

Chapter 1

Ethan Payne took a nervous breath and smiled down at the beautiful fairy holding his hand. Normally, Laurel was four inches tall, but she could change to human size when she wanted to. Now her head came up to just below his shoulder. Her wings were like iridescent jewels where swirling shades of blues, greens and yellows combined in an elegant pattern. Wisps of her pale blond hair had escaped the knot at the nape of her neck and formed a gossamer halo around her heart-shaped face. Her green eyes were sparkling with laughter at Ethan's expression.

"You will take good care of me, right?" he said.

"The best!" She cupped his cheek in her hand and stood on tiptoe to kiss him, finally fluttering her wings a bit to get high enough to reach him.

After only a moment's hesitation, Ethan wrapped his arms around her carefully to avoid trapping her wings in his arms, and returned her kiss. He watched her face for a moment as their lips met and was surprised to see the color of her wings intensify as he deepened the kiss. The color change touched him in ways he didn't understand but certainly enjoyed.

When they finally parted, Laurel said, "Are you ready to go?"

He smiled at her and brushed the tip of her nose with his lips. "Yes. I'm looking forward to it." He glanced up and flashed a grin at his brother and Merlin, who stood waving in the clearing, then followed Laurel into the woods where the two of them disappeared with a soft pop.

After Laurel cast the traveling spell, the two of them disappeared from Merlin's clearing and seemed to step into a tunnel of swirling lights and colors. Ethan had never felt anything like it. The effect was dizzying, disconcerting, nearly nauseating. Flashes of scenery went by too fast to recognize. Buildings, trees, animals all passed by as colorful blurs. A moment later, his foot fell on soft grass and the world stopped whirling. He stumbled a bit, still disoriented from their journey.

Laurel laughed as she grabbed his arm and helped him stay upright. "The first time through a fairy portal can be unsettling. Are you all right?"

Ethan nodded, then looked around in awe. There was a bright but soft glow everywhere, like sunshine through thin clouds. He was surrounded by flowers of all sizes and shapes, some of which were gigantic, while others were blooming out of season. Trees of many varieties he couldn't name filled the forest behind him. The ground rolled slightly, rising at last to a castle on a distant hill. Small dwellings surrounded it. Ethan could see a few people coming and going near the castle, some on foot, others on horseback.

He looked at Laurel, frowning in confusion. "Where are we? I thought we were going to Faerie."

"And so we did," she said, smiling at him. "Be at ease, Star Son. We're home."

"Your home, maybe. I'm just here for a few days of training."

Her lower lip drooped in a charming little pout. "I remember. But you can stay as long as you wish."

"I'll stay as long as my apples hold out," Ethan reminded her. Merlin had provided him with five apples so he could keep track of passing time. He was to eat one per day while he was with the fairies. If they tried to put more apples in his bag to fool him into staying longer, his apples were charmed to toss out the intruders, as well as staying fresh and sweet for the duration of Ethan's stay. Ethan also had self-replenishing elf bread and cheese to eat so he could avoid fairy food and an ever-full elvish water vessel. If he ate fairy food or drank their water or wine, he would be stuck in their land forever, and he simply couldn't stay. Ethan Payne was a Star Son and had a war to win in the mortal world.

The sound of trumpets blaring in the distance made Ethan look toward the castle. A large group of horses and riders were galloping their way, with hundreds of fairies flying overhead.

He felt a rush of adrenalin as his body instinctively prepared for battle despite both Merlin's and Laurel's assurances that he'd be safe here. Nearly dying in his first battle a few days prior was still all too fresh in his mind.

A quick glance at Laurel showed she was smiling, apparently looking forward to whatever was coming their way. He forced himself to relax and managed a casual tone when he said, "What do they want?"

"This is the beginning of your welcome."

She waved to the approaching fairies. Those fairies who were flying soon circled overhead while the riders drew their horses up a few feet from where Ethan and Laurel stood.

Ethan looked at the riders surrounding them. Each of them looked welcoming and friendly, but he stayed alert. He didn't want to be the victim of any unpleasant surprises. He glanced at the horses and then stared in shock. Every horse was a different color, some iridescent, some pearly, a few a glimmering white with rosy or blue undertones, others bright green or blue. There was even a glittering black whose coat sparkled as if it were coated with diamond dust. Each horse had large, intelligent eyes, some golden-brown, some blue, some green.

