

The Bard of
Souvac

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Dedicated to my dear wife and children for their
support and belief in me through the years.

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Chapter 1



The heavy blackness of a moonless night had closed over the town of Souvac, when the man stepped from the cover of the King's Forest. A storm had been building throughout the early evening, threatening to unleash its fury. Suddenly a lightning bolt burst overhead, revealing the man's six-foot-plus frame wrapped in a heavy, travel-worn cloak. His features—except for a neatly trimmed, black beard—were mostly hidden by the hood of his cloak. His piercing gaze fell across the clustered lights of the large town. His deep voice overpowered the rising wind as he spoke, "Now I finish it once and for all."

As he started his descent, a strong wind blew in behind him, bringing with it a spring storm the likes of which hadn't been seen in the land in over a century.

The Traveler's Inn was full that night, entertainers, merchants, and craftsmen were in Souvac for the one hundred years of freedom celebration.

Many of the townsfolk gathered to hear the tales of the visitors and partake of the innkeeper's famous beef stew. Haven was a middle-aged man with short, dark-brown hair, a strong jaw and ready smile. His less-than-average height and recent increase in size around the midsection caused some to think he was a pushover. However, more than one young man had found this to be an inaccurate assumption of the fiery innkeeper.

“Come on, Erick, you’ve been talking about that barmaid for the last three days. I dare you to smack her on the rump it might get you a date,” Eben challenged.

Erick was new to Souvac, but like most young men in town, he was immediately infatuated by the beauty of Haven’s daughter, Avalon. The only problem was, he did not know the beautiful barmaid was Haven’s daughter or the risk he was about to take. Thus he willingly took Eben’s challenge. Avalon passed by the two men, and Erick’s hand swung toward Avalon’s voluptuous hind end. However, contact was never made as Haven’s fist collided with Erick’s unprepared nose. The young man dropped to the floor, darkness enveloping his vision. A second later, Haven’s left fist, and possibly deadlier, connected with Eben’s right eye. He too slumped to the floor consciousness unceremoniously driven from his head.

“Do you think these idiots will ever learn?” Haven asked rubbing his fists.

“Dad, you shouldn’t hit them so hard. I swear you’re going to kill somebody one of these days.”

“Well then, they shouldn’t come looking for trouble.” Haven reached down, grabbing each man by the tunic. “I’ll drag their sorry behinds to the back room.”

“Just be a little more careful, you might really kill somebody one day,” replied Avalon, who continued serving tables.

Townfolk were still crowding into the inn’s common room, as Haven dragged the unconscious men to the back room. Conversations continued as the town was slowly covered in the blackness of descending night. The crowd was momentarily silenced when powerful winds suddenly rattled the windows and door, while rain thundered against the walls and roof. Those few that came in after the storm settled in had the door blown out of their hands as soon as they lifted the latch and could only close it with the help of other patrons. With the inn filled to capacity, it was as light and merry inside as it was dark and stormy outside.

A young man richly dressed, with dusty-blond hair and crystal blue eyes, was listening to the people of Souvac as they spoke among themselves.

“I’m just saying,” whispered a red-bearded man to a small group of locals. “Things haven’t been too wonderful lately. These council members are taxing us to the point of death.”

“I hear they are going to take up residence in the castle. My boy works as a page running messages for those worthless council members,” said a balding man.

“If you ask me, things would be better under the rule of Souvac. At least then we always had gold coming into the kingdom. Now the only time anything happens here is when we celebrate this cursed anniversary,” replied a wrinkly-faced man.

“Excuse me,” the young blond man said. “I couldn’t help overhearing your conversation about the council. I am new in town and...”

“See!” The red bearded man slammed his half full mug of ale on the wooden table. “I’m new in town,” he stated in a mocking tone. “This used to be a kingdom, not just a town.”

“I am sorry, I did not mean to insult anyone.” The young man raised his palms in a gesture of conciliation.

“Oh, never mind, Red. Ask what you like,” stated a large, burly man joining the group.

“Yes, I just wondered what is happening here. I was told that Souvac was ruled by a council who worked with the people to improve the living conditions for all here.”

