

SOMETIMES
YOU HAVE TO
STEAL GLORY



VOLUME ONE OF THE
RIYRIA REVELATIONS

THEFT OF SWORDS



MICHAEL J. SULLIVAN

THEY KILLED THE KING. THEY PINNED IT ON TWO MEN. THEY CHOSE POORLY.

There's no ancient evil to defeat, no orphan destined for greatness, just two guys in the wrong place at the wrong time...Royce Melborn, a skilled thief, and his mercenary partner, Hadrian Blackwater make a profitable living carrying out dangerous assignments for conspiring nobles until they become the unwitting scapegoats in a plot to murder the king. Can a self-serving thief and an idealistic swordsman survive long enough to unravel the first part of an ancient mystery that has toppled kings and destroyed empires in order to keep a secret too terrible for the world to know?

"This series has been perhaps the biggest (and most pleasant) surprise I have stumbled upon in recent years of reading fantasy." – Suite 101

"Hair-raising escapes, flashy sword fights, and faithful friendship complete the formula for good old-fashioned escapist fun." – Publisher's Weekly

"[I]t's been a while since I found a sword and sorcery story I truly delighted in reading and Theft of Swords reminded me of everything I love about the sub-genre." – Deluded Visions

"An exciting, out-of-nowhere swashbuckler, The Riyria Revelations by Michael J Sullivan astounds with its masterful combination of simplicity and depth." – Suite 101

"I really enjoyed Theft of Swords and will be eagerly awaiting the next installment." – Deluded Visions

"Mr. Sullivan has something special here, and I encourage any fan of fantasy to confidently grab Theft of Swords when it is released this fall." – Suite 101

"Sullivan succeeds with simplicity in his originally self-published epic fantasy debut."
– Publisher's Weekly

"I loved the social dynamic between the two of them and how opposite Hadrian and Royce were by nature and by trait, but how little true antagonism there was between them." – Deluded Visions

THEFT OF SWORDS

*Volume One 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

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*

2010 Fantasy Book Critic Anticipated Releases for *The Emerald Storm* and *Wintertide*

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: STOLEN LETTERS

Hadrian could see little in the darkness, but he could hear them—the snapping of twigs, the crush of leaves, and the brush of grass. There was more than one, more than three, and they were closing in.

“Don’t neither of you move,” a harsh voice ordered from out of the shadows. “We’ve got arrows aimed at your backs, and we’ll drop you in your saddles if you try to run.” The speaker was still in the dark eaves of the forest, just a vague sense of movement among the naked branches. “We’re just gonna lighten your load a bit. No one needs to get hurt. Do as I say and you’ll keep your lives. Don’t—and we’ll take those, too.”

Hadrian felt his stomach sink knowing this was his fault. He glanced over at Royce who sat beside him on his dirty gray mare with his hood up, his face hidden. His friend’s head was bowed and shook slightly. Hadrian did not need to see his expression to know what it looked like.

“Sorry,” he offered.

Royce said nothing and just continued to shake his head.

Before them, stood a wall of fresh cut brush blocking their way. Behind, lay the long moonlit corridor of empty road. Mist pooled in the dips and gullies and somewhere an unseen stream trickled over rocks. They were deep in the forest on the old southern road, engulfed in a long tunnel of oaks and ash whose slender branches reached out over the road quivering and clacking in the cold autumn wind. Almost a day’s ride from any town, Hadrian could not recall passing so much as a farmhouse in hours. They were on their own, in the middle of nowhere—the kind of place people never found bodies.

The crush of leaves grew louder until at last the thieves stepped into the narrow band of moonlight. Hadrian counted four men with unshaven faces and drawn swords. They wore rough clothes, leather and wool, stained, worn, and filthy. With them was a girl wielding a bow, an arrow notched and aimed. She was dressed like the rest in pants and boots, her hair a tangled mess. Each was covered in mud, a ground in grime as if the whole lot slept in a dirt burrow.

“They don’t look like they got much money,” a man with a flat nose said. An inch or two taller than Hadrian he was the largest of the party, a stocky brute with a thick neck and large hands. His lower lip looked to have been split about the same time his nose was broken.

“But they’ve got bags of gear,” the girl said. Her voice surprised him. She was young, and—despite the dirt—cute, and almost childlike, but her tone was aggressive, even vicious. “Look at all this stuff they’re carrying. What’s with all the rope?”

Hadrian was uncertain if she was asking him or her fellows. Either way, he was not about to answer. He considered making a joke, but she did not look like the type he could charm with a compliment and a smile. On top of that, she was pointing the arrow at him and it looked like her arm might be growing tired.

