



FORTUNE  
FAVORS THE  
THIEF

VOLUME TWO OF THE  
RIYRIA REVELATIONS

# RISE OF EMPIRE



MICHAEL J. SULLIVAN

# *Rise of Empire*

NYPHRON RISING

THE EMERALD STORM

MICHAEL J. SULLIVAN

*Rise of Empire* is a work of fiction. Names, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the copying, scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book (other than for review purposes) without permission is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like to use material from this book, prior written permission can be obtained by contacting the author at michael@michael-j-sullivan.com, Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Rise of Empire © 2011 by Michael J. Sullivan  
(Nyphron Rising © 2009 and The Emerald Storm © 2010)  
Map © 2011 by Michael J. Sullivan  
Interior design © 2023 Robin Sullivan  
Limited edition cover design © 2022 Sarah Sullivan  
All rights reserved.

Limited edition: 978-1-943363-55-1  
Regular hardcover: 978-1-943363-56-8

Published in the United States by Riyria Enterprises, LLC  
Learn more about Michael's writings at michael-j-sullivan.com  
To contact Michael, email him at michael@michael-j-sullivan.com

First Edition  
Printed in China, May 2023

RIYRIA  
ENTERPRISES



*This book is dedicated to my wife, Robin, for breathing  
life into Amilia, giving comfort to Modina,  
and saving two others from death.*



## CHAPTER TWO

# *The Messenger*

**H**e always feared he would die this way, alone on a remote stretch of road far from home. The forest pressed close from both sides, and his trained eyes recognized that the debris barring his path was not the innocent result of a weakened tree. He pulled on the reins, forcing his horse's head down. She snorted in frustration, fighting the bit—like him, she sensed danger.

He glanced behind him and to either side, scanning the trees standing in summer gowns of deep green. Nothing moved in the early-morning stillness. Nothing betrayed the tranquil facade except the pile before him. The deadfall was unnatural. Even from this distance, he saw the brightly colored pulp of fresh-cut wood—a barricade.

*Thieves?*

A band of highwaymen no doubt crouched under the cover of the forest, watching, waiting for him to draw near. He tried to focus his thoughts as his horse panted beneath him. This was the shortest route north to the Galewyr River, and he was running out of time. Breckton was preparing to invade the kingdom of Melengar, and he must deliver the dispatch before the knight launched the attack. Before he had embarked, his commander, as well as the regents, had personally expressed the importance of this mission. They were counting on him—*she* was counting on him. Like thousands of others, he had stood in the freezing square on Coronation Day just to catch a glimpse of Empress Modina. To the crowd's immense disappointment, she never appeared. An announcement came after many hours, explaining she was occupied with the affairs of the New Empire. Recently ascended from the peasant class, the new ruler obviously had no time for frivolity.

He removed his cloak and tied it behind the saddle, revealing the gold crown on his tabard. They might let him pass. Surely they knew the imperial army was nearby, and Sir Breckton would not stand for the waylaying of an imperial messenger. Highwaymen might not fear that fool Earl Ballentyne, but even desperate men would think twice before offending Ballentyne's knight. Other commanders might ignore a bloodied or murdered dispatch rider, but Sir Breckton would take it as a personal assault on his honor, and insulting Breckton's honor was tantamount to suicide.

He refused to fail.

Brushing the hair from his eyes, he took a fresh grip on the reins and advanced cautiously. As he neared the barricade, he saw movement. Leaves quivered. A twig snapped. He pivoted his mount and prepared to bolt. He was a good rider—fast and agile. His horse was a well-bred three-year-old, and once she was spurred, no one would catch them. He tensed in the saddle and leaned forward, preparing for the lurch, but the sight of imperial uniforms stopped him.

A pair of soldiers trudged to the road from the trees and grudgingly peered at him with the dull expression common to foot soldiers. They were dressed in red tabards emblazoned with the crest of Sir Breckton's command. As they approached, the larger one chewed a stalk of rye while the smaller man licked his fingers and wiped them on his uniform.

"You had me worried," the rider said with a mix of relief and irritation. "I thought you were highwaymen."