“I’ll tell you what is happening,” stated the oldest man in Souvac, joining the growing group. “Many years ago, King Bowen left for some reason, leaving the rule of the kingdom in the hands of nine families. They were meant to hear the voice of the people and work to make Souvac better than it had been under the true kings. However, their children and children’s children became corrupt, loving the position, power, and gold above the people. So they have done what Souvac did and ruined us all once more.”

“I wish we had a king like Bowen and Tean,” said the burly man.

“Hear, hear,” replied the group in unison.

The group continued to discuss the plight of the kingdom, and the young man listened intently.

Several minutes later, one of the older men in the group spoke out, "Alas, they have complete power now, and there is nothing that can change it." At this he raised his mug, draining it of the remaining ale.

"Aye," said the group, raising their individual mugs and, following the old man's lead, drained their own. After this, the group slowly dissipated into smaller clusters.

The evening carried on, and many of the craftsmen, merchants, and entertainers went up to their rooms. With their departure, the common room grew quiet as those not sleeping at the inn knew they would soon have to venture into the still-raging storm to go home. The door had remained closed for nearly three hours since the last group entered. So as a blast of cold wind and rain blew in, everyone looked up wondering who this could be.

A man walked in and closed the door with ease, in spite of the still-howling wind. Lightning flashed outside the windows, and muffled whispers around the inn were heard as new conversations about this strange man began. All eyes were on him as he surveyed the room. When his eyes fell on Haven, the stranger's powerful voice sliced through the whispers.

"A table by the fire if you please?"

Seeing a man not to be trifled with, Haven quickly began clearing a small table by the fire that had recently emptied.

When the man was seated a few moments later, the innkeeper looked under the cloak's hood at the man's face and was drawn into his ageless, forest-green eyes. A twinge of recognition tugged at Haven's memory. He had heard of or met someone with eyes like this before.

"Have I met you before, sir?"

"I have not been in Souvac for many years," replied the stranger. "The last time I was here, your father was just a child."

Haven's eyes widened in shock as memory came rushing back to his aging brain. He stepped back as if he had been punched in the face. "You are him—or he. You are the Bard of Souvac!"

The silence in the inn deepened further, as those still present watched the exchange between the two men.

"Yes, and I am here to finish the story of Souvac once and for all." Power and trepidation filled his words.

"What is it you will finish exactly?" asked a blond-haired young warrior two tables away. He was dressed in polished armor and wore a large sword on his left hip. A bright-blue cloak rested casually on his shoulders buckled with ornamental clasps of a white bear to his armor. He was known as the greatest swordsman and warrior in Souvac, often adventuring to other lands.

The Bard looked at the man, taking in his appearance and sizing him up. "I will tell you once I have eaten. Until then, continue as you were," said the Bard with a quiet force that demanded obedience. The whispered conversations from before the Bard spoke resumed, this time as excited chatter about this new guest's mysterious words.

Haven was quick about bringing the stew, along with his finest house ale, to the Bard. "Begging your pardon, sir. I was told by my grandfather and father about the Bard of Souvac, but they never gave me a name to go with the face."

"There is no name for the face. I am merely the Bard of Souvac. Now leave me in peace for a time."

The blond-haired warrior who had spoken earlier was talking to Avalon. The two had known each other from childhood and spent many years as best friends.

"He doesn't look old enough to have known your grandfather as a child. He can't be more than forty years old."

"If the stories are as true as Haven says they are, then that man did know my grandfather and great-grandfather," replied Avalon, unconsciously sweeping her auburn hair from her face.

"You really want me to believe this man was not only alive at the time Souvac and his knights disappeared but is alive today, looking no older than Egin the blacksmith?"

"Yes," replied Avalon as she cleared the table. "My grandfather told me stories about him. He came here frequently in the years following King Souvac's disappearance. He would tell the tale of what happened and of great treasure kept at the very heart of the King's Forest. He also said there would come a day when a rightful king would return and bring prosperity back to the land. Then we would

truly have freedom again, like that which was had when the great King Elam ruled.” She finished wiping the table with a rag.

“If there is great treasure at the heart of the forest, then why hasn’t anyone ever claimed it?” asked the blond warrior. He stood just over six feet tall, with his hand resting casually on the decorated pommel of his great sword. His well-muscled shoulders flexed under his tunic, and he carried a look of disbelief on his handsome face. Those who lived in Souvac knew this man and knew he was a great swordsman and adventurer despite his mere twenty-four years.

