



*The New York Times* Bestselling Author

MICHAEL J. SULLIVAN

THE RISE AND FALL — BOOK ONE

NOLYN

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# WORKS BY MICHAEL J. SULLIVAN

## THE RISE AND THE FALL

*Nolyn • Farilane* (Summer 2022)

*Esrhaddon* (Summer 2023)

## THE LEGENDS OF THE FIRST EMPIRE

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

*Age of Legend • Age of Death • Age of Empyre*

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*Triumph Over Tragedy*: "Traditions" (Fantasy: Tales from Elan)

*The Fantasy Faction Anthology*: "Autumn Mist" (Fantasy: Contemporary)

*This book is dedicated to everyone who has  
dared to dream the impossible.*

*Always remember that the only way to  
guarantee failure is to stop trying.*

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## Author's Note

Hello! I'm Michael J. Sullivan, the author of *Nolyn*. This book is the first in my latest series, *The Rise and Fall*. If you had told me twenty-five years ago that I'd be a published author with twenty novels, I would have concluded you were insane. You see, as a young man, I spent more than a decade trying to get published. By October of 1995, when none of the thirteen books I wrote went anywhere, I quit and vowed never to do anything creative again. So I started an advertising agency.

A decade later, I had proven to myself that I wasn't a complete failure because my wife, Robin, and I had built a successful business. At just thirty-four years of age, I'd accomplished most of my life's goals: I had a beautiful, intelligent wife, good children, a house, and financial stability. Times were good, but there was a problem. Both my wife and I had reached the top of the mountain and felt like Alexander with no more worlds to conquer . . . except one—the one that got away.

In the early 2000s, I picked up the first Harry Potter book for my daughter, who was struggling with dyslexia. Reading it, I remembered the joy of stepping through the covers of a book and tumbling into an immersive world, meeting people I wished were real-life friends. In my quest for publication by studying award-winning novels, I'd lost the fun. I forgot the whole reason I started writing in the first place. While I had refused to put pen to paper for over a decade, that hadn't stopped the stories. In particular, there were two insistent characters beating on the door to my conscious, demanding to be let in.

In 2004, I sat down to write the first novel in the world of Elan about an idealistic ex-mercenary and a cynical thief. But what made writing these books so truly crazy is that I had no intention of publishing them. That way led to the dark side—to the depression of waiting for a call that would never come. I abandoned that dream, and with it came the freedom to enjoy writing again.

I won't bore you with the details of how the books eventually made it "into the world." The short story is my wife, who came to believe in the dream I had given up, willed them into existence using a combination of small press publishers, self-publishing, and getting picked up by the big five. After finishing the Riyria Revelations, I never expected to return to the world of Elan. Still, Robin became depressed by the absence of her favorite duo (and so did many of my readers). So I created the Riyria Chronicles to provide some other standalone tales exploring how Royce and Hadrian met and started working together.

Being a fantasy, I had thousands of years of world-building, but only a small fraction of my universe made it onto the page. Having studied history, I knew there's always a significant difference between how people remember the past and what actually happened. As such, Elan consisted of two realities: the truth and a web of lies intertwined with various myths and legends.

And that's how *The Legends of the First Empire* series came into being. While Riyria centered on a pair of rogues with a complimentary set of skills, *Legends* focused on an unlikely group of ordinary people born in extraordinary times. Their ability to rise to the occasion ended up steering Elan's future, even if many of their deeds would become lost to antiquity.

Unlike when I first finished Riyria, I knew that I would return to the world of Elan. In *Legends*, we begin in what would have been Elan's Bronze Age, and we see the early formation of the First Great Empire. Having done that, it only made sense to show its eventual fall, which brings us to this series.



The three books are titled *Nolyn*, *Farilane*, and *Esrhaddon*. For those who have read my other stories, two of these names may be familiar. Nolyn is born in *Age of War*, the son of two of Elan's most famous historical figures: Nyphron and Persephone. Esrhaddon makes his rather mysterious appearance in Riyria during *Theft of Swords*. Truth be told, Farilane is briefly mentioned in both series, although I suspect many won't remember her. She's a scholar who is obsessed with history. Like Brin's famed book, Farilane pens *The Migration of Peoples*, a foundational historical record about my little invented world.

