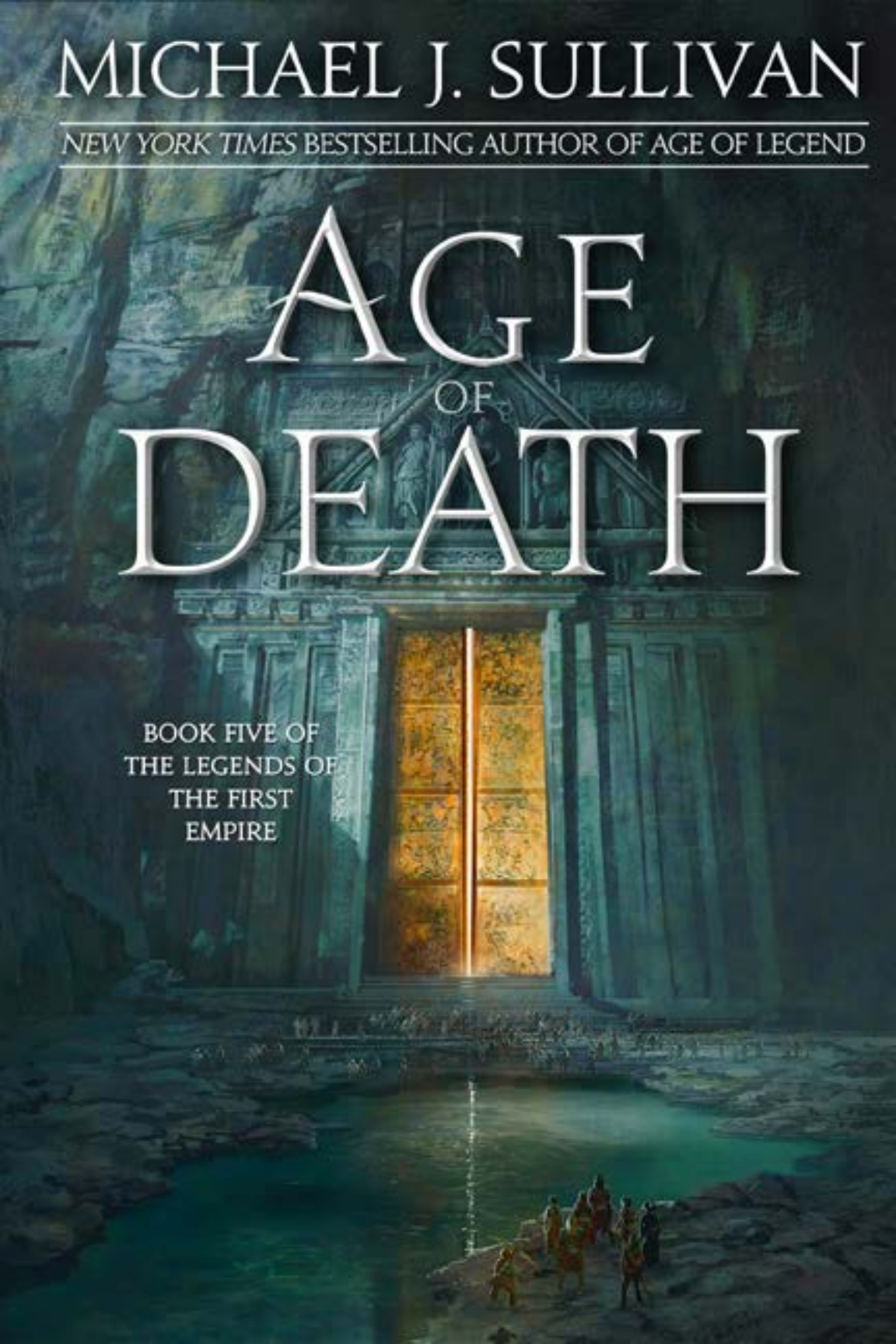


MICHAEL J. SULLIVAN

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF AGE OF LEGEND

AGE OF DEATH

BOOK FIVE OF
THE LEGENDS OF
THE FIRST
EMPIRE



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The Riyria Revelations: Theft of Swords • Rise of Empire • Heir of Novron

The Riyria Chronicles: The Crown Tower • The Rose and the Thorn • The Death of Dulgath • The Disappearance of Winter's Daughter

Standalone Titles: Hollow World

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“With hints of Jim Butcher’s *Codex Alera* and Brandon Sanderson’s *Mistborn*, the visceral and traitorous nature of George R. R. Martin . . . Michael J. Sullivan strides easily into a place I’d trust giving to any friend who loves high fantasy.”

