

MICHAEL J. SULLIVAN

AUTHOR OF *AGE OF SWORDS*

# AGE OF WAR

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BOOK THREE OF  
THE LEGENDS  
OF THE  
FIRST EMPIRE

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# *Age* OF *War*

BOOK THREE OF  
*The Legends of the First Empire*

MICHAEL J. SULLIVAN



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## *Author's Note*

Welcome back to The Legends of the First Empire! When I started this series, I planned to write a trilogy that told the events leading up to the first conflict between men and elves. *Age of War* was slated to be the final book. As a result, you'll likely notice many plot elements and character arcs have come to fruition. There is a kind of *finale* feeling to the book. But when I finished the tale, I realized I hadn't gone far enough. If the series had ended here, I'm sure you would agree.

My problem was that this series was titled The Legends of the First Empire. Sure, I've introduced you to the characters, the Legends if you will, but the formation of the Empire was still an untold tale. If you've read The Riyria Revelations, you already know who won the war, but if I ended the series here, I wouldn't have fulfilled my mandate. Also, those who *haven't* read Riyria would be left confused, wondering what the eventual conclusion came to be.

Those who have read The Riyria Chronicles (my prequel Royce and Hadrian tales) know that I strive to do more than rehash previously mentioned events. I search for ways to make those stories fresh and worth reading. I've done this by revealing untold aspects and, in some cases, showing how what readers believed to have happened, didn't—at least not the way they thought. This is the same technique I employed to get from the end of *Age of War* to the formation of the First Empire, and I did so by doing something no one expected, including myself. I wrote three more novels to provide readers the closure they deserved. The result is two closely related trilogies under a single banner. In practical terms, what that means is that the next book, *Age of Legend*, will continue the tale but with a slightly different focus. Don't worry, it'll pick up where *Age of War* leaves off, and

you'll continue to travel with the same characters, but the tale will *expand*. I'm quite proud of my solution and how I turned a potential problem into an opportunity, but that's for another day and another book's author's note.

As for *Age of War*, one of the reasons I write author's notes is to give readers a backstage pass, a behind-the-scenes look into my head. I'm not vain enough to think such a tour matters to many, but some people have found these insights interesting. I've already mentioned a lot of things regarding this book and the series as a whole, but I've not previously talked about my inspirations, so let's do that now, shall we?

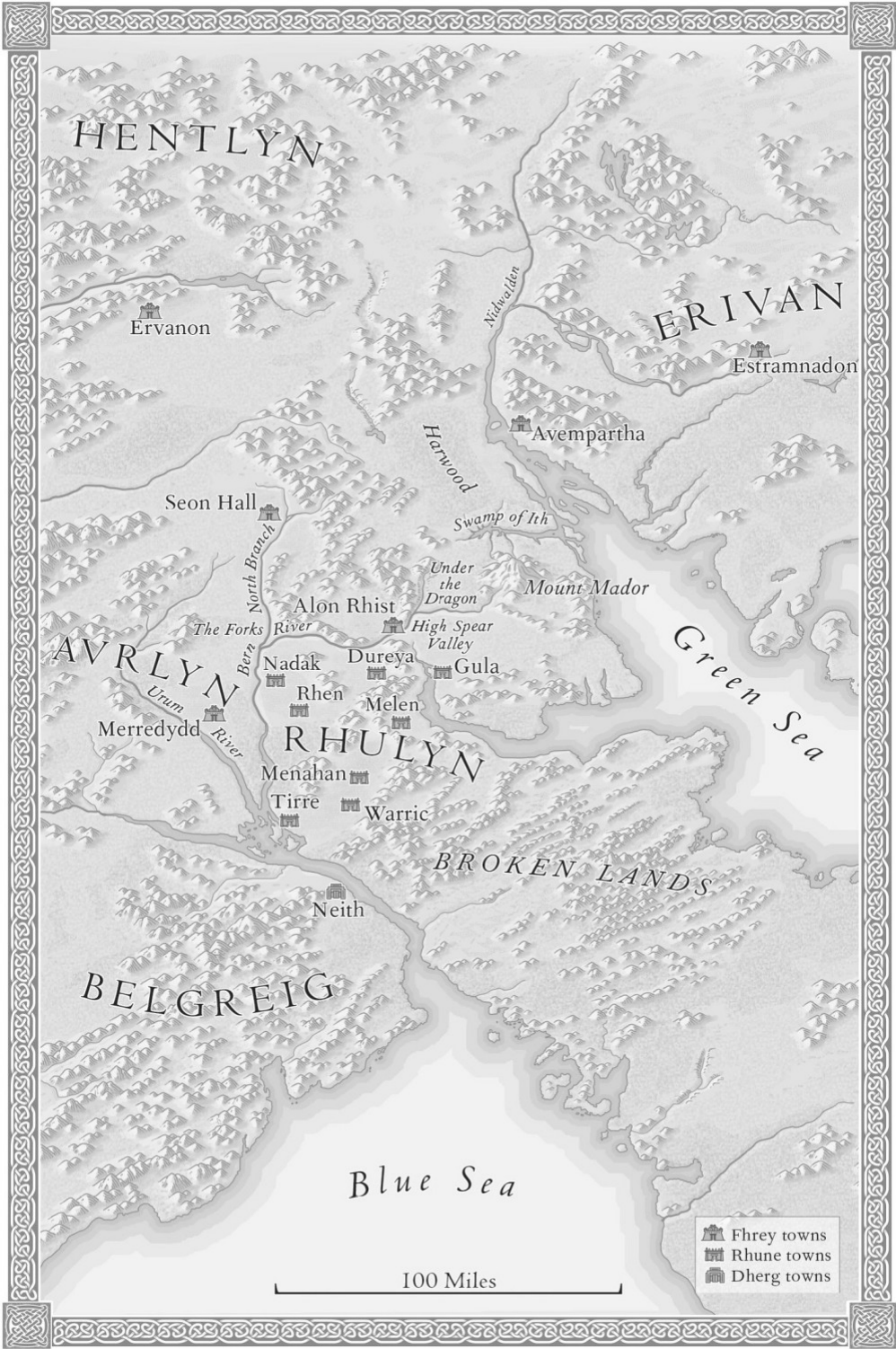
The most significant influences for *Legends of the First Empire* are *The Wizard of Oz* and the island of misfit toys from the *Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer* Christmas special. Some similarities you might already recognize. Many of the characters in my story weren't likely to be picked first in gym class. They are the castoffs, the unwanted, the useless. They are the broken toys losing hope of ever finding happiness with each passing year.