“I claim the big sword that fella has on his back,” flat-nose said. “Looks right about my size.”

“I’ll take the other two he’s carrying.” This came from one with a scar that divided his face at a slight angle crossing the bridge of his nose just high enough to save his eye.

The girl aimed the point of her arrow at Royce. “I want the little one’s cloak. I’d look good in a fine black hood like that.”

With deep-set eyes and sun-baked skin, the man closest to Hadrian appeared to be the oldest. He took a step closer and grabbed hold of Hadrian’s horse by the bit. “Be real careful now. We’ve killed plenty of folks along this road. Stupid folks who didn’t listen. You don’t want to be stupid, do you?”

Hadrian shook his head.

“Good. Now drop them weapons,” the thief said. “And then climb down.”

“What do you say, Royce?” Hadrian asked. “We give them a bit of coin so nobody gets hurt.”

Royce looked over. Two eyes peered out from the hood with a withering glare.

“I’m just saying, we don’t want any trouble, am I right?”

“You don’t want my opinion,” Royce said.

“So you’re going to be stubborn.”

Silence.

Hadrian shook his head and sighed. “Why do you have to make everything so difficult? They’re probably not bad people—just poor. You know, taking what they need to buy a loaf of bread to feed their family. Can you begrudge them that? Winter is coming and times are hard.” He nodded his head in the direction of the thieves. “Right?”

“I ain’t got no family,” flat-nose replied. “I spend most of my coin on drink.”

“You’re not helping,” Hadrian said.

“I’m not trying to. Either you two do as you’re told, or we’ll gut you right here.” He emphasized this by pulling a long dagger from his belt and scraping it loudly against the blade of his sword.

A cold wind howled through the trees bobbing the branches and stripping away more foliage. Red and gold leaves flew, swirling in circles, buffeted by the gusts along the narrow road. Somewhere in the dark an owl hooted.

“Look, how about we give you half our money? *My half*. That way this won’t be a total loss for you.”

“We ain’t asking for half,” the man holding his mount said. “We want it all, right down to these here horses.”

“Now wait a second. Our horses? Taking a little coin is fine but horse thieving? If you get caught, you’ll hang. And you know we’ll report this at the first town we come to.”

“You’re from up north, ain’t you?”

“Yeah, left Medford yesterday.”

The man holding his horse nodded and Hadrian noticed a small red tattoo on his neck. “See that’s your problem.” His face softened to a sympathetic expression that appeared more threatening by its intimacy. “You’re probably on your way to Colnora—nice city. Lots of shops. Lots of fancy rich folk. Lots of trading going on down there, and we get lots of people along this road carrying all kinds of stuff to sell to them fancy folk. But I’m guessing you ain’t been south before, have you? Up in Melengar, King Amrath goes to the trouble of having soldiers patrol the roads. But here in Warric, things are done a bit differently.”

Flat-nose came closer licking his split lip as he studied the spadone sword on his back.

“Are you saying theft is legal?”

“Naw, but King Ethelred lives in Aquesta and that’s awfully far from here.”

“And the Earl of Chadwick? Doesn’t he administer these lands on the king’s behalf?”

“Archie Ballentyne?” The mention of his name brought chuckles from the other thieves. “Archie don’t give a rat’s ass what goes on with the common folk. He’s too busy picking out what to wear.” The man grinned showing yellowed teeth that grew at odd angles. “So now drop them swords and climb down. Afterward, you can walk on up to Ballentyne Castle, knock on old Archie’s door, and see what he does.” Another round of laughter. “Now unless you think this is the perfect place to die—you’re gonna do as I say.”

“You were right, Royce,” Hadrian said in resignation. He unclasped his cloak and laid it across the rear of his saddle. We should have left the road, but honestly—I mean we are in the middle of nowhere. What were the odds?”

“Judging from the fact that we’re being robbed—pretty good, I think.”

“Kinda ironic—Riyria being robbed. Almost funny even.”

“It’s not funny.”

“Did you say Riyria?” The man holding Hadrian’s horse asked.

Hadrian nodded and pulled his gloves off tucking them into his belt.

The man let go of his horse and took a step away.

“What’s going on, Will?” the girl asked. “What’s Riyria?”

“There’s a pair of fellas in Melengar that call themselves that.” He looked toward the others and lowered his voice a bit. “I got connections up that way, remember? They say two guys calling themselves Riyria work out of Medford and I was told to keep my distance if I was ever to run across them.”

“So what you thinking, Will?” scar-face asked.

“I’m thinking maybe we should clear the brush and let them ride through.”

