



MICHAEL J. SULLIVAN

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *AGE OF LEGEND*

AGE OF EMPYRE

BOOK SIX 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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Age of Legend • Age of Death • Age of Empyre

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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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“Sullivan’s ability to craft an engaging and captivating fantasy world surpasses most any other fantasy author out there, and puts him alongside names like Sanderson and Jordan.”

— *Fantasy Book Review on Age of Swords*

“In this powerful third book of a projected six-book series, Sullivan continues providing excellent world building and character development . . . Sullivan also gifts readers with complex lives for his characters, filled with tests, triumphs, and tragedies . . . Sullivan’s fans will be delighted.”

— *Publisher’s Weekly on Age of War*

“A brilliant sequel which fulfilled both my eager anticipation and high expectations, *Age of Legend* takes the First Empire series to another level of greatness with the promise of a showstopper by its finale.”

— *Novel Notions on Age of Legend*

REDACTED SAMPLE CHAPTER

Age OF *Empyre*

BOOK SIX OF

The Legends of the First Empire

MICHAEL J. SULLIVAN

About the Book

A DOOR OPENS. AN ARMY OF DRAGONS ADVANCE.
AND THE FATE OF THE LIVING RESTS WITH THE DEAD.

After obtaining the secret to creating dragons, the leader of the Fhrey has turned the tide of war once more--but gaining the advantage has come at a terrible price. While Imaly plots to overthrow the fane for transgressions against his people, a mystic and a keeper are the only hope for the Rhunes. Time is short, and the future of both races hangs in the balance. In this exciting conclusion to the Legends of the First Empire series, the Great War finally comes to a climactic end, and with it dawns a new era in the Age of Empyre.

From the New York Times and USA Today bestselling author Michael J. Sullivan comes the concluding installment of his six-book epic fantasy. This series chronicles a pivotal point in Elan's history when humans and those they once saw as gods warred until a new world order was born. Set three thousand years before the Riyria tales, Legends is a standalone fantasy series that is independent of the Riyria novels. But for those who do read both series, Legends will unmask lies and reveal the truth about Elan's history and the men and women who shaped what the world became.

Author's Note

This sample chapter is presented to give potential backers of my Kickstarter a taste of my writing style. A few key points should be addressed:

- This sample is a pre-copyediting version, so there may be typos and grammatical errors, which will be fixed before the book is released.
- To make the sample spoiler free, the actual names of the characters were redacted and replacement names were used. So if you are an existing reader and you find yourself confused by whom I am talking about, you should be! But you may be able to figure out who John, Susan, and Karen are if you think a bit.

Why have I taken this unusual step? Well, when considering backing a Kickstarter, I think people should get an idea of the book they will be receiving, but I also don't want them spoiled if they aren't up to date on the series. For new readers, they won't know who I'm talking about, so they won't get information that will ruin any surprises when they eventually get to this book. For existing readers, they, too, may not know who I am talking about, but if they think a bit they should be able to figure it out.

Whether you are a Legends veteran, or a person new to my tale, I hope you'll find this little taste of the story to your liking.

Michael J. Sullivan

January 2020

CHAPTER ONE

HITTING BOTTOM

People often speak about “hitting bottom.” They have no idea what they are talking about.

— THE BOOK OF BRIN

In the eternal silence and absolute darkness of the afterlife’s unimaginable depths, John heard a scream. Faint at first, it grew to a piercing wail then stopped, interrupted by a loud clap. Sounds were rare in his neighborhood, light even more so. And yet he did see a dim illumination seeping into the entrance of his cave. Prior to the howl, there had been a rapid series of booms. John hadn’t bothered to investigate those as he wouldn’t be able to see anything, and the effort of crawling would have been wasted.

The cry was different. John was certain the voice was familiar. Someone had fallen into the Abyss—someone he knew, and there was a dim light to see by.

With great effort, he willed himself to stand. Few things drove John to such ridiculous extremes as walking, but this was a special occasion. He was certain who had fallen; he definitely recognized the scream.

John held out his hands, searching for the wall, and he followed it around to the narrow crack that formed the entrance to *his place*. He refused to call

it home. *Home* meant something else: warmth and comfort. Even at the most miserable of times, a home served as a locale with merit, an appeal beyond mere shelter. His cave served only as a place to be, a spot to sit, a hole to hide in.

