

DARK UPRISING

AUTUMN BIRT



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BURN



She smelled like gasoline. October hoped no one would notice.

Around her, the climate change protest swelled with chants and shouts. She let the crowd carry her down the street before hopping up the three steps to stand in the shadowy doorway of a brownstone. She wasn't here to demonstrate. Yelling at politicians did nothing, and it was long past time to do something.

Senator David Williams' voice echoed through the canyon of brick buildings lining the crowded Boston city street. Even over the cheers of protesters, October could hear the Kennedy twang of his accent. She didn't want to listen to his words. They'd distract her, and she might just hurl a Molotov cocktail at him instead of his car.

"We will lead the rest of the country!"

A roar of agreement followed the booming voice.

October's nostrils flared as anger swept through her. Damn, he annoyed her. She turned toward this man she despised even more than those who denied climate change as if drawn – only she would be the flame and he the moth. She promised that; it

would be him that would burn. The small plastic canister of gas pressing against her side added weight to her vow.

A dark figure standing in the shadows of a narrow alley across from her snagged October's gaze and evaporated the fledging idea to ignite the stage under David Williams' feet. Klint had that effect. He was always the calm amid the storm, acting a powerful center of a maelstrom that raged around him and at his direction. That was what had attracted October to him. Things happened near Klint while he stood there smiling.

Over the heads of chanting protestors, Klint nodded toward her. Despite the shadows where he waited, October swore she saw the hint of his familiar smile on his lips. He knew how the politician infuriated her. David would get his due, Klint promised her that and more. She took a deep breath, inhaling whiffs of car exhaust along with the fumes of gasoline. Yes, karma would catch up with David... today, actually.

Crossing the thoroughfare through the thick of a protest was just about as easy as dodging Boston traffic at rush hour. Slim as she was, October wove through the crowd with the nimbleness of a waifish teen, even if her actual age was another five years. But now, burrowing into her dark hoodie to avoid the chill in the late spring air as much as to hide her face and striking orange hair, she felt like a rebellious teenager. And she planned to act the part.

"The solutions to climate change will not only be what saves us but will save our jobs!"

October growled as she darted out of the crowd and into the concrete coolness of the alley. Here a stink of trash and something rotten might fill every breath, but it was better than David Williams' sweetly coated lies. If people couldn't see the fraud he was, she would illustrate it for them – her and the other members of Population Zero.

Klint had already slipped down the narrow canyon between buildings, but now he paused near the middle and glanced back

at her. With a nod, he gestured to the wall at his shoulder. In the faint light, October saw the rough oval and slashed “P” that Population Zero used as their symbol. The small sign of support made butterflies erupt in her stomach and brush against her spine as they swept up to her neck. She shivered with anticipation.

As she caught up with him, Klint’s smile below his slightly hooked nose leaned toward maverick. “We are moving beyond spray painting and yelling today.”

October grinned as she peered back at the protest behind her that filled the overcast daylight of the street. “Yeah. Screaming doesn’t change much, anyway.” She should know. She’d been shouting her entire life, and no one had listened.

Klint continued walking so that when she turned back, he’d nearly reached the mouth of the alley. October hurried to catch up, causing the gas to slosh in the container as she jogged, which sent a fresh waft of fumes into her nose. She resisted the urge to sneeze.

She finally caught up again as Klint glanced around the building corner. He jerked backward into the shadows so suddenly he almost knocked October off her feet. As he flattened himself to the rough bricks of the old building, he cursed under his breath.

“Cops?” October shifted her shoulder to ease the throb from where he’d run into her.

Klint rolled his eyes. “Counter-protesters.” He nudged her with his elbow. “Don’t worry about it. Just keep your head down.” His gaze lingered on her bright orange hair that inched from under the edges of her hood. “If we get separated, meet at the parking garage.”

She knew the plan. She nodded as she hugged the gas can tight despite the growing cramp in her arm. The scent of fuel followed her as she stepped from the alley.

Klint slipped through the throng as if he belonged. Around

October, mayhem broke out. A man grabbed another's jacket and punched him over accusations of selling out. A cop raised his baton. October ducked as he brought the rod down on the shoulder of a woman standing next to her. Pushed and jostled, October shoved her way through the restless crowd the best she could while protecting, and hiding, a full container of gas. She walked right into Klint.

