

TITLE: Real Dream (Part One of One)

BASED ON: NIGHTS into Dreams (by Sonic Team for the Sega Saturn)

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WARNING: This story contains some violent material, reader discretion is advised.

NOTE: Extra material about this story can be found in the MISCELLANEOUS section of this website.

Sleep.

"Oh, my, how deliriously delicious!" Reala cackles as he excitedly approaches a particularly seductive nightmare or dream. "How beautiful." He hisses as he peers into the sadistic pleasures presented by this vision. Only a soul as twisted as the Nightmaren Reala could be seduced by the anger and violence contained in this nighttime fantasy. "Little dream," Reala giggles as he relishes the sinister aura of it. "Would you like me to help you? It would be such a pity for a want such as you to die come the morning." He coos while cradling the chaotic dream in his arms, giving it a strong red glow.

Saturday evening at the Twin Seeds Mall.

Elliot holds Claris' hand as they force their way through the crowded mall. "C'mon, I don't want to miss this!"

"You don't want to miss this?" Claris repeats incredulously. "Since when do you have such an interest in fashion shows?" She inquires while following him through the mass of people.

"Ever since I heard that Joanna was going to be in it!" Elliot replies wolfishly as he continues his drive through the people towards the mall's court area, where the Middle School Fashion Show is to be held. "I heard she's gonna' be wearing a real knock-out dress during her run!"

"Oh, great, that's how I want to spend my day, gazing at some girl you have the hots for." Claris mutters icily, slowing down in order to aggravate Elliot's hormonally motivated advance.

Elliot looks back and tightens his grip on his friend's hand. "Don't worry, you're the only girl for me!" He says, then gives her a friendly wink. "But she's pretty hot you know."

Claris lets off another groan. "Fine. Fine."

The two of them eventually make their way to the noisy bustle of people crowded around the stage. Worming their way through, the two kids manage to pull up just in front of it. "Oh, great, we'll get an awesome view now!" Elliot declares cheerily.

Claris looks around, and notices that most of the people pressed up at the runway are boys from Elliot's school.

"Oh, it looks like all of your peers have a similar interest in girls' clothing." She says sarcastically.

"Hey, it's for a good cause, Claris! Yeah, okay, so Macy's does some exploitation of young girls and makes off with tons of publicity. Still, they're going to donate some money to the school and it's great work for Joanna's fashion club! It's getting them lots of exposure!"

Claris chuckles. "Key word being 'expose,' right?" She looks at Elliot and notices that he has not picked up on-or simply doesn't appreciate-her attempt at humor. "Okay, fine! You and your ... friends," she begins as she looks at the other boys gathered around the stage. "can stay here and drool over Jennifer."

"Joanna."

"Whatever! Anyways, I'll be going ... anywhere." She shrugs hopelessly and begins to try to make her way out of the crowd and to a store. Meeting with difficulty in breaching the wall of people, however, she sighs and turns back to Elliot who has taken up a conversation with one of his classmates.

"Hey! Did you see her on Thursday? When she was wearing that mini-skirt? Oh, wow, that was great!"

"Uh-huh? Neat." Elliot replies. Then, putting on a broad smile: "Well, I have gym class with her! Yup, every day I get to see her-"

Claris walks up behind him and coughs loudly in his ear.

"-prove that women are capable of being such wonderful athletes. Yessiree, she's an impressive opponent in dodge ball." Elliot shifts gears instantaneously, nervously looking at Claris through the corner of his eye.

Claris smiles amiably for his statement. "It's going to be impossible to get to any stores. It looks like I'm stuck up here. Who would've thought that the city would be so interested in young girls modeling?"

"Mainly just family and friends of family here, plus a couple of school faculty. Maybe a little press." The other boy says matter-of-factly. "And, of course, every boy in our school!" He adds, his tongue hanging out cartoonishly. He and Elliot high-five each other and laugh.

Claris places her head in her hands and moans: "Too many bloody noses."

