

MICHAEL J. SULLIVAN

AUTHOR OF AGE OF SWORDS

# AGE OF WAR

BOOK THREE OF  
THE LEGENDS  
OF THE  
FIRST EMPIRE



# AGE of WAR

Legends of the First Empire: Book #3

MICHAEL J. SULLIVAN

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# PRAISE FOR SULLIVAN'S WORK

*"Riyria has everything you could possibly wish for: the characters are some of the best I've ever encountered in fantasy literature, the writing is top notch, and the plotting is so tight you'd be hard-pressed to find a mouse hole in it."*

— B&N Sci-fi & Fantasy Blog

*"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

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— 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

*"The Rose and the Thorn is full of mystery, adventure, betrayal and just plain awesome."*

— Fantasy Faction on The Rose and the Thorn

*"A modernized classic, Hollow World is the perfect novel for both new and nostalgic science fiction readers."*

— Staffer's Book Reviews on Hollow World

*"There are plenty of twists and turns, a good number of surprises, and a lot of pleasant intensity, but Death of Dulgath shines because I can tell that the author really loved what he was doing, and I felt that in the book."*

— Bookworm Blues on The Death of Dulgath

*"Age of Myth bears the hallmark storytelling genius that we have all come to love of Michael's work. It's fast-paced, intimate, and beautifully cultivated"*

— Fantasy Book Review on Age of Myth

# ABOUT AGE OF WAR

(FROM THE BACK OF THE BOOK)

**Rich in magic and adventure, Michael J. Sullivan's soaring fantasy novels are masterworks of heroism, love, and sacrifice. Now, in *Age of War*, the epic battle between humankind and the cruel godlike beings who once ruled them finally ignites in all its fury.**

The alliance of humans and renegade Fhrey is fragile—and about to be tested as never before. Persephone keeps the human clans from turning on one another through her iron will and a compassionate heart. The arrogant Fhrey are barely held in check by their leader, Nyphron, who seeks to advance his own nefarious agenda through a loveless marriage that could keep Persephone from the one she loves most: Raithe, the God Killer.

As the Fhrey overlords marshal their army and sorcerers to crush the rebellion, old loyalties will be challenged while fresh conspiracies will threaten to undo all that Persephone has accomplished. In the darkest hour, when hope is all but lost, new heroes will rise . . . but at what terrible cost?

# WORKS BY MICHAEL J. SULLIVAN

## NOVELS

### **The Legends of the First Empire**

*Age of Myth • Age of Swords • Age of War*

Forthcoming: *Age of Legend • Age of Death • Age of Empire*

### **The Riyria Revelations**

*Theft of Swords (The Crown Conspiracy and Avempartha)*

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

*Heir of Novron (Wintertide and Percepliquis)*

### **The Riyria Chronicles**

*The Crown Tower*

*The Rose and the Thorn*

*The Death of Dulgath*

*The Disappearance of Winter's Daughter*

### **Standalone Novels**

*Hollow World*

## ANTHOLOGIES

*Unfettered*: "The Jester"

*Unbound*: "The Game"

*Unfettered II*: "Little Wren and the Big Forest"

*Blackguards*: "Professional Integrity"

