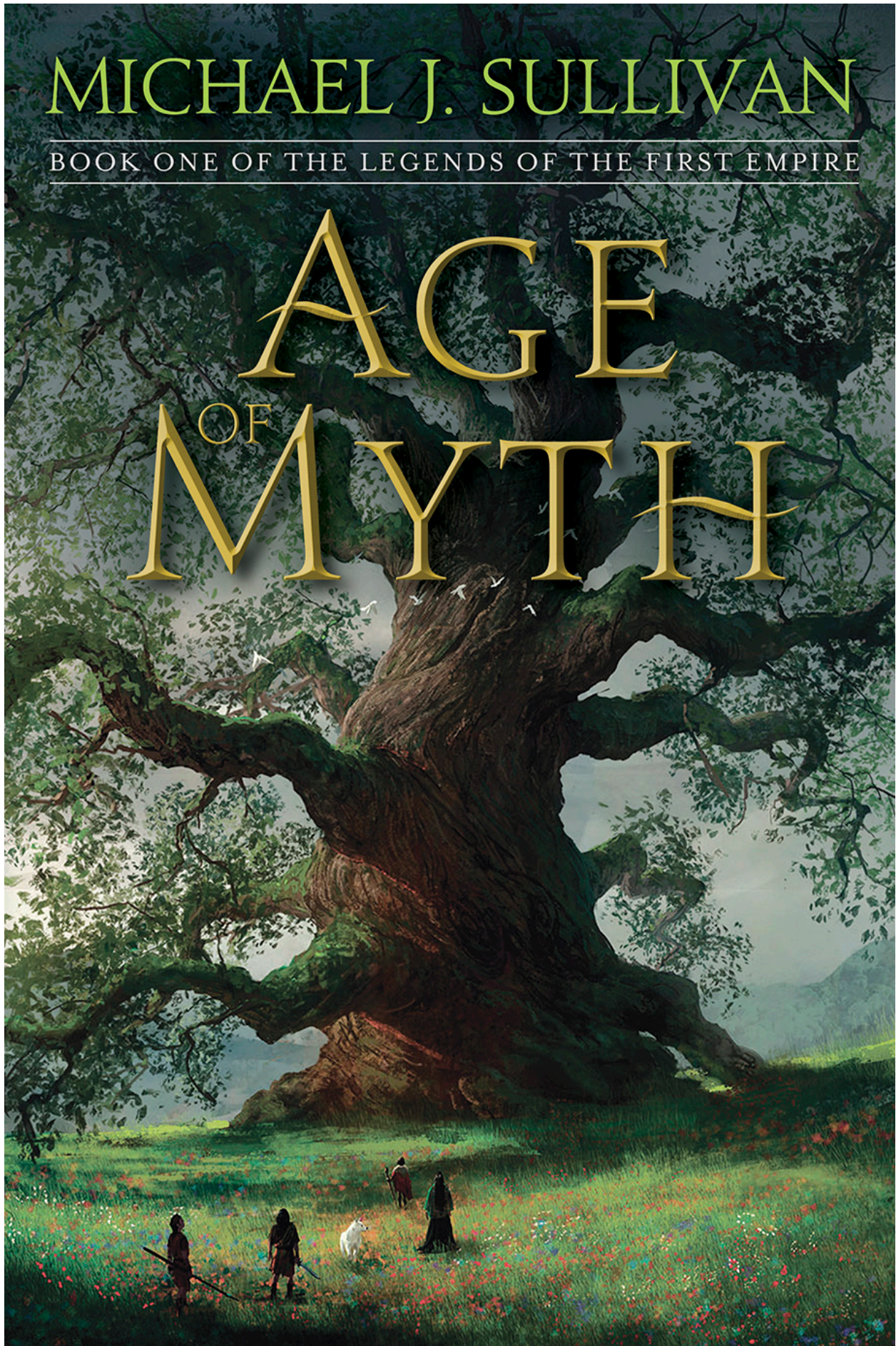


MICHAEL J. SULLIVAN

BOOK ONE OF THE LEGENDS OF THE FIRST EMPIRE

AGE
OF
MYTH



PRAISE FOR MICHAEL J. SULLIVAN

“This epic fantasy showcases the arrival of a master storyteller.”

— Library Journal on Theft of Swords

“A delightful, entertaining and page-turning read that reminds us just how enjoyable, and how good The Riyria Revelations series is. A must-buy for all fantasy lovers.”

— The Founding Fields on Rise of Empire

“Heir of Novron is the conclusion to the Riyria Revelations, cementing it in a position as a new classic of modern fantasy: traditional in setting, but extremely unconventional in, well, everything else.”

— Drying Ink on Heir of Novron

“Snappy banter, desperate stakes, pulse pounding sword play, and good old fashioned heroics are all on full display here.”

— 52 Book Reviews on The Crown Tower

“With less gore and a smaller cast of characters than George R.R. Martin’s “Song of Ice & Fire” but equally satisfying, Sullivan’s epic fantasy will be gaining fans at exponential rates.”

