



VICTORY
IS FOR THE
TAKING

VOLUME THREE OF THE
RIYRIA REVELATIONS

HEIR OF NOVRON



MICHAEL J. SULLIVAN

A forced wedding. A double execution. Two thieves have other plans.

The New Empire intends to celebrate its victory over the Nationalists with a day that will never be forgotten. On the high holiday of Wintertide the empress will be married and two traitors (Degan Gaunt and the Witch of Melengar) will be publically executed. Once the empress suffers a fatal accident, the Imperialists will finally reign. There is only one problem--Royce and Hadrian have finally found the lost heir and the time to act has come.

“Wintertide (A++) is the second top-rated combo (with The Emerald Storm) of 2010 for me and establish the series as one of the best traditional epic fantasies currently being published and a top 10 novel of mine.” – Liviu Suciu, Fantasy Book Critic

“I can't even START to tell you how amazing the last three chapters of this book are. I can't tell you cause I'd spoil stuff. Sufficed to say they knocked me right on my ass. My mouth was on the floor for like an hour, and I haven't actually stopped thinking of the ramifications to certain characters and places. Let's just say that as far as endings go, this is probably the best Sullivan has done yet in the series. Bar none. The revelations are fast and furious but it is the events of those last pages that will haunt you into the wee hours thinking about them, not to mention where they will take us...” – Iceberg Ink

“If you haven't yet stepped into the world of The Riyria Revelations I highly suggest that you do. Wintertide has solidified Michael J. Sullivan as a writer with creativity and finesse, a sense of humor and an understanding of what truly makes a book readable again and again - characters that push the boundaries of their existence and fight for what is right.” – Lisa Hurley, SciFiGuy

“Michael J. Sullivan has created a world and a cast of characters that pull you in and remind you why you fell in love with this genre in the first place. If you can remember how the wizards, warriors, damsels and dragons once moved your imagination, I highly recommend that you see a masterful author updating their genre's archetypes. Wintertide and the prior entries in Michael Sullivan's Riyria Revelations are some of the most enjoyable stories I've had the good fortune to stumble across in the last few years. If you consider yourself a fan of fantasy, run – don't walk – to jump into Michael Sullivan's world immediately. This is what you should be reading.”
– Ruled by Books

“Mr. Sullivan brings back a type of story that's had very little presence in this genre in the last twenty years or more. I, for one, wish him much success and hope his career is a long one. Making swashbuckling tales popular again creates more excellent choices for fantasy readers.”
– Greg Hersom, Fantasy Literature

HEIR OF NOVRON

*Volume Three of the
Riyria Revelations*

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WORKS BY MICHAEL SULLIVAN

Original Riyria Revelations
The Crown Conspiracy (2008)
Avempartha (2009)
Nyphron Rising (2009)
The Emerald Storm (2010)
Wintertide (2010)
Percepliquis (2012)

Orbit Riyria Revelations (Omnibus Versions)

Theft of Swords (2011)
Rise of Empire (2011)
Heir of Novron (2011)

Works in Progress

Antithesis (2012)
A Burden to the Earth (2012)
Short Story: *Riyria Chronicles #1* (2011)

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AWARDS & RECOGNITION

- 2011 Library Journal September Scifi/Fantasy Debut for *Theft of Swords*
- 2010 Fantasy Book Critic Top 25 Novels for *The Emerald Storm* and *Wintertide*
- 2010 GoodReads Choice Award Nominee for *The Emerald Storm*
- 2010 Fantasy Book Critic Top Independent Novels for *The Emerald Storm* and *Wintertide*
- 2010 Bookworm Blues Best Overall Read for *Avempartha*
- 2010 Fantasy Book Critic Top Independent Novels for *The Emerald Storm* and *Wintertide*
- 2010 Iceberg Ink Best Read Award for *The Crown Conspiracy*
- 2009 ForeWord Magazine Book of the Year Finalist for Fantasy for *Avempartha*
- 2009 ForeWord Magazine Book of the Year Finalist for Fantasy for *Nyphron Rising*
- 2009 Dark Wolf Award for *The Riyria Revelations*
- 2009 National Indie Excellence Award Finalist for Fantasy for *The Crown Conspiracy*
- 2009 Dark Wolf Top 5 books of First Half of 2009 for *The Crown Conspiracy*
- 2009 Fantasy Book Critic Notable Fantasy Book for *Avempartha*
- 2008 Fantasy Book Critic Notable Indie for *The Crown Conspiracy*
- 2008 ReaderViews Literary Award Finalist for Fantasy for *The Crown Conspiracy*
- 2007 ForeWord Magazine Book of the Year Finalist for Fantasy for *The Crown Conspiracy*

CHAPTER 1: AQUESTA

Some people are skilled, and some are lucky, but at that moment Mince realized he was neither. Failing to cut the merchant's purse strings, he froze with one hand still cupping the bag. He knew the pickpocket's creed allowed for only a single touch and had dutifully slipped into the crowd after two earlier attempts. A third failure meant they would bar him from another meal—Mince was too hungry to let go.

