

Something To Believe In

By Andrew Descheneaux

Liana Annabelle Grey gazed down upon the world she had created. It wasn't very large—just one city and a few scattered towns—but it was ever-growing. With each passing night, there were more people in the city and towns, and more land surrounding them as those same people journeyed outward. The distant mountains which began as mirages became real as those who had merely watched from afar began to take their first steps onto them. Trees which started as a distant haze gained detail and texture as explorers began to climb them. Oceans which stretched even farther than the eye could see as people began to sail them.

The world she imagined, slowly crafted in her dreams, became something more. Something infinitely beautiful as she gazed downward from the imaginary stars in the sky—the people below hadn't advanced to the point of exploring them yet, so they stayed in their ethereal state thus far.

Her perspective changed in the blink of an eye, and she now watched over a lecture taking place in the city's university as a kindly old professor taught algebra to a class of eager students. Another change brought her to a dark hall where a group of dark-robed sorcerers drew a magic circle on the floor to summon a being of great power, and she watched as a demon from a dark realm appeared to do their bidding. A third shift brought her back to the previous aerial view of the entire world.

She wasn't sure why, but Liana always found these scenes far more engaging than anything from her actual school. Something about watching the people in her dream develop just captured her attention in a way that nothing else in the waking world could even come close to.

Moreover, anything learned in the dream world could also be applied to real life. She didn't know why, but all the knowledge contained in those lectures and other demonstrations the dream people had was retained whenever she woke up. Even the feats of magic like the dark ritual she witnessed, but she hadn't tried to replicate things like that so far.

"And yet," She sighed, hearing distant voices at first before the entire world below vanished like smoke. "It's only a dream."

Everyone always told her that it couldn't possibly be real. That the things she learned inside were just her mind's way of processing what she already knew and she just had an overactive imagination. That it was all fake, a delusion she had to move past if she wanted to function properly in society.

That she was crazy.

"Lia!" A shrill voice interrupted Liana's thoughts as she rubbed her eyes in bed, sitting up and shaking her frazzled brown hair. "Time to wake up, you have school today!"

"Yes, I know," Liana muttered, looking down at her slender, empty hands before pushing off her blankets to get ready for school, the scenes from the other world still lingering in her vision all the while. *They all say it's just a dream, but why does it seem so real?*

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"What is this?" A woman's voice sounded above Liana as she tried to finish her breakfast.

"Hmm?"

Liana looked up from her cereal in confusion at the woman standing before her. She wasn't very tall, but made up for it with an expression of severity framed by long brown hair and piercing blue eyes. In her hand was a test paper marked with Liana's name and a "B-".

She continued to stare at Liana for a few tense moments before the latter sighed and gave a response.

"It's my geography test," She said, turning back down to shovel another spoonful of cereal into her mouth. Unfortunately, she was interrupted by her mother's hand shooting out and seizing the spoon before it could make any real progress.

"Is there a problem?" Liana asked, glaring back at her mother as her fingers tightened around the spoon.

"No, everything's fine. In fact, I had a wonderful day yesterday. I went out to dinner with my friends, my husband greeted me with a kiss when he returned from work, and even my somewhat-adequate daughter came home and showed me how she got an A+ on her test yesterday," She answered, her voice filled with faux-sweetness as she gripped the spoon even tighter in response to Liana's own attempts to wrench it away. "Ah, wait, perhaps that last part was just my *imagination*."

"Maybe it was, mother. In fact, I don't remember showing you that test at all. It should've been in my room, with the rest of my *private belongings*." Liana growled, the spoon now visibly bent from the sheer force each party was exerting on it.

"Hmph," Her mother scoffed, letting go of the spoon and slapping the test paper on the table by Liana's cereal. "You'll get your precious privacy when your grades improve."

Liana looked down at the now milk-stained paper sitting next to her breakfast. Geography was her worst subject, but it wasn't abysmal either. Her mother just didn't tolerate anything less than an "A", or maybe an "A-" if she was feeling particularly generous. Every other subject was up to par for that woman's "somewhat-adequate" standards, but anything less than total perfection always brought down her wrath.

Really, the only reason why I didn't reach that grade was because the dream world's geography is completely different. She thought, looking down at the mistakes marked in red on the test. *I would've aced it with my eyes closed otherwise.*

"Truly, I can't understand what could've caused this. Whatever this issue is, it must be serious. Perhaps you need another visit to Doctor Mendell," Her mother said, smiling in satisfaction as Liana's eyes went wide at that particular name. "After all, he was a tremendous help the last time you had those mental issues. It truly does take an expert to disabuse someone of such problematic delusions, doesn't it?"