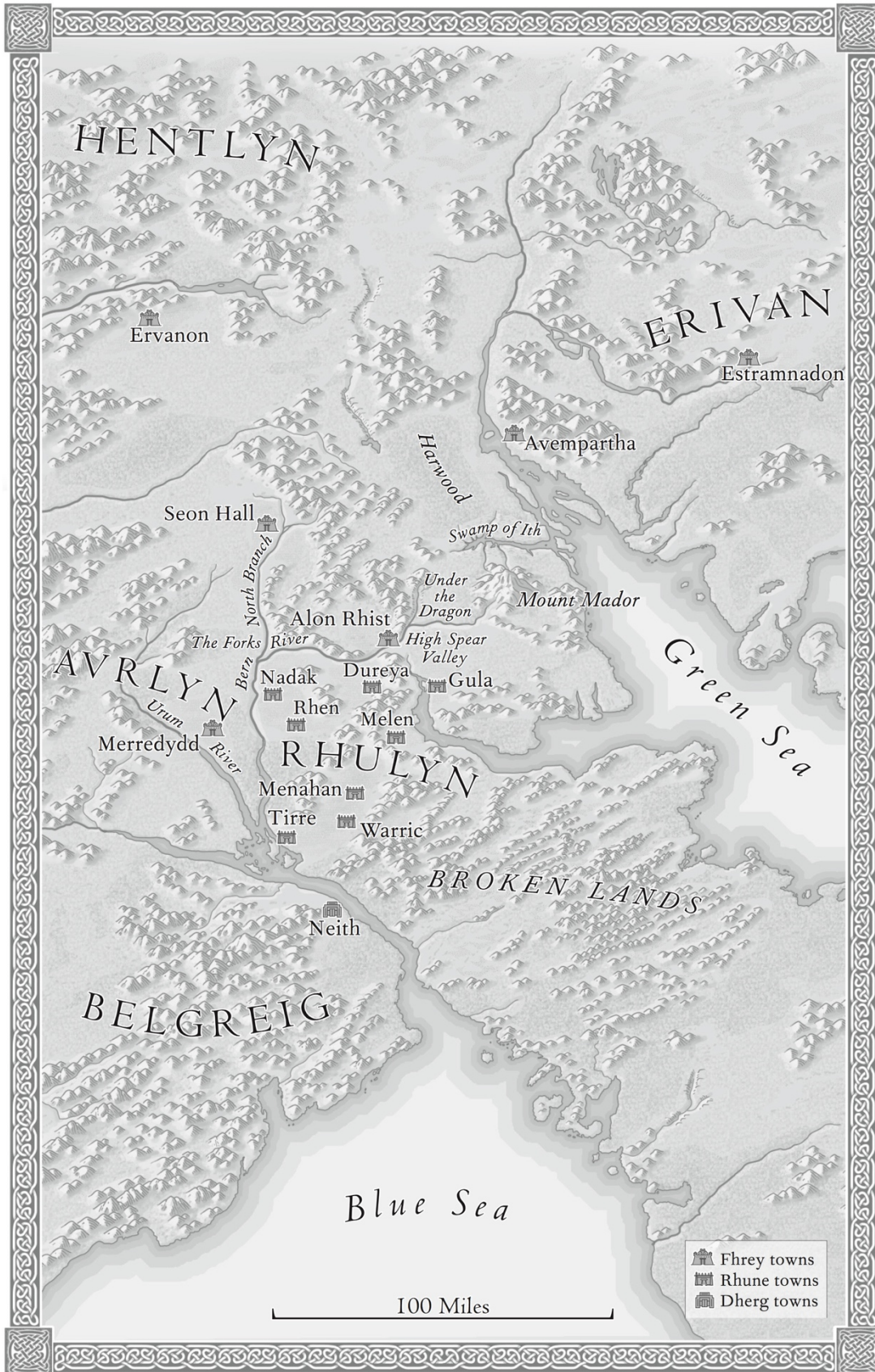
*The End: Visions of the Apocalypse*: "Burning Alexandria"

*Triumph Over Tragedy*: "Traditions"

*The Fantasy Faction Anthology*: "Autumn Mists"

*Help Fund My Robot Army*: "Be Careful What You Wisk For"





HENTLYN

ERIVAN

AVRLYN

RHULYN




BELGREIG

BROKEN LANDS

Green Sea

Blue Sea

100 Miles

-  Fhrey towns
-  Rhune towns
-  Dherg towns

Ervanon

Estramnador

Avempartha

Seon Hall

Harwood

Swamp of Ith

Under the Dragon

Mount Mador

The Forks River

North Branch

Bern

Urum

Merredydd

Alon Rhist

High Spear Valley

Nadak

Dureya

Gula

Rhen

Melen

Menahan

Tirre

Warric

Neith

*This book is dedicated to the artist Marc Simonetti. People are told not to judge  
a book by its cover, but as long as Marc is creating them, judge away.*



## CHAPTER TWO

# BEFORE THE BRONZE GATES

*Alon Rhist was just one of the seven Fbrey fortresses that dominated our borders, but it was more than the seat of the Instarya tribe and the tomb of a long-dead fane. Alon Rhist was the personification of Fbrey power and the absurdity of challenging it. — The Book of Brin*

Raithe pulled Persephone up the last ledge. She could have climbed it on her own, and none of the chieftains had needed or been offered a hand, but she took his. Persephone felt it best to be agreeable when she had the luxury, knowing she couldn't always be so generous. That's what she told herself, but she knew that if anyone else had made the gesture, she'd have waved them off.

Raithe was brave, capable, and handsome, wearing his leigh mor with a casual indifference. The young Dureyan was a popular topic among the women, but he took no notice of their flirtations. What he wanted, she couldn't give. Persephone was still married to her dead husband in ways she couldn't put into words, or even thoughts; emotions had a language of their own that didn't always translate.

