

LORIAN ELLIS



OUT
OF THE
ASHES

★★★★★
MICHAEL J. SULLIVAN

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About the Book

WHAT DOES ONE DO AFTER THE WORLD ENDS?

That question plagues every imperial citizen after the destruction of the capital city of Percepliquis. How three pivotal people answer will determine the course of the world of Elan's future: one will come to understand that she was spared for a reason; another will resolve to become the ruler he was meant to be; and the third will risk everything to discover the fate of the nefarious wizard known as Esrahaddon. In this first book of a trilogy, a new era arises. Come to witness the trials and turmoil of a fading dream, but stay because one last hope struggles to bloom . . . out of the ashes.

In her debut novel, Lorian Ellis — a devotee of bestselling author Michael J. Sullivan — proves why he was wise to trust a complete unknown with a portion of his beloved multi-series epic. In the *After the Fall* trilogy, you'll uncover yet another panel in the tapestry that is *The Elan Saga* and witness the birth of a rising literary star.

While set in the interconnected world of Elan, this novel is designed as an independent story. You don't need to read any of the other thirty books in the saga, you'll just want to.

EXPERIENCE THE ENTIRE ELAN SAGA

- *The Riyria Revelations* (1-6) - completed
- *The Riyria Chronicles* (1-6) - ongoing
- *Legends of the First Empire* (1-6) - completed
- *Rise and Fall* (1-3) - completed
- *After the Fall* (1-3) - ongoing
- *The Cycle* (1-5) - coming 2028 . . . hopefully
- *The Elan Compendium & The Elan Short Story Anthology*

Out ^{OF} THE Ashes

BOOK ONE

After the Fall Series

Dedication

*To Mike, whose unforgettable characters first inspired
me to pick up a pen, and whose inexhaustible patience
and encouragement kept it in my hand.*

— Lorian Ellis

Online version: bit.ly/oota-map





Authors' Notes

Greetings and welcome to *After the Fall*! I'm Michael J. Sullivan, the creator of the Elan Saga and co-author of this new series. For those who have heard that I don't play well with others you may be surprised that I have collaborated with another author. Two things have made this possible. The most important of which was finding an amazing literary talent already in love with my work and whose authorial voice is remarkably similar to my own. The other is that Lorian proved to be an amazing apprentice knowing when to fight for her story and when to take my advice. There is so much I could say — and have said — about the origin of this joint venture, but I'll get to that after the story, so check out my Author's Afterword if you want to learn more. Not only does this reveal a behind-the-scenes look at how Lorian came to be involved, it also provides insights into the creative process. It's an amazing true story, and I hope you'll check it out.

One of the challenges with this series was making it accessible to new readers despite coming at the tail-end of twenty interconnected novels. The solution was an ingenious idea provided by my wife, Robin. Always the reader's advocate, she never wants anyone to be left out — one of her many virtues that prompted one reader to write me to say, "Michael, I love your books, but I adore Robin."

My wife, alpha-reader, editor, and publicist suggested that *Out of the Ashes* employ the technique of providing quotes at the start of each chapter

in order to provide needed context, a technique I had used in when writing the Legends of the First Empire books. I thought this was a great idea, and it should help new readers with old concepts, but if you find yourself needing more assistance, there is also a glossary at the back of the book.

Now, if this is your first book set in Elan, I hope that after reading it, you'll want more. As I mentioned, there are twenty other novels where this came from (and another eight under development). I'm presently deep into writing the sixth, and final, series in the Elan Saga, something I call: The Cycle. How deep? Well, the Cycle will consist of five books and I'm presently working on volume number four. My hope is that by the time *Out of the Ashes* is released, I'll only have one more novel to complete. What does any of that have to do with the book you've picked up? Nothing . . . unless you like what you're about to read, and end up accidentally falling in love with the world of Elan. If that happens I suspect it's going to mean a great deal, and you can find our suggested reading order in the "What's Next" section toward the back of the book.

Well, that's enough breadcrumbs for new readers, so let me speak to those who have read my previous works. You've probably already guessed that *After the Fall* follows *The Rise and Fall*, and you'd be right. Yet unlike my traditional time jumps between series, this one picks up right where *Esrabaddon* left off, and because of Lorian, all of you will experience one of the most pivotal times in Elan's history that otherwise I never would have had the time to write.

So now, without further ado, allow me to introduce, your new guide into the world of Elan, Lorian Ellis.

— Michael J. Sullivan, June 2026

Hello, I'm Lorian Ellis. In the fall of 2024, I found myself in what I suspected was a unique position: living through a real-life disaster while writing about a fictional one. I penned part of *Out of the Ashes* on my front

porch in the aftermath of Hurricane Helene. When I say *penned*, I mean that literally: the electricity was out, as was the Internet, water, and cellular service.

For several days, I had only Roda for company. We sat on our respective hills, trying to wrap our heads around what had just happened. Trees, roads, bridges, shops, and homes that had been there the day before were all gone. In Roda's world, the city had been swallowed by an immense crater. In mine, entire towns had been destroyed by mudslides and flooding. No one in her world or mine had been prepared for such a catastrophic event, and the two of us worked through it together.

At first Roda did very little but sit in a daze. Like so many, she had been left with no home, no resources, and only the clothes on her back. Despite her desperate circumstances, she found a way to aid someone else. Helping one person felt like a small sacrifice in the grand scheme of things, but to that one person, the act was life changing.

Elinya dealt with her grief in much the same way as Roda but on a larger scale. She pushed aside her heartbreak to feed, clothe, and shelter countless survivors. But even the best-intentioned of people can bear only so much before breaking. When Elinya needed it most, the kindness she had shown others came full circle in the form of a helpful stranger who turned into a friend.

Nevrik dealt with his loss by sealing himself away. He took much-needed time to process, to recharge, and to work out a strategy. Then he emerged from his isolation quite literally ready to change the world.

I didn't create these reactions from pure imagination; I witnessed them in the people around me. In the face of unprecedented destruction, my family, friends, and neighbors came together — each in their own way and in their own time — with extraordinary resilience, ingenuity, courage, and compassion. When infrastructure crumbled, when all communication was severed, when we were cut off from the rest of the world, the easy thing

would have been to give up. Instead, the people of my community showed up, doing whatever was necessary to help even when their own lives were in chaos.

The amazing people of the Southern Appalachians are my Rodas, Elinyas, and Nevriks. In the worst of times, they stepped up with their best, not because they had to, but because that's who they are. They instinctively know what the characters in this book will come to learn: when the world stops making sense, the only way to move forward is together — come hell or high water.

I hope you'll enjoy spending time with my characters and hearing their tales. I couldn't be more honored for you to meet them!

— Lorian Ellis, March 2026

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Out ^{OF} _{THE} Ashes

BOOK ONE

After the Fall Series

CHAPTER ONE

The Perfect Ledge

On Founder's Day in the year 2120, the imperial capital city of the Novronian Empire — the great Percepliquis — was destroyed. No mighty army had besieged her, no volcano, storm, or quake had laid her low. The entirety of that one-time wonder of the world was erased in a single day, by the actions of just one person.

— ANTUN BULARD, *THE HISTORY OF APELADORN*

What does one do after the world ends?
Roda Kern didn't know the answer. No one ever had a reason to consider the question . . . until now.

As far as Roda was concerned, the best course of action was to sit and stare at the massive crater where Percepliquis had once stood, while she scrubbed her right hand on the spring grass. Although her palm had become red and inflamed from the constant abrasion, she couldn't stop. No matter how much Roda rubbed and scraped, her skin refused to feel clean. Her left hand was also dirty — filth caked her from head to toe — but the right was the real problem.

That's the guilty hand. The one that committed the crime.

After barely escaping the disaster, Roda had done little more than linger on a tiny hill ringed at its base by an elderberry thicket. Black columns of smoke rose from the ruins of the city that had been the center of the world, making the far side of the crater hazy on an otherwise clear morning. The bodies of close to a million people had been in the crater for four days, and a terrible stench hung in the air.

Has it really been four days? Could be three, I suppose, but might be as many as five.

Hunger fogged her mind, blurring days and nights together.

For the most part, Roda had passed the time by inventing new ways to torture herself. Refusing to eat had become her favorite form of self-denial. After the loss of the granaries, storehouses, and butcher shops, food remained a scarce commodity. Roda didn't deserve to share in what little remained. She didn't deserve to have or do anything.

I've done enough.

Instead, she leaned against a spindly ash tree and debated with her stomach, which, after being ignored for so long, had abandoned mild aches in favor of sharp, stabbing pains.

"We don't deserve food, remember?" she admonished, looking down at her belly.

As always, it grumbled in reply. Her stomach didn't care a whit about penance. Selfish beyond belief, it had no sense of remorse or regret. All it cared about was ham, a bit of milk, and maybe some roasted potatoes.

Oh, potatoes! With melted butter!

Roda wasn't without sympathy; it wasn't her stomach's fault it resided inside such a loathsome person.

Fortunately, there's a cure for what ails us both.

Lifting her head, Roda gazed once again at the crater she had dubbed The Hole. Where shops, houses, municipal buildings, the Imperial Repository of Tomes and Knowledge, and the palace had once stood, a gaping wound

tore across the landscape. The Hole extended for miles and grew larger each day as its unstable edges continued to collapse. Yesterday's rain had caused a massive mudslide to shear away the ground beneath a farmhouse on the crater's rim. Roda had watched the home tip ever so slowly, then topple.

