



The New York Times Bestselling Author

MICHAEL J. SULLIVAN

THE RISE AND FALL - BOOK THREE

ESRAFIADDON

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This book is dedicated to Patrick Brunett and Cheryl Skynar. To my knowledge, they are the only childhood friends who have read any of my books.

About the Book

A HERO TO SOME. A VILLAIN TO MANY. THE TRUTH FOREVER BURIED.

The man who became known as Esrahaddon is reported to have destroyed the world's greatest empire — but there are those who believe he saved it. Few individuals are as divisive, but all agree on three facts: He was exiled to the wilderness, hunted by a goblin priestess, and sentenced to death by a god — all before the age of eight. How he managed to survive and why people continued to fear his name a thousand years later has always been a mystery . . . until now.

From the three-time *New York Times* best-selling author Michael J. Sullivan, *Esrabaddon* is the final novel in The Rise and Fall trilogy. This latest set of stories sits snugly between the Legends of the First Empire series and the Riyria books (Revelations and Chronicles). With this tale, Michael continues his tradition of unlikely heroes who must rise to the call when history knocks, demanding to be let in. This is the nineteenth full-length novel in a body of work that started in 2008 and spans four series.

CHAPTER ONE

Tigerwolves

“This is all your fault, boy,” his father said, glaring down at him. Eleja was a big man by any standard, hard and fierce. His bare arms displayed lean muscle, while cracked hands adorned with callouses held tight to his hunting spear. To a seven-year-old boy, Eleja was a giant — an angry one.

Ezra said nothing.

Outside their little home, people were sobbing as the sun set and the last light faded. The men had spent all day making more walls, trying to defend their tiny village. But even as young as Ezra was, he knew the bamboo-and-jungo-leaf panels provided only the illusion of a barrier. Maybe that was all they would need. After all, animals weren't smart. Ezra wasn't either, but even he could tell the village defenses would be useless.

The tigerwolves, the largest and meanest kind of hyena, had begun their high-pitched squeals and chuckling laughter as soon as the sun vanished and shadows flooded the valley. There were more of them that night, many more than before, and they were closer. Their sounds scared Ezra. Animals shouldn't cackle.

Ezra, his two sisters, an aunt, and her two boys remained inside their mud-grass-and-stick house — ordered there by his father. To Ezra, their home, like the jungo-leaf barriers, provided only the illusion of shelter. The door was nothing but a woven mat that rolled up on a string.

Animals might not be smart, he thought, but they aren't stupid.

Maybe some hyenas were. They certainly looked dim-witted with their high shoulders and low-slung heads. But the striped ones, the tigerwolves, were cunning and vicious. And like dogs, they could dig. So if the mat door managed to fool them, they could go under it or through the walls.

The home was cramped and smelled of smoke and tulan, which was drying among the rafters. Members of Haddon Village harvested and sold the red leaves in exchange for salt and fish oil at the seaside town of Shahabad. But this year the crop was thin. The wet season had been dry. Rivers became rock gullies and lakes little more than circles of cracked mud. Haddon had seen droughts before, or so Ezra had been told. The last had been seven years ago—a few months after Ezra was born. He was told the animals had come then, too. That time it had been a pride of lions. Some days nothing would happen. As many as three nights might go by, and people would talk about the terror being over. Then someone else would disappear. The cats were quiet and quick. Fifteen villagers had been killed that year. Ezra's mother had been one of them—the last one.

Ezra had been with her. She was gathering abbra berries and rom nuts along the eaves of the forest. She didn't dare go in, everyone knew the Erbon Forest was a place of unspeakable horrors. Some had names. Others did not. A narrow trail through an open field connected the village of Haddon to the port city of Shahabad. This trail and the meadow they farmed were considered safe, and people stuck to them. Only hunting parties went under the forest canopy, and those that ventured too deep never returned.

Ezra's mother had carried him in a basket and set her new son down in a patch of dry grass, then the lions attacked. They tore her apart. Ezra couldn't remember the moment—not really. His information came from an after-the-fact retelling by village elders who had found Monsara's shredded body. His blanket, they said, was sprayed with her blood. The mystery that remained from that day, the one that baffled everyone, was why the starving lions had ignored a helpless baby. It made no sense for them to attack his mother when he was so easy to snatch. But even more curious was why the pride had left Monsara's body behind and had chosen that moment to leave Haddon Village for good. No one had answers, but many made guesses. Ezra's father was one of them.

"This is all your fault, boy," his father said again, perhaps thinking Ezra hadn't heard him the first time, even though Ezra stood close enough to feel the

spray of his spit. There was sweat, too. His father's skin glistened and drips gathered, rolling over the hills and gullies of Eleja's wrinkled forehead and entering the forest of bushy brows that ran together, joining forces in their reproach of Ezra. "Did you call them?"