Raithe and her husband were nothing alike. Reglan, nearly thirty years her senior, had been more like a father, a teacher, a guide. With Raithe, she was the wise one, the steady hand that kept the rows straight. And yet, Raithe's hand felt good—safe, warm, strong. She was the keenig, chieftain of the ten clans, and supreme ruler of millions, but she still needed more. Power couldn't replace respect,

devotion couldn't replace friendship, and nothing could replace the enveloping warmth of love. He did love her, wanted her, and while she couldn't grant his wish—at least not yet—she cherished the idea. The gift of his desire was another of those impossible-to-translate, difficult-to-corrall feelings. Passion was a wild, selfish thing that didn't respect boundaries or common sense, but without it life felt pointless.

“What did you call this?” She looked around, getting a feel for the natural pillar of rock rising sixty feet above the plain.

“Misery Rock,” Raithe replied.

The sheer drop on all sides of that far-too-small-for-comfort pillar produced a flutter in her stomach. She nodded. “I can see that. Sure.”

Persephone walked in a tight circle, shuffling her feet, too scared to lift them. Falling was an irrational fear as long as she didn't do anything crazy. The rock was as flat as a table, but she didn't trust herself. *Stumbling isn't an option, unless flying is, too.*

Persephone had never been one for heights. As a child, she stopped climbing trees at a young age and escaped roof-thatching duties by claiming illnesses that were greatly exaggerated. Standing on Misery Rock, looking down and seeing the tops of all those walnut-sized heads that made up the Rhulyrn clans, she felt dizzy. *How did I ever find the courage to jump off that waterfall in the Crescent Forest?* That incident seemed decades ago rather than just a few short months.

*Wolves*, she recalled. *Yes, a pack of wolves in pursuit provided the necessary incentive.*

Persephone watched in awe as Suri scampered up as if the summit were a foot off the ground. The young woman was beyond fearless; she appeared thoroughly bored.

From where they stood, Persephone could see for miles. “Did you live around here?” Persephone asked Raithe.

He pointed toward the northeast.

Most of Dureya was a dusty plateau, one great rock interrupted by jagged stone formations like the one they stood on. Looking in the direction he indicated, she spotted a black mark on the consistently blond plain.

“That was my village, Clempton,” Raithe said. “Thirty-seven buildings, forty families, and almost two hundred people.” He continued to stare without blinking, a hard, brutal look. She wondered what he was thinking, then imagined herself gazing on the ruins of Dahl Rhen.

Persephone put a hand on his arm. Her touch broke his stare, and he offered her a forced smile.

All the Rhulyn chieftains were with her on the summit, while the Gula leaders were with their men, strategically stationed among the dips and clefts of the Dureyan plain. Nyphron had positioned them the night before, saying he knew the places where Alon Rhist’s watchtower was blind. Persephone had been forced to repeat his instructions; the Gula refused to take orders from the Fhrey. A wild and vicious people, the Gula-Rhunes were little more than a pack of rabid animals—great when you needed that sort of thing, maddening when you didn’t.

Persephone forced herself to inch closer to the edge to get a better look at the world below. The northern boundary of the yellow plateau was a steep, jagged gorge that from their vantage point formed a curve resembling a frown. At the bottom of that canyon, the Bern River flowed, which historically marked the end of Rhulyn and the start of the Fhrey lands. Somewhere beneath Misery Rock, a worn path, appearing little more than a chalk mark on that open plain, ran north from Dureya to the gorge. The vague line ended at a set of white stone stairs that climbed to a bridge. For miles, the only place to safely ford the river was that span, which linked the Fhrey and human sides of the canyon like a single stitch in the gaping wound that was Grandford. On the other side was the city and fortress of Alon Rhist with its great dome and soaring watchtower, the whole of it protected by massive stone walls and a pair of impenetrable bronze gates.

Persephone had crossed that bridge of sculptured stone every year while married to Reglan. Each time had terrified her.

*We had been invited, but I was still scared.*

“They’re at the stairs,” Tegan announced. The Chieftain of Clan Warric looked like an overgrown dwarf with neat dark hair and a brushed beard. Possessed of a sarcastic wit, he had a sharp mind and had become one of Persephone’s closest advisers. Tegan pointed, and everyone on Misery Rock looked toward the Grandford Bridge.

“I can’t believe you agreed to this.” Raithe was shaking his head while looking at the sky.

“Nyphron knows what he’s doing,” Persephone said, trying to sound more confident than she felt. Her hands were clenched tight. She forced them open and made a deliberate effort to relax her shoulders.

“What if he’s wrong? What if they kill him?” Raithe asked.

“My people aren’t prepared for this,” Harkon said. “Most of Clan Melen are carrying farm tools. We can’t fight.”

“If that happens, we fall back. We already have a sizable lead,” Persephone told them.

“And Nyphron?” Harkon asked. “If things don’t go well, will he retreat?”

“I don’t think Nyphron or his Galantians understand *that* concept,” Tegan said. “They always assume they’ll win.”