With his hands still under the merchant's cloak, he waited. The man remained oblivious.

Should I try again?

The thought was insane, but his empty stomach won the battle over reason. In a moment of desperation, Mince pushed caution aside. The leather seemed oddly thick. Sawing back and forth, he felt the purse come loose, but something was not right. It took only an instant for Mince to realize his mistake. Instead of purse strings, he had sliced through the merchant's belt. Like a hissing snake, the leather strap slithered off the fat man's belly, dragged to the cobblestones by the weight of his weapons.

Mince did not breathe or move as the entire span of his ten disappointing years flashed by.

Run! the voice inside his head screamed as he realized there was a heartbeat, perhaps two, before his victim—

The merchant turned.

He was a large, soft man with saddlebag cheeks reddened by the cold. His eyes widened when he noticed the purse in Mince's hand. "Hey, you!" The man reached for his dagger, and surprise filled his face when he found it missing. Groping for his other weapon, he spotted them both lying in the street.

Mince heeded the voice of his smarter self and bolted. Common sense told him the best way to escape a rampaging giant was to head for the smallest crack. He plunged beneath an ale cart outside the Blue Swan Inn and slid to the far side. Scrambling to his feet, he raced for the alley, clutching the knife and purse to his chest. The recent snow hampered his flight, and his small feet lost traction rounding a corner.

"Thief! Stop!" The shouts were not nearly as close as expected.

Mince continued to run. Finally reaching the stable, he ducked between the rails of the fence framing the manure pile. He crouched with his back against the far wall, exhausted. The boy shoved

the knife into his belt and stuffed the purse down his shirt, leaving a noticeable bulge. Panting amidst the steaming piles, he struggled to hear anything over the pounding in his ears.

“There you are!” Elbright shouted, skidding in the snow and catching himself on the fence. “What an idiot. You just stood there—waiting for the fat oaf to turn around. You’re a moron, Mince. That’s it—that’s all there is to it. I honestly don’t know why I bother trying to teach you.”

Mince and the other boys referred to thirteen-year-old Elbright as “the Old Man.” In their small band only he wore an actual cloak, which was dingy-gray and secured with a tarnished metal broach. Elbright was the smartest and most accomplished of their crew, and Mince hated to disappoint him.

Laughing, Brand arrived only moments later and joined Elbright at the fence.

“It’s not funny,” Elbright said.

“But—he—” Brand could not finish as laughter consumed him.

Like the other two, Brand was dirty, thin, and dressed in mismatched clothing of varying sizes. His pants were too long and snow gathered in the folds of the rolled-up bottoms. Only his tunic fit properly. Made from green brocade and trimmed with fine supple leather, it fastened down the front with intricately carved wooden toggles. A year younger than the Old Man, he was a tad taller and a bit broader. In the unspoken hierarchy of their gang, Brand came second—the muscle to Elbright’s brains. Kine, the remaining member of their group, ranked third because he was the best pickpocket. This left Mince unquestionably at the bottom. His size matched his position as he stood barely four feet tall and weighed little more than a wet cat.

“Stop it, will ya?” the Old Man snapped. “I’m trying to teach the kid a thing or two. He could have gotten himself killed. It was stupid—plain and simple.”

“I thought it was brilliant.” Brand paused to wipe his eyes. “I mean sure it was dumb, but spectacular just the same. The way Mince just stood there blinking as the guy goes for his blades. But they ain’t there ’cuz the little imbecile done cut the git’s whole bloody belt off! Then...” Brand struggled against another bout of laughter. “The best part is that just after Mince runs, the fat bastard goes to chase him, and his breeches fall down. The guy toppled like a ruddy tree. *Wham*. Right into the gutter. By Mar, that was hilarious.”

Elbright tried to remain stern, but Brand’s recounting soon had them all laughing.

“Okay, okay, quit it.” Elbright regained control and went straight to business. “Let’s see the take.”

Mince fished out the purse and handed it over with a wide grin. “Feels heavy,” he proudly stated.

Elbright drew open the top and scowled after examining the contents. “Just coppers.”

Brand and Elbright exchanged disappointed frowns and Mince’s momentary elation melted. “It felt heavy,” he repeated, mainly to himself.

“What now?” Brand asked. “Do we give him another go?”