— Library Journal on The Rose and the Thorn

“The stakes are high, but there’s a light-heartedness to the proceedings, and the sense that the author genuinely enjoys playing in this particular sandbox.”

— Fantasy Faction on The Death of Dulgath

“This is social science fiction that H.G. Wells or Isaac Asimov could have written, with the cultural touchstones of today. A modernized classic, Hollow World is the perfect novel for both new and nostalgic science fiction readers.”

— Staffer’s Book Reviews on Hollow World

MICHAEL J. SULLIVAN'S WORKS

The Legends of the First Empire

Age of Myth • Age of Swords • Age of War • Age of Legends • Age of Empire

The Riyria Revelations

Theft of Swords (contains The Crown Conspiracy and Avempartha)

Rise of Empire (contains Nyphron Rising and The Emerald Storm)

Heir of Novron (contains Wintertide and Percepliquis)

The Riyria Chronicles

The Crown Tower

The Rose and the Thorn

The Death of Dulgath

Standalone Novel

Hollow World

Anthologies

Unfettered: The Jester (Fantasy: The Riyria Chronicles)

Blackguards: Professional Integrity (Fantasy: The Riyria Chronicles)

Unbound: The Game (Fantasy: Contemporary)

Unfettered II: Little Wren and the Big Forest (Fantasy: The Legends of the First Empire)

The End: Visions of the Apocalypse: Burning Alexandria (Dystopian Science Fiction)

Triumph over Tragedy: Traditions (Fantasy: Tales from Elan)

The Fantasy Faction Anthology: Autumn Mists (Fantasy: Contemporary)

Help Fund My Robot Army: Be Careful What You Wish For (Fantasy)

Age of Myth is a work of fiction. Names, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2016 by Michael J. Sullivan. Excerpt from *Age of Swords* by Michael J. Sullivan copyright © 2016. All rights reserved.

Published in the United States by Del Rey, an imprint of Random House, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

Del Rey and the House colophon are registered trademarks of Penguin Random House LLC.

This book contains an excerpt from the forthcoming book *Age of Swords* by Michael J. Sullivan.

This excerpt has been set for this edition only and may not reflect the final content of the forthcoming edition.

ISBN 978-1-101-96533-7 Ebook ISBN 978-1-101-96534-4

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.

randomhousebooks.com

987654321

First Edition

Book design by Christopher M. Zucker.

ABOUT AGE OF MYTH

(from the back cover)

What does it mean if a god can be killed?

Michael J. Sullivan's trailblazing career began with the breakout success of his Riyria series: full-bodied, spellbinding fantasy adventures whose imaginative scope and sympathetic characters won a devoted readership and comparisons to fantasy masters Brandon Sanderson, Scott Lynch, and Tolkien himself. Now, Sullivan's stunning hardcover debut, *Age of Myth*, inaugurates an original five-book series—and one of fantasy's finest next-generation storytellers continues to break new ground.

Since time immemorial, humans have worshipped the gods they call Fhrey, truly a race apart: invincible in battle, masters of magic, and seemingly immortal. But when a god falls to a human blade, the balance of power between men and those they thought were gods changes forever. Now, only a few stand between humankind and annihilation: Raithe, reluctant to embrace his destiny as the God Killer, Suri, a young seer burdened by signs of impending doom, and Persephone, who must overcome personal tragedy to lead her people.

The Age of Myth is over; the time of rebellion has begun.

To all the readers who've enjoyed my stories and have shared them with loved ones. My success is largely due to your generous support, and I thank you for making my dream a reality.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Welcome to The Legends of the First Empire, my latest fantasy series. If you haven't read any of my previous work, have no fear. This is a new series, and no knowledge of either The Riyria Chronicles or The Riyria Revelations is necessary to fully enjoy this tale. Also, reading this book won't expose you to spoilers, so there are no concerns on that front. This series is meant to be a separate entryway into the world of Elan, and if you want to read more—well, there are nine books (told in six volumes) waiting for you.

For those who have read the Riyria books, I should mention that this series is set three thousand years before the events in those novels. You might think you know how the First Empire was formed, or at least some general ideas about the events. But, having read my books, you probably realize that things aren't always as they seem. The accounts I've revealed through Riyria haven't been entirely accurate. After all, history is written by the victors. In this series, I can set the record straight, and you'll know the truth in myths and the lies of legends.

For those unfamiliar with my process, I write sagas in an unusual way. I finish the entire series before publishing the first novel, and these books continue that tradition. Why is this important? Well, there are several reasons. First, it allows me to weave threads throughout the entire narrative. Minor references that seem initially unimportant will usually provide some interesting insights upon re-reading. This is possible because I'm able to spread out details across the entire story line.

Second, writing this way assures me (and my readers) that the books are working toward an ultimate conclusion. Too often, series wander off track, and it's questionable if the author will be able to rein in everything when all is said and done. I'm honored by the praise The Riyria

Revelation's conclusion has received. The series' satisfying ending was mostly due to my ability to make tweaks, add characters, or provide foundation support in earlier books when an interesting idea came to me as I wrote a later one. Plus, there is no fear about me being hit by a bus or meeting some other unfortunate end, leaving you hanging and wondering how the full story works out.

