

# STAR VALLEY

*A Novel by*

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# STAR VALLEY

## CHAPTER ONE

# THE KING'S TEAR

**T**HE end. It was to be a gruesome end to a running battle which had been going on for more than six moon-cycles. It had been an overwhelming, one-sided battle.

King Andrew stood in a defensive circle with the other remaining thirty-six survivors. If you could have looked into their eyes, you would have seen into their souls and believed as they did. They had not survived. They were already dead.

Standing before them was an enemy without remorse, without feelings or even a hint of kindness. It was an enemy without a written language, and without the ability to pass down stories of the battle to their young. No one would know what had happened here. It would be lost to the world forever, just as the king and his band would be lost.

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Their eyes were not the only visible sign of the band's past troubles. Their clothes were torn without patches. Their bodies were thin to the bone. Their hair and beards were long and unkempt. Dirt covered their once brightly-colored clothes, now just a dim remembrance of those brilliant hues. The faded colors of their clothes matched perfectly with the dim remnant of a sparkle in their eyes. If there had been any chance of a truce, or even the possibility of negotiations, there could have been a little hope.

King Andrew had ordered his eleven living men to stand shoulder-to-shoulder, facing out in a circle. Their only weapon was their personal sword. Amazingly, their sword was one of the few things that they still had, though they were now rusted and blood-stained. Each man gripped the handle of his sword with both hands, holding it above his shoulders. Their grips were so tight that their hands had turned white from lack of circulation.

In between the men, and slightly behind them, stood the women, each holding a spear, with the end firmly anchored to the ground. The spears jutted out a foot and a half beyond the men. Within these two circles crouched the children, each holding a sharpened stick or a rock, although this was only a symbolic form of defense.

There were no tears in anyone's eyes, except for the

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king's—one small drop. It would be as big a miracle as their salvation for the tear to traverse down his scarred cheek. His cheek had seen many battles and many hardships in his long life.

The king had heard people say that your life passes before you when you die, but he knew in this case, it would not. For though he would die with his comrades, his subjects, his friends, in less than a few minutes, his life was already passing by. He could see it all. He was torn between his desire and need to stay focused on fighting to the end and the act of retracing his life with his mind. The two were in a battle of their own, each winning a few seconds at a time. The king had no control over either one. He wished he could just stay in one of the happier moments of his life and not have to face this last battle.

His mind led him back to his earliest recollection. It was as if he was having an out-of-body experience. He could see himself from above. He was perhaps five or six sun-cycles old, and was standing on one of the many staircases that ascended and descended from tower to tower in his castle.

\* \* \*

The steepness of the castle stairways, and how scary they were to a boy of five or six sun-cycles, had been forgotten by King Andrew. Watching himself in

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this vision, all the emotions, feelings, and thoughts came back to him. Even the smell of mold and the dampness of the stones came rushing back.

He was with his mother, the Queen, pointing at a painting, using his whole hand instead of only a finger.

“What dat?” He would say at each painting.

“What dat?” His mother would be patient and tell him who had been painted—this king or that queen—and if it was a great grandfather, or a great grandmother.

In each painting he would point to a little wooden carving the king would always be holding.

“What dat?” His mother would again try to explain, “It is a wooden carving made by the king.”

Even at his young age, Andrew knew the crude carving was out of place with the ornate uniforms the kings wore. It is why he kept pointing to the carvings and saying, “What dat?”

It wasn't until later in his life that he noticed how the carvings had progressed. The painting he was standing in front of now, in his near-death memory, was of the first king, King Alfred. He was the first to have a painting made of himself. He was the king who had the castle built—a castle with high, thick stone walls. He held his wooden carving close to his vest. Andrew could never figure out what it was of. It had a rough, carved nose, with painted white triangles on it.

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It looked like it would stand upright, yet lacked arms and legs like a person had. What was there in place of arms and legs were hairy looking things with the same white triangles where fingernails and toenails should have been.

Andrew attributed the lack of detail to the painter and type of paints used. As time went on, painters got better—in fact, really better. You could see every detail in the paintings of the last few hundred sun-cycles. Even the wooden carvings got better, though you could only see the carvings in the paintings, for the king was always buried with the carving he held. No one knew why.

Next to the first king's painting was a painting of an ancient battle—men on horses and men on foot, holding swords and spears, walking and fighting over fallen comrades. In the center stood a brown blur, a large brown shadow, twice as big as any of the men.

Whoa! A revelation hit the king. While watching himself, he put the puzzle together. The carving the king held, and the painting of the battle, were of the enemy now standing before him, the enemy that killed and ate almost four thousand of his subjects. The enemy was the brown blur in the battle scene. The enemy was the reason King Alfred had built the castle with such strong defenses. How ironic it was, after a thousand sun-cycles, that the brown blur would once

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again battle the same kingdom, and this time win.

His mind snapped back for a few seconds. He noticed the enemy was still circling and getting closer. He held his sword even tighter. Now he knew his enemy and its history, though it was too late to do him any good.