"I've never seen horses like these," Ethan murmured.

Laurel chuckled. "These are the horses of a different color you've heard of in children's stories. They can be any color they wish." As she spoke, a few of the horses tossed their heads and changed colors, as if they'd heard her.

Ethan tore his eyes away from the horses and stared at her. "Any color the horses wish?"

"Of course." She acted as if such a talent was an everyday thing. Ethan realized with a start that for Laurel, horses that changed color at will really were an everyday thing.

Ethan noticed two of the horses were riderless, and none of the horses wore saddles or bridles. Many of the elegant animals had garlands of flowers draped around their necks, while others had flowers woven into their long, wavy manes and tails. He raised his eyes to the riders again. None of the fairies spoke, but all gazed at Ethan avidly.

Ethan bent toward Laurel and whispered, "Why isn't anyone talking?"

"They're watching."

He gave her a puzzled look, then turned to the crowd now surrounding them and did his best to smile pleasantly. The two riderless horses came toward Ethan and Laurel. Ethan held his hand out for them to sniff, a smile of genuine pleasure on his face as the taller horse took another step toward him.

"Merlin told me you rode horses at your foster home in the American West," Laurel said with a wicked grin as she ran her hands lightly over the smaller horse's elegant head. "Do you remember how to ride?"

"It hasn't been that long since Jake and I left the ranch," he reminded her as he petted the black. "Yes, I remember how to ride."

With a teasing light in her eyes, she added, "Even without a saddle or bridle?"

He arched an eyebrow, perfectly willing to tease her back. In a credible western drawl, he replied, "Well, ma'am, if I cain't cowboy up and ride a nekked hoss, I ain't much of a cowboy, am I?"

She giggled. "Show me." She leapt lightly onto the smaller horse's back and watched him with her hand covering her smile while her eyes danced with laughter.

Amused by her, Ethan shook his head and grinned, then turned to his mount. This horse was a good bit taller than the ranch horses he'd ridden, and by far the biggest one among the fairies' horses. He guessed the stallion was well over sixteen hands, a good size for someone as tall as

Ethan. He was the one with the glittering black coat. Ethan had liked his looks at first sight. Laurel's mare was a bit shorter and more lightly built, her size well-suited to the fairy's delicate frame. Her pale golden coat had a pearl-like sheen.

Fairies may be known as tricksters, but they've never seen me ride. They wouldn't give me a dangerous horse, would they? He glanced around at the gathered fairies, who watched his every move with great interest but continued their total silence, which made him blush uncomfortably. He cursed his innate shyness, then forced himself to ignore them and turned all his attention to the horse.

Ethan scratched the horse's forehead as he murmured, "Hi. I'm Ethan." The horse dipped its muzzle into Ethan's hand and blew gently there, then licked his palm. When the stallion raised his muzzle and snuffled at Ethan's face, Ethan blew gently into the horse's nostrils, letting the stallion get his scent. The horse rubbed its upper lip lightly along Ethan's cheek while Ethan rubbed the stallion's beautifully arched neck, as if repaying Ethan for the neck rub. The horse began tugging playfully at Ethan's pocket and backpack with his lips, which made Ethan laugh.

"Oh, so you're a cookie monster, eh? I'll remember that. I'll have treats for you the next time we're together, okay?"

The horse bobbed his head, as if agreeing with Ethan, then stood calmly, as if waiting to see what Ethan would do next.

Ethan moved to the stallion's side, gently scratching his withers and back, then grabbed a hunk of the horse's mane and swung himself aboard. He gripped lightly with his knees so he wouldn't thump on the stallion's back when he landed. Ethan didn't notice the quietly pleased "Ahhh" from the fairies as they watched him mount and move the horse around a bit.

Ethan could tell from the horse's response to his slight shifts in weight and leg pressure that he was well-trained and responsive. He scratched the horse's withers as he looked at Laurel and smiled. "He's great! What's his name?"

"Feather." She turned her horse and began an easy jog back to the castle. Ethan rode alongside, taking in the scenery and nodding politely to the riders ranged on either side of them.

"I'm glad to see you know your way around a horse," she added.

He acted wounded. "You doubted me?"

