

VOLUME ONE OF THE
RIYRIA CHRONICLES

THE CROWN TOWER



MICHAEL J. SULLIVAN

THE LEGEND IS
JUST BEGINNING...



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MICHAEL SULLIVAN'S WORKS

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Theft of Swords (contains *The Crown Conspiracy* and *Avempartha*)

Rise of Empire (contains *Nyphron Rising* and *The Emerald Storm*)

Heir of Novron (contains *Wintertide* and *Percepliquis*)

THE RIYRIA CHRONICLES

The Crown Tower

The Rose and the Thorn

STANDALONE NOVELS

Hollow World

Antithesis (coming soon)

A Burden to the Earth (coming soon)

SHORT STORIES

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The Viscount and the Witch (Fantasy: The Riyria Chronicles)

Greener Grass (Science Fiction Thriller)

ANTHOLOGIES

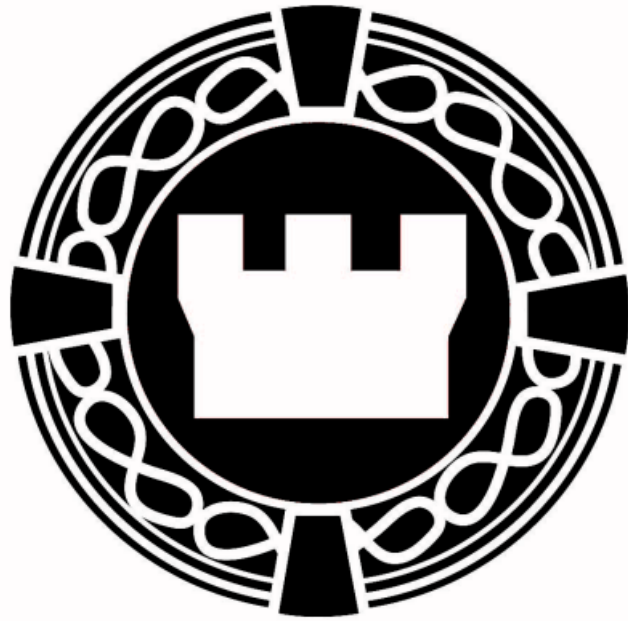
The End - Visions of the Apocalypse: Burning Alexandria (Dystopian Science Fiction)

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

Unfettered: The Jester (Fantasy: The Riyria Chronicles)

Fantasy Faction: Autumn Mists (Fantasy: Contemporary)

THE CROWN TOWER



BOOK ONE OF THE RIYRIA CHRONICLES

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Welcome to The Riyria Chronicles.

If you're new to the world of Elan, you might want to read this introduction to help determine where to start, because it might not be here. Even veterans of The Riyria Revelations might want to read this to learn a bit about how this series came into being and what to expect going forward.

The Riyria Chronicles are prequels to my debut series, The Riyria Revelations (originally published by Orbit starting with *Theft of Swords* in November 2011 and concluding with *Heir of Novron* in January 2012). If you prefer your tales in chronological order, start with this book, as I've taken great care to keep the Chronicles spoiler free. Also, no prior knowledge from Revelations is required. I wanted to accommodate readers from both camps (chronological or order of publication). That being said, the Chronicles were actually designed to be read *after* The Riyria Revelations, and veteran readers will be treated to hidden surprises made possible by having the inside scoop on the entire story arc. These won't be significant plot points, just little extra bonuses for *those in the know*. The bottom line is that readers can begin their adventures in Elan starting with either *The Crown Tower* or *Theft of Swords*.

I'd like to take just a moment to talk about the difference in structure between these two series. For those who don't know, I wrote all six books of The Riyria Revelations before publishing any of them. This was absolutely necessary for that particular series. While I gave each book its own conflict and resolution, there were a number of threads interwoven across the entire

series. Mysteries were hinted at, geese needed chasing, and everything was built to support the grand finale where all the secrets were...well...revealed. Being a first work, I could afford such luxury; after all, no one was waiting on the next installment.

My approach to The Riyria Chronicles is quite different. I have no idea how many there will be, so I'm designing this as an open-ended series rather than a single tale divided into episodes. The stories are more like stand-alone novels with less integration from one book to another. By doing this I'll be able to stop writing Riyria tales at any time without leaving open questions or unresolved conflicts. There are several reasons for doing this. First and foremost, is because I'm incredibly protective of Riyria. I'm very proud of what I've accomplished and we've all seen series that were once great but ended up going on longer than they should. Second, I have no idea if people will want any more stories with these characters. All told I've written and published eight novels, and that just might prove to be enough.

So exactly what are The Riyria Chronicles? And why did I opt to write a prequel rather than a sequel? Well, many people already know that Riyria is elvish for *two*; it's also the name adopted by Hadrian Blackwater and Royce Melborn to refer to their thieves-for-hire enterprise. Not surprisingly, then, the Riyria Chronicles will prominently feature the pair. As a carefully designed series, Revelations concludes with the end of an era, and I'm extremely pleased with how the events wrapped up. After working so hard to find the *perfect ending*, I was concerned that any continuation would be seen as "tacked on," and could have the very real possibility of destroying something I consider precious. So the obvious choice was to explore the opposite end.

Chronicles is in essence the origin story of Riyria. In the opening scene of Revelations, Royce and Hadrian were already the best of friends. Having worked together for twelve years, they demonstrate a bond that endears them to many readers. What was most interesting to me, as the

author, was to explore how these two very different men influenced each other, and how they came to develop the unquestioning trust that exists between them. It occurred to me that upon first meeting they really wouldn't have liked each other, or more precisely, they would have probably hated each another. The challenge for me was to realistically show how their union came into being, and there is nothing I love more when writing than a good challenge.