You may also have noticed that the majority of the primary characters are women. Few classic fantasy books have featured females in all the major and most powerful roles (good as well as evil) with as much success as *The Wizard of Oz*. One of the things I noted from that story (and from my own life married to an incredible businesswoman, who spent much of her early career in the male-dominated engineering field) was how women deal with conflict. Male protagonists—even my own—have a proclivity to play the hero by charging in, often alone. By contrast, Dorothy Gale of Kansas gathered a team of like-minded individuals of diverse backgrounds and unique abilities that afforded her victory. I saw value in Dorothy's approach that I sought to build on. Now that you know I've been having fun paying homage to these two classics, maybe you'll know what to look for, and I suspect you'll likely spot when I tip my hat. I hope you'll smile when that occurs.

Okay, what else should I mention? Oh, I know. If it has been awhile since you've read the other books and you want to catch up, you'll find recaps under the Bonus Material menu of The Legends of the First Empire website: [firstempireseries.com/book-recaps](http://firstempireseries.com/book-recaps). I should note that reading these shouldn't be necessary, because I've put in little reminders about essential

facts from previous events. These are not lengthy dissertations, just little memory joggers. Also, keep in mind that each book has an extensive spoiler-free glossary of terms and names. So if you forgot who Konniger is, you could look him up in this book's glossary. What you'll find will be different than the entry in *Age of Myth*, because it'll reflect what is known up to this point in the overall story, but you'll not find anything that'll ruin *this* book. I should note that there are a few entries that will be left out of the *Age of War* glossary, for instance, the name Turin. Why? Because there just isn't any way to write a spoiler-free entry for that. However, if you look it up in a future edition of *Age of Legend*, you'll be reminded why that name is important. Bottom line, if you want further memory refreshers, go ahead and skim through the glossary.

Well, I think that's plenty for now, except to say that I've greatly appreciated receiving all the amazing emails, so please keep them coming to [michael@michaelsullivan-author.com](mailto:michael@michaelsullivan-author.com). As I've said before, it's never a bother hearing from readers—it's an honor and a privilege. So now that the preamble is over, I'd like to invite you back to an age of myths and legends, to a time when mankind was known as Rhunes and elves were believed to be gods. In this particular case, allow me to take you to the Age of War.