“Because it is already claimed,” replied the Bard, his deep voice cutting into the young man’s moment.

“Perhaps it needs to be reclaimed.” The young warrior was obviously trying to regain his position in this fight of words.

“Perhaps, and what is your name, boy?” The Bard ate as he waited for the answer.

“I am Koyne Dale, the greatest warrior in all of Souvac.”

A few cheers and whistles came from the depleted crowd.

“Well, Koyne Dale, boy warrior, how will you claim this treasure?”

This remark from the Bard sent an angry flush of red across Koyne’s scowling face.

“Before you do something regretful, listen to me. I have traveled the world for one hundred long years and have finally found an answer I have sought. You, Koyne, are actually one piece of that answer.”

The Bard’s wry smile and unexpected words had Koyne’s jaw falling slightly, even as he tried to keep a stoic expression on his face.

“I seek three men to go with me into the heart of the King’s Forest. For it is nearly time for the treasure to be, as you say, claimed. Of course, there is the simple matter of destroying its immortal guardians. I rejoice that a strong young lad like you will be with me on this potentially perilous endeavor. However, before anyone else volunteers,” he looked straight into Koyne’s eyes, “I must tell you what awaits us.”

Koyne shifted slightly, as did all still gathered at the inn, awaiting to hear the Bard’s tale.

“This tale begins with the childhood of King Souvac, then known as Coran Cavous. Coran’s parents were wealthy landowners and friends of the great King Elam. Elam’s son, Prince Tean, became friends with Coran, and as a friend to the prince, Coran would spend weeks at a time at the castle learning with Tean everything that a king would need to know in order to rule. As they grew older, they were as close as any two brothers ever had been, and King Elam was like a second father to Coran.

“When the boys reached the age of twenty, problems began. You see, Coran fell in love with Tean’s betrothed, a beautiful maiden named Aislyn. She had hair as yellow and soft as corn silk, eyes as blue as the sky, and the face of an angel. She was one of the finest women I had ever seen, for even in death she retained her beauty. She loved Tean as deeply as a woman can love a man and cared for Coran as though he was her brother. Months passed as Tean and Aislyn followed the royal courting rituals. All the while, Coran fell deeper and deeper in love with Aislyn. During this time, jealousy and hatred found their way into his heart. He started to resent Tean and the king. He felt that in some way, both men had wronged him. King Elam had witnessed this change from a distance and warned Tean, but always the loyal friend, he told his father that Coran was as a brother and all would be well. King Elam remained skeptical.

“The week of the wedding feast, Tean found his friend alone with Aislyn in the castle gardens. He hid in the shadows and overheard Coran express his love for Aislyn. She replied that her heart belonged to Tean, and Tean alone. She told Coran that she considered him her dear friend. Tean stepped out of the shadows upon hearing Aislyn’s reply. Coran looked at him for a brief second, loathing burning in his eyes, before running away.

“However, Coran was not ready to give up on his obsession and snuck into Aislyn’s room in the castle the night before the wedding. He again professed his love for her, begging her to run away with him. He promised that he would make her happier than she could ever be with Tean. She again refused, emphatically stating, she did not love him. Disregarding her rejection, he grabbed her in his

arms and began to forcefully drag her away. Aislyn, gripped with fear, began screaming for help.

“Unable to sleep, King Elam was walking the halls that night, as he often did. He was just down the hall from Aislyn’s room when he heard the screaming. Rushing down the hall, he burst into her room where he saw Coran dragging Aislyn toward the door. Angered, he called for the guards. Coran became enraged, released Aislyn, drew his sword and charged the king, stabbing him through the heart. As the rage drained away and the realization of what he had done entered his mind, Coran looked once at Aislyn, fear and anger visible in his eyes, before fleeing.

“Shortly after Coran had fled, three guards arrived with Tean at their lead. He told them to wait in the hall as he surveyed the scene. Anger and sorrow gripped his heart as he looked upon the face of his murdered father lying just inside the door. Bending down, he gently closed his father’s sightless eyes. Aislyn staggered across the room to Tean as soon as she saw him, falling into his arms she told him between sobs what had occurred. Tean gently separated himself from Aislyn and stepped back into the hallway overwhelmed with grief.