He couldn't recall the last time he'd left his *place*. This didn't surprise John as he was finding it increasingly difficult to remember just about anything. He still knew his name—the first part at least. There had been more, a qualifier of some sort, but he couldn't figure out what that might be. His life was fading, his memories dissolving. The last significant event he could summon up was meeting Edvard, a Gula of the Erling clan. John had only been dead a short time when the man had beaten and dragged John to the cliff. It wasn't until he was falling that John realized why the man threw him over the edge. From high above, the Gula shouted, "This is for my wife, Reanna, you fat bastard! May you forever rot."

John had expected something horrifying waiting at the bottom. What he had found was nothing, which turned out to be even worse.

But now . . .

Creeping out of the cave, John saw a white glow coming off something on the ground not far away. At that distance, it appeared to be a bag of something, clothes perhaps. He remembered those. Drawing nearer, he saw it was a person. He shouldn't have been surprised. The biggest event in what felt like a century turned out to be nothing more than a casualty of some brutal combat. Some poor wretch had fallen into the depths known to all as the Abyss—the absolute bottom from which no one returned.

He moved closer and found the small frame of a woman with short-cropped, dark hair, or what was left of her.

I'm certain I recognized that scream.

John felt excitement rise for the first time in . . . well, he hadn't a clue how long it had been. But his high hopes were dashed when Experience chastised him, *Not possible. There's no way it could be her.*

The fall had left the woman crushed on the hard frost: the price of admission to the worst level of existence. John surmised that every bone was broken, and

her skull was shattered. Most of her body was lost in crumpled cloth, but John based the diagnosis on his own experience. It had taken an eternity to pull himself together, even now he had no idea how successful he'd been. In the Abyss, there were no reflections, no way to see.

Reaching the woman's crumpled form, John realized she seemed to have fared better than he. Still, her body was unnaturally twisted—her eyes open, alert, and still in her head. When they spotted him, both went wide. She attempted to scream again, but the only thing that came out was a wet gurgle.

"Karen," John said, shocked to discover his voice still worked. "It is you!"

Broken as she was, the woman struggled to inch away. Mounted on a broken neck, her head swiveled to one side.

"Karen, you've come back to me."

"Nooo . . ." She managed to moan through broken teeth and pooling blood.

"Oh yes," he said. "I'm here. We'll get you fixed up in no time. Won't that be nice."

At the comment, her eyes grew wider still.

They might yet fall out.

John bent down and gathered Karen in his arms. Her snapped bones limply hung, feeling eerily like a pile of split firewood.

She moaned and a tear slipped down her cheek and fell to the frozen ground.

"Don't worry, my dear." He grinned at her. "Once you're put back together, it'll be like old times."



The moment Susan's fingers slipped off the edge of the bridge and she plunged into the Abyss, a panic had taken hold. At first, her mind froze, locked by a singular idea: *This can't be happening*. Then as she fell deeper into darkness, she wondered what hitting the bottom would feel like. She hoped she would bounce but figured it would be more like dropping an icicle.

Will I shatter into a million pieces?

After an inexplicably long time, Susan discovered she *wanted* it to be over. There was no avoiding the collision, no saving herself, and the waiting threatened to drive her insane. Anticipating the impact, knowing it could come at any time was the real terror. She closed her eyes, didn't want to see.

Get it over with already!

Then it happened. Susan touched down with all the force of having leapt from the front porch of the lodge, a whopping four steps. Landing feet-first, her palms slapped the ground and prevented any real harm. Only the heel of her left hand suffered a wound—a slight abrasion from scraping the granular frost that covered the ground. It stung for only a moment. She stood there, staring at the frozen rock that formed the bottom of the world. Imagining herself breathing, Susan's exhalation created a fog, the way it always had in the depths of winter.

That wasn't so bad, she thought, relief pouring in. I never could have predicted such a gentle landing.

The light, however, did catch her by surprise. Pure white and without an apparent source, it illuminated the new world around her. She could see from one side of the canyon to the other. Cliffs rose, their tops disappearing into darkness. She was at the bottom of the Abyss, and nothing was there except a vast, frost-covered plain of uneven ground and miserly ripples of snow that had been blown by a long-extinct wind.