## CHAPTER ONE

# *The Road to War*

*Life had been the same for hundreds of years. Then the war came, and nothing was ever the same again.*

—THE BOOK OF BRIN

Suri the mystic talked to trees, danced to the sound of wind chimes, hated bathing, howled at the moon, and had recently leveled a mountain, wiping out centuries of dwarven culture in an instant. She had done so mostly out of grief, but partly out of anger. A dwarf had been insensitive after the death of Suri's best friend. He should have been more sympathetic, but during the days since it happened, Suri had come to realize she could have shown more restraint. Perhaps merely setting Gronbach on fire or having the earth swallow the vile wretch would have been a better choice. Neither option had occurred to her at the time, and an entire civilization had suffered. It had been a bad day for everyone.

Nearly a week later, Suri woke in a field amidst salifan, ragwort, and meadow thistle, the sun peeking over distant hills. Golden shafts made diamonds of dewdrops and revealed the labor of a thousand spiders who had cast nets between blades of grass. Having spent the night outside, Suri, too, was soaked and a bit chilled, but the sun's kiss promised to make everything better. She sat in the dew, the sun on her face, and stared at the fields surrounding the seaside dahl, listening to the faint hum of bumblebees as they began their morning's work. Then a butterfly flew across her sight and ruined everything.

Suri began to cry.

She didn't bow her head. Keeping her face to the sunlight, she let the tears roll down her cheeks, spilling onto the grass, adding to the dew. Her little body hitched and shuddered. Suri cried until she was out of tears, but the pain still tore at her heart. Eventually, she merely sat in the field, shoulders stooped, arms limp, fingers reaching out for the warm fur that wasn't there.

Since returning from across the sea, most days started this way. Mornings offered a tiny respite from the pain, but before long she remembered, and reality crashed in. Then the sky became less blue, the sun not nearly as bright, and not even the flowers could make her smile. And there was one more loss left to face. Arion was dying.

"Suri!"

She was slow to react, slow to realize it was *her* name being called. Somewhere behind her, the grass rustled and feet thumped. The rapid tempo of those footfalls indicated it could only be one person, and that meant just one thing.

"Suri!" Brin called again.

The mystic didn't bother to turn. Didn't want to see—didn't want to face—

"She's awake!" Brin shouted this time.

Suri spun.

"Her eyes are open." Brin was running, plunging through the tall grass, soaking her skirt.

Every muscle in Suri's body came alive. She sprang up like a startled deer and sprinted past Brin, racing toward the road. In no time she reached the tent Roan had built specifically for the Miralyith. When Suri burst in, Arion was still on the pallet, but her eyelids fluttered. Padera was helping her sit up to drink.

“Tiny sips,” the old woman barked. “I know you want to guzzle like a drunk, but trust me, it’ll come right back up on you—and me. Even if you don’t care, I do.”

Suri stood under the flap, staring. Part of her refused to believe what she was seeing. She was afraid it was merely a dream and worried that the moment she embraced the sight, the illusion would dissolve and the pain would rush back with twice the force. She didn’t know how many more blows she could survive.

“Come in—go out—pick one!” Padera snapped. The old woman, her lips sunken over toothless gums, squinted with her one good eye against the blinding sunlight.

Suri took a step forward and let the flap fall. The lamp was out, but sunlight burned brightly through the cloth walls. Arion was resting against Padera’s shoulder. The old woman helped the Fhrey hold a ceramic cup to her lips. Over its top, Arion peered back with weary eyes as she slurped loudly.

“Okay, okay, that’s enough for now,” Padera said. “We’ll let that settle a minute. If it stays down, if you don’t erupt like a geyser, I’ll give you more.”

The cup came away and Suri waited.

Arion’s voice—Suri needed to hear it to be sure, to make it real.

The Fhrey tried to say something but couldn’t. She pointed apologetically at her throat.

Suri panicked. “What’s wrong with her?”

“Nothing,” Padera grumbled. “Well, nothing beyond sleeping for almost a week without food or water, which made her dry as the dust she nearly became.” Padera looked at the Fhrey with a small shake of her head and a confounded expression. “With as little water as she’s had, she ought to be

dead. Any man, woman, child, rabbit, or sheep would have passed three days ago. 'Course, she's none of those, is she?"

Once more, sunlight pierced the room, blinding everyone. Brin stood in the entryway, holding the flap. She didn't say anything, just watched from the gap.

"Come in—go out—pick one!" Suri and Padera barked in unison.

"Sorry." Brin stepped in, letting the flap fall.