“Find Coran, catch him, and execute him for his crimes. Then return his body to me.” Anger resonated through Tean’s words, in a tone the guards had never before heard from their prince. In his state of sorrow, Tean didn’t realize those guards were Coran’s loyal friends. They had trained with him, had been knighted together, and he had been their captain.

“They had grown close to Coran over the last several months especially, for he had confided in them as he had fallen into the deep spell of anger, hatred, and jealousy. They had heard the lies he told about the wrongs Elam and Tean had done to him and all those that lived in the kingdom. They had even begun to sympathize with Coran’s pain at not being allowed to love Aislyn, just because the king said she was to marry the prince. With all this now racing through their minds, they followed after the fugitive.

“They tracked Coran for hours, finally finding him in a clearing at the very heart of the King’s Forest. Seeing their friend scared and alone caused them to hesitate in following the drastic orders of the

prince. Their failure to act immediately on Tean’s orders started their path of betrayal.

“Coran used his silver-tongue as his friends hesitated, saying he had gone to say farewell to Aislyn, and as he was preparing to depart, the king came in and attacked him. He had merely defended himself, and that was why King Elam lay dead in the bedchamber. He then told them about the evils that Elam and Tean were engaged in. These lies were so convincing that the knights started to question further the goodness of their king and prince. After all, Coran was close to both men and had been deeply involved in their councils. Coran continued weaving lies and planning how they together could make the kingdom even better than it now was. He created pictures of greatness in their minds of how wonderful the kingdom would be with him as king and they as the loyal captains of his armies. The knights started to share their ideas, and the plot to overthrow the kingdom continued in earnest. They plotted through the length of the day, and slowly as the evening shadows fell over the clearing, another shadow fell over their hearts.

“The Evil One had watched as jealousy entered Coran’s heart. He then fanned the growing embers of anger to a raging fire of pure hate. He delighted as this pathetic human murdered his king. Watching from his underground lair, reveling in this man’s fall, he saw an opportunity to further his work of death and destruction in the mortal world.

“Once the sun had set and a fire had been built, this being of immense power emerged from the trees cloaked in blackness so that his features could not be distinguished. ‘Coran, your plotting is in vain, for you do not have the power to complete your plans. However, if you swear fealty to me and an oath of perfect loyalty to each other, I will grant you all that you desire,’ the voice, barely a whisper, resounded with death and deception.

“Yet Coran, blinded by his own lies and ambition, was enthralled by the being and asked, ‘If we so swear to thee and each other, what will my knights and I be granted?’

“‘You, Coran, will have Aislyn and the crown, as well as your knights’ undying loyalty. Your knights will be known as the greatest

warriors and captains of men wherever they go in your service. Not even a full army will stand before the might they will wield.’

“Only after visions of grandeur were fed to their corrupted minds, blinding them further to what they were about to do, did they kneel before the Evil One and swear allegiance to each other and him by his unholy power.

“‘Know this, if any of you break the oath of loyalty you have sworn to one another, you will be cursed and imprisoned in this forest clearing for eternity. If you break your oath of fealty to me, you will be destroyed,’ said the Evil One as he vanished back into the trees.

“Once he had gone, Coran turned to his three companions. ‘Jerec, you have been my faithful friend, you are the strongest and most skilled fighter of us all, therefore I name you my chief captain. Oaran, you have skills with training animals the like of which I have never seen before, and so you will train all the horses for my armies and lead my cavalry. Kell, you are eloquent of speech and keen-minded, therefore I name you my adviser in all things.’ Each of the knights bowed their heads and gave thanks to their new king.

“The four men left the forest then, traveling into the southern kingdom where King Garion ruled. They knew they needed a safe place to hide while spying and finalizing their evil designs. Not only would this friendly and prosperous kingdom be their hideout, it would become the first victim of King Souvac’s rule.

“Months had passed, King Elam’s funeral had taken place, and Prince Tean and Aislyn were married. Tean often wondered during that time what had become of Coran and the knights he had sent after him. He had sent out other search parties, but no one had any information concerning the four men. He worried that he had been too harsh in judgment of Coran and feared all four men might be dead.

“As the months passed, Tean grew into a king much like his father. He even continued the practice of giving audience to the citizens of the kingdom in order to have their grievances heard.

“Coran and his knights knew all the activities of King Tean during this time through underhanded means. With all their plans laid out, the day they had looked forward to finally came.

