



THE
AUTUMN
MIST

MICHAEL J. SULLIVAN

Praise for Sullivan's Work

"This epic fantasy showcases the arrival of a master storyteller." — Library Journal
on ***Theft of Swords***

"A delightful, entertaining and page-turning read that reminds us just how enjoyable, and how good The Riyria Revelations series is. A must-buy for all fantasy lovers." —
The Founding Fields on ***Rise of Empire***

"Heir of Novron is the conclusion to the Riyria Revelations, cementing it in a position as a new classic of modern fantasy: traditional in setting, but extremely unconventional in, well, everything else." — Drying Ink on ***Heir of Novron***

"Snappy banter, desperate stakes, pulse pounding sword play, and good old fashioned heroics are all on full display here." — 52 Book Reviews on ***The Crown Tower***

"The Rose and the Thorn is full of mystery, adventure, betrayal and just plain awesome." — Fantasy Faction 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." — Speculative Herald 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***

"This is social science fiction that H.G. Wells or Isaac Asimov could have written, with the cultural touchstones of today. A modernized classic, Hollow World is the perfect novel for both new and nostalgic science fiction readers." — Staffer's Book
Reviews on ***Hollow World***

Works by Michael J. Sullivan

Novels

The Legends of the First Empire

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

The Riyria Revelations

Theft of Swords (contains *The Crown Conspiracy* and *Avempartha*)
Rise of Empire (contains *Nyphron Rising* and *The Emerald Storm*)
Heir of Novron (contains *Wintertide* and *Percepliquis*)

The Riyria Chronicles

The Crown Tower
The Rose and the Thorn
The Death of Dulgath
The Disappearance of Winter's Daughter
Blood of Thieves (contains *The Crown Tower* and *The Rose and the Thorn*)

Standalone Novels

Hollow World

Anthologies

Unfettered: The Jester (Fantasy: The Riyria Chronicles)
Unfettered II: Little Wren and the Big Forest (Fantasy: The Legends of the First Empire)
Unbound: The Game (Urban Fantasy)
Blackguards: Professional Integrity (Fantasy: The Riyria Chronicles)
The End: Visions of the Apocalypse: Burning Alexandria (Dystopian Science Fiction)
Triumph Over Tragedy: Traditions (Fantasy: Tales from Elan)
The Fantasy Faction Anthology: Autumn Mists (Fantasy: Contemporary)
Help Fund My Robot Army: Be Careful What You Wish For (Fantasy)

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Jack stared at the clock trying to estimate the exact moment he would die. An absurd thing to do, but he was bored. At eighty-eight, and in poor health, there wasn't much else to occupy his time.

He found it a peculiarity of aging, this increased desire for punctuality and orderliness. As a young man he would just as likely drop a towel as to hang it up, but that had been before bending over became a test of resolve. Keeping things organized just made life easier. At least that's what he told his granddaughter, Mary, when she likened the neatness of his sock drawer to that of a paint chart. The truth was that Jack just didn't like the idea of leaving a mess behind. Mothers obsessed about the virtues of clean underwear in the event of an accident, and Jack arranged sock drawers. Only now he didn't have a drawer, and no longer needed socks.

"Good morning," the nurse greeted him as she entered.

Her name was Debbie, too tall for Jack's taste and too wrinkled for her age. While only in her forties, she had the skin of a crocodile. Maybe she was one of those who spent her youth tanning into brown leather. Maybe she was pretty once, athletic most likely, but time was catching up; her otherwise dark hair showed random threads of gray, as if she had recently painted her kitchen's ceiling. "How are we feeling?"

He hated that—even from a nurse. It was her job, but if she really wanted an answer she'd know to pull up a chair and come armed with a cup of coffee and possibly a bag lunch. He ignored her. Another effect of aging—he was less tolerant. The years had granted him wisdom, he wished they gave it to everyone else instead.

She waited—more than an idle question.

"No better than yesterday," he muttered, feeling she won today's first round in their ongoing war.

"No worse either?"

"Too early to tell."

She crossed to the window and searched for the curtain's strings. She was too skinny, too lanky, and thanks to Her uniform showed no discernable figure. Nurses used to wear cute white dresses, but she wore loose-fitting purple scrubs and a stethoscope necktie. Like everything else with Debbie, function trumped esthetics. She pulled on the strings, blinding him with hazed sunlight as the curtains spread apart. His view opened onto the brick wall of the pediatric wing. Not real brick, but some uniform beige that matched the prevailing dullness. Above, should have been the sky, but it was lost in a fog. He could barely make out a few branches of the maple tree, its leaves changing colors—dying.