Almost everything had been consumed. But the Cenzarium — or at least what was *left* of the illustrious college of imperial wizards — still perched on a hill. The walls of its rotunda remained, but the elegant dome had collapsed. Four of the eight stately columns that had once held up its pediment still stood, now supporting nothing but air.

Of all the buildings to survive! How ironic.

Roda rubbed her hand once more, this time in the dirt, before wiping it on her skirt.

This must be how murderers feel. But it isn't blood I can't get off my hand — it's chalk. I should have died in that crater, too.

Giving up on the effort to cleanse her skin, Roda lay down and stared at the blue sky of another incongruously beautiful day. “Why did you spare me?” she called out to Lord Novron, who she imagined resided somewhere overhead alongside his divine father, Maribor.

He didn't see fit to answer.

Roda had asked *herself* the question countless times over the last few days and always arrived at the same conclusion. Novron had made a mistake. Gods could err, too, couldn't they? Perhaps he'd become distracted amid the mayhem and had forgotten to drop a building on her. Now, embarrassed and unable to admit his oversight, he waited for Roda to do the honorable thing and throw herself off a cliff. He'd even gone to the trouble of presenting her with an ideal jumping spot: a rock she'd named The Perfect Ledge.

She rolled over and studied the flat stone outcropping. It jutted several feet past the rim of the crater, like the wooden plank she'd fashioned for diving into her family's pond as a child. But as generous as the god's gift

was, the thought of plunging into The Hole rather than cool water proved more than a little disturbing.

“I’ll just sit here and die of starvation,” she said to Novron in a hopeful voice. “Will that be good enough?”

No thunder. No lightning. Not even a breath of wind.

Roda wasn’t sure what to make of that. She wasn’t sure what to make of anything anymore. After going so long without a proper meal, forming cohesive thoughts proved difficult.

Maybe I should eat after all. A clear head will help me decide whether to jump or starve. I don’t want to make another mistake.

She dragged herself upright once more, then peered around.

Roda had spent most of her time lingering atop the hill, staring at the crater, and trying to interpret the desires of gods and how they applied to her, but she hadn’t been oblivious to her surroundings. Although the tree-lined lane that used to lead into Percepliquis had been destroyed, some things remained: scattered trees dotted the landscape, sparse hedgerows separated nearby fields, and another thatch-roofed farmhouse stood not far away — no doubt terrified that The Hole would eat it, too. A fair number of people had survived as well.

Every morning since the disaster, farmers who had been lucky enough to escape the cataclysm came as close to the crater as they dared, which turned out to be several hundred feet away. They sat on wagons in the grassy field in front of the farmhouse and chatted with one another as crowds of people — who came from who knew where — arrived to purchase food. After only a few days, this impromptu market had developed procedures, rules, and traditions, the most important of which was the Reading of the List. Before the morning trading got underway, an elderly white-bearded man in a robe would appear and place a vegetable crate on a level bit of ground. The gathering crowd would watch while he perched unsteadily on

the box, parchment in hand, and read off the names of the newly confirmed dead. After that, the market would open for business.

This day was no different, and survivors amassed to await the arrival of the herald. Some huddled in small groups, speaking in low voices and occasionally stealing glances over their shoulders as if the crater might sneak up on them. More than a few sat on the ground, peering with blank eyes into empty air. This thousand-mile stare was a defining feature of new arrivals. The veterans of the market were as disheveled and filthy as the newcomers, but the stare had given way to a world-weary acceptance.

Do I look just like them?

Roda tried to run fingers through her hopeless mass of tangled hair. She gave up and dropped her arm, noting that while some of its scrapes and cuts had begun to heal, new ones already crisscrossed her skin beneath gaping holes in her sleeves.

Purchasing new clothes would be as improbable as buying food; Roda was now as poor as she looked. Two nights prior, a thief had stolen her coin purse while she slept in the shelter of the nearby elderberry thicket. In the waning evening light, Roda hadn't seen his face, just the tattoo of a badger that glared from his left arm. She'd managed to wrap her hands around the crude drawing, but the bastard had pulled free. Her one consolation was that the thief hadn't escaped unscathed. Roda had dug her nails deep, obtaining souvenir skin. But flesh had no market value, and without a single copper pith to her name, all she could hope for was to make a trade.

But what? All I have left is . . . Roda glanced at her sandals. They were covered in mud, one strap dangling by a thread. *No one will want these, but I need to try.*

Seeking to distract herself — and her stomach — until the opening of the market, Roda swept her fingers over the ground until they brushed the pointed edge of a rock. She wiggled the fist-sized stone free and inspected it, surprised that any good throwing rocks remained on the hill. Besides

starving herself, Roda had filled the long days with target practice, tossing stones at the discarded wagon wheel on the ground beyond the ring of elderberry bushes. Most of the rocks that had been within her reach now formed a sizable pile inside the hoop of the wheel. Few lay outside the rim.

Roda had never considered herself particularly talented but couldn't deny she excelled at two things, rock throwing being one. Weakness and mental fog notwithstanding, she rarely missed her mark thanks to a childhood spent hunting rabbits with stones. In a family with little coin and lots of hungry mouths, her rock-throwing skill had been crucial.

She tossed the stone toward the wheel. It sailed in an elegant arc, then fell neatly atop the pile just as a hollow *clang* signaled the opening of the market. The bell had been added yesterday, and Roda approved. Something akin to civilization echoed in its tolling, a vague sense that not everything had been lost.

Roda stood and instantly regretted it. She swayed and staggered with sudden dizziness. A fall would send her rolling down the slope and into The Hole. *I guess Novron plans to do me in after all*, she thought, as though watching the event from afar. Without conscious orders, her right arm shot out and grabbed the ash tree's trunk, while darkness nibbled at the edges of her vision. Then as suddenly as it had come, the blackness retreated and sight flooded back. Roda took a moment to steady herself, then released the tree.

Lured by the bell, the scattered masses headed toward the wagons. Roda would get only the dregs after everyone else picked over the carts — if she got anything at all — and felt no need to rush. She waited atop her knoll until the swarm of people dwindled and the area around the crater lay empty — save for one.

A solitary woman stood near The Perfect Ledge, staring out across the devastation. She appeared to be around the same age as Roda, but the similarities ended there. This woman looked *fancy* — the word Roda

used for highborn people. The lady's arms were free of scars earned from sleeping under bushes, her face clear of grime. She wore a simple yet elegant white dress. Not a speck of dirt marred the fabric, an inexplicable feat given the surroundings. Dark tresses were braided and wound into a neat bun. Although her body was slender, the lean frame and hollow cheeks of the starving were absent. The embroidered purse on her belt sagged as if from a great weight. Roda imagined the bag to be full of coin, but it could have contained something truly valuable, like four turnips. She lacked the optimism to imagine five.

Despite the lady's well-to-do appearance, tears rolled down her cheeks faster than she could brush them away. This wasn't a surprise. Who could help but mourn the loss of everything good in the world? What Roda found strange was the gold chain encircling the woman's throat. With or without a blank stare, this lady *had* to be a newcomer; Roda would have remembered a person foolish enough to walk through a pack of starving wolves with bacon clasped around her neck.

A merchant's wife or daughter? Who else would be so oblivious?

An aroma of roasting poultry and potatoes wafted on the breeze, catching the attention of Roda's traitorous stomach and sending dizzying waves of hunger through her body. She turned away from the crater and squinted across the field toward the source of the maddening scents. Thin wisps of smoke rose from cook fires behind several carts. In front of the farmhouse, a crude sign depicted pictures of turkey legs, and four whole birds turned lazily on a spit.

Roda couldn't imagine what the meat would cost. Certainly the lady with the gold necklace could buy a taste, but Roda could barely afford a smell. She scanned the other carts. Closer to the hill, a man balanced atop a wagon filled with root vegetables. He tried to woo passersby with the promise of the best roasted potatoes on Elan. Standing downwind of the enticing meat, he might as well have been selling the best mugs of muddy

water, and his offerings were ignored. Roda glanced again at her worn-out sandals. Given the potato man's lack of popularity, he might be willing to make a trade.

Even a terrible one.

Placing her feet with care, Roda started down the slope toward the market. She hadn't gotten far when a scream sounded from the direction of the crater. Looking back, she saw that the fancy lady was on the ground — and no longer alone.

A lanky man towered over the woman. He wore a long stained tunic so ripped that strips of the hem dangled free. Bare feet and legs were caked with mud. Dark hair fell in a tangled mess. His resemblance to the stereotypical thief in a traveling play would have been comical had he not been strangling the lady in an attempt to tear off her necklace. The golden chain refused to break. The man yanked and jerked, dragging the poor woman across the ground.

Gagging and choking, the lady clawed at the necklace, trying to wedge her fingers beneath it. She made no progress, and the thief pulled with such strength that he lifted the small woman onto her toes.

Roda looked around frantically for aid. The dusty edges of the crater still lay empty. No one else lingered between The Hole and the market. Help wouldn't be coming. Help no longer existed. The empire was gone, along with its imperial soldiers and laws. Despite the promise of the market bell, civilization had vanished, leaving no one to help any of them.

No one except . . .

Gritting her teeth, Roda ran down the slope toward the crater. The dirt beneath her feet was loose, and she was no mountain goat. After three strides, her right sandal broke apart. Roda slipped, fell hard on her side, then tumbled to the bottom of the incline. With a groan, she pushed to her feet, kicked off the remaining sandal, and plunged into the berry thicket that lay between hill and Hole.