The smaller one smiled. He took little care with his uniform. Two shoulder straps were unfastened, causing the leather tongues to stand up like tiny wings on his shoulders. “Did ya hear that, Will? He thoughts we was thieves. Not a bad idea, eh? We should cut us some purses—charge a toll, as it were. At least we’d make a bit o’ coin standin’ out here all day. Course Breckton would skin us alive if’n he heard.”

The taller soldier, most likely a half-wit mute, nodded in silent agreement. At least he wore his uniform smartly. It fit him better and he took the time to fasten everything properly. Both uniforms were rumpled and stained from sleeping outdoors, but such was the life of an infantryman—one of the many reasons he preferred being a courier.

“Clear this mess. I have an urgent dispatch. I need to get through to the imperial army command at once.”

“Here now, we’ve orders too, ya know? We’re not to let anyone pass,” the smaller said.

“I’m an imperial courier, you fool!”

“Oh,” the sentry responded with all the acumen of a wooden post. He glanced briefly at his partner, who maintained his dim expression. “Well, that’s a different set of apples, now ain’t it?” He petted the horse’s neck. “That would explain the lather you’ve put on this here girl, eh? She looks like she could use a drink. We got a bucket and there’s a little stream just over—”

“I’ve no time for that. Just get that pile out of the road and be quick about it.”

“Certainly, certainly. You don’t have to be so rough. Just tell us the watchword, and Will and me, we’ll haul it outta yer way right fast,” he said as he dug for something caught in his teeth.

“Watchword?”

The soldier nodded. He pulled his finger out and sniffed at something with a sour look before giving it a flick. “You know, the password. We can’t be lettin’ no spies through here. There’s a war on, after all.”

“I’ve never heard of such a thing. I wasn’t informed of any password.”

“No?” The smaller soldier raised an eyebrow as he took hold of the horse’s bridle.

“I spoke to the regents themselves, and I—”

The larger of the two pulled him from his horse. He landed on his back, hitting the ground hard and banging his head. A jolt of pain momentarily blinded

him. When he opened his eyes, he found the soldier straddling him with a blade to his throat.

“Who do you work for?” the large sentry growled.

“Whatcha doin’, Will?” the smaller one asked, still holding his horse.

“Tryin’ to get this spy to talk, that’s what.”

“I—I’m not a spy. I’m an imperial courier. Let me go!”

“Will, our orders says nothin’ about interrogatin’ them. If’n they don’t know the watchword, we cuts they’s throats and tosses them in the river. Sir Breckton don’t have time to deal with every fool we get on this here road. Besides, who ya think he works for? The only ones fightin’ us is Melengar, so he works for Melengar. Now slit his throat and I’ll help you drag him to the river as soon as I ties up this here horse.”

“But I *am* a courier!” he shouted.

“Sure ya is.”

“I can prove it. I have dispatches for Sir Breckton in the saddlebag.”

The two soldiers exchanged dubious looks. The smaller one shrugged. He reached into the horse’s bags and proceeded to search. He pulled out a leather satchel containing a wax-sealed parchment, and breaking the seal, he examined it.

“Well, if’n that don’t beat all. Looks like he’s tellin’ the truth, Will. This here looks like a real genuine dispatch for His Lordship.”

“Oh?” the other asked as worry crossed his face.

“Sure looks that way. Better let him up.”

His face downcast, the soldier sheathed his weapon and extended a hand to help the courier to his feet. “Ah—sorry about that. We were just followin’ orders, ya know?”

“When Sir Breckton sees this broken seal, he’ll have your heads!” the courier said, shoving past the large sentry and snatching the document from the other.

“Us?” The smaller one laughed. “Like Will here said, we was just followin’ his orders. You were the one who failed to get the watchword afore ridin’ here. Sir Breckton, he’s a stickler for rules. He don’t like it when his orders ain’t followed. Course ya’ll most likely only lose a hand or maybe an ear fer yer mistake. If’n I was you, I’d see if’n I could heat the wax up enough to reseal it.”

“That would ruin the impression.”

“Ya could say it was hot and, what with the sun on the pouch all day, the wax melted in the saddlebag. Better than losin’ a hand or an ear, I says. Besides, busy



nobles like Breckton ain't gonna study the seal afore openin' an urgent dispatch, but he will notice if'n the seal is broken. That's fer sure."

The courier looked at the document flapping in the breeze and felt his stomach churn. He had no choice, but he would not do it here with these idiots watching. He remounted his horse.

