

LEGENDARY BY L·H· NICOLE

PROLOGUE

Bleeding, bruised, and all but dead, Merlin stepped from a swirling portal onto the magical ground of Avalon. Behind him, his brother knights and friends, Sir Galahad and Sir Lancelot, carried a dying King Arthur between them.

“Lady Titania, queen of the Fae and ruler of Avalon, I beg your help,” Merlin cried out. “All the realms stand in mortal danger, and we have no hope of victory without you.”

The men stood silent as Merlin’s voice reverberated through the valley. Wind rushed around them, sending leaves and fallen petals dancing in front of the knights.

A beautiful, regal woman appeared in the churning greenery. “I have heard your call, my dear Merlin.”

With a pop, the wind died, dropping the foliage to the ground at the queen’s feet. Her copper hair fell in long curls. Tiny ringlets curled around a face which looked as soft as flower petals, though Merlin knew there was nothing soft about her. The Fae queen was unpredictable and dangerous when tested. She stood as tall as the knights, her body a perfect hourglass shape with the top half covered by a tight, shimmering gold bodice. Her skirt hung from her hips,

flaring loosely around bare feet, which were decorated with Fae jewels and silver anklets.

Still supporting King Arthur and suffering from their own painful wounds, the knights bowed to the queen of Avalon. Merlin dropped to his knee before her. “My lady, I have trapped Mordrid in a void between the realms, but I cannot kill him. Only someone of the Pendragon line can wield Excalibur and end this evil for good, but Arthur is the last of that bloodline.” Merlin looked up at the queen, trying to contain his rage. “If Mordrid is allowed to go unchecked, he will break free of his prison and destroy our worlds.”

Titania studied him for an endless moment. Her cold, glittering emerald eyes betrayed no emotion, but Merlin knew she understood all that was at stake. Glancing back to King Arthur, she saw the wounds at his side, the blood pooling at his feet as he slowly bled to death. Arthur’s loyal knights were not doing much better—their jaws were clenched tightly and their bodies shook as the power of Avalon flowed over their wounds.

“And what would you have me do, druid? Did not my lord give you an army to fight alongside you?”

“Yes, my lady.” Sir Galahad spoke for the first time, his voice labored and thin as he held back a groan of pain. “But Mordrid’s treachery knows no bounds. He delayed the army’s arrival long enough to drive his magic blade into our king.” The knight’s voice cracked, his eyes cast downward in shame.

Titania scoffed at the knight. “But your king is a great strategist. Surely, he would have planned for such an event.”

Sir Lancelot answered before the others could. “It does not matter how it happened! Mordrid is still a threat to everything *all of us* love, including your realms.”

“Please, my lady,” Merlin begged. “Save Arthur. My magic is all but exhausted and I do not have the strength to save him.” He rose, meeting her calculating gaze.

Titania glided forward, stopping before King Arthur. She placed a long, elegant finger beneath his chin and lifted his face to hers.

Arthur’s vision was so blurred he could barely make out the figure in front of him. A cool breeze washed over his face. His vision cleared and the pain that had been gripping his body vanished.

“Arthur Pendragon,” the Fae queen said in a silky voice.

Arthur peered into eyes of the deepest green.

“Do you want to live, Arthur Pendragon? To save the realms, regain your life, and find your happiness, will you do what is asked of you? If I save you, will you rise up and do what must be done to stop Mordrid and his evil?”

Arthur’s intense gaze didn’t waver. “Yes, my lady. I swear on my life I will not rest until Mordrid’s dead body lies at my feet.” He would do anything to avenge his kingdom and his fallen brothers.

Titania ran her fingers over Arthur’s cheek, gazing at him with a look akin to pleasure. “I have always had a fondness for you, dear king.” She stepped away and gave her attention to Arthur’s company. “Your king has given his word. Are the three of you willing to do the same?”

“Yes, my lady. You have our oath,” they said together, their faces shining with pride and determination.

Queen Titania smiled, triumphant. “Prepare yourselves.”

The Fae queen threw her arms above her head, and the valley was consumed with the

sizzling of her magic. Galahad and Lancelot covered their eyes against the force, curling their bodies to shield their king. Merlin held himself still—he could not show any more weakness to Queen Titania.