Third, writing all the books in advance allows me to tell the story unburdened by the constraints of publishing contracts or business concerns. In fact, when I started this series I had intended a trilogy. But as the plot emerged, it grew into four and then five books. Had I signed a contract with just one book completed, I might have been forced to make some difficult decisions to fit the narrative into a box that was determined by the deal brokered. Without that restriction, I was able to tell the story in the way that makes the most sense for the narrative as a whole.

Fourth, writing the entire series relieves me from deadline pressure. I'll admit that I hate trying to create on the clock. The muse doesn't always cooperate on demand, and I really enjoy being able to write the books without the company of a ticking time bomb. Without constraints, I'll produce the best work possible because a book is finished when I say it is finished rather than when the clock runs out.

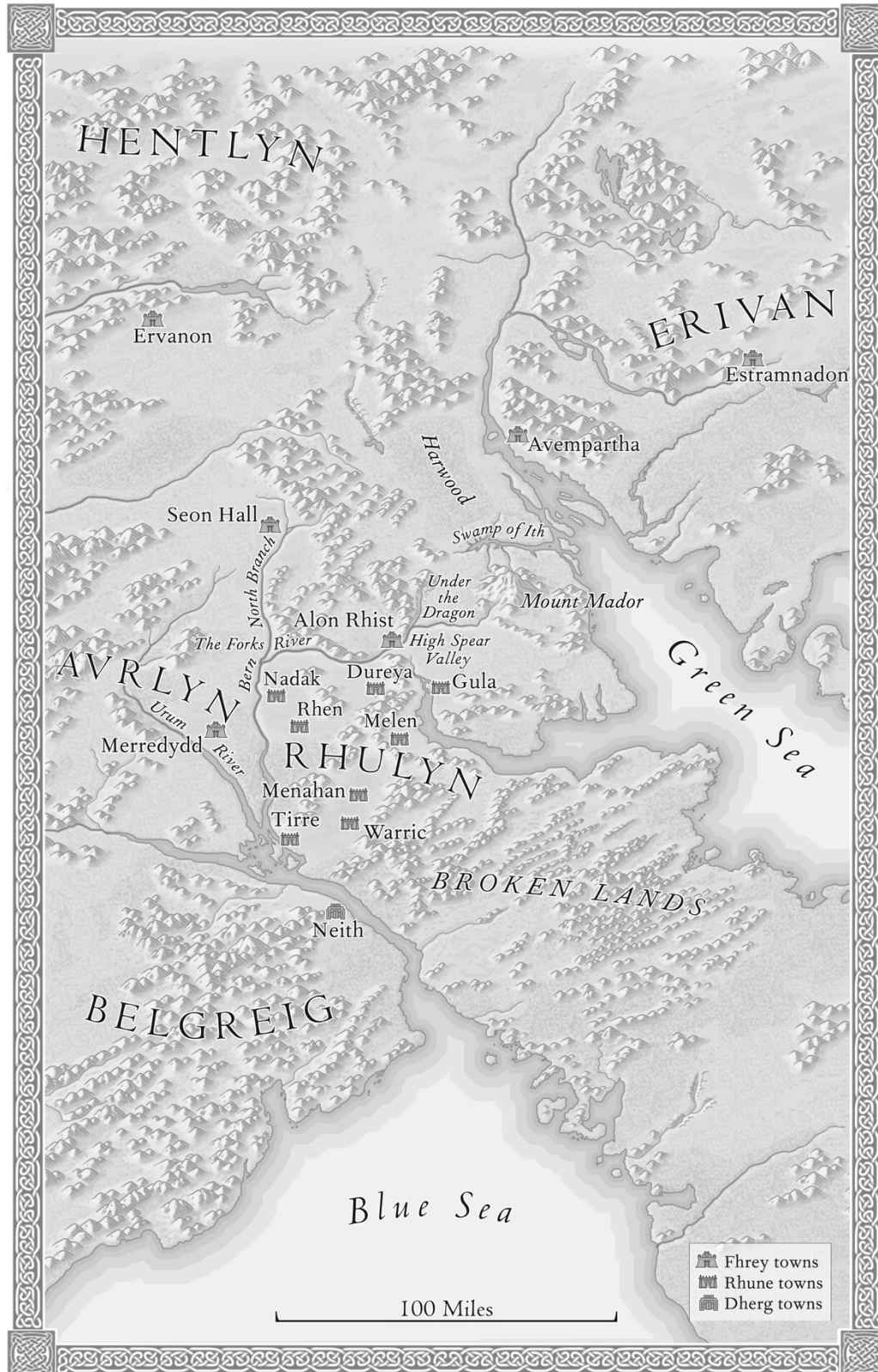
Last, but certainly not least, you are guaranteed to get the books in a timely manner. Too often readers are frustrated by constantly wondering when (or if) the next book of a series will appear. Having all the books written eliminates that concern. Sure, there could be publishing concerns regarding when to release a particular title, but my job has been completed, and I can move on to the next project.