“Coran went to the castle disguised as a commoner seeking audience with the king. He followed others past the guards stationed throughout the audience chamber. Once in view of Tean, he ran to the dais, upon which the throne stood, and prostrated himself before the king. Guards jumped to the king’s side, weapons drawn. Coran sobbed and apologized for what he had done, begging for forgiveness. Realizing his childhood friend and brother was before him, Tean’s heart softened. Waving his guards away, he stood and walked down the three steps to his father’s murderer.

“‘Coran, you were a brother to me, and as such I release you from the death that awaits you. However, justice must be served. I cannot imprison you as law dictates because I love you. However, you must leave my kingdom and never return.’ He bent down and took Coran’s hand, giving him his life.

“Coran came up on his knees, looking in Tean’s face. A wicked smile and look of victory shone in his eyes as he pulled Tean toward him, stabbing him through the heart with a dagger he had concealed in his tunic.

“As Tean fell, Coran took the crown from his fallen body and placed it on his head then turned to face the people gathered in the hall. Several of the king’s guards rushed at Coran, but his three loyal knights stood around him, seemingly appearing out of thin air to cut down the charging guards. ‘My subjects, I am your king, and any that defy me will find themselves like this man, his father, and their pathetic guards.’ Coran looked down at Tean, who was still gasping for breath. ‘I am King Souvac now. Your friend and brother Coran is no more.’

“‘You will suffer death and eternal damnation worthy of your treacherous actions. My blood will see to that,’ said Tean with his dying breath.

“Coran took Aislyn as his wife and prisoner that same night. This kingdom, along with two surrounding kingdoms, fell into eighteen years of sorrow and fear. Eight and a half months following the

marriage of Coran, who was now known only as King Souvac, Aislyn had a baby boy. He looked just like his mother and seemed to have none of King Souvac in his countenance. Aislyn named him Bowen and kept him to herself as much as she could, teaching him to be strong and moral, loyal to the ways of King Elam and Tean. The only thing she did not teach him was that he was Tean's son, knowing he would be in mortal peril if this knowledge was shared with him.

"King Souvac taught Bowen all about warfare and how to use all weapons of combat. The knights of Souvac, as they were now called, assisted in teaching Bowen the use of weapons, strategies, and manipulation as well as assassination techniques. King Souvac could see his son had goodness in his heart and might not be corruptible. He often wondered if he could trust his son as he trusted his knights. However, as wicked as Souvac was, he still held some semblance of love for Bowen.

"As the years passed, the knights of Souvac attacked neighboring villages and kingdoms, killing thousands with the king's army. They delighted in murder and plunder. These campaigns made their king wealthy and powerful and allowed them to use the skills enhanced by the Evil One's magic. As Souvac gained greater power, he watched all things that went on around him. He noticed his son Bowen going out among the peasants (for peasants they had become under Souvac's rule) from time to time. They loved and respected Bowen in ways they never had the king. Souvac could see that he did not have the peasants' loyalty. Only fear of him and his knights kept his subjects in place.

"As Bowen neared the age of eighteen, King Souvac began feeling anxious and fearful. His fear and anxiety were so great that he did something he had not done in twelve years. He went to the heart of the King's Forest and called upon the Evil One. That dark creature did not come but sent his witch in his stead. She crept from the trees with ragged breath, clothed in tattered, dirty robes, a crone as ancient as the forest itself perhaps. Her face was white as though it had not seen the sun in centuries. Purple scars stood out on that stark face in horrifying contrast to her skin. Her black eyes gleamed with an unholy light. King Souvac was so repulsed by her that he

tried to leave but could not and found himself frozen in place. As she continued forward, the smell of rotting flesh emanated from her bloodstained robes.

"What do you seek, my king?' she hissed through missing teeth.

Souvac, leaning away, replied, "My son is becoming a man, and I fear him. He is nothing like me and desires not my ways. What shall I do with him?"

"Your son he is most definitely not. The prince is the son of Tean, whom you murdered. The queen was already with child when you wed her that night.' A smile played at her lips.

"Why did no one tell me years ago, that I could have had a son of my own?' He looked at the witch, clenching his fists and teeth. 'I will kill Bowen and make Aislyn give me a son of my flesh.'

