist, gently twists it to reveal the underside of my forearm. With her other hand, she traces the three pale scars tracking across the soft flesh. “And these too.”

I look down at her fingers, at my scars. “Oh. Those. I didn't know you had noticed those.”

She runs her hand down my arm and then weaves her fingers into mine, holding my hand tightly. “Seriously, Addy? I'm pretty sure I've 'noticed' every inch of you. I just never knew how to ask you about them. I mean, I can guess how you got them. I know you had them before things went all crazy this summer. But I don't really want to guess.”

I let out the breath I didn't realize I was holding in. “So you want me to tell you?”

“I want you to feel like you can tell me.” Dare reaches out her other hand and strokes my arm. “Like you can tell me anything.”

I nod my head, but grip the railing hard with my free hand. “Okay, but there's not really much to tell. It happened after the first time I Changed. After that night with Peter. After the world went so sideways on me.”

"I never really imagined what it was like for you back then. When you didn't know what was happening or why," Dare says. "You must have been so freaked out."

I shake my head. "I wasn't just freaked out. I was a freak. And maybe the worst thing was that I had no power over any of it. I would suddenly become this monster or suddenly turn back into me, and there wasn't a damn thing I could do to control it."

Dare's eyes are teary now, bright as they catch the last light of the day. "Oh, babe. I wish I had known you then."

"Believe me, you wouldn't have wanted to know me then. I was so scared and so angry all the time. And then I felt so sad and so guilty. I was so terrible to Talia. And worse to Peter. I can't even stand to think about how I treated him."

Dare puts her arm around my shoulders, pulling me into her body. "Hush. You did what you had to do to protect yourself. And maybe to protect him too. You must have really...." Her voice catches. "You must have really loved him."

"I really did. Or at least thought I did. The person who felt like that seems like someone else to me now. Like just another clueless teenager. But he was really good to me and I did him so wrong."

Dare hugs me, her voice close to my ear. "Because you loved him. You pushed him away out of love. Your first love."

I look down, over the railing to the ground below us. I feel off-balance, but Dare's embrace anchors me, warms me. "Maybe. Or maybe out of selfishness, because I just couldn't deal. Maybe Peter was my first love, but maybe I didn't know what love really felt like then."

"You sure about that? I mean you guys never really got a fair chance at it, before all the Nemesis stuff happened to you." Dare's hands shiver against me. Her voice is shaking. "It might be different now. If he was here."

I turn to look at her. My eyes are watery and my nose feels like it's starting to run. I'm sure my whole face is going to start leaking, but I can't keep from smiling a little. "Hold up. Being insecure is kind of my thing. And you can't have it. Hell yeah, it would be different now. Because I'm different now. And because I'm truly, madly, deeply with you now."

Dare smiles back at me, and now I'm the one who is stunned. "Now who's talking pretty? But back then you felt so strongly about what happened that you did that to yourself, right?" She looks down at my scars.

"Yeah, I guess. Like I said, everything just felt so out of control, so unreal. So I started cutting myself. At least the pain was real. The blood was real. And it was there because I did it. Not some monster living inside me."

Dare pulls me in close. "Addy. I don't know what to say. I just feel so bad that you felt like that about yourself. Gods, I wish I could have been there for you."

I shake my head at the thought. "It wouldn't have made any difference. If you had been there, I would have hated you."

"Addy," she whispers.

"No, really. I hated everybody, especially myself. Especially my body that was betraying me

over and over again. Maybe I thought I could cut the monster out of me. I don't really know. After a couple weeks, it just seemed kind of pointless. And now I get to keep these as souvenirs of my time in crazy land.”

Dare pulls back, looking directly into my eyes. “Not crazy. Just confused. Who wouldn't be? But you were brave too.”

“Yeah, right. Bravely slicing myself open.”

“I mean it. This impossible thing was happening to you, but you didn't let it beat you. You didn't run away. Or drug yourself senseless. Or try to....” Her eyes tear up again. Her voice is fragile. “To really hurt yourself. Gods, Addy.”

I give her hand a squeeze, then run my fingers along the scars, holding my arm out to her. “Hey, Dare. Come on. I think those were all on the agenda before I got myself a little bit together. I was just too scared to do anything more than this.”

She snuffles and shakes her head, her hair falling over her shoulders. “Not scared. Brave. That's what these should remind you of. That you are brave.”

I leave my scarred arm between us, an offering. With my free hand, I wipe my eyes dry. “And also that when I'm not running around being Nemesis, I'm really easy to hurt.”

Dare's laugh catches in her throat, but her smile is bright. “Yeah, please remember that too. You know, I hate that you did it, but I love that you have them.”

“You must be one strange girl.”

“Probably. But I love them. Because they're kind of sexy.” She bends over and kisses the scar closest to her. Her lips are warm on my skin. “And because they remind me of how you ended up here.” She kisses the next scar and I have to focus to keep my arm from shaking. “And because they're signs of healing.” She kisses the last one and I can barely breathe. “And signs of your fearless heart.”

“You are definitely a weird girl.” My voice is a whisper. “Now what was that first reason again?”

Dare looks up at me and laughs. “You heard me the first time. They're sexy.”

I point to my shoulder. “Because I've also got this one here from when that Fury came after me with a whip.” Then I point to my belly. “And I've got this one where Finn stabbed me.”

She shakes her head and smiles. “Maybe I'll get around to those later. And then we'll figure out this thing with Morgan too. And what to do with Nemesis. And how to stop the war with the old gods.”

“Oh, is that all?” I ask.

“Nope. Because I haven't told you the most important reason why I love your scars,” Dare says, reaching for my hands so that she's holding them both close to her.

“So what's the reason, you strange, weird girl?”

“I love them because I love you. Because I'm in love with you.”

Her words stop my breathing. Her eyes short-circuit my brain. “Oh. I'm....” The words stumble out of me. “Well, I....” And I'm so scared right now, so powerless, unable to breathe or think. Or speak

the truth. "You're so...."

"*Stop.*" Dare smiles as she sings the word, and I feel its magic, her magic, burrow deep into my body, calming my breath, soothing my mind. She reaches up to stroke my face, her fingers glowing a faint indigo blue that warms the space between us. "You don't have to say anything. I know."

Speechless, I nod my head and pull her to me, hold her body tight against mine. I hold it as a shield against my jagged memories and my wild imaginings. I hold it as protection from the darkness growing all around us. I hold it as proof of my full and fearful heart.