Some have suggested that *Chronicles* was created at the urging of my publisher who wanted me to return to an established commodity. This is not so. Anyone familiar with me knows that no amount of money could entice me to write something I'm not interested in. So if Orbit wasn't responsible for *Chronicles*, who was? Well, in large part it was the readers, who insisted that 685,000 words just weren't enough. It is your support that keeps food on my table and a roof over my head. In many ways, I feel like an artist of the Renaissance, and you are my patrons. But there is another person, and probably the only one, who can actually make me do something. This person plotted to bring *Chronicles* to life. I was taken in by this mastermind, and how her devious manipulations ensnared me is a tale in itself.

It's the classic story of a husband whose wife falls for another man—a more dashing and charming gent. It sounds tragic, but this tale is a bit different because the love affair is between a real woman and a fictional man. My wife—let's call her Robin (because that's her name)—has developed an infatuation for Hadrian Blackwater. I'm not sure how I feel about enabling my wife's relationship with another man, but at least I know this guy is trustworthy. After finishing the *Revelations* series, Robin became depressed at having to say goodbye to the world of Elan, and especially at having to bid farewell to Hadrian—until she realized I could bring both him and Royce back in the form of prequels. This realization set into motion her diabolical plan to resurrect the pair.

It started when she persuaded me to write a short story so that I would have something for readers during the transition from self to traditional publishing. Preorder pages for Orbit's editions of Revelations had been posted (but the books were not yet released) and my earlier versions had been removed to make way. For the first time in years, I had nothing "out there," and since my contract allowed me to produce non-book-length works, and because short stories are...well...short, Robin asked me to create an early story starring Royce and Hadrian.

The thing is, I'm not very good at short stories. So I decided to approach the task like a chapter—the first chapter of a novel. I went back in time and wrote a simple little tale about Royce and Hadrian meeting Viscount Albert Winslow. This would have occurred about a year after the duo first met. I published this for free under the title *The Viscount and the Witch* and readers appear to have liked it. Once I had written that story, a seed had been planted, and while I worked on other projects, it began to grow. When it became apparent that Revelations had enough momentum, I started what would become *The Rose and the Thorn*.

As I neared that book's end, I realized I had a problem. I couldn't publish a novel about the second year of Royce and Hadrian's relationship. What was I thinking? Going back in time begged the question, How did it all start? What good is a legend without the origin story? The more I thought about it, the more I realized I had to write how Royce and Hadrian first met. When I told my wife, she feigned her support: "Well, whatever you think is best, dear." After leaving the room I heard the muffled "Yes!" and imagined her doing a fist pump, as if she had just scored a winning touchdown. And so *The Crown Tower* was born.

Having accidentally written the books spaced a year apart in Elan time, I am now envisioning the possibility of a twelve-book series—one novel for each year prior to the events in Revelations. Will those other stories be written? It's impossible to say until I see how these two books go. But as

with all things writerly, I've opened the door and ideas keep walking through. For now, I'm collecting them like pretty shells while I work on other projects.

And so there you have it. A happy accident born from a conniving wife's passion for a fictional man and a legion of readers who wanted to read more. If you are a veteran of the Riyria Revelations, I hope you will enjoy these books as much as you did my others. If you are new to my writing, you might just make some new friends, and if you do, there are six more books just waiting for you to jump into.

Finally, please consider dropping me a line at michael.sullivan.dc@gmail.com after reading to give me your impressions. It is exactly this kind of feedback that got Chronicles written in the first place. So if you do end up wanting more, speaking up is the best way to ensure that happens.

| Chronological Order | Published Order |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| <i>The Crown Tower</i> | <i>Theft of Swords</i> |
| <i>The Rose and the Thorn</i> | <i>Rise of Empire</i> |
| <i>Theft of Swords</i> | <i>Heir of Novron</i> |
| <i>Rise of Empire</i> | <i>The Crown Tower</i> |
| <i>Heir of Novron</i> | <i>The Rose and the Thorn</i> |



PICKLES

Hadrian Blackwater hadn't gone more than five steps off the ship before he was robbed.

The bag—his only bag—was torn from his hand. He never even saw the thief. Hadrian couldn't see much of anything in the lantern-lit chaos surrounding the pier, just a mass of faces, people shoving to get away from the gangway or get nearer to the ship. Used to the rhythms of a pitching deck, he struggled to keep his feet on the stationary dock amidst the jostling scramble. The newly arrived moved hesitantly, causing congestion. Many onshore searched for friends and relatives, yelling, jumping, waving arms—chasing the attention of someone. Others were more professional, holding torches and shouting offers for lodging and jobs. One bald man with a voice like a war trumpet stood on a crate, promising that The Black Cat Tavern offered the strongest ale at the cheapest prices. Twenty feet away, his competition balanced on a wobbly barrel and proclaimed the bald man a liar. He further insisted The Lucky Hat was the only local tavern that didn't substitute dog meat for mutton. Hadrian didn't care. He wanted to get out of the crowd and find the thief who stole his bag. After only a few minutes, he realized that wasn't going to happen. He settled for protecting his purse and considered himself lucky. At least nothing of value was lost—just clothing, but given how cold Avryn was in autumn, that might be a problem.

Hadrian followed the flow of bodies, not that he had much choice. Adrift in the strong current, he bobbed along with his head just above the surface. The dock creaked and moaned under the weight of escaping passengers who hurried away from what had been their cramped home for more than a month. Weeks breathing clean salt air had been replaced by the pungent smells of fish, smoke, and tar. Rising far above the dimly lit docks, the city's lights appeared as brighter points in a starlit world.