“Let’s hope there’s good reason for that.” Persephone straightened up. She kept reminding herself to stand tall. Her mother had always complained about her bad posture. *No one will respect the wife of a chieftain who hunches over like a troll.* Her mother could never have imagined that *Persephone* would be a chieftain, much less the keenig, but Persephone guessed the advice was still valid.

“There’s a first time for everything,” Krugen said.

“Then pray this is not that time.”

True to his word, Nyphron hadn't asked a single human to cross the bridge with him. Persephone's army was barely in sight of the Fhrey forming on the far side of the Bern. The Gula were even farther away—more than a mile—having formed on the crest of the high plain. That was the way Nyphron wanted it. Persephone hoped that his plan was designed to give them ample time to scatter if something went wrong, but Tegan was correct: Galantians didn't understand defeat. She agreed that the odds of Nyphron anticipating failure were equal to his expecting a day without a sunrise.

From the vantage point of Misery Rock, Persephone could see the Galantians approach Alon Rhist. The little troop of Fhrey appeared like a line of seven ants. They reached the bridge and without hesitation began to cross.

Trying to see better, Persephone took a step forward, forgetting—if only for that instant—that she was standing near a deadly precipice. Raithe caught her by the arm, silently reminding her of the danger and his concern for her. She glanced at him, and Raithe let go, looking embarrassed.

Harkon, the Chieftain of Clan Melen, shook his head in awe. "Fearless."

"Crazy," muttered Krugen, whose only interest beyond fine clothing was sleep—something the man did a great deal of, snoring far too loudly to hide the fact.

"Why isn't anyone stopping them?" Lipit asked.

"Same reason you wait when catching rabbits," Raithe replied. "Better to be sure you have them fully in the snare before pulling it closed."

Persephone's hands resumed their fists, and much to the dismay of her dead mother, she was imitating a troll again.

"What's that?" Krugen pointed.

"Do you see it?" Harkon asked. "On the plain—on our side!"

"More Fhrey," Raithe said.

Persephone saw them as well. Two dozen bronze-armored warriors had appeared out of nowhere, cutting off Nyphron's retreat.

"Where'd they come from?" Tegan asked.

"Cracks," Raithe explained. "The rocks out there are split with fissures and fractures. You can get into them, cover yourself in a dirt-colored blanket, and an enemy will walk right by. We did it all the time."

"Shouldn't Nyphron know about that?" Krugen asked.

"And there you have it—not as smart as he thinks," Raithe concluded with a morbid, self-righteous tone. Persephone knew he was directing his frustration at Nyphron, but she felt it spilling on her. After all, she had been the one who had sanctioned this action. The callousness of his cold judgment stung because he'd been right, and she hadn't listened.

"Do you think they planned for this?" Alward of the Nadak pleaded as if those gathered on that rock could grant wishes.

"The Galantians?" Tegan said with an incredulous expression. "They don't *plan* for anything. Forethought ruins the adventure, I'm told."

Alward frowned, his mouth still partially open, his shoulders slumping.

Persephone took another step forward. Once more, Raithe grabbed her arm.

The first time was bad enough; twice was uncalled for. Persephone was about to chide him, but then she looked down and saw she was less than a foot from the edge. Sucking in a short breath, she drew back.

"Can't afford to lose both you and the Galantians in one afternoon," Raithe said.

*Lose them?* The idea, so impossible, coalesced for the first time. *What if they are killed or taken? What happens to them? What happens to us?*

Persephone looked down at the hundreds of her people nearby and out beyond them at the thousands. She turned to reassure herself that Suri was still there. The girl had leveled a mountain, so she ought to be able to protect them from a few hundred Fhrey. That was why she was on the rock, why Persephone had insisted she come. But Persephone had no real clue how magic worked, what Suri was really able to do. And the mystic had embraced Arion's distaste for killing. A good thing, Persephone often told herself, but just then she wasn't so certain.

She noticed the black patch on the plain, the village that had once housed forty families, and she wondered if she'd made her first and last mistake as the Keenig of the Ten Clans.



Clutching the rolled-up flag in his right hand, Nyphron led his Galantians across the Grandford Bridge toward the bronze gates. Forty feet above the entrance, the crossed-spears symbol of onetime fane Alon Rhist frowned down. It would have been damn hard to erase, but the fact that Petragar hadn't tried illustrated the difference between the current ruler of the Rhist and himself—*one* of the differences. Only Ferrol knew how long that particular list might be if anyone thought to sit and compare. Nyphron imagined that he and Petragar didn't even chew food the same way. If the situation were reversed, Nyphron's own symbol would have replaced the mark of Rhist. Nyphron didn't have a symbol yet, but he would soon—a dragon or perhaps a lion—something fierce, something powerful, something worthy. All great leaders needed to leave their mark on the world, and he would have already chiseled his on that wall.

