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Opening extract from

Nature Mage

Written by

Duncan Pile

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Duncan Pile

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First Edition

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This book has always been a pleasure to write. It's been the thing I want to do crammed into the small spaces between the things I have to do. As a result, this book has been written in pleasurable hours, and has been a joy to watch unfold.

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I fell in love with fantasy literature the first time I picked up David Edding's Belgariad. Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman built on that foundation with their tremendous Dragonlance Chronicles, and before long, David Gemmell, Tad Williams, Raymond E. Feist, Terry Brooks and many other incredible writers added their portion of inspiration and magic to my burgeoning imagination. It is to these great writers that I owe the biggest debt of thanks, for giving me a love of magic and a passion for storytelling.

My thanks also go to you, the reader, for taking the time to get to know my beloved characters. As you enter their world, I hope you enjoy getting to know them as much as I have.

Chapter 1

Gaspi sat slumped at his desk, waves of warmth from the open fire blazing at the back of the small classroom sending him into a comfortable doze. A pleasant daydream featuring himself as the heroic goal scorer of the village Koshta team, was rudely broken into by the swinging clatter of hand-bell tones, followed instantly by the urgent scraping of chairs and the pounding feet of children, all convinced that every extra second of time outside the tiny schoolhouse's confining walls must be grabbed at all costs.

Ten seconds behind the pack now, Gaspi crammed his books, stylus and ink pot into his knapsack, and sprinted after his school mates, anxious not to miss out on the impromptu game of Koshta that would no doubt be starting up even as he ran. Over-garments would already be flung on the frozen village pond, heedless of mothers' scoldings to come later that night, and the hand-sized Koshta seed would already be skittering across the ice.

Gaspi's village was nestled in an upland valley, nearly two miles above the rolling plains far below that stretched into the distance. Surrounded by thick pine and fir forest, it was snowbound for the long stretch of winter, but that suited its inhabitants. The villagers of Aemon's Reach were not unfriendly, but winter was a time when the plains folk stopped their long treks into the mountains, and traffic across the peaks stopped completely. It was a time for family, and for community.

Once a week, roaring fires blazed in the Moot Hall, and everyone turned out in their Feast-Day best to gorge themselves on the plentiful game hunted and trapped in the thick forest surrounding their homes. Once the feasting was done the tables were dragged to the sides, and they would dance for hours to the rapped-out rhythms of the Tibor drum and the energetic scraping and wheezing of fiddles and the squeeze-box. Families would eat together every night, inviting those without companions to join them in their homes. And, all through the snowbound months, the villagers uniformly abandoned themselves to an obsession with Koshta. There were four other villages in the vicinity, all of a similar size, and all equally obsessed with their sport. As far as they knew it was played throughout the mountains, but they only ever had contact with these four villages, each of them reachable within two hours using the wide, flat snow shoes worn for such trips.

The villagers of Aemon's Reach practiced all week, but every third Feast-Day half the inhabitants of Vintarol, Steg's End, Steg's Nook or Petersvale turned up to try and take the lead in that winter's Koshta

competition. The opposition villagers were welcomed warmly, but the competition was deadly serious. More than once a winter fights broke out around the pond, and once in recent history at the Red Stag Inn later at night, where the visitors stayed before trekking back the next day to their homes.

The village pond was the stadium for these epic battles, but for the next hour at least an equally savage game of Koshta would be played by the school boys of Aemon's Reach, each proud young breast filled with hopes of one day taking his place on the village team. Every boy was given a full size Koshta whacker on their first Nameday, but while very small they would use miniature versions of the stick, until big enough to try their own. Gaspi had been using his own whacker for a couple of years now, from the age of twelve, when he managed to wield it successfully for a whole game without tripping over his own feet.

Catching up with the other children, he flung himself on the floor at the edge of the ice and pulled his ice boots out of his bag. One of the village blacksmith's regular jobs was crafting blunted metal blades to be rigidly fitted into hard leather shoes, which the villagers used to skate over the pond. Gaspi tugged his boots on with a mighty heave and was quickly gliding over the ice, flowing into the general ruck of bodies and sticks. Gaspi's best friend Taurnil was already in goal. Plumper than the rest of the boys, Taurnil was always in goal, a position he seemed quite happy to fill. Gaspi flashed him a quick grin, and Taurnil beamed his guileless, open smile in response. Never one to hog the limelight, and utterly innocent of jealousy, Taurnil loved it when Gaspi showed off, easily twisting around other players, and punching home goal after goal.

Gaspi was about to skate over to Taurnil when something slammed into his side, and he fell, grunting, onto the ice. Pushing himself up onto his hands, cold against the ice even through thick mittens, he looked up to see Jakko, the blacksmith's son, standing over him, holding his whacker threateningly and leering with his unpleasant, piggish face. Flipping his whacker from hand to hand, and surrounded by laughing onlookers, his leer grew even broader and he was just about to speak when a sudden look of surprise stole over his face, and with glazed eyes he crumpled to the ice.

Gaspi looked up to see Taurnil standing over twenty yards away, lowering his stick. He rested the butt on the ice and stood casually, his unflinching gaze quietly challenging Jakko's group. Jakko himself was coming round, groaning as one of his friends helped him to his feet. He picked up the Koshta seed that had struck him and eyed up Taurnil

uncertainly.

"Stay out of this, Taurnil. This is between me and Gaspi. I don't have a problem with you," Jacko grunted resentfully.

"Any problem with Gaspi is a problem with me. You know that, Jakko," Taurnil responded. The silent standoff lasted another few seconds, until Jakko spat in disgust and turned from the ice.

"You'll get yours, Gaspi," he threatened, as a parting shot.

"Anytime, Jakko. You know where to find me."

Taurnil skated over to Gaspi and helped him to his feet, grinning conspiratorially. Jakko had been out to get his best friend ever since Emea had gone to the midwinter festival with Gaspi instead of him. Emea and Jakko had been inseparable growing up, their parents being best friends, but Jakko had grown bigger than the other boys by his tenth Nameday, and Emea had started to draw away from him as he became pushy with his smaller schoolmates. Over the last few years she and Gaspi had formed a close friendship - though sometimes recently that friendship had become confusing - and Jakko had never forgiven Gaspi for stealing his friend.

He expressed himself through trying to hurt Gaspi at every opportunity, but so far Gaspi's phenomenal luck had kept him from any real harm. Only the previous week Jakko and three friends had caught Gaspi on his own behind the schoolhouse, and pushed him hard against the wall. Gaspi knew he was in for a beating, but on colliding with the wall a massive load of snow slid heavily off the roof onto the four bullies, giving him the few seconds he needed to make a getaway. There was no point trying to fight Jakko, who was much bigger than he was. Gaspi was a little small for his age, and wouldn't stand a chance, but he was fast, and once out of Jakko's hands there was no catching him.

