

ASCENSION

Paul Schembri

Ascension

Copyright © 2018 Paul Schembri

All rights reserved.

ISBN: 1722128224

ISBN-13: 978-1722128227

PROLOGUE

“You thought you could defeat me if you joined forces?” the Demon Lord growled, “all your efforts are wasted. Go home!”

The bodies of several challengers laid strewn across the floor of the large room. Splotches of blood could be seen on the dark-bricked walls as well as the carpet leading to the only way in or out of the large room. A woman, now adorned in broken armour that revealed fragments of her tattooed skin beneath, struggled to her feet as she looked around at her fallen comrades.

“I can’t let this end here,” she uttered to herself, arms shaking.

“We’ve come too far for us to fail,” a voice murmured from across the room.

The warrior caught a glimpse of one of

Ascension

the warlocks resting upon his staff which was emitting a warm light from its end. With a loud cry, the warlock lifted the staff into the air before stomping its base onto the stone floor where he stood. All the colour from his hair drained, turning each strand white. The light at the end of his staff took on a pink hue as it grew more radiant, filling the room and temporarily blinding the warrior. The warlock soon collapsed to the cold floor and the light faded. When the warrior's vision had returned, she saw all her fallen comrades rising to their feet. All had returned to perfect fighting spirit, save for one.

"All of you stand here because of him!" the warrior shouted, pointing at the now lifeless warlock.

"Don't let his sacrifice be for naught. Fight with everything you have for those who have fallen before us and pray that none shall endure the hardships we've faced!"

The Demon Lord stood from where he was seated and cracked his knuckles, "Looks like you have a bit of fight left in you. No matter, I'll make quick work of you once more."

Ascension

A dark aura began emanating from the Demon Lord and the challengers could feel a tremendous pressure upon their bodies. The tattoos on his face, gave off a dull glow as he increased in strength and, one by one, they fell to their knees, overpowered by the force of his energy. One of the warrior's comrades, a thief, who once stood in the far corner of the room, now doubled over in pain and gripped his head between his hands. One of the other warlocks cried out as he released a focused torrent of water on the enemy, causing him to drop to a knee. Another companion, this time an archer, managed to stand to her feet and draw back her bow. A cool mist started to form around her weapon and a symbol on her hand began to emit a blue hue. Moments later, several arrows made of ice were hurtling towards the Demon Lord, two of which hit their intended target.

"These attacks are merely an annoyance. Why do you insist on delaying the inevitable?" he said, rising off his knee.

The Demon Lord let out a mighty roar and the challengers were thrown off the floor and into the surrounding walls and pillars. The thief had been pushed back with

Ascension

such force, that he now laid unconscious within the next room. The archer, screaming in pain, had a pillar fall on top of her, pinning her to the ground. There was no sign of the warlock; however, one of the windows had been smashed and it could only be assumed he had been thrown from the tower. The Demon Lord smiled at another successful battle and turned to make his way back to his throne.

"I'm not finished with you just yet," a voice seethed from behind.

It was the warrior. She had struck her sword between two stones in the floor enabling her to keep in place. Blood streamed from her forehead where a piece of the stone floor had broken off and struck her. With one hand raised she let out a cry, igniting the symbol upon her hand and fire emerged from her shoulder, twisting and turning down her arm to her palm. A large fireball shot toward the Demon Lord with such power that the warrior feared she may have dislocated her shoulder. The hit from the attack forced the Demon Lord back several feet and he let out a disgruntled cry.

"That packed quite the punch; however, you can't best me when it comes to fire. I'm

the ruler of The Underworld!" he yelled, firing back in the same manner.

The two became entangled in a battle of flames so fierce that the walls looked to be melting. The warrior's hair began to turn white as her power slowly depleted. An intense energy surrounded her as the last of her might evaporated and her eyes glowed a deep red.

"Ah! It was about time another one showed up. It's a pity you don't have what it takes to fulfill the calling," he said, forcing even more power into his flames.

The warrior stood to her feet, raising her hand to meet the other and increased her spell ten-fold. Her hair, now fluttering back from the energy, mimicked the movements of the banners upon the walls. The Demon Lord's feet broke the stone beneath him as he held his footing and pressed forward into his magic. The warrior increased her might yet again and let out a cry so loud it could be heard several stories below. The flames raged on for what could be recalled as several hours, but in truth, they only lasted a few moments before the warrior's strength gave way causing her arms to drop to the side and she was engulfed by hell-fire.