He looked over her head, chuckling. "God, you cause trouble just by breathing. I love it. Come on." He dropped an arm over her shoulder like he was her older brother. October leaned into the embrace; it kept the gas can safe between them.

The public parking garage was only a few blocks down from the chaos of the twin protests. Only now, it wasn't so public. Cones blocked the entrance, but despite all the hostility occurring nearby, no enforcement guarded the place. October exhaled a relieved breath. She wanted today to go well. She needed something to happen, for once.

A slim figure ventured close to the murky sunlight of the dreary afternoon, nodding his head to come in before retreating.

"It all begins today," Klint whispered. He darted across the street without waiting to see if October would follow. There was no need. She was a step behind him.

"Any trouble?" Klint asked as the shadows of the structure swallowed him.

Despite the gray day, October could barely make out the three figures huddled near the corner stairwell.

"Nah," the parking attendant replied, which sent Klint chuckling at the gangly teen. "I parked all the cars together. They should make quite a bonfire."

"Any cameras?" Klint faced the attendant, though he flicked the other two members of Population Zero a half-smile. Ken and Diva waited their turn with amused patience.

"Not that are currently recording." The attendant winked.

Klint clapped the kid on the shoulder before turning to Diva and Ken. “And you?”

Ken fought a smirk as his gaze slid over the parking attendant like he was an over-eager and barely trained puppy. Reserved and dressed as if he’d just shopped at Saks or maybe Harrod’s, Ken waited to make sure the kid didn’t think the question was for him again.

“Of course not.” Diva snapped her fingers as she answered for both of them. She wasn’t one to worry about offending.

Though opposites in personality, Diva and Ken made a stunning couple. Both tall, Diva’s long pale blonde hair lay across her shoulder like silk before cascading in a waterfall of tasteful highlights to her bare midriff. If Ken, with his high cheekbones and dark skin, appeared reserved, Diva resembled a rockstar on an Instagram break. Ebony and Ivory, but both so beautiful it hurt to look at them, and so smart they would have you doing whatever they wanted while making you think you’d come up with the idea. October fiercely admired them both.

“We got everything.” Ken met Klint’s gaze and held it for a second. Klint nodded.

October’s brows scrunched. She knew the plan and didn’t know of anything else Ken was supposed to bring. The question hovering on her lips flashed in Diva’s eyes as she glanced toward October.

“Show us the way,” Klint said to the attendant as he turned his back on October before she could speak up. Diva shrugged.

“Great! Come with me. I’m Matt, by the way.” Matt rattled on as he led them up the staircase.

Diva mockingly groaned. “How sweet. He gave us his real name.”

“Yeah, that won’t be a problem that he is so honest at all.” Ken’s baritone bristled, especially laced with his British accent.

October coughed to cover her laugh. Matt reminded her of her nephew, even if the kid was only five. Maybe he would grow

up to be a gangly, talkative teenager too. It almost made her want to start speaking to her sister again.

“I love what you guys stand for. All this shit needs to change if our generation is to have a future.”

“Damn right,” Klint answered Matt. “Just glad you recognize the issues involved.”

“Hell, yeah, I do.” As he stepped out onto the third level, Matt swept his arm forward as if showcasing an award.

The gesture was unnecessary, though. The row of spotless, high-end cars were the only vehicles on the entire floor of the garage.

Ken whistled under his breath. “Which one do ya think is Mr. Williams’?”

Diva kicked the rear tire of a bright blue BMW. “This one. You can tell by the legislative plates.”

“Oh, look who is showing off her brainpower.” Ken flicked Diva’s hair while she rolled her eyes.

“Doesn’t matter.” The teasing ceased immediately at Klint’s voice. “Burn them all.”

Diva’s glance shifted toward October. Diva might have brains that made her beauty just a phantasma, but she always expected October to utter what she wouldn’t.

“That wasn’t the plan... and I didn’t bring enough fuel for that.” Standing up to Klint was hard for everyone, even if October tried her best.

Matt walking between her and Klint broke the momentary staring contest. “Nah, you have to torch all of them. They’re parked too close together, anyway.”

October released the breath she was holding. It wasn’t a big deal, and Matt was right. They couldn’t just scorch a single car in the middle of a row of eight.

