

# KALLYSTEN

The background of the entire image 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 12

Zaren's fingers twitched. She started reaching out toward Kris' arm, but stopped herself short of making contact. She had watched Kris draw numerous small lines into his skin, rub a reddish paste into the bleeding cuts, then wash it at the river. Now she could see the final design, an abstract drawing that spanned the width of his bicep. He had explained it was his people's symbol for the wolf, and why it was important that he bear this mark when he returned to his village.

The observer part of her had filed away the information, cross-referencing the practice with other cultures, and she had looked at the design closely enough that she would be able to draw it again and compare it to other symbols, exactly as she had been trained. But the rest of her, the part that was woman, that had flinched at each new line of blood, was only concerned about one thing.

"Does it hurt?"

Kris shook his head. "No. The plants help it heal."

Another twitch of her fingers made Kris smile. "You can touch it if you want."

Zaren could feel her cheeks warming up, and she wasn't sure whether it was from his smile or the fact that he could read her so well.

She reached out and ran a single fingertip against the topmost line of the tattoo. She could feel the raised edge of skin; she could also feel Kris shivering at her touch, as light as it was.

He cleared his throat, then looked around him as though getting his bearings. "We should go."

Returning to her makeshift hut, Zaren retrieved the first-aid kit along with the bag of fruit. When she returned to Kris, he had picked up some moss and leaves, and fashioned shoes for her in just moments.

“Where are you taking me?” she asked when he took the bag of fruit from her and slipped the strap over his shoulder.

He glanced at her medical bag but didn’t comment on it. “To my village. I have to go home, and you can’t stay in the forest. Not alone.”

When he started toward the line of trees, Zaren hesitated. On the one hand, she wanted to tell him about her people and how they would soon come to get her. How she would leave and probably never see him again. On the other, the prospect of seeing his village, of meeting his people, of seeing how they lived, and gathering as much information as she could was too enticing to pass.

Noticing that she wasn’t following, Kris looked back at her. “Is something wrong?” he asked, holding his hand out to her.

Afterwards, when they started walking through the forest, Zaren rationalized her decision by telling herself that it would take the rescue shuttle a couple days to arrive. They would find her through the beacon anywhere she was, and they’d be able to retrieve the shuttle later; she didn’t need to stay near it, so she might as well do what she did best: observe.

But the truth was, she didn’t think about reaching for his hand and holding on to it; it was pure instinct. She held on to his hand, to him, as long as she could, until he let go to push branches out of her way; she missed it at once.

They walked for a little while, Kris turning back every so often to check on her. Zaren had dozens of questions running through her mind, about the wolf, about the warriors who had attacked them, about Kris’ people, and the forest, and

everything that had happened so far; but now that she could ask them, she had no idea where to start.

In the end, it was Kris who broke the silence and asked, “Where did you come from?”

Zaren almost stumbled, surprised by so predictable a question. She wasn’t supposed to answer; it was bad enough that she had made contact with native people when she had not been authorized to do so.

But Kris was waiting for an answer, and she had to say *something*.

“I came from very far,” she tried, hoping that would be enough for him, knowing already that it wouldn’t.

Kris nodded as though it had been evident. “I know. Your... shuttle—” he still stumbled a little over the word. “—I saw it drop from the sky. Did you come from the stars?”

Zaren stopped walking at that question, taken aback. Kris noticed and stopped as well, turning fully toward her. In a culture that seemed as primitive as Kris’, she had not expected the idea of space travel to even occur to him.

Wetting her lips, she tried to figure out what to say now. She didn’t want to lie to him, but she was still worried about telling him too much. “Why would you think that?” she asked, trying to gain some time.

Kris grabbed a hanging vine and broke it, bringing the stem and the water dripping from it to his lips before he answered.

“There are stories,” he said, handing out the vine to her. “Old stories. About people riding on the wings of shiny birds to travel between the stars. You have... things.” His eyes drifted to the translang nestled at her throat. “Things I’ve never seen before on Haldae.”

Drinking from the vine, Zaren frowned a little. The translang worked better than she had expected, probably because Kris' language was related to some of the thousands of dialects in the translang database. But that last word stumped the device.