Hadrian followed four dark-skinned Calian men hauling crates packed with colorful birds, which squawked and rattled their cages. Behind him, walked a poorly dressed man and woman. The man carried *two* bags, one over a shoulder and the other tucked under an arm. Apparently no one was interested in *their* belongings. Hadrian realized he should have worn something else. His eastern attire was not only uselessly thin, but also in a land of leather and wool, the bleached white linen thawb and the gold-trimmed cloak screamed *wealth*.

"Here! Over here!" The barely distinguishable voice was one more sound in the maelstrom of shouts, wagon wheels, bells, and whistles. "This way. Yes, you, come. Come!"

Reaching the end of the ramp and clearing most of the congestion, Hadrian spotted an adolescent boy. Dressed in tattered clothes, he waited beneath the fiery glow of a swaying lantern. The wiry youth held Hadrian's bag and beamed an enormous smile. "Yes, yes, you there. Please come. Right over here," he called, waving with his free hand.

"That's my bag!" Hadrian shouted, struggling to reach him and stymied by the remaining crowd blocking the narrow pier.

"Yes! Yes!" The lad grinned wider, his eyes bright with enthusiasm. "You are very lucky I took it from you or someone would have surely stolen it."

"*You* stole it!"

“No. No. Not at all. I have been faithfully protecting your most valued property.” The youth straightened his willowy back such that Hadrian thought he might salute. “Someone like you should not be carrying your own bag.”

Hadrian squeezed around three women, who’d paused to comfort a crying child, only to be halted by an elderly man dragging an incredibly large trunk. The old guy, wraith thin with bright white hair, blocked the narrow isthmus already cluttered by the mountain of bags being recklessly thrown to the pier from the ship.

“What do you mean *someone like me*?” Hadrian shouted over the trunk as the old man struggled in front of him.

“You are a great knight, yes?”

“No, I’m not.”

The boy pointed at him. “You must be. Look how big you are, and you carry swords—three swords. And that one on your back is huge. Only a knight carries such things.”

Hadrian sighed when the old man’s trunk became wedged in the gap between the decking and the ramp. He reached down and lifted it free, receiving several vows of gratitude in an unfamiliar language.

“See,” the boy said, “only a knight would help a stranger in need like that.”

More bags crashed down on the pile beside him. One tumbled off, rolling into the harbor’s dark water with a *plunk!* Hadrian pressed forward, both to avoid being hit from above and to retrieve his stolen property. “I’m not a knight. Now, give me back my bag.”

“I will carry it for you. My name is Pickles, but we must be going. Quickly now.” The boy hugged Hadrian’s bag and trotted off on dirty bare feet.

“Hey!”

“Quickly, quickly! We should not linger here.”

“What’s the rush? What are you talking about? And come back here with my bag!”

“You are very lucky to have me. I am an excellent guide. Anything you want, I know where to look. With me you can get the best of everything and all for the least amounts.”

Hadrian finally caught up and grabbed his bag. He pulled and got the boy with it, his arms still tightly wrapped around the canvas.

“Ha! See?” The boy grinned. “No one is pulling your bag out of *my* hands!”

“Listen”—Hadrian took a moment to catch his breath—“I don’t need a guide. I’m not staying here.”

“Where are you going?”

“Up north. Way up north. A place called Sheridan.”

“Ah! The university.”

This surprised Hadrian. Pickles didn’t look like the worldly type. The kid resembled an abandoned dog. The kind that might have once worn a collar but now possessed only fleas, visible ribs, and an overdeveloped sense for survival.

“You are studying to be a scholar? I should have known. My apologies for any insult. You are most smart—so, of course, you will make a great scholar. You should not tip me for making such a mistake. But that is even better. I know just where we must go. There is a barge that travels up the Bernum River. Yes, the barge will be perfect and one leaves tonight. There will not be another for days, and you do not want to stay in an awful city like this. We will be in Sheridan in no time.”

“We?” Hadrian smirked.

“You will want me with you, yes? I am not just familiar with Vernes. I am an expert on all of Avryn—I have traveled far. I can help you, a steward who can see to your needs and watch your belongings to keep them safe from thieves while you study. A job I am most good at, yes?”

“I’m not a student, not going to be one either. Just visiting someone, and I don’t need a steward.”

“Of course you do not need a steward—if you are not going to be a scholar—but as the son of a noble lord just back from the east, you definitely need a houseboy, and I will make a fine houseboy. I will make sure your chamber pot is always emptied, your fire well stoked in winter, and fan you in the summer to keep the flies away.”

“Pickles,” Hadrian said firmly. “I’m not a lord’s son, and I don’t need a servant. I—” He stopped after noticing the boy’s attention had been drawn away, and his gleeful expression turned fearful. “What’s wrong?”

“I told you we needed to hurry. We need to get away from the dock right now!”

Hadrian turned to see men with clubs marching up the pier, their heavy feet causing the dock to bounce.

“Press gang,” Pickles said. “They are always near when ships come in. Newcomers like you can get caught and wake up in the belly of a ship already at sea. Oh no!” Pickles gasped as one spotted them.

After a quick whistle and shoulder tap, four men headed their way. Pickles flinched. The boy’s legs flexed, his weight shifting as if to bolt, but he looked at Hadrian, bit his lip, and didn’t move.

The clubmen charged but slowed and came to a stop after spotting Hadrian's swords. The four could have been brothers. Each had almost-beards, oily hair, sunbaked skin, and angry faces. The expression must have been popular, as it left permanent creases in their brows.

They studied him for a second, puzzled. Then the foremost thug, wearing a stained tunic with one torn sleeve, asked, "You a knight?"

