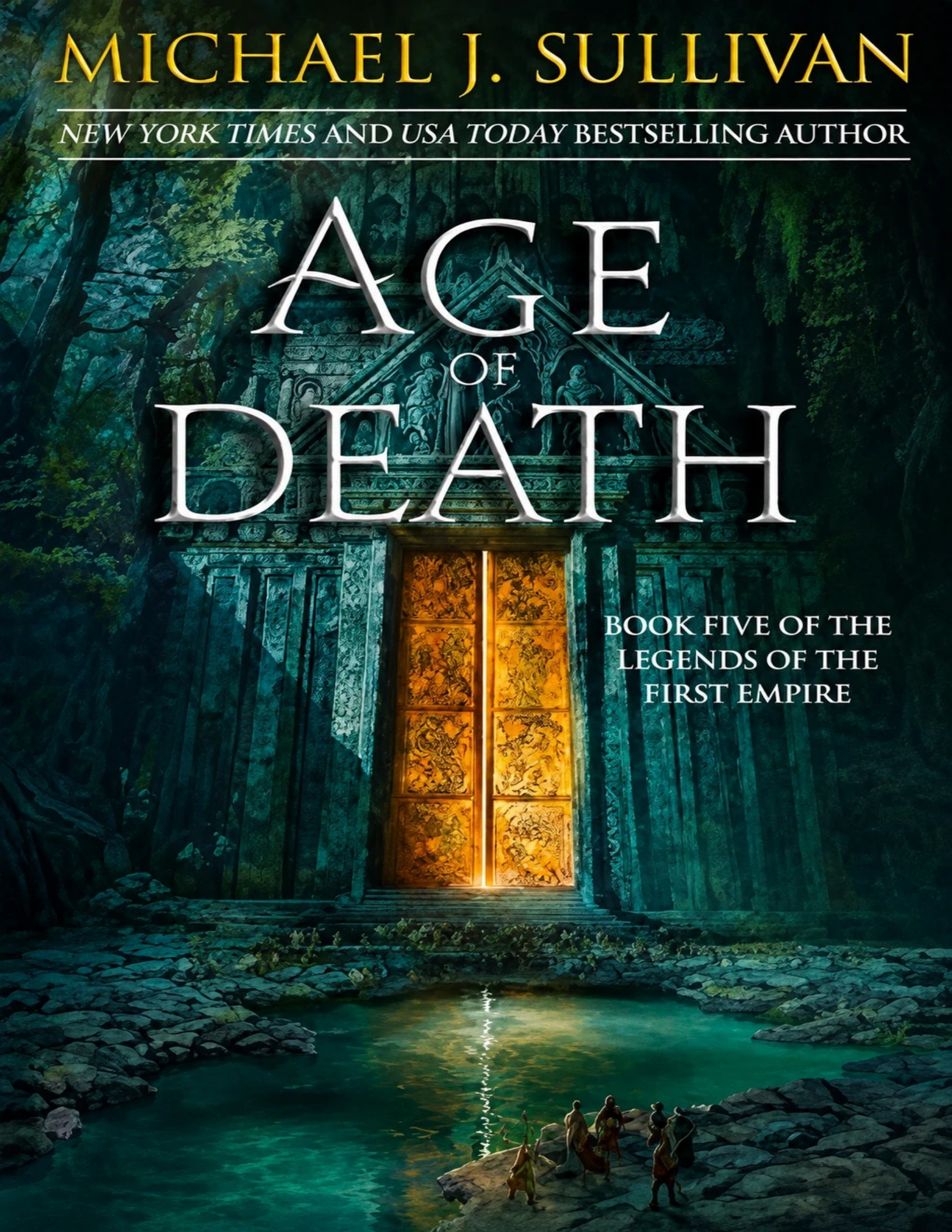


MICHAEL J. SULLIVAN

NEW YORK TIMES AND USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

AGE OF DEATH

BOOK FIVE OF THE
LEGENDS OF THE
FIRST EMPIRE



Praise for Sullivan's Work

"*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*

"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 (after *Age of Swords*) of a projected six-book series, Sullivan continues providing excellent worldbuilding 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." — *Publishers Weekly on Age of War*

"All I can say, after the wild ride I have been on, is that I NEED to read the next installment in this series, *Age of Death*, as soon as possible!" — *Genre Minx Book Reviews on Age of Legend*