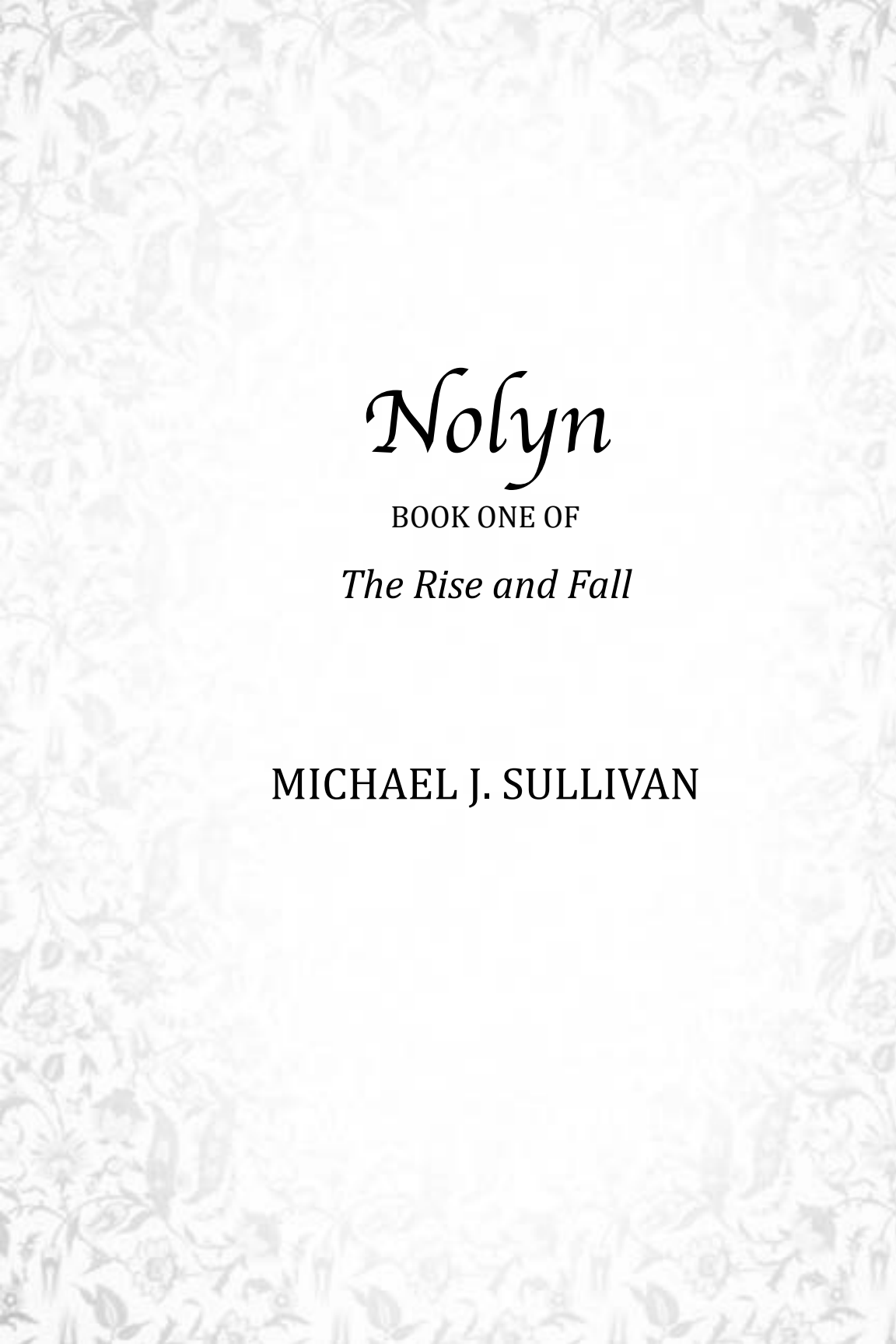
Now, if you are worried because you've never read any of my previous books, please don't be. I write each of my series to stand independently, and no knowledge of the others is required. That said, if you finish this book and decide to adventure further into the world of Elan, you'll find yourself on an Easter egg hunt where there are various "winks and nods" for people in the know.

Okay, so what is *Nolyn* about? Well, it begins about eight hundred and fifty years after the Great War and the founding of the First Empire. Humanity is trending away from its barbaric roots and embracing a more sophisticated civilization. But Nolyn's militaristic father still rules, and the question about who is best suited to lead this emerging culture to its next evolutionary stage is in question.

Like both the Riyria Revelations and Legends of the First Empire, I penned this entire series before releasing the first book. I do this so I can ensure the series wraps up in an extremely satisfying way. Plus, I have the freedom to go back and add foundations in earlier books when a great idea comes to me late in the series. Also, writing in this manner means people won't have to wait years (or decades) for the next installment. The plan is to release the books in the summer at one-year intervals. But for people who want the tales sooner, each title will have a pre-launch using Kickstarter. People who pre-order that way will get the stories three to four months before their official retail release.

Before I go, I would like to discuss how I structured this series because it's not conventional. In most series, you follow the same group of characters across multiple books, but *The Rise and Fall* books are more akin to three standalone tales. As indicated by the titular names, each novel will focus on an important figure who lives at a pivotal point in the First Empire's 2,000-year history.