"No, I'm not a knight." Hadrian rolled his eyes.

Another laughed and gave the one with the torn sleeve a rough shove. "Daft fool—he's not much older than the boy next to him."

"Don't bleedin' shove me on this slimy dock, ya stupid sod." The man looked back at Hadrian. "He's not that young."

"It's possible," one of the others said. "Kings do stupid things. Heard one knighted his dog once. Sir Spot they called him."

The four laughed. Hadrian was tempted to join in, but he was sobered by the terrified look on Pickles's face.

The one with the torn sleeve took a step closer. "He's got to be at least a squire. Look at all that steel, for Maribor's sake. Where's yer master, boy? He around?"

"I'm not a squire either," Hadrian replied.

"No? What's with all the steel, then?"

"None of your business."

The men laughed. "Oh, you're a tough one, are ya?"

They spread out, taking firmer holds on their sticks. One had a strap of leather run through a hole in the handle and wrapped around his wrist. *Probably figured that was a good idea*, Hadrian thought.

“You better leave us alone,” Pickles said, voice wavering. “Do you not know who this is?”

He pointed at Hadrian. “He is a famous swordsman—a born killer.”

Laughter. “Is that so?” the nearest said, and paused to spit between yellow teeth.

“Oh yes!” Pickles insisted. “He’s vicious—an animal—and very touchy, very dangerous.”

“A young colt like him, eh?” The man gazed at Hadrian and pushed out his lips in judgment. “Big enough—I’ll grant ya that—but it looks to me like he still has his mother’s milk dripping down his chin.” He focused on Pickles. “And *you’re* no vicious killer, are ya, little lad? You’re the dirty alley rat I saw yesterday under the alehouse boardwalks trying to catch crumbs. You, my boy, are about to embark on a new career at sea. Best thing for ya really. You’ll get food and learn to work—work real hard. It’ll make a man out of ya.”

Pickles tried to dodge, but the thug grabbed him by the hair.

“Let him go,” Hadrian said.

“How did ya put it?” The guy holding Pickles chuckled. “*None of your business?*”

“He’s my squire,” Hadrian declared.

The men laughed again. “You said you ain’t a knight, remember?”

“He works for me—that’s good enough.”

“No it ain’t, ’cause this one works for the maritime industry now.” He threw a muscled arm around Pickles’s neck and bent the boy over as another moved behind with a length of rope pulled from his belt.

“I said, let him go.” Hadrian raised his voice.

“Hey!” the man with the torn sleeve barked. “Don’t give us no orders, boy. We ain’t taking you, ’cause you’re somebody’s property, someone who has you hauling three swords, someone who might miss you. That’s problems we don’t need, see? But don’t push it. Push it and we’ll

break bones. Push us more and we'll drop you in a boat anyway. Push us too far, and you won't even get a boat."

"I really hate people like you," Hadrian said, shaking his head. "I just got here. I was at sea for a month—a *month!* That's how long I've traveled to get away from this kind of thing." He shook his head in disgust. "And here you are—you too." Hadrian pointed at Pickles as they worked at tying the boy's wrists behind his back. "I didn't ask for your help. I didn't ask for a guide, or a steward, or a houseboy. I was just fine on my own. But no, you had to take my bag and be so good-humored about everything. Worst of all, you didn't run. Maybe you're stupid—I don't know. But I can't help thinking you stuck around to help me."

"I'm sorry I didn't do a better job." Pickles looked up at him with sad eyes.

Hadrian sighed. "Damn it. There you go again." He looked back at the clubmen, already knowing how it would turn out—how it always turned out—but he had to try anyway. "Look, I'm not a knight. I'm not a squire either, but these swords are mine, and while Pickles thought he was bluffing, I—"

"Oh just shut up." The one with the torn sleeve took a step and thrust his club to shove Hadrian. On the slippery pier it was easy for Hadrian to put him off balance. He caught the man's arm, twisted the wrist and elbow around, and snapped the bone. The crack sounded like a walnut opening. He gave the screaming clubman a shove, which was followed by a splash as he went into the harbor.

Hadrian could have drawn his swords then—almost did out of reflex—but he'd promised himself things would be different. Besides, he stole the man's club before sending him over the side, a solid bit of hickory about an inch in diameter and a little longer than a foot. The grip had

been polished smooth from years of use, the other end stained brown from blood that seeped into the wood grain.

The remaining men gave up trying to tie Pickles, but one continued to hold him in a headlock while the other two rushed Hadrian. He read their feet, noting their weight and momentum. Dodging his first attacker's swing, Hadrian tripped the second and struck him in the back of the head as he went down. The sound of club on skull made a hollow thud like slapping a pumpkin, and when the guy hit the deck, he stayed there. The other swung at him again. Hadrian parried with the hickory stick, striking the man's fingers. The man cried out and lost his grip, the club left dangling from the leather strap around his wrist. Hadrian grabbed the weapon, twisted it tight, bent the man's arm back, and pulled hard. The bone didn't break, but the shoulder popped. The man's quivering legs signaled the fight had left him, and Hadrian sent him over the side to join his friend.

By the time Hadrian turned to face the last of the four, Pickles was standing alone and rubbing his neck. His would-be captor sprinted into the distance.

"Is he going to come back with friends, you think?" Hadrian asked.

Pickles didn't say anything. He just stared at Hadrian, his mouth open.

"No sense lingering to find out, I suppose," Hadrian answered himself. "So where's this barge you were talking about?"