"What?" Tadesha asked, confused. Ezra's aunt had her arms around her two little boys, pulling them close as they huddled on the mat beside the pit. The three were rocking and praying to Novron for protection. "The tigerwolves?"

The old man didn't answer. He continued to stare at Ezra, who shook his head. This did nothing to satisfy his father. "You're doing it again. I know you are. You brought lions to kill your mother, and called the tigerwolves for the rest of us."

"The drought brought the animals," Tadesha said softly.

"And just like before, *Ezrrrah* made the drought," Eleja declared, dragging out his son's name as if it were a lie that needed to be exposed to the light of day.

"No. I didn't," Ezra whispered.

"He's always been trouble," Eleja went on, talking to Tadesha or maybe to himself, possibly to Novron. Everyone else was speaking to the god that night, and his father was as faithful as they came. The family had little, but Eleja always found a coin to put into the wooden box at the church in Shahabad. "Not a bit like Kede, Nocea, Jaomo, and Ado."

"He's seven."

"All *my* sons are strong and tall, brave and fit." Eleja waved his left hand out and up in a violent motion. "This one is sickly and weak. He picks at his food, stays in the house, and draws pictures on the walls instead of learning to fight and hunt."

"He's seven," she repeated, but without much conviction.

"That may be, but he *is not* my son. He's . . . he's something else."

This wasn't the first time Ezra had heard this. Eleja often told the other men of the village that his wife had been unfaithful. He proclaimed her death was Novron's punishment for her wickedness. But maybe this was the first time Tadesha had heard, or perhaps she simply didn't like him speaking ill of her dead sister.

"You're crazy," Tadesha said, her voice rising. "What are you accusing Monsara of? My sister was a good woman! And Ezra isn't *something else*, he's just a boy. What do you think he is?"

"The forest is full of awful things. And if the village suffers, it's all *his* fault."

Tadesha straightened herself. She was a bony woman with a skull-like face dominated by sunken eyes and yellow teeth. Everyone said she was so devoted to

her deceased husband, Blar, that she refused to take another man after he died. But Ezra thought Tadesha was alone because no other man wanted her. People said that Blar was old and no great prize, but it was also said that Tadesha had been lucky to have him — luckier still that he gave her a pair of sons before passing.

With a final, hateful glare, Ezra's father left the house, dragging the butt of his spear and leaving a line in the dirt beside a set of bare footprints that led away — footprints Ezra knew he could never fill.

When Ezra turned back, Tadesha was hugging his cousins, Jaydan and Nomax, so tight they winced. She stared at Ezra with cold eyes. She *had* been supporting her sister's memory, not defending her nephew..

Maybe she agrees with Father. What is she seeing when she looks at me? And who am I if I'm not Eleja's son?



The attack came later that night.

Ezra had managed to fall asleep on his mat beside the big water urn. The woven carpet of grass that had belonged to his mother was thin and frayed. It had an ugly, rusty zigzag pattern that didn't quite line up, a stain that smelled of dung and sweat, and a corner that continuously threatened to unravel. The mat was also his most beloved and cherished possession — the only connection to the one person who had loved him.

His other two treasures were a clay cup and a colorful feather. The misshapen mug had been cast aside because a chip and a crack made it leak. The feather, Ezra had found about a year ago near the big rock. Almost a foot long, the feather was bright yellow and blue, and Ezra thought it had to be the most beautiful thing ever. He'd never seen a bird with feathers such as that. Imagining that it must be magnificent, he'd tried drawing the bird on the walls of his house, guessing at its wondrous shape. Ezra hoped someone might see the drawing and say, "Oh, that's a *something-something* bird," giving him the chance to ask questions and learn where he might catch sight of one. That never happened. He considered showing the feather around and inquiring about it, but he was afraid someone would steal it, or — and he felt this to be the worst possibility — that they would know exactly what kind of bird it came from and claim it was nothing special. He feared this because the feather *was* special. Too beautiful to be of the village, it had to come

from someplace else, someplace better. A softer world of brilliant colors, where things with such magnificent plumage could fly. Ezra often imagined that the feather had been left just for him. That the bird had dropped it in his path as a sign, or perhaps a message. What the bird was trying to tell him was a mystery, something for Ezra to figure out. He kept the plume under his inherited mat, taking it out only when he was alone. Looking at it made him grin, and because of that power, he knew it was magic.