Ascension

"The true victor rises alone. Neither I nor those before me had help obtaining the throne," the Demon Lord said, returning to his seat.

He sat back and admired another successful victory as the warrior's ashes were swept away in a mysterious breeze; with a snap of his fingers several ghastly creatures emerged from the shadows and removed the bodies scattered about the large room.

"It was a valiant, but pointless effort. It's time we went home," he said.

The Demon Lord's throne lifted through the ceiling of the room and stopped once it reached the outside. The setting sun glistened on the jewels that decorated where he sat. He noticed several burns on his body and scoffed. If that warrior held out just a few moments longer, he could have been defeated. He took a deep breath and, with what could have been interpreted as relief, sighed. The damage he sustained from the arduous battle, glowed a deep pink before vanishing completely. From atop his tower, the Demon Lord had a clear view of the world which surrounded him.

"It's a pity to destroy something, once

Ascension

loved so dearly," he thought to himself, wiping something from his cheek.

He raised his arm, palm facing towards the heavens, and darkness descended upon the world. He imagined the cries of every living creature as their homes were destroyed, forests became barren and crops withered away. The Demon Lord returned to his throne and watched the world burn as he descended back to The Underworld, only to return again in the next thousand years.

ONE

The day began like any other: Isa, the hard-working young woman awoke early in the morning to tend to the chores around the farm. She grabbed some bread, wrapped it in cloth and strapped it around her shoulders. Her trusty water skin sat on the wooden tabletop, ready for her to take it outside and fill it up. The light from the sun had only just barely become visible amongst the sea of trees that outlined the border of her rather large village and the air felt crisp. Isa always took a deep breath when she stepped outside her home. With her eyes closed, she let the air fill her lungs and the sound of the birds encompass her ears.

"Time to get to work!" she thought to herself.

Her home was situated highest in her village and from the road leading down to the farmland, she was able to see everybody going about their morning routine. The closest house to hers belonged to an old man named Osmond. He didn't do much around the village anymore because of his age, but everyone looked to him when they needed advice and he had inadvertently taken up the mantle of village leader.

"Good morning, Osmond!" she said, passing by.

He replied in kind and a large smile took shape on his face, causing it to wrinkle and make him look several years older. Isa took note to stop by on her way home in the evening to help Osmond in any way she could. She hoped to hear another one of his incredible stories, which always left her laying in bed awake at night, thinking of the amazing characters he would describe to her. It wasn't long before Isa had reached the rest of the village and she could see even more people hard at work in their shop fronts. She knew each person by name and they too, knew her. After passing several shops and their owners, she made a right turn and passed between two of the stores.

Ascension

Even though the path she took wasn't actually intended to be used, it was faster than going around and she enjoyed the adventure of taking the road less travelled so to speak. She came out from the other side in the section of the village where all the laborious jobs and those that partook of them resided. The blacksmith was already hard at work, hammering what looked to be a sword, while her son was crafting some arrows. It was rare for the village to use the weapons made, but passersby would often stock up on supplies as they made their way through the village and they were useful for fending off wild beasts looking to get a meal out of the farm animals. Isa waved to those she passed on her way further down to the farmlands and by the time she arrived at her final destination, the sun had risen above the trees and the warmth from its rays filled her with the last bit of energy needed to go about her day.

"Good morning, Isa!" a voice called out.

It was Joe. He usually started earlier than Isa and continued well-past sundown. She always wondered how he kept up his routine for so long. She had been part of the farming team for almost three years and he

had yet to take a day off. His hair was tied in the usual way of a hurried topknot and although the sun was only beginning to show itself, he was already covered in sweat.

"You certainly don't waste any time getting to work," Isa said.

"Who else is going to pick up the slack? You don't do very much around here," he said, giving her a light shove.