All of them watched Arion. The Fhrey lifted her head slowly, focused on Suri, and smiled. Arion reached out a shaky hand. That was enough. Suri fell to her knees and discovered she still had tears left. She buried her face in the side of Arion's neck. "I tried, I tried, I tried..." Suri managed in between sobs. "I didn't know what I was doing. I opened a door and found a dark river. I followed it toward a light, a wonderful and yet terrible light. I...I...I tried to pull you back, to fix you, but...but..."

She felt Arion's hand patting her head.

Suri looked up.

"Not...tried," Arion managed to croak with a voice as coarse as gravel. She then mouthed the word *succeeded*.

Suri wiped her eyes and squinted. "What?"

With more effort, the Fhrey said, "You...saved...me."

Suri continued to stare. "You sure?"

Arion smiled. "Pretty...sure."

Raithe refused to sit. Something about being seated in the face of such lunacy felt too much like acceptance. The rest of the clan chieftains, who referred to themselves collectively as the Keenig's Council, sat in the familiar circle inside Dahl Tirre's courtyard. Four chairs had been added: three to accommodate the chieftains of the Gula clans and an elaborate seat with carved arms for Persephone. Gavin Killian, the prolific father of numerous sons and the new chieftan of Clan Rhen, sat in Persephone's old chair.

Nyphron wasn't seated, either; he was up and speaking. Persephone nodded when the Galantian paused.

*She's not actually considering this, is she?*

Besides the ten chieftains, most of the other usuals were there, except for Brin, the keenig's personal Keeper of Ways. Raithe had last seen her heading toward Padera's tent, the one they had Arion in. The Death House some called it, since the Miralyith hadn't shown any sign of life in nearly a week. The other non-chieftains in attendance included Moya, Persephone's ever-present Shield with her famous bow; the dwarf named Frost, who always stood in for Roan and reported on weaponry progress; Malcolm, who simply had a habit of showing up; and Nyphron, who represented the Fhrey. That's how Raithe saw Nyphron's role, as the voice of a small band of warriors. Given that Raithe represented only himself and Tesh, he couldn't begrudge the Galantian leader a place at the council.

*At least I shouldn't, but I'm not making insane recommendations that will get everyone killed.*

"We must take Alon Rhist, and we must do so immediately," Nyphron repeated. He wasn't asking or suggesting; this wasn't a bit of advice or an option being presented. The Fhrey leader was demanding agreement.

Raithe usually refrained from talking in the meetings, and he felt Nyphron should keep quiet, too, for the very same reason: They represented virtually no one. But Raithe didn't like the look on Persephone's face. Her expression indicated she was weighing Nyphron's words carefully.

None of the other chieftains possessed the courage to challenge the Fhrey leader, so Raithe had to say something. Lack of proper weapons had been the reason he'd refused to be the keenig in the first place, and Nyphron wanted to take the Rhist before they had time to prepare. Persephone had returned from Belgreig with the secret of iron, but forging enough weapons for an army would take time.

"Your recklessness demonstrates why Persephone is the keenig and you are not," Raithe said loudly to Nyphron, drawing attention. "You're Fhrey. You don't care about the lives of us Rhunes. The only thing you care about is winning. The amount of blood spilled while reaching your goal is inconsequential—because it won't be yours. Attacking Alon Rhist before we're properly trained and have adequate weapons will be suicide. Hundreds, maybe thousands, could die on those walls. And then—"

"No one is going to die," Nyphron replied in a superior tone that suggested he was speaking to an imbecile.

Raithe took a step toward him. "If we attack one of the most fortified strongholds in the world with farmers armed merely with mattocks, men *will* die. Many men." Raithe turned to the other chieftains. "You've been to Alon Rhist, right?" He pointed at Nyphron. "Isn't it filled with an army of Fhrey warriors like him? Charging those walls will be like slapping a beehive with a stick. Except these bees don't just sting. They cut off your head with very sharp bronze swords while hiding behind massive shields."

Persephone was paying attention to him, listening.

*That's something, at least.*

"I'm not asking for anyone from here to fight." Nyphron spoke to Persephone rather than to Raithe. "Your people won't even have to get near the Rhist. They will merely be decorative, a garnish if you will." Nyphron began to pace back and forth. "That fortress is my home. I *own* it. My father was the head of the Instarya tribe, the people who have lived in that fortress for centuries. He was the supreme commander of all the western outposts.

That position typically falls to the son upon the father's death, which makes me the lord of the Rhist."

"But the fane—the leader of your people—put someone else in charge after your father challenged him, correct?" Tegan of Clan Warric asked.