Taurnil had silently elected himself Gaspi's protector, and, though a little plump, he was the strongest and largest boy in their year; even Jakko wouldn't take him on. Taurnil was well liked by everyone, and his support of Gaspi had saved his friend from the beating brewing in Jakko's limited imagination as many times as Gaspi had saved himself through speed or good luck.

It looked like the game was off, so Gaspi and Taurnil wondered over to Emea, who was watching from the side of the pond. A few blond locks escaped the confines of her thick, fur-lined hood, framing a face lively with intelligence and humour. A little line sat in the middle of her forehead, which deepened adorably when she was thinking. Gaspi found himself noticing the redness in her cheeks and on the tip of her

nose, remembering when she had hugged him after the midwinter dance and pressed that little cold face against his own, as she kissed his cheek. He remembered with curious clarity the way their skin has stuck together, made tacky by the freezing air. All of these things came to Gaspi again in the moment he saw her, along with a tumbling ball of stomach-tightening emotions he could not name. And then she grinned at him and the moment was gone.

"Did you see that? Taurnil shot the seed at Jakko's head all the way from the goal!" Gaspi said, falling back into their usual banter.

Taurnil shrugged, but still seemed quite pleased with himself. "Well I wasn't aiming for his head. I was just trying to get his attention."

"Aww don't say that, Taurn," Gaspi said. "It was a heroic shot. One in a million. You should at least pretend it was deliberate. I know I would!"

Emea laughed at Gaspi, before turning to Taurnil with a more serious expression. "Yeah, it was a great shot Taurn, but I wish you'd not knocked him out. This'll only make him worse. You know what he's like." When Gaspi looked unconvinced she carried on, saying "Everyone thinks it was him who beat little Fredo up last summer."

"That's not what Fredo said," Taurnil responded.

"That's because he's afraid of Jakko," Emea said emphatically. "He just made up that story about strangers in the forest to keep Jakko off his back."

"You worry too much, Emmy," Gaspi said. "He's just a lot of talk and not much else. Anyway, I've got Taurn to look after me, and the worst that could happen is a beating. God knows, I've taken a few of those before."

And it was true. Gaspi had a bad habit of getting into fights, and always seemed to attract the enmity of one large boy or another, but his legendary luck had fished him out of most situations, and the few times he had come away with bruises and cuts had done nothing to calm him down.

Gaspi and Taurnil sat down to take off their ice boots, and then the three friends trudged home through the snow laughing and joking, the problem with Jakko out of their minds, kicking up snow at each other and eventually breaking into a snowball fight outside Gaspi's house.

As the light dimmed to a warm evening glow they each went their own way, to parents waiting at home and the smell of food cooking on the stove. As Emea turned away, the evening light caught her profile in soft hues, and Gaspi found his stomach tightening again with that ball of uncomfortable emotion, like his insides wouldn't stay still. Irritated with this unwelcome intrusion into his familiar feelings for his friend,

he shook his head involuntarily, and turned into the house.

The door creaked as it swung open, the old metal hinges in need of repair, and Gaspi stepped into the dark hallway. Night came quickly in the mountains, and the lamps should be lit by now. A dim glow was seeping under the kitchen door, and, pushing it open tentatively, Gaspi didn't have to look far to find Jonn, his guardian. Unmoving in the corner chair, Jonn slumped unconscious before the fire, yesterday's growth still shadowing his face and a bottle of strong highland malt sitting on the floor below a dangling hand. Clasped tightly in his lap was a red scarf, and half-dried tear tracks glistened in the low light on his face. Sighing, Gaspi moved to his side and gently shook him, calling his name until Jonn began to stir. Helping him to his feet, Gaspi moved him to the bedroom. After putting him to bed he left the room, closing the door gently behind him and leaning back against the wall, breathing deeply and slowly, his head hanging loosely on shoulders too young to understand this sorrow.

Gaspi knew Jonn's story of course. Jonn and his wife Rhetta had been inseparable from Gaspi's parents, and when Gaspi was conceived they had proudly accepted the role of guardians, responsible for supporting Gaspi's parents in mentoring and guiding their child. Less than one year after Gaspi was born, Jonn and Rhetta had been deep in the forest on a hunting trip with Gaspi's parents, when a group of drunk trappers from the other side of the mountains had come across their camp. They had hit Jonn from behind before he realised they were there, and he had come around to see them running their knife across his best friend's throat. The two women were already dead, and if Jonn had been out for a minute longer he would never have woken. Jonn had never said much about what happened next, and all that Gaspi knew was that he had lost his mind, murdered the trappers, and nearly died out in the wilderness before he was found by a search party three days later.

He'd been unresponsive and speechless, staring incoherently into space, lost in a deep inner landscape where pain couldn't touch him. It had taken months to bring Jonn back to himself, and Gaspi had been taken in by Taurnil's family while he recovered. Jonn had taken Gaspi back when he was two years old, and the boy didn't remember any of these things, so for Gaspi life with Jonn was simply life as he knew it. Since that day in the mountains, Jonn had changed. He was no longer the warm, gregarious man he had been, when love and blessing had surrounded his days in a golden cloud. He was still kind, and helpful, and sincere, but in a distant way; he did not come often to village gatherings, and mostly kept himself to himself. He did odd jobs around

the village to keep himself and Gaspi fed and clothed, and sometimes went out on his own hunting for a few days at a time, leaving Gaspi with Taurnil's folks while he was away.

The only person he ever showed real warmth to was Gaspi, his last remaining link to the friend he had loved like a brother. He loved Gaspi fiercely and protectively, and Gaspi loved him in return. Theirs was a rare loyalty and understanding, and when every now and again sorrow overtook Jonn and he fled into drunken oblivion, he was always filled with remorse the next day and apologised over and over to Gaspi, who just wished Jonn's pain could be taken away.

Jonn seemed most happy watching Gaspi on the ice, an unfettered smile of genuine pleasure bringing light to his usually solemn face every time Gaspi scored. Sometimes Gaspi watched with surreptitious envy through open shutters as families ate together, laughing and smiling in the warm glow of fire-lit kitchens, but mostly Gaspi felt he was lucky to have a guardian like Jonn. Although he was the only boy in the village to live in such a situation, the other children were too respectful to mock him for it. That is, with the exception of Jakko, who had recently started throwing barbed taunts about Jonn into his normal abuse. For the first time in his life Gaspi started to feel genuine hatred towards another human being, when Jakko stepped so cruelly on that sacred ground.

Gaspi found he hadn't the heart to do much that evening, so after getting some cured meat from the cellar, and munching on dried fruit, he sat in the kitchen until the fire died. He made his way to the bedroom he shared with Jonn and lay on his smaller cot staring at the ceiling - thinking of ways to make Jonn happier - until he, too, fell asleep.