\* \* \*

He was back at the castle. He was now eleven or twelve sun-cycles old. For several sun-cycles there had been some staircases that he would not use unless ordered to, or if someone was watching. He could not explain why he went out of his way to use a different staircase. He was, after all, the prince, and shouldn't have been afraid.

It was one of those times when his mother, the queen, asked him to take some honey and tea to his father. Haste was needed, as his father had the beginnings of a sore throat.

While ascending, Andrew realized why he hated this particular staircase. In the paintings along this staircase, all the carvings were of ugly, frighteningly hideous creatures. He would call the sun-cycles in which these carvings were made the Gargoyle Period. Many of the creatures had long fingers, large mouths, hunched backs, little hair and bony arms and legs. They were completely different from one another,

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except for one thing. Every one of the carvings during this whole period, every one of the creatures, had long pointed ears. He soon had an instant dislike of pointed ears. In fact, he carried it to the extreme. He had never seen anyone with pointed ears (Okay, maybe a rabbit,) until his crush on a sweet young girl. The first time he tried to kiss her, her bonnet came off and there, on one of her ears, was a little bump. It looked just like a pointed ear. In fact, it was just a pimple, not yet red. No matter, he ran from the room vowing never to see his first love again. For days he anguished over what he had done, and for the stupid reason he had done it.

He sent her flowers, gold, and then an apology. She had become his wife, his queen, Queen Victoria, the same woman now standing just behind him. She had been the best choice he could have ever made, a choice he almost didn't make because of a prejudice without cause.

In later times, the carvings became whimsical and joyous. King Andrew loved the carvings of the last few kings. He was to be given carving lessons when he reached his thirteenth sun-cycle.

\* \* \*

His eyes were clear again, and his mind was on the present. There was one monstrous brown shadow

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very close, staring right at him. The shadow seemed to know that King Andrew was the leader and had picked him out for his own.

In King Andrew's first couple of seconds of being back in the present time, his mind fluctuated between the two realms. If he could have survived this battle, what would his carving be like? Would it also be joyous and lighthearted, or revert to the style of the Gargoyle Era? He would never know, yet he leaned towards something beyond Gargoyles—way beyond.

\* \* \*

Now he was sixteen, standing on a little hill looking down at a campfire on the Island. He could smell the smoke from the campfire and see a silhouette of one person, a man. What would he be doing on the Island? Why is he even there? The Island was the name for a piece of ground about a mile long and a half mile wide which the river split around, flowing on one side or the other, and sometimes on both sides at once. It was no man's land.

There was an unwritten law that Prince Andrew's kingdom and the kingdom to the south, on the other side of the Island, would never use that land. No war would be fought over it, and it would remain off-limits to all but the animals and the birds. No one knew why. They only knew that it worked and kept them from war.

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Prince Andrew often snuck out of the castle, saying he was going hunting or to see friends on a farm. Really, he would just ride out to the Island and be alone, or to explore parts of the kingdom he had yet to see. His mother and father would have disapproved of him going off by himself. He was, after all, heir to the throne.

Andrew waded across the shallowest part of the stream, a place he had often crossed before. Even now, in the dark, he had no problem crossing. The water was cold. It chilled his feet, even through his leather shoes. He was not used to anything being cold, except the river. It was the only thing that was ever cold. The days and nights were warm, seldom hot, and seldom cool—but never cold. The coldest it ever got was when it rained, and many times even the rain was warm. He did not like cold. It hurt his toes. He never understood why the river was cold. It came out of the ground a few miles upstream, and was really cold there. It warmed up as it flowed. By the time it left the kingdom's border, it was as warm as the ground. He wondered if anything else in the world was cold.

A visitor from the east had once talked about a white layer of cold, on the mountains that rose above the sky—mountains that disappeared above the clouds. There, the white cold became cold rivers because of a hot sun.

No one believed the stranger, yet, the beginning of

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this river was cold. There weren't any mountains that high in the kingdom and no white cold was on the mountains they did have, nor was there a hot sun anywhere in the kingdom. Nope, it couldn't be true.

Once Andrew's feet were warm again, and he had feeling in each of them, he began to creep towards the campfire and the lone man. He crept so silently that even a mouse scurrying across a bed of cotton would make more noise.

When the campfire and the man were within sight, Andrew stopped and watched him. If the stranger was from the southern kingdom, how would he communicate with him? For they spoke a different language.

It was strange to see one's self and the surroundings and the happenings while being many miles away, and many sun-cycles in the future. Yet, at the same time, it was right and normal—like watching a play about your life, with your twin playing the part of you.

Andrew remembered watching the stranger for several hours, and remembered him finally falling asleep. The man was Prince Andrew's age—just as young, and about the same height and build. He wore common clothes, as did Andrew when he was exploring.

Andrew watched the young man spread open a bedroll, shake out his blanket, and roll up his coat for a makeshift pillow. The young man had taken off his shoes, tied the laces together, and draped them over a

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limb on a nearby tree. It was to keep some little animal from dragging them away and chewing on them. Andrew knew well what would happen to shoes left on the ground, because it had happened to him. Andrew had been able to get only one back, but even it had holes chewed in it, and he had to sneak into the castle barefoot. He was not going to let that happen again. It was obvious that this young man once had the same experience. It was nice to think, 'Okay, we have at least one thing in common.'