Unable to see the lady, the thief, or anything at all beyond a sea of green leaves, Roda pressed forward blindly. Woody branches lashed her face, arms, and hands, adding fresh cuts to tortured skin. Exposed roots scraped her bare feet and snagged her toes. All the while her malnourished brain whispered, *It's too late. He's killed her.*

Roda burst out the other side of the thicket to find that the lady still lived. The woman lay in the dirt, gasping, a nasty red ring around her throat. Either the gold necklace had snapped or the woman had managed to unclasp it. The thief raised the chain in his fist as if it were a war trophy. That's when Roda saw it — the tattoo of a badger on his left arm. Long red gashes ran across the image, caging the beast behind bloody bars.

You!

The thief wasn't finished. Pocketing the necklace, he kicked the lady as he tugged on the purse tied to her belt. "Give me your coin!" he demanded.

The woman had her arms up to protect her face. Her body jerked like a toy in a dog's mouth as the thief yanked on the bag.

Untie it! Roda thought, trying to will the words into the man's mind. *It's called a knot, you idiot! Untie it, take it, and leave her be!*

"Give it to me or I'll kill you!" the thief shouted. Perhaps he feared the attack was taking too long and might draw attention. Or maybe his anger was rising with his frustration. Either way, he was growing more violent, desperate, and dangerous by the second.

That's when Roda noticed she was standing beside the wagon wheel filled with rocks.

Well, look at that!

Scooping up the fist-sized stone on top of the pile, she hurled it at the thief. The rock struck the man squarely in the back. His head snapped around — teeth bared, face red.

"Remember me, you miserable rat?" Roda shouted. "That first shot was a warning. Your head is way bigger than a rabbit's!"

The thief gave her a quizzical look that turned to alarm when Roda loosed a second stone. The rock shot toward the man's face, but he pivoted and took the hit on his badger tattoo. Still, it must have hurt. He released the lady's purse as Roda launched one stone after another. Flailing his hands to ward off the attack, the thief fled. He darted for the space between the elderberry thicket and Roda.

Oh, no you don't!

Roda flung herself at the thief. A solid hit from her shoulder sent him crashing headlong into the bushes. The lithe man recovered quickly, bounding back to his feet as if part deer. Roda whipped a stone at his head. The shot was pure perfection, and the thief collapsed face down in the dirt without so much as a gasp. He lay unmoving, a stream of blood leaking out below his hairline.

"Ha!" Roda jabbed her fist into the air in triumph. She kicked the thief in the ribs. That proved so rewarding that she did it again. "Wanna get in on this?" she called over her shoulder. "He kicked *you*." Turning, Roda saw the lady sitting on the ground, sobbing. "Hey, are you okay? Did he hurt you?"

The woman didn't answer, didn't even look up. With one hand, she massaged her side.

"Do you need help?" Roda pressed.

The lady shook her head. She wiped her cheeks, then cast a glance toward the thief.

Roda dropped to one knee and began searching the folds of the man's clothing. "He's not dead, in case you were wondering."

"I wasn't." The woman's voice was soft, without a trace of the expected haughtiness.

"You *should* be. He'll wake up eventually, and you need to get going before that happens."

"I'm certain I'll be long gone by then," the lady replied in a flat monotone.

“Good.” Roda located her own coin purse in one of the thief’s pockets. She turned the bag upside down and gave it a shake. When nothing emerged, she tossed it aside and glanced at the woman. “*You* need to wake up, too. What were you thinking? Wearing your finery for every desperate wretch in Elan to see wasn’t smart.”

The lady gazed at the ground with a detached, unfocused expression. “It doesn’t matter.”

“No? Maybe you can afford to lose a few kengs, but what if this guy had covered his tracks by dumping you into the crater?”

The woman sat silent, hands folded in her lap. Her tidy bun had come loose in the tussle, and the braid hung in a disheveled mess. The dazzling white gown was now smeared with streaks of dirt. She didn’t seem to notice or care.

Roda shoved her hand into another of the thief’s pockets and withdrew the necklace. Morning light played on the gold chain, making it shimmer. She held it out toward the lady, who briefly glanced over before finding the ground interesting again. Roda shook the necklace. “It’s yours, isn’t it? Take it.”

The woman’s fingers strayed to the red ring around her throat. “Didn’t remember I was wearing that one. Don’t need it. Keep it.”

Roda eyed the beautiful chain. “You sure?”

The lady nodded, still refusing to meet her gaze.

So much for not being haughty.

The woman lowered her hands to her lap again. When they brushed against her belt, she looked down as if she’d never seen it before. She ran her fingers over the smooth leather, then slowly, dreamily, unlatched the buckle. “Take this, too.” The lady tossed the belt, purse and all, toward Roda. The embroidered bag hit the dirt with a solid *clink* of coins.

Roda stared.

Not at all a bag of turnips.

She desperately wanted the money, but the fancy lady didn't need to know that. With everything else gone, Roda still had her pride — only a shred of it, of course, but that much coin could buy a lot more. “Well, if you insist on throwing it away.” She untied the pouch from the belt, knotted the string behind her neck, then concealed the bag beneath her tunic. Roda held out the belt. “Want this back?”

Another head shake.

Roda stood and dusted herself off — for all the good it did — then looped the belt around her waist. It sagged on her small frame but stayed put. “If you're sure you're okay, I guess I'll be going.”

The woman showed no sign she'd heard.

Roda pivoted from the lady to the unconscious thief. She prodded him with her foot, but he didn't stir. The wiry man lay like a discarded pile of filthy rags. His breath came in shallow rasps, and one cheek spasmed as if a tiny drum beat inside his mouth. In a suitably grave tone, Roda said, “You need to make yourself scarce. Otherwise, when this guy gets up —” She turned to find that the other woman had climbed to her feet and was walking in the direction of The Hole.

“See you around, I suppose,” Roda called.

No answer.

With a shrug, Roda began the trek across the field toward the market. Repeated stomping from trudging feet had left the ground muddy, and every few strides she hopped on one leg as a bare foot found a jagged pebble. Still, she felt as happy as . . .

As a starving woman who's been handed a small fortune. What's in the purse? Silver? Gold?

Roda would be able to buy all the turnips in the market. *Maybe an entire turkey!* For the first time since the disaster, she let herself believe better times might be on the horizon. Roda couldn't forgive herself for her crime — not yet — but maybe Novron had. The god had given her

another chance because, instead of hurting more people, this time she had saved a life.

Roda stopped short. *Or did I?*

Ahead, the market called to her, the smell of meat thick in the air. Her stomach growled like an angry bear. *Shut up! I'm trying to think!* Something wasn't adding up, but Roda's underfed brain was having trouble with the math. *A reward of a few coins is one thing, but why give me everything?* The fancy lady had been dazed, in shock, not thinking straight. Still, no rich person would give so much wealth to a total stranger. *Unless . . .*

"I'm certain I'll be long gone by then," the lady had said.

"Uberlin's arse!" Roda swore. She turned and began retracing her steps at as fast a pace as she could manage, which turned out to be little more than a shambling shuffle. Most of her limited energy had been expended during the confrontation with the thief.

In the distance beyond The Hole, lightning flashed. Angry-looking clouds had gathered on the other side of the vast crater, turning the air below them a stormy blue. Thin lines of rain trailed from the darkening sky, obscuring fields and woodlands behind a shimmering mist.

The fancy lady stood on The Perfect Ledge, her loose braid whipping in the wind.

Roda halted beside the impression the downed thief had left in the dirt. The man was nowhere to be seen, but a wide trail led away into the bushes, as though a tortoise had pulled itself across the ground. "Hey!" she called to the woman. "What are you doing?"

The lady didn't move a muscle. Not even to glance over her shoulder. "Go away."

Ignoring the command, Roda approached the ledge. She looked back and forth between the woman and the sheer drop. "You're all alone out here. Why?"

"Why are *you*?"

"I've been starving myself and indulging in creative self-loathing," Roda explained. She glanced back at the tortoise trail. "And kicking butt, of course. But that's not why you're here, is it?"

"Please . . . just . . . leave." The lady's voice came out weak, like a person too tired to keep treading water. One foot inched so close to the edge that dislodged dirt rained into the crater.

Roda's heart picked up speed, but she moved forward with glacial slowness. "That's a great ledge, isn't it?" she asked in a cheerful tone. "I can see why you picked it."

The woman craned her head around with a bemused expression. "What?"

"I've had my eye on it for a while," Roda said, taking another step forward. "Named it The Perfect Ledge for obvious reasons. It's as if Novron put it there for a single purpose, isn't it?"

Brows knitted, the lady looked from Roda to The Hole, then back again.

Roda stepped onto the ledge, close enough now to make a grab for the woman if necessary. She jutted her chin toward the crater. "The sides go almost straight down from here. You won't hit any limbs or jagged rocks, and there's no slope to break your fall. If there were, you'd probably just hurt yourself and lie at the bottom all maimed, bloody, and screaming for who knows how long."

The lady's mouth opened, and her eyes narrowed in confusion.

"To be honest," Roda continued, "I'm surprised only the two of us noticed this spot. Given the way things are, there should be a longer line."

The woman stared at Roda for a few moments before returning her attention to the crater. Her fists clenched and unclenched as she drew in deep breaths.

Then she glanced over again.