"Not really."

Ethan had to grin at that. Laurel was a funny, interesting woman and seemed to take great pleasure in teasing him. Ethan had discovered that he enjoyed being teased by her, so it was a good situation for both of them.

Feather's gaits were feather-light beneath him. Ethan imagined those elegant gaits might be why the horse had been so named. He saved that question for later as he began to look around and take in the scenery. "I thought your people lived inside a fairy hill. It's daylight here," he said in confusion. "Where are we?"

Laurel laughed. "Faerie has many realms. Some are in forests, some in meadows, some under hills. This one is under a hill in Avalon. You don't think we'd live in the dark like dwarves, do you? We have glow-plants in many places throughout our land to give us light."

"What's a glow-plant?"

"It's a plant where glow worms — firefly babies — grow. The babies give off a glow, and when there are enough together, they cast this lovely soft light. With the help of a bit of magic, it's enough light to grow our plants and keep everything healthy. And the plants are nourishment for the babies when they're born."

"Lights from firefly larvae? Brilliant!"

"We have many amazing things to show you, Ethan," she said with a complacent smile. "You will long remember your stay among the fairies."

"I'm sure I will."

They rode in silence for a while. Ethan wondered why the fairies around him were as quiet as he and Laurel. He leaned toward her. "Why isn't anyone talking?"

"They are observing you. We have waited long for the Star Son to arrive, and are so pleased we can help in your training. You're the first Star Son in many generations who has come to manhood with little or no magical training. It is an honor for us to help you prepare for your battle against Broga."

Ethan straightened, discomfited by what she'd said. He shifted the floral garland draped around Feather's neck a bit farther away from his legs, then ran his fingers through the stallion's silky mane, thinking hard. He wasn't comfortable being observed so closely by all these strangers, nor that everyone had such high expectations of him. Yes, he and his brother were the Star Sons of this era, born to defeat Broga, the most evil mage ever born. Other enemies of light mages and wizards had come and gone, but in all recorded history, only one Star Son had been born each time such threats arose. This time there were two Star Sons, a sign of the immense power wielded by Broga, who was only aware of one Star Son's existence as far as anyone knew.

Ethan and his brother, Jake, had fought Broga's men only a few days earlier. The brothers won the battle, but at great cost. If not for Laurel's fairy magic and the healing potions of the elf, Erderon, Ethan would have needed months to heal from his devastating wounds, but here he was, four days after the battle, healthy, strong and off on a new adventure. Jake, who wasn't as badly wounded as his older brother, had healed much more quickly.

Knowing that everyone was depending on him and Jake to defeat Broga was a terrible burden. Now that they'd been through a real battle with his followers, Ethan and Jake had an idea of what they were up against, and were even more terrified than before. Jake's magic had only manifested fully on his seventeenth birthday seven months ago, so his skills were still developing. At twenty, Ethan had three more years of experience with his magic, plus the advantage of having the use of his magic all of his life, while Jake's had been suppressed until a few months before his seventeenth birthday to keep him from doing something impulsive, as he had when he was little, that would reveal his power to Broga's men. The boys had been orphaned ten years prior and grew up with non-magical people, so Ethan had had little magical training and Jake even less until Merlin brought them to Avalon when he found them soon after Jake's birthday. It was unnerving to think about all they still to learn.

Ethan gritted his teeth and scowled for a moment, determined to put such demoralizing thoughts behind him. With a tremendous force of will, he shoved his fear and worries for both himself and Jake behind the red door he'd created in his mind where he could hide such things until he could take the time to face them.

Laurel noticed his tension. "What's wrong?"

He was silent for a long moment, then sighed, squared his shoulders, turned and gave her a determined smile. "Nothing. I was just setting my priorities in order."

"I don't understand."

"I've decided to enjoy this experience and not worry about other things for now." He was glad to feel the calmness he'd sought filling his mind and body.

"Oh. That's good, then." She gave him a hesitant smile.

"Yeah, it is."

