Wonderful Nightmare

72. Unreal Dream of a Really

I woke in a torture chamber that bore significant resemblance to my bedroom. It couldn't really be my bedroom, though. In my bedroom, my head was never filled with such agonizing pain, nor did my tongue dare to feel so much like an inflated badger's tail in my private 374 sanctum. This was a torture chamber. Now, I only had to wait for the torturers to arrive, and the fun could begin. a³ I waited. á And waited. And waited a little longer. The badger who had substituted his tail for my tongue wiggled his behind, and I groaned as pain lanced through my head. Desperately, I tried to think of any ways I had ever learned to make badger-tails vanish from one's mouth. None came to mind. ä I waited some more. đ Slowly, the piercing pain in my head began to recede a little. As it did, memories of the previous night started to trickle back into my 393 consciousness. The drive to the East End... Dear me, had I really visited that horrible part of the city? It seemed so, the images were there all right, if a little bit jumbled. The dirty pub... the old sailor... the fight... by Jove, a real gun fight! Pity I didn't have a nice, daring scar to show for it that would put any suitors of or the rest of my life. The drive back to 3.2K Empire house in the dark... the o ice... the kiss... My mind froze in mid-thought. a Wait just a minute! a⁵ 26K The kis? I sat bolt upright, and regretted it immediately as a searing surge of pain shot through my skull. Clamping both hands on my eyes in an attempt to shut out the world, I pushed the pain aside and grasped desperately for the vague images of last night. No! Dear God, no...! My hands slipped from my eyes, over my face, down to my parted lips. I was sure they had to be hideously swollen, about twice their normal size. Nothing less than such a gruesome disfigurement would do as a punishment for forsaking all my feminist principles and giving myself, even if just for a moment, willingly over to a man. Shivering, I remembered Mr Ambrose mouth on me... The memory was demanding and gentle, cold and fierce all at the same time. It had been like nothing I had ever felt before. 328 a In a totally disgusting way, of coursereminded myself! **1**4K Ha! As if having Mr Ambrose kiss me could ever excite any other feelings than horror in me. It really had been horrifically horribly terrible, the way his lips had caressed mine, had asked me to open up, to give myself to him and just for a moment forget my aims, my dreams, the world and everything else for the sake of a hot feeling in the pit of my stomach that had rapidly grown into a firestorm. His arms around me had been like iron vices, his eyes dark as the deepest wells, and full of secrets I couldn't hope to fathom. The fire that spread through my body seemed to be drawn to them, to him, out of my body into his, heating us and moulding us together in a silent cyclone of feelings. **823** I realized I was staring dreamily o into the distance, and hurriedly snapped my thoughts back on the here and now, where they belonged. a⁹ As you said before reminded myself once more. Frightfully disgusting and horribly terrible! That's what it was like. Definitely. **574** Absolutely. My hands were clenching the sheets in a steely grip, and only now did I realize that they were shaking. How could I have let myself go like this? How could I have let got of every cherished principle of female independence, for the sake of a few seconds of hot, immensely blissful... 292 a No, not blissfull corrected myself hurriedly, awful! Awful, **Understood? Awful!** 288 a How could I have forgotten myself like this, just for a few seconds of immensely awfulkissing in the arms of a man? å Not just any man, mind, but Mr Rikkard Ambrose! The man who had humiliated me, who had made my life hell for the past few weeks, the man who was determined to get rid of me. But... wasn't he also the man who had let me stay because he had given his word, even though he didn't like it? The man who had given me a job when nobody else would have? The man who had brought adventure and independence into my life? The man whose kiss roused feelings in me that had never, ever before... No! Stop it! I had to stop right there. If I sank into those memories again, I would start thinking thoughts I wouldn't like... or rather would like too damn much.... and would despise... and desire... oh, this was all so confusing! Grabbing the pillow on the bed that most resembled Mr Ambrose's head, I drew back my arm and gave it a good right hook. Unfortunately, the pillow didn't have a great resemblance to the original. I knew, because if it hadn't been before last night, now his chiselled face was branded into my mind forever. No surprise, considering the lengthy opportunity I had had to study it at close quarters. Once more, the scene from last night flashed in front of my eyes: he swooping down towards me, pressing his lips on mine, hard, demanding, so incredibly... 