Away from the seaside pier, the city of Vernes was still choked and stifling. Narrow brick roads formed a maze overshadowed by balconies that nearly touched. Lanterns and moonlight were equally scarce, and down some lonely pathways there was no light at all. Hadrian was thankful to have Pickles. Recovered from his fright, the "alley rat" acted more like a hunting dog.

He trotted through the city's corridors, leaping puddles that stank of waste and ducking wash lines and scaffolding with practiced ease.

"That's the living quarters for most of the shipwrights, and over there is the dormitory for the dockworkers." Pickles pointed to a grim building near the wharf with three stories, one door, and few windows. "Most of the men around this ward live there or at the sister building on the south end. So much here is shipping. Now, up there, high on that hill—see it? That is the citadel."

Hadrian lifted his head and made out the dark silhouette of a fortress illuminated by torches.

"Not really a castle, more like a counting house for traders and merchants. Walls have to be high and thick for all the gold they stuff up there. This is where all the money from the sea goes. Everything else runs downhill—but gold flows up."

Pickles sidestepped a toppled bucket and spooked a pair of cat-sized rats that ran for deeper shadows. In the vast network of darkness, finding them was easy. Halfway past a doorway Hadrian realized a pile of discarded rags was actually an ancient-looking man seated on a stoop. With a frazzled gray beard and a face thick with folds, he never moved, not even to blink. Hadrian only noticed him after his smoking pipe's bowl glowed bright orange.

"It is a filthy city," Pickles called back to him. "I am pleased we are leaving. Too many foreigners here—too many easterners—many probably arrived with you. Strange folk, the Calians. Their women practice witchcraft and tell fortunes, but I say it is best not to know too much about one's future. We will not have to worry about such things in the north. In Warric, they burn witches in the winter to keep warm. At least that is what I have heard." Pickles stopped abruptly and spun. "What is your name?"

"Finally decided to ask, eh?" Hadrian chuckled.

“I will need to know if I am going to book you passage.”

“I can take care of that myself. Assuming, of course, you are actually taking me to a barge and not just to some dark corner where you’ll clunk me on the head and do a more thorough job of robbing me.”

Pickles looked hurt. “I would do no such thing. Do you think me such a fool? First, I have seen what you do to people who try to *clunk you on the head*. Second, we have already passed a dozen perfectly dark corners.” Pickles beamed his big smile, which Hadrian took to be one part mischief, one part pride, and two parts just-plain-happy-to-be-alive joy. He couldn’t argue with that. He also couldn’t remember the last time he felt the way Pickles looked.

The press gang leader was right. Pickles could only be four or five years younger than Hadrian. *Five*, he thought. *He’s five years younger than I am. He’s me before I left. Did I smile like that back then?* He wondered how long Pickles had been on his own and if he’d still have that smile in five years.

“Hadrian, Hadrian Blackwater.” He extended his hand.

The boy nodded. “A good name. Very good. Better than Pickles—but then what is not?”

“Did your mother name you that?”

“Oh, most certainly. Rumor has it I was both conceived and born on the same crate of pickles. How can one deny such a legend? Even if it isn’t true, I think it should be.”

Crawling out of the labyrinth, they emerged onto a wider avenue. They had gained height, and Hadrian could see the pier and the masts of the ship he arrived on below. A good-sized crowd was still gathered—people looking for a place to stay or searching for belongings. Hadrian remembered the bag that had rolled into the harbor. How many others would find themselves stranded in a new city with little to nothing?

The bark of a dog caused Hadrian to turn. Looking down the narrow street, he thought he caught movement but couldn't be sure. The twisted length of the alley had but one lantern. Moonlight illuminated the rest, casting patches of blue-gray. A square here, a rectangle there, not nearly enough to see by and barely enough to judge distance. Had it been another rat? Seemed bigger. He waited, staring. Nothing moved.

When he looked back, Pickles had crossed most of the plaza to the far side where, to Hadrian's delight, there was another dock. This one sat on the mouth of the great Bernum River, which in the night appeared as a wide expanse of darkness. He cast one last look backward toward the narrow streets. Still nothing moved. *Ghosts*. That's all—his past stalking him.

Hadrian reeked of death. It wasn't the sort of stench others could smell or that water could wash, but it lingered on him like sweat-saturated pores after a long night of drinking. Only this odor didn't come from alcohol; it came from blood. Not from drinking it—although Hadrian knew some who had. His stink came from wallowing in it. But all that was over now, or so he told himself with the certainty of the recently sober. That had been a different Hadrian, a younger version who he'd left on the other side of the world and who he was still running from.

Realizing Pickles still had his bag, Hadrian ran to close the distance. Before he caught up, Pickles was in trouble again.

"It is his!" Pickles cried, pointing at Hadrian. "I was helping him reach the barge before it left."

The boy was surrounded by six soldiers. Most wore chain and held square shields. The one in the middle, with a fancy plume on his helmet, wore layered plate on his shoulders and chest as well as a studded leather skirt. He was the one Pickles was speaking to while two others restrained the boy. They all looked over as Hadrian approached.

“This your bag?” the officer asked.

“It is, and he’s telling the truth.” Hadrian pointed. “He is escorting me to that barge over there.”

“In a hurry to leave our fair city, are you?” The officer’s tone was suspicious, and his eyes scanned Hadrian as he talked.

“No offense to Vernes, but yes. I have business up north.”

The officer moved a step closer. “What’s your name?”

“Hadrian Blackwater.”

“Where you from?”

“Hintindar originally.”

“Originally?” The skepticism in his voice rose along with his eyebrows.

Hadrian nodded. “I’ve been in Calis for several years. Just returned from Dagastan on that ship down there.”