“Did you sleep well? Were there any more dreams?” the nurse asked as she came near the bed and checked the I.V. bag hanging from a metal tree.

“Yes!” His hands made excited fists. “I dreamt of the sea,” Jack blurted out before thinking. His dreams were personal, fragile as butterfly wings. He hadn't meant to share, especially not to Debbie, but the excitement of remembering had hotwired his tongue. Once more he felt she stole a victory.

“I see,” she said.

“You see what?”

She shrugged, tapping on the plastic tab that fed the clear tube. “Several patients on this floor have dreams of the sea.”

This floor. She meant the geriatric wing—the section of the hospital with the one way door. Dying people dream of the sea. She likely read that studying for her degree, or maybe she saw it on a daytime talk show where the doctor isn't a doctor at all—just some guy with a PhD in art history or dead languages. “...*the sea is a metaphor for eternity, which in Latin is aeternitas.*”

“What do you mean?” He baited her.

She smiled. A condescending smile of an adult to a child. “Now now, Mr. Paper, we won’t get better with that attitude.”

“Exactly how does one recover from living too long?”

She ignored the question. “I want you to eat your breakfast this morning. I saw that you didn’t clean your dinner plate yesterday.”

“I don’t like Salisbury steak. It doesn’t taste like meat. It doesn’t feel like meat. And that gelatinous goo is certainly not gravy.”

“You need to keep your strength up. Protein is good for you—you need protein.”

“I don’t *need* anything.”

She looked at him sternly, folding her arms across her chest. “But you *will* eat it.”

He set his resolve fully intending to do battle. He was zero-for-two that morning and needed to put something on the scoreboard to avoid a humiliating shutout. Jack hunkered down for a staring competition, but just then something outside the window caught his eye. Perhaps it was just a bird or a shadow flashing across the brick, but he thought it was bigger...much bigger.

One of his Get Well cards fluttered to the ground and Debbie bent over to pick it up—always the same one. Cut in the whimsical outline of a cartoon ship, the card had no defense against the air conditioner’s gusts. She placed it back on the side table with his glasses, a plastic pitcher of water, and a tissue box. “Would you like to watch television?” the nurse asked, clicking the set on before he answered. She thumbed through the channels.

“Put the news on,” he told her.

“No, that won’t do. You know how we get when we watch that.”

Her insistence on using the word *we* was more grating than usual. Was that also something they taught in nursing school? Nautical terms for death, and the royal *we* as a means of belittling your patients.

“We need to watch your blood pressure. The doctor wants to limit your exposure to stress.”

He considered asking if her full name was Debbie Stress. He’d get a point for that and he was still down two, or was it three now?

“Here, this is good.” She stopped on a cartoon. He did not have his glasses, but he saw a brightly colored logo in the lower right corner indicating a children’s network. “You can watch this. Do you need to go to the bathroom?”

“No,” he snapped.

“Don’t be grumpy. There will be Jell-O with lunch. If you’re good. I’ll see that you get cherry.”

“Everyone gets cherry.”

She ignored the comment, pulled a pen from her pocket, and made a note on his chart. On the screen above her, what looked to be a goldfish narrowly avoided a shark by diving through a crack in an old shipwreck.

He wondered what she was writing: *Old man’s still a prick*. Or was she amending her date for when he’d “check-out.” It likely wasn’t a medical chart at all, but some office betting pool. They probably had one at the foot of all the old-timer’s beds. He considered asking if he could get in on the action.

“Your granddaughter called while you were sleeping. She says she’s sorry, but won’t be able to make it over today. The boys have the flu, but maybe some other time.” He noticed she kept her eyes focused on the chart. “I’ll return with your pills after you’ve eaten.” She walked out silently on white sneakers.

Mary was not coming.

Jack felt the depression descending. He had been looking forward to seeing his great grandsons for over a week. Mary and her two boys were all he had left now. His parents, his wife, even his own son were gone. Time took everything but somehow forgot about him as if he was a Post-it note stuck to the bottom of a trashcan.

He watched the cartoon for a while, it was better than the news, but he wouldn't let Debbie know that. When a commercial for some plastic toy came on, Jack's gaze shifted back toward the window. He wondered what he almost saw.

