



A
GIANT'S
TREK

NICK STELLA

CHAPTER I

FIRST SNOW

Ash was running through the forest as darkness gathered. The howl of wolves came from all around and he could see their white and grey bodies flashing past the trees. He was breathing heavily and his boots kept slipping in the wet leaves littering the forest floor.

He ran into a clearing and everything was quiet except for his laboured breathing. A leather bag lay on a stone table in the centre of the clearing. He approached, step by step, and placed his hands on the mossy table. The bag was open but he could only see darkness within. He didn't want to reach inside because he was sure there was something in there

waiting to scratch or bite him. But he *needed* to reach inside, into the darkness within the bag. He did so, slowly, and pulled out a stone. The word *starvation* was inscribed into the stone. He drew another stone from the bag. It read *injury*. And another. This stone felt heavier than the others and he knew which word was inscribed onto its surface before he had even seen it. *Death*.

Ash woke with that word etched into his mind like it had been on the stone.

He was aching and cold from sleeping on the ground, having decided to catch a quick nap under a tree rather than returning to the village for lunch with the rest of the workers. After a long morning of chopping down trees, he had just wanted to lie down and close his eyes.

He looked up at an overcast sky with a thick blanket of cloud that promised snow—a thought that made him shudder.

Ash stood, stamping his feet and rubbing his hands together in an effort to get warm. He stood ten feet tall and had a mouthful of teeth capable of crunching through bone. He had the strength in his arms to tear a cottage door clean off and a pair of legs as thick as tree trunks, which could upend a wagon with a single kick.

But Ash wasn't the biggest giant living in the village of Haven-Home. He couldn't swing an axe the hardest or throw a spear the furthest. His hunting skills were ordinary and he swam like a stone.

Ash was about to chop down the tree he had been sleeping beneath when he saw a lizard high up on the trunk, beyond his reach. With a stick, he gently prodded the small animal. It scurried down the trunk and raced away into the forest.

He picked up his axe, took a deep breath and swung it at the tree, the blade biting into the trunk. A painful vibration shot up into his arm and shoulder. He removed the axe and swung again. And again.

'I can hear your tree laughing,' said a familiar voice. 'All you're doing with that axe is giving it a tickle.'

Ash's twin brother, Oak, approached the tree next to his. Oak was everything that Ash wasn't. He was good with an axe, skilled with a spear and at home in the woods. He also had a beard that could shame some of the adult giants. It was chestnut brown and as thick as a berry bush.

Oak laughed at his own joke and lifted his axe, the blade glinting in the afternoon light as he swung it back and forth, chopping at his own tree. From

all around came the sound of axes striking timber: the giants of the village had returned from lunch and resumed the task of felling trees. It had been a long morning and they would work right up until nightfall.

Ash put his hand up to his own beard, which was no more than a tangle of blond fluff. Oak often teased Ash about his miserable excuse for a beard, as well as his height, his poor hunting and wrestling skills, and any other number of things. Oak would become the village chieftain when their father became too old. Everyone knew this, especially Ash.

He watched Oak make one final almighty swing with his axe, and the tree came toppling down with a crash.

‘You’ve got to use your axe like you mean it,’ Oak called. ‘A little confidence goes a long way.’

‘Mind your own business,’ Ash shouted back.

‘It is my business,’ his brother said, coming closer. ‘We need trees for the Wolf-Wall. If it’s not repaired by winter, the blizzard-wolves will come knocking at the front gate.’

Ash started to attack his tree again and chopped a dozen more times before finally, with a slow creak, it crashed to the ground.

Oak gave him a sarcastic round of applause. ‘Congratulations.’

Ash dropped the axe and saw that blisters had risen on his hands like mushrooms in a field. He turned to Oak, ready to tell him to be quiet, when he saw...

Mithra.

She was swinging an axe at her own tree, the blade biting deep into the timber with every stroke. Mithra was the same age as Oak and Ash, and she lived on the far side of the village with her father. Ever since they could walk, Oak, Ash and Mithra had done everything together. When they were young, they had explored the village; as they had grown older, they began to venture into the fringes of the Netherwood, pretending to hunt bears and wolves with their undersized axes and spears. But even with his two closest companions, Ash had always felt like the third wheel on the cart. Like he didn't belong.

While Oak and Mithra had crept among the trees whispering to one another about where the bears and wolves might have their dens, Ash would be strolling several paces behind, the head of his spear dragging along the ground. His mind was focused on the trees around them, the stones beneath their feet and the small streams they occasionally had to jump over.

Today, as usual, Oak was already far ahead, dragging his tree with ease over the grassy farmland that surrounded Haven-Home. Ash glanced again at the overcast sky, then grabbed his own tree and began to haul it away, limping as he went. Ash had been born with his right leg a tad shorter than his left, so the village cobbler had made him a boot with a thicker sole to help him walk more evenly.

