

KALLYSTEN

The background of the entire page is a vibrant blue sky. Two crescent moons are visible, one in the upper left and a larger one in the center. The lower half of the image is filled with soft, white, fluffy clouds. The text is overlaid on this background.

**BENEATH THE
TWIN MOONS
OF HALDAE**

Beneath the Twin Moons of Haldae - Kallysten

Beneath the Twin Moons of Haldae Kallysten

Chapter 11

Zaren followed the wolf—Kris—back into the forest. Every time she heard a noise behind her, she couldn't help looking back. The vegetation was too dense, however, and she never caught sight of any movement. Still, she couldn't help but wonder if the warriors that had attacked Kris, that surely would have attacked her without his interference, were tracking them, just out of sight. Every time she looked forward again, though, her mind returned to a different set of questions.

Even after seeing Kris transform into this wolf with her own eyes, Zaren could still hardly believe that it was truly him in front of her. She had heard that some cultures had fairy tales about humans shifting into animals, but she would never have imagined there was any truth to them. She now wished she had listened more closely to those tales. She vaguely remembered that, in some stories, the transformation had something to do with the moon cycle. Could it possibly be true here as well? She hadn't been paying much attention to the rising and setting of the moons since she had crashed on the planet, so she wasn't sure whether the wolf had been around when they were up or not.

She was also wondering whether Kris could change back to his human form. It had all happened very fast, but she thought he had changed to fight the warriors back. Shouldn't he change back, now that they were out of danger? Unless they weren't out of danger yet, and that thought made Zaren turn back to look behind her once more. She still couldn't see anyone following them, but there had to be a reason for Kris' continuing to trot so fast that Zaren had trouble keeping up with him.

Eventually, she had to call out for respite.

“Kris! This is too fast.”

The translang at her throat repeated her words in his language. The wolf stopped and looked back at her, his tongue lolling out of his open mouth. He came back toward her, flicked his tongue at Zaren's hand, and started walking again, more slowly now. That had to mean he had understood her – or at least she hoped so.

“Can you understand what I say?”

The wolf continued to look ahead without acting like he had even heard her.

“Kris?”

He looked up at her at that, gray eyes flat and unreadable. There had always been feelings in his eyes before, whenever the wolf had approached her, but not anymore.

“Can't you transform back into a human?” she asked. “Is that why you're still a wolf?”

He looked back at the faint trail they were following and didn't give any sign she could interpret as an answer. Zaren's throat tightened painfully.

They walked for hours, stopping every so often for Zaren to catch her breath. The wolf would walk back and forth around her while she rested, eyes and ears searching for... Zaren wasn't sure she wanted to know what.

Nightfall was still a while away when their path came within sight of the river. A large curve gave way to an embankment where the water was almost still. On the river edge, a circle of stones—and a handful of dark ashes and branches burned by fire in the center—betrayed that the spot had been used as camping grounds before.

“All right, I’m not going any further.” She let herself fall at the foot of a tree, the moss that surrounded it cushioning her fall. Every muscle in her body ached.

The wolf looked at her, head tilted to one side. After a moment, it barked once, started trotting away, and then came back to her to bark once more.

Zaren shook her head. “I can’t, Kris. I’m too tired. Can we stay here for the night?”

He looked at her a little longer, long enough that Zaren thought he understood, even agreed. But in the time it took her to blink, he turned around and ran off. She couldn’t have followed even if she had wanted to.

For a moment, she remained under the tree, her eyes on the place where Kris had disappeared, trying to catch a glimpse of him coming back. She could see no movement, though. On the edge of her vision, the water glittered softly, almost invitingly. It was the first opportunity she had had to bathe in much too long, and she didn’t know how long Kris would stay away. She had no time to lose.

She undressed near a bush just on the edge of the river, leaving her suit there, and stepped into the water. It was shallow, a gentle slope of soft sand yielding beneath her feet. She stopped when the water was at her waist and lowered herself into the water. It was cool, but not cold, a natural pool warmed by the sun, maybe. She could feel her body relaxing, one tense muscle after the other, until she was sighing in relief.

She stayed in until her skin was pruned, until the sun had disappeared behind the trees and the air had begun cooling down. She looked around carefully, searching for a trace of Kris, and when she found nothing, she hurried back for the cover of the bushes.

After she had slipped her suit on again—and wished for the thousandth time that she had spare clothes to change into; the suit stayed clean but she was tired of wearing it—she walked around and tried to gather fruit like Kris had shown her, but it felt different when he wasn't with her. She was careful as she walked, since she was now barefoot. She wished she could have fashioned shoes for herself the way he had, but she didn't remember what moss and leaves he had used.