Roda folded her arms and tapped her foot in a display of impatience. "Could you get a move on? I'm not planning to die from *old age*."

Shaking her head, the woman turned to face Roda. “I know what you’re trying to do. Please don’t. I have a good reason.”

Roda swept her arm, indicating the entire area. “The world just ended. Show me a person who’s still drawing breath and I’ll show you someone with a *good reason*. Those people are still trying to survive, though, and you’re obviously more fortunate than most.”

“Why? Because I have coin? Is that what you think? You know *nothing* about me. Not even my name!”

Roda cocked her head. “Well, what is it? My name’s Roda.”

The lady glared for a long while, then looked away and muttered, “Elinya.”

“Well, *Elinya*, maybe I don’t know your favorite color or how much honey you like in your tea, but I strongly suspect you’re innocent of any terrible crime.”

Elinya dropped her voice as well as her head. “I’m *not* innocent. Someone truly great — a man I loved — is dead because I was too stupid to understand a message he sent.”

Roda smirked. “Being dumb isn’t a crime. If it were, most of the empire would’ve been locked up in prison.”

Elinya’s head shot up, eyes flashing and jaw clenched. Roda thought the woman might take a swing at her.

Good. That means I have her full attention.

“When ignorance *kills*,” Elinya snapped, “it most certainly *is* a crime.”

“I can’t argue with that,” Roda conceded, “but it’s the degree of the mistake that matters. I can understand why you’d feel sad, or remorseful, or guilty, but that doesn’t mean you deserve to die. A ledge as perfect as this should be reserved for the monster who singlehandedly destroyed Percepliquis, collapsed the empire, and killed countless innocents.”

Elinya stared hard at Roda. “That person is already dead.” She motioned toward The Hole. “Down there with the rest.”

Roda shook her head and sighed. “No, I can assure you the culprit still lives.”

“*What?*” Elinya lunged forward and seized Roda by both arms. “You’ve seen Esrahaddon?” she asked in a trembling voice.

Startled, Roda tried to step back, but Elinya held on so tightly her nails dug in. “Esra *who?*”

“You said the one who destroyed Percepliquis isn’t dead!”

Roda nodded. “That’s right.” She freed one arm from Elinya’s death grip and pointed at the rubble of the destroyed city. “*I did that.*”

CHAPTER TWO

Arrivals

Before the collapse of Percepliquis, the emperor took counsel from two main entities: Cenzars — the vile magic-wielding corruptors of the imperium — and the noble knights known as Tesblors. With the loss of the imperial family and those two governing bodies, it was Bishop Venlin, leader of the Church of Novron, who stepped into the vacuum and restored order from chaos.

— ANTUN BULARD, *THE HISTORY OF APELADORN*

“I did that.”

Elinya couldn't make sense of the words she had just heard. She gaped at the woman while still gripping one arm. Holding on wasn't optional; Elinya would have collapsed otherwise.

Who does this person think she is? Why is she tormenting me? She comes out of nowhere, tells me the love of my life is alive, then takes it back! And how could she have anything to do with the fall of the city? If anyone still living is to blame, it's me.

A trembling began in Elinya's shoulders and made its way quickly to her legs, and she feared she would lose her fight to stay upright. She was doing

her best to hold herself together — had been since the disaster. Every bit of her strength and focus had been tapped to walk and talk, to fake smiles, and even to breathe . . . in and out, out and in. She'd managed to keep going long enough to get herself here, to the crater's edge, and now this *Roda* person was blocking her escape. The easiest act in the world — stepping into nothingness — had suddenly become difficult. *And why not? Everything else is.* The very air felt as if it were crushing her. Loss, memories, and pain worked together, needling, burning, and ripping at her heart.

Behind Elinya, the gaping crater beckoned. Esrahaddon was down there somewhere, and if they couldn't share a life, they would share a grave. Together forever. No one was ever meant to know. Elinya planned to go out of the world the same way she'd come in: unnoticed and unloved.

Maybe my mother loved me? Impossible to know because Elinya had been so young when her mother died. *Or was she killed? Was she my father's first victim?* Elinya had long refused to face the truth that a man she'd thought of as kind and decent would be capable of such a thing. But years later he had shattered her illusions by luring all her childhood friends to their deaths.

How did no one in that tiny village know what was going on? They must have!

Of course, I didn't, or I wouldn't have gone searching for my friends in that forest, never would have crossed paths with the witch Ruby Finn.

"I don't give a snake's ass about her." That was what her father had said about Elinya when he'd finally shown up in the Forbidden Forest. He hadn't come to save Elinya from the infamous Ruby; he'd been dragged there against his will by an imperial wizard. It hadn't been Elinya's own flesh and blood who had rescued her, but a stranger — a handsome young Cenzar in a glowing robe.

I fell in love with Esrahaddon the first moment I saw him. And he saved me time and time again.

Not only had Esrahaddon saved her from the witch, he'd rescued Elinya from her miserable village. He had taken her to Percepliquis, where her empty life turned into a tale worthy of song. The wizard had shown her the wonders of the capital city, introduced her to Jerish Grelad — an honest-to-goodness knight — and the imperial prince himself. She had traveled in illustrious company to the city of Rochelle and met goblins, a people she'd thought to be mere legend. Then Elinya had entered the fortress of Mileva Hitartheon, a general in the ancient army of an actual god. Wrapped in her cloak made from living flies, Mileva had been impressive: beautiful, intelligent, regal, powerful, and every other thing Elinya was not.

And I killed her. But not by challenging her to a fair fight. No! I stabbed her in the back like a coward. What a noble hero I am!

Elinya was just like her father, but not because they both had killed. Anyone with an opportunity would have tried to destroy Mileva, who meant to erase not just a city, but the entire world — to plunge all of existence into the chaos from whence it came. What made it clear that Elinya and her father had the same dark poison oozing through their veins was the fact that she felt no remorse for killing Mileva.

My father was right. No one should give a snake's ass about me. But Esrahaddon loved me — against all reason and common sense — and with his whole heart. And how did I repay his love? By letting him die. He should have known better than to trust me, to care for me so much, after he met my father — the tree to my apple. Esra needed me, probably begged for help in that letter he sent, but I'm just a stupid village girl and can't read. I failed him, and Percepliquis was destroyed as a result.

Elinya couldn't fathom why Roda had claimed responsibility for the city's destruction. Perhaps the woman had gone insane. Given recent events, that was understandable, but also not Elinya's problem. This was her time, but maybe not her place. She'd find another ledge just as perfect. Elinya let go of Roda and brushed past her, taking a few steps away from the edge of

the crater. There she paused, scanning for gaps in the trees and shrubs still clinging to the crumbling cliff. Somewhere to hide from prying eyes and do-gooders.

Roda's voice came from behind, "So this is what you really want, is it?"

Elinya spun around. "Just leave me alone!" she growled, but the other woman wasn't even looking her way.

Roda stood with raised arms, staring up at the gray sheet of clouds as fat droplets of rain began to plop into the dirt. Her dark curls were knotted, her face drawn and pale with hunger, her body thin as a bit of wind-tossed parchment. "Have it your way, then," she yelled at the sky. "What do I have left anyway?"

Heat rose inside Elinya. "Stop it!" she shouted. "Stop mocking me!"

Roda turned with a puzzled expression. "I'm not mocking you. I'm trying to help."

"By making light of my pain? Just stop. You know nothing about me, and you never will!"

"I know enough," Roda said with smug certainty. "You're a poor little rich girl who thought she was special because that's what everyone always told her. But there's no one left to clap for you, no one to button your dresses or cook your food. You're on your own just like the rest of us now, and you can't handle it. Ending it all is infinitely easier than making your own bed and washing your own feet."

"Amazing!" Elinya exclaimed. "That's me in a nutshell! Privileged from birth. Diapers of spun gold and unicorn hair." She scoffed and folded her arms. "Now let's talk about *you*, an ignorant girl from some tiny backwater village that no one has ever heard of — or cares to. You weren't appreciated by your mother, and don't get me started on your father. The head of the house is supposed to protect and provide, but your father didn't know how to do either of those things, right? So you ran to the big city, but it was *too* big. People saw you as some kind of mongrel dog, like you didn't belong,

like you didn't deserve to be there. But someone helped you — somebody important who you never thought would look at you twice. He got you a good job, made you feel like you were worth something. For a while, you actually believed you might get a happy ending to your miserable life. Only . . ." Elinya's voice cracked. "Only that important person asked you to do something you didn't understand. You messed everything up. You trashed happily-ever-after for you and everyone else, razed it all to the ground because even though you left your backward village, it never left you."

Roda's face went even paler. She stared at Elinya with wide eyes and a slack jaw. "H-how did . . . Why would you say that?" She began to shake, and her bottom lip trembled. The woman's expression was a potent mix of guilt, shame, and regret.

Elinya knew the look — the same one that gazed back at her from her own mirror.

Around the women, the air grew darker, heavier, as clouds veiled the sun. Appearing dazed, Roda turned and took a step toward the end of the ledge. She stared down into the void, her tattered clothes fluttering in the wind, her bare feet dislodging rivulets of dirt. The light drizzle increased to a steady pour, mixing with tears that began streaming down her cheeks. Then sudden determination hardened Roda's eyes, and her teeth and hands clenched.

Elinya recognized *that* look, too.