She smiled and continued through the fields towards the shed. Some of the crops still had early-morning dew on them and she drew in several more deep breaths as she neared the trees, which were just beyond the shed. There was a small window to the left of the shed's entrance, which Isa preferred to use. It was rare for her to actually enter the small structure and instead she used the window for quick access to the bench just beyond its threshold. She peered around the corner of the building to look at the dense array of trees behind it and the adventures it held called out to her. On most days, after work, Isa would venture off into the woods. Many different types of animals inhabited the area and like the villagers, most of them were friendly. There was one recent time she

Ascension

managed to find a cave which was a small climb up a cliff. At the time, she had never gone so deep into the woods and its mysteries kept pulling her further in. It grew darker as the sea of trees towering over her, blocked out the sunlight and their scent, along with the plants all around, became more potent. She came to a stop when she neared a riverbed. The cave was just beyond it, but she could see no easy way across. Although she had the time, she didn't want to backtrack and find a way around, for her eagerness to explore was overwhelming. She looked around for a short while and could find nothing to help her cross, until she looked up. Many of the trees were so close together, their branches would often touch and all she needed to do was climb one of the trees growing over the river. It was certainly no small feat making her way up the tree she decided would be best to climb, but she managed it, nonetheless. The branches swayed as she sat on them, sliding herself across the water and she breathed a sigh of relief when she made it to the other side without incident. Once she had managed to climb back down, she could make out strange etchings in the cliff-

Ascension

face. Upon closer inspection, they looked to be a way to climb up to the entrance of the cave.

"Does someone live up there?" she thought to herself.

The opening to the cave was only a few feet above, so she decided to climb and managed to reach it with relative ease. It was dark inside and she had no way of creating a light source, but she proceeded forward, her hand traced one of the stone walls and ears listened for any evidence of an inhabitant. There was nothing to be seen or heard; however, the unknown kept pulling her deeper. She ventured further into the abyss, her feet often rolling over loose dirt and rocks. It seemed like she had been wandering for a long while before she thought she could hear something. She could tell the source wasn't close because the echo was faint so she stood still and tried to listen for it again, but it must have been her imagination. Curiosity piqued, Isa pressed on with an eagerness in her step, which wasn't there before. Several moments later, she was certain she could hear something. She stopped walking and without thinking, slowed her breathing; there it was. It

sounded like someone was sobbing and she could tell it was still quite a bit deeper into the cave, but she could no longer see her hand on the wall and didn't want to get stuck inside the darkness. Did she call out, making her presence known, or, did she continue to listen for a while longer before leaving?

"Is anyone there?!" she called out.

The crying immediately stopped and cold air surrounded her, causing the hairs on her body to stand on end.

"Get out!" a terrifying voice screeched.

It was far louder than the crying she heard earlier, but she knew it was the same person. Isa felt a strong fear in the pit of her stomach and she immediately retreated. She ran as fast as she could, stumbling over several rocks, but maintaining her hand upon the wall to keep track of her position. She was almost able to make out some of her surroundings as she drew closer to the cave's entrance and soon enough, she had reached the outside world. She heard the voice once more as she climbed down the cliff, this time much closer than before; in fact, she expected the figure belonging to the voice to reveal itself at any moment. She ran

even faster, not looking back to see what may emerge from the darkness. Now that she had full visibility of her surroundings, she could see that quite a large chunk of time had passed while inside the cave, but with her fear intensified, she felt there was no time to waste returning home. She didn't bother to climb the trees once more and instead, opted to run through the river. She pushed her body through the water with all the strength she could muster and soon found herself drenched, but safely on the other side of the riverbed.

"Isa! There you go, daydreaming again. Come help me with this," Joe called out.

Isa snapped out of her daze, shuddering as the fear she felt crept back into her mind. She wasn't the type of person to get frightened easily; however, something about what she experienced in that cave felt eerily ominous. Whenever she decided to venture into the woods after that incident, she would always keep well away from the area which surrounded that horrible cave and whatever creature inhabited it. Joe must have been calling out to Isa for a long while before she was brought back to the present moment because he seemed rather frustrated when

she finally met up with him in the field. The rest of her day passed quite drearily, as it often did, after thinking about her adventures and when it finally came time for her to finish up, she wasted no time walking past the shed and grabbing her sandwich cloth, eager to enter into the other realm. Although she lived alone, Isa always made sure to bring something home for Osmond as a courtesy for his stories. She took a quick glance around where she stood and eyed some berries which looked ready to be picked. A number of animals were gathered around the various bushes; none of which appeared to be startled by her presence, as they continued eating what they could manage to get their paws on. She placed her cloth on the ground and began picking the berries and placing them inside it. A few of the smaller animals seized the opportunity and tried sneaking a few of her picks, but she managed to shoo them away with relative ease. Once her cloth was filled, she tied it around her shoulders before proceeding to pick a few more handfuls of berries. She took a few steps back from the animals and called out for the attention of the smaller ones from before. She placed the

berries on the ground and watched as they munched away, letting her pet and scratch them however she pleased.