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Unbound: “The Game” (Fantasy: Contemporary)

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Triumph Over Tragedy: “Traditions” (Fantasy: Tales from Elan)

The Fantasy Faction Anthology: “Autumn Mist” (Fantasy: Contemporary)

About the Book

Winter blankets the land, and more than hope has died. Barred by the tower of Avempartha, the western army cannot invade the Fhrey homeland. So it must seek a way across the Nidwalden River before the fane obtains the secret of dragons. As time runs out for both humanity and the mystic Suri, the only chance for the living rests with the dead. Having made their fateful choice, can a handful of misfits do the impossible, or are they forever lost to an inescapable grave? Do gods truly exist? Is it possible to know the future? And what lies beyond the veil of death? As in Virgil's *Aeneid*, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the most epic tales transcend the world of the living. It's time to see what lies in Elan's *Age of Death*.

From Michael J. Sullivan, *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *Washington Post* bestselling author, comes the second-to-last installment in the epic fantasy series *The Legends of the First Empire*. The series chronicles a pivotal point in Elan's history, when humans rise against the Fhrey, whom they once saw as gods. Set three thousand years before the *Riyria* tales, *Legends* is a standalone fantasy series that is independent of all other Elan stories. But if you have read the other books, *Legends* will reveal lies and unmask truths about historical figures.

CHAPTER ONE

The Great Gate

The good news is that death is not the end, but that is also the bad news.

— THE BOOK OF BRIN

Oh dear Mari, what have I done? Brin's thought came too late. The pool had her. There was a distinct sucking sound as she was drawn into its center. She could feel the muck around her feet, a sensation like entering the throat of a toothless serpent, pulling her down. The icy chill, colder than anything she'd ever felt, inched up her legs and continued past her waist. What trapped her wasn't liquid nor mud, but rather a thick freezing tar that seemed alive. She shook with terror as, inch by inch, the goo crept up her chest, making it difficult to breathe.

Tesh cried out as if he, too, were dying—the loss of Brin's life ending his own.

How can I do this? He really loves me, and I—

Like the hand of a corpse from a nightmare, the muck slid around her neck. Sinking farther, Brin tilted her head back in a last desperate attempt to keep her face above the murky pool. When the slime covered her mouth and eyes, she could no longer suppress the scream.

With her mouth filled with muck, the shriek was silent. Tesh would never know that her last word had been his name. After the shout, Brin refused to inhale. The instinct not to draw in a breath while underwater proved stronger than her desire for air.

Heroic thoughts, which had given her the courage to enter the pool, vanished from her mind; reason, reflection, and contemplation soon followed. What remained was a staccato rhythm of imagery: sunshine on leaves, rain in a bucket, chopped carrots, her mother's laughter, an icy pond. As her mind froze in terror, her body lashed out, kicking and thrashing in a hopeless struggle to survive. Reaching up, her hand briefly broke the surface. She felt air—air!

So close.

And so short-lived, as her fingers were consumed once more.

Her arms slowed, growing weak. Her legs refused to listen to her mind and stopped moving.

Additional images emerged: fire in the lodge, sheep in a windstorm, Tesh's hand in hers, words on a page.

While trying to breathe *might* kill her, her body determined that *not* breathing certainly would, so she inhaled. Sludge entered through her nose and mouth. Further attempts to bring in more air stopped with all the suddenness of a bird hitting a window. An involuntary cough sought to clear her airways, but it was as futile as a frightened child shouting at a tempest.

The panic dissipated. A calm enveloped her as she hung motionless in a cold, timeless expanse.

Slowly, her mind returned. Thoughts coalesced into ideas once more, and the first was the most obvious.

I made a mistake—my last mistake.

Brin waited patiently, knowing death was overdue.

More time passed. Nothing happened.

Is it over? Am I . . . ?

The darkness was so absolute that Brin wasn't sure if her eyes were open or closed—a ridiculous thought because she couldn't tell if she had eyes anymore.

Am I dead? I must be.

The thought surfaced with a peculiar calm acceptance, an oddly reasoned conclusion to a most unusual situation. The deduction wasn't obvious, as she still had no clear indication of death. The panic had departed, as had the discomfort of choking, and she no longer felt cold. But by themselves these things didn't definitively signify death. She briefly considered that she might still be alive and had merely passed out.