"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*

"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 Nouron*

“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*

“No question about it, this book is another winner, bringing back everything I love about Riyria: great characters, great setting, great story. I really couldn’t have asked for more.” — *The Speculative Herald* on *The Death of Dulgath*

“Another tale full of twists, turns and that brand of humour only Royce and Hadrian can provide. The absolute best literary duo ever—EVER.” — Scott Vout, beta reader on *The Disappearance of Winter’s Daughter*

About the Book

(From the Back Cover)

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

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

Works by Michael J. Sullivan

Novels

The Legends of the First Empire

Age of Myth • Age of Swords • Age of War • Age of Legend • Age of Death

Forthcoming: Age of Empyre

The Rise and the Fall

Arrow of Death (Summer 2021) • Farlaine (Summer 2022) • Untitled #3

(Summer 2023)

The Riyria Revelations

Theft of Swords (contains The Crown Conspiracy & Avempartha)

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

Heir of Novron (contains Wintertide & Percepliquis)

The Riyria Chronicles

The Crown Tower • The Rose and the Thorn • The Death of Dulgath

The Disappearance of Winter's Daughter

Forthcoming: Drumindor

Blood of Thieves (contains The Crown Tower & The Rose and the Thorn)

Standalone Novels

Hollow World (Sci-fi Thriller)

Short Story Anthologies

Heroes Wanted: "The Ashmoore Affair" (Fantasy: Riyria Chronicles)

Unfettered: "The Jester" (Fantasy: Riyria Chronicles)

Unbound: "The Game" (Fantasy: Contemporary)

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

Blackguards: "Professional Integrity" (Fantasy: Riyria Chronicles)

The End: Visions of the Apocalypse: “Burning Alexandria” (Dystopian Sci-fi)

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

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

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

Individual Short Stories

“Pile of Bones” (Fantasy: The Legends of the First Empire)

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Michael's Novels Include:

The First Empire Series: Age of Myth • Age of Swords • Age of War • Age of Legend • Age of Death • Age of Empyre

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

*This book is dedicated to John Patrick Sullivan, my brother, who
introduced me to fantasy when I was just a boy.*

Author's Note

Well, we are getting down to the wire—just two books left! Let me start by mentioning a few things from my last author's note. First, if you have read the prior books but need a refresher on what has happened so far, you can find recaps for each at www.firstempireseries.com/book-recaps. And second, you can also take a gander at the "Glossary of Terms and Names," which can also be found online at www.firstempireseries.com/age-of-death-glossary. It's written to be spoiler-free, and it's updated for each book to provide additional details as more secrets are revealed. Why has it been moved online? There are several reasons, and they all revolve around how large and complex the glossary has become. For people on ereaders, its inclusion gives an inaccurate indication regarding how much story is left, and some people have complained about that. For those who read physical books, waiting until it was fully compiled would have delayed the printing and would have pushed back not only this book but the next as well. Given that, it seemed like moving the glossary was worth doing.

With that addressed, I want to take just a moment to talk about the writing of this book because it has a lot to do with how the second part of the Legends series was structured. As I mentioned in my last book, this series was supposed to end with *Age of War*, and that book does indeed tie up a great many loose threads, but not all of them. When I started what I thought would be the last book, an idea had popped up that would give me the possibility to dig into the bedrock of Elan and delve into the origin story of my world. I knew it wouldn't be a short tale, and I wasn't even sure if I would be able to reveal the whole yarn (because there was so much to tell), but I thought I needed to try.

With this new direction, the fourth book grew, and grew, and then grew even more. Also, my wife (whom I'm sure you know by now is a genius and

my most trusted critic) indicated that the writing was “too close to the bone” and “much too rushed.”

The “too close” statement might need some clarification. What Robin pointed out is that while I had the plot points well-established, there wasn’t enough flesh on the skeleton. In my desire to fit everything in, I had been sacrificing the narrative and missing excellent opportunities for emotional impact. On reflection, I saw (as so often is the case) that she was absolutely right. So, guess what, the book started to grow once more.

Eventually, the story became too large to fit into a single book. Yes, we could have played around with font size, the spacing between lines, or used thin paper. But even with such concessions, we would be right up against the two-and-a-half-inch spine width that limits most printers. We would also have to leave out some desired front and back matter like my author’s note and Robin’s afterword. We didn’t want to make those changes because I still read printed books, and I think the look and feel of them matter. If the font is too small and the line spacing too tight, I don’t enjoy reading the physical copy. And I wanted to love all versions of my book.