With the sun beginning to set, Isa decided it was time to head back home. The few rays left of sunlight were visible above the mountain behind her home, which cast a cooling shadow over the entire village, giving it an entirely different feel compared to earlier in the day. She wasted no time returning home as she was eager to cleanse herself of the day's labour and relax. Those she had passed on her way down were still hard at work, preparing for the next morning and she gave each of them a cheerful smile when their paths crossed. Up ahead, Osmond could be seen sitting on his favourite chair, almost as if he hadn't moved from it since the early morning.

When he noticed Isa's arrival, he gave her a smile so pleasant that she couldn't help, but return the gesture.

"I've brought something for you, Osmond," Isa said, handing him the cloth.

"What's this?" he untied the cloth and continued, "Berries? Thank you, my dear. You always seem to bring me the things I want most."

He stood up from his chair and began to make his way into his home, but stopped in the doorway.

"I have something for you, too. Wait there for a moment," he said.

Isa hadn't expected anything in return, but Osmond was always full of surprises and they often turned out to be very helpful. The last thing he had given her was a small stone which emitted a large flame when a phrase had been spoken over it. That same day, she had traveled too far into the woods and night had settled in. The trees, that towered overhead were so dense they blocked out most of the light from the moon. Lucky for her, she remembered the stone and she pulled it out before placing it on the ground. She placed her hand over it and repeated the words Osmond gave her.

"Light the dark, heat the cold, break the silence, heal the soul."

The sound took Isa by surprise and she jumped back, but the spell had worked. The stone was engulfed in a bright flame, but there was something odd about it. She could feel the heat coming from the stone, but the area around it didn't burn as if only the rock could be used as fuel.

"You always were one for excitement. Even now, your mind is off on an adventure."

Osmond had returned from his home with a small wooden case in his hands. The design was plain, but she had never seen that type of wood before. Osmond stood in front of Isa and placed one hand on top of the box, lifting the lid. A soft, red material lined the inside of the box and a small vial rested within, containing some sort of glowing liquid.

"This potion will completely restore your energy. It will replenish itself several hours after being consumed so you can drink this if you ever find yourself lost without food or water," he said, removing the vial from its home.

She couldn't tell if the liquid within was blue or if the colour of the vial gave it that appearance. She soon had the answer as Osmond flipped the seal with his thumb and poured the blue drink down his throat. His skin gave off a radiant glow and a marking, which could be seen underneath the collar of his shirt, looked to grow brighter as a result. Even his hair looked to have regained some of its colour, but all of it

returned to normal soon after.

"This old body isn't what it used to be. It can't even hold the energy it once did," he chuckled to himself.

He closed the lid to the now empty vial before handing it to Isa. She lifted the vial up in an attempt to get a better look at it, but by that time, the sun had set too far and she was unable to make out any of its details so she placed it in her pocket.

"I have a feeling, with your sense of adventure, you're going to need that more than I," Osmond said with a smile.

Isa thanked him and bid him goodnight as she made her way back home. She would have liked to use that potion right now; she was beginning to feel the effects of the days work and she wasn't wanting to go to bed just yet, but her body had other plans. She knew there was no fighting it so she had a quick wash and jumped into bed. The moment her head hit the pillow, she gave an automatic sigh of relief. She must have been more exhausted than she thought because immediately, her mind drifted off to sleep. It didn't feel like much time had passed; however, when a violent rumble had woken her up. Sitting in her bed, it seemed like an

earthquake, only several times more powerful, but it stopped shortly after. Worried about the well-being of the village and its people, Isa got out of bed and looked outside her window. There, beyond the forest, in front of the rising sun, stood a tower so tall the top could not be seen. Isa left her home and started the descent into the village, but stopped at Osmond's cottage. All the villagers had gathered and were in a panic.

"What do we do?!" a voice cried out.

"Did anyone see where it came from?" another yelled.

Osmond could be seen sitting in his favourite chair, eyes closed and nodding his head. Isa pushed her way through the crowd and approached him.

"What's going on?" she asked.

"It's time for your ultimate adventure, my dear," he continued, opening his eyes, "you can hear the tower calling out to you, I know it."