She tried moving her arms and legs, and they resumed obeying her commands. These limbs reported that she was in a liquid, but it wasn't the thick slime of the pool.

Water. I'm in water.

A moment later, her head breached the surface. Brin took an involuntary breath and began to bob and splash.

Have I somehow survived? Did I . . . ?

Everything was still black, but some things were self-evident. She wasn't in the pool, nor anywhere on the island, and no longer with the witch. Tesh was gone, forever beyond her reach.

The River of Death.

Brin knew the stories. Those who had almost died told of a powerful, dark waterway that carried them toward a bright light. Brin didn't see any glow, and she didn't feel dead. She had her arms and legs, and she was just as bad at swimming as always. Relaxing her efforts, she stopped kicking and let her arms fall limp. Rather than sinking, she floated and bobbed. In that stillness, she couldn't perceive anything: no light, no sound, no smell, no taste or feeling. Brin found herself drowning in nothingness, and in that void, she had to wonder, *Am I only imagining the existence of arms and legs?* With nothing to interact with, she had no means to confirm anything, no ability to refute a growing fear.

Do I still exist? With that came a second, even more horrifying thought. *Was there ever someone named Brin? Did any of what I remember of my life actually happen?*

She had no clear answers. Thoughts needed frameworks, references, and foundations. She had none. Along with her senses, she felt herself slipping away.

Am I . . . ?

The sensation of the water vanished. The feeling of bobbing disappeared.

Do I exist?

Without connection, Brin couldn't maintain any sense of herself.

I'm not drowning. I'm dissolving.

What little had been left of her dispersed, broke up, and melted. She faded, nearly vanished, and then—

A light appeared.

Brin saw it. A mere pinprick, like a far-distant star.

Something else exists—so I can, too. I'm not completely gone.

The glint grew. Its radiance revealed the river, a dark, inky snake that wound through a massive rock canyon. Seeing the walls, watching them slide past, Brin knew she was moving, going somewhere. In the reassurance that swelled within her, Brin had a moment to think, to remember. Instantly, she was stabbed by the memory of Tesh, of the cry he'd let out. The sound had stayed with her. That horrible scream had followed her all the way down.

I'm sorry, Brin thought, as the light grew bigger and brighter.

Neither yellow nor orange, the glow possessed a lackluster, pale quality, like a late afternoon in deep winter when the sun was lost behind a blanket of clouds. As she drew closer, the illumination made it possible to see farther, and she discerned the impossibly high walls of jagged stone that rose to either side. Where the river ended was a pool and a beach bathed in light. The movement of silhouetted figures caught her attention.

People! Yes, there are most definitely others.

The light was behind them, so all she saw were silhouettes, hundreds standing together in a crowd. Beyond them, Brin spotted the source of the glow emanating from behind a great gate and a pair of towering doors. They were closed, but the brilliance was so powerful that it bled through the gaps between the door and the frame.

Unexpectedly, Brin's feet touched a sandy bottom. She was dragged along for a bit, then she caught her footing and stood.

"Brin!" Roan shouted while coming toward her. Her friend didn't look dead. Roan appeared just as she had before entering the pool, not a bit of muck visible as she pulled Brin from the water.

"Stupid girl." Moya came over and hugged Brin tightly. Breaking the embrace, Moya reached up and brushed away one of Brin's stray hairs. "I told you not to come. Ordered you. Why? Why didn't you listen?"

"I realized something that I hadn't before but should have. Muriel's name was listed in the Agave tablets along with Ferrol, Drome, and Mari. If she is a god, then her father would be, too. Tressa was right about Malcolm and he wanted me to come."

"So, you're a believer now, too? And that faith was enough to kill yourself over?"

"That's only part of it. Malcolm told me *The Book of Brin* might be the most important thing ever created by mankind. He knew I would write everything down. He wants me to tell the truth, and he thinks I'll find it down here."

"You still shouldn't have done it." Moya's voice was tense. "Persephone will never forgive me."

"She will if we succeed."

"Slim chance of that."

Together, they walked over to join Gifford, Tressa, and Rain, who stood in a tight cluster overlooking the pool and the crowd at the door. They all glanced at her, smiling cheerlessly and nodding as if they shared a solemn secret. Brin knew what it was. They were together, but they were also dead.

