

The Settlers

Chapter 6

Ash kept running, scrambling over boulders, changing direction and ducking under low branches until he saw an old, gnarled oak tree ahead of him.

He practically threw Arrow up the tree. The puppy clung on with his little claws and scrambled to a fork in the big branches at the top. Ash followed, climbing as quickly as he could.

The wind picked up, and he shuddered with the chill. He hugged his dog. There was a rumble of thunder and Ash heard the distinctive squeal of a boar. His heart skipped and he gasped, almost losing his balance on the branch.

Ash looked around. He could see for miles and miles and... there was nothing at all that he recognised. He was lost.

Completely and totally lost.

The rain came all at once. Not in individual drops that built steadily, but in one almighty torrent which did not stop. It washed them out of the tree. The boy and his dog tumbled down the trunk, panicked and soaked.

They ran from tree to tree, cover to cover, Ash trying frantically to remember which way they had come, but it was getting dark. The thunder cracked through the sky once more.

Ash saw too late that thunder meant bright sheets of ferocious lightning power pounded down, shattering the trunk of a tree fifty paces ahead. Terrified, he changed course, running even faster than before.

“WHEEEEEEEEEEE!”

The wind and the rain almost sounded like the boar.

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“WHEEEEEEEEEEE, WHEEEEE!”

In fact, it sounded exactly like it. Ash stopped so suddenly that he slid on to his back in the mud. Arrow skidded beside him, whimpering.

The boar stood, steam rising from its back and mud covering half its body, at the bottom of a tree, and up in the tree Ash spotted a flash of Auburn.

Then he heard Red scream.

“WHEEEEEEEEEEE!” squealed the boar in response.

Ash tucked Arrow into his deerskin jacket. “Stay in here, safe and warm,” he whispered. Arrow was shivering and cold, wet against his chest.

Ash looked up at the tree. Red was clinging on to the topmost branches. He could hear her screaming for help and see her red hair whipping around, wet in the gale.

A crack of thunder shook the forest, so loud that it drowned out the sound of the rain, the boar and Red’s desperate shouts.

He stood up and slowly walked towards the boar. He tried to shout in a soothing voice: “He-ere bo-ar, come here.”



He fished in the sodden pouch to his side and brought out a handful of hazelnuts. "Boar, come he-ere; I have some lovely food for you." The boar looked round.

"HUWHEEEEE!" it squealed. It squared its body in confrontation.

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Ash bent lower to the ground, holding the nuts in front of him. His hand was trembling, but the wind disguised it.

The boar relaxed slightly and edged closer. Ash took a hazelnut with his other hand and threw it on to the ground in front of the great animal. Luckily, it didn't sink into the mud. The boar lowered its head and chomped. It moved closer. They repeated this motion: Ash low to the ground and the giant pig coming closer for treats until it was standing right next to Ash. He was trying not to look scared but he was shaking and holding his breath.

Ash opened his hand and put all the hazelnuts on the ground. The pig tucked in heartily. Ash took a deep breath and reached out to stroke the middle of its head. One of its ears twitched but apart from that the boar was completely distracted by the hazelnuts.

Ash looked up and saw that Red was quietly climbing down from the tree. When she reached the bottom, Ash slowly stood up and walked around the animal, stroking and making soothing noises as he walked.

Ash reached Red and gripped her hand. They ran.

The boar whipped its head around and squealed. It knew it had been tricked.

"This way!" she shouted, through the rumbling thunder. "Then we follow the river." They ran and ran, the boar on their heels, squealing and grunting, crashing through the forest.

Red screamed and Ash looked back. She had tripped, her ankle trapped in the roots of a tree. The boar screeched and leapt.

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