

# KALLYSTEN

The background of the entire page is a blue-toned sky. Two large, pale, crescent-shaped moons are visible in the upper half of the frame. Below them is a thick layer of white, fluffy clouds. The overall aesthetic is ethereal and otherworldly.

**BENEATH THE  
TWIN MOONS  
OF HALDAE**

Beneath the Twin Moons of Haldae - Kallysten

# Beneath the Twin Moons of Haldae

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## Chapter 1

“Zaren Hall speaking. Request immediate assistance. I lost control of observation vehicle 77B8 above the fifth planet of System 59. I repeat. I need immediate assistance. My OV is about to crash on—damn it!”

The last thing Zaren saw before the automatic safeguard ejected her from the cockpit was the blinking line on the transmitter screen.

*No signal.*

The two words echoed in her mind as her seat fell freely through the air, leaving her struggling for breath. She had been ejected too high in the atmosphere; there wasn't enough air for her to breathe properly. She gasped and fought back the black dots that were threatening to take away her vision, hanging on to one thought. She couldn't faint, not now. She had to keep watching and see where the shuttle crashed. She would need to find it if she ever was to leave this planet.

Clutching hard the armrests of her seat, she kept her eyes open as wide as she could. She could breathe a little more easily now, though the air rushing by her made her eyes tear up. She blinked furiously and twisted her body as the seat spun in the air to try and keep the silver body of the observation vehicle in her line of sight. She was going down too fast, she realized. She would lose the shuttle before it crashed for good. Tearing off the cover of the right arm of her seat, she pulled the lever and braced herself. Even so, she lost her breath when the parachute deployed above her, stopping her fall abruptly. She had to search the sky to

find the shuttle again; when she did, it was with both relief and a sense of immense helplessness.

Without any outward sign that there was anything wrong with it, the shuttle seemed to glide in the nearly cloudless purple sky. Behind it, the planet's two large moons had finished rising above the horizon, two pale crescents drawn on the sky, one just a little smaller than the other. The shuttle went down in the same direction the moons had risen, part of Zaren's mind noted, while she forced herself not to wonder how far she was from the site of the crash, or whether there would be anything left to salvage when she reached it.

Only when she had totally lost sight of the shuttle did Zaren look down. A flash of fear coursed through her. She took a deep breath and pushed the fear away.

"You'll have time to be scared once you're on the ground," she muttered. "Now think. Which way?"

As an observer, she had only received a basic pilot training. The OV automatic navigator did all the work, taking her from the base to observation sites and back. All she had ever needed to do was input the different places she wanted to fly over, or decide how much time she wanted to spend in orbit. Part of the pilot training, however, had been devoted to crashing. She had been on an ejector seat before, had learned to deploy the parachute, maneuver the small seat boosters and land safely onto a prairie. She had never learned, however, what to do when the terrain beneath her was a dense forest.

It seemed rather dangerous to let herself fall into the trees. The cover was so thick that she couldn't tell how high the trees were, but she imagined she would be

lucky to escape without broken bones. Getting to the ground might also prove tricky. The only alternative, however, seemed to be the river that wound through the forest in large curves. She didn't know how fast the current was or even whether native fish might attack her, but she was much better at swimming than she was at climbing down trees.

"Guess it's the river, then."

The controls for the booster were inside the left arm of the seat. She pressed the forward and left buttons. Plumes of smoke rose on her right as the propulsion flashed to life in short successive bursts. She couldn't go too fast or the parachute might give out.

"Small, easy steps," she said to herself, repeating her instructor's words from what seemed like a lifetime ago. "Short bursts. Work with the wind."

That last admonition didn't help her since, as far as she could tell, there wasn't much wind. It made it easier to navigate, though, and, little by little, she approached the river. It was much larger than she had thought, she realized as she started getting a better sense of distance. Maybe two hundred yards wide. She didn't know if that was good or bad. It was less likely her parachute would catch in the tree branches hanging over the river, but she would need to swim more than she had expected. Her suit wouldn't be all that practical for that. If she could only have slipped out of the light, silvery material...

But even if she had been able to undress, it was too late. The water was only yards beneath her. By the rushing sound of it, the current was fast. She closed her hand over the fastening of her harness. She would need

to get out of the seat and away as fast as possible. She didn't dare unhook herself too early, though.

Her heart thundering in her chest, she looked down. The water seemed to be rising up toward her, ready to grab her, rather than her falling down to it. Only seconds, now. She looked at both sides of the river. The left bank seemed closer. She'd have to swim left, then. Her hand tightened on the metal release of the harness. She opened her mouth to take a deep breath in. The seat crashed into the water, immediately sinking. The coldness of the water spurred Zaren into action, prickling her exposed skin and sending a rush of adrenaline through her. She pressed on the harness release and pushed hard against the seat with both hands and feet.

The water was clean but too tumultuous for her to see anything. She kicked with her feet, the lack of air starting to burn her lungs, and finally breached the surface. Coughing and sputtering, she took in deep gulps of air as she moved arms and legs to keep her head above the water. The red fabric of the parachute rushed by her. A jolt went through her at the sight. If she had been caught beneath it...

"Left," she reminded herself. "Swim now. Worry later."

Lessons she had taken as a child returned to the front of her mind as she applied what she had learned, even though the setting couldn't have been any more different. The clear, calm waters of her childhood had parted easily for her. The river did nothing of the sort. It pulled her back toward the center, tugging at every inch of her, fighting her movements and reclaiming instantly any ground she managed to gain.

Zaren continued to fight. Every fiber of her being bristled at the mere thought of giving up. She hadn't learned this much, traveled this far to end up drowning on a routine mission. There was too much, still, that she wanted to discover. Too much to do, too much to see, too much to experience.