One final thing I should note—for any aspiring authors out there—this isn't how I recommend approaching your own writing. There are many good reasons why most series aren't produced this way. I'm an outlier by using this method, and while it produces the highest-quality product for me, it could result in years and years of wasted effort when employed by others.

Well, that's more than enough preamble. I just wanted to give a little peek behind the process to help set expectations. Now turn the page, tap the screen, or adjust the volume—a new adventure awaits.

MAPS

It is difficult to get high resolution maps to show up well on some e-reader devices. For this reason, there is a [high resolution copy of the map online](#), which you can reference at your pleasure.



CHAPTER ONE

OF GODS AND MEN

In the days of darkness before the war, men were called Rhunes. We lived in Rhuneland or Rhulyn as it was once known. We had little to eat and much to fear.

What we feared most were the gods across the Bern River where we were not allowed. Most people believe our conflict with the Fhrey started at the Battle of Grandford, but it actually began on a day in early spring when two men crossed

the river. — The Book of Brin

Raithe's first impulse was to pray. Curse, cry, scream, pray—people did such things in their last minutes of life. But praying struck Raithe as absurd given that his problem was the angry god twenty feet away. Gods weren't known for their tolerance, and this one appeared on the verge of striking them dead. Neither Raithe nor his father had noticed the god approach. The waters of the nearby converging rivers made enough noise to mask an army's passage. Raithe would have preferred an army.

Dressed in shimmering clothes, the god sat on a horse and was accompanied by two servants on foot. They were men, but dressed in the same remarkable clothing. All three silent, watching.

"Hey?" Raithe called to his father.

Herkimer knelt beside a deer, opening its stomach with his knife. Earlier, Raithe had landed a spear in the stag's side, and he and his father had spent most of the morning chasing it.

Herkimer had stripped off his wool leigh mor as well as his shirt because opening a deer's belly was a bloody business. "What?" He looked up.

Raithe jerked his head toward the god, and his father's sight tracked to the three figures. The old man's eyes widened, and the color left his face.

I knew this was a bad idea, Raithe thought.

His father had seemed so confident, so sure that crossing the forbidden river would solve their problems. But he'd mentioned his certainty enough times to make Raithe wonder. Now the old man looked as if he'd forgotten how to breathe. Herkimer wiped his knife on the deer's side before slipping it into his belt and getting up.

"Ah..." Raithe's father began. Herkimer looked at the half-gutted deer, then back at the god. "It's...okay."

This was the total sum of his father's wisdom, his grand defense for their high crime of trespassing on divine land. Raithe wasn't sure if slaughtering one of the deities' deer was also an offense but assumed it didn't help their situation. And although Herkimer said it was *okay*, his face told a different story. Raithe's stomach sank. He had no idea what he'd expected his father to say, but something more than that.

Not surprisingly, the god wasn't appeased, and the three continued to stare in growing irritation.

They were on a tiny point of open meadowland where the Bern and North Branch rivers met. A pine forest, thick and rich, grew a short distance up the slope behind them. Down at the point where the rivers converged lay a stony beach. Beneath a snow-gray blanket of sky, the river's roar was the only sound. Just minutes earlier Raithe had seen the tiny field as a paradise. That was then.

Raithe took a slow breath and reminded himself that he didn't have experience with gods or their expressions. He'd never observed a god up close, never seen beech-leaf-shaped ears, eyes blue as the sky, or hair that spilled like molten gold. Such smooth skin and white teeth were beyond reason. This was a being born not of the earth but of air and light. His robes billowed in the breeze and shimmered in the sun, proclaiming an otherworldly glory. The harsh, judgmental glare was exactly the expression Raithe expected from an immortal being.

The horse was an even bigger surprise. Raithe's father had told him about such animals, but until then Raithe hadn't believed. His old man had a habit of embellishing the truth, and for more than twenty years Raithe had heard the tales. After a few drinks, his father would tell everyone how he'd killed five men with a single swing or fought the North Wind to a standstill. The older Herkimer got, the larger the stories grew. But this four-hooved tall tale was looking back at Raithe with large glossy eyes, and when the horse shook its head, he wondered if the mounts of gods understood speech.

"No, really, it's okay," Raithe's father told them again, maybe thinking they hadn't heard his previous genius. "I'm allowed here." He took a step forward and pointed to the medal hanging from a strip of hide amid the dirt and pine needles stuck to the sweat on his chest. Half naked, sunbaked, and covered in blood up to his elbows, his father appeared the embodiment of a mad barbarian. Raithe wouldn't have believed him, either.

"See this?" his father went on. The burnished metal clutched by thick ruddy fingers reflected the midday sun. "I fought for your people against the Gula-Rhunes in the High Spear Valley. I did well. A Fhrey commander gave me this. Said I earned a reward."

“Dureyan clan,” the taller servant told the god, his tone somewhere between disappointment and disgust. He wore a rich-looking silver torc around his neck—both servants did. The jewelry must be a mark of their station.

The gangly man lacked a beard but sported a long nose, sharp cheeks, and small clever eyes. He reminded Raithe of a weasel or a fox, and he wasn’t fond of either. Raithe was also repulsed by how the man stood: stooped, eyes low, hands clasped. Abused dogs exhibited more self-esteem.

