

Leila Chapter 15

It was not until a few days later that she followed her tree-codes again, double-taking momentarily at the two little nicks in the bark under her fingerprints before continuing.

His voice sounded a note of genuine surprise.

‘Oh hello, you’re back?’ He adjusted his ropey old sweater, as if trying to impress an important visitor. ‘Lyla isn’t it?’ His jaunty, almost casual, tone suggested a deliberate forgetfulness.

‘Leila actually.’

‘Oh yes, Leila, do come over. Please, take a seat.’

She'd resolved, albeit briefly, not to return and to leave him in peace. He probably lived there for a reason, and was happy with his own company. But she hadn't spoken to anyone that day, and she knew that he would listen. This time she sat down on one of the stools on the deck.

‘What’s that burning over there?’ She pointed to one of the piles she'd seen smouldering on her way in.

‘Oh that’s charcoal. Precious stuff that is!’

‘Charcoal? Barbecues and things, right?’

‘That’s right, Leila, I sell quite a bit for barbecues. It’s also for things like filters and masks. It’s very absorbent you see. You just burn wood as slowly as possible. There’s a fine art to getting it just right.’

‘So you make it?’

‘Well I have to do something! It fascinates me actually. Two hundred years ago, there would have been many families working each summer making charcoal in these forests. Have you noticed how many clearings you come to as you walk on through? Many of those would have been cleared for the kilns. The raw material is all around and at one time much of the forest would have been cut down to produce enough fuel for iron and bronze making. Back in the day, you know.’

She didn't, really.

‘So do you do anything else?’

‘Apart from making and selling a bit of charcoal? Not really. Fixing this place mostly. Sorry to disappoint you. Maybe you were thinking I was the front for some criminal superpower, and underneath here is a network of bunkers and supercomputers?’

He laughed.

She didn't.

‘I didn't think that. It's just a shack.’

He smiled.

‘No I guess you didn’t. Honestly Leila, I don’t really want to talk about it. I do what I do. It’s an honest and simple life. I don’t bother anyone and I look after the forest. I’m not doing anyone any harm. Everything changed for me after I lost my wife.’

Leila didn’t really pick up on the last comment. She thought for a moment and then said, ‘It’s a good life. Quite cool actually. And useful.’

He genuinely felt happy with that endorsement.

‘Thank you. Would you care for some tea?’

The old-fashioned language made her smile.

‘I would not care for any, at least not today. Thank you though. I should probably depart.’

They both smiled at the formal language.

Wordsmiths.

Both of them.