Straightening up in the water, she tilted her head back and breathed in deeply. She would rest for an instant, let the water carry her, then try again.

As she watched the sky, a large bird appeared above her, wings spread wide on each side of its body, gliding as it followed the river—and her. Did it think she was food, she wondered, or was it merely curious? The bird started diving down and Zaren shook her head. She wasn't sure she wanted to find out. She started swimming again, putting all her strength, all her energy into her strokes and kicks. Behind her, the water splashed as though something had dropped in it. Was it the bird? Had it just caught its prey? Part of her wanted to look back, but she couldn't afford to. She had to reach the bank and couldn't waste any more energy, not when every muscle in her body was screaming for rest and warmth.

She jerked suddenly, losing her rhythm. Something had passed beneath her. She was sure of it. Something big and—

There it was again, now breaking through the surface just feet in front of her. Her eyes widened in shock and she tried to scream, but water rushed into her mouth. In front of her, large gray eyes watched her above the tumultuous water, and a large mouth opened, teeth gleaming like steel. She wasn't going to drown, she thought, battling hysteria. She was going to be killed by

a river creature that looked like a wolf and was bigger than she was—a wolf that swam better than she did.

She started kicking and batting at the animal, hoping to scare it off. It growled but didn't fight back, and merely remained ahead of her in the water. Zaren's efforts meanwhile were beginning to take a toll on her. Her movements became sluggish, and she was having trouble breathing. She felt herself slide under the water and, panicked, kicked hard to return to the surface again. Seconds later, she was sinking again. Without thinking, she flung her arms and grasped the first thing she could find. Her fingers closed on long strands of fur and she let go at once when she realized it was the wolf-like creature. She batted with her feet and arms again, and again the wolf was there, right in front of her. Feeling her strength disappear, she gripped the thick fur of the animal's back. She was sure it would attack, now, but one way or the other, her life was about to end. She closed her eyes. Her last thought before she lost consciousness was to wonder whether anyone would ever know what had happened to her.

\* \* \* \*

Zaren pushed away the memories of her crash-landing and, her hand shaking a little, she picked up the pitcher in front of her. She poured water into a glass. Droplets escaped and fell onto the white plastic table. She wiped them off with her hand before picking up the glass and taking a sip. She barely disguised her grimace. The water, bland and tepid, did nothing to cool her nerves.

Shifting in his seat next to her, Loic leaned in and murmured, "Relax. They just want to hear what happened."

Zaren threw a glance at the people trickling in at the other end of the room.

"I told you what happened," she replied, just as quietly. "And I wrote a report. Why do we have to do this?"

"You know it's simply procedure."

The half-circle of chairs facing her was almost full, and some members of the council had picked up their electronic readers. She was sure they were reviewing her report, finding holes in it, preparing questions that would bring her story down. Zaren grabbed the edge of the table in front of her until her knuckles were almost as white as it was.

"Relax," Loic said again. "Why are you so nervous?"

She shook her head but didn't respond. How could she tell him, her boss, that just about every word that had come out of her mouth since her rescue had been a lie? She would be fired if anyone learned of her deception. She would have been fired even if she had told the truth from the beginning.

All the members of the council seemed to have arrived, and the heavy doors behind them closed shut with a deep metallic sound. At the center of the semi-circle, the head of the council, Ilona Brink, cleared her throat and side conversations ceased on either side of her. Zaren had only seen the woman once before, at her graduation, years earlier. She hadn't changed one bit. A thick mane of white hair fell onto her shoulders in wild curls. She held herself straight in her chair, her heavily-lined face raised, her light blue eyes looking at Zaren directly, though not unkindly.

"Observer Hall," she said, her voice wavering slightly. "We thank you for attending this meeting today."

Zaren bit the inside of her cheek so as not to laugh hysterically. She hadn't realized she had had any choice in the matter.

"We have a few questions for you," Brink continued, inclining her head left then right to acknowledge the rest of the council, "but before that, we would like to hear you tell us what happened."

"My report—" Zaren started, but she stopped when Brink shook her head, smiling thinly.

"Yes, we have read your report. I am sure you worked on it very diligently. Tell us more. Tell us what you thought when the observation vehicle stopped responding, what you felt."

Unsure what she meant by that, Zaren answered the first thing that passed her mind. "I felt scared. Is that what you want to hear?"

Brink gave a shallow nod.

"I didn't know what happened to the OV. I only figured out the role of the moons later on. All I knew was that I was crashing onto a wild planet and I couldn't even send a distress signal."

"You were scared," a man said on Brink's right, "yet you must have kept a cool head to take note of where your shuttle was crashing."

Zaren shrugged. The fabric of her suit felt too confining over her shoulders and chest, making it hard to breathe.

She pulled the first two magnetic fastenings free, baring her throat.

"I knew the shuttle was my only chance to send a message out if I survived that long. So I watched as long as I could, tried to get landmarks."

She held her breath for a second, relieved when no one asked what landmarks she had found. In her mind, the forest was immense, covering everything as far as she could see except for the river.

"Then you landed in the river," Brink prompted, a slim eyebrow raised.

"Yes. The water seemed safer than the trees. I freed myself from the chair and started swimming for the bank. The current wasn't too strong so I managed to get to the edge easily enough."

The lie was burning her tongue. She clutched her glass and took another sip, remembering too late that the water wasn't fresh. She grimaced as she put the glass down with a soft clinking noise. She missed the clear, fresh waters of the river F'ryn in which she had almost drowned. She missed Haldae and its two moons, even if they had almost caused her death. She missed the forest and its traps; they seemed infinitely less dangerous than this meeting. More than anything, though, she missed Kris.

*to be continued...*