She kept looking around, expecting the wolf to return, or maybe even the Kris she knew, but as the birds started falling silent above her, announcing the arrival of night, she was still alone. She picked up leaves, trying to remember which ones Kris had chosen as she quickly realized not all of them were suitable for weaving. By the time night had fallen, she had a small hut, but she knew the weaving wasn't nearly as tight as Kris', and she could only hope it wouldn't rain. She tried to make fire, again trying to mimic the gestures she had seen Kris make by rubbing pieces of wood together, but she never managed to light the dried herbs she had gathered.

Sitting inside her hut, she ate the fruit she had picked and tried not to jump at every sound in the forest around her. Somehow, it hadn't sounded so loud and threatening when she had had Kris with her, in whichever of his forms.

When the wolf finally returned, she wanted to sigh in relief. She smiled at him, and he came closer to her, observing the hut for a moment before he entered it and lay down in front of her. Finally reassured, Zaren curled down on the ground with her head resting on the med kit, close enough to the wolf to share his warmth. Exhausted by a day made even longer by surprises, she fell asleep almost immediately.

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When Kris woke up, back in his body and mind, he was lying down against Zaren. He wasn't completely sure how he had

ended up there. Everything that had happened since his final shift was a blur, with only a few flashes clearer than the rest, like drawings in his mind. Every one of them showed Zaren as clearly as he could see her now, no more than a hand's length away from him.

He couldn't resist reaching out to her and caressing her hair with his fingertips. It had spilled over her face, red strands like the rays of the setting sun, and Kris was almost surprised it didn't burn his skin.

He pulled away before he could wake her and slipped out of the makeshift shelter. The sun had risen, but it was low enough that the forest was still coated in gray. Kris looked down at himself and touched his abdomen with two careful fingers. He vaguely remembered being hurt, remembered a little better the pain of metal piercing his body, but what was most vivid in his mind was Zaren helping him. Healing him. The cut was nothing more than a thin white line beneath his fingertips, a scar to remind him of what had happened during his final shift but that wouldn't mean anything to anybody who wasn't him. He needed more proof before he could go home, another mark on his skin.

It didn't take him long to find the herbs he needed and to crush them between two flat stones until they turned into a reddish paste. Different herbs would create a different color, but this reminded him of Zaren's hair. He plucked a long, thin torn from a low bush and sat down on the ground. Clenching his teeth hard, he started scratching the design into his forearm. The symbol wasn't complicated, nor did it have to be drawn very big, but the cuts needed to be deep enough to last a lifetime. As he worked, Kris willed his fingers to be steady; he was no child to come back with a botched mark that spoke of shaking hands and frayed nerves.

He was halfway done when Zaren woke up and joined him. She was grinning widely as she approached, but her smile faded as she observed him.

“Kris?” She sat a couple of feet in front of him, arms tight around her legs. “Are you all right?”

His eyes flickered to the speaking box at her throat, and he lifted the thorn from his skin. “I’m fine,” he said slowly. “How are you? I’m sorry if I scared you, I didn’t mean to.”

She shook her head. “No, you didn’t. I was just...” She shrugged. “Surprised, I guess.”

She gave him a half smile, and he replied in kind. “As surprised as I was to hear you speak my language.”

She touched the box at her throat with two fingers. “Yes, I bet you were. It’s easier this way though, isn’t it?” She took a deep breath and added, “Thank you. For everything.”

He nodded. Still smiling, he returned his eyes to his forearm and started working again. It wasn’t long before her voice rose again.

“Kris? What are you doing?”

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“A ritual tattoo?” Brink sounded captivated, her eyes widening a little as she leaned in toward Zaren.

Zaren nodded. “Yes. He scratched the design into his skin first, then rubbed in this... paste. Crushed leaves and roots, I think. He said it was their symbol for the word wolf, and proof that he was now of age.”

“Fascinating,” Brink breathed. “Both the shifting and the highly ritualized customs around it. Did you witness anyone else shifting?”

Zaren swallowed around the lump in her throat. It certainly was easier to speak to Brink like this than it had been to face the council, but she still felt like she was betraying Kris' trust. She couldn't stop now, though.

"I didn't," she replied. "And Kris was adamant that I shouldn't mention it at all to his people. He seemed to think we might both get in trouble if his people knew I had seen him shift."

Brink's gaze dropped to the leaf she was twirling between her fingers. She seemed thoughtful. "I see," she said quietly, then looked up at Zaren again, an eyebrow raised questioningly. "Did it have anything to do with the moons like you first thought?"

"Not as far as I know, but there was a lot I didn't get to ask."

"Yes, it certainly seems so. Quite a pity."

There was something in Brink's voice, something sympathetic but also distracted, as if her mind were busy thinking something over. Somehow, Zaren found that the little something she couldn't quite identify gave her hope. Hope for what, however, she couldn't have said.