

Chapter 1

Our Aircraft machine—the *Starry Night*, large, black, and rather bulky, but adequate for our traveling needs—passed over the forests and fields below like a ship sailing across the Deep Ocean. We had been journeying northward for some time now, traveling across the Six Continents, crossing each landmass with the grace of a child skipping across stepping stones sticking out of a lake.

Not that I thought it was much of a good idea. I sat in a wobbly metal chair, staring out the clear glass windows as the clouds and birds and forests zipped by underneath us. My friend, Jill Franklin, had told me that we were going back to my hometown, Long River, which was located on the First Continent, in order to get some extra supplies and equipment for our inevitable confrontation with the Lord of the Silver Blades himself.

Don't ask me why she said we needed to do that. Though I was by no means against returning to my quaint hometown, it was about as far away from the Lord of the Silver Blades' castle as a place could possibly be. We had come so close—so very, very close—to saving our world from the Lord's wrath, yet instead of heading directly into his throne room in his castle in the city of Three Hundred Towers, Jill thought we needed to go back to the place where all of this started.

I shook my head, but at the time I had not voiced any objections to her plan. As incomprehensible as the plan seemed, over our journey I had learned to trust Jill's premonitions. Always, it seemed to me, her premonitions turned out to be correct, even if at first they made no sense whatsoever. I well recalled how, not more than a few days ago, she had taken us all the way to the Third Continent, up Black Blade Mountain, to a secret cave where the legendary Starblade—the most powerful sword ever crafted—was located. That Starblade had come in handy more than once on our journey to save the world, including one instance where Jill used it to defeat a whole pit of Giga Snakes.

Getting bored of looking at the same old scenery, as beautiful as it might have been from this height, my eyes wandered over to the interior of the Aircraft. Having originally been built for the avian Angelians, who were taller and ganglier than the average human, the ceiling was quite tall and the seats were well above the floor; in fact, my feet didn't even touch the floor as I sat in my seat. The walls, floor, and ceiling were covered with smooth metal paneling, bare save for the small lights shining from the ceiling.

Sitting on the opposite side from me was another of my friends, Julius Manna. Unlike me, he was fast asleep, his massive arms curled over his thick chest, looking almost like an oversized baby taking a nap. Not that I would ever say anything like that out loud, of course. While Julius was a good friend of mine and had a good sense of humor, he was also a Warrior, easily the strongest among us, and was not above using violence when he got angry (I once saw him wrestle an Omega Goblin and win, which had taught me to be thankful that my friends were not psychopaths who hurt anyone who looked at them funny). Saliva leaked out of the corner of his mouth, trailing down his chin and onto his lap. His massive ax, known as Skull-cruncher, lay on his lap like a dog.

Then I looked over to the cockpit. Jill Franklin, dark-haired and light-skinned, sat at the control seat, her strong hands gripping the wheel tightly, occasionally pressing a button or flipping a lever to make sure we were on course. Despite the fact that the Lord of the Silver Blades was now the proud owner of all six Omega Crystals and had threatened to use their power to conquer the world

the last time we saw him, Jill looked perfectly at ease, as if we were taking a stroll down the street to the local butcher's shop, rather than sky-hopping across six continents just to return to a small town in the middle of nowhere. Then again, if she had been freaking out, the *Starry Night* would probably have crashed and we'd all be dead, so I supposed it wasn't much of a problem.

Sitting next to her in the backup pilot's seat was Alicia Bangs, a Healer who, thanks to her tall height, was about the only one of us who fit comfortably in the *Starry Night*'s seats. Her white robes reflected the bright light streaming in from the windshield, making it a bit painful to look at her directly. She looked just as at ease as Jill did, if not more so, as Alicia was a huge Aircraft fanatic, despite having had a childhood on the ground in the Second Continent, and knew more about Aircraft than even many Angelians did. The only reason she wasn't piloting was because Jill was a superior pilot to her, which was odd because Jill had only been flying the *Starry Night* for a few months now and hadn't ever even flown an Aircraft prior to taking the helm of this ship. Just another mysterious part of the Hero who is Jill Franklin, I supposed.