The next thing Elinya knew, she had hold of Roda's shoulders and was pulling her backward. Roda yelped as she slipped on the wet rock, sending a cascade of pebbles over the brink. The two women hit the ground together, sliding away from the gaping maw of the crater.

"What are you doing? Let go!" Roda struggled to free herself from Elinya's grip. "Leave me alone!"

"Like you left me alone?"

“No! The opposite of that!”

“I won’t let you jump!” Elinya screamed. “Do you hear me?” She was crying, too, sobbing hard enough it hurt, but she refused to let go. The crater was filled with innocent souls. One more might not matter, but what if it did? What if just one more death meant Esrahaddon’s afterlife would be spent agonizing in the fires of Rel?

I won’t fail him again!

Roda managed to slip out of Elinya’s grip and began to crawl away. Elinya reached out, catching the other woman’s foot and sending her into the mud. “Ack!” Roda exclaimed, looking back as she shook her leg free. Her face was smeared with the same brown muck that coated Elinya’s dress. Both women twisted to sitting positions, breathing hard, hair plastered against their faces by rain and grime. They stared at each other for what seemed like days. The only sounds besides pattering rain were metallic clangs and indistinct voices that echoed from the distant market.

At length Roda pushed hair away from her eyes, then asked, “So now what? Are we just going to sit here forever?”

Elinya brushed wet strands of hair from her own face. “I don’t know. Maybe. I’m definitely not letting you out of my sight.”

“And I’m not going to let you out of mine, so it appears we’re at an impasse.” Roda bit her lip and narrowed her eyes as if pondering. “I suppose that leaves us with only one option.”

“What’s that?”

“We should go get a couple of turkey legs.”

Elinya drew back, blinking. “You can’t possibly be serious.”

“There are two things I never joke about. One of them is food.”

“What’s the other?”

Roda merely smiled and patted the bulge of the coin purse beneath her tunic. She pushed to her feet with a groan, then offered a hand to Elinya. “Come on,” she said. “I’m buying.”



Elinya hadn't expected to walk home to the estate again. But here she was, traipsing with Roda down dusty ruts in the road past familiar sights: the tree with a knot that resembled an old man's face; the rock, as tall as she was, that stood on end for no discernible reason; the white sheep with a black ring around one eye; and the chicken coop that had been started nearly a year prior but never completed. Quite a few trees lay on the ground, victims of the shock wave that had blown outward from Percepliquis. Most still stood, arching over the road and casting irregular patches of welcome shade. The black rain clouds hadn't followed them from the crater, and a sweltering sun shot bright light into her eyes through breaks in the canopy as sweat beaded on her brow.

Roda walked contentedly beside Elinya, the crooks of both arms cradling treasures purchased at the market: a turkey leg, three ears of seasoned sungrain — corn's less-tasty springtime cousin — a paper sack of roasted potato wedges, and another bag full of chicken pulled from the bone. She held food in both hands, alternating between them and swallowing almost before chewing. Roda's chin and clothing shone shiny with grease, and she would undoubtedly make herself sick, but at least some color had come into her cheeks. She scooped out a handful of potato wedges and held them out to Elinya. "Sure you're not hungry?"

When Elinya shook her head, Roda smiled at the potatoes as if they were old friends before stuffing them into her mouth. "Uh wafen weely gun zhumi ye no."

Elinya knitted her brows. "Come again?"

Roda swallowed hard. "I wasn't really going to jump, you know."

"Ok. Sure."

"I *wasn't*. I didn't need saving . . . or this sore bum." She limped a bit for emphasis. "I got worse treatment than that thief!"

“You looked plenty upset to *me*.”

Roda selected an ear of sungrain. “Well, you *did* say some pretty awful things. You’re a great guesser missed a few details, of course, but those can wait. I’m busy right now.” She shoved the sungrain into her mouth pointy end first, then raked off the kernels with her teeth as she pulled it back out. She looked as though she’d never seen any version of corn and needed to work out the mechanics of how to ingest it. Roda tossed the stripped cob into the bushes, then tugged on a silk that had lodged between her teeth. She freed the string, wiped it on her tunic, then showed Elinya a grin. “Glad some food managed to survive all the destruction I caused.”

Elinya rolled her eyes in response, but Roda didn’t notice as she peered into the bag of chicken.

Even with a full stomach, she still thinks she wiped Percepliquis off the map. Elinya had hoped Roda’s reason might return along with the pink in her cheeks, but the woman obviously required more than food. Roda needed rest, safety, and a place to call home. Elinya meant to provide all three. Giving comfort and direction to scared and rudderless people had been her full-time job since the disaster. By establishing a predictable routine in familiar surroundings, she had been able to push aside her own problems and focus on others. Elinya moved through the world in a dream in which Esrahaddon wasn’t dead, the empire hadn’t collapsed, and the ground never swallowed Percepliquis. The tactic had worked well . . . until today. *Today, I woke up. Everything I pushed down came back up and drove me to the edge. Literally.* Elinya glanced over her shoulder, half expecting the crater that had followed her in her thoughts to have done so in reality.

Roda stopped so abruptly she might have collided with an invisible wall. “Is *that* where we’re going?” she asked. “How does a place like that still exist?”

Elinya followed the woman’s gaze to the iron gate standing open at the end of the road. Beyond lay the villa — home. She tried to see the estate

through Roda's fresh eyes, but that proved impossible. At one time Elinya herself had marveled at the sprawling house, which flowed down a slope like a cascade of red tile and cream walls surrounded by green fields and rolling hills. Familiarity had taken the awe out of the place. "The entire world wasn't destroyed," she answered, "even though it feels that way." She waved Roda forward. "Come on."

Elinya led the way along a curving path of smooth, multicolored stones toward the villa's wide veranda. Scores of people wandered the grounds in front of the house, most of them involved in labor of one kind or another. Some toiled amid squat olive trees whose wispy tufts resembled green sheep. To the right of the path, more workers fed and watered actual sheep, along with goats and cattle. Almost everyone sported the colorful, fashionable new clothing Elinya had provided, and they smiled and waved as the two women passed. A few disheveled wretches — new arrivals — sat on the ground in tattered clothing, clutching small bags to their chests and casting about with suspicion.

Reaching the veranda ahead of Roda, Elinya pushed open the arched front door. Halivar appeared instantly, as if he'd been observing their approach. The fingernails of his large hands were stained with dirt, and the knees of his linen trousers had been worn to holes, but his sun-bronzed face was clean and wore a smile of relief.

"Lady Elinya!" Halivar exclaimed. "You're back!" His gaze swept over her stained and torn dress. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Elinya answered, trying to bat some of the hardened mud off her clothes. "Why are you minding the door instead of Jesup?"

"Tossed him outside to till a new plot for beans. Those young arms can be put to better use than opening doors. Do him good to see what real work outside the house is like for the rest of us." Halivar studied Roda for a moment, then shook his head. "What have you dragged home this time?" he spoke in a low growl, but his eyes smiled.

Elinya swept a hand toward her companion. "This is Roda, our new guest. Will you please find someone to draw her a bath?"

"The maids who aren't harvesting are out working on the fence."

"You have the *maids* doing that?"

"Cooks, too. Need all the hands we got. Housekeepers can carry rails, I reckon. And if cooks can lift iron pots, I figure they can swing hammers just fine."

Elinya sighed. "That's okay. I'll do it." She beckoned Roda to follow into the great room. Something felt different about the space, and it took a moment to realize what it was — no people. Just a few hours before, the chairs, sofas, and even the rugs had been occupied, making the room, with its exposed beams and low ceiling, feel cramped rather than cozy. Elinya suspected more people than the cooks and maids had been *tossed outside* by Halivar.

Roda's head swiveled left, right, up, and down. As they passed out of the great room and into a lengthy tiled hallway lined with closed doors, she finally spoke up. "I don't get it."

Elinya stopped walking. "Get what?"

"This is Ingram Evarburton's house, right? That's what was written on the sign beside the gate. Everyone knows The Textile King is richer than the first emperor. The way everyone here defers to you means you must be his daughter, not a poor girl from a little village. Why did you say all that stuff?"

Elinya smirked. "Evarburton's not my father."

"Oh, he's your husband?" Roda cringed. "I'm sorry. I meant no offense. It's just . . ."

"Just that he's also *older* than the first emperor?"

Roda shrugged. "Hey, you said it, not me."

"Mister Evarburton is my employer. At least, I *think* he still is. No one has seen him since . . . well, you know."

Roda's face turned grave.

Of course she knows. More people than not went into the crater.

"So you see," Elinya continued, resuming their slow walk, "I'm only slightly less poor than the people I bring here."

"Refugees?"

"I prefer *guests*, but yes. There's little distinction between staff and guests at this point; we're all survivors. Everyone works together to keep the estate running and mouths fed."

"Would your employer approve of *guests* in his home?"

"He probably wouldn't, but as the Head of the House, I'm in charge in his absence. We have too much here: stores of food, crops, livestock, literal tons of clothing, and a warehouse large enough to shelter scores of people. Not to share that abundance with those who are suffering would be . . ." She paused, searching for the right words.

"An affront to Novron?" Roda suggested.

Elinya flashed a tight smile. "Well, *wrong* certainly."

Arriving at the door at the end of the hallway, she paused with her hand on the latch.

Roda continued, "But wouldn't you agree that Novron —"

"Well, here we are," Elinya interrupted, a bit louder than intended. "There's a tub inside. Go in and pick out some oils while I fetch water."

"Um . . . okay."