Andrew decided to have some fun with this fellow to see what would happen. After Andrew was sure the young man was fast asleep, he slowly crawled over to the shoes. Yep, they fit! He exchanged his shoes for those of the young man. Just to make it interesting, Andrew took out from his pocket a wooden carving of a horse he had finished a few days earlier, and slipped it into one of the shoes he had exchanged. He then crawled away to the other side of the Island and slept.

The next night, Andrew smelled more smoke and found the young man again at the same camp. Again, Andrew waited until the young man was asleep. This time, when he crawled to the shoes—his shoes—he found a beautiful knife in one of them, a knife so fine it would make a great carving tool. Andrew exchanged the shoes to their rightful owners, and crawled back out of sight.

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All day long the prince carved on a small piece of wood until he had a face on it, in the perfect likeness of the stranger. Andrew hoped the stranger would still be at the camp site. He wanted to give the carved face as a thank you for the knife.

His luck held. The young man was there. This time, Andrew did not sneak into camp. He hollared, "Ho! I come." The stranger had not yet gone to bed and was sitting on a log by his fire. He mimicked Andrew's first word, "Ho!" along with a greeting in his own language, and then waved his arm and hand in a gesture meant to say, "Come in, sit." Andrew sat across from the stranger and held the new carving out so the stranger could take it.

The stranger studied the carving, and with a smile so genuine that it made Andrew smile as well, the stranger pointed to the carving then to himself, and said "Samuel."

Andrew pointed to the stranger and said "Samuel," then to himself and said "Andrew." Both smiled, and Samuel offered Andrew some tea.

The night grew long and both young boys would point to different things, saying the word for them in their own native language. Soon, they were out of things to point at. Andrew arose, said good-bye, and left. Samuel said something Andrew couldn't understand, and then went to bed.

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It would be several weeks before they were to see each other again, and their friendship would go to a new level by a twist of fate.

Andrew was again on his way to the Island. He hoped by chance that Samuel would be there. Andrew carried a beautiful new sword for Samuel. He knew by the knife, that Samuel liked fine weapons. It was the second thing they had in common, and it was the least he could do as payment for the best carving knife ever.

Andrew heard some splashing of water. Animals never usually splash like that. He would investigate. Sure enough, there was Samuel, taking a cold water bath. Andrew thought to himself, 'Now, that's just plain dumb.' He thought he would see how close he could get before Samuel noticed him.

Samuel was taking a bath in a little pool in an eroded rock hole. The main stream was a little lower than the top of the pool. The sun had warmed the water to a nice temperature. It was not cold, as Andrew had presumed, and Samuel was enjoying it immensely. Just a few yards away, the stream fell over a cliff, perhaps falling a good thirty feet, and formed a great big pool of cold, deep water at the bottom.

Above the little heated pool reached a big branch from a tree on the bank. Samuel had thrown his clothes over the limb to keep them safe and dry. Samuel was facing away from the branch and his

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clothes, looking towards the cliff. His eyes were full of water, and some suds, from a bar of soap which he had brought from home. He had looked forward to this bath for several weeks.

Andrew thought it was funny to be able to walk right up to Samuel and not even be noticed. As he approached, many things happened at once. Andrew wasn't really aware of everything when it happened, but now, watching it from a different vantage point, it all became clearer.

Andrew was now within a yard of Samuel. He quickly drew his gift, the sword, and held it with both hands high above his head. He took a forceful step forward towards Samuel while swinging the sword.

Samuel's eyes cleared, and the first thing he saw was the anger, the rage, and the determination in Andrew's eyes. The second thing he saw was the shining sword poised to behead him, slicing through the air. The only thing Samuel could do was fall backwards and kick at Andrew. His right foot struck Andrew's stomach as Andrew's sword swung through the air. Both young men, because of their youth and athleticism, struck their mark.

Andrew, upon being struck, and having used his balance to swing the sword, fell backwards over the cliff, with a scream all the way down.

Samuel, for a moment, thought Andrew had missed

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because of his well-placed kick. Andrew had not missed his mark. It took less than a second for Andrew to fall over the cliff and less than a second for the head of a giant cougar to land in Samuel's lap. There had been a cougar on the branch above Samuel. If it had not been for Andrew, Samuel would be dead.

Samuel jumped up and dove over the ledge, into the icy pool below. He found Andrew floating, face down in the water. Samuel pulled Andrew to the bank, laid him on his stomach, and pushed down on his back, trying to expel the water from his lungs.

Andrew slowly began to cough and spit up enough water to start breathing on his own. Samuel built a fire, and both young men sat there smiling at each other.

It was the beginning of a true friendship and a true trust. They would spend countless days together, learning each other's language and customs. It would serve them well in the times to come.

Both young men knew the time would come when duty would cause them to never see each other again. Duty to their king, duty to their wife and children, and duty to their jobs.

They never talked about it to each other, even though they thought about it often. Then, one day, it happened. Neither one went to the Island again.

King Andrew's attention shifted into a different memory from his past.