The officer glanced at the dock, then at Hadrian’s knee-length thawb, loose cotton pants, and keffiyeh headdress. He leaned in, sniffed, and grimaced. “You’ve definitely been on a ship, and that outfit is certainly Calian.” He sighed, then turned to Pickles. “But this one hasn’t been on any ship. He says he’s going with you. Is that right?”

Hadrian glanced at Pickles and saw the hope in the boy’s eyes. “Yeah. I’ve hired him to be my...ah...my...servant.”

“Whose idea was that? His or yours?”

“His, but he’s been very helpful. I wouldn’t have found this barge without him.”

“You just got off one ship,” the officer said. “Seems odd you’re so eager to get on another.”

“Well actually, I’m not, but Pickles says the barge is about to leave and there won’t be another for days. Is that true?”

“Yes,” the officer said, “and awfully convenient too.”

“Can I ask what the problem is? Is there a law against hiring a guide and paying for him to travel with you?”

“No, but we’ve had some nasty business here in town—real nasty business. So naturally we’re interested in anyone eager to leave, at least anyone who’s been around during the last few days.” He looked squarely at Pickles.

“I haven’t done anything,” Pickles said.

“So you say, but even if you haven’t, maybe you know something about it. Either way you might feel the need to disappear, and latching on to someone above suspicion would be a good way to get clear of trouble, wouldn’t it?”

“But I don’t know anything about the killings.”

The officer turned to Hadrian. “You’re free to go your way, and you’d best be quick. They’ve already called for boarders.”

“What about Pickles?”

He shook his head. “I can’t let him go with you. Unlikely he’s guilty of murder, but he might know who is. Street orphans see a lot that they don’t like to talk about if they think they can avoid it.”

“But I’m telling you, I don’t know *anything*. I haven’t even been on the hill.”

“Then you’ve nothing to worry about.”

“But—” Pickles looked as if he might cry. “He was going to take me out of here. We were going to go north. We were going to go to a university.”

“Hoy! Hoy! Last call for passengers! Barge to Colnora! Last call!” a voice bellowed.

“Listen”—Hadrian opened his purse—“you did me a service, and that’s worth payment. Now, after you finish with their questions, if you still want to work for me, you can use this money to meet me in Sheridan. Catch the next barge or buckboard north, whatever. I’ll be there for a month maybe, a couple of weeks at least.” Hadrian pressed a coin into the boy’s hand. “If you come, ask for Professor Arcadius. He’s the one I’m meeting with, and he should be able to tell you how to find me. Okay?”

Pickles nodded and looked a bit better. Glancing down at the coin, his eyes widened, and the old giant smile of his returned. “Yes, sir! I will be there straightaway. You can most certainly count on me. Now you must run before the barge leaves.”

Hadrian gave him a nod, picked up his bag, and jogged to the dock where a man waited at the gangway of a long flat boat.



GWEN

Gwen knew she would be too late the moment the screams began on the second floor. The ceiling shook, casting dirt into the drinks of those huddled at the bar. Overhead, the pounding sounded like he was taking a club to Avon's head.

No, not a club. He's hammering her head against the floor.

"Avon!" Gwen yelled, charging the stairs.

Unwilling to slow for the turn, she slammed her shoulder into the wall at the top of the flight, knocking loose a little mirror that fell and shattered. Gwen sprinted down the hall. The screams sounded inhuman, like something from a slaughterhouse—the futile cries of the doomed.

Stane is killing her.

Gwen clawed at the latch and pushed, but the inside bolt had been thrown. The door refused to budge. She threw herself against it, but the wood ignored her slight weight. Inside, the pounding softened, turning mushy. No longer a muffled thump, it had become a wet smack. The screams faded to whispered moans.

Gwen wrenched open the door across the hall where Mae had been entertaining a redheaded man from East March. Mae screamed in fear. Whatever business they had been engaged in had stopped with Avon's shrieks. Gwen kicked at the loose post of the bed's footboard. The

carpenter had constructed the frame from solid stumps of maple, but he'd done a lousy job fitting the pieces together. Two more kicks and the leg toppled, collapsing the mattress to the floor along with Mae and the redhead from East March.

Running like a jousting knight, Gwen drove the post into Avon's door. The impact threw the ram from her hands but left a sizable dent in its surface and splintered the frame. Scrambling, she grabbed it once more just as Raynor Grue appeared at the top of the stairs.

"Damn it, ya stupid bitch! Stop!"

With every ounce of her strength, Gwen rammed the door again, aiming for the same spot and hitting it, more or less. The frame shattered, and the door burst open. The momentum carried her through, and she landed on the floor in a pool of blood.

"Great Maribor's beard!" Grue cursed, standing in the doorway.

Stane was on top of Avon, his hands still around her neck. "She wouldn't stop screaming."

Avon's eyes were open but not seeing, her blond hair stained crimson.

"Get outta here!" Grue said, grabbing Gwen and dragging her into the corridor. "Go downstairs! Ya owe me for a new bloody door and a bed."

"Is she dead?" Stane asked, still straddling her with his naked legs, his skin slick with sweat, his chest splattered with blood.

Grue nudged Avon's head with his boot. "Yeah, ya killed her."

"You bastard!" Gwen launched herself at Stane.

Grue caught her and shoved her backward, causing Gwen to stumble and fall. "Shut up!" he yelled.

"I'm sorry, Grue," Stane offered.

Grue grimaced and shook his head, surveying the blood spreading across the wooden floor. Gwen could tell from the way he stood and the downward curl of his mouth that he wasn't seeing Avon as a beautiful young girl gone before her time but merely as a mess to be cleaned up.

Grue sighed. "I don't want no apology, Stane. You're gonna have to pay for this. Avon was popular."