A hush falls over the crowd. "It's starting" and "be quiet" can be heard whispered among the audience. The constant drone of the mall's customers seems to also have been muted in anticipation. Claris watches bemused by the ardent attention being paid by her peers. Even her "friendboy," Elliot, is completely fixated on the stage. She

feels she would laugh at all of them were she not so tired all of a sudden. Her eyes begin to grow heavier, but she tries to fight it. Curious as to what this goddess-turned-eighth-grader looks like, she looks up at the stage along with the boys-although with considerably less energy.

She's aware of the loud music being played, the emcee talking-up the clothes that are being advertised and the girls walking the runway, but it all seems to move almost in slow motion and as if heard through earmuffs to Claris as she feels her eyelids grow heavier. She wobbles around a little, still standing, and turns her head to Elliot. She's about to speak, but notices his eyes suddenly widen and his mouth gape in amazement. Mumbling something about the star now being on stage, Claris turns her head up and sees Joanna.

She is rather pretty. She's well-tanned, with shoulder-length black hair and big, brown eyes. Claris looks at her chest a moment. Realizing that the girl is "real" she feels she can suddenly understand why these boys are so interested in seeing this Joanna in her low-cut and very high-cut black dress. Claris thinks to herself that this fourteen-year-old could rather easily pass for an eighteen-year-old. Claris notes the girl's big smile and sexy demeanor. "Maybe if I looked like her." Claris begins to lazily think to herself. She closes her eyes, and slumps forward.

Just then, her weariness is brought to an end.

A sharp explosion snaps Claris out of her lethargy. She pulls back from the stage and her eyes flash open. Tensing up, her fingernails dig into the wooden stage that they had been gripping. She looks up, and sees the stunning Joanna thrown to the ground. Claris stares in disbelief at the girl's almost slow-motion descent, her head trailed by a ribbon of crimson. As the body strikes the floor of the runway, Claris impulsively screams out in horror-only one of a hundred let out by the shocked audience within a moment of Joanna's tragic death.

Monday afternoon at Claris' school.

The tragedy that occurred two days ago was all over the news for the rest of the weekend. She was on the phone with Elliot while they watched much of the coverage. Like the rest of the city, there was an overwhelming feeling of disbelief. Both of them unconsciously hoped that during a newscast, Joanna would appear, alive and well, and explain that the apparent assassination (as it was being labeled because the "execution" had been performed, one interviewed officer stated: "With absolute expertise. No witnesses, no clues, nothing.") was no more than a psychotic publicity stunt.

Clariss can only imagine how down everyone at Elliot's school must be right now. As she sits in the cafeteria of her school, she sullenly pokes at her mashed potatoes with her plastic fork while holding her heavy head up with her left arm. A similar spirit of loss has descended on her school as well. Joanna apparently had many friends among Clariss' classmates. The students are also sensitive to so tragic a death of anyone their age.

The whole cafeteria seems subdued compared to its usual clatter. She can hear the dead girl being discussed in low voices. Clariss looks up, and sees her two friends talking across the table. Either of them occasionally takes furtive glances at her, in hopes of catching a glimpse of a lapse of depression on Clariss' part.

"You going to be okay?" One of them finally asks, looking at Clariss directly. "I heard-" she begins, then pauses, and continues in a lower tone. "That you were actually there when it happened. What was it like?"

Clariss looks at her with an expression bordering on disgust, but she does not answer.

"Oh, uhm ... sorry." The friend babbles, confused. Then, leaning closer to the other girl, she whispers into her ear: "Clariss can be so weird sometimes."

The other girl nods in response and they continue to eat their lunches.

Tired, not physically, but emotionally, Clariss abruptly stands up, taking her tray with her. The noise caused by her chair being pushed back draws a couple of curious looks from other classmates, who then return to their meals and overwhelmed feelings. As Clariss walks towards the trash bin so she can clear off her tray, she passes a table that has had slightly more lively conversation during the meal. She overhears some of their words:

"So, you, like, were steady with her, huh?" One boy prods with a hushed, weasely voice.

"Yeah. She was a hottie." A larger boy responds rather brusquely.

"How far did you get?"

"Ah, she was just a tease. Only second base." Despite the feigned modesty, it is a boasting statement.

"How long had it been since you'd talked to her?"

"'Bout a month. She was history to me already."

"What put an end to it?"

"Ah, I punched her little brother." Another, albeit disturbing, boast.

"You did, why'd you do that? ... Dude?"