The inside of the *Starry Night* was very quiet, save for Julius's incessant snoring. Jill was not one to talk and Alicia was usually too excited by the prospect of flying in a real Aircraft to say anything. Because I had no one to talk to, I had to keep all of my worries and concerns to myself, knowing from experience that Jill, with a flip of her dark hair, would just laugh and tell me not to worry, that she knew exactly what she was doing and that everything would be fine if I just trusted her.

Which I did. I really did. She had been too correct over the past few months for me to ever even think of distrusting her. Her actions had saved not only my own life, but the lives of Alicia, Julius, and thousands if not millions of other people all over the Six Continents. She took every surprising turn of events in stride and always seemed to have just the right plan to take down any enemies who crossed our path.

So when Jill said, "We're here," I got up from my seat, straightened the creases out of my Bard Cloak, and walked over to the cockpit to get my first glimpse of my hometown, Long River. It had been quite a while since I had last visited my home, and for a moment I wondered how old Butcher Jim was doing, the town's local butcher and a good friend of mine.

I stood on Jill's left, peering through the windshield, watching as my hometown became clearer and clearer. I saw the butcher's shop, a square brown building made of stone from a local quarry; the item shop, an equally square but bright blue building owned by a man whose name I had never thought to ask but who I had seen every day standing behind the counter; and of course, the Performance Hall, owned by Harold, which, while not as grand as Performance Halls found in such beautiful cities as Twin Crystals or Magisteria, was such a familiar sight to me, with its open double doors and spire, that a wave of nostalgia flowed over me like an ocean wave.

Alicia frowned as we drew closer to it. "Sure is small."

I almost laughed. Alicia came from Wide Plains, the largest city in all of the Six Continents. Of course she would think Long River small. "It's not a bad place."

"I know," said Alicia. "Still, what do you do in there? Watch the moss grow on the trees?"

Annoyed, I leaned against Jill's chair and said, "Actually, you awake to the chirping of the birds and the shining sun. Then you have a wonderful breakfast of fresh-picked berries from the blackberry patches that grow in abundance in the woods, followed by bathing in a crystal clear stream of

water. During the day you see squirrel, deer, raccoons, and a variety of other animals, engaged in the kind of silly antics you expect from such creatures. And at night, you peer through the thick branches of the trees at the stars in the sky, wondering if the Five Stars themselves might be looking down on you that night.”

Alicia stared at me. “I was asking what you *do* down there, not what you see.”

I sighed and said, in plainer terms than I normally used, “I usually just went to the Performance Hall and entertained any visitors we had there. Sometimes I’d visit Butcher Jim’s shop and buy some bacon so I could have something good to eat in the morning.”

“Ah,” said Alicia. “Sounds boring. You don’t even have any Aircraft races to watch.”

“Well, neither does Wide Plains,” I pointed out. “Besides, when you live in a small town like I did, you learn to appreciate the small things in life. It is why I am a Bard, so I can not only focus on the small things, but bring them to life using story and song so others may enjoy them as well.”

“Are there any Healers down there?” Alicia said. “I don’t see a Healer’s House. What do you do if you get injured or sick?”

“We heal ourselves,” I answered. “We have plenty of medicinal herbs and plants with which to treat our injuries, though a Healer does occasionally come from the next town over to make sure we’re not all dead.”

Alicia still frowned. “As a Healer, I don’t like the sound of that.”

“Well, as you are not from around here, your opinion doesn’t matter,” I said. “What matters is —”

“Hey, guys.”

It was Jill. She was looking straight ahead at Long River, not looking at me or Alicia, but despite that her tone of voice caught both of our attention. I did not recognize her tone at first, as it was not a tone I had ever heard her use before.

“What is it, Jill?” I said. “It better be important because I was just telling Alicia here about how we do things in Long River.”

“Look at Long River.” She still spoke in that same unrecognizable tone, a tone that worried me greatly. “Something is happening to it.”

That was when I recognized her tone: It was surprise.

And what frightened me most about it was that Jill was *never* surprised.

Therefore, I had to look out at Long River, as she ordered. At first, I didn’t notice anything out of the ordinary; the town’s layout looked the same and, now that we were so close, I even saw a few people walking along its streets, though from this distance it was impossible to tell who they were.

