

The Settlers

Chapter 2

“RROOOAAAARRR!”

The bear had him cornered. Ash stood in front of his family; Skylark and his mother huddled into his father's chest.

“RRROOOOOOAAAARRR!”

Ash lunged forward with the spear. The bear snorted a few times and then coughed. Coughed?

It roared again, just the same as last time. Ash blinked and dropped his spear. The world faded and he felt the goatskin rug underneath him and the morning light on his eyelids.

Ash realised that the sound of his sister's snoring had invaded his dream. Skylark made a lot of noise for a very small person.

He opened one eye and turned over. His little sister was about to snore again so he reached out and poked her face. She twitched and snorted. He poked her again.

“Unnggghh,” she groaned. Ash smiled. She flapped her arms.

“Stop tormenting your sister,” said their mother, coming into the cave with some wet clothes that she had washed in the river. Ash rubbed his eyes and stretched.

“Where's Father?” he asked.

“He wanted to help,” said Mother, “so I asked him to fetch some milk. Why don't you go and see if he wants a hand?”

Ash jumped out of bed; he had never been asked to help his father before.

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The morning was bright, crisp and wet with dew. Ash skidded around the big rock to where he could see his father, who was wearing only goatskin trousers and crouched in a hunting position. Ash ducked down. His father caught his eye and made the signal to stay where he was and keep quiet.

The big man leant back on his heels then pounced like a cat, bringing his arms down from above. Ash stood up, craning to see. There was a wild bleating and a thump as the goat his father had landed on protested by kicking him in the guts. Ash's father made an "oof" noise and tumbled backwards, right on to a pile of fresh goat droppings. He glared at the goat, which bleated and carried on munching its patch of grass.

"Hrnng!" His father grunted and thumped his fists on the ground.

A laugh rang out and a girl, not much bigger than Ash, came striding across the paddock. She gave the goat a pat on the head and tickled its beard.



Ash's father huffed, his face still red.

"How do you do that?" asked Ash. "Who are you?"

The girl laughed again. "My name's Red," she said, "because of my hair." She shook her head and her auburn curls swished and bobbed. "I come from the settlement at the other side of the mountain." She gestured with her hand. "Why were you two trying to hunt this poor little goat?"

Ash's father was standing, trying to wipe the goat poo off his trousers with a handful of grass. He looked at Red.

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"We were not trying to hunt it," he said, "I was trying to capture it to get some milk."

Red laughed again. "Then what? Were you going to squeeze it until the milk came out?" Ash's father looked like he was about to explode. Ash felt embarrassed.

Red beckoned them to come closer. The goat bleated and stepped back. Red stroked its neck reassuringly and crouched next to it. She was talking, soothingly and in a low voice, into its ear. She held out her hand and fed it a hazelnut.

She looked at Ash's father. "What's your name?" she asked.

"Bear," he said, quietly. He crouched down. The goat moved a little, nervously. Red carried on stroking it. Bear inched forward, almost crawling. He leant and stroked the goat's head. He let out a breath as the animal nuzzled his hand.

Ash had never seen his father be tender before. He moved closer, and Red nodded in encouragement.

"I'm Ash," he said to the goat. It bleated in reply.

"Now," said Red, "I'm going to show you how to milk her." She fetched a clay pot, which she placed under the goat.

With Ash on one side and Bear on the other, Red stood up and straddled the goat so that she was facing its rear end.

"Believe me," she said, "this is the best way to do it."

She bent forward so that her face was resting on its back and reached underneath to its udders. She started to squeeze and the milk squirted into the pot. She stood up.

"See," she said, "if the animal trusts you, you can do anything. If it's frightened of you then it will always either fight or run away. Now it's your turn." She got off the goat and stepped away.

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Ash and his father crouched there, neither one wanting to go first, until Bear stood up.

“Well,” he said, “I should go first to show my son how it’s done.”

He straddled the goat