"You shouldn't have come back," Sikar said, standing first and foremost among a brace of shields at the far end of the bridge. He wore full armor, as if he expected trouble. He also wore the



red-plumed crest on his helm, an indication that the spear commander had risen in rank since the Galantians' banishment.

"Couldn't stay away." Tekchin threw out his arms and puckered kisses at Sikar. "We missed you *too* much."

Sikar frowned and shook his head. The captain of the Rhist wasn't in a joking mood. "You're an idiot, Tekchin." His gaze moved to Grygor and paused briefly on the wooden box the giant carried, then it shifted to the flag in Nyphron's hand. "Surrender or truce flag?"

Elysan, an older Fhrey who had been a close friend and adviser to Nyphron's father, stood on Sikar's right and answered first. "Truce. When have you known the Galantians to surrender?"

Sikar kept his eyes on Nyphron. "You know, it's customary to wave that *before* approaching. Not that it would do any good. The fane has declared you exiles—no longer protected by Ferrol's Law." There was a terrible gravity in his tone and enough remorse in his eyes for Nyphron to make a mental note.

Tekchin chuckled as he folded his arms across his chest. Nyphron had given orders that no one was to touch weapons, and Tekchin was likely going through withdrawal. "So this is your big chance to rid yourself of those gambling debts you owe me, isn't it?"

"This isn't a joke!" Sikar shouted. "They're going to—"

Overhead, horns blared and the gates opened.

"Quiet," Tekchin said. "Your boss is coming. Don't worry. I won't tell him anything."

Sikar didn't look irritated; he looked sad. He slowly shook his head as he sighed.

"Relax, Sikar," Nyphron told him. "I'm back now. I'll make everything right again."

"They're going to execute you—you understand that, right?"

Nyphron only smiled.

Out of the gate poured a cohort of Instarya warriors. Nyphron didn't need to look behind him to know that more would be blocking their retreat. He guessed Petragar had turned out the entire First Spear to *welcome* them. The show of force was more than a compliment, more even than evidence of Petragar's cowardice; it was exactly what Nyphron needed.

The warriors fanned out in precision to either side of the bridge, filling the landing before the gates and denying them entrance. Nyphron didn't have any intention of taking another step. He had planned this meeting down to the block of stone he stood on and, more importantly, the landing where the Instarya had gathered. After centuries, Nyphron knew every blind spot and vantage point.

Petragar was the last one out. *A brave one, he is.*

At his side waddled Vertumus, legate to the fane. A portly Gwydry, he'd somehow managed to rise in station—or fall out of favor—in order to earn his post in the wilderness of Avrlyn. Vertumus had accompanied Petragar when the latter arrived to replace Nyphron's dead father as lord of the Rhist. All Nyphron knew about the man was his complicity in the plan to send Rapnagar and the other giants to destroy Dahl Rhen and kill Nyphron, Arion, and Raithe. *The boy and his weasel make quite the pair.*

"Nyphron, son of Zephyron," Vertumus began, "you have been—"

"Shut up," Nyphron ordered. "I didn't come all this way to speak to you."

Petragar's eyes widened. "You have no—"

"Didn't come to talk to you, either, you son of the Tetlin Witch."

Petragar looked confused by the Rhunic insult, the tone of Nyphron's voice, and . . . well, everything. That was just the sort of Fhrey he was. While he looked to the others for understanding, Nyphron took in the gathered faces of his family. He knew them all.

Nyphron's father was a tyrant when it came to his son. Zephyron, lord of Alon Rhist and supreme commander of all the western outposts, granted Nyphron no privileges or special treatment.

His son was forced to sleep in the barracks with the other Instarya. Nyphron was also made to take his meals in the communal dining hall. Zephyron's son marched in the same mud and fought and bled alongside the lowliest soldier. At the time, Nyphron had protested, but now, while standing on the Grandford Bridge, he mentally thanked his father. This was just the second time he'd done that; the first was when Zephyron had gotten himself killed during the Uli Vermar.

"I've come home to speak to my brothers." The moment he said this, Grygor set the box down and Nyphron stepped up. "Instarya!" he shouted from his elevated position, wielding the still-rolled flag as a baton conducting a symphony of eyes. "The lord of Alon Rhist has returned. I come as a liberator to free you from the tyranny of morons and cowards."

"How dare you!" Petragar nearly screamed, his voice a perfectly discrediting screech. "You are a—"

"For too long, we have suffered the indignities and humiliation of a fane who does not respect us, who does not appreciate us, who does not love us." Nyphron had no trouble drowning out Petragar's squeals. The Galantian leader had a good voice for speaking: loud, deep, confident.