With that, she turned around and left, leaving Liana shaking in her chair with an explosive mixture of rage and dread in her heart.

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"Miss Grey, are you paying attention?" A rather stern tone sounded in Liana's ear, bringing her out of her absentminded reverie as she glanced up at the disappointed-looking teacher standing beside her desk.

"Uh..." She began, glancing at the blackboard for a few seconds before responding. " $X = 5$, right?"

"That's—" The teacher began, turning toward the board himself before faltering. "—correct."

He stood there awkwardly for a few more seconds as Lia looked up at him.

"Well, uh, please continue paying attention, Miss Grey. We have a lot to cover today." He said, walking back up to the front of the class before resuming his lesson.

Liana immediately stopped paying attention as she recalled what her mother said that morning, which occupied far more of her attention than Mr. Whatshisname's algebra lesson. Actually, she probably wouldn't have gotten that answer right if it weren't for previous nights spent in the dream world, like the one last night where she listened to that particular lecture on algebra. To her, any actual classes in the real world were pretty much redundant by now.

But that meant she had nothing to actually do at the moment. She wasn't allowed to do something openly distracting like use her phone or read a book, and talking to her classmates would also land her in trouble for making too much noise.

Not that there's much to talk about. She thought, twirling her pencil in her fingers. Ever since the dream world had manifested, Liana had grown even more distant from her peers. It wasn't like there was anything wrong with them, but there was nothing else that caught her interest. Every other topic, like boys, activities, shows, or the latest drama was just *boring* now.

Of course, there was also how nobody wanted to talk with the crazy girl who believed her dreams were real, but that was always a given for her.

Nobody except for him. She thought, an image of a shy boy with black hair and the occasional dark circles around his eyes.

Class quickly came to an end and the dismissal bell rang to signal the end of the school day. Liana was the first to rush out the door because she already put her things away during the lecture itself, to the teacher's helpless chagrin.

With a clear destination in mind, she made her way through the crowd of students eager to reclaim what was left of the day for themselves, skillfully navigating her way toward the back entrance where she usually exited the building. As she grew closer, her eyes lit up with joy when she spotted a certain black-haired figure lingering near the door.

"Lee, wait up!" She shouted, picking up her pace as she caught up with him. Lee looked back in surprise, seemingly not expecting her to show up. Of course, Liana knew full well that he wouldn't linger here if he didn't think she'd arrive.

"Hey, Lia," He said, his lips slightly curling upward. "How's it going?"

"Oh, same old," She said, shrugging as she tossed her hair back. "Mr. Whathisface gave another algebra lecture in the last period, wanting me to pay attention, the works."

"You'd think they'd stop bothering after the first few months, especially with your grades," He said with a chuckle. "How do you manage it, anyway? Everyone else in that class always talks about how much of a hardass Mr. Pelker is when it comes to that stuff."

"I already told you, Lee," Liana replied, perfectly deadpan.

Lee's cheeks flushed slightly at her response, and he turned his head away.

"Right, the dream." He muttered, seemingly very interested in his shoes as they walked toward a mostly-empty sidewalk.

Liana shrugged and stared ahead, leaving him to his thoughts while contemplating her own plans. Lee was always skeptical when it came to the dream world, but Liana didn't blame him. It was enough that he actually listened, even if he didn't truly believe her words.

She much preferred it over her parents' reaction, anyway.

A few more minutes passed as they continued their walk before Lee mustered up the courage to speak again.

"Listen, I'm sorry. It's just kinda hard for me to grasp, y'know?" He said, tentatively looking toward her before averting his eyes again.

"It's fine, Lee," Liana said, her face adorned with a gentle smile as she placed her hand on his shoulder. "You don't need to worry about that."

"Oh, t-thanks, Lia," He said, looking down at the ground again for an entirely different reason this time. Not that it helped, as Liana could clearly see how bright red his ears were.

"Much appreciated." She said, trying her best to suppress a playful giggle after seeing Lee in this state.

They continued to walk in silence for a few more minutes as Lee's face returned to a normal color. Liana's mind drifted back to what happened at breakfast that morning, and her mother's threat.