Chapter 2

The red glow of morning radiated through Gaspi's eyelids, waking him comfortably into the new day. He was about to drift back to sleep when he heard the sound of pots clanking through the wall, and knew that Jonn was up and about. Pulling on some leggings and a shirt, Gaspi went into the kitchen, where Jonn was bending over the stove, frying some strips of meat for their breakfast. As the door closed behind Gaspi, he straightened and turned around, running a hand through his hair.

"Gaspi, about last night...I'm sorry," he said.

"It's okay, Jonn," Gaspi said.

"No, Gaspi, it's not okay. A boy shouldn't have to carry his Da to bed." The pain in Jonn's voice was palpable.

Gaspi was desperate to reassure him. "Jonn, really, I understand."

Tears brimmed in Jonn's eyes. "I know you do Gasp, I know it. But it doesn't stop me feeling ashamed. I just want you to know, I'll try not to..." Silence fell between them for a few moments.

"I know you will, Jonn." Gaspi moved to his guardian and hugged him gently, a hug Jonn returned self-consciously, but with gratitude. Jonn only fell into his drink once every few months, and Gaspi had never felt neglected by him. He just worried for Jonn, and silently shared his pain to a degree Jonn would never understand. More than anything else Gaspi just wanted Jonn to be happy, to maybe find another wife, have some children of his own. It wasn't the drinking that bothered Gaspi; it was the loneliness. Jonn seemed much more cheerful after that, and when Gaspi left that morning he even heard him humming a tune to himself as he cleaned.

The brilliant sunshine reflected off the snow in a blinding flare, and, looking around him, Gaspi drank in the sparkling beauty of the scene. The dark, bald undersides of tree limbs were iced starkly in white; the sheer black rock of the mountainside contrasted against its snowy covering. Birds flitted from branch to branch, chirping brilliantly in the still air. Breathing deeply, Gaspi shook off the last of the previous evening's darkness, and ran to the pond to meet his friends, as he always did on a Feast-Day morning.

Emea was helping her Ma that morning, so Taurnil and Gaspi practiced their goalkeeping and shooting skills on the pond, and after eating lunch with Taurnil's family they went back out that afternoon to carry on - only to find Jakko and his friends already using the ice. One of his friends pointed them out to Jakko as they approached, and turning to

face them, he leaned confidently on his stick and stared them down, a customary sneer stealing over his face.

"Here comes the orphan. How's your useless Da, Gaspi?" he taunted. It was unspoken but common knowledge that Jonn sometimes fell to drinking heavily, but most people understood why and left him alone. Few things could make Gaspi's blood boil, but mocking Jonn was the worst of them. Seething, he froze momentarily, clenched fists turning as red as his face. Taurnil only just caught on to the level of his friend's fury in time, and grabbed him by the arm as Gaspi was about to lunge forward.

"Stop, Gasp!" Taurnil said firmly.

Gaspi tried to pull away, but after several attempts he stopped and stood glaring furiously into Taurnil's eyes. "Let go of me, Taurn, I'm telling you…"

"There'll be another time, Gasp. He has his ice boots on and you don't, and he has five of his friends with him."

"I don't care," Gaspi retorted. "He can't get away with that. I just..." But the moment was passing, and Gaspi's anger was easing to a simmer. "Okay, let's go then," he said angrily. Taurnil released his friend's arm and they walked away, Jakko and his gang's laughter following them down the street.

"I don't care so much what he says about me, Taurn," Gaspi said as his anger drained away. "It's that recently he's started bringing Jonn into it. You know what he's been saying? That Jonn was too much of a weakling to defend my parents that day. That he cowered in the bushes begging for his life while they killed them. I mean, I know it's not true, but if Jonn was to hear…"

"Jonn can look after himself, Gaspi," Taurnil responded. "You don't need to protect him."

Gaspi sighed. "Maybe not, but I just can't help myself. Jakko drives me insane. I'd love to pound his face in..." The two friends walked in silence for a few minutes, before Taurnil suggested they go and see Emea at her Ma's place and see if they could persuade her to come out with them.

Emea was sitting with her Ma, a plump woman of middle years who always had some sweet goodies for them hidden away somewhere. Emea's little sister Maria was playing with coloured wooden balls in the corner and the two ladies were at the kitchen table with cloth and thread strewn all around them. Looking up, Emea's Ma saw the boys as they approached the door. Smiling, broadly she called out to them "Come in boys, you're just in time," and bustled off into the pantry to find something for them to eat.

Gaspi and Taurn went in, and sat down at the table. Emea looked sharply at their faces. “What happened?” she asked.

It was Taurnil who answered, “Jakko was making trouble again.” Gaspi huffed and looked at the floor.

“Well, that’s not unusual. What’s got you so riled, Gasp?” Emea probed.

“He was having a go at Jonn,” Gaspi answered reluctantly, still looking at the floor. He glanced up, and seeing the sympathy in Emea’s eyes he continued, “I just can’t bear it when he goes for Jonn. He can say what he likes about me, but when he starts in on Jonn like that I just see red.” Passing a hand across his eyes he blew out some air. “He was saying that Jonn was useless,” he added, some seconds later.

Emea reached out a hand and placed it gently on Gaspi’s. “Sorry Gaspi,” she said.

Gaspi knew he should be feeling embarrassed, but looking into Emea’s eyes he felt strangely comfortable. The moment extended warmly, until Emea’s Ma came back in with a plate of pastries, and Emea withdrew her hand. The pastries were light, soft rolls of dough with fruit sprinkled throughout, one of the boys’ favourites. Grabbing a couple each, all three of them gobbled them in silence apart from the occasional noise of pleasure, their host beaming at their enjoyment.

When the plates were clear, Emea’s Ma shooed them out of the house. “Go on then, you three. Go and have fun. Just make sure you’re back before we go to the Moot Hall tonight, Emmy!” Flinging rucksacks on their backs, the three friends bustled out of the door and into the cold, fresh air. It was a good day for exploring the forest, hunting imaginary boar, and shooting at game birds with homemade slingshots. They had some strips of cloth Gaspi had ripped from one of Jonn’s old shirts, into which they placed rocks, spinning them round and round their heads and releasing them at whichever unlucky feathered target they chose.

Gaspi was particularly good at this, but Emea and Taurnil were fairly skilled too, and after an afternoon of high imagination and hunting they trudged home in the failing light with five plump birds to give to their parents and to Jonn. They wouldn’t be needed tonight, as it was a Feast-Day, and they would eat in the Moot Hall with the village. Parting at the village well, they went to their homes in preparation for the night’s festivities.

Just as they were separating, Emea caught Gaspi’s arm. “Gaspi, save me a dance tonight?” she asked. Her sweet face looked oddly determined and intense, and, feeling suddenly nervous, Gaspi smiled weakly and nodded, before turning and walking away. He was suddenly

aware of a storm of movement in his belly, and wondered why he felt that a pit had opened beneath him and that his next step would send him tumbling into it.