He stopped to catch his breath every now and then, admiring the tumbling waters of the River Tind, which wound its way behind the village like a colossal serpent. In the distance, the icy summit of Diamond-Top Mountain glimmered in the sun, casting its shadow over the lower peaks and foothills that were known for their roving packs of wolves. Ash shivered at the thought and sped up as he approached the half-built Wolf-Wall. The barrier of oil-soaked logs ran around Haven-Home's protective stone wall, from the front gate and down each side to the river. Though Oak would have mocked him for it, Ash secretly felt proud that he was able to help with the work of ensuring the Wolf-Wall was ready for winter. That the very tree he had cut would be soaked with oil, ready for a spark to set the wall alight to keep the wolves from getting to Haven-Home.

Other giants were overtaking Ash with their trees. Kirkrit Shield-Breaker went past as did Pezzard Swamp-Clearer. Even Seven-Toes Tevnat, who also had a limp, was progressing more quickly than Ash. His legs ached and his hands felt as if they were on fire as he struggled on.

‘Good morning, Ash,’ a voice boomed at his side. It was Trondor, the tallest and largest giant in the village, possibly in all of Wild-Reach, the land where the giants lived. ‘You’re almost there, lad,’ he said as he strode past, a tree trunk grasped in each of his massive hands.

Ash gave him a little nod, but was too puffed to reply. He was halfway to the village when he heard someone else call his name.

‘Ash!’

He turned and watched as Mithra caught up to him, dragging her own tree trunk. ‘It’s snowing,’ she said with glee, as flakes of snow landed in her red hair that danced around her head like tongues of flame.

The day he had been dreading had arrived. The first snow of winter was here.

Tomorrow, the day after this first snow, he, Oak and Mithra would each reach into a bag and draw a stone inscribed with the name of an adult giant. They

would pair up with this guardian and strike out into the wilderness to test their survival craft and weapon skills. This was the giants' rite of passage, known as the Trek.

As Ash walked beside Mithra towards the village, all he could think about was the dream he'd just had. The words on the stones were burned into his brain. *Starvation. Injury. Death.*

Oak and Mithra had been looking forward to their Treks for years, eager to test themselves. Mithra lived for her bow and arrows while Oak had a battle axe that Ash could hardly lift. They would return to the village after the Trek and be accepted as adult giants and as warriors.

The most important part of the Trek, however, was their duty to return with a great weapon to help the giants defend the village. Mithra planned on fashioning a quiver of arrows cut from the trees of the Shadewoods while Oak was to construct a shield from the wood of the Frost Forest in the far west.

Ash, however, had no interest in arrows or shields. He wasn't a warrior and he knew it. *Everyone* knew it.

But there was one thing that Ash was interested in. One thing that he could seek while away on his Trek,

that he could bring back and use to defend the village.

It was incantation that Ash was interested in. The magic of wood, stone and water.

And also of fire, the most dangerous and unpredictable element of them all.

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Supper that night was a lively affair. Ash and Oak's father, the village chieftain Rolward Tollfarn, sat at the end of the table, spilling as much ale as he drank. With froth in his black and grey beard, he laughed and chewed on his roast meat, banging his fist on the table. His enthusiasm for all things dangerous and wild had been inherited by Oak. It was his passion for adventure that made Rolward loved by all the giants of Haven-Home.

'The first snow of winter has fallen!' he proclaimed, thumping his fist on the table. 'Tomorrow, my boys, you will take part in the Selection, where a guardian will be chosen for each of you to accompany you on your Treks!'

'Trondor will be my guardian!' Oak shouted, thumping his fist on the table as well. 'I just know I'll draw his stone from the bag.'

'You couldn't go wrong with Trondor, my boy,' his

father called back with a laugh and another bang on the table with his meaty fist.

‘Broad as a mountain and tall as a tree is Trondor,’ Oak said.

‘That he is, son. I once saw him wrestle a cave bear in nothing but his fur loincloth. He won the match and kicked the bear in the behind as it ran away.’

Rolward and Oak often exchanged this story much to their delight. Ash had found it slightly amusing the first time around, but it wasn’t nearly as funny now he’d heard it at least once a month for as long as he could remember.

Rolward took another bite of meat and looked at Ash as he chewed. ‘Who do you hope to draw from the bag, Ash?’

‘The butcher’s wife,’ Oak said, with sauce in his beard. ‘She is stronger than Ash and better with a blade.’

‘Enough, Oak.’ Their father’s eyes were still on Ash, waiting for an answer.

‘I hope for Bando.’ Ash thought about banging his fist on the table as well but decided that the moment had passed.

‘Bando?’ Oak said, almost choking on his food. ‘That one-eyed half-deaf giant who swims naked

in the river?’

Rolward shot Oak a sharp look and returned his attention to Ash. ‘Why Bando?’ he asked.

‘He has knowledge of herbs and medicine.’ Ash paused to clear his throat. ‘And of incantation.’

His father frowned. ‘That old magic is no match for a sharp axe or a well-thrown spear.’

Ash waited for his father to say more, but the chieftain took a mouthful of ale and looked away. The conversation was apparently over.



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