

## **The Scars on My Face**

Alaina stood in front of the mirror with a smile on her face. Waking up at sunrise never bothered her too much. While Lula slumbered, it was a quiet time she could use to do the housework, make breakfast, complete her exercises... and naturally, her affirmations too.

"Make each day count". That was the idea. A ritual noone really needed to introduce her to, but one which brightened her day all the same. She stood in the mirror and recited what she wished to embody, or what to achieve.

"I, Alaina Annabella-Brianne Tinkerbolt-Wyrther of Corlain do promise to be kind to someone today, so that I leave the world a little better than I found it". She had a few things she wanted to get done today for herself, namely preparing reservations for a surprise dinner with Lula in about a week at a very fancy restaurant, so putting a little happiness back into the world would surely pay off the happiness she'd soon have.

Just as she turned away from the mirror, though, something in the corner of her eye that turned her stomach.

Her acne had started to break out again. One ugly nodule reared its head just on the lower part of her left cheek. But no worries! She'd still be beautiful for Lula when they went for dinner. She still had time, and some lotion she kept in the bathroom cabinet, it would all be cleared up. Alaina vigorously washed the region, then applied the lotion, and went about her day as normal.

A few days passed though, and only more and more spots appeared, her face laden like a rotting field. She had taken to hiding it under layers of makeup, but they would soon be large enough she couldn't keep it up. Alaina remembered all the times she had it growing up and... thought it better not to remember. But it wouldn't be like that again. More strict measures were needed, so she went to her cousin looking for some advice like a big sister could give.

Cel chuckled as she pressed her fingers lightly against Alaina's forehead, the oil slick of her forehead sure to be the bane of many fledgling seabirds. "I used to get it terribly too," she said, "but I would not worry about it. It will go away on its own. If you were to put anything more on it, it will only irritate it further."

"So you can't do anything for it? Your skin always looks so clean, so pale. How do you do it?"

"Not drowning in dirt and muck like a Fallhaven pig on a weekly basis surely helps, but I already know how you'd feel about me suggesting you stop that. You know, Auntie used to viciously, venomously chide me for even the slightest spot?"

Alaina felt a lump in her throat. It wasn't a stranger to her either.

"She wasn't kind much of the time."

"Oh, but it was worse for me! You got away scott-free, naturally. You didn't have the whole weight of the family carried upon your shoulders, and you..."

Alaina didn't pay much attention to the rest of the conversation. She went home that night. The spread continued.

The next day, Alaina was out buying groceries for the house. She got all manner of things, from healthy vegetables to grains and rice, bread and cheese. It was a busy day. Hundreds of faces were there in the crowd. She could blend in easily. But as she took out her coin purse at the spices stall, she saw a child tugging at her sleeves.

"What's that on your face?" He pointed and looked.

Alaina gave a smile, but was too embarrassed to reply as she proceeded the transaction.

"Oi. Oi! Why is your face like that?"

"It's so gross... mommy, look at that woman's face! She's so gross!"

"Darling, it's rude to point and stare. She must have something wrong with her."

"What if she's sick?"

"Tides, someone's sick? Fuck's sake, I can't be catching anything today..."

The crowd's stirring grew, at least to Alaina, like raucous cacophony. She bowed her head and pushed through it. In the mirror tonight the spread continued.

She wasn't even safe from her potions. She wrapped herself in layers of cloth and masks, to keep the fumes out. But as one unstable mixture exploded onto her, she felt their gruesome infusions soaking into her skin. The spread continued.

Hero work had always empowered her. Father had told her to never go into battle with anything but a calm mind, for a troubled one would only cause trouble. But she defied him. It was battle that stilled her stirrings, to align her body and mind to a blade as straight and sharp as Valour's edge. And she found an easy job, but an important one. In the woods outside the city, a boy had been abducted by a small pack of wolves. She tracked the footprints, the broken bramble, and found their lair a cave. Standing at the entrance with the evening sun backing her, she raised her sword and called clarion.

"Foul beasts!" She cried- knowing they couldn't understand but perhaps 'twas more accurate than she had bargained for. "No more shall you pray on our innocent and young. Show courage for once in your cowardly lives and fight a foe worthy of your ill-gotten prize!"

She'd fought wolves countless times. The strategy was simple, really. They'd circle her as a group, taking turns to strike her from her blind spots before running away again. If she became staggered, two or more would leap to bring her down, before the pack could finish

her off. A strategy was simple- with their strength in numbers, keep all in your line of sight, single them out, give them no quarter, and slowly cut their numbers.

