

Fantasy in Reality

Michael was always a little strange. He never really fit in. He always felt that there was something more he should be doing. Some greater purpose in his life. So when he had the dream that told him he needed to go on a journey, a journey to save the world, he didn't hesitate to believe it. Maybe it was in the message itself. The honesty, the truth of the situation. Maybe the messenger engendered trust, or demanded it in some unearthly way. I don't know myself, but I do know that Michael never for a second doubted that what he was told was absolute truth. At least not at the time. The funny thing is, neither did the rest of us. When Michael gathered us all together and told us his *mission*, none of us doubted that it was all real. None of us questioned his sanity, or our own in believing that a dream was a message from a higher power and nothing less. Of course none of us were really mainstream in the first place, that might have had something to do with it, but I would like to believe that it was more than that. Now you may just think me crazy, but I am going to tell the story anyways. The way it happened. And somebody needs to tell this tale. People should know. Life itself may be in the balance. I'm not going to get into a social commentary on the nature of our world and the downfall of civilization. And yes, this tale, this story, this account, what I am about to tell you of what actually went down, did happen in this world. This isn't the ramblings of some crazy person. You can believe that if you want, if it's easier to accept, but this is the truth. To borrow a word from Chaucer, I pledge my trouthe on what I am about to say.

When Michael gathered us all together, we had no idea what we were in store for. Michael was one of my best friends. We both went to the college together part time, and both worked for Wal-Mart on nights, stocking shelves. Nanaimo. I should probably mention where

and when these unbelievable events unfolded. December 3, 2004 in Nanaimo. The college we attended was Malaspina University – College. Not really strange in and of itself. Well, Michael was in his thirteenth year, but that's not too strange. He owed about \$40,000 in student loans, and as long as he was going to school, he didn't have to pay them back. He also owed about ten thousand on his visa. He had enough credits to get his Bachelor of Creative Writing, but he had decided to go back and do a minor in English while trying to pay off his visa, so he could afford his student loan payments when he did finally quit going to school. Okay, maybe a little strange, but understandable. I joined up with Michael in his eighth year of college, when he started in on Creative Writing. (He did obtain a diploma in business management previous, or actually the year I met him as he had one class left to complete and took care of that while he was in his first year of creative writing, but that's neither here nor there.)

Okay, back to the actual point. Michael gathered a group of twelve of us together. Why twelve? I don't really know. Maybe he gathered all the people he could think of. With Michael, it made thirteen. Supposed to be an unlucky number, but I've always thought the opposite. Anyways, there was Mark, Dennis, Brenda, Elizabeth, and Darek from his night shift crowd. Tom, and Tony from the college, his friend Jonathan from Cumberland, his friend Mathew who was in the coast guard program in Nova Scotia, his roommate Lizz, his brother John, from Courtenay, and his father Rick, who was from even further up island, the edge of nowhere, Port Alice. And of course me, from Wal-Mart, the college, and always just hanging around. How did he get all these people in the same place at the same time? Luck. Chance. Destiny. Take your pick. Getting some people from work and college together isn't too far fetched, even though Michael had never had any of them over to his house before. I wasn't friends with any of the crowd from Wal-Mart, and only knew Tom and Tony casually through classes. Mathew was on

a month off of coast guard school for December, visiting his parents in Cumberland. Jonathan, who was also friends with Mathew, drove them both down to Michael's for a visit. John, Michael's brother, came down island to see him once ever couple weeks, and it happened to be on the right day. Now, the father was where it started seeming like more than a coincidence. Michael hadn't seen him for about seven months, since John's wedding, and Rick seldom ever came down island as far as Nanaimo anymore. But of course it was Christmas (at least getting close), and people need to shop at Christmas, there being no malls north of Campbell River, so maybe still believable. If you're going to shop down island, you might as well go to Nanaimo where the shopping is better.

So Michael gathers us all in his living room, his roommate Lizz obviously just being home at the time, and told us he had had a dream. I'll explain it the way I understood it, which should be pretty close to word for word.

All twelve of us gave Michael our absolute attention, which again seems a little weird, but he seemed to draw our attention out of us. Almost like we couldn't have talked among ourselves even if we had wanted to. The look in his eyes was distant, trance-like, powerful. This is going to sound cliché, but his eyes pierced our souls as he stared at us. As he judged us worthy, he pulled our wills out with his gaze. I may have been the only one to notice that his eyes had turned from blue to grey, but noticing things is what I do.