The larger boy suddenly begins coughing violently. He puts his big hands to his throat and tries to call out for help. His friend gets the idea and yells for one of the aides to come over. The school employee makes a gesture to one of his cohorts, signaling to retrieve the school nurse and bring her here. That man departs the cafeteria and the other one dashes to the boy, now lying on the ground with his face turning an unrealistic bluish color.

Claris hears the commotion and turns around, still gripping her lunch tray. She sees the school aides huddled around the boy, one of them attempting to pick him up to perform the Heimlich maneuver. Unfortunately, the boy is rather muscular for someone his age, and his coughing is so intense that the man can't get a hold of him.

Claris looks on the scene with a face frozen with fear. "No," she says to herself dumbly. She's pushed aside as the nurse runs into the room and moves towards the stricken boy. The nurse tries to examine him, but he is acting so wildly that she just can't help him.

A moment later, he is beyond help. He goes limp in the aide's arms, the nurse leaning over him. Her face becomes drawn out and sad, the aide closes his eyes tight to fight back the tears. He lets go of the boy, and lays him down on the ground. The nurse feels for a pulse, choking back a sob, and shakes her head sorrowfully. All of the students gathered in the dining hall are frozen, their eyes fixated on the dead boy. The approaching ambulance can be heard not far away.

Claris drops her tray, the sudden noise shattering the disturbing stillness. "It's following me." She says to herself weakly as she places her right hand over her heart. "Oh, god." She babbles as she backs out of the cafeteria, unnoticed by everyone, and into the main hallway.

The hall is abuzz. Claris hears kids exchanging shouts with each other, communicating the ghastly event which has just taken place in their midst. She finally hears the dead child's name: Jacob King. She remembers the name vaguely. He was a class bully and a football player. A good one, too, so he was still very popular despite his often-hurtful behavior with his peers. She hears them tell that the nurse has been overheard saying that it appears Jacob died from his extreme allergy to garlic. He was very allergic to it, but there was some in his food. He had never made such a mistake like that before.

"He was murdered." Claris thinks to herself. "Just like Joanna. Death is following me. Why?" Tears well up in her eyes and the color drains from her face.

"Well, the guy was an idiot. I'll bet he was just stupid enough to have put some garlic powder in his food by mistake. Dumb jock probably thought it was salt or something. Good

riddance." She hears one boy venomously shout.

In amazement at such coldness, Claris looks around the hall for the speaker of those words. Her eyes meet his for only a second. They're not what she would have expected: they're brown and warm. She expected the eyes of a monster. She doesn't get to see his face, however, because the world suddenly goes dark around her.

Monday night at Claris' home.

"Thank you, Mrs. Sinclair." Elliot says politely as Claris' mother takes his jacket.

"I'm happy you came over, Elliot. Claris had a very tough time at school. She fainted in the hallway just after seeing the ... incident. The nurse was very worried. After the weekend she's had, she must be absolutely traumatized. It'll be good for her to have a friend with her." Claris' mother says with a concerned tone. "She's in her room, I think she's awake. Just go on up. If there's anything you'd like, please don't be afraid to ask." She watches Elliot ascend the stairs, absently wringing his coat tensely in her hands.

"Claris?" Elliot whispers as he cracks open the door to her room. He quietly tip-toes inside. The lights are on, and he can see Claris sitting up in her bed-propped on the pillows piled against the headboard-with a dazed, blank look on her face. Her hands are calmly set in her lap. Elliot takes the chair that she keeps before her work desk, and sets it down beside her bed. He sits in it and gently takes Claris' hand in his.

"I heard about what happened at your school today. I came over here right away. Do you want to talk?"

Claris turns her face towards him and slowly shake head. "No." She says in a hoarse whisper. Then she thinks a moment. "Death is following me."

"Death isn't following you. You're one of the liveliest, happiest girls in the world. Nothing like that could be trailing you." Elliot says, desperately hoping to comfort her.

Claris looks at him disparagingly. "Then how come people keep dying around me?" She asks him miserably.

"You're not the reason." Elliot states rather dryly. He looks over her. "You look tired. How long have you been just ... sitting in bed like this?"