“I don’t see—” I said, but then something happened.

How to describe it? I don’t know. First, I saw Long River, sitting peacefully among the trees of the Long Forest. Then the town … it blinked in and out of existence several times. It was like someone was trying to wipe off a stubborn stain out of a white shirt, but even that didn’t quite describe it. I had no idea what I was looking at because I had never seen anything quite like it.

Alicia must have seen it, too, because she sat up ramrod straight in her seat and said, “What the hell is that?”

“I don’t know,” said Jill. She was still surprised. “This has never happened before.”

A large, black, empty hole opened in Long River and one of the people fell through it. But then

the person appeared again, right before the hole, and then walked into it again. The process repeated over and over, each time making my heart break and my mind question its own sanity.

"Is it the Lord of the Silver Blades' sorcery at work?" said Alicia, leaning forward over the control panel, as if that would help her make sense of what she was seeing. "Is he attacking the town with some strange magic?"

"Can't be," said Jill, shaking her head, her tone as surprised as ever. "The Lord of the Silver Blades is in Three Hundred Towers. And he never attacks Long River, not even once."

I would have questioned Jill's tense—"He never attacks, Long River, not even once"—but I was too distracted by the strange distortions going on below to care. The item shop had somehow duplicated itself, making a perfect copy that stood right on top of it like the owner had built a second story. Even more bizarrely, the ground around the shop was built into the pseudo-second story, which would have sent me running away screaming like a maniac if I had not been completely, utterly paralyzed by the fear creeping up my spine.

Then I heard heavy footsteps behind me and I looked over my shoulder. Julius was awake, rubbing his eyes and yawning as he dragged his ax behind him like a toddler's favorite toy. He seemed to have heard the commotion because he said, "What's everyone getting so excited about? Are we under attack by a dragon or something?"

Jill shook her head, but she didn't even speak. Like me, she was too shocked to say anything; at least, that was the explanation I had. It was the only one that made sense. This was the first time I'd ever seen Jill surprised by anything. No wonder she seemed to have lost her voice.

Julius walked up to Alicia's chair and peered over it at Long River below. "Uh ... is Long River supposed to look like that?"

"Of course not," I said, though my tone was more afraid than annoyed. "It just started happening. We don't know why."

Julius looked at Jill, just as he always did in these kinds of situations. "Jill, what's going on?"

"She doesn't know, either," I said, putting my hands on my cheeks. "She said she's never seen anything like this before. Says it's never happened before."

"The Lord of the Silver Blades?" said Julius. His fingers tightened around his ax handle.

"No," said Alicia. "It's ... something else."

"And Jill doesn't know?" There was fear in Julius's voice now, the kind of fear I had never heard in it before. "Jill's gotta know. She *always* knows."

"But she doesn't know this," I said, gesturing at my hometown, which was looking more and more like some kind of nightmare the longer I looked at it. "She said so."

Julius grabbed Jill's shoulder with his large hand and said, "Jill, please, you had to have some kind of premonition or something, right? Like you saw this coming at some point and you were prepared for it?"

Jill knocked Julius's hand off her shoulder and actually glared at him. "Weren't you listening to Dale? I. Don't. Know. This is the first time I've ever even seen something like this."

"There has to be something we can do about it," said Julius. "Like, I don't know, maybe use magic to fix everything?"

"Magic won't help," said Jill. "Besides ... we're too late. Look."

Right before our very eyes, Long River—beautiful Long River, quaint Long River, petite Long

River, my wonderful hometown—vanished into thin air. It was replaced by a flat black square, with only what appeared to be the outlines of houses and people on its surface. Like all of the color had drained from my home and my friends.

Jill stopped the Aircraft in midair, right before we flew over the black emptiness that was once my hometown. Her shoulders slumped, she just stared at the large black space where my home had been, looking completely lost.

“Where did it go?” I said. “Jill, where did Long River—”

“It's gone.” She said that with a finality in her voice that crushed my soul. “Dale, I'm sorry to say this, but your home—and everyone and everything in it—is gone. And there's nothing I can do to bring it back.”