And with all that said, I'll take my leave and let you dive into the first book. I want to extend my gratitude to you for giving *Nolyn* a try. If you haven't read any of my other stories, I hope that it will be the key to opening the door to more tales from the world of Elan, of which there are many: six *Riyria Revelations*, four *Riyria Chronicles*, and six in the *Legends of the First Empire*. As for reading order, I suggest starting with *Age of Myth*, as the *Legends of the First Empire* does have some character cross-over between the two series. While you're doing that, Robin and I will continue to edit and polish the remaining two books. You see, writing the book is only half the battle, and there is plenty of work yet to do to ensure you receive the best stories possible. Hopefully, I'll see you again in the summer of 2022 for the release of *Farilane*.



# *Nolyn*

BOOK ONE OF

*The Rise and Fall*

MICHAEL J. SULLIVAN

## CHAPTER ONE

# *The Arrow of Death*

Nolyn Nyphronian stood in unrelenting heat and a cloud of biting flies, contemplating philosophy. No small achievement in Erbon's rain forest where hot, moist air made breathing a labor, and all things frantically rushed to become dirt. Clothes rotted and metal rusted at baffling speeds. Leather turned green in days; all else picked up a spotted black taint—jungle grime, they called it. Everything everywhere returned to that from whence it came.

*But here, the race to dirt is absolutely absurd. If the enemy doesn't kill us, the jungle will.*

This reminded him of the popular, albeit fatalistic, adage among the imperial legions: *The Arrow of Death is never seen*. Despite this theory, Nolyn believed that when his time came, he would know. Now he had proof. The scout he'd dispatched was returning, and far too soon to be bringing good news.

Nolyn couldn't remember the scout's name. He'd met a lot of people since transferring to the Seventh Legion. Three days traveling with a group of twenty men hadn't been enough time to learn much of anything, much less everyone's name. While the scout was gone, the remainder of the squadron had waited where a rare shaft of sunlight reached the floor. None of them had spoken, moved, or so much as coughed. They were deep inside the enemy's territory, and silence was their only protection.

Cutting his way out of the brush, the scout was slick with sweat and breathing heavily. The kid's eyes were wide with worry, but no blood coated his blade. *The fear isn't from having been attacked—not yet, at least.*

“No outpost?” Nolyn knew the answer but wanted to make it official.

“Not just that, sir,” the scout said, then took a breath. “There’s no pass. Cliffs just come together.” He looked back into the dense cluster of wagon-wheel-sized leaves that had closed up, erasing all evidence of his passage. “This is a box canyon, sir. There’s no way out ’cept the way we come in. We’re trapped.”

*That explains the quick return.* Nolyn calmly nodded as if he received such news every day. “Thank you,” was all he said.

*I was right, Sephryn, we aren't meant for each other.* Never before had winning an argument tasted so bitter. *First Bran, now me. She'll be alone—the last of us.*

Touching the leather strap she'd given him, he wondered how long it would take for news of his death to reach Percepliquis, and who would be the one to tell her. *Maybe my father.* This brought a miserable smile to Nolyn's lips. *No—that's what a real father would do; that's what a human being would do. Nyphron has never been either.*

Nolyn walked over to Acer, the only animal they had. The horse was fitted with a saddle because squadron commanders were expected to look down on their troops. Even so, Nolyn hadn't used her. He held out the reins to the scout. “Here.”

The kid looked at the animal, puzzled. “I don't understand.”

Nolyn thrust the reins into the young man's hands. “Ride back to Urlineus. Report what happened. Tell them to send help.”

The light of purpose and understanding ignited in the young man's eyes. He nodded. “Yes, sir. Right away, sir.”

“Go, lad, hurry. We're counting on you.”

The scout climbed up, and with a last look back, he spurred the horse and thundered away, crashing through the broad leafy plants

lining the rough trail they had only recently cut. The squadron watched until the sounds of the horse faded, then they stared at Nolyn. He wondered if the Arrow of Death was now visible to everyone.

Just as he hadn't had time to learn their names, the men had no evidence he could be trusted. This was their first crisis, and likely their last. He could lie and offer hope to shore up their courage, but he doubted it would matter.

*Everything returns to dirt. All that remains is theater.*

"My apologies, gentlemen." Nolyn tried to sound as gallant as possible. "It appears you are to be sacrificed along with me, and for that, I'm sincerely sorry."

"What do you mean, Your Highness?" Jerel DeMardefeld asked. Nolyn remembered *his* name because it sounded as absurdly dignified as he looked. DeMardefeld stood out from the rest by virtue of his exceptional plate armor and polished weapons, making even Nolyn appear a pauper. At that moment, the impeccably bedecked soldier stared incredulously, as if Nolyn had just declared the sun was but a lie.

Nolyn took a breath. "I'm about to be assassinated, and because someone wants my death to be seen as a casualty of war, all of you have the misfortune of joining me." He frowned, felt the need to say more, and added, "You deserve better."