Elinya made her way back down the corridor. Just before turning the corner, she glanced back to find Roda watching her with a thoughtful expression.



Elinya collapsed on the little bed in her quarters, relieved to have Roda squared away. The fresh dress Elinya had changed into made her only marginally more comfortable. She lay bone-tired, body aching from her

treatment at the hands of the would-be thief and her tussle with Roda. A large contusion darkened the right side of her body, and a rib or two was surely bruised. Her scalp burned where hair had been ripped out. As if that weren't enough, her left wrist still throbbed, having been twisted and wrenched days earlier by Master Yolric.

The elderly Cenzar had literally dragged Elinya out of the doomed city. She'd fought him the entire way, punching, biting, and scratching to break free. For a white-bearded relic the old wizard had been amazingly strong, and together they'd watched as the city called The Center of the World collapsed into the center of the world.

Elinya closed her eyes, wishing for sleep, but memories stood in her way. She saw it all again, just as she had each night since the city's fall.

She collapsed, crying and tearing at grass while Master Yolric knelt over her. He was trying to provide comfort, but everything was too strange. All of Elan was quiet. Even birdsong had stopped, and no rustling came from the few leaves left on the trees. The world seemed to be holding its breath. The odd notion popped out of nowhere, and yet Elinya knew it to be true. She understood beyond any doubt that something incomprehensible was about to happen. The event of the millennium. But what could be more momentous than the collapse of the imperial city?

"I knew it," Yolric breathed. "At long last, he comes."

Elinya turned over to see a tall, thin man walking their way. He wore a simple tunic and carried a bag over one shoulder. The sack swung with his movements, appearing to weigh almost nothing.

"Elinya!" the stranger said, stopping before her and smiling. "I'm so glad to see you're all right. I had hoped you would be." He glanced at Yolric. "For so many reasons." The smile faded as he turned to the old Cenzar and the two studied each other. "Hello, brother."

The newcomer couldn't possibly be the Yolric's real brother; they looked nothing alike and decades separated their ages. The men remained silent for a long while,

and yet it felt as if nothing in the world were more important than this awkward meeting that neither of them seemed to want to start.

Yolric broke the tension. He jerked his chin toward Elinya and gave his brother a pointed look. The Cenzar's expression was unmistakable, one that every kid knows: not in front of the children.

The brother nodded, then turned to address Elinya again as she pushed herself up to her knees. "You must not go back to Percepliquis. It's much too dangerous. There's no point in getting yourself hurt . . . or worse. Nothing you can do now will help Esrahaddon. Be comforted by the knowledge that he had no choice but to destroy the city." The stranger laid a gentle hand on her shoulder. "Esrahaddon is beyond your reach. He did what he had to do — what he knew to be right — just as you will. Your decisions will not merely affect you, Elinya. Like Esrahaddon, your choices will have an impact on the lives of many. More than you will ever know."

Elinya understood this to be a farewell when the two men began to walk away. Then the brother stopped and looked back. "There's more you should know. Bishop Venlin is a guise used by Mawyndulë, an elven wielder of magic who has been attempting to eradicate the imperial bloodline since the first day the empire was formed. Esrahaddon tried, but failed, to kill him. The bishop yet lives."

Elinya opened her eyes, bringing herself back to the reality of her little room. She stared up, following the progress of a fly as it made its way across the ceiling, as the brother's final words echoed in her mind.

Why on Elan would I need to hear that? And how did that man know my name?

Muffled sounds of splashing came from the other side of the wall. Roda was blissfully enjoying her bath, no doubt satisfied that she'd thwarted Elinya's plans. She hadn't. Roda would soon take her place among the guests, and then Elinya would be done with *everything*. There would always be more people in need, and she wasn't a Cenzar, a Teshlor, or a member

of the imperial family. She couldn't be expected to aid everyone, nor would she be able to. Elinya hadn't even managed to help the one man who'd truly mattered.

"I love you, Elinya," Esrahaddon had told her the last time they were together. *"Never doubt that. No matter what happens, believe it with your very soul."*

She missed him so much it hurt — too much to keep breathing . . . not without a reason.

Right now, that reason was Roda. Elinya would make sure the woman was taken care of if it was the last thing she ever did. With any luck, it would be. *I'll get her settled, introduce her to the other guests, give her a job. Then, after nightfall, when everyone's asleep, I'll slip out and —*

"I said you can't do that!" Halivar's raised voice echoed down the hallway from the direction of the great room.

With a groan, Elinya pushed herself up.

What now? Will it never end? How long until dark?

Leaving her muddy sandals beside the bed, she stood and made her way barefoot down the hall. Elinya found Halivar standing at the open front door, putting his large frame to good use to deny entry to someone beyond. "What's going on?" she asked, rising onto her toes to peer over Halivar's shoulder.

On the veranda stood a tall man with graying hair and sagging cheeks. He wore a long white robe, and an equally white satin stole wrapped his neck. A handful of men in similar garments flanked him, their expressions stoic and dignified. To their rear waited a random assortment of people in casual clothing. At the end of the walkway outside the gate, a wagon sat piled high with supplies of every kind: sacks overflowing with grain, rolled carpets, and a massive carved chair that rested atop a single pedestal rather than four legs. A gaggle of boys, presumably given the unfortunate task of pulling the wagon, sat panting on the ground, wiping their foreheads.

“They’re trying to move into the house!” Halivar reported, glaring at the party. “I told them we ain’t got room in here for so many folks, so they gotta set up in the fields.”

“Okay, let me handle this,” Elinya said. When Halivar reluctantly moved aside, she stepped forward and addressed the man in the stole. “I’m Head of the House. How can I help you?”

With a respectful nod, the man replied, “I’m Theopol Devoy, General Secretary of the Nyphron Church. We have acquired permission to move our headquarters here, seeing as how our building was damaged in the . . . ah . . . unfortunate incident.”

Elinya wasn’t sure which was more upsetting: referring to the end of civilization as an *unfortunate incident* or having what looked to be the entirety of what remained of the church on her doorstep. “I’m sorry,” she said, “but the main house and the warehouse are both filled to capacity with refugees. We won’t turn you away, but the only available place is the pasture.”

Theopol cast a dubious glance toward the field, then turned back with a frown. “My sincerest apologies for the imposition, but I’m afraid I must insist on the house. The church received an invitation from Ingram Evarburton himself.”

Elinya pursed her lips. “My employer hasn’t been home since the city fell on Founder’s Day. Perhaps *someone* approved this, but I doubt it was him.”

Theopol blinked at her in confusion. He patted his robes as though searching for something, then reached into an interior pocket. The secretary produced a folded parchment and passed it to Elinya.

She stared at the paper. The document had been penned in a tight, flowing script and stamped at the top with an official-looking symbol in scarlet ink.

“As you can see, everything is in order,” Theopol said with a hopeful smile.

Elinya hesitated, unsure what to do. She wanted these devotees of Novron in the house about as much as she fancied having a pack of rats in her cupboard. Both were vile creatures that, once established, would be impossible to remove.

But how can I refuse? If Mister Evarburton is alive and gave his permission, it's not my place to say no. Everyone knows he has ties to the church — to Bishop Venlin himself.

Elinya's eyes shot toward the cart. Her heart picked up speed, and she fought to maintain a neutral expression. She stared for so long that Theopol turned to follow her gaze. “Is anyone else with you?” Elinya asked. “Someone still on the wagon, perhaps?”

Theopol's brows knitted. “No, just us,” he said, gesturing toward his companions. “And the servants, of course.”

She nodded with an inward sigh of relief.

“Bishop Venlin will arrive in a private carriage,” Theopol added.

Elinya suppressed a gasp. Her gaze shifted to the spot where the road emerged from the tunnel of arching trees. She imagined a coach careening around the bend, pulled not by horses but by demons — their flared nostrils billowing black smoke and cloven hooves throwing up sparks.

Venlin is coming here? Will he remember my connection to Esra? What will happen if he does?

Elinya slammed the door in the secretary's startled face, then spun and leaned against the reassuringly solid wood.

“What was that about?” Halivar asked.

“I — I just don't think this is a good idea.”

“I ain't keen on having them in here, neither. But that parchment says they can stay, right?”

Elinya bit her lip as she glanced down at the scribble-covered paper clutched in her hand. *It might as well be penned in elvish! This could be a Cenzar's shopping list and I wouldn't know the difference.* She oversaw the estate, and scores of lost souls looked to her for guidance. It wouldn't do to shake their faith by admitting she couldn't read the very document that would determine the household's fate.

"It certainly looks legitimate," Elinya said, choosing her words with care. "And if it is, I suppose we have no business refusing them." Turning, she opened the door to Theopol's bemused expression.

"Is everything all right?" the secretary asked. The cleric's large, honest eyes almost made Elinya regret her actions. *Almost.*

"My apologies," she said, struggling to make the words sound sincere. "Please come in. Halivar can show you —"

A coach emerged from the trees.

Elinya's jaw dropped, prompting Theopol to turn his attention to the road. "Ah!" he exclaimed. "Yes, His Grace's carriage is indeed impressive."

She gaped at the coach, heart pounding. It wasn't pulled by racing demons but by four horses plodding through the heat, their white coats lathered with sweat. Fit for a prince, the opulent carriage sported a rounded body of gold and purple, a plush driver's box, and curtains with a lustrous sheen. Where the bishop had obtained such lavish transportation was anyone's guess. Perhaps it had been among the countless possessions left behind by deceased lords.