She didn't know what he was talking about, but she was eager to investigate the strange structure. Osmond gave her a wink and stood from his seat.

"All of you can relax. There's nothing you

can do about this tower and you should continue about your day as if it weren't there. I'm sending Isa to sort things out so just be patient while you wait for her return."

"Relax?! What if they're violent? We should gather everyone we can and march there right now!" someone called out.

"You will do no such thing!" Osmond said.

His voice boomed throughout the air and he took on a completely different aura to the frail, old man they all knew.

"Isa is best for this job and you will all do as I say!"

It was rare for him to give commands, but when he did, there was no arguing and it was always for the best. The crowd fell silent, and one by one everyone started to make their way back down to the village to go about their day as if nothing had happened. Osmond gave a quick glance to Isa, before nodding his head in the direction of the tower and winking. She wasn't sure what to expect to find at the tower, or why he had chosen her to investigate, but the decision had been made.

TWO

Isa was unsure of what to bring with her or if she even needed much at all. She grabbed her stone and the now replenished vial from her bedside table, before rushing to the kitchen. Some bread was sitting on the bench, ready for her to take so she wrapped it in a cloth and headed out the door. The sky was clear, but despite the lack of clouds obscuring the tower, she still struggled to see the top of it. The colour of the mysterious building was an earthy brown, mixed with a dark red, and although it was daylight, she could see flames scattered about it from top to bottom. Even from several kilometres away, Isa was able to sense a vile presence coming from the direction of the tower and she wondered if

anyone else in the village was able to sense the same feeling. She had an inkling Osmond would know more about the tower, but when she arrived at his home, he wasn't in his usual seat. Rummaging could be heard from inside, so she let herself in and found him looking around for something.

"Is everything alright, Osmond?" she asked.

"I knew I should have kept them close-by. Where could they have gone off to?" he asked himself, apparently not noticing her presence.

"Did you need help looking for something?" she asked.

"Ah, there you are!" he said as he picked a small satchel from the cupboard.

Osmond let out a small gasp of fright when he turned toward Isa and said, "You frightened me, my dear. Here, I have something for you."

He loosened the small string, opening the satchel and emptied its contents into his hand. There were two rings, made of steel with crystal lining the outer circumference. One of them was black in colour, embellished with a deep-blue stone and the other a transparent, light-pink. He reached

for Isa's hand and placed them in her care.

"These have helped me throughout the years and I can only pray they work for you," he said.

The sizes of the rings were not the same and the only fingers she could fit them on were the thumb and little finger of her left hand. Once in place, she felt a small pull from within her chest and the crystals appeared to glow for a moment before returning to normal.

"What are these?" she asked.

Osmond smiled, placing a hand on her shoulder, "Everything will become known once you reach the tower."

He was giving off a sense of urgency as he led Isa to the door, the tower taking up much of the view from his home. She hugged Osmond goodbye and set off down the hill, and through the village. Isa saw the familiar faces of everyone hard at work, but each of them had a look of worry. No one knew what was happening and the one person who did wasn't willing to share anything. Was he purposely leaving everyone in the dark to stop them from panicking or because he really thought everything was going to be alright?

Ascension

Isa stood at the outer edge of the forest and contemplated what to do next. To get to the tower, she would need to travel further than ever before and that would require passing the dreaded cave. She stared into the woods a while longer until the sun moved from behind the tower and shone upon her face. Unconsciously, she closed her eyes, took a deep breath and drank in the warm energy before finally moving on. She had only taken a few steps through the forest before a voice called out to her. Isa could see a silhouette running towards her and once the figure had passed the threshold of the forest and into its shadows she recognised the face. Joe stopped a few steps from her, gasping for breath with his hands on his knees. Although he was in quite good shape from tending to the crops every day, he struggled when it came to cardiovascular activities, but the distance from the fields to the forest wasn't very far. After taking a few moments to catch his breath, he finally stood straight and looked at Isa with sweat dripping down the side of his face.

"What's wrong?" Isa asked.

"I want to go with you to the tower," he said, taking a deep breath with every other

word.

"Who's going to take care of the fields?" she asked.

"I told Osmond I was going with you. He said he would figure something out," he said.