I can't go back there, I'd rather die than spend another moment like that. She thought, unknowingly tightening her grip on the straps of her backpack. *I'm not crazy.*

"Hey, is there something wrong?" Lee asked, interrupting Liana's thoughts. His eyes drifted to her clenched fists. "You seem a bit... tense."

Liana let out a weary sigh, looking down at the ground herself.

"Mom said it might be good for me to see Doctor Wendell again," She said, her voice devoid of emotion.

Lee's eyes flashed with anger at that name.

"Are you fucking serious? Did that woman learn *nothing* from what happened last time?" He shouted, his own fists clenched as he continued his angry tirade. "All that fucking quack knows is how to traumatize children and make them repress themselves so they can take more abuse from their shitty parents so they don't have to deal with their kids actually standing up for themselves for once!"

"It's alright, Lee," She said, interrupting him. "There's nothing you can do, anyway."

"It's not fucking 'alright'!" He shouted back, undeterred. "Nobody should have to go through that, not you, not anyone. She probably did it because of some school thing, right? Didn't get a perfect score on a test?"

He's certainly perceptive. Liana thought, sighing again as she looked away and pondered her seemingly hopeless situation. She knew that no matter what she did, it was only a matter of time

before her mother sent her back to that doctor. Either her grades would inevitably slip in some way, she'd find out about her daughter's continued interest in the dream world, or some other capricious reason would have her gone with one phone call. That woman always followed through on her threats.

Her mind went back to the scenes of many nights past she witnessed in the dream world, seizing on one in particular. *Maybe there is something I can do.*

"Actually, I think there is something you can help me with," She said, interrupting Lee's rant yet again. "Meet me in the woods in a few hours, the usual spot."

"Usual spot? We haven't been to the woods together in years..." He said, trailing off as he tried to figure out what she meant before widening his eyes in realization. "Wait, you mean that giant rock cliff from when we were little?"

"Bingo!" Liana said, flashing a smile as she recalled those idyllic moments playing together as children. Back when things like an entire world in her dreams weren't considered delusions worthy of being committed to a mental ward.

"I mean, sure I can go, but why?" He asked, clearly bewildered at her sudden request.

"You'll see when we get there," Liana said, winking mysteriously as she concocted a plan in her mind. "If we do this right, it might just solve all my problems in one fell swoop."

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Lee Fisher gasped in exhaustion as he finally reached the top of the rocky cliff face and rolled onto his back. He actually thought finding it would be hard and climbing it would be the easier part, but it was the other way around. Despite not having visited or even thought about it for years, he remembered the way to it like he'd been there every day in the intervening time.

It's not actually that big. He thought, comparing the cliff he climbed to the one in his memory. *Maybe it just seemed that way to us as kids.*

On the other hand, even though the cliff wasn't very tall and he was older and taller now, it was still much more tiresome to actually climb the thing than he recalled.

"Was it always this tough to climb?" He wondered out loud, not really paying attention to his surroundings.

"I think you just need to work on your arms," A light, teasing voice came from his right. "It's been a while, after all."

“Ugh, shut up, Lia,” Lee muttered, pushing himself up from the ground and facing the girl who invited him here. He had another remark prepared, but it died in his throat as he took in the scene in front of him.

Draped over the rocky, leaf-covered ground was a large tarp with a giant symbol drawn on it. Lee wasn’t sure what its origins were, but it looked very similar to a “summoning circle” used in movies and games whenever some kind of dark cultists were summoning a demon or something similar. Not helping was how Liana was setting up candles at various points, and had already decorated it with different kinds of powders that emitted a strong herbal scent.

“Is this what you wanted my help with?” Lee asked, his throat tightening as he watched his best friend diligently position and light each candle at different points in the ritual circle.

“Yep,” Liana said, carefully adjusting the position of a newly-lit candle. “I need another person to do it properly.”

“Uh, Lia, this is a bit...” Lee began, unsure of what to even say after being confronted by the sight before him. She said her plan would help solve all her problems at once, but he had no idea that this was what she had in mind.

“I know,” She said, cutting off his unformed response. “It probably wasn’t what you were expecting, but please... just do it for me.”

Another pause hung in the air between them for a little while before she continued.

“I know you don’t believe in it, but you can pretend like usual,” She pleaded, staring directly into Lee’s eyes. “One more time.”

Lee recalled all the previous moments they shared together, with Liana describing the world in her dreams in great detail and him listening intently. It all seemed like make-believe to him, but he knew more than anyone how much she truly believed in every word she said when it came to that world. How, at times, she saw it as more real than the one they experienced while awake.