Several men trotted beside the coach, carrying or dragging belongings despite the ample room on the roof of the carriage. One man toted a sack of scrolls on his back and a crate of books in his arms. Another lugged rolls of cloth in myriad hues, struggling to keep control of his load as the heavy bolts took turns sliding out of his grip. As the carriage came to a halt behind the wagon, the men dropped their burdens with sighs of relief. Some abandoned pride and threw themselves on the lawn beside the servants. A

smartly dressed man hopped down from the driver's box and swung open the carriage door.

The coach's lone occupant emerged: a feeble-looking old man who wrinkled his nose at the stately villa as if it were a thatched hut. With sunken eyes and a thin frame, Bishop Venlin looked more frail than many of the starving guests Elinya had welcomed to the estate. Thinning hair fought a losing battle with a broad forehead for control of his hairline. He sported the same fraying white robe she had last seen him wearing.

Why does he travel with a personal tailor if he never changes clothes?

Elinya considered running while she still had the chance. The person she had been a week ago would have. But as she watched Venlin stride toward the house — radiating confidence like the son of a god — she realized fear was a thing of the past. Terror was for people with a future to protect. Elinya had nothing to hope for, nothing to look forward to, nothing to dream about. All that remained was a burning rage that began in her belly and spread through her body like an oil fire.

He's the reason Esrahaddon died!

Venlin made his way up the porch steps and peered into the great room. "Yes," he said to no one in particular, "I suppose this will suffice."

Beside him, Theopol beamed like a pup being patted for retrieving slippers.

The bishop said nothing more, and an awkward moment passed before he raised his eyebrows at his secretary.

"Oh," Theopol said, "of course." He turned to Halivar. "If you please, His Grace wishes to be shown to the master bedchamber now."

"The master *suite*," Halivar growled, "is for the master — Mister Evarburton."

"Apologies, my good man, but if you will recall —"

Venlin silenced the secretary with a raised hand, which he then placed on Halivar's shoulder. He smiled warmly, like a father showing pride in

his favorite son. “You strike me as a pious servant of Our Lord Novron. I’m certain you wouldn’t wish to deny your church. We are, after all, the nails holding civilization together, the barrier between order and chaos. We can hardly be expected to bear the great weight of our responsibilities if relegated to inadequate accommodations.”

Elinya glanced at Halivar. The man’s expression showed he was puzzling out the meaning of *relegated to inadequate accommodations*. Elinya came to his rescue. “It’s okay, Halivar. Please show our honored guest to the main suite.”

Venlin waited until the big farmhand nodded, then released him and turned a smile on Elinya. His grin faltered and his eyes narrowed. “And who is this?”

“I’m Head of the House.”

Venlin cocked his head and looked her up and down.

Elinya waited.

The bishop finished his assessment without comment. Apparently finding nothing interesting about Elinya, he returned his attention to Halivar. “Shall we?”

The big man nodded again but gave the remaining church officials one more disapproving eyeballing before leading the way through the great room in the direction of the dining hall.

Theopol excused himself and set about encouraging his reluctant minions to leave their grassy resting places and unload the wagon. This left Elinya alone to glare at the bishop’s retreating backside as he made his way through the house.

My home!

Halivar and the bishop were waylaid halfway through the dining hall when a servant, flustered by Venlin’s unexpected appearance, upended a full basket of pole beans onto the silk carpet.

Elinya started forward to help the poor girl, then caught sight of Roda emerging from the hallway into the great room. The change in the woman made Elinya stop and stare. Roda's face and skin had been scrubbed clean, the smears of dirt and dried blood washed away. Dark, curly, wet hair hung shiny and untangled across her shoulders. A green linen dress from Evarburton's storehouse cut a flattering shape on her small frame, and the belt Elinya had gifted her cinched her waist. The laces of new leather sandals twined around her feet and up her ankles, and the gold necklace that had belonged to Elinya encircled her neck. Roda looked like a young woman on her way to a spring festival rather than the survivor of an epic disaster.

Spotting Elinya, Roda beamed. She raised her arms and spun in a slow circle to show off her new attire. Halfway through the rotation, her gaze landed on the turned back and balding pate of Bishop Venlin. Roda froze. Her smile vanished as her face blanched. Without a word, she whirled and ran back down the hall. The *slap, slap* of sandals on tile was followed by the slam of a door.

Seems I'm not the only one who doesn't like the bishop!

Elinya chased after Roda. She hurried down the hallway, opening doors to each of the adjoining rooms and peering inside. In the last chamber on the left — Elinya's own quarters — she found Roda perched above the bed with one leg in and the other leg out of an open window. Damp hair dripped a dark patch down the back of her dress as she struggled to squeeze her body through the narrow opening.

"What are you doing?" Elinya asked.

Roda looked over her shoulder. "Leaving. Obviously."

"Are you coming back?"

"People who flee out windows usually don't."

"But —"

"I don't owe anything for the bath and clothes, right? I'm free to go, yes?"

Elinya nodded. "Of course! But what in Elan is wrong with the front door?"

Roda didn't answer, but the look in her eyes verged on desperation.

"Can you come down and talk for a second?" Elinya asked. "After that, if you still want to climb out the window I won't stop you."

"I doubt you could, anyway. You're not that big."

"Please?"

Roda hesitated, looking from Elinya, to the pasture beyond her perch, then back again. With a sigh, she swung her leg inside and dropped onto the bed.

Elinya crossed the room and sank down on the edge of the mattress. "You're running from Venlin, aren't you?"

Roda shrugged. She reached toward Elinya's nightstand, picked up a small clay statue of a fat sparrow, and rolled it absently between her palms.

"Why?" Elinya pressed. "What are you afraid he'll do to you?"

"It's not what *he'll* do to *me*," Roda answered. "It's what *I* might do to *him*." She tossed the round figurine into the air several times as though testing its weight. "You saw how I handled that thief, and our *good bishop* is far, far worse than a petty criminal. What do you think would become of a person like me if I dared to attack the great Bishop Venlin, even in these lawless times? The satisfaction I'd get from one moment of uncontrolled anger would buy me a lynching from Venlin's rabid followers."

Roda was right about such an encounter not ending well, but not for the reasons she thought. If Esrahaddon had been no match for the bishop, Roda and her sparrow didn't stand a chance. Venlin himself would kill her before his devotees got the chance. Elinya said, "Sounds to me like the bishop *already* did something to you."

"Plenty." Roda paused in her bird abuse to look Elinya in the eye. "I know you don't believe I was responsible for the collapse of Percepliquis. You mentioned some *Esra-ha-ha* guy who did it. But even if that's somehow true, I'm at least partially to blame. And what's more, Venlin is the reason. I might have loosed the arrow, but the bishop nocked it. He sent me to . . . ordered me to . . ." Roda swallowed hard. "I didn't understand what I was doing! I made a mistake! I know you won't believe any of this, even though you described my situation perfectly back there on that ledge. That was pretty disturbing, by the way."

"But I *do* believe you."

Roda's eyes widened. "You do?"

"The part about Venlin being responsible, at least. He's not what he appears."

"Yeah, he is. He *appears to be* a scheming bastard. Venlin used me. If I'd been smarter and taken one minute to think about what he was asking . . ." She trailed off, eyes growing glassy.

"You're not a bad person," Elinya assured her.

"So?" Roda snapped. "Does being a good person bring back Percepliquis? Does it resurrect all those people? What about the man you loved? Is he by your side or still buried in the city?"

Elinya dropped her head.

In the silence that followed, Roda reached out hesitantly and took Elinya's hand. "I . . . I'm sorry. That was cruel." She squeezed hard, as though trying to convey the depth of her regret through the strength of her grip.

"It's okay," Elinya said. "Really." She placed a hand over Roda's.

Roda shifted in discomfort. "It's not, though. The last thing I want to do is make you feel worse and send you running back to the crater."

"I was going to do that anyway — tonight, after you were asleep."

Roda jerked her hand away and glared. "*Again?*"

“No need to worry. My plans have changed.”

“So you’re *not* going to kill yourself?” Roda asked, eyes narrowed to slits.

“That remains to be seen.” Elinya leaned forward, and in a conspiratorial whisper said, “I’m going to *destroy* Bishop Venlin — or die trying.”

Lorian Ellis's Acknowledgments

This book couldn't have been created without the following amazing people:

My husband, who supported both of us throughout the writing of this novel despite having no assurance that it wouldn't join the long list of hobbies I've passionately pursued then dropped forever.

My mom, who held out hope that I would write a book since the day she first put one in my hands.

My sister, who was my biggest cheerleader from the moment I first picked up a pen.

John Patrla and Gregory Amato from Novel House, for their unwavering help and support and their endless encouragement.

And Robin Sullivan. I've heard rumors that people manage to publish books without her, but I'm not sure how.

What's Next?

Hey all, Robin here. Before we leave you, I want to take a moment to talk about where to go from here. For those who have devoured every one of Michael's books, the answer will be *Blythin Castle* (the sixth Riyria Chronicle, which will be releasing in 2027). We've even included the first chapter of that book in this one to wet your whistle (and thank you to the Kickstarter Backers that made that inclusion possible). After that, you'll absolutely want to jump into *The Cycle* — more about that in just a moment, but first I want to chat with those who are new to the world of Elan.