Elbright shook his head. “No, and all of us will have to avoid Church Square for a while. Too many people saw Mince. We’ll move closer to the gates. We can watch for new arrivals and hope to get lucky.”

“Do ya want—” Mince started.

“No. Give me back my knife. Brand is up next.”

The boys jogged toward the palace walls, following the trail that morning patrols had made in the fresh snow. They circled east and entered Imperial Square. People from all over Avryn were arriving for Wintertide, and the central plaza bustled with likely prospects.

“There,” Elbright said, pointing toward the city gate. “Those two. See ’em? One tall, the other shorter.”

“They’re a sorry-looking pair,” Mince said.

“Exhausted,” Brand agreed.

“Probably been riding all night in the storm,” Elbright said with a hungry smile. “Go on, Brand, do the old helpful stableboy routine. Now, Mince, watch how this is done. It might be your only hope, as you’ve got no talent for purse cutting.”



Royce and Hadrian entered Imperial Square on ice-laden horses. Defending against the cold, the two appeared as ghosts shrouded in snow-laden blankets. Despite wearing all they had, they were ill-equipped for the winter roads much less the mountain passes that lay between Ratibor and Aquesta. The all night snowstorm had only added to their hardship. As the two drew their horses to a stop, Royce noticed Hadrian breathing into his cupped hands. Neither of them had winter gloves. Hadrian had wrapped his fingers in torn strips from his blanket, while Royce opted for pulling his hands into the shelter of his sleeves. The sight of his own handless arms disturbed Royce as they reminded him of the old wizard. The two had learned the details of his murder while passing through Ratibor. Assassinated late one night, Esrahaddon had been silenced forever.

They meant to get gloves, but as soon as they had arrived in Ratibor they saw announcements proclaiming the Nationalist leader's upcoming execution. The Empire planned to publically burn Degan Gaunt in the imperial capital of Aquesta as part of the Wintertide celebrations. Having spent months traversing high seas and dark jungles seeking Gaunt, to have found his whereabouts tacked up to every tavern door in the city was as much a blow as a blessing. Fearing some new calamity might arise to stop them from finally reaching him, they left early the next morning, long before the trade shops opened.

Unwrapping his scarf, Royce drew back his hood and looked around. The snow-covered palace took up the entire southern side of the square while shops and vendors dominated the rest. Furriers displayed trimmed capes and hats. Shoemakers cajoled passers-by, offering to oil their boots. Bakers tempted travelers with snowflake-shaped cookies and white-powdered pastries. And colorful banners were everywhere announcing the upcoming festival.

Royce had just dismounted when a boy ran up. "Take your horses, sirs? One night in a stable for just a silver each. I'll brush them down myself and see they get good oats, too."

Dismounting and pulling back his own hood, Hadrian smiled at the boy. "Will you sing them a lullaby at night?"

"Certainly, sir," the boy replied without losing a beat. "It will cost you two coppers more, but I do have a very fine voice, I does."

"Any stable in the city will quarter a horse for five coppers," Royce challenged.

"Not this month, sir. Wintertide pricing started three days back. Stables and rooms fill up fast. Especially this year. You're lucky you got here early. In another two weeks, they'll be stocking horses in the fields behind hunters' blinds. The only lodgings will be on dirt floors, where people will be stacked like cordwood for five silvers each. I know the best places and the lowest costs in the city. A silver is a good price right now. In a few days it'll cost you twice that."

Royce eyed him closely. "What's your name?"

"Brand the Bold they call me." He straightened up, adjusting the collar of his tunic.

Hadrian chuckled and asked, "Why is that?"

"Cuz I don't never back down from a fight, sir."

"Is that where you got your tunic?" Royce asked.

The boy looked down as if noticing the garment for the first time. "This old thing? I got five better ones at home. I'm just wearing this rag so I don't get the good ones wet in the snow."

“Well, Brand, do you think you can take these horses to the Bailey Inn at Hall and Coswell and stable them there?”

“I could indeed, sir. And a fine choice, I might add. It’s run by a reputable owner charging fair prices. I was just going to suggest that very place.”

Royce gave him a smirk. He turned his attention to two boys who stood at a distance, pretending not to know Brand. Royce waved for them to come over. The boys appeared hesitant, but when he repeated the gesture, they reluctantly obliged.

“What are your names?” he asked.

“Elbright, sir,” the taller of the two replied. This boy was older than Brand and had a knife concealed beneath his cloak. Royce guessed he was the real leader of their group and had sent Brand over to make the play.