"Karen?" she called out but got no answer. Susan had seen her friend fall, so she should be close by.

Perhaps she wandered off? It would be exactly like her to go exploring, curiosity eclipsing everything else.

Wondering if anyone else had slipped over the edge the way she had, Susan looked up but saw nothing.

I hope everyone else is all right. I'm alone down here—except for Karen. I really need to find her.

Walking in no particular direction, Susan found herself in a maze of fissures, which branched off into narrow canyons that zigged and zagged into the dark.

These gashes were no doubt the reason for the many bridges they had traversed while traveling across the Plain of Kilcorth on their way to Mideon's castle. The impossibly high walls were porous like a sponge, and dark holes and caves peppered its surface: some at ground level, others higher up and extending for as far as she could see.

From time to time, Susan paused and called out for Karen. Her voice didn't travel far. The Abyss was a quiet place, its silence broken by the harsh crackle of her feet on the frosty ground. Karen didn't respond, so Susan picked an offshoot at random and ventured down one of the side branches. She guessed there were dozens of these tributaries, perhaps hundreds, and it could take a long while to search each one, but time was all she had now. Eventually, she would find Karen. This would be the keepers quest for as long as it took, and the reward would be maintaining her sanity. Searching gave her something to do beyond wallowing in self-pity for her failure.

The deeper into the ravine she went, the narrower it became. After leaving the open space where she had touched down, this confinement gave her an unexpected sense of security. Her dog, Darby, had often crawled under a table or bed when frightened, and Susan's father had explained that animals sometimes found small spaces comforting. Susan now felt that same sense of sheltered protection, and she was surprised that the Abyss wasn't frightening. The worst she could say about it was it seemed more than a little cold.

And lonely. The idea popped into her head. *What if each person falls into their own separate area? Is that why I can't find Karen?*

Now she was scared, and she recoiled from the notion the way she instinctually pulled back her hand after touching a hot pot. She tried to calm herself. *No reason to think like that . . . not yet.* She shook off the possibility and tried to focus.

Thinking that Karen may have crawled into one of the many caves the way Darby had wriggled under the bed, Susan called out again. This time she was rewarded by movement. From where she stood, she could see a shifting shadow

some ways up the craggy cliff's face where no vegetation grew. She watched, hoping to see the familiar figure of her friend. Crossing to the opposite side of the gorge, she got a better look and wondered why Karen would be up so high. Then she realized it wasn't her. This figure was too short and wide. Whatever it was, she didn't think it was human.

What would Betty do?

After taking a calming breath, Susan set her jaw, squared her shoulders, and inched closer. As she did, she spotted more holes in the honeycombed cliff. Most weren't big enough to be considered true caves, just little cracks and fractures. As she drew nearer, Susan saw more shadows. Figures crawled out of holes. With two arms, two legs, and one head, they were generally in the shape of people, but it was obvious they were not. These figures appeared to be made of partially melted wax. Shoulders were sloped and limbs elongated. Faces were merely vague contours with lumps where noses or cheeks ought to be. Some had only a slight indentation instead of a mouth.

Susan felt her stomach twist.

Dozens, scores, perhaps hundreds slipped out from cracks and ledges. Many appeared as shriveled as raisins, others lumps, and in some places, she saw only oozing pools of thick slime.

Susan stayed clear of the moving shadows, which was easy to do given how slowly they crawled. With them came a sliding, dragging slurp—the noise a snail might make if it were five-feet long.

Splat!

The sound was so close that she jumped. Susan spun and discovered one of the creatures had fallen from the heights, landing near her heels. Little more than a glob of ooze, it had an empty socket and a single gaping eye that peered up at her. Its mouth moved like a sock puppet, silently opening and closing.

Terrified, Susan stumbled backward, grimacing. *What in the name of the Grand Mother of All is that?*

Plop. Slip. Plop. Clap.

Dozens more fell from everywhere at once. They landed near and far, in front and behind. Hundreds oozed out of the ground-level caves, creeping, sliding, and dragging their misshapen bodies across the crackling frost—each one coming toward her.

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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