

The Settlers

Chapter 4

"Arrow," said Ash, the puppy jumping wildly about in front of him, "Arrow, go get the stick!" He threw it into a clearing between the trees. The little dog yipped and bounded after it. He ran back quickly with his prize between his teeth; he looked like he was grinning.

"Good dog," said Ash, taking the stick back. He lifted it up again, teasing the dog, then threw it. It bounced off a tree and fell into a bush. Arrow sped after it and the whole bush bounced and rustled. Ash waited for his puppy to reappear.

A small, grey rabbit bolted out of the greenery, with Arrow closely behind. This was Ash's chance to get his first taste of hunting. The animals raced around the clearing; every time the rabbit slowed, so did the puppy. Ash wasn't sure which was more scared. He reached to his side to find the small spear he was carrying. He was glad he had taken it, as well as some hazelnuts for snacking on, when he had crept away that morning.

Ash kept his eye on the rabbit. It darted from tree to tree, kicking out its back legs whenever Arrow got too close. Ash just had to figure out where it was going next. He waited until it was cornered and he lunged, throwing the spear.

He missed. The rabbit dodged and skittered off into the undergrowth.

Arrow stopped, his hackles raised, backing away from the rustling leaves.

"What's wrong, boy?" said Ash. Arrow started to growl.

The bush began to shake. Ash felt the back of his neck prickle. Arrow backed away towards his master.

There was a chorus of cracking sounds, and then the bush seemed to explode. A shot of coarse brown hair and a pair of yellow tusks burst out in

a shower of leaves, accompanied by a deep, wheezing squeal. A wild boar.

Ash grabbed Arrow and began to run as fast as his legs would go. His heart was pounding and his muscles burned with every stride. Arrow was yelping in his arms. He could hear the rasping wheeze of the giant pig behind him; it would catch up with him any second.

He saw the river up ahead, with the big boulder he recognised. He jumped across to the stepping stone in the middle, the water rushing wildly on either side. He threw Arrow on to the far bank and followed quickly.

The water was too deep and fast for the boar to cross. It squealed in frustration.

Ash let out a sob of relief and then ran back towards the settlement with Arrow at his side, .

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The houses were almost finished.

"I'll get you!" shouted Skylark, running towards Ash with a handful of daub, the mixture of clay, water and straw that they were plastering the house with. She flicked it, Ash ducked out of the way and the gloopy mess found its way directly on to the back of River's head, then slid down through her hair.

"Skylark!" shouted River.

"Sorry, Mum," said Skylark from behind her hands. Ash held back a laugh. Skylark wiped her daub-covered hand down the back of his goatskin tunic. He retaliated by putting a blob on the end of her nose.

"Will you both stop it?" said River. "We've got a whole house to finish while the weather is still clear. It won't dry if it rains."

"Sorry," they both muttered, and then they joined in, squashing the daub in between the woven hazel branches that made up the walls of the new house.

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They carried on for the rest of the day. They daubed and bundled and cut with flint axes until all that was left was the final step.

The whole community gathered round as the men were finally able to lift the roof, thatched with bundles of straw tethered by the women, on to the top of the house. They secured it into place with wooden pegs and there was a cheer as Bear, River, Skylark, Ash and Arrow entered their completed family home for the first time.

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It took Ash a while to settle that night. It was strange being so enclosed. He was used to the solid rock of the cave and he could hear the new noises of the house in the wind. He snuggled down with Arrow, drawing up his old furs, so familiar in the new surroundings.

He was just dropping off when he heard them.

Voices, hushed and hurried.

Cracking, then a scream.

His father sat up, followed by the rest of the family.

Arrow was growling.

A whooshing sound.

The smell of burning.

The look on his family's illuminated faces as flames licked under the edges of their brand new roof.

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