They didn't break, which surprised Nolyn. Legions were held together by discipline and faith in the infallibility of their leaders, even unfamiliar ones. By admitting defeat, he'd cut those invisible bonds. They were free to run, to panic, or if nothing else, to at least complain. Instead, they remained silent, though their eyes shifted to the ground.

*Dirt. They're all thinking the same thing—this day has forced everyone to become a philosopher.*

"I don't understand," the First Spear said. "If that's true, why didn't you take the horse? Why send the scout? It'll take days for any help to arrive, and we only have hours. You've thrown away your only hope of escape."

“Did I? What a fool I am.” Nolyn moved to a fallen tree and began breaking off dead branches. “What’s your name, First Spear?”

“Amicus, sir.”

“Well, Amicus, you’re a very bright man.” Nolyn snapped another stick. “Which is why I’m turning command of this squadron over to you.”

“Me? But *you’re* the prymus, sir.”

“Not anymore. You’re going to do your best to lead these men to safety. I’m going to stay here and build a nice fire.”

“Oh, no, sir!” one of the others said. Nolyn didn’t know his name, either, but the spike on his helmet declared he was the squadron’s Second Spear. “You can’t do that, sir. You’ll bring the goblins for sure. Building a fire is like hanging a lantern in a swamp. You’ll draw in a cloud of ghazel, but these pests have four-inch claws and fangs.”

“That’s what he wants,” Jerel said with absolute conviction. “He plans to distract the ghazel to help us escape.”

Nolyn picked up another branch and snapped it in half, tossing both pieces onto a small pile. As he did, Jerel DeMardefeld took out his hatchet and started chopping wood.

“You don’t have to do that,” Nolyn told him.

Jerel only smiled at him and then at Amicus.

In reply, Amicus frowned, set his shield on the ground, then scratched the bristle on his neck. He addressed Nolyn. “Are you certain you’re the emperor’s son? Because . . .” He looked down the narrow trail where the scout had gone. “It’s not normal for the likes of you to sacrifice yourself for people like us. It’s always the other way around.”

“Not normal at all,” Jerel added as he cleaved a thick branch in half.

“Oh, really?” Nolyn said. “You’re both such experts. As I’m the *only* child of Nyphron, who are you comparing me with?”

“I just meant . . .” Amicus apparently didn’t know what he meant and concluded his absent thought by folding his arms.

“You’re wasting time. Sun’s going down.” This was merely a guess. Nolyn wasn’t certain how late it was. In the jungles of Calynia, time was difficult to gauge. Except for the one diminishing shaft of sunlight, the leafy canopy blocked the sky.

“You honestly want us to abandon you? So we”—Amicus gestured to the others—“can get away?”

Nolyn shrugged. “Look, it’s not like I’m loving the idea, but it’s your best chance. So yeah, that’s pretty much it. I stay, build a big fire, make a lot of noise, and invite as many unwanted guests as I can. Might help, certainly can’t hurt.”

“Wait a minute.” Amicus looked down the trail, then whirled back on Nolyn. “Everette’s the youngest. Is that why you sent him on the horse?”

*Everette—is that his name?* Nolyn thought. *By Mar, I’m terrible with names. Faces I do okay with, not bad at numbers, but names . . .*

“That’d be my guess,” Jerel said. His smile turned into a grin, which was still directed at Amicus.

The First Spear glared back. “Oh, shut up. This has nothing to do with you and your delusions.”

Jerel shrugged and returned to chopping wood.

Amicus started shaking his head. “No, I’m not buying it. None of it.” His voice picked up an edge of anger. “You don’t even know us. Besides, you’re the prince, an officer, and a—” He stopped.

Nolyn lifted his sight from the woodpile to look at the First Spear. “Yes? Go on.”

The soldier refused to reply. He stared, his face a grim shield.

“Well, say it, First Spear. What am I?”

Amicus remained silent.

“We’re all likely to die. And although I’m new to Calynia, I’ve fought the ghazel for far longer than you can imagine. I suspect we both know what they do to their enemies. I can’t punish you any more than they. So go on, speak your mind. Tell me. What am I?”



“One of *them*,” Amicus said. “An Instarya.”

“Ah.” Nolyn presented a judicial smile and nodded. “Honestly, I didn’t know which way you were going to go with that. Could have been elf, or Fhrey, or privileged—none of which are true, by the way, and that includes Instarya.”

“Your father is Emperor Nyphron, leader of the Fhrey warrior clan. That makes you one, too.”

“You’re forgetting Persephone.” He paused, still holding two sticks destined for the fire. “It’s been over eight hundred years since my mother died, so I suppose it’s understandable—depressing but expected. A lot of people have forgotten her.” He threw the sticks into the pile. “She was the one who named me. Do you know what *Nolyn* means?”

“I know it’s Fhrey.”