“What? Why? There’s five of us and just two of them,” flat-nose pointed out.

“But they’re Riyria.”

“So what?”

“So, my *associates* up north—they ain’t stupid, and they told everyone never to touch these two. And my associates ain’t exactly the squeamish types. If they say to avoid them, there’s a good reason.”

Flat-nose looked at them again with a critical eye. “Okay, but how do you know these two guys are them? You just gonna take their word for it?”

Will nodded toward Hadrian. “Look at the swords he’s carrying. A man wearing one—maybe he knows how to use it, maybe not. A man carries two—he probably don’t know nothing about swords, but he wants you to think he does. But a man carrying three swords—that’s a lot of weight. No one’s gonna haul that much steel around unless he makes a living using them.”

Hadrian drew two swords from his sides in a single elegant motion. He flipped one around letting it spin against his palm once. “Need to get a new grip on this one. It’s starting to fray again.” He looked at Will. “Shall we get on with this? I believe you were about to rob us.”

The thieves shot uncertain glances between each other.

“Will?” the girl asked. She was still holding the bow taut but looked decidedly less confident.

“Let’s clear the brush out of their way and let them pass,” Will said.

“You sure?” Hadrian asked. “This nice man with the busted nose seems to have his heart set on getting a sword.”

“That’s okay,” flat-nose said, looking up at Hadrian’s blades as the moonlight glinted off the mirrored steel.

“Well, if you’re sure.”

All five nodded and Hadrian sheathed his weapons.

Will planted his sword in the dirt and waved the others over as he hurried to clear the barricade of branches blocking the roadway.

“You know, you’re doing this all wrong,” Royce told them.

The thieves stopped and looked up concerned.

Royce shook his head. “Not clearing the brush—the robbery. You picked a nice spot. I’ll give you that, but you should have come at us from both sides.”

“And William—it is William, isn’t it?” Hadrian asked.

The man winced and nodded.

“Yeah, William, most people are right handed so those coming in close should approach from the left. That would’ve put us at a disadvantage having to swing across our bodies at you. Those with bows should be on our right.”

“And why just one bow?” Royce asked. “She could have only hit one of us.”

“Couldn’t even have done that,” Hadrian said. “Did you notice how long she held the bow bent? Either she’s incredibly strong—which I doubt—or that’s a homemade greenwood bow with barely enough power to toss the arrow a few feet. Her part was just for show. I doubt she’s ever launched an arrow.”

“Have too,” the girl said. “I’m a fine marksman.”

Hadrian shook his head at her with a smile. “You had your forefinger on top of the shaft, dear. If you had released, the feathers on the arrow would have brushed your finger and the shot would have gone anywhere but where you wanted it to.”

Royce nodded. “Invest in crossbows. Next time stay hidden and just put a couple bolts into each of your target’s chests. All this talking is just stupid.”

“Royce!” Hadrian admonished.

“What? You’re always saying I should be nicer to people. I’m trying to be helpful.”

“Don’t listen to him. If you do want some advice, try building a better barricade.”

“Yeah, drop a tree across the road next time,” Royce said. Waving a hand toward the branches, he added, “This is just pathetic. And cover your faces for Maribor’s sake. Warric isn’t that big of a kingdom and people might remember you. Sure Ballentyne isn’t likely to bother tracking you down for a few petty highway robberies, but you’re gonna walk into a tavern one day and get a knife in your back.” Royce turned to William. “You were in the Crimson Hand, right?”

Will looked startled. “No one said nothing about that.” He stopped pulling on the branch he was working on.

“Didn’t need to. The Hand requires all guild members to get that stupid tattoo on their necks.” Royce turned to Hadrian. “It’s supposed to make them look tough, but all it really does is make it easy to identify them as thieves for the rest of their lives. Painting a red hand on everyone is pretty stupid when you think about it.”

“That tattoo is supposed to be a hand?” Hadrian asked. “I thought it was a little red chicken. But now that you mention it, a hand does make more sense.”

Royce looked back at Will and tilted his head to one side. “Does kinda look like a chicken.”

Will clamped a palm over his neck.

After the last of the brush was cleared, William asked, “Who are you, really? What exactly is Riyria? The Hand never told me. They just said to keep clear.”

“We’re nobody special,” Hadrian replied. “Just a couple of travelers enjoying a ride on a cool autumn’s night.”

“But seriously,” Royce said. “You need to listen to us if you’re going to keep doing this. After all we’re going to take your advice.”

“What advice?”

Royce gave a gentle kick to his horse and started forward on the road again. “We’re going to visit the Earl of Chadwick, but don’t worry we won’t mention you.”

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.