What kind of men travel with a god?

“That’s right. I’m Herkimer, son of Hiemdal, and this is my son Raithe.”

“You’ve broken the law,” the servant stated. The nasal tone even sounded the way a weasel might talk.

“No, no. It’s not like that. Not at all.”

The lines on his father’s face deepened, and his lips stretched tighter. He stopped walking forward but held the medal out like a talisman, his eyes hopeful. “This proves what I’m saying, that I earned a reward. See, I sort of figured we”—he gestured toward Raithe—“my son and I could live on this little point.” He waved at the meadow. “We don’t need much. Hardly anything, really. You see, on our side of the river, back in Dureya, the dirt’s no good. We can’t grow anything, and there’s nothing to hunt.”

The pleading in his father’s voice was something Raithe hadn’t heard before and didn’t like.

“You’re not allowed here.” This time it was the other servant, the balding one. Like the tall weasel-faced fellow, he lacked a proper beard, as if growing one were a thing that needed to be taught. The lack of hair exposed in fine detail a decidedly sour expression.

“But you don’t understand. I *fought* for your people. I *bled* for your people. I *lost three sons* fighting for your kind. And I was promised a reward.” Herkimer held out the medal again, but the god didn’t look at it. He stared past them, focusing on some distant, irrelevant point.

Herkimer let go of the medal. “If this spot is a problem, we’ll move. My son actually liked another place west of here. We’d be farther away from you. Would that be better?”

Although the god still didn’t look at them, he appeared even more annoyed. Finally he spoke. “You will obey.”

An average voice. Raithe was disappointed. He had expected thunder.

The god then addressed his servants in the divine language. Raithe’s father had taught him some of their tongue. He wasn’t fluent but knew enough to understand the god didn’t want them to have weapons on this side of the river. A moment later the tall servant relayed the message in Rhunic. “Only Fhrey are permitted to possess weapons west of the Bern. Cast yours into the river.”

Herkimer glanced at their gear piled near a stump and in a resigned voice told Raithe, “Get your spear and do as they say.”

“And the sword off your back,” the tall servant said.

Herkimer looked shocked and glanced over his shoulder as if he’d forgotten the weapon was there. Then he faced the god and spoke directly to him in the Fhrey language. “*This is my family blade. I cannot throw it away.*”

The god sneered, showing teeth.

“It’s a sword,” the servant insisted.

Herkimer hesitated only a moment. “Okay, okay, fine. We’ll go back across the river, right now. C’mon, Raithe.”

The god made an unhappy sound.

“After you give up the sword,” the servant said.

Herkimer glared. “This copper has been in my family for generations.”

“It’s a weapon. Toss it down.”

Herkimer looked at his son, a sidelong glance.

Although he might not have been a good father—wasn’t as far as Raithe was concerned—Herkimer had instilled one thing in all his sons: pride. Self-respect came from the ability to defend oneself. Such things gave a man dignity. In all of Dureya, in their entire clan, his father was the only man to wield a sword—a *metal* blade. Wrought from beaten copper, its marred, dull sheen was the color of a summer sunset, and legend held that the short-bladed heirloom had been mined and fashioned by a genuine Dherg smith. In comparison with the god’s sword, whose hilt was intricately etched and encrusted with gems, the copper blade was pathetic. Still, Herkimer’s weapon defined him; enemy clans knew him as Coppersword—a feared and respected title. His father could never give up that blade.

The roar of the river was cut by the cry of a hawk soaring above. Birds were known to be the embodiment of omens, and Raithe didn’t take the soaring wail as a positive sign. In its eerie echo, his father faced the god. “I can’t give you this sword.”

Raithe couldn’t help but smile. Herkimer, son of Hiemdal, of Clan Dureya wouldn’t bend so far, not even for a god.

The smaller servant took the horse’s lead as the god dismounted.

Raithe watched—impossible not to. The way the god moved was mesmerizing, so graceful, fluid, and poised. Despite the impressive movement, the god wasn’t physically imposing. He wasn’t tall, broad, or muscled. Raithe and his father had built strong shoulders and

arms by wielding spear and shield throughout their lives. The god, on the other hand, appeared delicate, as if he had lived bedridden and spoon-fed. If the Fhrey were a man, Raithe wouldn't have been afraid. Given the disparity between them in weight and height, he'd avoid a fight, even if challenged. To engage in such an unfair match would be cruel, and he wasn't cruel. His brothers had received Raithe's share of that particular trait.

"You don't understand." Herkimer tried once more to explain. "This sword has been handed down from father to son—"

The god rushed forward and punched Raithe's father in the stomach, doubling him over. Then the Fhrey stole the copper sword, a dull scrape sounding as the weapon came free of its sheath. While Herkimer was catching his breath, the god examined the weapon with revulsion. Shaking his head, the god turned his back on Herkimer to show the tall servant the pitiable blade. Instead of joining the god's ridicule of the weapon, the servant cringed. Raithe saw the future through the weasel man's expression, for he was the first to notice Herkimer's reaction.

Raithe's father drew the skinning knife from his belt and lunged.