“Got a hose?” Ken asked. “We can siphon more gas out of them.”

That was when it hit her. She studied David Williams’ car

again and snorted. Diva raised an eyebrow.

“It isn’t even a fucking Tesla or a Prius. He could at least pretend he cares about climate change since it’s the platform he’s preaching.”

All four of them cracked up at that, breaking the lingering tension. Now, finally, the day felt the way October had imagined it would. As Ken and Matt broke open gas caps and Klint did his best to puncture fuel tanks with the long knife that he kept on his belt, it became an act of celebratory rebellion. October gladly splashed her tiny can of gas over David’s car before puddling a trail between it and the staircase. Diva painted the logo for Population Zero across the concrete plinths before pulling out her cell phone.

“Heads down or back to me!” she sang. “I don’t want to see any faces. Having to blur you all is too much work.”

October grinned as she pulled her hood over her head. Matt spun around and held up his hands with fingers splayed as ‘V’s. Ready to give Diva a picture worth remembering, October yanked out the lighter in her pocket. She jumped as Klint dropped his hand over it.

“Not yet.” For once, Klint acted jumpy in the way of a kid about to get something they really wanted. “This was just prep, so we’d be ready.”

“Ready for what?” October whispered as she glanced at Diva, whose shrug ruffled the fake fur trim of her jacket.

“Phase two.” Klint held out his hand to Ken.

Ken reached into his jacket and tugged out something small and black. October tried to make sense of the glint of metal that looked the wrong shape for a cell phone. Possibilities flooded her mind, but she still didn’t recognize it as Klint turned and pointed at Matt. The gun went off. Matt fell to the floor.

“What the fuck?” Matt’s voice gurgled. Despite the blood seeping between his fingers where he held them over his chest, he acted angry enough to attack Klint.

“Figured you’d understand. A few sacrifices have to be made.” Klint shot him again.

Diva backed a few unsteady steps swiftly in her high heels as Matt collapsed a dozen feet from her.

October expected to hear sirens, cops, anything but the ordinary noise of people and traffic outside on the street below. It all sounded normal. Shouldn’t people be screaming?

Ken cleared his throat. “I thought that was just for protection?”

Klint aimed the gun at Ken.

Ken flexed his fingers wide. “So a decision has been made on what Population Zero stands for then?”

“Yeah, not just zero pollution.” Klint lowered the muzzle but didn’t put the gun away. He peered at Diva and October. “We got... rid of the naysayers at the upper level. We stand for zero population. Humanity’s time is ending.”

October choked on the acid that flooded her mouth. This wasn’t what she’d signed up for.

Ken stared at her. “You good with that?”

“Of course,” Diva answered as she stepped close enough to Klint to place a hand on his arm holding the gun. “We’re all fine with that. Too many people anyway.”

Klint watched October over Diva’s shoulder. She met his gaze, knowing if she looked away, she would stare at the blood pooling around Matt’s body. But she couldn’t bring herself to speak because if she opened her mouth, she was going to puke or scream.

“Good.”

Klint walked to the edge of the garage, where he put a foot up on the concrete barricade as he peered down at the street. A distant siren cut through the silence as Klint lifted the gun and pointed it toward the teeming street.

October finally unfroze. She clicked the lighter and dropped it. A fireball erupted before it even hit the gas.

RUN



There are only so many ways out of Boston. Following the escape route she'd planned days ago, October tried not to run or glance behind her. The hairs on her neck stood on end, though. Especially as sirens blared and echoed down the canyons of the city's brick and glass streets.

A firetruck pushed its way through the snarled traffic while a police cruiser flashed through the space left in its wake. October's gut heaved.

She swallowed the acrid bile in her mouth and leaned against a building. No longer moving, her body trembled. She missed the relative safety of her hoodie, but she'd ditched it a block back. No matter where she looked, the image of blood pooling around Matt flooded her mind again. Along with it came the older memory of a small owlet, partially crushed with feathers matted by mud and gore. The few deaths she'd seen haunted her. She pushed both aside with tears dampening her lashes.

Walking was better than standing still and untangling her thoughts. Ahead, the complex housing North Station came into view. Slight relief quickened October's pace at the sight of the

tall letters on the building. She would have taken any train out of the city. That the next one leaving headed toward Fitchburg was fine with her. She could pretend to be a student returning to campus. Part of her wished it were true. Her mother would have been thrilled to hear it.