“It means ‘no-land.’ It means I don’t belong anywhere. My father was Fhrey, but my mother was human, which makes me . . . what? Both? Neither? Something else entirely?” His voice was raised. “You’re pointing the finger. You tell me, First Spear, what *am* I? I’d honestly like to know.”

That shut him up. Amicus sighed, and with one more look at Jerel, he removed his helmet.

Nolyn saw doubt, deep grooves lining his brow, but . . . he looked familiar.

*Is this the first time I’ve seen him without the helm?*

Studying his unfettered face, Nolyn was convinced he’d seen the First Spear of the Seventh Legion’s Sikaria Auxiliary Squadron before. But Nolyn couldn’t place where. The memory was as elusive as names had always proven to be.

“Amicus? We going?” the Second Spear asked.

For a moment, he didn’t answer. His sight tracked to Nolyn with an irritated, almost hateful, glare. “No. We’re staying.”

Nolyn shook his head in disbelief. “This is ridiculous. You’re all going to die because of what? Honor? Decency? Duty?”

“You started it.”

Nolyn sighed. “Stupid is what it is.” He looked down the trail. “I doubt even Everette will escape. They know we can’t get out any other way, so the ghazel will come at us from upriver, corking our way out.”

Amicus nodded. “In the dark, they’ll expect us to run blindly and become separated. Easy pickings is what they’re hoping for.” He looked down at the little pile of wood Nolyn had assembled. “But with a *big* fire to help us *see* . . .”

Nolyn considered this. “The Durat Ran ghazel from the north hate bright lights. Living in mountain caves makes their big eyes overly sensitive. How is it here?”

Amicus gestured at the jungle canopy. “Same way with the Gur Um Ran. Jungles are dark, too.”

Nolyn nodded. “And I suppose if we put our backs to the cliff and had the river in front . . .”

“Then we would narrow their access,” Amicus finished. “Reduce the benefit of their numbers, negate their advantage.”

Nolyn looked around. “They’ll send—what do you think? A hundred daku?”

“They aren’t called that here,” the Second Spear said. “The Gur Um Ran call their veteran warriors zaphers. And it will be more like two hundred.”

Nolyn looked at the man. “I swear I have the worst memory for names. Have you told me yours?”

“Yes, sir. Back in Urlineus, sir.”

“Tell me again, will you?”

“Riley Glot, sir.”

“Thank you, Riley. And two hundred you say? Since there are twenty of us, we’ll *only* need to kill ten each,” he said sarcastically, then regretted it. This wasn’t the time to weaken morale. “I mean, that shouldn’t be a problem, right?” he added with as much enthusiasm as he could muster.

“Oh, absolutely, sir,” Riley said, with more sincerity than Nolyn expected. “With Amicus, we ought to—”

The First Spear coughed.

“Ought to what?” Nolyn asked.

Riley didn’t offer any more.

“Is there something I should know?” Nolyn pressed. “I only ask because, well, since you aren’t abandoning me, I remain the commander of this squadron. Our chance of survival is somewhere between nonexistent and iffy, so if there’s something that could help, perhaps you’d like to share?”

Again, Riley stared at Amicus. This time they all did.

“The squad appears to be tossing the ball to you, First Spear,” Nolyn said. “What’s your play?”

Amicus glared back at the men around him but offered no explanation.

*I saw him in a crowd, Nolyn realized, a big one, an event of some kind.*

Nolyn studied the annoyingly familiar man. Like the rest, the First Spear was laden with armor, a javelin, dagger, and survival gear weighing nearly sixty-five pounds. This was a heavy load to bear through a sweltering jungle, so it struck Nolyn as odd that Amicus chose to carry additional weight. The man wore three swords. One on each hip and a third—a giant one—strapped to his back. First Spears were responsible for the men of their squadron. As such, they often carried extra bandages, food, or liquor, which they handed out as needed. Packing two extra swords was an odd choice, particularly the big one, which could be of little use in the dense jungle.

*Three swords!* The thought finally registered. *Of course! That’s what he’s famous for.*

“What is your full name, Amicus?”

The First Spear’s frown increased. He shot pointed looks at his fellow soldiers.

“You have one, don’t you? A family name?” Nolyn chuckled at the man’s reluctance. “Come now, the Arrow of Death is hurtling our way. What tale will any of us tell?”

After a deep sigh, Amicus said, “Killian.”

Amicus was a common name, but *Killian* was not, and *everyone* knew Amicus Killian.

“What are you doing here?”

He glared once more at his fellows. “I was hiding.”



Nolyn had fought the Fir Ran, Fen Ran, and Durat Ran ghazel in the forests, swamps, and mountains of Avrlyn, but even after centuries, he still wasn’t certain if goblins were truly nocturnal. Ghazel attacked at night because they saw better than men in the dark. Even when the legions attacked in daylight, the battles were never easy because the ghazel’s homes and camps were always located in dim, gloomy places where they had the advantage. Light was an ally of the legion, but on this day, the Seventh Sikaria Auxiliary Squadron struggled in the fading dusk to build a fire.