Michael's voice commanded belief; "I have had a vision sent down to me through a dream. It is a quest. It is the fulfillment of my destiny. Our destiny. The world is in grave danger. There is a demon by the name of Zalek that is gaining power and will soon enter our world destroying everything but the vilest creatures of humanity.

We are the only ones that can stop him. We are the only ones pre-warned of his coming. He already has many minions in this world doing his bidding. They corrupt and destroy in his name, increasing his power and paving the way for his return. And yes, it is a return, for this world was his before it was given to mankind. Zalek's and his brethren. Few of the demons of the old times remain, but of them, Zalek is the most powerful, and the most vengeful. He hates mankind with a hatred that has burned for millennia. It was Zalek's corruption that led to the crucifixion."

Michael paused there for the rest of us to absorb what he had been saying. We looked around at each other in silence and contemplated the unbelievable. But we did believe. His eyes shone with faith and conviction. For the others, I cannot say what truly convinced them, but we all waited for Michael to continue. None of us leaving in laughter or anger.

Michael turned his grave gaze toward each of us in turn, and his eyes looked to our hearts and our minds. He spoke, shattering the silence, "We thirteen are what stands between civilization and destruction. We thirteen must undertake an arduous journey to confront Zalek in his realm before his power is too great for anyone to defeat him. We must leave as soon as we are able. I am packed and ready, but I understand that you all need some time to gather your thoughts and some provisions and clothes. It is late afternoon now; we will leave tomorrow at daybreak. We will meet here and begin our excursion. I need you all. Every one of you to agree to join me on this mission. If you do not have faith, if your will is going to falter, tell me now, so that I might find a replacement. You will not all finish the trek. In fact most of you will not be there at the end, but each of you serves a purpose. Once we have begun our journey, there is no turning back. The path is set, the bell is rung, and with failure the end will come."

Poetry. Overdramatic. Hyperbole. Looking back now, I can see all of these things in what he said, as I am sure you see it too. But at the time, it made sense. It wasn't cliché, it wasn't melodrama, it was life or death, and it was gospel. We were like characters in a not-so-well written movie that just gloss over bad writing, but when you are actually in the situation, it seems natural to take a walk down by the old abandoned graveyard, or to go on a quest because somebody you know had a bad dream.

So Michael looked to each of us and waited for acceptance. Each one of us in turn nodded in silence that we believed, that we would go with him. I believe Michael held some sort of supernatural sway over the others. He gazed into their eyes, and they couldn't say no. As for me, none of that really affected me. I had to go because it was what I was there for. He hadn't even told us where it was we were headed, and maybe that was by design, or just positive oversight. At that moment, the exact moment that Lizz, the twelfth and final member, accepted the quest; Michael snapped his head around and stared at a blank wall. "They are here," is all he said. If there were no walls, he would have been staring right through the front door of the house, into the driveway. I felt like an icy wind ran the length of my spine with those prophetic words. The room seemed to shrink in on itself. I tried to leap to my feet, but only managed to move my finger. Michael slowly turned his head back toward the group of us and said, "It begins now. We leave at once. Out the back." We all got our bodies in motion at the same time and tried to detangle from one another with speed as Rick went to the window, pulled back the curtains and peered out towards the driveway. He said, "It's an RCMP car." He paused only a moment before continuing; "It's only Frank Griffith with a young partner. What could they want?"

Michael turned to his father and said, “It is not Frank, or his partner. They are demons. They have possessed the bodies of Frank and his partner. The souls that used to inhabit those bodies are gone. Destroyed. Evaporated into the abyss of space. They are no more.”

Michael’s father Rick was skeptical. Frank was stationed in Port Alice a couple years previous. “They don’t look like demons to me. I’m not running away from Frank Griffith. He may be an RCMP, but he’s still a loser.” Meanwhile the rest of the group, myself included, had grabbed their jackets and shoes and were fleeing out the back door as the doorbell resounded it’s death toll through the house. Michael replied to his father as he raced towards the rear of the house saying, “We must leave now or all is lost. The red eyes tell all.” And with that, Rick was alone in the living room as the back door was already open and half of us were tearing through it. Michael close behind grabbing his school bag on his way out of the house. As we raced through the backyard to the alleyway behind, I stole a glance back through the open door to see Rick heading from the living room towards the front door.