On entering the house, Gaspi was surprised to find Jonn sitting in the kitchen, polishing his best shoes.

He looked up as Gaspi entered the room. “Alright there Gasp? You’d better get a rush on if you want to be ready for the feast.”

Gaspi grinned and ran to his room to get ready. Jonn hadn’t been to a feast all winter, and even though Gaspi really enjoyed them, he always hated leaving Jonn on his own. On previous occasions his enjoyment had been overshadowed by images of Jonn sitting on his own in front of the fire, leaving him with a burden of guilt. This time would be different. Jonn would be there with him, enjoying the music and company. Maybe this would be the start of a new happiness for Jonn. Gaspi’s imagination continued to create a happier future for him and Jonn as he got ready for the evening.

The villagers flowed into the hall in twos and threes. Some families would have to leave one parent at home with very young children, but almost the entire village would be out for the feast. In Gaspi’s opinion, this was the best thing about winter: the massive tables groaning under the weight of platters of food, everyone laughing and happy, the wild swirling music and the stamping of feet going on long into the night. This was also a chance to dance with Emmy, something he was trying not to think about, but which kept intruding into his thoughts, bringing with it a fresh surge of discomfort in his belly.

He was sitting in the corner with Jonn, feeling proud of his guardian with his combed hair, brushed jacket and shining shoes. Jonn looked like the perfect highland gentleman, and Gaspi wanted everyone to notice how finely he had dressed.

Despite some minor signs of twitchiness, Jonn himself looked surprisingly comfortable, even among the large crowd of fifty or sixty people. He sat in the corner smiling and nodding to people as they called out greetings, Many of the women made a fuss over him, coming over and saying just how lovely it was to see him. One or two of them asked him to dance with them later, and to Gaspi’s amazement Jonn agreed, smiling warmly at the requests. Suddenly tears were welling up in Gaspi’s eyes, and he had to blink furiously and clench his jaw to avoid letting them spill onto his cheeks. A surge of pure, bright hope was filling Gaspi’s heart, so strong he wondered if he could contain it, but he kept it to himself, and as the feasting began he found that incredible feeling fuelling his happiness to new levels. He laughed and

joked with ferocity, drinking in every last drop of joy, earning amused, warm glances from Jonn and other adults around him.

After the feasting the dancing began, starting with a slow, rhythmic tune that relied heavily on the booming of the Tibor. Two lines of villagers faced each other, made up of men on one side and women on the other. Sleeves were already rolled up above elbows and the top few shirt buttons undone in anticipation of the exertion to come. Everyone was smiling already, and as the music started people began the careful pacing that later on would become a ruck, as steps and form were entirely forgotten and people abandoned themselves to rhythm.

Gaspi spun and twirled with person after person, swapping partners many times in the course of a dance. He was old enough to be allowed to drink some ale from the casks that sat in the corner, and two cool, creamy, flagons later he was feeling a great warmth spreading out from his belly that seemed to have reached his face, where a grin had fixed itself immovably. Out of the corner of his eye he caught sight of a lady taking Jonn's hand with a look of infinite kindness on her face, and leading him to the open floor. Jonn had a look of surprise on his face the whole evening, as if taken aback that he could relax enough to let some of the warmth in. He looked out of his element but happy to be so, and though a big man, he looked smaller to Gaspi in the company of all these other adults, dancing in the bright, flickering light of torches and fire.

Gaspi passed to another partner, and turned his head away from Jonn to find Emmy in his arms, smiling exquisitely at him. He became aware of the sweatiness of his fingers, and the complexity of the footwork he found himself suddenly unable to follow. He had never noticed before the flecks of hazel in her deep brown eyes, and found himself saying so. Emmy looked both pleased and nervous, and neither noticed they had stopped dancing. There was a long moment of stillness and unbroken eye contact, and then, following his instinct, Gaspi leaned forward and kissed her. It was only a brief kiss, but Gaspi would never forget the softness of that moment, and the sensation of her lips on his, her warm breath mingling with his own. It was a moment isolated from all others, with a meaning and sensation all of its own. What came before and after were just seas surrounding an island of bliss.

And then they pulled back, becoming aware of the smiles directed at them from nearby dancers, and the laughter of some of the men. One woman slapped her husband's hand as he playfully mocked Gaspi. Feeling embarrassed, Gaspi caught Jonn's eye, whose smile had no mockery in it, but was full of approval and understanding, and suddenly

Gaspi was not embarrassed anymore. Grinning, he grabbed Emmy and began to dance with her again. She too seemed unconcerned by the onlookers' attention, and though sometimes they passed shy looks back and forth, they were mostly comfortable with each other. The swirling in Gaspi's belly had diminished, and he was left with an excited feeling that this was the beginning of something new for himself and Emmy; something well worth exploring.

The dance drew to a close, and the two friends moved to the chairs left at the side of the moot hall where exhausted revellers were resting, to find Jakko sitting with two friends and scowling like a thundercloud. He stood up as they approached, anger radiating from him in waves. "Jakko, please don't!" Emmy pleaded.

"Why should I listen to you, you…whore?" The word fell out of Jakko's mouth uncomfortably, and he looked embarrassed to have cursed in such a way, but anger and injured pride would not allow him to back down, and his jaw firmed as he prepared to take it further. Lights flashed behind Gaspi's eyes, but before he was able to pounce on Jakko, Emea grabbed his wrist and pulled sharply, turning him towards her.

"Gaspi, don't be like him! Listen to me…please!" The words cut through the blaze in Gaspi's head and he held back, just. Standing there, fists still clenched, he stared at Emea in frustration. She span back on Jakko, fury sounding in every word. "Get out of here, Jakko. You can forget we were ever friends. You are a pig."

Jakko's face flared bright red, and for a moment regret and pain showed in his eyes. But unwilling to voice his feelings, he turned and stalked out of the room, his friends trailing behind him.

"Thank you, Gaspi," Emea said. "I know you wanted to hit him, and he would have deserved it. But I don't want to descend to his level."

Gaspi was smiling at her. "Why are you smiling?" she asked.

"I don't think anything I could have done would have been as harsh as what you said to him," he answered. Emea looked suddenly uncertain. "No, don't feel bad," Gaspi said firmly. "He deserves it. Let's forget about him and have another dance."

And they would have done that, but the musicians were packing up and it was time to go home. Jonn had volunteered to help clear up, so he and Gaspi and a few others were putting away tables and chairs and sweeping the floor. In the morning, some of the women would come in to clean properly, but this would make their job easier. Emea had gone home with her parents, and in the aftermath of the feast the men worked with easy companionship in the light of the dying fire.

When they were done, they threw dirt on the fire and made their way out. The other men departed, and Gaspi and Jonn turned alone from the large doors of the hall and began to walk home.