She tried to blend in, but that meant acting like she didn't feel as if she were about to jump out of her skin. Looking bored while her heart raced a marathon left her shaking. So, she slunk into an empty seat and stared out the window, pretending the headphones in her ears held music instead of a wall of silence.

As the train rolled out of North Station, the jitteriness congealed to a lump in her stomach. Around her, people settled, and conversations flowed.

"Did you hear about the parking garage fire?"

"... found a body..."

At that, October held her breath as she listened. Just one? She hoped.

After the gasoline exploded, she'd heard two gunshots as she raced for the stairs. She didn't know who else Klint had shot at. The idea it might have been Diva strangled her throat. The thought he aimed at people in the street below made her queasy. She didn't want to imagine he could have been targeting her.

"... they're still looking."

October blinked away a tear. She had no answers today — not even why Klint had killed the parking attendant or who he fired at after. She could find that out later. Right now, she just wanted to get out of Boston. Heck, she wanted to leave the States.

Her body was one tense muscle ready to race out of the station as the train slowed for the Fitchburg depot almost two hours later. She could have puked but had nothing in her stomach other than roiling bile and upchucking that wouldn't help her remain unnoticed. Instead, as the train slowed, she jolted to her feet with the grace of a junkie coming off a high

and scooted out from the carriage as soon as the door opened. She should have waited.

She landed on the platform two feet from a policewoman. Her heart stopped. But as the officer turned, October realized she was talking on her phone. Chills rippled down October's bare arms. The cop glanced at her. October involuntarily smiled. Kindness touched the officer's eyes, and then October was beyond her, carried by the small crowd toward the exit and parking lot.

Outside, the late-spring sunlight faded. Afternoon warmth lingered in the open, but as October stepped into the shadows of the building, coolness slipped over her skin. She had no jacket, no clothes, and no transportation. Her original plans had been more organized, but she'd panicked. Her backpack with supplies was in a locker in South Station. She'd meant to head to Rhode Island for the weekend. But not here, and certainly not like this.

But that was okay. She'd figure out the rest if she could put some distance between herself and Boston, between herself and Klint.

October was not an expert at stealing cars. And she had no tools on her anyway that would allow her to steal something new. Heck, her cell was stashed in her missing pack along with the extra clothes. There was no way she wanted to be tracked today. She needed luck, and despite how the day was going, she usually dredged some out of the weeds.

She paced toward the campus, trusting naivete and college distractions to offer what she needed. Along the tree-lined streets, October found more than she'd hoped. Pulled aside more than parked outside a small apartment building, a little hatchback sat running with the driver's door slightly ajar. October didn't ask or hesitate. She walked along the car from the rear, glanced both directions and once toward the closed

front door. With a quick breath, she opened the driver's door and dropped into the front seat.

The interior had the sweet smell of vape while the seat was too far back for her to reach the pedals. There was no time for that now. She moved the stock to drive as she toed the brake.

“Hey!”

October jammed her foot on the accelerator. The car leaped forward as she jerked the wheel to avoid sideswiping a Jeep about to pass. She swore under her breath as she raced the car down the block. A minute longer, and she would've escaped unnoticed. But who was she kidding? She needed an hour or more. Now, she was fleeing a murder scene in a stolen vehicle.

October gripped the wheel as she laughed until she hiccuped while tears dampened her cheeks. Today was fucked, and she had no idea how to get out of the mess she was in.

Ahead, signs pointed to Route 2 and west. She almost took it. A straight highway might buy her distance, but it was exactly where police would search for a stolen car. Instead, she veered onto the first side road she saw heading northwest. With a quick glance, she realized she had at least one thing going for her; the hatchback had a full tank of gas. With an awkward shrug, she clicked the seatbelt across her chest to avoid the ire of any cops who didn't know to keep an eye out for her yet.

Late afternoon became dusk as October navigated a weaving path along forested back roads. Somewhere northwest of her was Canada. She'd have to ditch the car to cross. Heck, without a license, she was going to have to sneak across, but first, she needed to get close.