"You're a traitor!" Petragar shouted. "And the son of a traitor!"

Without looking at him, Nyphron chose to respond to the accusation, mostly because it dovetailed neatly with his speech. He hadn't expected help, certainly not from Petragar, but Nyphron wasn't above accepting it when offered. "My father gave his life for his tribe, in service to his people, to free them from exile, from the mud and the blood that only we are forced to suffer. We fight and die while the Miralyith, Umalyn, Nilyndd, Eilywin, and Gwydry all enjoy the benefits of our sacrifice. Even the Asendwayr are allowed to return across the Nidwalden. Only the Instarya are banned from our ancestral home. Why is that?"

"Because it is the fane's decision, not yours," Petragar shouted. His voice sounded thin and reedy.

“Indeed!” Nyphron was really starting to appreciate Petragar’s assistance. The weeping willow of a Fhrey possessed the unexpected virtue of making him look good, a gift Nyphron loved more than all others. “Because the fane has decreed that we—we who shoulder the greatest burden—should receive scorn and humiliation as our reward. Those of you who were in Estramnadon, those who witnessed my father’s challenge, can attest to this. Were those the acts of an honorable fane who respects his people? Or did he act the tyrant, imposing his rule through terror?”

“Sikar!” Petragar yelled. “Arrest him! Get him off that box!”

Sikar hesitated.

*They really hate him. This might be easier than I expected.*

“Let me explain why I came.” Nyphron softened his tone and said, “I am here to rescue you, all of you. Alon Rhist is the only home I’ve ever known, the Instarya, my family. I’ve come to save you.”

“You’re the one who needs saving,” Petragar growled, pushing forward through unresponsive ranks.

“For many years, I have warned that the Rhunes are capable of combat equal to the skill of the Fhrey. Few believed.” He focused on Sikar. “I was proven correct when Shegon was killed while on patrol at The Forks.”

“Shegon was murdered while he lay unconscious,” Sikar said.

“Doesn’t matter. I personally witnessed a Rhune warrior kill Gryndal. Slaughtered him with a perfect blow to the neck, severing his head from his shoulders. You remember Gryndal, don’t you?”

This drew a reaction from every face, including Sikar’s. He turned, and like many others, looked at Petragar.

“Is that true?” Sikar asked.

“I—I was told that something—”

“A Rhune killed Gryndal, and you didn’t tell us?”

“And Gryndal wasn’t unconscious at the time,” Nyphron said. “If that’s not enough, then know that I myself have fought the Rhunes, and in Rhen I was nearly killed in a one-on-one battle. Only the timely intervention of Sebek saved me.” He paused and looked at Sebek, who nodded.

This brought even greater expressions of shock to those gathered.

“Then you have lost your skill,” Petragar said as he shoved past the remaining shields to join Sikar. The lord of the Rhist shouted in frustration. “Draw your weapon and take them into the duryngon, or kill them where they stand. But do it now or you’ll be accused of defying the fane and will be prosecuted as one of them.”

Sikar recoiled from Petragar’s rant. He made a miserable face, then sighed and reached for his weapon.

“You don’t want to do that,” Tekchin said.

“Shut up.” Sikar pulled his sword as if it weighed more than Grygor. “For once, can’t you just shut up?”

“I know it’s hard to believe,” Nyphron told Sikar. “But this time Tekchin’s right. Put the sword away.”

“I can’t.” Sikar shook his head. “You shouldn’t have come back.”

Sikar was a good soldier, which meant he was no free thinker. He was a strong pair of arms for whoever pulled the strings, and at that moment the puppet master was Petragar.

*Time to snip those cords.*

“Before you order my friends to kill us . . .” He spoke slowly, clearly, and loudly as he unrolled the ruddy-red face of the flag. “Let me show you one more thing that you might not have noticed.”

“There is no need for your theatrics. We’ve already seen the ragged band of Rhunes you traveled with,” Sikar said.

“You saw only the ones I wanted you to know about,” Nyphron spoke to Sikar. “Let me introduce the ones I didn’t.”

Nyphron waved the flag over his head.

In the distance, horns replied.

Nyphron didn’t turn, didn’t need to. Everything that happened behind him was reflected in the wide-eyed faces of those before him. Even Sikar’s mouth opened. Petragar appeared as if he might faint.

“Seal the gate! Seal the gate!” Petragar cried.

“Wouldn’t do that, either.” Tekchin grinned.

“Once more, Tekchin defies the odds by being correct.” Nyphron stopped waving and lowered the flag. “What you are looking at are five thousand battle-hardened, Dherg-armed, Gularhune warriors. And before you start thinking the walls of Alon Rhist will save you, consider this—we also have a Miralyith.”