Before they had gone even ten paces, Jonn put an arm out to stop Gaspi, who was lost in a reverie and came to a halt in surprise. Following Jonn's gaze, he saw a flicker of movement from out of the dark near the pond. His hand on Gaspi's shoulder, Jonn stood still and waited for the shadows to resolve themselves. Two figures emerged from the gloom, and Gaspi was surprised to see it was Jakko and his Pa, Brock Hermon. Jonn seemed less surprised.

"Good evening to you, Brock. I didn't get the chance to say hello at the feast."

As Brock moved forward, his face caught the light from nearby windows. Gaspi had never really noticed before, but Jakko's piggish face was a close imitation of his father's, though bulk and years lent a worn quality to that unappealing look. Brock was the village blacksmith, the skin of his arms and hands scarred and reddened in places from his work, and in the lantern's glow his face looked red to Gaspi too. His face was set in a leer, aggression seething behind hard little eyes.

"Why did you turn up tonight, Jonn?" Brock asked. "You're a disgrace to yourself and to the village." The deep slur in Brock's voice showed him to be very drunk, and he was speaking so loudly that faces quickly began to appear in nearby windows.

"Brock, I think you should go home to bed and sleep this off," Jonn said.

"What was that? Don't you tell me what to do Jonn! You lost that right when you killed her," Brock slurred drunkenly. Gaspi felt Jonn go rigid next to him. "You heard me, Jonn. You lay in the bushes and cried like a coward. You may as well have killed her yourself." This was the first time Gaspi had heard anyone say that rumour to his face, and for a moment he was so shocked he couldn't even react.

"I didn't..." Jonn murmured.

"What's that...coward? I can't hear you!" Brock shouted. Jakko was sneering at Jonn, and then turned his face to Gaspi, a mingled look of hatred and satisfaction beaming unpleasantly from his face. The moment of shock was over, and Gaspi felt a burning fury building in him beyond anything he had ever known. Men were coming out of doors, feet crammed hastily into thick, fur-lined boots but otherwise dressed for bed, and freezing in the winter air.

"Brock, you need to calm down," called Seth Bertram, Taurnil's

father.

"Don't you tell me what to do, Seth," roared Brock. "She should have been mine. But she got what she deserved."

Brock's attack had caused Jonn to withdrawn into a protective trance, trying to prevent the sharp edges of painful memories he tried so hard to submerge from scraping his mind once again. But at these words he came awake like a boar springing from concealment, an agonised roar sounding from his mouth. In a moment he was surging forward, arms outstretched, but he was stopped in his tracks by a mad rush of movement and wind sweeping past his head.

In the heart of unquenchable anger, Gaspi's fury broke free of the constraints of his body. He became aware of the environment around him: of trees and soil and ice, and of creatures sleeping or prowling in the night. They felt like they were a part of him, his to command, and he filled them with the fire burning in his heart. He sent his will swirling and spreading out through the air, leeching up through tree trunks and along branches, filling the breast of every bird nearby, crackling through the thick ice of the pond. Gaspi didn't know how he did it, but suddenly nature had become an extension of his anger, responding to his every thought.

Birds came awake and flung themselves from branches and nests, diving from the trees, gathering speed and momentum, before swooping down past Jonn and driving their sharp beaks into Brock and Jakko. They scraped them with scrabbling claws, flying in again and again to stab and scratch at the focus of Gaspi's hate.

Brock and Jakko were shouting fearfully, swinging their arms wildly at their assailants, before turning and running out over the pond. They slid and fell, scrabbling to their feet, falling again, crawling desperately away from the unrelenting swarm of cruel beaks. Blood was showing on their clothing, seeping through a hundred holes and tears. Gaspi's anger flowed through the ice, the inches-thick surface groaning as power coursed through it. He extended a hand, palm downwards, thrusting out splayed fingers. Massive cracks splintered the edges of the pond, sending a fine spray of snow and ice into the air and then, as Gaspi clenched his fingers fiercely into a fist, they lanced inwards from every direction. The thrusting fractures met in a violent explosion in the middle of the pond, shattering the surface beneath Jakko and Brock. The two terrified, bleeding men disappeared in a surge of spray.

"Gaspi, STOP!" yelled Jonn. Gaspi had been standing with a look of furious concentration on his face, with legs spread and planted on the ground, hand outstretched and pointing at the break in the ice, where

even now the birds were diving at the water, trying to get another stab at the drowning men. Jonn's shout did something to disturb his unrelenting focus, and as Jonn pleaded with him again he felt himself returning to his right mind. Seeing what he had done, and suddenly overcome by a massive wave of fatigue, Gaspi fell to his knees, head in his hands. A dark pit seemed to have opened beneath Gaspi, its draw irresistible, and he found himself plunging into unconsciousness.

Jonn ran to Gaspi and threw his arms around him, yelling to the onlookers, "Get them out, Seth!"

Like daydreamers snapping out of a reverie, the men of Aemon's Reach leaped into action, running to the shattered ice of the pond. Gaspi's attack had left giant breaks all through the ice, and Brock and Jakko had surfaced through two of these dark holes. The rescuers lay down on the edge of the frozen surface and reached out to the freezing, bleeding men, pulling them out of the water. One of the women ran into her house and brought back thick towels to wrap around Jakko and Brock, who were taken into Hahldorn's house to recover. Their faces blue and their bodies shaking uncontrollably all over, the father and son threw terrified glances around them constantly, checking for more bird attacks, but Gaspi's flock had dispersed the moment his trance was broken, flapping back to tree branches and away over the forest as if nothing had happened at all.

Hahldorn moved over to Jonn, who was still holding Gaspi protectively. As he approached Jonn looked up, his gaze defensive. Now was not the time to discuss what had happened.

Hahldorn spoke quietly so that only Jonn could hear him. "Take the boy home Jonn. I'll come by in a while after I've seen to Brock and Jakko."

Nodding gratefully, Jonn picked Gaspi up, who lay unmoving in his guardian's arms as he took him home.

Jonn closed the door behind him and lay Gaspi down on his cot, covering him with blankets and pulling up a nearby chair to sit in. Only then did he have a chance to examine Gaspi's condition. He was completely immobile, not twitching and rearranging himself like a normal sleeper, but statuesque, still as a stone, his breathing shallow and too fast. Panicking, Jonn ran back out and pounded on Hahldorn's door until he opened the door. Hahldorn was the village Healer and the only one Jonn could think of who could help Gaspi.

"Hahl you have to come and see Gaspi. He isn't moving."

"Hold on Jonn," Hahldorn answered. He poked his head back into

the house and called out to his wife. “Martha, can you look after these two? I need to go and see to Gaspi.”

Martha must have said yes, as Hahldorn grabbed his coat and followed after an anxious Jonn to his house. Hahldorn had a close look at Gaspi, opening his eyelids and peering at his eyes, lifting his arms and letting them fall, poking and prodding at him until eventually he grunted and sat down.