That explained why he was so exhausted. He had run from the fields to Osmond and back again. Isa didn't have the heart to turn him away after the effort he went through to go with her so she complied and let him tag along. It wasn't that she didn't enjoy being around Joe, she just wanted to be in the forest on her own. She always enjoyed being alone with nothing but the trees and animals for company but thinking about the cave and its mysterious inhabitant made it a little easier for her to say yes. With a new companion in tow, Isa once again began her trek to the ominous tower.

The pair had only been walking a short while before Joe began to tire. There were several times Isa had to stop because Joe fell too far behind and she didn't want him to become lost in the labyrinth of trees. Up ahead, Isa could hear the sounds of flowing water and her heart began to beat faster. They were approaching the cave faster than

she had anticipated and she started to wonder whether the creature would be around waiting for her return. She recognised the point where she crossed the water and she slowed her breathing, along with her movements; however, she noticed something very odd. There was no sign of any animals and thinking back, she couldn't remember seeing or hearing any animals the entire time they had been in the forest.

"There's something wrong," she said as Joe caught up to her.

"Is it the animals? I thought it was a bit quiet for a forest," he said.

Isa didn't respond, but she had a feeling the tower had something to do with the silence and if all the animals were gone; was the creature from the cave missing too? She picked up the pace again, Joe groaning behind her. Isa's eagerness for answers prevented her from slowing down for her trailing companion and Joe had no choice but to push his body harder to keep up with her. Isa had never been this deep into the forest before; however, she was so consumed with her mission, she didn't have the time to enjoy her new surroundings. She did manage a quick glance at a few trees and

she noticed strange markings on them. They were claw marks, but they didn't have any bears in the area. Isa took a mental note to have a closer look at the marks on her way home and pressed on. She could see the trees starting to thin up ahead and sunlight was growing brighter.

"We're nearly out, Joe!" she yelled, knowing he was far behind.

"Finally! Can you slow down now?" he cried.

Isa slowed her pace allowing Joe to catch up and cross the threshold with her and into a grassy field. Large stone walls circled the entire field and it looked as though there would be no way to pass them save for climbing over. Still, the pair searched and studied the walls carefully hoping to find a narrow or hidden path to the other side. The field was rather large and it took Isa quite some time to meet up with Joe who started at the other end. Neither of them were able to find any sort of way through and Joe threw his arms up in surrender.

"Did we really come all this way for nothing? Maybe we took a wrong turn in the forest," he said.

Isa knew this was the only way. She saw

the forest and the mountains that hugged its edges every morning when she left her home. There was no other path to take except through this field. Joe found a large rock to sit on while Isa studied the walls for a second time. Her efforts yielded the same results as before and so much time had passed that the sun had begun to set and they were left with no option but to make camp for the night. Isa sat beside Joe on his rock and pulled a stone out from her pocket.

"I didn't know you collected stones," he said.

Isa smirked and placed the rock on the ground not far from where they sat. She closed her eyes and repeated the incantation Osmond had taught her. The noise hadn't surprised her this time, but Joe let out a yell and fell off the rock.

"What was that?!" he asked.

"Osmond gave this to me a while ago. He knew I liked to go exploring and gave me this in case I was ever out at night," she said.

Joe approached the flaming stone with caution and crouched beside it, reaching out his hand.

"It's hot! How is it not burning the grass around it?" he asked.

Isa shrugged. She had no idea how the stone worked or where Osmond managed to find it, but she was grateful he did. It had come in handy so many times when she was in the forest after dark or when there were no candles in her home. She crouched down across from Joe and picked up the stone. His eyes grew wide with fear which slowly changed to amazement when he realised nothing happened to her hand.

"When I first used the stone I didn't know how to extinguish the flame so I tried to pick it up with my coat. I could feel the heat coming off it, but it didn't burn me and the flame went out a few seconds later," she explained.

With that, the stone's flame disappeared and Isa placed it back on the ground reigniting it. She pulled some bread out of her bag and broke it in half before giving the rest to Joe, who eagerly wolfed it down. It wasn't long before he fell asleep and Isa was left to her thoughts as she gazed up at the stars. Her mind was full of questions about the tower and how Osmond seemed to know so much about it that she found it impossible to sleep. She let out a sigh of both exhaustion and frustration as she sat

upright. Joe could be heard snoring from across the fire and when Isa turned to look at him something had caught her eye. There, on the wall furthest from the forest's edge was a dull, blue light. The light was in a pattern that looked quite familiar to Isa, but she couldn't figure out why. She raised her hand and pressed it lightly against the glowing pattern, half expecting a door to appear, but nothing happened.