This time the god didn't disappoint. With astounding speed, he whirled and drove the copper blade into Raithe's father's chest. Herkimer's forward momentum did the work of running the sword deep. The fight ended the moment it began. His father gasped and fell, the sword still in his chest.

Raithe didn't think. If he had paused even for an instant, he might have reconsidered, but there was more of his father in him than he wanted to believe. The sword being the only weapon within reach, he pulled the copper from his father's body. With all his might, Raithe swung at the god's neck. He fully expected the blade to cut clean through, but the copper sliced only air as the divine being dodged. The god drew his own weapon as Raithe swung again. The two swords

met. A dull *ping* sounded, and the weight in Raithe's hands vanished along with most of the blade. When he finished his swing, only the hilt of his family's heritage remained; the rest flew through the air and landed in a tuft of young pines.

The god stared at him with a disgusted smirk, then spoke in the divine language. "*Not worth dying for, was it?*"

Then the god raised his blade once more as Raithe shuffled backward.

Too slow! Too slow!

His retreat was futile. Raithe was dead. Years of combat training told him so. In that instant before understanding became reality, he had the chance to regret his entire life.

I've done nothing, he thought as his muscles tightened for the expected burst of pain.

It never came.

Raithe had lost track of the servants—so had the god. Neither of the combatants expected, nor saw, the tall weasel-faced man slam his master in the back of the head with a river rock the size and shape of a round loaf of bread. Raithe realized what had happened only after the god collapsed, revealing the servant and his stone.

"Run," the rock bearer said. "With any luck, his head will hurt too much for him to chase us when he wakes."

"What have you done!" the other servant shouted, his eyes wide as he backed up, pulling the god's horse away.

"Calm down," the one holding the rock told the other servant.

Raithe looked at his father, lying on his back. Herkimer's eyes were still open, as if watching clouds. Raithe had cursed his father many times over the years. The man neglected his family, pitted his sons against each other, and had been away when Raithe's mother and sister

died. In some ways—many ways—Raithe hated his father, but at that moment what he saw was a man who had taught his sons to fight and not give in. Herkimer had done the best with what he had, and what he had was a life trapped on barren soil because the gods made capricious demands. Raithe's father never stole, cheated, or held his tongue when something needed to be said. He was a hard man, a cold man, but one who had the courage to stand up for himself and what was right. What Raithe saw on the ground at his feet was the last of his dead family.

He felt the broken sword in his hands.

“No!” the servant holding the horse cried out as Raithe drove the remainder of the jagged copper blade through the god's throat.



Both servants had fled, the smaller one on the horse and the other chasing on foot. Now the one who had wielded the rock returned. Covered in sweat and shaking his head, he trotted back to the meadow. “Meryl's gone,” he said. “He isn't the best rider, but he doesn't have to be. The horse knows the way back to Alon Rhist.” He stopped after noticing Raithe. “What are you doing?”

Raithe was standing over the body of the god. He'd picked up the Fhrey's sword and was pressing the tip against the god's throat. “Waiting. How long does it usually take?”

“How long does what take?”

“For him to get up.”

“He's dead. Dead people don't generally *get up*,” the servant said.

Reluctant to take his eyes off the god, Raithe ventured only the briefest glance at the servant, who was bent and struggling to catch his breath. “What are you talking about?”

“What are *you* talking about?”

“I want to know how long we have before he rises. If I cut off his head, will he stay down longer?”

The servant rolled his eyes. “He’s not getting up! You killed him.”

“My Tetlin ass! That’s a god. Gods don’t die. They’re immortal.”

“Really not so much,” the servant said, and to Raithe’s shock he kicked the god’s body, which barely moved. He kicked it again, and the head rocked to one side, sand sticking to its cheek. “See? Dead. Get it? Not immortal. Not a god, just a Fhrey. They die. There’s a difference between long-lived and immortal. Immortal means you can’t die...even if you want to. Fact is, the Fhrey are a lot more similar to Rhunes than we’d like to think.”

“We’re nothing alike. Look at him.” Raithe pointed at the fallen Fhrey.

“Oh, yes,” the servant replied. “He’s so different. He has only one head, walks on two feet, and has two hands and ten fingers. You’re right. Nothing like us at all.”

The servant looked down at the body and sighed. “His name was Shegon. An incredibly talented harp player, a cheat at cards, and a *brideeth eyn mer*—which is to say...” The servant paused. “No, there is no other way to say it. He wasn’t well liked, and now he’s dead.”

Raithe looked over suspiciously.

Is he lying? Trying to put me off guard?

“You’re wrong,” Raithe said with full conviction. “Have you ever seen a dead Fhrey? I haven’t. My father hasn’t. No one I’ve ever known has. And they don’t age.”

“They do, just very slowly.”

Raithe shook his head. “No, they don’t. My father mentioned a time when he was a boy, and he met a Fhrey named Neason. Forty-five years later, they met again, but Neason looked exactly the same.”

“Of course he did. I just told you they age slowly. Fhrey can live for thousands of years. A bumblebee lives for only a few months. To a bumblebee, you appear immortal.”