“Miralyith?” Sikar and Petragar said together, and like an echo in a cavern, the word was repeated throughout the crowd.

“You know her as Arion, the tutor of the prince.”

“She was sent to arrest you,” Petragar said.

“Changed her mind. Even she recognizes that the fane has gone mad.”

“And the fane sent giants to punish her for that error in judgment.”

“A giant mistake.” Tekchin chuckled.

Nyphron smiled and shook his head. “Yeah, that didn’t work out so well for the giants. They’re dead now, and she’s working with us. So closing those gates won’t help. She’ll blow them open or simply tear down your walls.”

“You’re lying,” Petragar said.

Nyphron turned to the Galantians. “On your honor, speak the truth before your brethren and our Lord Ferrol. Is the Miralyith Arion, former tutor of the prince, in our company by her choice and assisting us in our endeavors?”

Together in one voice the Galantians replied, “Yes, by our honor.”

“You’re lying!” Petragar howled. “They’re all lying.”

Irritated beyond the ability to keep quiet, Elysan turned and faced him. “These are Galantians.”

“And they’re liars!” His voice was a shrill rattle.

“Don’t say that again,” Sikar said, setting his jaw so that his words were forced through his teeth.

“You don’t tell Lord Petragar what to do,” Vertumus spoke up. “Petragar is in command here.”

“That’s right,” Petragar said. “I am in charge. These . . . these Galantians are wanted heretics and traitors and are to be returned to Estramnadon, or, if they resist, they will be executed. This is the will of the fane.” He faced Sikar. “Do your duty.”

“The war is going to begin here,” Nyphron told Sikar. “I can’t allow this fortress to stand if it stands against me.”

“You can’t ask us to kill our own. Even if the fane is a poor choice to rule, Ferrol’s Law still stands.”

“I’m not asking you to *do* anything.” Nyphron began rolling the flag up again. “In fact, I want you to do absolutely nothing.”

This was the key to the lock that Nyphron inserted and prepared to turn. He could see the surprise and, more importantly, the eager interest in Sikar’s eyes. The soldier was trapped between duty and honor, desperate for a way out.

“Nothing? I don’t under—”



“I said arrest or kill him!” Petragar barked, causing Elysan to roll his eyes.

“I’m the leader of the Instarya,” Nyphron responded to Sikar, ignoring Petragar. “I don’t ask my people to do anything I am not willing to do myself. And I am not willing to break Ferrol’s Law. If I were, do you honestly think *he’d* still be alive?” Nyphron used the rolled flag to point at Petragar. “All I am asking is that you don’t get in the way. Just stay out of it. If you need to, simply report to the fane that you were overwhelmed, that you had no choice but to surrender to a vastly superior force certain to slaughter every last Fhrey in Alon Rhist, which I’m afraid is the truth of the matter. That’s why I brought them, why they’re here. The Rhunes are here to absolve you, to expunge any concerns about tarnishing your honor.”

Sikar narrowed his eyes. “What is your plan?”

“Stop listening to him!” Petragar gave Sikar a shove from behind, which anyone who knew Sikar even a little would recognize as a mistake. The captain of the guard brought his elbow around and slammed it into Petragar’s jaw. The Fhrey screamed, staggered, and fell. Without looking back, Sikar addressed Nyphron again. “How do you see this working?”

“The Rhunes are in total revolt. The Gula *and* the Rhulyn. They’ve united and appointed a keenig.”

“Yes, we know,” Elysan said, looking past the Galantians toward the hills.

“The Rhunes will be the arms we shall use to make the fane understand reason,” Nyphron explained. “Or the swords by which we will replace him.”

“But this is . . .” Sikar looked pained. “I hate to say it, but Petragar is right. What you’re doing is treason.”

“And what the Miralyith have done to the Instarya is what? Right? My father tried to follow the rules. He obeyed the laws, and you saw what happened. Do you think Ferrol, who gave us the

horn, intended that one tribe should be forever dominant? What's the point of the horn, then? The Miralyith will never give up power, and who can hope to succeed in single combat against one?"

Sikar and Elysan shared a look, and while it was slight, Nyphron was certain he saw Elysan nod.

"So, what do you say?" Nyphron asked. "Will you turn your back on Ferrol and learn to worship the Miralyith as your new gods? Or will you trust me, a fellow Instarya who was raised to lead this tribe by a father who gave his life to save us from these so-called gods?"

"Bas-ward! My jaw bwoke again," Petragar slurred. He had only managed to make it back up to his knees and crouched on the ground holding his face, tears in his eyes.