He picked up his glasses from the side table. Outside nothing moved. Even the yellow and red leaves on the maple were motionless. Beyond the pediatric wing were more buildings, but he couldn't see them. The autumn mist obscured everything. It was thick this year. He could be anywhere, floating on a cloud perhaps. He might even be in...in...his memory failed him. There had been a thought there, a logical destination that was missing like remembering a commercial jingle from ages past but forgetting the words. *My bologna lost that something, it's just the way we are!*

He glanced at the clock again. *What would be the hour? What would be the minute?*

He had spent fifty years selling insurance, warning people about the dangers that threatened, but he wasn't home the night his wife died, and there was no insurance to recover lost time. That was thirty years ago. He had difficulty remembering her face now. In his memory her features were faded as an old photograph, his whole life one oddly short newsreel in black and white, lacking sound and color.

It had been a good life...hadn't it?

He recalled the first time kissing his wife, his son's birth, and the birth of his granddaughter, Mary. She had been a beauty. All wonderful memories, but...he had also been fearful during those times, afraid for his wife and daughter-in-law; his company had paid too many claims for accidents during childbirth. And at his wedding he had been nervous about the commitment and all those eyes focused on his back.

Was he ever really happy?

The thought surfaced like a bar of soap slipping through fingers at the bottom of a tub—a piss-poor time to be popping up. He never made a bucket list. Didn't know what one was until he saw a movie about old men dying. Buy a sports car, have sex with a girl half your age, and make a list of things you'll never do. How that last one helped he wasn't sure.

What was happiness?

He thought it should involve contentment, but that sounded more like peace and he wasn't sure happiness and peace were the same. Joy should be at the heart of happiness; the pulsating beat of excitement—thrills without care, without want, without fear. Had he ever known that? Maybe such feelings didn't exist. If they did, he missed it.

Or have I?

He had been happy as a child. He was certain of it. There had been sunshine and endless summer days. Then school began. Knowledge replaced innocence; a poor trade that seemed a bargain at the time. Competition for grades, for praise, and for girls—spring stolen by Honest John promising Pinocchio that rich and famous was the only way to live. Then came the death of his mother and nothing was ever sunny again. Work followed school, children followed work, and if the sky was blue he never noticed—never had the time to look. Mortgages, car repairs, college funds, more deaths, the days carried a gray weight as he passed through autumn into winter. *My bologna has a fast lane, it's why I own a car!*

But I was happy as a child, right?

A vague memory returned, hovering elusive, hiding near the edges.

His mind was like a dusty attic of cobwebs and Sharpie-scrawled boxes with handwriting he could no longer read. Most of the stuff up there was junk. Memories of watering lawns, paying bills, and passing out in the checkout line at Safeway because after

eighty-eight years of service his heart wanted a five minute vacation. Unlike his old sock drawer, nothing in that mental attic was organized. Not that it mattered there wasn't anything up there he wanted, except...*My bologna has a secret, it's hidden in a jar!*

Was there something? Something in the very back behind the kid's baby pictures, and the wedding album, buried deeper even than his high school yearbook with its black and whites of a thin kid who played wide-receiver on the Wasee Wildcats football team. This memory was ancient, a buried treasure shrouded in a haze as thick as the autumn mist. Something about the ocean. He tried to concentrate; he tried to clear the mental image.

The shadow flashed across the bricks of the pediatric building again; something flying, too big for a bird. He stared at the haze and the bland brick. Nothing. Like trying to catch floaters in his eye.

He lost his thought and his attention wandered back to the television where another cartoon played. This one starred a mouse in a fireman's hat. His grandsons would love this, perhaps not Paul, he was the older one, but Peter was still young enough. Illusions still existed for him. Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, the Tooth Fairy and... *My bologna has great big wings, flies higher than a star!*

Once more he felt something was there, just beyond his reach. He laughed bitterly; his brain was full of holes. The doctors spent all their time under the hood tweaking that fist-sized slacker of an organ while the control room's light bulbs were in dire need of replacement.

He fell asleep and once more dreamed of the sea.

White bursts of froth and foam, sunlit fireworks cascading before the dark maw. There in the surf, barnacle-faced, the cave lay grinning. Tendrils of seaweed hanging, bangs left to grow too long. Battered with loss, it beckoned with a siren's wail. Jack stopped. He needed something. Turning out his pockets, he found them empty.

He woke when breakfast arrived. The usual scrambled eggs, dry toast and fruit ensconced in a compartmentalized plastic plate, complete with matching cutlery. He ate some but it caused tightness in his chest. His heart sped up to outpace the ticks of the clock. Something wet ran down his cheek. He was sweating. In his state even eating was an exertion. He lay panting, pressed to the mattress as if the Earth just upped its gravity.