"How much?"

Grue thought a moment the way he always did, chewing on a toothpick and sucking on his teeth. "Eighty-five silver tenents."

"Silver? Eighty-five? She only cost six coppers!"

"Ya done killed her, ya stupid son of a bitch! I'm out everything she would have made in the future. I should charge ya gold!"

"I ain't got that much."

"You'll have to get it."

Stane nodded. "I'll get it."

"Tonight."

Stane hesitated, then agreed. "Okay, tonight."

"Gwen, get a bucket and clean this up. You, too, Mae. Red, you're done for the night. Go on and get outta here, and send Willard up on your way out. I'll need help getting her body down the stairs."

"You can't let him get away with this," Gwen said through clenched teeth as she got to her feet. The tears hadn't started yet, and she wondered why. Maybe she was still too angry. The smashing of the door had gotten her blood up, and she hadn't calmed down yet.

"He's paying for the damages, just like you will."

“In that case, I’m not done damaging.” Gwen picked up the bedpost and charged at Stane’s head. She might have made it, but Grue caught her arm. He spun her, striking her cheek hard with the flat of his hand. She fell backward again. The bedpost hit what was left of the doorframe and rolled harmlessly down the hall.

“Get your ass downstairs! Mae, get in here with that bucket, and where’s Willard? *Willard!*”

Gwen sat, dazed. If he had used his fist, she would’ve been down awhile, maybe spitting teeth. But Grue knew how to handle his girls, and he avoided marking them if he could. With the heat still on her cheek, and the jaw-rattling pain reaching around her face, Gwen got up and ran downstairs. Everyone in the bar got out of her way as she barreled through the front door of The Hideous Head Tavern and Alehouse, heading straight for the sheriff’s office.

The night was cold with the blow of an autumn wind, but she barely noticed as she ran through the cracked-mud streets of Medford. No one was out—all the decent folk were asleep.

She didn’t knock, just shoved the door open.

Ethan was asleep in a chair, his head nestled in his arms on the table. Gwen kicked the table’s leg, and he popped up like a flushed quail.

“What the—” He sounded angry.

Good.

She wanted him furious. She wanted him seething.

“Stane just murdered Avon at The Hideous Head,” she yelled, making Ethan flinch. “The bastard hammered her head against the floor until he split her skull. I told Grue he’d do it. I told him not to let Stane back in, but he didn’t listen. Now get over there!”

“All right, all right.” Ethan grabbed his sword belt off the chair and buckled it as he followed her out.

“He blackened Jollin’s eye just three days back,” she told him as they walked down Wayward Street. Ethan wasn’t moving fast enough to suit her. Not that time was essential. Avon wouldn’t be getting any better, and Stane wouldn’t be getting any smarter. Still, she wanted to see justice done, done right and done fast. Stane didn’t deserve to live any longer than Avon, and every breath he took was a crime in Gwen’s eyes. “And he broke Abby’s arm a little more than a month ago. Grue was a fool to force Avon to go with him. She knew, and she was scared, but that’s how Stane likes us. Fear excites him, and the more excited he gets, the more damage he does. And Avon—Maribor love her—she was absolutely terrified. Grue should have known better.”

The door to the tavern was still open, casting a long slant of light across the porch and into the rutted road. Maybe she had broken that one too; she hoped so. The drunks had left, likely chased out. Grue and Willard were bringing Avon down, wrapped in the blanket from the bed. One end was dripping a dark line down the steps.

“What ya doing here, Ethan?” The cords of Grue’s neck stood out from the strain. He wasn’t yelling, just angry, which meant he was back to normal.

“What do you mean? Your girl came and got me.”

“I didn’t send her.”

“Well, she woke me out of a dead sleep, so here I am. What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” Grue said.

“Don’t look like nothing. Is that Avon in the blanket?”

“What’s it to you?”

“It’s my job to make sure justice is done. Stane upstairs?”

“Yep.”

“Well, get him down here.”

Grue frowned, hesitated, then set his end of the burden down. “Go get him, Willard.”

As angry as Gwen was at Stane and Grue, she couldn't help feeling she was also to blame. More than anyone, she had known what would happen. She should have done something—gotten Avon out of there—but she couldn't even get herself out. But maybe she could have done something, anything. Only she didn't. Now Avon was dead.

Gwen stared at the little puddle forming around the end of the blanket and wondered how she was still standing. Guilt tore at her insides, pulling her apart. *How is it possible to remain upright after being gutted?*

Stane came downstairs buttoning his pants, finger streaks of blood smeared across his sun-bleached shirt. There was more on his face where he'd wiped his nose.

“You kill this girl?” Ethan asked.

Stane didn't speak. He just nodded and sniffled.

“That's a serious crime. You understand that, right?”

“Yes, sir.”

Gwen spotted Grue glaring at her. She'd pay later, but it was worth a beating to see Stane suffer the same punishment as Avon. It wouldn't be the same, of course. Ethan wouldn't bash his head against the floor over and over. They would just hang him. It would be public, though. He'd suffer humiliation before he died. At least that would be something.

Ethan brushed the hair from his face, letting his hand rub the back of his neck. He chewed his lower lip while staring at the blanket-wrapped body. Finally, he took a breath and addressed Stane. “You're gonna need to make restitution.”

“What’s that?” Stane asked nervously.

“You need to compensate Grue for damages. Pay him for his loss.”

“We done settled that already,” Grue said. “He’s gonna pay me eighty-five.”

“Silver...right?” Ethan asked, nodding. “Seems fair. Any other damages?”

“A busted door, mirror, and bed, but that was her doing.” Grue pointed at Gwen. “She’s gonna pay for them.”