"This course of action is ill-advised, my king. Besides, your loving queen saw to it after Bowen's birth that she would never again bear a child,' the hag sneered. 'You have known all along in your heart that he was not yours. You merely tricked yourself into believing you had fathered the child. Now depart from here with your trivial matters, the Dark Master has no time for you, unless...'

"Unless what?' asked the king, desperate.

"Unless you desire a child by me. Master would smile on a child between us, since your queen will not carry a child ever again.'

"It was well after midnight when Souvac returned to his castle. He called his dreaded knights to him and began setting forth his plans as he sat in his throne. 'Bowen must die tonight mysteriously. The queen cannot know I had a hand in this,' he said, shaking with anxiety.

"How should we proceed, my lord?' Jerec hissed, moving closer to the throne, a gleam of anticipation in his hateful eyes.

"He must die tonight,' Souvac repeated, his voice shaking even more. 'It must look like an accident.'

"We could take him up to the tower walk. He is always up there. We will throw him off the edge. Make it look like he was up there alone and fell. I will place a bottle of your strongest wine on the wall to enhance the effect/' Kell's black eyes held cold calculation.

"The bottle must be mostly empty,' replied the king.

“As you wish,’ the knights replied, bowing in unison.

“Aislyn, having become accustomed to spying on the king’s councils with his knights, crept quietly to her son’s room and slipped inside. It was unusually cool that night, and Bowen was curled up under several blankets.

“Aislyn rushed to his bedside and shook him awake. ‘Bowen, wake up! Hurry, my love, your life is in danger!’

“Bowen sat up bleary-eyed and looked at his mother. ‘What is it?’

“‘There is no time to explain, they are going to kill you.’ Her voice was shaking with fear as she looked at her son.

“Bowen came to his feet, grasping his mother’s shoulders gently, guiding her to sit on the edge of the bed, ‘Calm down, what is happening? You’re white as a ghost.’

“‘There is no time now. I should have told you years ago.’ She looked him in the eyes and softly touched his face. ‘Bowen, Souvac is not your father.’ Bowen’s eyes widened, but he didn’t speak. ‘You are the son of Tean, son of Elam, the true kings of this land. Souvac killed your father and grandfather. Bowen, I beg you, leave tonight that you may live. They are coming, and I fear I am too late.’

“‘Mother, I have suspected for some time now that he was not my father.’ As he spoke, an idea came to his mind, and he quickly began putting on his armor. ‘Through the years I have listened to the knights’ conversations while they trained me, especially when I was young, they were less careful about their words. On one rare occasion, I heard them speak of a powerful oath that they were subject to. This information may protect us both, but you need to go back to your bedchamber before Souvac returns to find you missing.’ Pausing, he helped his mother to her feet. ‘I will not leave you here to live out your life in misery.’

“That was the last time young Bowen saw his mother in life. As she rushed away, he continued to dress in his armor and weapons. Strapping them in place, he prepared to face the knights. Moments later, the knights opened the door and silently rushed at the sleeping form of Bowen. Pulling back the covers, they grabbed pillows and wadded up blankets.

“‘Looking for something?’ sneered a voice from a darkened corner. A lamp flared to life, temporarily blinding the knights as they looked for the speaker. Bowen was standing, sword in hand, prepared to meet his attackers.

“‘So you were warned of our coming. It is painfully clear who alerted you. I am sure our king will take care of your meddling mother once and for all,’ said Jerec.

“‘You will die tonight, Jerec, unless the curse takes you first,’ replied Bowen.

“‘You know nothing of the curse.’ Fear showed in Kell’s black eyes.

“‘I asked my father for a birthday gift, didn’t he tell you? I asked him if I could replace you three and become his general. He seemed quite pleased with the idea and came up with this plan to be rid of you all.’

“‘Liar!’ the knights yelled together and rushed at him.

“Bowen was able to defend himself with some difficulty. After all these were the men who had taught him to use a sword. A dagger from his blind side came around in a wide arc and cut his cheek. Bowen beat back his attackers and touched his face.

“‘I do know of the curse that will befall you if you betray the oath sworn to the Evil One. You have until sunrise to reach your prison in the forest. By spilling my blood, even this much,’ he said, holding up his left hand, blood glinting on his gauntlet, ‘you have brought the curse down upon yourselves. I am the son and blood of Souvac, the blood that you swore to protect. Now begone, unless you wish to die by the curse here and now.’