Not wanting to stare at his hosts, Ethan glanced sideways from time to time at the beautiful people surrounding him. Most were fine-boned and thin like Laurel, although some were more portly or petite. Their wings came in a variety of shapes: butterfly wings, moth wings, dragonfly wings, and more. The colors on their wings would shame the finest jewels, they were so rich and beautiful. Many of the female fairies wore dresses that looked as if they were made of flower petals. Others wore garments in shades of green, gold or russet, made from some fabric with the soft luster

of velvet. The younger women and girls wore short-skirted dresses like Laurel's, with tops that tied around their necks, leaving their backs bare, with plenty of room for their wings. Their dresses were in nearly every color imaginable, although none of them wore the same shade of pink Laurel wore most of the time. The older men were dressed in Victorian-style clothes, wearing top hats, waistcoats with heavy gold chains across their middles, coats with broad velvet lapels and long tails. Some had spats on their shoes. They looked like characters out of old films.

Ethan leaned toward Laurel and murmured, "Do the ones wearing suits have wings too?"

She chuckled. "Oh yes. They've just put them away for now to be more formal. They wanted to give you a proper welcome."

Ethan wasn't sure how to take that. "Oh. Um. That's nice of them." *And here I am in a t-shirt and jeans. She could've warned me!*

"And you look fine, don't worry," she added.

He chuckled. "Reading my mind again?"

She smiled. "You looked concerned."

He shook his head ruefully. *I need to work on my poker face.* He decided it might be safest to change the subject before she teased him again. "How do they hide their wings?"

"That's one of your lessons. I'll explain it then."

"Okay." He watched the fairies around him with a sense of wonder. They were amazing to watch, very similar to humans in many ways, and totally exotic in others. The elder folk rode with great formality, while younger female fairies flitted about above them. The girls were being quite silly as they flew, giggling and pointing at Ethan, fluttering in for closer views, then zooming away, blushing to their hairlines when he caught their eyes. He wasn't sure if he was annoyed or just amused by their behavior, but the serious demeanor of the older fairies had him worried.

Ethan kned his horse closer to Laurel's again, then leaned toward her and murmured, "Why are the older people so serious? What's going on?"

"They're being dignified. This is a royal procession, after all." She acted as if he should have known that.

That was a surprise. "Royal? There's a king or queen here, in this group?"

"Yes. You'll meet them later. They wanted to test you with Feather first."

Ethan's brows drew together in a puzzled frown. "Test me?"

"You have fairy blood, so you should have an affinity for these horses," she explained. "Seeing how you managed an untrained stallion told us a great deal about you."

He stared at her in shock. "Feather's untrained? But he's so responsive!"

"You approached him with respect, treated him with kindness and listened to him. You didn't mount until he was ready, and you asked him to do what you wanted, rather than commanding it. This test showed us that your fairy blood is strong in you, which will make teaching you much easier."

"But if he's not trained, how is he doing whatever I ask so easily?"

"He is attuned to you. When you blew in his nose and he responded to you, the two of you bonded. He could have refused you, but he didn't. Now he will know when you want him wherever he is, and will always come to you. He will give his life for you. Remember that and respect it, and never treat him lightly.

Ethan swallowed hard. Feather had given him not only a great honor, but a great responsibility. "Did you intend for us to bond?"

"It is a good sign that you did. If you had not bonded, he would not have hurt you, but he would not cooperate with you nearly as well as he is." She smiled at the handsome stallion jogging along quietly beside her mare. "He is not only the biggest, but also the best horse we have. He is worthy of a Star Son. I'm glad you two bonded."

“Does our being bonded mean I can keep him?”

“He’s yours for life and he’s happy about it. Look at him.”

Feather shook his mane gently and flicked his ears back as if he were listening to Ethan and Laurel’s voices.

Ethan felt gobsmacked. “I’ve never had such a wonderful gift. Who should I thank, other than you?”

“You should thank Feather first of all, but you’ll also be meeting the king and queen at the feast. You can thank them.” She tossed her head and the ribbons binding her pale blonde hair came loose. Her hair flowed down between her folded wings in shimmering ripples.

Ethan patted Feather and leaned forward to whisper his thanks in the horse’s ears. When he sat back, he smiled at Laurel. He enjoyed watching her ride. She sat her horse as if they were one being, her body flowing naturally with the animal’s motion.

He blushed when she caught him looking and winked at him. He looked away for a moment, then stole another glance at her, admiring her dimpled smile and her long fall of pale gold hair. He thought it might be fun trying to understand her. She was gorgeous and completely aware of the effect she had on him, yet she wasn’t stuck on herself like some girls seemed to be — not that he’d known that many girls.

