

# The Settlers

## Chapter 7

Ash grabbed a stick from the forest floor and lunged at the boar, roaring. It was probably more surprised than scared but it reared back, buying Red a little time to free her ankle from the roots. Ash dragged her to her feet and they rushed on. She was limping badly. The boar was back on their heels; Ash's attack hadn't bought them much time. The boar was catching up with them.

Ash began to recognise things.

The rock that looked like a mammoth.

The boulder by the river.

The stepping stone!

They were across.

The boar screamed in desperation before running back into the forest.

They were home.

But it looked different.

The houses were all but destroyed. The rain had put out most of the fires but most houses had a smouldering mess where the roof should have been and various holes in the sides.

The most unnerving thing was the lack of people. There was not a soul to be seen.

Ash and Red exchanged a worried glance. They hadn't had a chance to talk about the fact that Red's people had attacked Ash's new settlement and ruined the new home they had spent weeks building. He decided not to speak to her now. He turned with a huff and walked off, determined to

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find his family. They had been in danger and he had run away. He couldn't believe that he had just left them. Bubbles of guilt and worry moved painfully in his chest and stomach.

He put Arrow down on the floor and the little dog shook himself out. Ash was already running. He had to find his family.

Red followed. He wondered if she was feeling the same as him, or whether she was glad that the whole of his settlement had fled or been captured. He couldn't bear to look at her.

They rounded the edge of the mountain and heard voices.

They went further and they could smell cooking smells.

Someone was laughing.

They slowed to a stop. Around the side of the mountain was a huge crowd of people. Some had white shoulder plumes and some had black, but all were eating, drinking and laughing. Together.

Arrow bounded towards a group of people.

The woman at the back looked down at the puppy and then turned.

"Oh, Ash!" shouted River. "My boy, we were so worried!"

His mother fell on him in a wet hug. Skylark hugged him round the middle. His father gripped his shoulder.

"But... what happened?" asked Ash. "They were trying to kill us!"

"Aye," said his father, "we had a good, long fight. Many have been injured but, luckily, nobody has been killed. After we fought back it became clear that neither group would win so we talked. We have come to an agreement to work together and help each other. We can share our crops and resources, and learn from one another."

Ash nodded. He thought this was what everyone had wanted from the start.

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He looked at Red, who he could see was having the same reunion with her family. They were fussing over her injured ankle and someone had fetched the wise woman who helped with injuries and illnesses.

They feasted well into the night.

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One by one, the community awoke, stretching and yawning in the new day. River had already retrieved some of the smoked and salt-cured pork they had stored and was placing small pieces of it on top of cooking rocks in the fire. The smell was fantastic, and within minutes, everyone was up and about, with River handing out breakfast to everyone.

“We will gather some reeds,” said Red's father, “to help rebuild the roof.”

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Bear was holding his stone axe. "And I will fetch some more wood," he said. "Son, you will come with me." He handed Ash another, smaller axe.

Ash realised that this was an adventure itself. But it was even better than their life before because now it wasn't just them: all of their new friends were with them. He had never been allowed to help with anything before, but now, with the houses, crops and animals, Ash could help with everything.

"Come on, boy," he said, "let's go and help Father."

They ran off between the houses, across the goat paddock and towards the woods.

Red was already gathering reeds by the riverbank, her ankle wrapped in protective clay. She waved as they passed.

"We're going on an adventure!" shouted Ash. "Do you want to come?"

Red looked at her mother, who took the reeds off her and nodded. She grinned and hoisted herself to her feet. She limped over to Ash and Arrow.

"Adventures it is," she said.