A few raindrops struck the windshield, but hope pricked her to alertness when she saw the welcome sign to Vermont. Now she headed north on old Route 5. Less than fifteen minutes later, a cop car putted by her heading south. October held her breath. When she saw the red brake lights come on, she floored it.

A quick left took her off the main road and into rolling, forested hills. She hoped with all her body and soul not to take a dead-end street. All she wanted was to find somewhere safe. Behind her, she saw the faint flash of a blue light.

“Shit.”

October wove through the back roads. Pavement led to dirt as the meandering lane swept up into highlands. She veered onto a side road again, hoping to leave behind any pursuit. At the top of the climb, she had a brief glimpse of a moonlit valley before the dark tunnel of trees closed over her again. Behind her, a blue glow illuminated thin fog forming in the steady drizzle as the police cruiser tenaciously followed. She jammed the gas pedal to the floor.

The front tires shimmied on the loose gravel of the wet dirt road. October nudged the wheel. In response, the car’s rear tires fishtailed. It was over before she corrected the skid.

Branches broke as the hatchback plummeted over the embankment and into the forest. Saplings snapped, and then a large bump sent the car onto its side. It rolled over and over again, falling into the darkness like it would never stop tumbling. When it finally did, October sat unmoving, expecting to set the turbulent motion going once more. She was just amazed to be alive.

Dazed, she climbed out of the crushed framework of the car and into the cold spring rain. Broken glass fell around her as she stood. When she wiped the shards away, she left a streak of blood across her skin from a long cut across her palm. On the lane far above her, a police car with lights flashing sped by. October turned away from the road and headed into the forest. Her only thought was to get as far away from the car as possible.

It took two steps before she realized her right leg wasn’t working the way it should. She tried to place weight on it, which proved to be a mistake. World tilting in pain and unresponsive limbs, she stopped her fall against a tree. The

rough bark pressed into her cheek before she forced herself upright. But upright didn't feel quite up. She grabbed the tree before she fell again, snagging a handful of wet leaves before she found the stout trunk.

Above her, the crunch of tires on the gravel road grew louder.

She pushed off, ignoring the sharp ache from the cut on her hand. At least she was stumbling downhill. She doubted she could even crawl uphill.

Every jarring step shot explosions of agony up October's leg to ignite white sparks against the deepening black of her vision. A branch full of dripping leaves smacked against the skin exposed by her low-necked tee shirt. The saturating cold brought October to a halt with one hand clutching rough bark while the other pressed hard against her right knee. Over her gasps and the drumming rain through the canopy, October heard people shouting, the loud snap of branches, and over it all, the dull whoop of a siren.

"Damn it."

They had spotted the car. It would only be a matter of time before they caught up to her. There weren't exactly too many directions she could go after plowing off an embankment.

Gritting her teeth in what felt a purposeful recreation of the bones grinding together somewhere in her lower leg, October pushed off once more. A few minutes more down the bank slick with wet leaves, and the world was spinning. She reached for another tree as it split into two in her vision. She didn't find either trunk as she fell forward, careening as she tried to catch herself on her right leg, and instead stepped into rising oblivion.

Throwing her arms wide to embrace the ground reaching for her, October found something warm catching her. She had just enough awareness remaining to peer up into the startled eyes of a man whose pale skin offset his dark hair. With her

wounded hand caught against his chest, she found only two words left to her.

“Help me.”

His eyes widened, flashing darker than the night coming to claim her. As he glanced between her blood-covered hand and her face, her last thought was that she'd never seen someone look so frightened and frustrated at once.

HELP, OF A SORT



“**S**he shouldn’t be here,” a woman argued.
“Well, I didn’t have much choice, did I?” a male voice retorted.

They were talking about her. October tried to crawl out of the oblivion that wanted to hold on to her. She needed to know where she was and who these people were.

She really thought she’d open her eyes to a hospital room. Instead, curtains rustled in the breeze of an open window next to an antique wooden dresser. The room smelled of sunlight, honey, and just a hint of sage, without a trace of chemicals or strong cleaning solutions. Wherever she was, it definitely wasn’t a medical facility.

“She’s waking up. Get Soyla.”

October rolled her head, which felt only loosely connected to her body. The taste of pungent herbs as if she’d been chewing on grass coated her tongue. But blinking her eyes, she finally found someone to focus on.