Ethan was nervous. He had no idea how to manage a king and queen. He certainly had no idea how to manage the spirited young woman riding beside him who had set her mark on him soon after meeting him, choosing him as her mate without giving him any say in the matter. She’d told him the mark would protect him from other fairies, but the way she looked at him and the many ways she showed him affection made him wonder. She’d told him that fairies fall in love at first sight, and that she loved him. She’d dreamed of him long before she met him, and she thought the reality was far better than her dreams of her future mate. Ethan didn’t want to be anyone’s mate, not for a while. He had a war to win! But Laurel was fun, she was sweet and pretty and was openly affectionate with him. Heady stuff for a shy young man who’d only had his first date a few days ago, and not with this particular young lady! Maybe when the war was over . . . but that would be a long time from now, he feared.

Ethan glanced at her again. Maybe he didn’t need to “manage” her or the meeting with the king and queen. He’d done all right bumbling through life so far. He wished he had Jake’s easy charm and wasn’t so shy, but with Laurel to help him out, he’d probably muddle through okay.

The group moved through the outer castle gates, across the drawbridge and under the portcullis inside the castle walls. Ethan couldn’t remember being in a castle before. He looked around him now with avid curiosity. He knew that Jake, who loved novels and films set in Merlin’s time, would be sorry he’d missed seeing this castle. Then again, once Jake went to study with the elves, maybe he’d see a castle there.

Geese waddled busily across the horses’ path, chased by a small girl with gossamer wings transparent as crystal. She giggled and flew above the geese calling to them to move faster. The street was lined with shops and stalls offering food, jewelry, weapons, clothing, decorative items, magical instruments and many other things that Ethan couldn’t identify. When people in the street saw him, the cry went up, “The Star Son is here! The Star Son is here!” People leaned out of windows and ran out of the shops to see him.

Ethan blushed at all this attention. He swallowed hard, not certain how to behave, then lifted a hesitant hand and waved at them. Their cheers doubled in volume. Women and children ran ahead of the procession, strewing flowers and leaves on the road as they went.

“Why are they doing this?” Ethan murmured to Laurel, who was waving and smiling at the crowd as if she did this every day.

“Because you are the Star Son. They are welcoming you. Just smile and wave as you’ve been doing. That’s all they want.”

“Okay.” He lifted his eyes to the crowd and waved again, then fell into the rhythm he observed from the older people in the procession and Laurel herself. Smile and wave to the right for two of Feather’s steps, then smile and wave at the left for two steps. That way, no one was being neglected, he realized. His cheeks soon hurt from smiling so much, but he wasn’t going to shortchange any of those who were greeting him with such joy.

The buildings were made of white stone, with an occasional grouping of colored stones in the walls as decoration. Tile mosaics decorated walls where fountains spouted water out of the mouths of mythical animals carved from the same white stone as the buildings. Every window sported a box filled with colorful flowers. The vendor stalls were made of brightly striped cloth. Each stall was a different color, which gave the street an even more festive atmosphere.

At last they came to the castle itself, where they dismounted. Ethan stood with his hand on Feather’s neck, whispering to the horse affectionately.

“What are you telling him?” Laurel said, after patting her horse and allowing it to wander off on its own.

Ethan hesitated, blushing at being caught talking to his horse. *Well, why not?* “I’m telling him what a fine fellow he is, how handsome he is and how much I enjoyed the ride.” He glanced around and noticed the other horses were leaving without any guidance. “I just turn him loose?”

“Yes. He knows where to go. And he will come when you need him again,” she assured him.

“See you later, Feather,” Ethan said, patting the horse once more. “Have fun with your friends. And the next time we ride, I want to gallop, okay? I’ll bet you can just fly.” He smiled as the horse nuzzled him before turning to follow the others.

“I’m glad you like him. And yes, we can take them for a gallop the next time we ride.” She stifled a laugh as she spoke.

“What are you laughing at now?”

“Nothing. I’m just happy.”

He smiled. “Yeah, I’ve noticed that about you. You’re happy a lot. I like that.”

“Good!”

Ethan walked beside her toward the castle steps, then leaned down and murmured. “I’ve been wondering something.”