The wet wood was stubborn. Gleefully eager to become dirt, it had no desire to turn to ash.

Three teams labored with bow, spindle, drill, and fire board. Two groups used knife blades scraped along flint files. The rest had cut and dragged logs to the base of a V-shaped fissure in the cliff. The crevice provided the walls for their makeshift fortress, which would hopefully have a fire for its moat.

As darkness descended, the men worked by feel, and even Nolyn could barely see his own hands. Fhrey saw almost as well as goblins in the dark. This improved eyesight was one of the few gifts Nolyn inherited from his father, but the jungle’s triple canopy made it difficult even for him. The men had to be blind. The squadron was deathly silent while the sound of drilling and scraping argued with the wood.

A communal sigh was released when the flicker of an infant flame cast back the darkness. A drilling team had beaten the flint scrapers.

*Sometimes the old ways work best.*

As that baby flame was raised to a toddler by a community of well-wishers, Nolyn took the time he had left to get to know his men. He shook hands with each, asking who they were. Names remained slippery fish that his mind couldn't hold on to. Instead, he focused on *who* they were: a runaway slave; a murderer fleeing the gallows; a fourth-generation soldier; a part-time thief and full-time gambler; an idealist; a drought-suffering farmer; a young son of a poor Calynian woman who struggled to feed her family.

Many called the nearby provinces home, but some came from as far away as western Warica. Most were there because the military was their best option to make money and obtain status. Shiny Jerel DeMardefeld remained unique in his lack of need, and if Nolyn was to guess, he would suspect Jerel had joined the legion out of boredom. The Second Spear, Riley Glot, *whose name rhymes with dryly rot*, offered up that Jerel was *different*, but the man declined to say more. In addition to Amicus Killian, Jerel DeMardefeld, and Riley Glot, *whose name also rhymes with wily plot*, Nolyn managed to commit to memory the names of Paladeious and Greig, two giant-sized men whom Amicus had suggested should be stationed on the right and left flanks. Amicus, Riley, and a dark-tanned bear of a man called Azuriah Myth would form up in the center. Nolyn remembered Myth's name because it bordered on comical and sounded entirely made up.

"I've never been to Percepliquis," a young Calynian lamented. This was the destitute one who sent his pay to his mother living in a hovel somewhere outside Dagastan. Although not personally acquainted with the eastern coastal city, Nolyn knew enough that the term *city* was more than generous; it was wishful. And a *hovel* in that neighborhood must be an extremely humble home. The soldier admitted he was only nineteen, but he looked to be thirty. His black curly hair and

matching beard hid his youth, but his eyes seemed weary—they had seen too much too soon. Like most people from that region, his name was complicated and not only difficult to remember but impossible to pronounce. Knowing a lost cause when he saw one, Nolyn didn't bother trying. Instead, he mentally designated him *the Poor Calynian*.

"Is the city as incredible as they say?" the lad continued. "I've heard the roads are perfectly straight and don't get muddy, and that water, clean and clear, can be summoned into people's houses at will. It must be wonderful."

"Yes, it is," Nolyn replied because he knew that from the Poor Calynian's viewpoint it would be seen that way. But Nolyn knew the empire's capital was something else entirely.

"I thought one day I might see it. You know, as part of a victory parade or something. But this war . . ."

"Never ends?" Nolyn finished for him, then nodded. "We've been fighting it for over four hundred years."

"That long?" He scratched his beard. "I'll never see Percepliquis."

The first volley of arrows came without warning, clattering off nearby rocks. An arm's length from Nolyn, a man died instantly as an arrow pierced his eye and punched out the back of his skull. Paladeious, that mountain of a man, grunted as a wooden shaft hit him in the thigh. He stayed on his feet, and with an angry growl, he snapped the black-feathered end off.

"Shields!" Amicus shouted. The men responded and the second volley thundered against a wall of wood.

Only then did Nolyn notice the Poor Calynian on the ground. The young man had been struck in the first volley. An arrow had hit him in the face while he was scratching his beard. The shaft pierced his hand before continuing through both cheeks. The arrow remained in his mouth like a bit on a horse. He rocked on his knees, a hand pinned to his cheek.

“Don’t move,” Nolyn ordered. Pulling his dagger, he cut the end from the arrow. Then he gripped the Poor Calynian’s head and jerked the shaft out. The soldier’s face and mouth were slick with blood, but there wasn’t as much as Nolyn had expected. Incredibly, the arrow had missed the man’s tongue, jaw, and teeth—a miracle wound: *all flesh and no bone*, as the saying went. The Poor Calynian kept his wits and quickly wrapped a strip of cloth around his face.

