

The Settlers



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Chapter 1

“But I want adventures!” shouted Ash. “I’ve never been allowed to join in the hunt, and now I never will!”

His father sighed, his breath making a cloud of fog in the cold air. “Son, I am tired,” he said. “We have spent our lives hunting, running and hiding. Travelling from place to place. We can settle now. Grow our own food. Keep our own animals.” The huge man adjusted the plume of white fur on his shoulder. It showed they were now a part of the settlement by the mountain.

Ash glared at his father and stomped to the opening of the cave to sit and watch the rain. His mother looked up from shelling hazelnuts and sighed. She shrugged the heavy fur tighter round her shoulders and warmed her hands by the fire.

The cave was in the side of a mountain, facing the forest and a clearing where they had started to build houses. The mountain provided protection and the trees provided wood for building. There was also a river nearby so they had a permanent water supply. Permanent. Everyone kept saying that word. Ash didn’t like it.

Through the rain, Ash could see the clearing. A few goats were grazing on the grass and ferns but still the whole world looked grey and dull. He wondered if this was where they would stay forever. Would he ever see other lands?

The world went dark as a familiar pair of hands covered his eyes.

“Rawrrrr! Guess what animal I am?”

Ash knew it was his little sister, Skylark, but he played along.

“Is it a buffalo?” he asked.

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"No!" she answered. "Try again!"

"Is it... an eel?"

"No, silly!" she giggled. "It goes RAAAWRR!" She shouted right into his ear. He winced.

"Oh, I know," he said, "it must be a woolly mammoth!"

"No, and you aren't even trying now; it's..."

"RRRRRAAWWW!"

Skylark stopped. This noise was definitely not her.

She silently removed her hands from his face.

Ash felt his mother's hand on his arm and turned to see the panic in her eyes. They had been taught to go quiet and still when faced with danger. He retreated carefully into the cave.

Father's huge silhouette blocked out the light from the cave's opening. He was holding his hunting spear.

The growling came again. The sandy face and glinting white teeth of a sabre-toothed cat appeared a few paces from the cave, then the rest of its body. It was enormous, twice as big as Ash's father, even in all his furs. Steam rose from its back. Ash could feel his heart thumping in his chest.



His father stepped sideways. The big cat crouched lower to the ground. It growled again, curling its lips to show the length of its fangs.

Ash pressed his back into the rocky wall. He glanced at his mother and sister, who were almost hidden by their winter furs. His mother was holding Skylark tightly to stop her crying, her own breath quick and panicked.

His father stepped sideways and knocked a horn cup that fell, clattering on to the stone. The sabre-tooth flinched and Ash's father lunged forwards with his spear, roaring with all his might. Yowling, the animal twisted away and he missed it by a fraction.

Ash could see his father was breathing heavily, the furs on his back rising up and down just like the big cat's.

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A yapping and pounding noise filled the air, coming closer. The sabre-tooth looked to see what it was but Ash's father kept his gaze on the beast.

A pack of dogs swarmed into view, growling and howling as they came, splashing in the mud. They were followed by four men, who all began to roar when they saw the sabre-toothed cat. All of the men had a plume of white fur on their right shoulder.

The big cat turned and leapt away, skidding in the mud as the pack sped after it, nipping at its tail and legs. The four men stopped running and the dogs dropped back as the huge animal ran into the forest as fast as it could.

Ash let out a breath he didn't even know he was holding. Skylark began to cry.

The men came over and Ash heard his father thanking them. They murmured a few words to each other and then walked back the way they had come, towards their own families and makeshift homes. The pack of dogs followed them.

Their father turned and looked at his family. He walked to the back of the cave where they were all huddled and dropped to his knees. He opened his arms and gathered the three of them into his chest.

"We are safe now," he said. "We are safe here."