"Oh, since I was sent home from school. An hour or three." A silent moment passes between them. Then: "I tried sleeping ... but it was like I was too tired to sleep. After I blacked out at the school ... " She shrugs her

shoulders. "I felt very tired when Joanna was killed, too. Right now, though. I don't want to sleep."

"Are you afraid that you'll have bad dreams?"

"I'd be frightened if I didn't have bad dreams after what I've seen."

Elliot ponders that. "Oh," he says, finally understanding. "No, you're not heartless, Claris. Not at all. In fact, I think it would be best if you had good dreams. You shouldn't have to be plagued by this awfulness."

"Maybe with you here, I'll be alright." Claris smiles weakly at him.

"Yeah." Elliot squeezes her hand. "I've had enough bad dreams for the both of us. You'll be fine. Just get some rest."

Claris perks up and stares at him inquisitively. "What do you mean 'bad dreams'?"

"Nothing. Just the sorts of dreams that you were afraid of having."

"Elliot, we always talk about those kinds of things. What were these dreams like?" Her voice now has an edge to it.

Elliot draws away from her a little. "I keep on seeing their deaths. Only ... " He bites his lower lip a moment. "No, not their deaths. Now that I think about it, I don't think I see them at all."

"What do you see?"

"Some boy. He's uh ... " Elliot thinks a second. "Maybe a little taller than me. He's got brownish blond hair, uhm ... brown eyes. He's wearing ... " Elliot's eyes widen. "Your school's uniform. Just after Joanna died, I had this dream. He was standing over a girl in a dress like hers, I guess it was her. Someone's body, anyways. He was holding a gun in his hands."

Claris cups her hand over her mouth in surprise.

"And last night. I had a similar dream, only he was holding a small can, or something. And there was a dead boy at his feet." He looks away from her. "A premonition?" He asks himself wonderingly. "But, anyway, I can't see the dead peoples' faces. Only the boy standing over them. But, I just knew that the girl was Joanna."

"Get my yearbook from last school year. It should be on my desk somewhere." She tells him.

Elliot nods and gets out of the chair, jumping over to Claris' desk. He starts shoving around the papers and magazines piled on it. "Here it is!" He shouts triumphantly, then shrinks in embarrassment at his outburst. He walks over to Claris' bedside and sits down again.

"Find him!" Claris commands Elliot.

He begins thumbing through it, scanning over the pages of faces.

Elliot rapidly flips through the pages, scrutinizing each person's portrait. He eventually stops. Jabbing his index finger onto one of the pictures, he declares: "Ah ha! Theodore Jones!" As he reads the name beneath the small black and white portrait.

Claris leans over to see the picture. "My goodness! That's the boy. He has the same eyes." She pensively bites down on her index finger. "I saw him today. Just after Jacob died." She closes the book and looks at Elliot. "I fell asleep the instant I looked him in the eyes!"

"This is weird." Elliot states. After a second's reflection, he smiles at Claris dumbly. "Oh yeah. Never mind what I said." He adds a nervous chuckle.

"Tomorrow," Claris begins with resolve. "I'm going to find out what his part is in all this."

Tuesday afternoon at Claris' school.

"We need to talk." Claris says sternly as she sits down across from Ted Jones' lonely seat in the cafeteria.

Ted eyes her cautiously. "This is unexpected and unprecedented." He comments dryly, leaning back and folding his arms over his chest defensively. "But very welcome, I must say. You're not an unattractive girl."

Claris blushes involuntarily, but suddenly feels a wrenching in her stomach upon the realization that she may have been flirted-with by a killer. She makes tight fists with her hands, hanging by her sides. "Yesterday, after what happened in school—"

"Yes, yes, Jacob. Awful shame, really." Ted eagerly says.

"I saw you."

"Yes, I believe you did."

"I went unconscious just after seeing you."

"Funny coincidence, no? You must have been in shock about what you saw."

Claris moans in frustration. "I heard you say something rather cold-hearted when you found out about his death."

"Well, to be rather honest, I didn't care much for that guy. He was a bully. The creep tormented my friends and I." Ted sniffs haughtily. "I don't know why all these ... people," he waves

his hand in a gesture indicating the unaware lunch eaters in the cafeteria. "looked up to the S.O.B. so much, or why they're so sad."