Michael yelled, “Split up. Harbour in an hour.” And with that, the twelve of us left ran in four different directions. Me, Michael and Tony were in a group together. We ran, hard, weaving from street to street. Down Bowen, along Wakesiah, and down third. Michael pushed us hard. We reached the harbour in a half of an hour. We hid in the covered parking area waiting for the others. We didn’t have to wait long for nine of the ten to show up.

The one missing person was Rick. We waited a while longer in silence before Michael spoke. “He is not coming.” He said it with such finality that we all accepted it as fact. I don’t know if Frank was a demon, or if Rick didn’t hear Michael’s rally point. Maybe Rick was just slow and we didn’t wait. Or maybe Rick confronting Frank is what gave us all the chance to get

away. All I know is that our quest was only minutes old and we had already lost one. There were twelve of us left. It was a bad omen for the rest of us. Maybe for the world.

Michael had chosen the harbour as a regrouping point by design. Tom's father owned a boat. That would prove our transportation to the mainland. Tom's father was away on business and wouldn't miss it, and the enemy would be waiting for us at the ferries or airport. They wouldn't have known who any of us were, so they could never have suspected us to travel by "The Sea Hag". Except somehow, they must have guess something of our plan. Or maybe it was just more coincidence, chance. I still don't know for sure, but the trip went downhill quickly.

So "the Sea Hag" was a boat. A sailboat. I don't really know much about boats. It wasn't too big. Maybe it was a schooner. That's a sailboat. All I know is that between Tom, Darek and Dennis, they had no trouble sailing it. It's not like we were sailing it around the world anyways, just across to Van on the mainland. There was a cabin that packed nine of us in without too much discomfort. Which was a good thing, because the minute we had climbed onto the boat, the very second, the sun disappeared behind clouds. Dark clouds. The clouds rolled in faster than I have ever seen before. Maybe it was coincidence, but sometimes coincidence can only take you so far.

Tom had taken Darek and Dennis out on his father's boat a few times in the past, so they knew what they were doing. They had been in a couple regattas together, and they all three had the same days off at Wal-Mart, so they spent a lot of time together aside from sailing. They complimented each other well, which was a good thing, as the rest of us huddled in the cabin knew nothing of sailing. By the time we had made it out of the harbour, the clouds were the

colour of pitch and screaming rain down on “the Sea Hag”. If it weren’t for Tony, Darek and Dennis, we would have all ended up in the ocean. But they fought against the weather laughing; they were enjoying themselves, as the rest of us prayed for our lives. Maybe we should have prayed for them too.

Nobody was really saying anything in the cabin, just sitting there contemplating inwardly, and trying not to think about all the rocking. A few people were feeling the effects of the motion. About half way across to the mainland, everyone else seemed to have dozed off. I got restless and decided to go see what was happening above deck. I went up into the night-storm darkness. I could barely see ten feet in front of me through the gushing rain. And that’s when it happened. The rain changed from vertical to a forty-five degree slant, and then to horizontal. I grabbed onto the door of the cabin as the wind rushed in at full force, like a hand rushing across the deck. The wind hit Tom with a thump, picked him up off the boat high into the air, and then seemed to change direction straight towards the water. Tom was slammed hard into the ocean off the back of the boat, and immediately went under. We were clipping along at a good pace.

By the time Darek grabbed for a life preserver, we were already too far away to see if he had surfaced. Michael said, “He’s gone. There’s nothing we can do for him now.” I don’t even know when he came up on deck, but he was standing in the doorway to the cabin. He was staring out into the ocean like he could see Tom. Darek threw a life preserver into the water anyways. I like to think that Tom found it and that a fishing boat or the coast guard picked him up after the storm blew out. The wind was too strong and the waves too high to turn around safely. We probably wouldn’t have been able to see him in the rain and darkness. You would expect we would have tried anyways, but when Michael told us Tom was gone; we all just

seemed to accept it. All I know is that we were down to eleven, and we hadn't even made it to Vancouver yet. I went back down to the cabin. Michael got Mathew up on deck to help Dennis and Darek run the boat. Mathew hadn't been taught anything about sailing yet, but being in the coast guard program he knew about boats, and how to keep his balance. He was also a big man, six foot four, two hundred and thirty pounds. He wasn't getting blown off the ship.