*Thank you, Tegan. At least one person is paying attention.*

"True," Nyphron replied. "But that Fhrey isn't well-liked by my tribe, and the Instarya have been ill-treated for centuries, alienated and exiled through no fault of their own. They need a leader who understands their plight and can right their wrongs." Nyphron sighed. "Do you think this is some impetuous idea that popped into my head this morning? I've worked on this plan for quite some time. I know how to take Alon Rhist. And I can do so without the loss of a single life."

"That's not possible," Raithe said. "We need to—"

Nyphron rolled his eyes. "Allow me to explain why we must act immediately. I'll do so in short sentences with small words. Right now, the fane is preparing his own forces. He'll need to marshal his troops on the frontier to attack us. His best soldiers are the Instarya tribe—*my brethren*—and they're headquartered at Alon Rhist. The Instarya are the greatest warriors in the world; without them, the fane has no troops. I intend to steal his strength, but we have to move quickly. We can't allow Lothian to reach Alon Rhist first." Nyphron moved closer to Persephone. "I can nullify the whole Instarya tribe from Ervanon to Merredydd. Doing so will cut off the fane's arms. He'll have no army to fight for him."

"Will they fight for us?" Siegel asked.

Nyphron looked at the Gula-Rhune chieftain as if he were a child. "Of course not. Fhrey don't kill Fhrey, but if you do as I say, I can ensure that they won't kill Rhunes, either. And without his warrior tribe, the fane will need to train others. That"—he pointed at Raithe, still without looking at him—"will give us time to forge weapons. Something we can do more effectively behind the Rhist's walls." Nyphron began counting off with his fingers. "Alon

Rhist has tools, facilities, shelter, and food, everything required to build the sort of fighting force needed to face the fane's inevitable assault."

"But *how* do we take it?" Tegan asked.

"Just leave that to me."

"See, that's where I have a problem," Raithe said. "You expect us to trust you?"

Nyphron dragged a hand over his face in frustration. "It doesn't matter if you have doubts. The Rhunes will be perfectly safe. I don't want any of them within a quarter mile of the Rhist. *I* and my Galantians will secure the fort. I only want you to be there."

"You're certain the Rhunes won't have to fight?" Persephone asked.

"That's correct. I want you and your people to stand across the Bern River Gorge in the high plains of Dureya. Is that too much to ask?"

Persephone looked at Raithe.

"You can't listen to him," Raithe said. "This is foolishness. He can't take an entire fortress with a party of seven. Either he's delusional or this is some kind of trap. At least wait until we have a thousand swords and shields." He turned to Frost. "How long will that take?"

The dwarf puffed air through his beard and mustache, clearing the hair out of the way in order to speak. "We've selected a dozen good men who are eager and capable of learning, but we're still struggling with the method and system.

"Although Roan carefully watched the swordsmiths produce an iron blade, she apparently missed a number of details. We are still working out the process—but we're getting there. Once we have the steps down, those twelve will take what they've learned and train a smith in every village in Rhulyn. And those smiths will take on apprentices, expanding our numbers. When

the system is perfected and people are trained, the work won't take long. But getting all that going is the problem." He rubbed his chin. "I estimate we could outfit a small army in...a year."

"There," Raithe said. "And in that time, we can train the men to—"

"It will be too late by then," Nyphron said. "The fane will consolidate his hold on the frontier before winter. This is a race, and we've already delayed too long. Besides, there is a fine smithy inside the fortress, and a few residents in the city have excellent forges and tools. Also"—the Fhrey looked at Persephone—"where will the people of Rhen winter? Here? Will you shelter from the icy blasts against that wall?" He looked to Lipit. "Do you have room for them inside the city's walls?"

Persephone's eyes darkened.

Raithe was losing her. Losing her to *him*, which made it worse.

"My way will ensure we can defend ourselves if things go wrong," Raithe declared. "If he fails to deliver on his outlandish promises—"

Nyphron smiled as he cut Raithe off. "And my way will win this war."

Raithe glared at Nyphron, but the Fhrey steadfastly refused to even glance his way. Nyphron continued to study Persephone.

"How soon would you want to move on Alon Rhist?" she asked.

"Immediately," Nyphron said. "We have already wasted too much time." He gestured at the dahl around him. "While we sit and talk, who knows what the fane is doing."

"I'd feel better if we had some *Artistic* support." Persephone looked Raithe's way. "In case anything goes wrong. But Arion can't be moved, and Suri won't leave her side."