“As these words left Bowen’s lips, an ear-piercing scream ripped through the cold interior of the castle. The knights looked at each other, eyes suddenly glowing red. They rushed from the room toward the king’s bedchamber. When they burst through the door, they found their king standing near the fireplace covered in blood, eyes staring at nothing, his sword lying on the floor next to Aislyn’s body. The fire had burned low, and the morning sunrise was only a few hours away.

“Aislyn has spied on us for the last time,’ said the king, his voice hollow. ‘Is your part complete?’

“‘It is done,’ said Jerec venomously. ‘But we will not go alone to the hell that awaits us. You will accompany us. First, however, you will die for your betrayal.’ The knights raised their swords.

“‘What do you mean by this?’ Souvac’s attention came screaming back to his knights. ‘I am your king, you swore to protect me!’ yelled the king.

“‘You tricked us and brought the curse down upon us!’ yelled the knights as one. In their anger, they rushed the king, each stabbing and slashing at the defenseless man. ‘Your son carries your blood, which we spilled, the blood we swore to protect,’ Jerec hissed into Souvac’s ear as he lay dying.

“Souvac’s eyelids rose slightly as he spoke his final words. ‘Bowen is no son of mine. He is Tean’s.’

“His eyes closed forever as understanding entered the evil minds of Souvac’s knights. They looked as one toward the window. It was still dark, but they knew they had much to do before they must be to the King’s Forest. They howled in rage at being tricked. They wanted revenge on Bowen, but did not have time to seek it.

“After the knights fled, Bowen found his mother on the floor of her bedchamber. The words ‘I am finally free, my son’ were written on the stone floor in the queen’s blood. It was Aislyn’s last message to her son.

“The knights took Souvac’s bloody corpse, his crown, and as much of the dead king’s riches as they could fit into carts. They then fled toward the forest with as much speed as they could, for the skies over the eastern mountains had begun to lighten. The hooves of their horses thundered; the wheels of the carts sounded like a mighty wind as they raced along behind them. The sun, which chases away all shadows and dark things, had nearly crested the top of the mountains when they entered the forest. Those three foul beings looked back once, cursing the false son of Souvac.

“‘Someday we will be free again, and when we are, we will find and destroy your bloodline, Bowen,’ vowed the leader Jerec.

“They then traveled to the heart of the forest, taking with them an unlucky young man they had captured moments before on the road. The poor sot tried with all his power to run away, but alas, he was unsuccessful and remains their prisoner to this day. They entered the cursed clearing where they made their oath at the same moment the sun completely cleared the mountains.

“Souvac’s knights built a makeshift throne from dead branches to place their king on. Once his body was seated in his high place, they piled all the riches they had brought around his feet and throne. They sang a song of lament for themselves in an evil language forbidden by the world as darkness closed over them. As they finished, the teachers of that song separated from the nearby trees and stepped forward. The witch in her rasping voice approached Souvac’s corpse, ‘I told you it was folly to go after that child.’

“‘Cursed forever are you, knights, unless you use your prisoner wisely,’ said the Evil One, pointing at the young man who had lain tied up at the edge of the clearing, paralyzed with fear throughout the day.

“‘The Evil One and his witch then left, and to my knowledge have never returned to the King’s Forest,’ finished the Bard. Leaning back in his chair, he sipped at his ale.

“‘How does the tale end?’ asked Avalon.

“‘What do you mean?’ replied the Bard.

“‘You old fool, she means what happened to the knights, and the treasure,’ said Koynne.

“‘They remain just as they were, in the clearing in the middle of the King’s Forest, waiting for someone to release them,’ said the Bard matter-of-factly.

Deep silence fell over the room as the crowd pondered the Bard’s last statement.

About the Author



Tony Bishop was born in Payson, Utah. He grew up working on a farm and as a tree trimmer. After spending two years in Japan, he returned to Payson where he met his wife. They have been married for twenty years.

Tony has worked as a licensed massage therapist and as a physical therapist assistant over the last several years. In these roles he has met many people who have inspired him to seek his life's goals.

One of these goals has been to share the stories that have always been in his head and in his heart. Tony first gained a love of writing in the fourth grade. This has continued throughout his life, and now he shares with the world his first novel *The Bard of Souvac*. Please enjoy the adventure.