Raithe wasn’t fully convinced, but it would explain the blood. He hadn’t expected any. In retrospect, he shouldn’t have attacked the Fhrey at all. His father had taught him not to start a fight he couldn’t win, and fighting an immortal god fell squarely into that category. But then again it was his father who had started the whole thing.

Sure is a lot of blood.

An ugly pool had formed underneath the god, staining the grass and his glistening robes. His neck still had the gash, a nasty, jagged tear like a second mouth. Raithe had expected the wound to miraculously heal or simply vanish. When the god rose, Raithe would have the advantage. He was strong and could best most men in Dureya, which meant he could best most men. Even his father thought twice about making his son too angry.

Raithe stared down at the Fhrey, whose eyes were open and rolled up. The gash in his throat was wider now. A god—a real god—would never permit kicks from a servant. “Okay, maybe they aren’t immortal.” He relaxed and took a step back.

“My name is Malcolm,” the servant said. “Yours is Raithe?”

“Uh-huh,” Raithe said. With one last glare at the Fhrey’s corpse, Raithe tucked the jeweled weapon into his belt and then lifted his father’s body.

“Now what are you doing?” Malcolm asked.

“Can’t bury him down here. These rivers are bound to flood this plain.”

“*Bury* him? When word gets back to Alon Rhist, the Fhrey will...” He looked sick. “We need to leave.”

“So go.”

Raithe carried his father to a small hill in the meadow and gently lowered him to the ground. As a final resting place, it wasn’t much but would have to do. Turning around, he found the god’s ex-servant staring in disbelief. “What?”

Malcolm started to laugh, then stopped, confused. “You don’t understand. Glyn is a fast horse and has the stamina of a wolf. Meryl will reach Alon Rhist by nightfall. He’ll tell the Instarya everything to save himself. They’ll come after us. We need to get moving.”

“Go ahead,” Raithe said, taking Herkimer’s medal and putting it on. Then he closed his father’s eyes. He couldn’t remember having touched the old man’s face before.

“You need to go, too.”

“After I bury my father.”

“The Rhune is dead.”

Raithe cringed at the word. “He was a *man*.”

“Rhune—man—same thing.”

“Not to me—and not to him.” Raithe strode down to the riverbank littered with thousands of rocks of various sizes. The problem wasn’t finding proper stones but deciding which ones to choose.

Malcolm planted his hands on his hips, glaring with an expression somewhere between astonishment and anger. “It’ll take hours! You’re wasting time.”

Raithe crouched and picked up a rock. The top had been baked warm by the sun; the bottom was damp, cool, and covered in wet sand. “He deserves a proper burial and would have

done the same for me.” Raithe found it ironic given that his father had rarely shown any kindness. But it was true; Herkimer would have faced death to see his son properly buried.

“Besides, do you have any idea what can happen to the spirit of an unburied body?”

The man stared back, bewildered.

“They return as manes to haunt you for not showing the proper respect. And manes can be vicious.” Raithe hoisted another large sand-colored rock and walked up the slope. “My father could be a real cul when he was alive. I don’t need him stalking me for the rest of my life.”

“But—”

“But what?” Raithe set the rocks down near his father’s shoulders. He’d do the outline before starting the pile. “He’s not your father. I don’t expect you to stay.”

“That’s not the point.”

“What *is* the point?”

The servant hesitated, and Raithe took the opportunity to return to the bank and search for more rocks.

“I need your help,” the man finally said.

Raithe picked up a large stone and carried it up the bank, clutched against his stomach.

“With what?”

“You know how to...well, you know...live...out here, I mean.” The servant looked at the deer carcass, which had gathered a host of flies. “You can hunt, cook, and find shelter, right?”

You know what berries to eat, which animals you can pet and which to run away from.”

“You don’t pet any animals.”

“See? Good example of how little I know about this sort of thing. Alone, I’d be dead in a day or two. Frozen stiff, buried in a landslide, or gored by some antlered beast.”

Raithe set the stone and returned down the slope, clapping his hands together to clean off the sand. “Makes sense.”

“Of course it makes sense. I’m a sensible fellow. And if you were sensible, we’d go. Now.”

Raithe lifted another rock. “If you’re bent on sticking with me and in such a hurry, you might consider helping.”

The man looked at the riverbank’s rounded stones and sighed. “Do we have to use such big ones?”

“Big ones for the bottom, smaller ones on top.”

“Sounds like you’ve done this before.”

“People die often where I come from, and we have a lot of rocks.” Raithe wiped his brow with his forearm, pushing back a mat of dark hair. He’d rolled the woolen sleeves of his undertunic up. The spring days were still chilly, but the work made him sweat. He considered taking off his leigh mor and leather but decided against it. Burying his father should be an unpleasant task, and a good son should feel something at such a time. If *uncomfortable* was the best he could manage, Raithe would settle for that.

Malcolm carried over a pair of rocks and set them down, letting Raithe place them. He paused to rub his hands clean.

“Okay, Malcolm,” Raithe said, “you need to pick bigger ones or we’ll be here forever.”