“Mince, sir,” said the other, who looked to be the youngest and whose hair showed recent evidence of being cut with a dull knife. The boy wore little more than rags of stained, worn wool. His shirt and pants exposed the bright pink skin of his wrists and shins. Of all his clothing, the item that fit best was a torn woven bag draped over his shoulders. The same material wrapped his feet, secured around his ankles by twine.

Hadrian checked through the gear on his horse, removed his spadone blade, and slid it into the sheath, which he wore on his back beneath his cloak.

Royce handed two silver tenents to the first boy, then addressing all three said, “Brand here is going to have our horses stabled at the Bailey and reserve us a room. While he’s gone, you two will stay here and answer some questions.”

“But ah, sir, we can’t—” Elbright started but Royce ignored him.

“When Brand returns with a receipt from the Bailey, I will pay *each* of you a silver. If he doesn’t return, if instead he runs off and sells the horses, I shall slit both of your throats and hang you on the palace gate by your feet. I’ll let your blood drip into a pail then paint a sign with it to notify the city that Brand the Bold is a horse thief. Then I’ll track him down, with the help of the imperial guard and *other connections* I have in this city, and see he gets the same treatment.” Royce glared at the boy. “Do we understand each other, Brand?”

The three boys stared at him with mouths agape.

“By Mar! Not a very trusting fellow are ya, sir?” Mince said.

Royce grinned ominously. “Make the reservation under the names of Grim and Baldwin. Run along now, Brand, but do hurry back. You don’t want your friends to worry.”

Brand led the horses away while the other two boys watched him go. Elbright gave a little shake of his head when Brand looked back.

“Now boys, why don’t you tell us what is planned for this year’s festivities.”

“Well...” Elbright started, “I suspect this will be the most memorable Wintertide in a hundred years on account of the empress’s marriage and all.”

“Marriage?” Hadrian asked.

“Yes, sir. I thought everyone knew about that. Invitations went out months ago, and all the rich folk, even kings and queens, have been coming from all over.”

“Who’s she marrying?” Royce asked.

“*Lard* Ethelred,” Mince said.

Elbright lowered his voice. “Shut it, Mince.”

“He’s a snake.”

Elbright growled and cuffed him on the ear. “Talk like that will get you dead.” Turning back to Royce and Hadrian, he said, “Mince has a bit of a crush on the empress. He’s not too pleased with the old king on account of him marrying her and all.”

“She’s like a goddess, she is,” Mince declared, misty-eyed. “I seen her once. I climbed to that roof for a better view when she gave a speech last summer. She shimmered like a star, she did. By Mar, she’s beautiful. Ya can tell she’s the daughter of Novron. I’ve never seen anyone so pretty.”

“See what I mean? Mince is a bit crazy when it comes to the empress,” Elbright apologized. “He’s got to get used to Regent Ethelred running things again. Not that he ever really stopped on account of the empress being sick and all.”

“She was hurt by the beast she killed up north,” Mince explained. “The Empress Modina was dying from the poison, and healers came from all over, but no one could help. Then Regent Saldur prayed for seven days and nights without food or water. Maribor showed him that the pure heart of a servant girl named Amilia from Tarin Vale had the power to heal the empress. And she did. Lady Amilia has been nursing the empress back to health and doing a fine job.” He took a breath, his eyes brightened, and a smile grew across his face.

“Mince, enough,” Elbright said.

“What’s all this about?” Royce asked, pointing at bleachers that were being built in the center of the square. “They aren’t holding the wedding out here, are they?”

“No, the wedding will be at the cathedral. Those are for folks to watch the execution. They’re gonna kill the rebel leader.”

“Yeah, that piece of news we heard about,” Hadrian said softly.

“Oh, so you came for the execution?”

“More or less.”

“I’ve got our spots all picked out,” Elbright said. “I’m gonna have Mince go up the night before and save us a good seat.”

“Hey, why do I have to go?” Mince asked.

“Brand and I have to carry all the stuff. You’re too small to help and Kine’s still sick, so you need to—”

“But you have the cloak and it’s gonna be cold just sitting up there.”

The two boys went on arguing, but Royce could tell Hadrian was no longer listening. His friend’s eyes scanned the palace gates, walls, and front entrance. Hadrian was counting guards.

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...just to name a few. During that time he wrote ten 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 hiatus from writing 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 60,000 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 foreign right translations including: France, Spain, Russia, Germany, and the Czech Republic.

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 Goodreads Choice Award Nominee for Fantasy 2010 Goodreads Choice Award Nominee for Fantasy and the 2009 Book Spot Central's Fantasy Tournament of Books, which he won.

Today, Michael continues to fill blank pages and has three projects under development: A modern fantasy, a literary fiction piece, and a prequel to his bestselling Riyria Revelations.