"You needn't worry, my dear," a voice said from behind.

Isa faced the source of the voice but saw nothing. Her eyes darted here and there hoping to catch a glimpse of whoever had spoken.

"You won't find me unless I allow it," the voice said.

"Who are you?" Isa asked.

"There will be time for questions later. Right now, I'm here to show you the way."

The field began to glow with the same light as the pattern and along the walls, Isa could see several shapes appear. Isa approached the closest one and touched it. The pattern grew brighter and emitted a quiet humming sound. She made her way to the pattern further along the wall and did

the same thing, only she noticed the glowing of the first pattern had stopped along with the one in front of her.

"A little help would be nice. What do I do now?" she asked the mysterious presence.

Isa waited a few moments, but when it became clear she wasn't going to get an answer she returned to touch the other patterns to the same end. There were six patterns in total, but no matter which she touched first, it continued to glow until she touched another. It was after several tries that she managed to keep two patterns glowing at once and she realised there must have been some sort of order to them. From what she could tell, there was no distinct correlation between the first and second patterns other than that was the order they needed to be activated. With the knowledge she had just obtained she continued to study the next patterns closely before activating them, but when she had found the third she could still see no relation between the three.

"What are you doing?" a groggy Joe asked.

"I think I've found the way out of here," she said.

There was no response from Joe other

than snoring and Isa smirked realising he must have been sleep-talking. She returned to the patterns and after several failed attempts, she managed to get all six patterns to glow at once and a small key-hole sized light appeared on the original wall. She paused for a moment when she arrived at the wall, her thumb hovering in front of the light. She was unsure about bringing Joe with her and looked back at him before facing the wall again. With her eyes shut tight, Isa pressed her thumb against the light and the rest of the pattern lit up before dissolving the wall it encircled. A clear path now lay before her and she strode forth toward the tower ahead. She felt a pang of guilt in her chest as she passed the final feet of the wall and she paused for a moment. She felt terrible for leaving him behind, but he really wasn't of any use to her. She looked back to see if the sleeping Joe had been disturbed when she realised she had left the stone behind. She returned swiftly to retrieve it and to her dismay, Joe had awoken.

"Did you find a way through?" he asked, slurring his words.

Isa grimaced, "I have. The path is just a

ways in that direction."

"Right. Give me a moment to gather myself," he said.

She watched as Joe stumbled to his feet and picked up his rucksack. He managed to get a chuckle out of her when he stubbed his foot on a nearby rock before cursing at it and throwing it away. Maybe it was better to have him come along. Although he slowed her down, maybe his pacing would remind her to take things a little easier. Once Joe had composed himself, Isa lead the way through the wall and out to the other side, where dawn could be seen on the horizon. There was a short way to go before the pair reached the foot of the tower and as they came closer they saw what looked to be a small village at its base. The tower appeared to grow taller with each stride they took and when they had reached the boundary of the village, Isa craned her neck back in an attempt to see the top.

"Ah...more challengers," a gaunt man said.

"Challengers?" Isa asked.

"Those who arrive at this village when the tower appears are challengers."

"That's it? We're challengers of something because we came here?" Joe asked.

"Precisely, my boy. If you do not wish to challenge the tower, I suggest you leave or suffer the consequences."

"What are these consequences?" Isa asked.

"Death," the man replied.

Isa and Joe looked at one another for a moment. Isa made gave an expression which conveyed her thoughts all too clearly: I'm going, but I think it would be best if you returned home.

"I think I'll go home. Good luck, Isa," he said, waving as he walked away.

"He's a smart lad. Now, your name is Isa, correct? My name is Bartholomew. I shall be your guide through the tower. Please, follow me."

Isa followed the man who she thought moved with such vigour for someone with his appearance. There were moments when she caught a glimpse of him looking back and sneering when he saw she was still following him. There was a clear path from where they walked to the entrance of the tower and Isa was dumbfounded. The base of the tower reached farther than any of the farms in her village and she could only assume the circumference was equally

Ascension

impressive. Bartholomew stopped at the large double-doors and raised his hand toward it. A red pattern spiralled from his palm and grew as it approached the doors. It hung there for a moment and Isa felt as if time had been suspended before the pattern dissipated and the doors opened with a loud groan. Bartholomew gestured for Isa to enter and as she did, the enormous doors slammed shut.