“What?”

“Why are the men dressed in such, um, formal clothes, and some of the women wear flower petals?”

She stood on tiptoe and whispered back, “We wear what we like. The young men dress more like you.”

“What young men?”

“Look up. They’re flying higher than anyone else.”

Ethan looked where she indicated and saw that, past the giggly girl fairies still flitting about overhead, there was a good-sized cadre of young men and boys flying quietly above him, some of them eyeing him curiously, others glaring at him for some reason. Some wore jeans, others wore loose white trousers. None were dressed as formally as the older men he’d seen so far. Some of the young men waved when they saw Ethan looking at them. He smiled and waved back at them. *How cool would it be to fly like that?*

Laurel took his hand and led him into the castle.

Ethan had never even imagined anything so gorgeous. Windows made of crystal cast rainbow shards of light across the luxurious rooms. Crystal chandeliers above him caught, repeated

and amplified the beautiful colors. Candles in the chandeliers and lamps and the torches on the walls all gave off a soft, golden light that cast a warm glow on everything. The walls were covered with tapestries showing great cavalcades of fairy warriors going off to war with spears, bows and arrows, highly decorated shields and lances. Their horses seemed to dance across the tapestries in their gold and silver armor. Paintings showing dances, parties, picnics and other gatherings decorated other walls. Ethan goggled at the unbelievable splendor surrounding him.

Laurel slid her arm through Ethan's and tugged on him. "Come on, everyone's waiting for us."

He turned to look at her. "Why?"

"We're having a welcome banquet for you, of course," she said as she led him through a pair of high, wide doors that opened onto a tremendous banquet hall. Nearly everyone was already seated. They all turned expectant eyes on Ethan.

He gasped and backed away from her. "I can't do this."

She looked at him in surprise. "What are you talking about?"

He stared at her, feeling both frightened and angry. "I can't eat your food. You know that."

Laurel patted his arm. "Don't worry, you won't have to. We all understand."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. Come on now. You'll enjoy this."

Ethan was confused. "But I have to study. When do my lessons start? I only have a few days to be here."

"Your lessons started already. Meeting Feather was the first step. You'll see. Trust me." She held out her hand and waited for him to make his decision.

Ethan gulped and took her hand, going step by nervous step toward the head table. Laurel stopped in front of the table and bobbed a curtsey to the man and woman seated in the center. "Your Majesties, may I present the Star Son, Ethan Payne. Ethan, this is King Caedmon and Queen Oriana."

Ethan stood staring at the couple. Queen Oriana's hair resembled the finest corn silk, so light it was almost colorless. Her huge blue eyes sparkled with humor. She was tall and thin like Laurel, with an elegant grace to her every movement. She wore a gown of crimson velvet and a crown that looked like a wreath of flowers wrought in gold and gems. King Caedmon exuded power in his strong build and in his intelligent green eyes. His dark hair fell to his shoulders beneath an ornate golden crown. Ethan was so fascinated by them that he barely noticed when Laurel grabbed his sleeve and pulled him into some semblance of a bow.

"They're royalty," she hissed. "You're supposed to bow to them!"

Ethan felt his face heat up as he blushed. He straightened and shrugged, giving the king a crooked smile. "I'm sorry, Your Majesty, but I don't know how things are done here. I grew up on a ranch in America. People there don't bow to anyone, so I just didn't know any better."

The queen smiled at him. "I feel certain that Lady Laurel will teach you proper manners. In the meantime, we shall all understand if you don't give us the appropriate greetings for our rank." She glanced around the banquet hall, taking in all the people in attendance. "Be certain to spread the word. The Star Son is not to be criticized for what he does not know. He is here to learn. We will teach him with kindness and good heart. Is that clear?" She saw nods all around. "There, you see? That was easy enough to take care of. Do you need anything, Star Son?"

"Um, no, ma'am. Um, sorry, um, Your Highness," Ethan said, stumbling over his words. "Thanks for the horse. He's brilliant!"

"Ma'am' and 'sir' will do. As for Feather, it was our pleasure to provide him for you. We were glad to see the two of you bond so quickly." The queen leaned forward and spoke more quietly. "We know you are not allowed to eat our food or partake of our drinks. We know you

have food with you. Please, eat and refresh yourself while we provide an entertainment to celebrate your coming. We have looked for the return of the Star Son for years. We are so glad you are here at last!" She raised her voice to include the rest of the room. "Let the festivities begin!"