Leaning in the doorway, a tall man with black hair and pale skin watched her intently. Dark-eyed as well, his stare unnerved her as he stood with arms crossed and not a word to say. His

scrutiny and silence made her want to get out of the bed and go. Her fingers twitched against the blanket.

“Your leg is broken. You aren’t going anywhere, so just stay put.” From his tone, she wasn’t sure if he hated her or having to speak the words that came roughly from his lips.

A young woman whose brown head could barely be glimpsed behind the man laughed. The man snarled.

“That’s enough, Leanag. Riasg can’t help it.” A woman older than the teenage girl placed her hand on the man’s shoulder as she passed by him. A plain maroon linen sundress fluttered around her calves as she walked into the room.

“Risk?” October tried out one of the names. It didn’t sound right.

“Close, but that fits him.” The woman sat on the bed and smiled.

It was her kind, warm chestnut brown eyes that caught October’s breath. She felt totally safe next to this woman, which was a huge contrast from the moment before. Otherwise, with long, obsidian dark hair slightly streaked with gray and dusky tan skin, the woman appeared ageless as well as Native. The flash of a string of crystals alternating with feathers circling her neck in a rough necklace only enhanced the impression.

“I’m Soyla. How do you feel?”

October took a breath, asking herself that question before she answered. “Not right.”

It was the only answer that worked. She didn’t hurt, but she didn’t feel well either. Her memories told her she should be curled up in agony. In the absence of acute suffering, the world felt like it floated or that she was floating above it.

“I gave you something for the pain. You were a bit of a mess when Riasg brought you to me.”

October squirmed in Soyla’s pause. The movement sent her leg aching. She bit her lower lip before finally voicing her fear. “How bad is it?”

“Oh, well, I’ve seen worse.” Soyla’s smile crinkled the corners of her eyes where the faintest of lines betrayed an age somewhere over forty.

Soyla pulled back the covers just enough to reveal October’s now bare leg bound in wide strips of muslin cloth tied around wooden splints. The contraption looked quaint and old-fashioned. Just like the room with its gingham curtains and delicately carved maple furniture. October nearly laughed but suspected the euphoria might be at least slightly due to whatever Soyla had given her.

Besides, facing the world outside of this place was sobering enough. October swallowed the knot of worry stuck in her throat — as if waking up in a strange house, half-dressed, and with a leg bandaged and aching wasn’t enough of a problem. But Soyla offered calm confidence and seemed competent with healing, at least adequate to keep October’s pain at bay. Well, for the moment. How long that would last might depend on how badly she was injured.

“Do I need to go to the hospital?”

Soyla pressed her lips into a thin line before a gloss of warmth seeped back into her face. “If that is what you want, dear. One of the boys can take you to town in the truck. We’ll have to figure out how to make you comfortable for the ride. It’s a bit bumpy.”

October cocked her head. “You could call an ambulance?”

“Not without a phone,” Risk — Riasg, replied.

Soyla kept her steady dark eyes on the young man a moment before turning back to October. “Plus, they don’t come this far out. We are... hard to find.”

October’s breath released in a whoosh. As kooky as these people seemed, they’d also helped her. And they didn’t have a phone. They were hard to locate... maybe her luck had led her to the perfect place after all. Assuming she could heal.

“But my leg... will be OK, right? I don’t need a doctor?”

“It’ll be fine. I’ve fixed more than my share of injuries over the cen—years.” A faint wrinkle formed between her brows as she gazed at October. “You... don’t want us to take you to the hospital?”

October would have sworn there was a trace of hopeful relief in Soyla’s question. She latched onto that idea. “If you don’t mind me staying? I—” October looked away, at a loss for how to explain the predicament she was in without getting herself kicked out.

“Had a bit of trouble?” Riasg walked to the end of the bed and rested his hands on the footboard. “We sort of noticed. You don’t even have an ID on you.”

Now that he’d spoken more than five words strung together, even if they still sounded unwilling, she heard the accent that hovered somewhere between British and Scottish. October eyed the man and tried to ignore how wildly handsome he was now that he’d left the shadows of the doorway. Though in the black leather jacket and black jeans, it seemed like darkness clung to him. Shit, this was the guy who’d carried her out of the woods? She wished she’d been awake for that.