The rest of the trip seemed to go quicker after that. Eight of us huddled in the cabin thinking about Tom, and Rick, trying to sleep. Two down already. Michael had said that not all of us would make it. How many would be lost along the way? Did Michael know, or was he just guessing?

Mathew called down from the deck, "We're almost there. I can make out the dock." I went up to see, wondering how he could see the dock in this storm, and how we could have made it across to precisely where we wanted to be. As I left the gloom of the cabin, I was hit with brightness. The dark clouds only covered half the sky now, and were shrinking quickly. The sun was cresting the horizon as I stared across the short gap of ocean to the docks. The sun lit up the docks and the water around them like a haven from evil.

It took some time to park the boat. Everyone was relieved to set foot on semi-solid ground again. Everyone was half-smiling and relieved. Everyone except Michael. I hadn't seen him smile since his dream. Tom and Rick's loss were forgotten for the moment, as the eleven of us were traipsing up the dock joyful just to be alive. I noticed a man at the top of the docks with his arm outstretched, but thought nothing of it. Darek, who was walking just ahead, turned around in front of Michael and said, "Oh hey...." And that was all he ever said. The man with his outstretched arm had a gun that I hadn't noticed. Darek had coincidentally put himself between

the man and Michael. The bullet ripped whatever words Darek was going to say from his lips and he collapsed to the ground. Another shot fired out and somebody screamed.

Dennis was lying at Elizabeth's feet with a hole in his chest. It all happened so fast. The man with the gun had run off after the second shot. There were already a couple people that were talking frantically into their cell phones. Michael bent down and checked Darek's neck for a pulse, and said, "He's dead." He checked Dennis and didn't even say that much. Just shook his head. "Come on, we have to get out of here," Michael said. We all ran with him, up the dock and into the streets of Vancouver.

It occurred to me that we should phone Darek's and Dennis's parents, and inform them of the tragedy. And Tom's as well. We never did. And then there were nine. I always liked Agatha Christie, but I never really thought about what it would be like to have people dying around you and you could be next. I never really feared for my own life, but looking around at the others, I wondered if any of them were going to make it to the end. I could see the same thoughts on their faces. Especially Brenda's. I saw her and Mark whispering forcedly. They were a couple. They had met working at Wal-Mart and were now engaged. I don't know if Michael noticed their exchange or not. It's interesting. I don't know what Michael noticed or didn't notice on this journey. Or what he thought. Or even how he felt. I used to know all those things, but he had changed since the dream. I couldn't read him anymore. He didn't even confide in me like he used to. He was almost a stranger.

As we were passing a bank machine, Mark stopped and pulled out his wallet. Everyone else stopped as well, watching him. He put his bankcard into the machine and withdrew some money. I didn't catch how much, but there were a lot of twenties. He put his card back in his wallet and put his wallet in his pocket with the money still in his hand. He turned to Michael and

said, “We can’t go any further.” Obviously the “we” meant him and Brenda. Michael didn’t respond, so Mark continued, “Three of us are already dead. Rick might be too. Me and Brenda are getting married next spring. I don’t want to lose her. I don’t want to die. We’re going home.” Brenda just stood beside him holding his arm for support. It was obvious to me that it had been her decision, but I couldn’t blame Mark for wanting to leave. He was right. Four gone already. Who was next? Mark handed Michael the wad of twenties still in his hand and said, “Here, take this. It’s all I can afford. I hope you make it. I’m sorry.” Michael took the money, and Mark turned and started walking away with his head hanging. Brenda reached into her purse, pulled something out and handed it to Michael saying, “Here, take this too.” Then she skipped to catch up to Michael. She had given Michael pepper spray. Michael hadn’t said anything to Mark or Brenda. He didn’t try to convince them to stay. He didn’t chastise them for leaving. He didn’t look surprised, or angry, or sad. He just said to the rest of us, “Lets go.” And then there were seven.

