

Excerpt from
Dream Within a Dream

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Pinching used to work. Yes- believe it or not! I used pinching quite often. Sometimes I tried screaming. But that always gave the girls quite a scare. On one occasion, I jumped from the top of a building and felt that sensation deep down in my stomach; the feeling of that thing squirming up from the depths of the abdomen, rushing over the heart and stretching out its tiny fingers for the throat. That did the trick once. But usually, if there was a need to wake up, a tiny pinch of the arm and I found myself safe upon my pillow and deeply surrounded by the dusty quilt.

I knew something was wrong the night that pinching didn't work. I was sitting in a peaceful meadow filling my nose with the sour scent of dandelions when I noticed the wolf approaching me. Instantly I dropped the bundle of yellow weeds from my hand and stretched out my left arm for a light pinch. Not to fear, I thought, this dream will soon end. But instead of the ceiling of my room, I glanced up and looked into the eyes of the wolf. I remember standing slowly and stumbling backwards into a tree. That was the moment I opened my eyes to the high ceiling of my room, my body dripping with sweat. As the realization of the dream entered my mind, a familiar poem by Poe whispered in my head:

*All that we see or seem
Is but a dream within a dream.*

The following day seemed to be going well until I pricked my finger as I was sewing a button back onto my uniform, for immediately I winced and found myself staring at the ceiling from my bed. The clock on the rickety nightstand told me that my day would *really* begin in less than two hours. That is when I began to worry.

*I stand amid the roar
Of a surf-tormented shore,*

I tried to confide in one of my schoolmates. As I spoke, she stared at me blankly with obvious disinterest. The only support I received was the "blessing" of a ruler to my wrist- "graciously and thankfully" given to me by the Mistress for talking during class. I felt hopeless. But I convinced myself that the fear was premature.

That night, I pulled the quilt around my body tightly and shut my eyes. Sleep seemed impossible so I began to silently recite the rules of the Academy. I knew every letter, comma, and exclamation point in the rules and I was far beyond the age when girls would receive punishment for not knowing them. The recitation felt so comfortable and relaxing that I lost track of time- until I felt the presence. It was unusual for the Mistress to be checking rooms at such a late hour. I squeezed one eyelid open just enough that I could survey the room. I saw nothing. But the feeling remained.