"Clear the road!" he barked.

The two soldiers dragged the branches aside. He kicked his horse and raced her up the road.



Royce watched the courier ride out of sight before taking off his imperial uniform. Turning to face Hadrian, he said, "Well, that wasn't so hard."

"Will?" Hadrian asked as the two slipped into the forest.

Royce nodded. "Remember yesterday you complained that you'd rather be an actor? I was giving you a part: Will, the Imperial Checkpoint Sentry. I thought you did rather well with the role."

"You know, you don't need to mock *all* my ideas." Hadrian frowned as he pulled his own tabard over his head. "Besides, I still think we should consider it. We could travel from town to town performing in dramatic plays, even a few comedies." Hadrian gave his smaller partner an appraising look. "Though maybe you should stick to drama—perhaps tragedies."

Royce glared back.

"What? I think I would make a superb actor. I see myself as a dashing leading man. We could definitely land parts in *The Crown Conspiracy*. I'll play the handsome swordsman that fights the villain, and you—well, you can be the other one."

They dodged branches while pulling off their coifs and gloves, rolling them in their tabards. Walking downhill, they reached one of the many small rivers that fed the great Galewyr. Here they found their horses still tied and enjoying the river grass. The animals lazily swished their tails, keeping the flies at bay. "You worry me sometimes, Hadrian. You really do."

"Why not actors? It's safe. Might even be fun."

"It would be neither safe nor fun. Besides, actors have to travel and I'm content with the way things are. I get to stay near Gwen," Royce added.

“See, that’s another reason. Why not find another line of work? Honestly, if I had what you do, I would never take another job.”

Royce removed a pair of boots from a saddlebag. “We do it because it’s what we’re good at, and with the war, Alric is willing to pay top fees for information.”

Hadrian released a sarcastic snort. “Sure, top fees for us, but what about the other costs? Breckton might work for that idiot Ballentyne, but he’s no fool himself. He’ll certainly look at the seal and won’t buy the story about it softening in the saddlebag.”

“I know,” Royce began as he sat on a log, exchanging the imperial boots for his own, “but after telling one lie, his second tale about sentries breaking the seal will sound even more outlandish, so they won’t believe anything he says.”

Hadrian paused in his own efforts to switch boots and scowled at his partner. “You realize they’ll probably execute him for treason?”

Royce nodded. “Which will neatly eliminate the only witness.”

“You see, that’s exactly what I’m talking about.” Hadrian sighed and shook his head.

Royce could see the familiar melancholy wash over his partner. It appeared too often lately. He could not fathom his friend’s moodiness. These strange bouts of depression usually followed successes and frequently led to a night of heavy drinking.

He wondered if Hadrian even cared about the money anymore. He took only what was needed for drinks and food and stored the rest. Royce could have understood his friend’s reaction if they had been making a living by picking pockets or robbing homes, but they worked for the king now. Their jobs were almost too clean for Royce’s taste. Hadrian had no real concept of filth. Unlike Royce, he had not grown up in the muddy streets of Ratibor.

Royce decided to try to reason with Hadrian. “Would you rather they find out and send a detachment to hunt us down?”

“No, I just hate being the cause of an innocent man’s death.”

“No one is innocent, my friend. And you aren’t the cause...You’re more like”—he searched for words—“the grease beneath the skids.”

“Thanks. I feel *so* much better.”

Royce folded the uniform and placed it, along with the boots, neatly into his saddlebag. Hadrian still struggled to rid himself of his black boots, which were too small. With a mighty tug, he jerked the last one off and threw it down in frustration.

He gathered it up and wrestled his uniform into the satchel. Cramming everything as deep as possible, he strapped the flap down and buckled it as tight as he could. He glared at the pack and sighed once more.

“You know, if you organized your pack a little better, it wouldn’t be so hard to fit all your gear,” Royce said.

Hadrian looked at him with a puzzled expression. “What? Oh—no, I’m...It’s not the gear.”

“Then what is it?” Royce pulled on his black cloak and adjusted the collar.

Hadrian stroked his horse’s neck. “I don’t know,” he replied mournfully. “It’s just that...I thought by now I’d have done something more—with my life, I mean.”

“Are you crazy? Most men work themselves to death on a small bit of land that isn’t even theirs. You’re free to do as you choose and go wherever you want.”