Rain still had his pick, Moya her bow, and Tressa wore the same oversized shirt she'd taken from Gelston, a bit of rope binding it around her waist. Brin hadn't finished the garment she'd promised to Tressa for learning to read, and it gave her a stab of regret that the woman would endure all of eternity in such a shabby outfit.

Moya studied Brin, then peered over the Keeper's shoulder at the water. Her eyes darkened. "Tesh?"

Brin shook her head and pretended to smile. "He let me go," she said in a cheery tone that sounded forced, even to herself.

Moya gave her a sad nod.

"He tried to stop me. It took a while to convince him. I was worried you might have left already, and I wouldn't know how to find you."

"Not much chance of that." Gifford gestured at the mob gathered near the great doors. "There appears to be a wait to get in."

Roan spun abruptly. "Gifford?" She stared at him in fascination.

"What?"

"You just—what did you say?"

Gifford shrugged. "I was just thinking that there must have been a big battle to have so many people waiting."

"You did it again!" Roan hopped on her toes in excitement.

"Did what?"

"Gifford, say my name."

His brows furrowed. He glanced at the rest of them, confused. "Roan, what are you—" Then, his eyes went wide, and his mouth hung open.

"You can speak like everyone else." Roan reached up and caressed his lips.

"Roan," he said, louder this time. "Roan, Roan, *Rrr-oan!*"

Gifford threw his arms around his wife, and the two hugged and laughed.

Brin found herself smiling. All of them were grinning except—
"Where's Tekchin?"

“He went to the gate—” Something caught Moya’s attention from the direction of the crowd, and she waved her bow over her head. “Here he comes.”

The Fhrey trotted over, moving with the same ease he had exhibited in life. “It’s locked up good and tight. No one can get in, and they don’t know why. The consensus is something is wrong.”

“I’d say so.” Moya frowned. “We go through all the trouble of dying just to get stuck here? Are we even sure where the gate goes?”

“Yep. It’s Phyre, all right. That gate is usually open,” he explained. “The light from inside attracts the newly dead. When they get close enough, they find family and friends waiting.”

“How do you know all that?”

“There’s a woman over that way who has been here before—but she was sucked back into her body. At least that’s what she told me. And according to some guy who died from a fever in southern Rhulyn, the doors have been closed for a long time.”

“Any idea how long?”

Tekchin gestured at the darkness behind them. “How can you tell?”



Moya led the others toward the doors. The crowd was nearly all Rhunes, and she became unsettled by the large number of children. Tekchin was the only Fhrey, but there were a fair number of dwarfs. The common thread was that they all looked frightened, lost, and confused.

Everyone here is dead.

The idea would take some time for Moya to get used to. None of them looked like ghosts. They were just people, although oddly dressed. Few besides those in her group wore traveling clothes. Most of the ladies were draped in gowns, and the men sported what had to have been their best tunics. None of them had cloaks or packs or so much as a bag, but they all had stones. Some hung around their necks, but most were clenched tightly in fists.

“Make way, make way!” Tekchin plowed through the mass of people, who dutifully let them pass. He used an outstretched hand like the prow of a ship to cut through the sea of spirits. No one appeared offended at his forcefulness. On the contrary, the party’s determined movement must have provided an air of authority because people approached with pleas.

“There’s been a mistake,” a man told them as they brushed by. He was dressed in shredded clothes that dangled in tatters. Unlike most of the others, he had no stone. “I shouldn’t be here. I wasn’t even sick. I was out in the forest . . .”

They walked out of hearing range, and Moya was grateful she didn’t find out how that scenario played out.

“My babies, my babies . . .” They came upon a weeping woman, who sat rocking and hugging herself. She looked right at Moya. “How will they live without me?”

A finely dressed woman with her arms folded tightly across her chest glared at them and then at the gate. “Are we expected to just wait here for eternity? If people keep dying, it’s going to get mighty crowded on this beach.”

Tekchin reached back and took Moya’s hand as they pushed into a denser section of the crowd. Drawing near the gate, she realized that the entrance was even bigger than it had appeared at a distance. Above the doors, three figures were carved from stone. The trio stood shoulder to shoulder, looking down on them: one male dwarf and two females, a Rhune and a Fhrey. At their feet, creatures were depicted perched on the lintel, throwing rocks. Below them were the great doors themselves. Far taller than those of Alon Rhist—bigger even than the great entrance to Neith—these were massive and appeared to be cast from gold. Each door was decorated with relief sculptures of people struggling in all manner of misfortune. Some were falling from great heights. Others raised defensive arms while being pelted by the stones thrown from those on the lintel. Still more were stabbed, strangled, or beheaded. Moya couldn’t help noticing a panel near the bottom where a woman was being overwhelmed by huge, crushing waves. One arm reached up for help that would never come.