“I’ve seen people in a state like this Jonn,” he said sombrely, “but normally they have to climb a mountain with a sack of rocks on their back to get there. Whatever happened out there tonight has drained him dry.” Pausing to scratch his head, Hahldorn peered at Jonn from the corner of his eye. “Jonn, I think most people won’t link Gaspi with the birds, and it may be best to keep it that way, if you get my meaning. But you and I know different. I don’t have the ability myself, but I think this is the emergence of magic in Gaspi.”

“Magic?” Jonn repeated, stunned by the concept. He had known in the moment that Gaspi was somehow linked to the birds’ attack on Brock and Jakko, but hearing it said so starkly was still a real shock.

“Not just magic, but nature magic,” Hahldorn added significantly. “He was angry enough to let it break loose, and the birds and the ice were responding to him. My gifts lie in healing, but it seems to me the amount of power released through the boy was immense, and without training that is really dangerous.”

“But can’t you help him…train him?” Jonn asked.

“I’m sorry, Jonn, this is outside of my knowledge. Nature magic is a rare gift, and Gaspi will need special training. I know one thing: he is going to have to leave here to get it.” Seeing the look of protest on Jonn’s face, he added “You don’t have a choice, Jonn. You saw what happened tonight. Now that Gaspi’s power has manifested, it will do so again, and unless it’s managed properly, it will kill him. He’s going to have to go to Helioport and study at the College of Collective Magicks.”

Jonn stared at Hahldorn in unbelieving silence. “I can do something for him right now, though, Jonn. I will replace some of the energy he has lost. He’ll still be weak as a baby deer when he wakes, but it’ll put him back on the road to recovery.”

Jonn nodded gruffly. Turning back to Gaspi, Hahldorn leant over him and, cupping his hands, placed them over Gaspi’s chest. Hahldorn’s breathing slowed down, becoming rhythmic and steady, and from beneath his hands light began to radiate, glowing pink through his skin. The pink glow intensified to a deep red, white light peeking out from the gaps between fingers, and then faded gently away again. Once

the light was gone, Jonn noticed Gaspi's breathing was now deep and steady, just as Hahldorn's had been a minute previously, and his pale cheeks had a redness to them. Gaspi's arm twitched involuntarily, and he turn onto his side in his sleep.

"Thanks, Hahl," Jonn said, awestruck by what he had just seen, but mostly just relieved that Gaspi was going to be okay.

"Not a problem, Jonn," Hahldorn replied, sounding weary. "We can talk about this more tomorrow. Rest well." And with that he left the room, and Jonn sat down next to Gaspi, determined to be awake when Gaspi came around. Jonn began his silent vigil, watching over the boy who felt in every way like his own. A child of his own flesh couldn't mean more to Jonn than Gaspi did, and seeing him lying there, drained to exhaustion by such a hateful event, was painful.

In the deep of the night, a sob sounded from Jonn's lips. It was Gaspi who had brought him back from madness after Rhetta had been killed. His love for his friend's boy had given him a reason to live. In Gaspi he had found someone to love, and to protect, and earlier that evening he had thought for a short time that he might lose him. The thought of never seeing Gaspi grinning again, or fooling around with his friends, or shooting a goal on the ice, cut deeply into his heart, releasing an intensity of feeling he hadn't allowed to surface since losing Rhetta. With no-one around to see him, Jonn abandoned himself to the flood of feelings rising in him, and sobbed from the heart: deep, gut-wrenching sobs wracked his body as he sat huddled over, arms clasped tightly around his knees.

Later that night, when the flow of emotions had ebbed to a trickle, Jonn pondered what was going to happen to Gaspi. If this really was the first manifestation of magic in him, then his entire life was going to change. For starters, he was going to have to go to the great city of Helioport and join the College of Collective Magicks. He would have to say goodbye to his friends, to the safe and simple life he had known, and learn to embrace a dangerous discipline. Everyone knew magical ability was as much a curse as a blessing, hard to handle and potentially lethal to the user. Many students died as their magic blazed out of their control and turned on them. Last night Gaspi had drained himself to exhaustion with his first magical act, and it scared Jonn to think how close Gaspi might have come to killing himself. The only thing Jonn knew was that where Gaspi went, he would go.

His purpose was simple from now on - to be Gaspi's protector - and to do that, he would have to be strong. The night's release of feelings would be a new start for Jonn, and he would have to make it

last. Getting up he went to the pantry, and fishing out the bottles of Highland malt he had stashed away in the back, he stepped outside and poured them onto the ground, a great golden patch growing in the snow at his feet, and vowed never again to touch strong drink. Returning to his vigil, he sat up all night as Gaspi rested.

Chapter 3

It wasn't until about midday the next day that Gaspi awoke. Rubbing his eyes, he peered around confusedly for a moment, then his eyes widened as memory resurfaced. Gaspi tried to sit up, but found himself unable to do so, and collapsed back on the bed.

"It's alright, Gasp," said Jonn. "Just lie still."

"But last night I…" Gaspi trailed off. He looked uncertainly into Jonn's eyes, and saw there the confirmation that his memory was correct, but also acceptance. "Brock and Jakko?" Gaspi asked tremulously.

"They're messed up, but both will be fine," Jonn answered. Breathing out a sigh of relief, Gaspi gave up trying to sit up. "How are you feeling, Gasp?" Jonn asked, concern evident in his tone.

"Very tired, but basically okay," Gaspi answered.

"If you're feeling up to it, can you tell me what happened?" Jonn asked tentatively. "I know what I saw but I'd like to hear it from you."

Starting uncertainly, Gaspi started to describe what had happened. When he reached the point about Brock's attack on Jonn he paused, looking again into Jonn's eyes, unsure if this was something they could talk about.

"It's okay, Gaspi. Carry on," said Jonn, with a wave of his hand. Gaspi described how angry he had felt when Brock had said what he did, how that anger had grown until it seemed to break out of his body. He talked about how he had become aware of every living and natural thing around him, touching the essence of wood, and ice and rock, and even the creatures creeping on the ground or sleeping in the trees. He had known in that moment all of those things were his to command, and he had sent his anger flowing into them, releasing it all at Brock and Jakko.

At this point Gaspi stopped, horrified by what he had done. He had knowingly made those birds attack other human beings, and had not stopped when blood began to show. He had been aware of the pounding of their feet on the ice, had waited until they were in the very centre of the pond, and had shattered it beneath them. It was a miracle they weren't dead, but Gaspi wasn't sure he would be able to live with himself, even though they had survived.

"Gaspi, I understand what you're feeling. I've never talked about it with you, but when those men killed Rhetta and your parents, I lost it completely. I'd been knocked out in the attack, and when I came around and saw…what they'd done, I became something else altogether - a kind of monster. There was a sword lying on the ground, and before

they could even react I'd killed two of them. The remaining three men could probably have taken me, but my berserker rage must have terrified them, and they fled. I could have let them go, Gaspi, but I chased them down one by one. I murdered them, Gaspi, brutally and without mercy. The last one was begging for his life when I took it from him forever."