Laurel took Ethan's hand and drew him away from the king and queen, settling him at the head table several seats away from the royal couple.

"Our finest entertainers are performing for you today," she said as she reached across him for the sugar.

Ethan smiled at her. "I would've passed that to you, you know."

She tilted her head and looked up at him through her eyelashes coquettishly. "But it was so much more fun to lean on you."

Ethan just shook his head and grinned at her. Laurel could be such a flirt, yet there was a seriousness to her, as well. Merlin had told him she was a being of great power. Every so often, he saw that in her, but she kept that power well-hidden behind her playful exterior most of the time. Ethan wasn't quite sure what to think of her, but at least being around her was never boring.

As the people seated around the banquet hall ate, a troupe of performers put on an entertainment in the open area between the tables. They darted about so quickly, their wings were a blur. They flew in formations that broke apart and came together in different configurations, then swooped and soared and tossed acorns back and forth as if they were playing a game. A few of them changed the color and shape of their wings in mid-flight, apparently for the sheer pleasure of it. They sang and danced and juggled, their every movement exuding joy.

While Ethan watched the show, Laurel watched Ethan. After a while, he turned to her. "What? Do I have food on my chin or something?"

"Why?"

"Because you keep staring at me. You're supposed to be watching the entertainment," he teased with a raised eyebrow and a smirk.

She shrugged. "I find you more entertaining than them."

He turned to face her fully. "Entertaining? How?"

She narrowed her eyes, then raised her eyebrows, as if she were giving his question careful consideration. "In every way. Finish your lunch, Ethan. We have work to do."



When the entertainment was over, the king stood and raised his hands for silence.

"We are gathered here to celebrate the arrival of the long-awaited Star Son."

Cheers rolled through the hall as the king turned to smile at Ethan, who could feel his ears turning bright red from all the attention.

"Star Son, would you grace us with a few words?"

"Huh?" Ethan gulped and stared wide-eyed at Laurel. "They want me to make a speech?"

"Just stand up and say something nice. They'll be happy with that," she urged, pushing on his arm to get him moving.

Ethan pushed his chair back, wincing as it scraped noisily across the marble floor, then got slowly to his feet. As he stood there looking around the room, he saw attentive, eager faces turned toward him. He swallowed hard and crossed his fingers for luck behind his back, wishing Jake was there to do the talking for both of them, as he did so often.

"Um, thank you very much for the entertainment. I've never seen anything like it! It was brilliant." He paused, trying to think of something else to say. "Thanks for this, um, fine gathering,

too.” He didn’t feel right thanking them for the banquet since he’d eaten his own food, but still, they’d gone to the trouble to have a party in his honor, so he felt he owed them thanks for that.

Ethan glanced down at Laurel and thought of something else to add to his little speech. “I, um, I can’t tell you how grateful I am that Laurel,” he glanced at the queen and went on, “I mean, Lady Laurel, came and helped us when my brother and I were wounded after the battle a few days ago. She saved my life and helped both of us heal more quickly than I could have imagined. And she made us laugh. After what we’d been through, I never thought I’d laugh again, but she helped us with that, too. I’m looking forward to learning whatever I can from you. Your castle and the land I’ve seen so far are beautiful, as are your people and your horses. I’m honored to be here.” He wondered if there was anything else he should say. “Oh, and you don’t have to call me ‘Star Son.’ My name’s Ethan. Thank you for having me.” Since he couldn’t think of anything else to say, he sat down rather abruptly.

The room exploded in applause and cheers. Ethan felt his face burning even more than before. He glanced at Laurel, looking for guidance or an interpretation, at the very least, of what was going on. “Now what?”

“What do you mean?” She was applauding with the rest, smiling at him in pure delight.

“What do they want now?” He glanced nervously around the room. Now people were standing as they applauded. Some stamped their feet, while others banged their tankards on the tables.

“You were kind and gracious in your speech. They’re very pleased, and so am I.” She leaned over and kissed his cheek in front of the king and queen and all those gathered before she stood up to join the ovation.

Ethan didn’t think he could blush harder, but somehow, he managed it.