When the magic subsided, they found themselves in a chamber hidden deep in the mountains of Avalon. In the center of the chamber was a stone bed, lit from above by a small opening in the mountain's wall.

“Do you have the Grail of Power?” Titania asked Merlin.

Arthur's druid reached under his cape and pulled the coveted grail free, handing it to her.

“Lay Arthur on the stone,” she commanded. Lancelot and Galahad carefully placed their king on the stone bed, stepping back as the Fae queen lowered the cup to catch several drops of Arthur's blood. “Each of you must add your own blood to the grail.”

Lancelot exchanged a guarded look with his friends. Galahad nodded to his brother-in-arms, pulling a dagger from his belt. The knight slashed a new wound in his palm, squeezing a few drops of blood into the golden, jeweled cup. Taking the dagger, Lancelot cut a matching wound, adding his blood, which was followed by Merlin's. Facing Titania, the three men wore expressions of determination and hope, along with ones of guilt and regret.

Titania pricked her finger, adding a drop of her own enchanted blood, and whispered ancient, binding words. She then tilted the grail over her open palm. The blood poured out, transforming before their eyes into a small, glittering ruby. As Merlin studied his king and friend lying helpless and as pale as moonlight, guilt choked him. His fellow knights felt the same sense of failure. If they had foreseen Mordrid's curse, their king wouldn't have been on the verge of death and they wouldn't have been in Avalon.

Looking down at Arthur, the ruby rose from Titania's palm and hovered above the king.

“Arthur Pendragon, you are the once and future king. I command you to sleep until the one who is destined to awaken you seeks you out and calls for your aid.”

The blood ruby consumed Arthur's consciousness, slowly darkening everything in the king's sight. He wanted to reassure his loyal knights and friends, but all he could see and feel and hear was Queen Titania. Her mighty emerald eyes demanded his acceptance, and he found he could not fight her power. The ruby returned to Titania's hand as she stepped away from the shrine.

Galahad and Lancelot relaxed as Titania moved away from their king, but the calm did not last long.

The queen fixed her gaze on them. “I have done what you asked and saved your king's life, but now you three must accept the cost. Never again can you reenter the mortal world without Arthur by your side. Your lives are now bound to his, and you will only be freed after his quest is complete.” Titania's commanding voice was as hard as diamonds as she examined the knights. Sir Galahad was drowning in his guilt; Sir Lancelot was struggling to balance his desire to defend his king and his wish to rejoin his wife. Merlin's eyes were downcast, his fists white from tension, his shoulders shaking as he tried to rein in his anger at the woman who had betrayed them—the witch, Morgana LeFay

“I warn you now, break your vows to me, to your king, fail in the tasks set before you, and you will pay a dire price.”

“We will not falter,” Sir Galahad swore.

“See that you do not.” Titania smiled, calling on her magic to hide her from the knights'

view.

“My queen, what have you done now?” Titania’s husband, Oberon, king of Avalon, materialized at her side, visible only to her eyes.

Tempering her voice, the Fae queen answered, “I could not stand by and let Mordrid go unchallenged, my lord.” If her plan was to flourish, it would take centuries, but Oberon could not know her intentions. Her husband was a master deceiver, the only one to ever challenge her own skills of deceit.

He stepped in front of Titania. “You know my laws. Directly interfering with mortal affairs is forbidden,” he thundered.

“Yet you gave them an army, my husband.” Her eyebrow rose, almost mocking her king.

“I am king of Avalon. It is for me alone to decide *if* or *how* we influence the mortal realm.”

Titania bowed low. “My apologies, my king,” she said, her voice honey-smooth and placating.

“You know the laws of Avalon, the consequences of your actions.” Indeed, she did know what her punishment would be for her interference, but it was a small price to pay for what it would accomplish. She would be banished to the mortal realm until Oberon saw fit for her to return. There would be much work for her to do during her banishment.

Queen Titania rose to her full height, her chin held high, and met her husband’s unwavering gaze. “Indeed, my lord.” She turned from him and looked at the knights. “But you must agree that their story—and what is to come—will make a tale worthy of legend.”

King Oberon studied his queen silently before vanishing from the cave.

“So it begins.” The queen departed for the mortal realm, a cunning smirk on her lips, satisfaction bright in her emerald gaze.