Alaina backed herself against the cave entrance- knowing there could be no wolves behind her, and fought them from this chokepoint. It was narrower at this part than any, so as the wolves approached she swung her blade, catching an eye or their neck as they looked for cracks in her infallible defence. They scampered away, frightened, only to soon come back to join the sortie once more. She managed to catch one in the paw and impale it, stopping it from running away, and swiftly dispatch it through the throat. Quick, flawless, and elegant. She made it to the end without a single scratch.

Until she heard a bubbling gargle behind her.

One wolf hadn't been in the cave with the others. It was too weak. Too sick. Mangy and decaying, it returned once it heard the howls and cries of its fallen kin in some sort of hollow loyalty, and when it smelled the rich ichor of their spilled blood.

Frenzied, the wolf leapt at Alaina and knocked her off balance. With her sword rammed horizontally across its throat as she laid down and tried to force it off her, all she could feel was the oozing drool dripping from its tongue onto her forehead... and the pus leaking from her pustules.

She didn't remember much of what happened after. It was a blur. Maybe she chose to ignore it. Kneeling there after, she saw a clump of tail fur in her hand... she remembered a terrified scream from the child she meant to save, the ache in her arm of a viscous, enraged swing... and the wolfs battered, blasted head, smeared against a rock on the cavern floor.

She met her old friend, the mirror, again that night.

Her face rife, a battlefield strewn with the bodies and blackheads she hated so much.

And why did she hate it so much?

It was stupid. She had to be over it now. She was twenty-three, but those feelings of when she was eleven and fourteen had never left her. It was stupid and pathetic.. or maybe she was just told it was?

A little before she came into her teens, Alaina had her first issues with that red pox. Always having been athletic due to her training and with a face covered in sweat and soaked with the grime of the outdoors, it surely came as no surprise to anyone it would affect her of all people. But it did come as a burden.

"Auntie, my face hurts.." A little Alaina said, plodding into the reading room with a big blotchy forehead.

She raised an eyebrow over her book, never moving.

"That's disgusting." She commented. "Go wash your face." And so Alaina did, but it didn't solve it. Auntie sighed like it was her problem. "That had better be fixed before the next dinner. We were supposed to be meeting the Rutherfords this week. We can't have you going out looking like that. It's a disgrace."

Whenever Alaina got her acne, she did her best to hide it, over and over. But Auntie could always tell.

"It's unsightly."

"Can't you just cover it up?"

"Don't look at me while your face is like that. It's putting me off my tea."

It was always a matter of image. Of looks. Because nobles with acne can't be respected- only the subject of ridicule by the townspeople that were meant to look up to them.

It got so bad she ran to Father once, her tears barely checked, feeling unloved and unloveable.

"Don't cry. If you mean to become a Knight, you'll fare far worse than a few spots on your face. Crying has no use in battle, only to betray weakness to your opponent, to your allies." He said, never smiling, an ever present scowl forming from his brow. " 'Tis vain to care about your appearance so, anyhow. No one will be able to tell when you wear a helmet."

Knights shouldn't feel joy, feel sadness, feel vain or feel pain. They were statues, immutable and unbreaking, just like him. They weren't people. But such is the price to pay for duty. Knights who can't hold back their fickle feelings end up taking their anger out on rabid dogs, and become barely more civilised than the beasts they slay for better men.

Alaina stared in the mirror and saw these ghosts wrap around her, one on each shoulder, their breath hot and their hands heavy. Is this the legacy she inherited? Is this what Wyrther meant? Is this what she was left with? Her trauma and a name, only defined by cruelty and pettiness and hatred for others and for herself? Once, Auntie and Father were shining pillars she couldn't help but climb to reach the peak, but she saw now they only cast shadows too long for her to escape.

And even through all of that, there was one thing she wanted the most. If those ghosts could wrap their hands around her, hold her, tell she was beautiful and strong and that they were proud of her and who she became, then it would be all okay.

But they wouldn't. They'd call her ugly and emotional. They'd say she was overreacting. That she should grow up. That she shouldn't feel at all, and feel every shame when she wasn't who they wanted. They never really cared. And maybe she never really grew up.

Alaina's face was red in the mirror. And with a frustrated scream, she broke it.