The nurse returned. "Mr. Paper, I thought we discussed the virtues of a clean plate." She stood in front of him, her arms folded again.

"I'm not hungry."

She huffed and stabbed the pile of eggs. Holding the spork before his face she said, "Open up."

He kept his mouth closed and shook his head.

"You have to eat. Now, open up." She bumped the eggs and the spork against his lips. *Knock, knock.*

He grunted, jaws firm.

"Well, I'm not taking this tray away until everything is gone." She set the spork down. "You can just sit there with it. And no TV." She took the remote and punched the little red power button. The television mounted high on the far wall winked out. "I don't like this attitude of yours, not one bit. You need to eat."

The spork was down, and she was across the room, but still he held his mouth defiantly shut. She paused one last time at the door to jab her index finger at him before leaving.

He gave her a finger in reply, but she failed to see it. Jack gave himself a point on the scoreboard anyway.

He relaxed and laid his head back. There was no way he was going to eat any more. The eggs would turn green before he swallowed them. The television remained dark. *What had she done with the remote?* He looked around him, but instead noticed the

cards—only three. One was from Dr. Leonard Lipton. The letters on the front spelled “*Get Well!*” in a mixture of fonts as if the cardiac surgeon was really a serial killer. The second was from Mary; it also read “*Get Well,*” but written in a wedding invitation script, the phrase surrounded by watercolor roses. The last one—the card that suffered chronic vertigo—listed precariously to one side. On the front was a crayon drawing of a ship with billowed sails riding on wavy lines of Prussian blue or was that midnight blue? He thought he remember that Crayola changed the name sometime in the fifties. On the inside were the names Paul and Peter each scrawled in crayon.

He had hardly glanced at the card when the nurse handed it to him three days ago, but now his eyes tried to focus on the ship riding the waves. Something about it drew him, something familiar. He wanted his glasses, but Debbie had likely hidden those as well. He squinted and felt the room fade.

The ship was hard over, sails full, the prow bursting through a wave. He could smell the salt air, feel the shift of the deck, and hear the whippity-snap of the sails. He was perched up high, keeping watch upon the sea. For a moment everything was clear, the cry of seagulls, the crash of the waves, and the roar of—the card toppled face down, blown over once more by the draft from the air conditioning unit.

What’s with the ocean?

He had never sailed, never wanted to, never even liked to swim much.

Out the window—the movement again. He saw a great shadow race up the face of the pediatric building—something was out there, something huge, something flying, circling. It had to be a trick of the light, nothing that big could fly.

A poor sentry, he fell asleep while keeping watch and woke once again when Debbie bumped his bed. The tray was gone: two-for-two. She was adjusting the curtains.

“Anything flying around out there?” He asked.

“Pardon?”

“I keep seeing a shadow of something run along the wall across the way. Maybe a flag on top of the—”

“Perhaps a plane,” Debbie offered. She moved to the foot of his bed and flipped through his chart.

“I didn’t hear anything.” He continued to look out the window where the mist lingered despite the late hour. “No engines, no whine.”

“You wouldn’t. The hospital is well soundproofed. Besides, it could have been miles up, crossing in front of the sun.”

Debbie was no physics major. Neither was he, but he didn’t think a plane a mile high could cast a giant shadow on the side of a building.

“It would have to be circling. I saw it more than once.”

“Air traffic follows the same routes, you know. Like big roads in the sky. You probably saw different planes.”

“And do planes *flap*?”

She scowled at him. “I think you’re getting a bit overexcited.” She returned to the window, looked around, then pulled the drapes shut.

“No leave it open!”

“I don’t think so, you need to relax, and you’re obviously getting yourself all worked up.” She injected the contents of the needle into his I.V., made a note on his chart, and then walked out.

As soon as she was gone he tried to get up, but the pain in his chest flared and he fell back, panting.

He puffed as if he had run a marathon and felt sweat coating his face. His heart pounded, the poor little horse trapped in his rib cage was trotting again. Gradually, it settled, slowing to a simple rattle, the sound an old car makes after the key is switched off.

He stared at the drapes. There was something out there. Something hovering, waiting.

I need an offering. A gift to bring to the cave—like I used to. How else will he recognize me after so long? How else can I make up for it?

When Jack woke it was dark. Only the lights of the machines and the faint glow from the hallway allowed him to see. He was soaked. Not sweat, he could smell it. Ashamed he refused to ring. They found out in the morning just the same.