So, after much deliberation, we decided to break the fourth book into two parts. The only problem was that there wasn’t an appropriate stopping place around the half-way mark. You see, when I wrote the story, I wasn’t concerned with page count, or word count, or book count. I was telling the tale in the best way I could to make a good story. My job was to write a compelling tale, and *how* that saga would eventually be published wasn’t foremost in my mind.

Eventually, I had to turn my attention to the more practical side of getting the books into people’s hands. When looking objectively at the entire story, it became evident that we had a three-act play, and two breaking points stood out. But the balance was a problem. I could have made one regular-sized book and one double-dipper volume, but that didn’t feel right to me. Plus, I liked the idea of two trilogies under the umbrella of a single epic tale. Also, as a storyteller I liked where the two climaxes occurred, and I thought they had great drama.

Besides the story aspects, making the last part of the series three books instead of two would split the first half and second half of the story evenly. From a balance and symmetry perspective, I liked that. Having one book that was essentially twice as long as the other stories just felt lopsided in a way that I can't fully explain. So, since we were in a position to control such things, we did exactly that. We followed the convention of *The Lord of the Rings* and made one long story that was split between three volumes.

So, problem solved. But there was another issue. Unlike my previous books (each of which was a self-contained episode), the second half of my Legends series would end with cliffhangers. I expected bad reviews (and I did receive a few), but I had a much larger number of positive reviews praising the book. Also, I knew that once all the books were released, the cliffhanger aspect wouldn't be nearly as big a deal. The trick, then, was to get the books out as quickly as possible.

Now, as many already know, Del Rey signed the first half of the Legends series and published them one book a year (June 2016, July 2017, July 2018). That's the schedule most traditional publishers standardize on, but I wasn't going the traditional route so I wanted to accelerate the release dates. My thought was to put out a book every six months (a rate I had previously used when self-published), but Robin wanted to be even more aggressive. She wanted the full second half to come out in a year or less. As is often the case, Robin won, and we'll have all three books published within ten months. Here are the dates:

- *Age of Legend* – July 2019
- *Age of Death* – February 2020
- *Age of Empyre* – May 2020

But even that accelerated schedule wasn't quick enough for Robin, so we'll continue our tradition of giving Kickstarter backers the books several months before the retail release. Those who preordered during the *Age of Death* Kickstarter received the story in October 2019. We don't yet have a

date for the *Age of Empyre* project, but backers of it will get the last book in February instead of May.

That's really all you need to know when starting this book, but I will repeat something I've said in other author's notes: I have greatly appreciated receiving all the amazing emails, so please keep them coming to michael@michaelsullivan-author.com. It's never a bother hearing from readers—it's an honor and a privilege.

Now that this preamble is over, let's all gather in a circle around the lodge's cozy eternal flame as I invite you back to an age of myths and legends, to a time when humans were known as Rhunes and elves were once believed to be gods. In this particular case, allow me to take you to the *Age of Death*.

— *Michael J. Sullivan*

October 2019

World Map

Maps are problematic on e-readers that don't have adequate resolution to display them, and for this reason you can access [a high-resolution map online](#).



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Kickstarter Backers

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Age OF *Death*

BOOK FIVE OF

The Legends of the First Empire

MICHAEL J. SULLIVAN

RIYRIA
ENTERPRISES


Chapter One

The Great Gate

The good news is that death is not the end, but that is also the bad news. — The Book of Brin

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

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

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

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

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

Heroic thoughts, which had given her the courage to enter the pool, vanished from her mind; reason, reflection, and contemplation soon followed. What remained was a staccato rhythm of imagery: sunshine on leaves, rain in a bucket, chopped carrots, her mother's laughter, an icy pond. As her mind froze in terror, her body lashed out, kicking and thrashing in a

hopeless struggle to survive. Reaching up, her hand briefly broke the surface. She felt air—air!

So close.

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

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

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

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

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

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

I made a mistake—my last mistake.

Brin waited patiently, knowing death was overdue.

More time passed. Nothing happened.

Is it over? Am I . . . ?

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

Am I dead? I must be.

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