"I do not understand. What is Haldae?"

Kris blinked very slowly, then laughed. "Everything," he said, raising his arms and gesturing at the forest around them. "The earth, and the trees, and the river, and the plains. Haldae is everything."

He meant the planet, Zaren realized. It certainly was a much nicer name than the string of numbers that designated it in her observation files.

He was still waiting for her to answer his question, she realized, but she still didn't know what to say. In the end, she settled for a cautious, "Some of your old stories tell the truth," and it seemed to be enough for him.

He nodded, apparently satisfied, then gestured toward the trail. "We should walk. We still have a long way to go."

They started walking again, but it wasn't long before Kris turned back to her once more and said, "Can I ask another question?"

"You can ask all the questions you want," Zaren replied without thinking and immediately regretted it; she wished she didn't need to lie to him.

"If your shuttle is your wings," he said slowly, holding low branches out of her way to ease her passage, "Why didn't you fly away again when the Ushias attacked us?"

Shocked, Zaren stopped at once and grabbed Kris's arm without thinking. "I wouldn't have left you!"

Kris' expression was one of surprise at first, but when he covered her hand with his own and squeezed once, he was smiling widely enough that heat started creeping up Zaren's face. She let go of his arm and looked away, taking advantage of the trail being clear on the forest floor to lead the way for a moment.

"Also," she said over her shoulder, "my shuttle is broken. It doesn't fly anymore. That's why I fell from the sky, and I don't know how to fix it."

She couldn't tell him the truth about everything, but on this, at least, she had no reason to lie.

"So you'll be staying here then?" Kris asked behind her, and he sounded hopeful.

Zaren bit down on her lower lip and didn't reply.

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When he realized Zaren wouldn't be able to go home, Kris was thrilled. The next second, his delight turned to shame. Surely, staying on Haldae would mean that she would not see her family and friends again; Kris could only imagine how difficult it would be for her.

Just the same, there wasn't much he could do about her situation except offer her a place to stay, a place where she would be safe. He wasn't sure what the circle of Elders would say. They were usually suspicious of anyone who wasn't part of the village, and rarely allowed a stranger to stay for a substantial amount of time. Still, now that he had accomplished his final shift, Kris would finally take his place in the circle, and he would be able to help Zaren.

Or at least, he hoped he would be able to.

It was another long day of walking through the forest. Every so often, they stopped so that Zaren could rest, drink from vines, and share some fruit with Kris. She did not eat animal flesh, she explained, and while she tried to explain why, Kris didn't really understand.

"Can you change into a wolf at will?" Zaren asked during one of these resting times.

Kris' first instinct had been ingrained in him since he had been a child: refuse to answer. Talking about shifting with outsiders was utterly forbidden, and if the circle discovered she even knew about it before she officially became part of the village, they would both be in trouble.

Then again, she had seen him shift, and a few more answers wouldn't change anything.

"I can," he finally said. "The wolf is my final form, that's what I will shift to for the rest of my life."

If anything, his answer seemed to confuse her.

"Your final form?" she repeated. "Does it mean you have other forms?"

More secrets Kris shouldn't have shared, and still he couldn't not answer. He wanted Zaren to trust him, wanted her to see he trusted her back.

"I did. I had several other forms. But becoming an adult means choosing a final form and renouncing the others."

Her eyes were wide, a little awed, but she looked like she believed him, and for that Kris was grateful.

“Do all your people change?” she asked, sounding as eager to hear his reply as a child to hear a story.

Once again, Kris hesitated. He wanted to tell her everything she wanted to know, but he was beginning to understand that, the more he told her, the more questions she would ask. Did it matter, though? She was going to remain in the village, he would ask the elders permission for her, and since he would be one of them now, they wouldn't be able to refuse.

“Not all of them,” he said softly, and proceeded to explain about the First Families.

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It was hardly the first time Kris had prowled through the village in one of his animal forms, but it was the first time he had ever tried to keep to the shadows and remain unnoticed for more than a game.

He followed Zaren's scent to the edge of the village to an abandoned house that was sometimes used to hold prisoners. Kris circled the house once, careful to remain out of sight. The windows had been boarded up, and the only way in – or out – was through the front door.