“Well, from the look of you, you know what trouble is like.”

Soyla snorted a laugh.

The young woman who’d taken Riasg’s place in the doorway giggled her light laugh. “We really should start calling you Risk. I like it.”

“Shut up, Meadow Girl.”

“Leanag, out if you can’t stay quiet,” Soyla said with the calmness of having repeated the phrase a million times with each repetition no less loving than the first.

Leanag stuck out her tongue before skipping out of view with her golden-brown locks bouncing and lightweight blue dress hitching up to her knees with the motion. The actions made her seem a decade younger than her full figure and height indicated.

With Leanag's absence, silence settled in the room as Soyla and Riasg peered at October. Finally, October took a long breath. "Yes, a bit of trouble. But... I won't bring you any, I promise. I just need to stay a week or so." October glanced from Soyla to Riasg but neither blinked nor offered acceptance. Instinct caused her to settle on Riasg's dark gaze. He'd carried her here, after all. "Please?"

Anger flashed in Riasg's eyes as he slapped his palm on the footboard. He turned his back to her and crossed his arms. Soyla watched him and waited. Finally, he turned toward the aged hippie woman and nodded.

"Sure, dear." Soyla's warm eyes contrasted with Riasg's strange coldness. "We just need something to call you."

"October."

At that, Riasg glanced quickly at Soyla. October couldn't read what the look communicated. She shifted on the bed, weighing her desire to stay with how much she didn't know about these people. Considering the cops were looking for her and Klint had murdered someone, the back-to-earth vibe of Soyla had to be the safest bet.

"October... is an interesting name," Soyla offered, her tone as neutral as her words.

"Yeah, my mom hates it. But it suits me, you know?" October flicked her fingers at her orange hair.

Riasg snorted. "I'll call you October as long as you don't call me Risk. I'm not changing my name again and definitely not to something that would probably get me killed."

"Works for me, Riasg." She let his name roll around in her mouth, far from confident that she had it right. When he said it, he had an accent that she couldn't place. Something UK-oriented, but not quite British and a lot stronger than his normal, decidedly English tone.

"Thank you," the words came out with the whoosh of a long exhale. "And thank you for helping me—" October glanced

outside. Beyond the fluttering curtains of the open window, sunlight streamed into the room and brightened the green and tan of planted fields with a forest beyond. “Yesterday?”

“It isn’t like I had much choice,” Riasg snapped. The fragile connection from the moment before evaporated like the mirage of water in a desert. He dashed his fingers through his dark hair as he glared at October. “Things are settled well enough here,” he said to Soyla before turning on his heel and leaving.

October stared after him. “I didn’t mean..”

“Oh no,” Soyla said as she stood. “That’s just Riasg. He’s dark.” She looked down at October with a bemused smile that was more grandmotherly than her age. “I’ll get you some food, and then we’ll check your leg in a little while?”

October nodded, second-guessing herself and her decision to stay. Something felt not right about the place.

“Where am I?”

Soyla paused in the doorway and answered, “The farm is called Wind River.”

It wasn’t until October was alone that she realized she had expected the name of a cult.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Autumn (also known as Weifarer) is a travel and award winning fiction writer who has traveled across North America in an old Land Cruiser. She currently lives in a tiny cabin in the woods of Vermont. Along with her for all her adventures are her husband and small cairn terrier, Ayashe. Check out her Instagram feed for lots of fun travel pics!

With a Bachelor of Arts degree from Bucknell University in Studio Arts and English, Autumn once considered a career in illustration. However, an ecology course at Virginia Tech led to a Master of Science degree in Ecology and Environmental Sciences from the University of Maine in Orono. Since graduating with her M.S., Autumn has worked for the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service. But all of that changed in 2016, when she left her day job to become full time

writer and graphic artist. Expect a lot of great adventures, both real and fictional, coming soon!

You can learn more about Autumn's book online at her website www.AutumnWriting.com including her latest work-in-progress. If you want to get an automatic email when Autumn's next book is released, sign up [here](#). Your email address will never be shared and you can unsubscribe at any time.

Word of mouth is crucial for any author to succeed. If you enjoyed the book, please consider leaving a review where you purchased it even if it's only a line or two; it would make all the difference and would be very much appreciated.

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