Jonn stalled for a moment, staring into space with an expression Gaspi could only think of as haunted. Gaspi knew the story of his parents' murder. Jonn had explained it to him when he felt Gaspi was old enough to hear the truth, but he'd never heard Jonn speak openly of his own experience of that evil day. It was hard to imagine his gentle guardian doing the things Jonn was describing.

Jonn started to speak again. "What I did that day drove me insane, Gaspi. It took me months to recover my mind, and it's been one of the hardest things for me to live with; almost as hard as losing Rhetta, or not being able to protect your Ma and pa. What I'm trying to say is...I know what it means to lose control."

"But Jonn," replied Gaspi, "what happened to you was much worse than what happened to me. I mean, someone killed your wife and friends. Of course you were going to lose it. Brock was just…saying things."

Jonn's brow furrowed in thought. "Well, for one thing, neither Brock nor Jakko is dead," he said. "I'm guessing you didn't actually want to kill them?"

Gaspi thought about it for a moment before speaking. "You're right, I didn't want to kill them. I don't even know what I wanted, but that's what worries me. After I'd started, well you know…once the..."

"Magic," Jonn interjected.

Astounded, Gaspi waited a moment before continuing. "Okay, once the…magic took over, I didn't think about the consequences. I was wrapped up in the moment, in the power….it was unbelievable. I'm scared, Jonn."

Placing his hand firmly on Gaspi's shoulder, he tried to comfort him. "Gaspi, we don't know anything about magic. Maybe that's part of how it works. The most important thing is that we find out about it as quickly as possible. We need to take you to people who can train you in it, as soon as you are better."

"You mean I have to leave Aemon's Reach?" Gaspi asked, cottoning on straight away to the implications of what Jonn was saying.

"We don't seem to have a choice, Gasp," Jonn answered gently, his voice overflowing with sympathy. "This….gift of yours will grow out of control without proper training, and you can only get that in

Helioport."

Gaspi was silent for a few minutes. He stared at the ceiling, his brow furrowed, and Jonn could sense him grappling with the idea of the immense change that was thrust upon him. Jonn sat silently, not interrupting Gaspi, giving him time to work through his thoughts.

Finally, Gaspi looked at him again, his eyes showing he already knew the answer to his question. "What about Emmy? Taurnil? I'm going to have to say goodbye, aren't I?"

Jonn sighed deeply. He looked steadily into Gaspi's eyes. "I'll be with you, Gaspi. You'll never have to say goodbye to me."

Gaspi sighed in return, and sagged back against the pillow. "When do we leave?"

Jonn hugged him then, speaking to him as he held him closely. "You're such a brave lad, Gaspi. I'm proud of you." Pulling back from him, he placed his big hands on Gaspi's shoulders. "I've never been to Helioport, but when I was younger I travelled with your father. We went to some big towns, even a city, and they can be great fun. And this gift of yours: Hahldorn says it's rare, so maybe it's really important that you develop it. Maybe you can help people, do great things."

Gaspi tried to smile to show appreciation for the effort Jonn was making to cheer him up, but all that Gaspi could feel was sadness at having to leave his friends behind. Jonn seemed to understand how deeply that would cut him. "Rest now, Gaspi," he said gently. "I'll make you some food when you wake up." Once Gaspi had closed his eyes, Jonn lay down on his own bed, and fell asleep too.

Later that day they were both up and sitting at the small table in the kitchen, eating fried strips of boar and venison, when Hahldorn knocked on the door. Pulling up a third chair he joined them at the table, and allowed Jonn to pour him a cup of water.

"How are you feeling, Gaspi?" he asked.

"Okay, I guess," Gaspi answered, unwilling to divulge his unexplored feelings about the previous night's events, or on the colossal change his life was about to undergo.

"Feeling weak?" Hahldorn asked.

"Yeah, just coming into the kitchen was tiring," Gaspi answered.

"You'll need to rest a couple of days, but you'll be fine after that," Hahldorn said. The Healer seemed to be rallying himself for something.

"Listen, Gaspi," he said seriously, "I don't know how much Jonn has said to you and there's no easy way to say this but what happened last night is going to change things forever for you. There's no going back. What emerged in you was magic - and more to the point - nature

magic. It is a powerful and rare gift, and very dangerous without training. You are going to have to study with the magicians in Helioport, and you are going to have to go soon, or your power will grow out of hand and something bad could happen."

"Like last night?" Gaspi said quietly.

"Yes, like last night," Hahldorn responded. "The villagers don't really know what happened. Brock and Jakko don't know what happened either but I do, boy, and when that power erupted in you, I felt it. It was like nothing I've ever sensed, like a caged lion fighting to escape." Hahldorn's eyes widened as he spoke. "I'm not saying this to frighten you. Any magic can be a great power for good, but without training you are a danger to everyone around you."

Gaspi brooded silently, not responding to Hahldorn's comments.

"There's one more thing you need to know," Hahldorn continued, looking at both Gaspi and Jonn. "You two will not be going alone. Martha had a dream last night. She has a lesser talent than me for healing, but few people know she occasionally gets visions, and they always prove to be accurate: She knew when that blizzard was going to hit last winter; it was her sight that showed us where to find Jonn when he was wondering in the forest, after…" He glanced apologetically at Jonn, who just shrugged and waved for him to carry on. Sitting upright and placing a hand firmly on each leg, Hahldorn continued. "She has always, always known that you are important, Gaspi."

The people of Aemon's Reach were not anti-magic as such, but they preferred not to hear too much about it. They accepted Hahldorn and Martha's healing gift easily enough, as all villages in the mountains had a Healer, and it had become the norm, but prophecies and visions were another thing altogether, and were not spoken of.

"Martha dreamed last night of you and your friends. You were standing in a triangle, facing outwards, holding hands. She says it was a symbol of strength, that the three of you needed each other. There's more to it than that, but that's the essence of it. You will all have to go to Helioport."

Gaspi was looking at Hahldorn keenly. "When you say my friends, you mean Taurnil and Emmy…Emea?" He felt a twinge of guilt at the hope blossoming in his heart, but he couldn't help feel the burden that had sat on his shoulders all day lighten at this news.

"Yes, Gaspi," Hahldorn responded. "I probably shouldn't tell you this, but in Martha's picture you all had a symbol over your heads. Yours was lightning, and we already know what that is about. Emea had the sign of a Healer: a ball of light held in cupped hands. Taurnil had the great bear, which is a symbol of protection. It seems that Emea

has an untapped healing gift, and Taurnil is in some way going to protect you, or both of you."

Hahldorn hadn't been able to keep the pride out of his voice when speaking of Emea's gift, and Gaspi was suddenly annoyed with him for finding any excitement in their situation. More than that he was annoyed with himself, for wanting his friends to have to leave their homes and everything they knew just so he could feel better.