Light seeped out around the edges of the doors and bathed the beach with its only source of illumination.

It's like the moon is trapped back there.

“What’s your hurry?” a dwarf asked as Tekchin pushed past. “Got someplace to be, do you?”

The Galantian gave the complainer a nasty look, and nothing else was said. He handed out a few more shoves and glares until they reached the gate. Moya moved right up against the doors, touching the cold stone and feeling the face of the drowning woman. “Such comforting carvings they have. Makes you want to rush right in. Who do you think those three at the top are?”

“No idea,” Tekchin replied. “But as for getting in, do you have a plan?” He gave her a questioning look along with a mischievous smile. Most everything Tekchin served up came with some version of an amused grin. For him, life was an unending adventure. Death hadn’t tarnished his attitude, and Moya was grateful for that.

He loves me. The great Galantian, the-onetime-god-from-across-the-river, loves me, Moya—the uncontrollable daughter of Audrey the washerwoman.

She still couldn’t get over that Tekchin had forfeited more than a thousand years of life for her. In all the time they’d spent together, he’d refused to say, “I love you.” But in that one amazing moment of self-sacrifice when he’d scooped her up and carried her to the pool, he’d proven his devotion.

Moya stared up at the towering pair of doors, then shrugged. She looked at those nearby. “Anyone tried knocking?”

“Are you insane?” the impatient woman asked.

Moya nodded. “Probably.” Reaching up, she found a smooth area and gave the door three solid slaps with the palm of her hand.

The noise was louder than expected, but nothing happened.

Moya gave the gates a solid shove, which did nothing except push her backward.

The testy woman rolled her eyes.

“Worth a try,” Moya concluded. She rose on her toes to see the river that lay beyond those gathered. More were arriving. Heads bobbed along like debris, and the newly arrived climbed out at a sandy bank.

“There must be a few hundred here—maybe more.” She looked at a man in a nightshirt. The gown’s chest and armpits were stained yellow. His mustache and beard looked hard, coated with dried mucus. “How long do we have to wait?”

“Like I know?” He pulled on his filthy garment with a scowl. “I was in bed, sleeping. Then I wake up to this!”

Moya scowled right back. “Oh, you poor dear. Died in your own bed, did you? How sad. Some of us drowned in a disgusting pool of slime. And that sad bastard back there”—she pointed at the man in the tattered clothes—“looks like he was mauled by a bear. And have you looked at these gates? Seen these images? You should think of all the ways you could have gone.” She shook her head. “Died in your sleep. Honestly!”

The man backed up and slipped into the crowd, leaving the base of the doors to them.

With Mucus Beard gone, she looked to Rain. “Okay, so how does it work, exactly? The *you-know-what*, I mean?”

The dwarf straightened up as if guilty of something. “What? Oh, ah—right.” Like Moya, he, too, took a second to be certain no one was around. Then lowering his voice, he said, “So, a key goes into a lock.”

“What’s that?” Moya asked.

“Ah, well, they appear as openings, little holes that the key fits into.”

They all scanned the vast and confusing face of the panels. “There are dozens of them,” Moya said. She pointed. “There’s a cave up there, a doorway over here. Which is the right one?”

“Could try all of them,” Gifford said.

Moya shook her head. “Can’t really be experimenting in front of an audience. No one is supposed to know, remember?”

“You’re right,” Tressa said. “So, let’s just wait forever, which down here isn’t just a figure of speech.”

Moya frowned at her. “The idea that death would make you less of a bitch was just too much to hope for, wasn’t it?”

“I am what I am,” Tressa said while dramatically sweeping her hands down her sides as if showing off a new dress.

“Won’t be at the top,” Rain said. “Too hard to use. Most locks are within easy reach for convenience. Look there.” He pointed partway up near the center of the right-hand-side panel at a scene where a bear mauled three men. Near it, the sun was depicted as a man with wild hair. His mouth was wide open, revealing a hole in the stone. “That’s Eton, and she has his key.”

He turned to Tressa. “Slide it in teeth first, the part with the jagged edges, then turn it around like this.” He rotated his wrist.