“Oh, Jackie,” the nurse sighed turning him over. There were two of them working as a team, doubling his humiliation. The assistant was pretty, which only made matters worse. She was blonde and wore her hair up, reminding him of a girl he had dated back in Syracuse—a lifetime ago. Asking her out had taken all his courage. She had laughed. The humiliation then was about the same as now.

Jack had been taught that happiness, was unattainable in this life, only he never put much stock in an exit ramp to heaven, or nirvana, which sucked considering he was running out of highway. Reality didn't allow for fairy tales or happy endings; life had enlightened him to that. He watched his wife die slowly of cancer. His son was only thirty-two when an SUV crushed his Chevy. The funeral was closed casket—only so much they could do. Everyone he knew were gone, his family, his friends. Only Mary and the boys remained and he almost never saw them. Too far away to visit. Disappointment was all too often the rule in his life and given that he figured heaven had about the same chance of being real as—

“Oh my!” the nurse exclaimed as the windows violently shook.

They had him in a clean gown, and the ghost from Syracuse finished tucking in the sheet's corners as Debbie went to the window. Reaching for the curtain's strings she hesitated then turned around. “Probably just the wind. The weatherman said it would be gusty today.”

They left him alone with the regular beep of the machine that monitored his heart. Like the thinking music from the game show *Jeopardy*, his time was running out and he still didn't know the answer. No, on *Jeopardy* you were given the answer, what you needed to know was the question, but what was the category? He tried to feign ignorance with himself, but deep down, he knew—*Lost and Found, for all the marbles, Alex.*

He looked toward the window. The curtains hid something from him. It had to do with the autumn mist and the shadows he had seen. There *was* something, even Debbie in her practical scrubs had heard it. Why had she stopped? She was going to look but changed her mind. Was it fear? Jack wasn't afraid. For the first time in decades he found he was excited, as if he'd just caught a whiff of pine signaling Christmas morning.

There was another flutter. The window rattled softly.

Jack's heart sprinted, working to pump what was left of his viscous blood to his perforated brain. He felt the hair on his arms rise. If only he could draw back the curtain; if only he could see what waited outside. Jack knew that he would remember what he had forgotten. He would find what lay hidden in the last trunk in the attic beneath the high school year book, under the baseball glove, behind his first tricycle.

He took a deep breath and lifted himself until he was sitting. The pain in his chest held a heated conversation with the monitor. He ignored both and swung his legs so they dangled off the edge of the bed. With every ounce of willpower he still possessed he shuffled toward the window. Using the IV pole as a crutch to inch along. Only a step or two more, but the distance was eternity, which while in Latin is *aeternitas*, in the dusty attic-mind of a dying man is a long fucking way. He would need to throw himself. A leap of faith with no fuel for a return trip, this was the one-way door to the sea.

The window rattled again. Something was impatient, left outside too long. No, not left—forgotten. Tears slipped down Jack's cheeks, yet he did not know why.

He had to bring the present, but what? He had nothing, not even a drawer of well organized socks. Then the curtain fluttered and he spied the pull string of the curtains.

String! Of course, string! Jack needed just to reach it and hold tight. The weight of his body would do the rest. Jack felt his breath shorten, the pain in his chest exploding. His left arm had gone numb.

The mist is high, Jackie, and the sea rising. Time to go. Time to sail. You can ride on my tail again and keep lookout. Do you remember now?

The enraged beeping of the heart monitor screeched a shrill alarm. Red and yellow lights flashed.

I missed you, Jackie. I've been waiting. All you need to do is jump. I'll catch you. We'll be just as we were. Giant's rings and ceiling wax, Jackie. Jump and let me roar again. I promise they'll hear me from here to Honalee.

There was a rushing of feet, shouts outside his room. The door burst open. Florescent lights flickered on. Nurses and doctors spilled in just as Jack pushed off. The pain erupted like a freight train jumping tracks, but the string wrapped around his fingers pulled the curtains wide, and in that moment Jackie Paper heard the dragon roar.

“Puff.”

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About the Author

Michael J. Sullivan is the bestselling author of the Riyria Revelations and Riyria Chronicles series. 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.

In today's turbulent publishing environment, Michael and Robin embrace hybrid authorship and utilize self-publication, small presses, and Big Five publishers to ensure that Michael's works are available to the widest audience possible. They also actively help fellow authors (both aspiring and established) by sharing what they've learned through online posts, free in-person seminars, and courses for *Writer's Digest*. Michael can be reached at:

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