“I know, but when I was young, I used to think I was...well...special. I imagined that I would triumph in some great purpose, win the girl, and save the kingdom, but I suppose every boy feels that way.”

“I didn’t.”

Hadrian scowled at him. “I just had this idea of who I would become, and being a worthless spy wasn’t part of that plan.”

“We’re hardly worthless,” Royce said, correcting him. “We’ve been making a good profit, especially lately.”

“That’s not the point. I was successful as a mercenary too. It’s not about money. It’s the fact that I survive like a leech.”

“Why is this suddenly coming up now? For the first time in years, we’re making good money with a steady stream of *respectable* jobs. We’re in the employ of a king, for Maribor’s sake. We can actually sleep in the same bed two nights in a row and not worry about being arrested. Just last week I passed the captain of the city watch and he gave me a nod.”

“It’s not the amount of work. It’s the *kind* of work. It’s the fact that we’re always lying. If that courier dies, it’ll be our fault. Besides, it’s not sudden. I’ve felt this way for years. Why do you think I’m always suggesting we do something else? Do you know why I broke the rules and took that job to steal Pickering’s sword? The one that nearly got us executed?”

“For the unusual sum of money offered,” Royce replied.

“No, that’s why *you* took it. I wanted to go because it seemed like the right thing to do. For once I had the chance to help someone who really deserved to be helped, or so I thought at the time.”

“And becoming an actor is the answer?”

Hadrian untied his horse. “No, but as an actor, I could at least *pretend* to be virtuous. I suppose I should just be happy to be alive, right?”

He did not answer. The nagging sensation was surfacing again. Royce hated keeping secrets from Hadrian, and it weighed heavily on his conscience, which was amazing, because he had never known he had one. Royce defined right and wrong by the moment. Right was what was best for him — wrong was everything else. He stole, lied, and even killed when necessary. This was his craft and he was good at it. There was no reason to apologize, no need to pause or reflect. The world was at war with him and nothing was sacred.

Telling Hadrian what he had learned ran too great a risk. Royce preferred his world constant, with each variable accounted for. Lines on maps were shifting daily and power slipped from one set of hands to another. Time flowed too fast and events were too unexpected. He felt like he was crossing a frozen lake in late spring. He tried to pick a safe path, but the surface cracked beneath his feet. Even so, there were some changes he could still control. He reminded himself that the secret he kept from Hadrian was for his friend’s own good.

Climbing onto his short gray mare, Mouse, Royce thought a moment. “We’ve been working pretty hard lately. Maybe we should take a break.”

“I don’t see how we can,” Hadrian replied. “With the imperial army preparing to invade Melengar, Alric is going to need us now more than ever.”

“You’d think that, wouldn’t you? But you didn’t read the dispatch.”

# WORKS BY MICHAEL J. SULLIVAN

## 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 • Esrahaddon*

## THE RIYRIA CHRONICLES

*The Crown Tower • The Rose and the Thorn*  
*The Death of Dulgath • The Disappearance of Winter's Daughter*  
*Drumindor (Forthcoming)*

## THE RIYRIA REVELATIONS

*Theft of Swords (The Crown Conspiracy • Avempartha)*  
*Rise of Empire (Nyphron Rising • The Emerald Storm)*  
*Heir of Nowron (Wintertide • Percepliquis)*

## STANDALONE NOVELS

*Hollow World (Sci-fi Thriller)*

## SHORT STORIES IN ANTHOLOGIES

*Heroes Wanted: "The Ashmoore Affair" (Riyria Chronicles)*  
*Blackguards: "Professional Integrity" (Riyria Chronicles)*  
*Unfettered: "The Jester" (Riyria Chronicles)*  
*When Swords Fall Silent: "May Luck Be With You" (Riyria Chronicles)*  
*Unbound: "The Game" (Fantasy: LitRpg)*  
*Unfettered II: "Little Wren and the Big Forest" (Legends of the First Empire)*  
*The End: Visions of the Apocalypse: "Burning Alexandria" (Dystopian Sci-fi)*  
*Triumph Over Tragedy: "Traditions" (Fantasy: Tales from Elan)*  
*The Fantasy Faction Anthology: "Autumn Mist" (Fantasy: Contemporary)*