303 Blast him! How dare he! How dare he want me? And how dare I not want him to not want me? Dash it all! I had to face the facts. a⁵ It had really happened. Mr Ambrose had kissed me, kissed me passionately. I remembered it distinctly. I sank forward onto the bed. This was probably the time when I should have started to cry in shame, like a good little lady. Ella probably would have. Personally, I thought my head still hurt too much to make the e ort, but I punched the Mr Ambrose-pillow a few more times for good measure. å Blast, blast! Was there no way it could nothave happened? No way I could get out from under the weight of this horrible catastrophe, and imagined the whole thing? a⁵ No. I distinctly remembered it. a³ But then... I also remembered Napoleon playing chess in the powder room and a dance-troop of little yellow piggies. Maybe my memories of last night weren't quite as reliable as I had thought. A ray of hope broke through the darkness of despair around me. Please I prayed. Please let them be unreliable, please! a¹ Calm down! told myself. You have to think about it logically. a⁵ Easier said than done. Every time my mind strayed back to those few heated moments in the oice, every kind of logic simply vaporized, leaving in its place a hot shiver that usurped power over my brain and tried to have my common sense executed by guillotine. Slowly. Do it slowly. Think back to what happened first, before the ā⁵ kiss... Well, I got drunk. Royally. Epically. The thrumming pain in my skull could attest to that. A smile tugged at the corners of my lips. a⁹ Don't get me wrong—I didn't exactly enjoy the pain. But the realization that I had done something which proper young ladies definitely were not supposed to do gave me great satisfaction. Plus, while doing it, I had actually had fun. I could understand why man drank. There was a certain liberating e ect to it, if you didn't mind yellow piggies too much. I might actually drink again some time though maybe not quite as much. And not the same rotgut they'd sold in that tavern. a What next... Oh yes. The fight. My smile widened. Most of that was a blur, a red and black blur. On some level I knew that I hadn't been of much use, and that irked me a bit, but the thrill of the experience made up for it. 34 Hmm... Could you try and learn how to shoot a gun? Why not? Soon enough, at the end of the month, I would have money of my own. Money with which I could buy anything I wanted – even firearms. Or perhaps solid chocolate. My smile widened even more. What next... á The drive to the o ice. I didn't remember much of that. ā² And then... đ The shower. My smile disappeared, whisked o my face like chalk o a board. a⁶ I had been in the shower – which had been much too cold, by the way - and Mr Ambrose had come in, dressed in a red hunting costume, and he had... Heat flooded my cheeks, and I hurriedly buried my face in my blanket. Dash it, no! I... we... we couldn't have, could we? I mean... how could he even...? That wasn't really possible, was it, that a man and a women could... like that? Dear me! And a er he... O gosh, that was even more... No, he couldn't possibly, we could never have... no! I refused to believe it! It had to have been a dream. I would never have done anything like... well, like what I remembered us doing. Not with him, anyway! And even if I would have been persuaded to by some underhand method, Mr Ambrose would never, ever wear a red hunting costume. He probably didn't own a stitch of coloured clothing. This last point consoled me a great deal. A really great deal. I had actually been wondering, whether he and I had, a er all... no! Laughable. It hadn't happened. It couldn't have happened. a⁸ But did that mean the kiss hadn't happened either? Almost against my will, I reached up to touch my lips again. They didn't feel swollen. If anything, they felt... warm. Surely, a er touching the lips of that silent, cold master of Mammon they would be cold as ice. But I remembered his lips on mine so fiercely! Could all that have been a dream? I thought of Mr Ambrose – of his arctic manner towards me, his attempts at getting rid of me. It must have been a dream. How could this coldest of men, this block of ice, ever feel something for anybody? The warmth of the feeling would surely melt him away and just leave a puddle of meltwater for Mr Stone or Karim to clean up. I couldn't suppress a giggle at the mental image. Him? Feel something? Let alone feel something for