And how, despite his inability to truly share that belief, she still confided in him whenever she could. She didn’t care as long as he listened. As long as he didn’t dismiss her beliefs as mere delusions or worse like everyone else in her life.

As long as he didn’t call her crazy.

“Okay, sure,” He found himself saying, his lips parting into a practiced smile even though he felt little reason to at the moment. “Just tell me what to do.”

What followed was Liana slowly guiding him through a series of poses and gestures he needed to perform outside the circle, while she stayed inside. It was nothing too complicated or even

dangerous, but Lee was still relieved that it didn't involve anything like bloodletting or killing animals like the movies he remembered. He did feel pretty ridiculous doing them despite this, but there was nobody else watching him besides Liana herself, anyway.

"So that's it?" Lee asked, lowering his hands from the final vague gesture which mimicked cupping the sun in his hands. "What happens now?"

"Now, all you need to do is focus on me and think of whichever higher power you believe in," She said. "It doesn't matter which, but you just need to truly believe in it. That belief will fuel the ritual."

"Right..." He said, suddenly feeling his palms become sweaty as she gave her final instructions. "What is this ritual supposed to do, anyway?"

"Well, you've probably noticed that it looks a lot like one of those demon-summoning rituals from a horror movie, right?" She asked, letting out a light giggle as she continued her explanation before Lee could give an answer. "That's because it is. I'm copying one from the dream."

"Uh... right?" Lee muttered, trying to get it all straight in his head. He figured it was something like this after seeing the ritual for the first time, but it was still hard to grasp despite Liana directly telling him. "So you're trying to summon a demon to help you?"

"Not quite," She said, breaking eye-contact for the first time since they began the ritual process. "The people in my dream use it to summon demons, but this one is done in reverse. Instead of summoning a demon to you, you 'summon' yourself somewhere else."

"You're trying to summon yourself away? To where?" The question left Lee's lips despite him having already guessed the answer. His eyes widened in realization as he understood what she was trying to do.

Liana nodded, still refusing to meet Lee's eyes.

"This is..." Lee muttered, trying to process what she revealed to him. It wasn't any of the fantastical or outlandish elements that were hard to stomach—he was used to hearing such things from her all the time. Rather, it was another, far more bitter realization.

"...You're going to leave me behind?"

Liana didn't give a verbal answer this time, only giving the slightest of nods before turning away and pressing her sleeve to her face. Lee felt the urge to do much the same, but the expected tears were nowhere to be found.

Lee sighed, looking down at the cloth upon which she'd set up her ritual. Though the drawing was slightly rough, it still showed impressive precision and attention to detail. He wasn't sure

when she made it, but he didn't think she could've created and prepared everything here in the span of a few hours.

Even if it doesn't work, she's not going to stick around. He thought, looking up and seeing Liana still facing away from him, trying and failing to stifle the sounds of her crying. It was something he should've realized after she talked to him earlier that afternoon, and the mere thought of what would happen if she stayed kept him from blaming her for abandoning him like this.

He contemplated the other possibilities in their future for a brief moment before shaking his head to clear those thoughts away, leaving only Liana standing in the center of the ritual circle.

It's the least I can do.

"So," He said, trying his best to muster up something resembling a smile as he broke the silence. "What do I need to do?"

She didn't turn around, visibly wiping her face again before answering.

"Like I said before, just believe in something. Anything."

Lee furrowed his brows. That really was the hard part for him: he didn't believe in any kind of higher power. God, gods-plural, Brahma, Buddha... all of it just felt fake to him. Like Liana with her dream-world, he could respect the beliefs of others, but it was always just some exaggerated stories in the end from his perspective.

Something I believe in...

He closed his eyes for a moment before they promptly shot open again, fixed directly on Liana.

She seemed to notice something, turning around and meeting his stare. Their gaze was held like that for a few seconds before Lee felt something odd. It was difficult for him to fully understand, but there was a sensation of something 'flowing' away from him. Flowing toward Liana.

She seemed to feel it too, widening her eyes at first before gazing down at her hands and curling her lips into the largest smile Lee had seen from her in a long while. He could see the sorrow on her face magically transform into pure joy as she tearfully gazed back at him.

"Thank you for everything, Lee," She said, before looking upward at the orange-tinted sky. "I hope I'll see you again."

The next thing Lee Fisher knew, everything went white.

And that was the last he ever saw of Liana Annabelle Grey.