That was the other reason he kept the feather hidden. Magic was evil. Ezra's father and Novron, the Son of Maribor, had said so. Any magic—even reading—was forbidden. Once, a Monk of Maribor had come to their village. Everyone was happy to see him until they noticed he carried books. The village elders sent him on his way, calling him a sorcerer of Uberlin. A goat was slaughtered that night and every building painted with its blood to purify the village. For weeks afterward, conversations centered on the evils of the outside world and on how fortunate they were to live in such a blessed place as Haddon.

If a Monk of Maribor is cast out for having books, what would the elders do to a boy hiding a magic feather? Not to mention a boy who had killed his own mother? Or was it Novron who killed her as punishment? He would never dare ask, but he guessed his father would say, both were true. That was the way with Eleja.

Ezra couldn't tell if it was the screams or the growls that woke him. The sounds were similar. The throaty snarl of a striped tigerwolf was much like a man groaning out in anguish. Such a noise was a terrible thing to wake up to, and Ezra's eyes snapped open. Most of the cries came from outside where a big fire had been built. But one issued from across the room. This wasn't the growl of a tigerwolf; it was the scream of Aunt Tadesha.

Her prayers to Novron had not worked. Ezra watched as his aunt was jerked by her foot. Using a series of violent tugs, a huge tigerwolf with wild eyes, hauled his aunt toward the doorway. She screamed and kicked at the beast with her free foot while she clawed the floor, digging shallow lines in the packed dirt as out the door she went.

The tigerwolf didn't have the slightest trouble getting past the mat on the string.

Cowering, abandoned by both Novron and their mother, Ezra's cousins cried. Ezra did, too. The night was filled with screaming—screaming, crying, growling . . . and laughing. But only the animals laughed.

Ezra's brothers weren't there. Older and armed with spears, they would be fighting. His sisters weren't around, either. They both had men now, and that night they were with their new families. With Tadesha gone, Ezra was alone with the wailing Jaydan and Nomax.

Shut up! he screamed in his head. *You're just asking for —*

Another tigerwolf entered. It ducked its dog-like head under the doormat, lifting it up to look inside. One of its eyes was blind and milky. Its ears were big, like a bat. And its fur—all around its face—was soaked with blood that dripped from long chin hairs that created a deep-red beard.

Is that Aunt Tadesha on its face?

Framed in the firelight, creeping in slowly, the beast kept its head low, shoulders high, tail tucked.

It's not an animal at all. This is one of those Awful Things that Father said the forest was full of.

The blind, milky eye looked at the screaming cousins, and the animal showed its teeth.

"No!" Ezra shouted.

The monster's head turned, and its good eye found him.

Ezra felt under the mat, and drew forth the feather. He pointed it at the animal. The plume was long and drooped lazily—quivering. "Stay away!"

With labored wet breaths that smelled of rotting meat, the beast took a step toward Ezra. Then it crouched, growled, and finally cackled.

Terrified and expecting to die, all Ezra wanted was for it to stop laughing—for all of them to stop making that noise..

Another tigerwolf entered the house, then another.

They all laughed.

Ezra continued to point his feather, but closed his eyes. "*Stop it!*" he screamed. "*Stop it! Stop it!*"

The laughing ended, and the tearing began.



Ezra woke on his back in the center of the village with the sun on his face. He wasn't alone. A circle of men surrounded him. All the elders were there. So was his father.

“See?” Eleja said, pointing down at him. “What did I tell you?”

The others nodded with serious expressions.

“Not a scratch,” Kenja said. He was the Chief Elder, the biggest and oldest, and on his shoulders was the drape of the leopard skin that went by the name of the Great Oska.

The men stood shoulder to shoulder in a ring, and above them was the blue sky and a high sun that told Ezra he had been sleeping a good while.

“What happened?” he asked.

They ignored him.

A fire was burning somewhere—a big one. Ezra could hear snapping and crackling. He heard crying, too, but that was faint and muffled. Inside a house, perhaps. In the gaps between the fence of men’s legs, all he was able to see was smoke.

“What do we do?” Ashah, the Second Elder, asked while holding his spear in two hands.

When Kenja hesitated, Ezra’s father spoke up. “He must be killed.”

Who? Ezra thought. *Me? Why?*

“He’s just a boy,” Kenja said.

“He is not,” Eleja declared. “He’s a demon spawn. That’s why trouble always comes—he draws it, causes it! He’s the reason for the drought that saw fifteen of us die. And now this.” His father shook his head in disgust. “So twisted even a lion refused to eat him. Only a child, but he’s as evil as a new moon is dark.”

Several of the elders nodded at this.

It is me. I’m the one. My father wants me dead.

“What happened?” Ezra asked again, more earnestly this time, but once more they acted as if they couldn’t hear.

“We cannot kill him,” Kenja said. “It is dangerous. We all saw that.”