*These men are well trained.* Nolyn looked to Amicus Killian, who stood directly before him. *That’s because he taught them.*

The shrieks came next—a high-pitched jagged set of cries. The sound was all too familiar, and like teeth scraping metal, the noise set Nolyn on edge. The foul creatures flooded out of the darkness like a swarm of wasps. They skittered from the dense maw of the jungle, their talons clicking. A sickly yellow glow rose behind oval pupils. Their hunched backs, powerful arms, and mouths filled with row upon row of needle-sharp teeth were the shared nightmare of all legionnaires, the unwanted souvenir that survivors brought home.

The standard battle maneuver employed by the legion was the Triple Line, a combat system whose evolution Nolyn had personally witnessed. The ancient phalanx, with its rigid devotion to straight lines and long spears, had given way to the more flexible javelin assault followed by a shoulder to shoulder wall of shields defended by short swords. Each row had a commander. The first line was designated for fodder, the inexperienced and ill equipped. The second group usually consisted of the strong and young, and the third comprised the veterans. The standard station for a *prymus* was on his horse in the rear, giving him a clear view of the battle. With only enough men for two lines, Amicus commanded the first and Nolyn the second.

The First Spear positioned himself at the center, becoming the prow of their little ship that braced against an angry sea. This was unconventional, and while brave, it was also ill advised for a commander to make himself the focal point of the attack. Nolyn considered

intervening, but experience taught him not to second-guess a First Spear's instincts—especially when the prymus was new to the region.

Amicus ordered the flight of javelins, the effectiveness of which was difficult to gauge in the dark. Then the men closed ranks. Trapped as they were, the first line's unenviable task was to become an impenetrable wall, denying the enemy all opportunities. As the goblins advanced, Amicus inexplicably dropped his shield and broke the line. He stepped forward while drawing two swords. If it had been anyone else, Nolyn would have ordered him back, concluding the soldier had panicked. But this wasn't the first time the prymus had seen Amicus Killian fight.

That had been years before when everyone in Percepliquis had crowded into the Imperial Arena to witness the *Battle of the Century*, as it had been promoted throughout the city—the day a lowly human fought an Instarya, one of the best fighters of the invincible Fhrey warrior tribe. Nolyn had attended the spectacle with Sephryn. As prince, he could have sat in the High Box, but the two had chosen to stand in the Common Field. The view was limited but the energy amazing. During a competition that was as much an act of rebellion as entertainment, everyone saw where the heir and the councilwoman stood—shoulder to shoulder with humans.

The fight became the stuff of legend.

Amicus Killian had fought Abryll Orphe, son of Plymerath, the legendary hero from the Great War. Abryll, dressed in shimmering bronze armor, danced about the arena, his blue cloak and long blond hair flowing. Amicus didn't move. Dressed in only a leather skirt, bracers, and simple sandals, he waited—a sword in each hand and that huge one on his back. He'd used them in every arena battle where, over the course of three short years, he had become the most famous warrior in the world. Holding Sephryn's hand on that day, Nolyn learned why. Now, trapped in a dead-end canyon by the light of a now adult fire, he witnessed the inconceivable again.



The enemy spotted Amicus and the door he held open in the ranks. They rushed Amicus, coming two at a time. Caught in the narrow cleft and blocked by the fire, there wasn't room for more. With an economy of movement, Amicus wasted no step, swing, glance, or even breath. Every action was purposeful, as if he performed a practiced-to-perfection choreography. Watching him, seeing how the fighter was two steps ahead of his opponents in each encounter, Nolyn recalled the man's famous nickname—the one the crowds had chanted in the arena: PRO-PHET! PRO-PHET! PRO-PHET!

*He sees the future, Nolyn thought. Nothing else can explain it.*

Never off-balance or in doubt, the man moved with simple grace: thrust, slice, block, jab. All of it looked so easy. The ghazel appeared as trivial as children with sticks. But while it had been in a different war, Nolyn had faced their kind in numerous battles, and he knew all too well their strength, speed, and cunning. And yet, they fell in pairs before Amicus's twin blades. Two, four, six . . . the carcasses piled up.

"That's ten," Riley called back. "He's already met *his* quota."

Why they kept charging puzzled Nolyn. Maybe they thought Amicus would tire? Or perhaps slaying the one who had killed so many would elevate the victor? The most likely answer was that his lack of shield and unprotected position ahead of the line was too tempting to resist. Whatever the reason, they continued to come, two by two, left and right. And they died in sets. It took a surprisingly long time for their mass slaughter to abate. By then, a wall of bodies had stacked up, impeding their forward advance. The ghazel finally found a solution to their problem, and another hail of arrows flew past the fire.

This was where the tide ought to have turned. Buried beneath the corpses, Amicus had no shield to raise. Instead, he ducked behind the pile of bodies. In that instant, Nolyn realized the full extent of the unfathomable martial genius of Amicus Killian. The man hadn't merely defended his life against waves of powerful enemies; he had planned where each body needed to fall. He'd killed every goblin in the precise

place to build a defense against the assault of arrows that he knew would eventually arrive. The man wasn't just *two steps* ahead of his enemies, he was *miles beyond* them.