We hopped a bus to Langley. Tony’s grandparents lived in Langley, so he went to see them and ask to borrow their van. The rest of us just sat around Denny’s a few blocks over, drinking coffee and talking.

Elizabeth was the first to bring up the subject on everybody’s mind. “Three of us are already dead. Two smart enough to leave, and one MIA. How many of us are going to actually make it through?” Her question was directed at nobody in particular, but Michael responded anyways.

“Let’s not talk about that right now, “ he said.

John said, “If it wasn’t for Tony, we wouldn’t have had any way to get off the island.”

Lizz said, “And if it wasn’t for Darek and Dennis, we would have ended up drown in the ocean.”

Elizabeth, always to the point, asked Michael, “Did you know they would die? Were they just here to get us to Vancouver?”

When Michael remained silent for a moment, his brother John said, “Answer the question Michael. How many of us are going to die before we give up on this quest of yours?”

Michael finally responded, “It isn’t my quest. It is all of humanity’s quest. I am just the vessel to carry it out. As for how many of us will die, I don’t know. I knew we all wouldn’t make it. I didn’t know some would die, I assumed they would abandon the quest like Brenda and Mark. I told you, each of you serves a purpose. Once that purpose has been fulfilled, you are no longer needed on the quest. As for when we will give up the quest? We don’t.”

Mathew, always the joker, said, “Well, as long as that’s all cleared up.”

“And how do you know that Mark and Brenda fulfilled their great purpose?” Jonathan asked.

Michael said, “Because I didn’t feel the need to try to stop them from leaving.”

Mathew laughed, “Oh, so you think you could stop me from leaving little man?”

Michael looked into Mathew’s eyes and said, “I don’t need to, you don’t want to leave.”

Mathew stopped smiling and said, “I guess I don’t.”

Michael looked at John, Lizz, Jonathan, Elizabeth, and me each in turn and then said, “None of you want to leave yet. Lets talk about something unrelated to the quest.”

His words didn’t have any effect on me of course. I still wondered how many of them would die before the end, but everyone else seemed to lighten and start talking about mundane things like movies and games.

Lizz, a huge movie buff along with Michael, opened the conversation, “Has anyone seen Alexander yet?”

Elizabeth said, “It wasn’t that great. There was one small battle scene, that was good, but the rest of the movie was dragging. And I didn’t like the homosexual overtones.”

Jonathan added, “Yeah, there are twenty five lawyers in Greece who are trying to sue Oliver Stone over it. They want him to remove the scenes that imply Alexander had gay sex as there is no factual proof that he did.”

“It was a long time ago. I don’t think things like gay and straight were an issue back then,” Mathew said. “The bible says that men shouldn’t have sex with other men. You don’t tell people to stop doing something that is unacceptable already.”

John said, “What do you mean?”

Mathew answered him, “If gay sex was taboo back then, they wouldn’t have had to tell people not to do it, because they would already know. It must have been at least partially acceptable. And I think Alexander was alive before the bible was written.”

“Oh, I never considered it that way.” John drifted off into thought.

Jonathan asked Elizabeth, “Troy was a good movie. Did you like that one? How do the two compare?”

Elizabeth answered, “I haven’t seen Troy, but I liked King Arthur.”

“That doesn’t really help me. Arthur and Troy are two totally different movies.”

Jonathan replied.

Mathew jumped in, “I liked King Arthur too. Keira Knightly is hot. She could be my Guinevere any day.”

Lizz laughed at Mathew, “You realize that means she would cheat on you with your best friend, right?”

Michael for the first time since the dream seemed to come back to his old self. He smiled and said to Mathew, “Yeah, I wouldn’t mind her being your Guinevere. You get all the responsibilities, I get all the benefits.”

“Screw you, “ was all Mathew could come up with in response.

We talked like that for about an hour, with Michael even seeming to forget about the quest and everyone just being friends sitting around drinking coffee. It was a good calm in the middle of the storm. When Michael went to pay for the food, his interac didn’t work. Neither did his visa. He had a couple hundred of dollars in the bank, and a few thousand dollars room on the visa. He just scowled and didn’t say anything as he paid with a twenty from the pile Mark had given him.

Tony had no trouble getting his grandparents van, and so we all piled in and headed across Canada.