Malcolm scowled but returned to the bank, gathered two good-sized stones, and carried them under his arms like melons. He walked unsteadily in sandals. Thin, with a simple strap, they were ill suited to the landscape. Raithe’s clothes were shoddy—sewn scraps of wool with leather accents that he’d cured himself—but at least they were durable.

Raithe searched for and found a small smooth stone.

“I thought you wanted bigger rocks?” Malcolm asked.

“This isn’t for the pile.” Raithe opened his father’s right hand and exchanged the rock for the skinning knife. “He’ll need it to get to Rel or Alysia if he’s worthy—Nifrel if he’s not.”

“Oh, right.”

After outlining the body, Raithe piled the stones from the feet upward. Then he retrieved his father’s leigh mor, which still lay next to the deer’s carcass, and laid it over Herkimer’s face. A quick search in the little patch of pines produced the other end of the copper sword. Raithe considered leaving the weapon but worried about grave robbers. His father had died for the shattered blade; it deserved to be cared for.

Raithe glanced at the Fhrey once more. “You’re certain he won’t get up?”

Malcolm looked over from where he was lifting a rock. “Positive. Shegon *is* dead.”

Together they hoisted a dozen more rocks onto the growing pile before Raithe asked, “Why were you with him?”

Malcolm pointed to the torc around his neck as if it explained everything. Raithe was puzzled until he noticed the necklace was a complete circle. The ring of metal wasn’t a torc, not jewelry at all—it was a collar.

Not a servant—a slave.

The sun was low in the sky when they dropped the last rocks to complete the mound. Malcolm washed in the river while Raithe sang his mourning song. Then he slung his father’s broken blade over his shoulder, adjusted the Fhrey’s sword in his belt, and gathered his things and those of his father. They didn’t have much: a wooden shield, a bag containing a good hammer stone, a rabbit pelt Raithe planned to make into a pouch as soon as it cured, the last of

the cheese, the single blanket they had shared, a stone hand ax, his father's knife, and Raithe's spear.

"Where to?" Malcolm asked. His face and hair were covered in sweat, and the man had nothing, not even a sharpened stick to defend himself.

"Here, sling this blanket over your shoulder. Tie it tight, and take my spear."

"I don't know how to use a spear."

"It's not complicated. Just point and stick."

Raithe looked around. Going home didn't make sense. That was back east, closer to Alon Rhist. Besides, his family was gone. The clan would still welcome him, but it was impossible to build a life in Dureya. Another option would be to push farther west into the untamed wilderness of Avrlyn. To do so they'd need to get past a series of Fhrey outposts along the western rivers. Like Alon Rhist, the strongholds were built to keep men out. Herkimer had warned Raithe about the fortifications of Merredydd and Seon Hall, but his father never explained exactly where those were. By himself, Raithe could likely avoid walking into one, but he wouldn't have much of a life alone in the wilderness. Taking Malcolm wouldn't help. By the look and sound of the ex-slave, he wouldn't survive a year in the wild.

"We'll cross back into Rhulyn but go south." He pointed over the river at the dramatic rising hillside covered with evergreens. "That's the Crescent Forest, runs for miles in all directions. Not the safest place, but it'll provide cover—help hide us." He glanced up at the sky. "Still early in the season, but there should be some food to forage and game to hunt."

"What do you mean by *not the safest place*?"

"Well, I've not been there myself, but I've heard things."

"What sorts of things?"

Raithe tightened his belt and the strap holding the copper to his back before offering a shrug. “Oh, you know, tabors, raow, leshies. Stuff like that.”

Malcolm continued to stare. “Vicious animals?”

“Oh, yeah—those, too, I suppose.”

“Those...*too*?”

“Sure, bound to be in a forest that size.”

“Oh,” Malcolm said, looking apprehensive as his eyes followed a branch floating past them at a quick pace. “How will we get across?”

“You can swim, right?”

Malcolm looked stunned. “That’s a thousand feet from bank to bank.”

“It has a nice current, too. Depending on how well you swim, we’ll probably reach the far side several miles south of here. But that’s good. It’ll make us harder to track.”

“Impossible, I’d imagine,” Malcolm said, grimacing, his sight chained to the river.

The ex-slave of the Fhrey looked terrified, and Raithe understood why. He’d felt the same way when Herkimer had forced him across.

“Ready?” Raithe asked.

Malcolm pursed his lips; the skin of his hands was white as he clutched the spear. “You realize this water is cold—comes down as snowmelt from Mount Mador.”

“Not only that,” Raithe added, “but since we’re going to be hunted, we won’t be able to make a fire when we get out.”

The slender man with the pointed nose and narrow eyes forced a tight smile. “Lovely. Thanks for the reminder.”

“You up for this?” Raithe asked as he led the way into the icy water.

“I’ll admit it’s not my typical day.” The sound of his words rose in octaves as he waded into the river.

“What was your typical day like?” Raithe gritted his teeth as the water reached knee depth. The current churned around his legs and pushed, forcing him to dig his feet into the riverbed.

“Mostly I poured wine.”

Raithe chuckled. “Yeah—this will be different.”

A moment later, the river pulled both of them off their feet.