"Well, it's always sad when someone so young dies." Claris remarks.

"Is it? I'll bet that if I died right now, nobody but the few friends I have would care. But for him," the word is spoken with venom. "They're all speaking with low voices, eating slowly, you can tell, they're all depressed about this guy's death, and he was a jerk! Just like when that girl died. It's pathetic, really."

"Did you know her?" Claris asks, leaning towards him.

"Who?"

"That girl, Joanna."

"Are you working for the school newspaper or something? Why are you asking me these questions?" He turns his head a bit and considers Claris through the corner of his eyes. "Ooooh." He says slowly, on the verge of a realization. "You ... you think I killed them? Who are you?"

"My name is Claris Sinclair." She answers curtly. "And no, I don't think you killed them. That's absurd! But ... I think you're somehow related to these deaths."

"Related to them? How? Look, I didn't like these people. And I sure as hell am not going to miss them. But I have nothing to do with these deaths. You're insane!" Ted says in a hushed shout, clearly agitated.

"No! No!" Claris blurts. "No, it's just that. Uhm," she nibbles on her lower lip a second. "What have your dreams been like lately?"

Ted pulls back. "This is going to sound nuts to you, I'm sure. But I've been seeing some insane jester-like guy." He says guardedly, then adds in a nervous laugh. "Weird, huh?" He relaxes a little.

"Yeah, weird." Claris repeats, dazedly, and suddenly as far away from comfortable as humanly possible.

Theodore Jones' house. Tuesday night.

Claris stands outside of Ted's house, just beyond the classic white picket fence bordering the front lawn.

Elliot waves to Claris, hefting his backpack assuredly. He approaches her and she gives him a light hug. "I hope you know what you're doing, Claris." Elliot says to her, a bit irritably.

"So do I." She replies helplessly.

Elliot nods to her and then turns around. He raises his right arm and waves to a minivan idling nearby. "It's okay, dad! I'll be at home tomorrow!" He shouts to the vehicle, and it starts to move away hesitantly. He turns back to Claris. "You have no idea how hard it was to convince my father to bring me here on a school night!"

"We have to be here." Claris pats him on the back.

"Tell me why again." Elliot asks her skeptically as he begins to walk towards the front door with Claris following him closely.

Claris touches her index finger to her chin. "I don't know exactly why Elliot! It's just, y'know, a feeling. I mean, after what we've been through. We're ... special somehow. Dreams aren't the same for us as they are for everybody else. With Reala coming into our world and killing people, here and now, it has to be related to us one way or another. I thought it best that we both get together with this boy."

Elliot sighs. "So a sleepover, huh?"

Claris puts her hands on her hips. "Yeah, a sleepover. You have a better idea? Be near him when he sleeps. Oh yeah, and let's be quiet going in, his parents are already asleep."

Elliot looks over his shoulder at her. "How can we be sure that this Ted kid has anything to do with it?"

"I've talked with him. He's ... he's angry."

They halt just in front of the door. Elliot points at a seat on the porch. He sits down on it and pats the surface next to him, signaling to Claris to sit beside him. "What do you mean?"

"I mean he's angry Elliot. It scares me a little. He was bullied by Jacob, he had some run-in with Joanna. He was so angry with them. I was scared when he started talking about that stuff. He wanted them dead. He wanted revenge."

"Who else does he hate?"

"I compiled a list while talking to him. There's a few people. He seems pretty upset with his parents, too. I feel sorry for him, in a way." Claris feels herself going numb.

Elliot leans his head back against the wall of the house and sighs deeply, the crisp night air forming a puff beyond his mouth. "Do you ever think about what happened? You know, with NiGHTS, Nightopia, all that?"

Claris smiles at him. "Every time I think of you, actually."

Elliot cocks an eyebrow. "Which I would hope is often."

"It was so scary for me at first. But in the end, it was so magical. Flying near the tower and all that. People only dream of having an adventure like that!" She lets off a light giggle. "Which is what it was all about, I guess."

"Hrmm." Elliot thinks. "I often think about the mechanics of it. Parallel universes, stuff like that."

Claris shakes her head. "You are a basketball player, right?"