Sikar turned fully around but didn't even look at Petragar. He faced the gathered Instarya and said, "The fane has ordered us to apprehend or kill these Fhrey. Nyphron asks us to stay our hands. The fane is our ruler, the Galantians our family. In this, I am inclined to side with family, and I'm willing to recognize Nyphron, son of Zephyron, as the rightful lord of the Rhist."

"I concur," Elysan said. "But, as it is against the will of the fane, no one can be ordered to do likewise."

Sikar nodded and backed up, clearing the path to the bridge and the Galantians. "Any Fhrey who doesn't wish to defy the fane's orders, you are free to draw your weapon and do what you believe is your duty."

Sikar took a few more steps away from the bridge and made a show of looking and waiting for those loyal to the fane.

Petragar, still clutching his face, shifted his head, looking around. "Ooh it!" he shouted when no one moved. "Obey your fane!"

Still, no one moved.

After several minutes of stillness and a silence that was broken only by the desperate outbursts of Petragar, Sikar nodded. "So be it." Then he turned back to Nyphron. "Welcome back, my lord."



"What do you think that means?" Krugen asked when most of the Galantians and the defending Fhrey disappeared inside the gates of the fortress. Only Tekchin and Grygor walked back across the bridge.

"They didn't kill them," Lipit said. "That's got to be a good sign, yes?"

Persephone was already descending the narrow dusty trail, wondering how fast she could safely move. She wanted to be at the bottom, wanted to learn what transpired, and was wondering why she'd climbed up in the first place.

"What happened?" Moya was the first to greet her. Her big eyes loomed larger than usual. "Did they fight? Did Suri do something?"

The mystic looked at her, surprised.

"No to both questions, but we don't know *exactly* what happened." Persephone slipped on a loose stone two feet from the bottom, stumbled, but landed safely on the hardscrabble plain. She touched down within the gathering of the chieftains' Shields. They had all remained there after Raithe explained there wasn't room for everyone at the top. "Tekchin and Grygor are on their way back, I hope with good news."

"Tekchin?"

"Yes, Moya." Persephone rolled her eyes. "Your boyfriend is fine."

"Just asking, Madam Keenig," she said crisply.

"Don't call me that."

“Everyone else does.”

“No, they don’t.”

Persephone pushed past Oz and Edger, grabbed the hem of her skirt, and trotted down the slope to the road. From there, she saw the two Galantians striding toward her. The gathered clansmen, a mixture of Rhen, Tirre, and Warric men, flowed in behind, all curious for news.

“Madam Keenig,” Tekchin greeted her with a modest bow.

Persephone scowled. “What happened?”

“We’re in.”

“What do you mean by that?”

Tekchin made a lavish wave of his arm in the direction of Alon Rhist. “Welcome to your new fortress. I think you’ll find it more suitable than East Puddle.”

“*My* fortress?”

Tekchin laughed. “Madam Keenig, weren’t you watching? You just conquered Alon Rhist.”

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael J. Sullivan is the bestselling author of the Riyria Revelations, the Riyria Chronicles, and The Legends of the First Empire. Like most authors, his road to publication has been both a lifelong dream and a difficult road to travel. Michael was just eight years old when he discovered a manual typewriter in the basement of a friend's house during a game of hide-and-seek. He inserted a blank piece of paper and channeled the only writer he knew at the time...Charles M. Schulz's Snoopy. Yes, he actually typed the iconic line: *It was a dark and stormy night.*

That spark ignited a flame, and the desire to fill blank pages became an obsession. As an adult, Michael spent more than ten years developing his craft by studying authors such as Stephen King, Ernest Hemingway, and John Steinbeck. During that time, he wrote thirteen novels but found no traction in publishing. So he did the only sane thing he could think of (since insanity is repeating the same act but expecting a different result), he quit writing altogether and vowed never to write creatively again.

Michael stayed away from writing for over a decade and returned to the keyboard in his forties...but with one condition: He wouldn't seek publication. Instead, he wrote a series of books that had been forming in his head during his hiatus. Michael's first reading love had been fantasy, and

his hope was to foster an appreciation for the genre in his then thirteen-year-old daughter, who struggled with the written word due to severe dyslexia.

After reading the third book of this series, his wife, Robin, insisted that the novels needed to *get out there*. When Michael refused to jump back onto the query-go-round, she took over the publication tasks and has run the business side of his writing career ever since.

Michael has come a long way since those early days of being “the little engine that might.” He has sold over one million copies, made the *Washington Post’s* Hardcover Bestseller List twice, been nominated for six Goodreads’ Choice Awards, and his books have appeared on more than 200 best-of or most-anticipated lists including those compiled by Amazon, Barnes and Noble, *Library Journal*, and Audible.com. He’s currently working on a new series (The Rise and the Fall) which will bridge the gap between the Legends of the First Empire and the Riyria novels.

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