m@ Never! He couldn't want me for my money, either. I had none, and he had all he could ever wish for. Well, knowing him, he probably wished for a lot more still. I should have said he had all the money a sane person could ever wish for. ā² Last but not least, the last possible motivation: him wanting me not because of some silly romantic feeling, or for pecuniary reasons, but because he had been overcome by irresistible desire at the sight of me, like the villain in a penny dreadful. I looked up from my blanket into the mirror that hung on the opposite wall. In the glass, I could see my reflection: round cheeks, a perky nose, wild tangles of brown hair and equally chocolate brown eyes, and skin that was turning tanned from all the time I had spent outdoors. No, I was pretty sure that sight wouldn't instil irresistible desire to get their hands on me in anyone, except perhaps a hairdresser with a serious work ethic. I sighed. I was now quite sure the kiss hadn't happened. Well, that was cause for rejoicing, wasn't it? And I wasrejoicing, I was definitely rejoicing a lot I wasn't feeling the least bitsentimental or regretful that it all had turned out to be a hallucination. Now that I knew there had never ever happened anything between us, I could go back to the o ice and face Mr Ambrose with my head held high, knowing that I had not succumb to this supposed weakness of my sex that men propagated, suggesting that we needed men to take care of us. Ha! I was proud of myself. Once more, I knew I was an independent and rational human being and perfectly capable to take care of myself. How wonderful. Absolutely wonderful. In the mirror on the opposite wall, I caught sight of my reflection. It was looking quite dejected, considering how wonderful everything was. Grabbing the Mr-Ambrose-pillow, I hurled it at the wayward å image. "Smile!" I commanded. "Smile already, will you? Everything is **133** spi ing. Just spi ing!" Apparently, my reflection didn't quite agree. I grabbed another pillow, convinced it needed persuading, but then, suddenly, a bolt of pain shot through my head again. "Ohhh!" ā° With a groan, I sank back onto the bed and used the pillow for its conventional purpose instead of ammunition. The pain in my head receded only slowly. Blimey, was this normal a er drinking? Surely not. If it were, not so many people would be doing it. I resolved to make the experiment to test my theory at the earliest opportunity. But not right now. Right now, I was trapped in this torture-chamber facsimile of my bedroom, with no hope of escape. At least there still were no torturers in sight, but that didn't do me much good. My head felt as if were full of red-hot coals anyway. Maybe I would get lucky, and Ella would show up instead of the torturers. Lying buried under the blanket, I touched the sleeve of my nightgown. She must have put me in it, I realized, since I didn't remember changing into it last night. My heart swelled with love for my dear little sister. She had taken such good care of me. Surely, she wouldn't leave me here alone for long, in my terrible state of ill health? No, she would come and fight o any torturers that dared to approach me. From somewhere downstairs, screeching and yelling met my ears. I wondered whether I was starting to hallucinate again. Well, at least there were no yellow piggies this time. Why piggies? Why in God's name had I halluzinated little yellow sus domestica I didn't even like piggies! I didn't even like any animals in general. They either peed on the carpet or bit you. And pigs? I only liked them in slices on a dish, which unfortunately we never got in this stingy household. Oh, my head... My eyes slid shut. Forget hot coals, this was an inferno! 34 "Is she in there?" The commotion downstairs was getting louder, and was now joined by an exuberant voice I knew very well. "Well, Leadfield, is she? Get out of my way, man! We have to see her! No, I don't care what hour it is, or what day or week or century for that matter! We have a victory to celebrate and are missing our general!" Footsteps thundered up the stairs. More than one pair of them. A moment later, the door to my bedroom burst open. I squinted at the doorway, and there she stood: Eve Saunders, a huge grin plastered on her face. Over her shoulder I could see two other figures, one large, one slight. Patsy and Flora. "Lilly!" Eve yelled in triumph. "There you are!" a⁷ "Oh, fabulous," I groaned. "The torturers have finally arrived." a My Dear Lords, Ladies & Gentlemen, **Clap, clap, clap** That's the sound of me, Sir Rob, energetically applauding your spi ing artistic skills! I've already received lots

Yours Truly

Sir Rob

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