“Maybe you should do it,” Tressa said as fear crept into her voice. “You know how it works.”

“No,” Moya interjected. “Malcolm gave it to you, and you’re the one who got us into this. So don’t try pushing your responsibility onto others.”

Tressa looked up at the gaping mouth, then back at the crowd. “If I reach up, people will see.”

Tressa looked at Moya as if she held all the answers to life’s many riddles. She didn’t, and even if she did, being dead meant the rules had changed.

Roan whispered into Gifford’s ear. “I’ll handle that,” he declared. “Just be ready.”

“For what?” Moya asked, and before she could say more, Gifford walked down the slope into the crowd.

“What’s he doing?” she asked Roan.

Roan smiled. “Just watch.”

Gifford tore his leg brace off, threw it aside, and strode out straight and tall down to the bank of the river. Then he shouted, “Hello, everyone!” Reaching into the bag that was still at his side, he pulled out three stones. “I wonder if any of you know me. I’m Gifford of Dahl Rhen. I was once a potter.”

“I do!” exclaimed a woman from the crowd, as if she’d won a prize. “Bought a bowl in Vernes by a potter named Gifford of Rhen. Good pot. Real good pot.” Confusion dawned, and she added, “But I was told a cripple had made it.”

“Indeed!” Gifford shouted. “That would be me. I’m that very same wretch. All my life I could never talk right. I had a terrible speech impediment. Couldn’t even say the name of my beautiful wife. It’s Roan, by the way—RrrOAN!” he roared. “While alive, I couldn’t say *right* or *rain*, *ridiculous* or *terrible*.” Gifford grinned immeasurably, his smile reflected on the faces of those in the crowd.

Roan stood beside Moya and Brin, watching in rapture, her hands clasped together in front of her mouth. She bounced on her toes and appeared to be on the verge of both laughing and crying.

“Yes, I was an awful mess. My back was as twisted as a carrot grown in a rock-filled garden. I couldn’t even walk without help. People in my dahl used to call me The Goblin because of how I shambled around. A terrible, wretched thing I was, but watch this!”

Gifford began juggling the three stones Suri had given him. The crowd paid closer attention now, following the stones as they flew high into the air. Moya guessed that such entertainment was a welcome change for those who had been waiting on the beach for who knew how long. Everyone watched, including Tressa.

“Hey!” Moya called out through clenched teeth, shaking the woman’s arm. “Now! Do it! Hurry!”

“Oh, right.” Tressa plunged a hand down her shirt and retrieved the twisted bit of metal hanging from a chain.

“And now, watch this!” Gifford shouted.

Moya didn’t see what he was doing, but the crowd was impressed enough to let out a combined, “Oohhhh,” which was followed by an, “Ahhhh!”

Tressa inserted the key into Eton’s mouth and twisted. There was a *clank*—a loud one. When Moya looked around, all eyes were still on Gifford, who was catching the rocks behind his back.

Tressa withdrew the key and shoved it down her shirt.

Moya gave each door a slight push, and they began to swing inward, the light growing. This caught the crowd's attention, and everyone turned to look.

The doors continued to part as if drawn back by giants. As the gap widened, the brilliance blinded everyone.

About the Author

Michael J. Sullivan is a *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *Washington Post* bestselling author who has been nominated for eight Goodreads Choice Awards. His first novel, *The Crown Conspiracy*, was released by Aspirations Media Inc. in October 2008. From 2009 through 2010, he self-published the next five of the six books of the Riyria Revelations, which were later sold and re-released by Hachette Book Group's Orbit imprint as three, two-book omnibus editions (*Theft of Swords*, *Rise of Empire*, *Heir of Novron*).

Michael's Riyria Chronicles series (a prequel to Riyria Revelations) has been both traditionally and self-published. The first two books were released by Orbit, and the next two by his own imprint, Riyria Enterprises, LLC. A fifth Riyria Chronicle, titled *Drumindor*, will be self-published in the near future.

For Penguin Random House's Del Rey imprint, Michael has published the first three books of The Legends of the First Empire: *Age of Myth*, *Age of Swords*, and *Age of War*. The last three books of the series will be distributed by Grim Oak Press and are titled *Age of Legend*, *Age of Death*, and *Age of Empyre*.

Michael is now writing The Rise and the Fall Trilogy. These three books are set in his fictional world of Elan several hundred years after the events of The Legends of the First Empire and one thousand years before the Riyria novels.

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