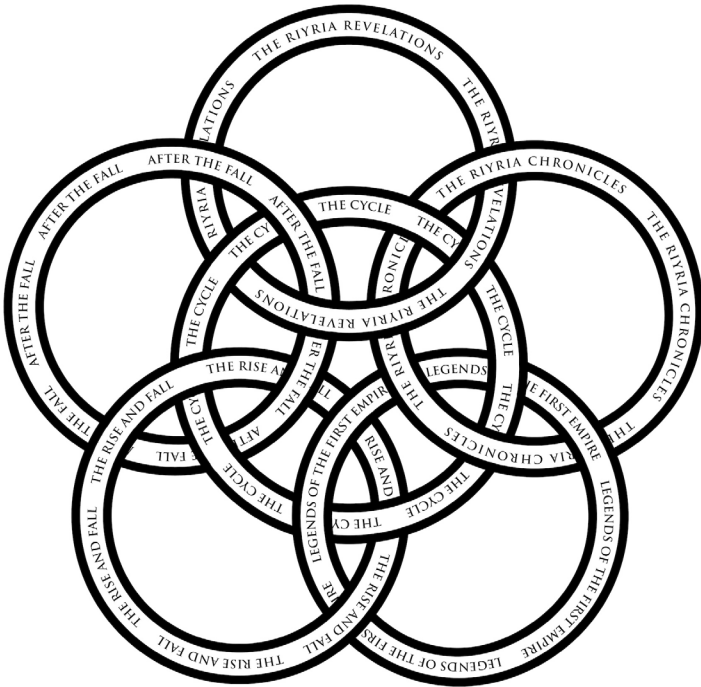
If *Out of the Ashes* is the only book of Michael's that you've ever read, it may be difficult to determine what to pick up next. In the past, Michael and I would have suggested either chronological or — our personal preference — order of publication. But these days that's getting complicated. Given you have opted to start your Elan journey where you have, allow me to strongly suggest the following order:

- The Riyria Revelations, beginning with *Theft of Swords*
- The Legends of the First Empire, starting with *Age of Myth*
- The Rise and Fall, first book *Nolyn*
- And finally, The Riyria Chronicles, pickup *The Crown Tower*

The above order simplifies matters by keeping series grouped together, and it correctly places *Drumindor* after *Esrabaddon*.

Okay, now, let me chat with people who have read only one of Michael's series but not the others. Strange as it might seem, we aren't in the habit of pushing people to read our books. We don't advertise and no longer attend conventions. Truth is, Michael's career has exceeded our expectations several times over, so there wasn't any point — or at least not until something changed.

What was it? The Cycle.



It's the series Michael swore he would never write. This is the single most requested tale that Michael's readers have pleaded for since 2011: a sequel to his debut series the Riyria Revelations. More than that, Michael claims that *The Cycle* will answer all unresolved questions and reveal the conclusion to every lingering mystery. But unlike his other series, this one cannot be read without prior knowledge of the other books — all the other books. Because this series was specifically created for long-time loyal readers of the Elan Saga, *The Cycle* demands a massive prerequisite that includes

the existing twenty-one novels, the soon to be released Blythin Castle, the other After the Fall books, and a number of short stories that will be released prior to The Cycle in our first-ever solo anthology. Obviously, you can ignore this advice, but if you do, you'll be missing out on something truly exceptional.

Given its prerequisite, we expect The Cycle to be our lowest selling series of all time. Afterall, the potential audience will be small. But, honestly, Michael doesn't care about that because this series is a love letter to his most ardent fans and a way of saying thanks to those who have spent hundreds of hours consuming millions of his written words. I've had the privilege of being the first — and so far, the only one — to read the first two books, and they are by far the best things I've ever read. Period. I'm not saying that because I'm Michael's wife. It's already well known that I adore his work. But The Cycle . . . oh, The Cycle . . . it has turned the amp up to eleven, and I want as many people as possible to experience what I have.

The good news is you'll have plenty of time to get up to speed. *Out of the Ashes* is our 2026 release, *Blythin Castle* (the sixth Riyria Chronicle) is written and scheduled for 2027. Our hope is that the first Cycle book will hit the streets in 2028, but until all five books are completed, I can't say for certain that date will be met. Right now it is based on how things are going since Michael is deep into the fourth book and the outline for the last book is filling out nicely. So, this should be good news for those watching the offices of the Exploratory Committee of One: there's, indeed, white smoke coming from the chimney.

Well, that took longer than I would have expected. But since we only get a chance to chat once a year, I thought it was a good idea to give new readers a roadmap in case they want to continue in the world of Elan. Oh, and also provide veteran readers a bit of homework so they won't miss out on what is surely going to be Michael's magnum opus.

— Robin Sullivan, July 2026

Reading Buddies

While reading or listening to a Michael J. Sullivan book, have you ever finished a chapter or a scene and wanted to talk with someone about it only to realize you didn't know anyone else reading the book? Have you found yourself dying to share a theory? Needing a question answered? Or just plain mad as hell about the death of a beloved character and wanting someone who would listen, understand, and sympathize? Well, thanks to discord, there is just such a place (see links and QR codes on the next page). From there, you will find individual channels for each of Michael's twenty novels based in Elan. From there, you can interact with other Sullifans as you read without having to worry about spoilers. Each book has a channel that includes:

- **news:** for announcements on production and release information. Michael may also post events he's going to or cities he's traveling to.
- **author-free-zone:** a channel where you can discuss matters you don't want seen by Michael or Robin Sullivan.
- **ask-michael-or-robin:** a channel where you can pose questions to the author or the "woman behind the books" for anything non-writing related such as book orders.
- **typos:** if you see an error in the book, report it so that future versions can be improved.

- **end-of-the-book-discussion:** a place where spoilers can't exist because everyone there has finished the entire story.

And if you're looking to with other diehard Sullivan readers, there is also a lively and popular Riyria server: a site launched and operated by fans of Michael's books. He often visits this site with news, announcements, or merely to answer questions that befuddle the minds of readers. You can access from the link and QR code below.

Oh, something else you might enjoy. For those who would like to know more about Elan and the stories, there is the wonderful YouTube Channel called Riyria Explained (see link and QR code below). There you will find deep dives into popular topics, but tread lightly. While its creator is careful to avoid — or at least warn — about spoilers, there are many of them to be found here.

Elan Discord: bit.ly/elan-discord



SCAN ME

Out of the Ashes: [bit.ly/oota-](https://bit.ly/oota-discord)



SCAN ME

Riyria Discord: bit.ly/riyria-discord



SCAN ME

bit.ly/riyria-explained



SCAN ME

About the Authors

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 of 2008. Michael has been published by the fantasy imprints of Penguin Random House (Del Rey) and Hachette Book Group (Orbit). He has also been a pioneer in the author-publishing movement. As of 2026, Michael has released twenty-two novels (twenty-one of which are set in his fictional world of Elan. Michael always enjoys hearing from readers, and you can email him at michael@michael-j-sullivan.com. His current work in progress is the fourth (and next to final) book in *The Cycle*.

LORIAN ELLIS developed a love of stories at an early age which gave birth to a voracious reader who delighted in the subjects that were the bane of her fellow students: English, literature, and grammar. In 2020, she was invited into an exclusive community led by Michael J. Sullivan to teach and support aspiring writers. Her strong authorial voice, writing acumen, and “tenacity to take a beating and come back asking for more” ultimately led to the fulfillment of a lifelong dream: becoming an author with the creation of her debut novel, *Out of the Ashes*. Lorian is looking forward to hearing from readers, and you can email her at lorianellisbooks@gmail.com. Her current work in progress is the second book in the *After the Fall* trilogy.

About the Type

This book was set in Caslon, a typeface named for the English designer William Caslon (1692–1766). Caslon worked in the tradition of what is now called old-style serif letter design, which produced letters with a relatively organic structure resembling handwriting with a pen. His work was influenced by the imported Dutch Baroque typefaces, which previously had not been common in London.

Caslon's typefaces established a strong reputation for their quality and their attractive appearance, suitable for extended passages of text. The typefaces he created were popular in his lifetime and beyond. After a brief period of eclipse in the early nineteenth century, they returned to popularity, particularly for setting printed body text and books.

THE ENTIRE ELAN SAGA

THE RIYRIA REVELATIONS

Theft of Swords (*The Crown Conspiracy* • *Avempartha*)

Rise of Empire (*Nyphron Rising* • *The Emerald Storm*)

Heir of Novron (*Wintertide* • *Percepliquis*)

THE RIYRIA CHRONICLES

The Crown Tower • *The Rose and the Thorn*

The Death of Dulgath • *The Disappearance of Winter's Daughter*

Drumindor • *Blythin Castle* (releasing 2027)

THE LEGENDS OF THE FIRST EMPIRE

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

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

THE RISE AND FALL

Nolyn • *Farilane* • *Esrabaddon*

AFTER THE FALL

Out of the Ashes • *Into the Darkness* (release TBD)

Between Two Evils (release TBD)

THE CYCLE

A five book post Riyria Revelation's series (releasing 2028)

SHORT STORIES

Unbroken: "The Eternal Winter" (The Cycle)

Unavowed: "The Storm" (The Cycle)

Grimoire: "Traditions" (Tales from Elan)

Unfettered: "The Jester" (Riyria Chronicles)

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

Blackguards: "Professional Integrity" (Riyria Chronicles)

When Swords Fall Silent: "May Luck Be with You" (Riyria Chronicles)

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

"Pile of Bones" (Legends of the First Empire)