“Should have listened to me. Should have killed him while he slept,” Eleja said. His lips were wet, his teeth showing, and he breathed hard as if he’d been running, but there was no sweat on him.

“Wouldn’t have mattered,” Kenja proclaimed. “The lions didn’t kill him. The hyenas couldn’t either. There must be a reason for that. He is protected. Trying to harm him would only bring wrath.”

“Novron will protect us.”

“If Novron wants this boy dead, then he can do it.” Kenja clapped his hands. “We shall banish him. Give him to the forest.”

“A child cannot hope to survive in the Erbon —” Ashah said.

“Not a child,” Eleja said. “A demon spawn. We need to —”

“Novron will decide,” Kenja declared, and clapped his hands once more in judgment. He faced Ashah. “Or do you suggest that our Lord, the Son of Maribor, cannot protect an innocent child, should he so wish?”

“He’s not innocent.” Eleja spoke with such frustration he spat with the effort.

“And are *you* saying Novron cannot kill a child—spawn of a demon or not—should it be his will?” Kenja asked.

Eleja panted and sputtered but said nothing more.

“What happened?” Ezra asked a third time, pleading for them to answer.

“How say you?” Kenja asked the elders, and each in turn nodded in agreement.

Ashah pulled Ezra to his feet. “Food and water?” he asked Kenja.

“Novron will provide, should it be his will,” Kenja said. Then for the first time, he addressed Ezra. “You will leave Haddon and never come back. If you do, we will try to kill you.”

Without another word, the circle of men dispersed, and Ezra could see what was left of the village. Most of the homes were gone, flattened as if by a mighty wind. The feeble walls the men had spent all day building lay as if blown outward. One was high in a tree at the edge of the clearing. The watchtowers were toppled, the stones of the well scattered, baskets and pottery flung in all directions. And everywhere, there were bodies. Some were villagers—Ezra spotted Tadesha, her throat ripped out—but most were the striped carcasses of tigerwolves. There might have been as many as fifty, but it was difficult to say. They appeared to have been torn apart.

The only building unaffected was Ezra’s home.

Not a scratch.

“Go,” Kenja ordered, and pointed at the forest. “Leave, and never come back.”

All the survivors of the village stared at him, Jaydan and Nomax among them. His cousins looked at Ezra in horror.

What did they see? What happened?



Ezra had nothing. His feather and cup were lost, and they were sending him away without even his mother's mat. All he had left was a single drape of plain cloth tied with a string. The garment measured less than his height in length and yet it was long enough to wrap twice around his waist and once between his legs. Seven years and three full moons old, and Ezra would be alone for the first time.

He cried all the way across the field, past the big rock where he had found the feather and up to the start of the forest where the great umbra trees held hands with stalks of jungo plants. Together they created an intimidating barrier that separated the world Ezra knew from oblivion. No one went into the forest except the bravest men, who hunted in troops of twenty, all armed with spears. Even they only ventured in to slay a single kapa, the long-nosed pig the village roasted on each of the Four Feast Days. The great Erbon Forest was no friend to the people of Haddon. It was the Other, the place from which all terrible things came.

Two men, Kenja's sons, had followed him. Tall, lean, and as stern as their father, the pair climbed atop the rock and watched as Ezra reached the eaves of the forest. They stared at him without a line of kindness on their faces.

"Why?" he half-shouted, half-cried, nose running. His hands squeezed into fists. His body shook.

One of Kenja's sons pointed firmly at the trees. The other folded his arms tight across his chest.

Ezra hitched a breath, lips quivering, eyes blurred. Turning, he looked at the shadow-line that divided the sunny brittle grasses and dusty patches of the field that had always been his home from the darkness of the unknown forest canopy. Ezra had never once been inside. Where he stood was as close as he had ever come, and that was with his mother—the day she died. He didn't know the exact spot. Many had told him, but they each mentioned different places. It didn't matter. Everyone agreed she had died at the eaves, and that's where he now stood.

He looked back once again, and once more received the insistent point and the folded arms.

Sobbing so hard that his stream of tears ran unchecked down his neck and chest, Ezra clutched his shoulders in resignation and stepped into the forest, into the darkness of shadow, into the Realm of Awful Things.



We hope you have enjoyed this sample chapter of *Esrabaddon*, the third and final book in the Rise and Fall series. The book will be launched with a Kickstarter beginning February 6th, 2023. Backers who pre-order the book will receive electronic copies in April, many months before the August 15th release date (for audio and ebook). There will be two versions of hardcovers produce. A faux-leather limited edition which can only be purchased from the author, and a regular hardcover which will be available through the retail chains starting in early December 2023.