*PRO-PHET! PRO-PHET! PRO-PHET!*

After two fruitless volleys, the battle paused. The fire blazed, and from the darkness of the far side, the ominous clicking drone of frustration rose.

*Stalemate. Although it'll be short-lived.*

Being trapped and unable to feed the fire, they would see their only source of light die. But it was full-grown now, a proper bonfire fed by the logs Paladeious and Greig had added. It might last until dawn, but daylight wouldn't save them. Even with Amicus's amazing feat, they were still significantly outnumbered.

No one spoke. All eyes peered through the dancing flames, struggling to spot what the shifting shadows were up to.

Amicus remained in his gruesome fortress of death, swords in hand.

*He doesn't even look winded.*

Nolyn checked on the Poor Calynian. The lad's bandage, which made him look like a gagged prisoner, was soaked with blood, but it didn't drip. Nolyn pulled one of his bandages from his belt pouch and wrapped the boy's wounded hand.

"Tanks," the poor Calynian managed to say around his bandaged mouth. "Gonna 'ave to fight left-'anded."

"Can you?"

The kid shrugged. "Find out soon, aye?"

Nolyn was hoping they wouldn't. If Amicus could maintain his amazing performance, there was a chance they would see sunlight at least one more time—and with it, a clear picture of their foes. In the Erbon jungle, it was tempting to think of the ghazel as animals, mindless beasts that could be stymied by the complexities of doors, fires, and a single-man slaughterhouse.

Nolyn knew better.

Ghazel were as cunning as men—more so—and once again, they proved it. The entire Seventh Sikaria Auxiliary Squadron cursed the moment they heard the chants. Everyone knew what that meant: oberdaza.

The goblins had a witch doctor, one of the crazed little wretches dressed in feathers and beads who danced and summoned dark magic. Their presence was never welcomed. No one knew exactly what to expect—that was part of their terror. The squadron might be swallowed by the ground they stood on or struck dead by lightning. They had to wait for the chant to end to discover their fate.

The answer came in the form of a rumble, a deep growl as if the jungle had grown angry. Loud and powerful, the ground shook with the noise.

*No, it's the ground's movement making the sounds.* Nolyn felt shards of rock strike him, and he turned. Behind them, the cliff's face quivered. Pebbles became rocks as the wall cracked and splintered. Then the fire suddenly went out, as if a giant had blown on a candle.

Choices became simple.

"Legionnaires!" Nolyn shouted while raising his sword. "Charge!"

He had no idea if anyone listened or if they could hear him in that crash of rock and drone of clacking claws. All he saw was shadows and vague rushing shapes. Nolyn sprinted straight ahead over the hot coals, hoping to avoid death by a rockslide. The crash shook the ground. A blast of powdered rock and a hail of stones followed.

Ahead, the darkness was filled with glowing sets of yellow eyes that darted like fireflies. A pair flashed directly before Nolyn. He instinctively ducked and stabbed. Claws breezed overhead as his blade punched into flesh. Pulling it free, Nolyn ran on. Faint moonlight dribbled in, revealing outlines of leaves and hunched shoulders. Hundreds of years of battle granted Nolyn his own sixth sense, and he blindly dodged, swung, and killed as he advanced. Without warning a stunning blow

rang his helm and threw Nolyn to the ground. Remaining motionless was suicide, so while he was still working out which way was up, he log-rolled into a tree. Scrambling to the far side, he heard something hit the trunk. With an even chance of success, Nolyn thrust to the left and was rewarded with a cry.

Clearheaded once more, he sprinted into the darkness, but he'd lost all sense of direction. He might be running back to the cleft or out into the canyon. Neither mattered; moving was the important thing. Listening for voices, telltale sounds that could help him regroup, he heard screams from every direction. They were scattered, the battle lost.

Striking an unseen log with his knee, Nolyn went down again. His teeth clamped against a cry. He rolled beneath the fallen tree and waited for the pain to subside. Cries cut the night, but they were distant and fading until . . .

Nothing.

Around him, stillness reigned.

*I'm alone.*

Nolyn pulled himself deeper beneath the massive log and waited. He was dug in, partially buried, and filling his nostrils was the overwhelming smell of dirt.

# About the Author

Michael J. Sullivan is a *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *Washington Post* bestselling author who has been nominated for nine 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*. Grim Oak Press distributes the last three books of the series, and they are titled *Age of Legend*, *Age of Death*, and *Age of Emyre*.

Michael is now writing The Rise and the Fall Trilogy. These three books are set in his fictional world of Elan and cover a historical period after the Legends of the First Empire and before the Riyria Chronicles.

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