“She bust up the place trying to get that one out?” Ethan gestured at the blanket.

“I suppose so.”

“Seems to me she wouldn’t have done all that if he wasn’t beating on Avon, so Stane is gonna take care of those too. Understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

The sheriff nodded. “Okay then.”

Ethan took a step back, and Gwen saw him start to turn. “That’s all? That’s not right. He needs to pay.”

“He is. Eighty-five and—”

“A woman is dead! He killed her and needs to die.”

“A whore,” Grue corrected.

Gwen glared.

“A *whore* is dead, and that’s not the same thing. No one is gonna execute a working man for getting a little carried away.”

“She’s *dead!*”

“And *I’m* the injured party. If I say the settlement is fair, then that’s the end of it. This never was any of your concern. Now shut up.”

“You can’t do this,” Gwen said to Ethan.

“She got any family?” he asked.

Gwen shook her head. “If any of us had family, do you think we’d be here?”

“Then that makes him responsible for her. He’s satisfied, so this affair is done.” He turned back to Grue. “Make sure you get the body out of the city walls before noon, or the constable will have my ass, and I’ll be after yours to replace it. Understand?”

Grue nodded and Ethan left.

The two men hoisted the bundle again and headed for the front door. As they passed Gwen, Grue said, “Guess who’s getting a beating when I get back?”

Grue and Willard headed out, leaving Gwen staring across at Mae and Jollin. Between them, stood Stane.

He gave her a smile and a wink. “I’m gonna enjoy having you,” lowering his voice, he added, “as soon as I get me another eighty-five saved up.” He took a step toward her.

“He won’t ever let you in here again.”

“Grue?” He laughed. “Avon ain’t the first. There was another girl in Roe. If I can pay, they’ll wrap you in a bow.” He looked at Mae and then Jollin. “Don’t worry. I won’t forget you two neither.”

He gave another little laugh that turned Gwen’s stomach. Stane walked to the door, but instead of leaving, he stuck his head out and looked both ways before closing it. When he turned around, he was grinning and his eyes were fixed on Gwen.

“Run!” Jollin shouted.

As Gwen ran for the back door, she heard him curse. He fell hard, probably slipping in the puddle of Avon’s blood. It sounded like a chair or a table fell over, too, but by then Gwen was

running in the dark, her skirt hiked. She sprinted up the alley past the tanner's shop to the "bridges," a couple of narrow wooden planks crossing the river of sewage that ran behind the buildings. She was too scared, going too fast. Her feet skipped off slick, unsteady boards, and she fell forward into the muck. Gwen's arms sank to the elbows, but she saved her face.

She expected him to be on her, bloody hands closing around her throat and forcing her into the foul soup, which smelled of urine and dung. She spun, but he wasn't there. No one was. Gwen was alone.

Pulling her arms out, she wiped them on any clean parts of her dress she could find. She found few, and in her frustration the tears finally came. Sitting next to the filthy trench, she sobbed so hard her stomach hurt, and each gasp of air was thick with sewage.

"I don't know what to do!" she cried out loud. "Tell me what to do!" She scooped a fistful of manure and mud and flung it as hard as she could. Tilting her head back, she screamed at the sky. "Do you hear me? I'm not strong enough. I'm like my mother and I'll break." She sucked in a shuddering breath. "And if I don't break first, he'll kill me. Me, Jollin, Mae, and all the rest. I can't...I can't wait anymore. Do you hear me? I can't. It's been five years! I just can't wait for him any longer."

She shivered, panting for air and listening for a reply, but all she heard was the wind.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

After finding a manual typewriter in the basement of a friend's house, Michael inserted a blank piece of paper and typed: It was a dark and stormy night and a shot rang out. Well, he was just eight years old at the time, so we'll forgive him that trespass. But the desire to fill the blank page and see what doors the typewriter keys would unlock wouldn't let him go. For ten years Michael developed his craft by studying authors such as Stephen King, Ayn Rand, and John Steinbeck. During that time, he wrote twelve novels, and after finding no traction in publishing, he gave up and vowed never to write creatively again.

Michael discovered that never is a very long time, and he ended his writing hiatus after a decade. The itch returned when he decided to create a series of books for his then thirteen-year-old daughter, who was struggling in school due to dyslexia. Intrigued by the idea of writing a series with an overarching story line, he created the Riyria Revelations. Each of the six-books were written as individual episodes but also included intertwining elements and mysteries that develop over time. Michael describes this endeavor as something he did "just for fun with no intention of publishing." After presenting the first manuscript to his daughter, he was chagrined that she declared, "I can't read it like this, can't you get it published?"

So began his second adventure on the road to publication, which included: drafting his wife to be his business manager; signing with an independent press; and later creating a small press. After two and a half years, the first five books sold more than 70,000 copies and ranked in the top twenty of multiple Amazon fantasy lists. In November 2010, he leveraged his success and received his first commercial publishing contract for three novels from Orbit Books (the fantasy imprint of Hachette Book Group, USA). In addition, Michael reached international status with more than a dozen foreign right translations including: France, Spain, Russia, Germany, just to name a few.

Michael's work has been well received by critics and readers alike, earning him hundreds of positive reviews, interviews, and articles. He has attributed much of his success to the fantasy book blogging community. Dubbed "the little indie that could" he found his books pitted as the only independent in major competitions such as the 2010 & 2012 Goodreads Choice Award Nominee for Fantasy, the 2013 Audie Award for Fantasy, and the 2009 Book Spot Central's

Fantasy Tournament of Books, which he won.

Today, Michael continues to fill blank pages and is working on his third series tentatively titled, the First Empire.

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