"Well, yeah, but think about it. How all of those things worked out. Red dream energy. Remember, NiGHTS said we were special. Red dream energy was rare. I guess that bravery in a dream would be hard to come by. It's hard to find bravery when faced with a nightmare, otherwise it wouldn't be one; and in a normal dream, there's no need for bravery."

"But we had it."

"Yeah. That's what made us so special to Nightmaren. That's why he did what he did. Giving us those nightmares and all. He was trying to take our red dream energy from us so that he could be stronger."

Claris leans forward tensely. "Oh my god."

"What?"

"Wizemen, he ... he couldn't just take away our courage or make us fail. He could only influence us! By making me see nightmares of failing at the audition, I would lose confidence-courage-and fail in real life." She looks at Elliot gravely. "Why should Reala be able to do anything more? He can't kill anybody in this world." The color leaves her face again.

"And he'd be able to give Ted the courage to follow-through with his dreams by taking the red energy from us. Which is why you got so sleepy around the deaths." Elliot finishes her thought with the same tone of dread as Claris spoke with.

"He did kill them." Claris says to Elliot in a whisper. She stands up and runs towards the door, banging against it.

"Oh Jesus, he just seemed to get even angrier when I talked to him about his parents! He's been alone with them in there!" She twists the doorknob furiously, but the door doesn't open. "HE LOCKED IT!"

Elliot frowns and looks around the porch. He stares at the big window. "Well, no choice," he says as he swings his bag around and then throws it into the glass, shattering it. Elliot leaps into the house through the broken window, appearing inside the living room. He looks around cautiously. "Nobody in here." He says to himself, getting out of his crouching position as he skulks over to the door and opens it, letting Claris in.

"It's so quiet in here." She whispers to him, trying to keep the terror she feels from being heard.

The two wander into the hallway, and Claris points to a large door. "That's the master bedroom." She says to him. The two approach the door and open it slowly. Quiet an entrance as they wanted to make, it insists on making a low, moan-like creak that makes the kids cringe. They enter the bedroom, and take a moment for their eyes to adjust to the darkness. Claris hears the light snoring of Ted's father and sees his mother's chest rise and fall with each breath. She turns to Elliot, about to indicate to him that they should get out, but sees the stunned look on his face. She follows his eyes to the nightstand next to the father's side of the bed. She sees the glowing red digits of his electric alarm clock, a glass of water ... and glinting in the moonlight a large, very sharp, kitchen knife. Claris lets out a short, surprised squeak, but stifles herself, and then pulls Elliot out of the room with her. They close the door softly behind them.

"They probably don't take knives to bed with them, do they?" Elliot asks her.

"Of course not! Nobody does! I think Ted was going to ... " She cuts herself off, horrified at the thought.

"Why didn't he?"

"I don't know! I haven't gotten too tired lately, though. Maybe ... maybe he wasn't able to drain our courage, so he couldn't do it!" Claris' voice rises. "Where is he?" She looks around, both angry and frightened, and sees the light coming into the hall from under the bathroom door. "Ah! There he is."

The kids throw-open the door and step in. There, they see Ted, lying face down in the half-filled bathtub, and an empty bottle of sleeping pills dropped on the floor. Elliot and Claris approach him, and try to jar him awake, to no avail. Claris looks away, crying. Elliot closes the shower curtain and steps into the hallway.

"Maybe remorse was all he needed." He thinks to himself as he walks to the kitchen to call the police.

Reala lurches forward, off of his stone throne of nightmares. His body thrown on the ground, he begins to jerk around and shake convulsively. Incredible pain wracks his body, he feels as though his heart has been torn from him.

Reala smiles wickedly as he props himself up with his arms and retches in anguish. He sees NiGHTS out of the corner of his eye, watching the scene stoically.

"A triumph, is it not? Wizemen never achieved so much. Claris and

Elliot will have nightmares for some time to come, as will have of the children in their schools. Feeding me. Isn't it beautiful? Oh, it's a regret I have that the boy could not have continued to perform so well, but he still accomplished much." Reala taunts NiGHTS with his contemptible bragging.

NiGHTS shakes his head sorrowfully. "You are a Nightmaren." He says without the usual tone of familiarity that he used to share with Reala.

Wake.