"Have you spoken to them yet?" he asked.

"Not yet. I came here first, and will be going straight to their parents once we are done. I have one more thing to say to you, Gaspi," Hahldorn said, all excitement gone from his voice, and a look of gravity stealing over his features, his eyes curiously intense. "This vision of Martha's; she said it felt very significant, and not just for you. There is a sense of destiny in what she saw, and you three are going to be involved in something momentous. I'm asking you to take this seriously, Gaspi. More lives than your own may count on it."

"Okay, Hahldorn, stop scaring the boy," Jonn said firmly, placing a hand on Gaspi's shoulder. "What will be, will be. Gaspi and I will go to Helioport. We'll see what Emea and Taurnil's parents say before counting them in, shall we?"

"Of course, of course," Hahldorn responded, his face reddening in embarrassment. "Yes, let's head on over there now. Will you come?"

"I will, but Gaspi is too weak," Jonn responded. "He can stay here. I'll send Taurnil and Emea over to keep him company while we hammer this out." The two adults left the house, leaving Gaspi to his thoughts.

Not five minutes later, Taurnil and Emea burst through the door, and finding Gaspi at the kitchen table they pulled up some chairs and bombarded him with questions.

"What happened last night?" Taurnil asked.

"What's going on?" Emea joined in. "Da sent me away before I could hear."

"Why are Hahldorn and Jonn looking so serious?" Taurnil followed up, not giving Gaspi a chance to speak.

Gaspi answered their questions, filling them in on the confrontation with Brock and Jakko the previous night, on the eruption of his magic, on Martha's vision, and after many more questions his two friends eventually became quiet.

"Well, you know I will come, Gasp," said Taurnil, his gentle gaze steadfastly holding Gaspi's own. Gaspi was overwhelmed by the surge of gratitude he felt for his friend right then, his eyes filling with tears. He looked down at the floor, coughing and rubbing his face with his

arm to cover his embarrassment. Taurnil was like a rock, and nothing more needed to be said. He had made his decision, and nothing could turn him from it. In his heart of hearts, Gaspi knew that to Taurnil their friendship meant more than life, and in that moment he began to wonder if there might be something to this talk of destiny. If he was to have a protector, he couldn't wish for anyone better.

Without meaning to, they both turned to look at Emea, whose face was a conflicting mixture of emotions more complex than either boy could interpret. She looked up, embarrassed at the attention, and feeling the pressure to respond as Taurnil had.

"It's okay, Emmy," Gaspi said, "If you don't want to…" He trailed off unconvincingly, vulnerability shining through his words like a beacon.

In that moment, Emea's confusion cleared up. "Oh Gaspi, of course I will come. That is not even a question." She reached out and held onto the hands of both her friends. "It's just that it's all too much. I mean…you having magic, and *me*, a *Healer*? And this is our home. And how will our parents feel? I just don't think they will let us go."

Gaspi barely heard any of it. The people who meant more to him than anything in the world - his two friends and Jonn - wanted to travel with him. Yes, he would miss Aemon's Reach, but to Gaspi home was where these three people were, and life could not be too bad if they were with him.

The three friends talked long into the afternoon - waiting for the verdict on their futures, imagining travel and adventure and the great city of Helioport - until Jonn came back and took them all to Taurnil's house, where all four parents were waiting, along with Hahldorn and Martha.

Taurnil's Ma looked like she had been crying, and his Da's face was ominously serious. "Sit down, you three," he said, which they instantly did. He was the kind of man you didn't disobey; not given to anger or ever harsh, but he carried the kind of soft-spoken authority people naturally submit to.

There was a long silence while he weighed them up, and then, rubbing the back of his neck he said "Hahldorn here has been telling us why we have to say goodbye to our children. I'm not going to drag this out, boys, Emmy. You can go to Helioport if you want to. We won't make you...but if you think it's the right thing, you are free to go." Emea's Ma let out a muffled sob, and turned her head away.

"The thing is," Seth continued, "you are fourteen now. Taurnil is already fifteen, so in just over a year all three of you will be free to do as you please anyway. We may not be happy with this, but Martha is

adamant this is what must be done, and we need to trust her. Hahldorn has told us how her visions have helped the village again and again, and she has never yet been wrong. So we are going to trust you three to God, and let you go."

The two boys and Emmy sat in stunned silence. Not a single one of them had thought it would be this easy, and Emmy hadn't believed her Ma would let her go at all. She rushed to her feet and flung herself on her mother. "Oh Ma," she cried, "I'll miss you so much." Her Da, a gentle man, rested a hand on his wife's shoulder, a look of pained resignation on his broad face.

Taurnil hugged his Da, and then went and sat with his Ma, holding her hand. "He's my best friend. I have to go."

"I know, son," Seth responded. "We're proud of you." His Ma drew him into a long embrace. Jonn stood behind Gaspi with his hands on his shoulders. And right there and then, the matter was settled. They were going to Helioport. They didn't leave straight away, to give Gaspi time to get his strength back, but three days later the rising sun found Gaspi, Emea, Taurnil and Jonn standing at the border of the village, about to set foot on the winding path that many miles down the trail would join the Great South Road.

It was a tearful parting; Emea and her Ma were sobbing unrestrainedly. Her Da was more self-contained but was clearly upset at having to say goodbye to his daughter. Maria was too young to understand, looking around in confusion at her parents and big sister as they cried and embraced.

Emea picked her up and kissed her wetly on the cheek. "You be good now Maria," she said. Maria reached out a pudgy hand and pulled on a lock of her hair, cooing uncomprehendingly. Taurnil's Ma's tears were expressed more quietly than Emea's Ma's, but were no less heartfelt for it. Gaspi felt a little awkward, anxious not to intrude on his friends' sorrow, and he couldn't help feeling guilty that he was the cause of this separation.

Perhaps sensing his thoughts, Seth turned to him and said "Gaspi, I want you to know we don't hold you responsible for what destiny has decided. Taurn has chosen to go with you, but fate has chosen you all. Go with our blessing, son, and if you are going to be great, you will have great friends standing by you."

Jonn shook hands with Seth and Emea's Da, and when Emea's mother finally released her daughter, the four travellers turned and stepped out onto the road. Gaspi couldn't help the surge of heady excitement that thrummed through him, as morning lit up the landscape below. The tree line dropped away like a skirt, and thousands of feet

below them many miles of plains stretched for as far as could be seen, shrouded thinly in golden mist. And through it all snaked a widening path, a great road to adventure, to magic, to destiny. Gaspi turned to look at his two friends, in whose faces he thought he could see some of that same excitement, despite the sorrow at parting from loved ones. As they walked he looked back several times, anxious for a last glimpse of life as he had always known it, but soon he could no longer see the village, quickly hidden by thick stands of trees. Turning back to face the road, his heart bursting with joy, Gaspi strode into his future.