This was it, he realized. If he did this, if he went directly against the circle's wishes and helped a prisoner escape, he would lose everything. At the very least, he would lose his place in the circle and be banned from the village; if things turned to the worse, he might be hunted and put to death.

In no more time than it took him to blink, his decision was made. He wasn't acting on a whim, disobeying because he felt like it. Weeks earlier, maybe, he would have played pranks like this, but not anymore. He was a man, his status solidified by his final shift. He believed the circle was wrong. He also believed that, after she had helped Elea—*saved* her—it was his duty to do anything he could to help Zaren.

Just as importantly, it was what his heart demanded.

Zaren had been escorted away by two guards, and Kris was fairly certain they would both keep her under surveillance. She was a stranger after all, and nobody knew what her powers might be. Crouching low in bushes that hid him perfectly, he watched the prison and waited for an opportunity. At mealtime, the door opened, and a guard stepped out. Suddenly alert, Kris waited until the guard had disappeared behind the house, no doubt on his way to get food. Then Kris took his chance. He ran to the front door, jumping on his last stride so that he hit the wooden door with both front paws. His weight flung the door open, and he hopped inside, his gaze darting everywhere and taking stock of the situation.

As he had hoped, only one guard was left in the house, seated at a table, a game of stones laid out in front of him. Kris knew him, knew his final form was a panther, knew he was trained to fight in ways Kris couldn't even imagine. He never had a doubt, however, never was afraid. His reason to fight—to win—was stronger, and so he would do both things.

The guard pushed away from the table and shifted to his panther form in one fluid movement. Kris attacked at once, using brute force and the difference in sizes to make up for his lack of training. He growled as he fought, instinct rather than intent, and at once his name rose from the other room.

“Kris?” Zaren called out. “Kris? Is that you? What’s going on?”

Redoubling his efforts, Kris lashed out at the panther’s neck with his paw, and his extended claws drew blood.

A lot of blood.

The guard collapsed, returning to his human form to clutch a hand to his bleeding throat. It wasn't what Kris had wanted, he had tried not to wound the guard, but there was nothing he

could do to take it back. Shifting back to his human form, he watched the guard for a few seconds before Zaren's continued shouts drew him to her door. He undid the lock and drew the door open, but even as Zaren threw herself in his arms, he couldn't help but glance back at the guard.

When he had fought the Ushias, he had been too lost in the shift to worry about taking a human life, and even if he had had all his mental abilities, they were enemies and they had attacked first. This was different, however. This was one of his people, someone it was his duty to protect.

"I had to hurt him," he told Zaren when she pulled away. "Can you help him?"

Looking down at the guard, she shook her head. "I can't. They took my medkit." At his blank look, she added, "The gray box I took from the shuttle?"

Kris blinked, then turned around. He had seen that box as he fought, resting on a shelf near the door. He grabbed it and presented it to Zaren with both hands. "Now can you help him?"

"I can try," she said, already kneeling by the guard's side. She pulled a long object from the box, and when she touched it in a certain way, a light, frothy substance bubbled at the end. She tugged the guard's hand away from his neck. "It's all right," she murmured. "This will help."

Whether he heard her words or was too weak to resist, the guard let put the object right next to his neck.

Kris vaguely remembered that she had healed him like this after she had scared the Ushias away. The memory was sensation more than anything else, and when the guard shuddered, Kris shivered as well, remembering how cool the white foam had felt on his skin.

When she pulled away, the three slash wounds were entirely covered in the white foam, and they had stopped bleeding. After only seconds, the foam had disappeared, and all that was left was unblemished skin. The guard blinked very slowly, and raised a hand to touch his throat. His eyes widened when he found unbroken skin beneath his fingertips.

“Are you... are you an angel?” he whispered, staring up at Zaren.

She turned a confused look toward Kris as she stood.

“She is,” Kris replied for her, and if he was lying, he felt no guilt about it. “Do you understand now why I have to free her?”

The guard nodded, still awed. Very slowly, he got to his feet, his eyes never leaving Zaren as though he expected her to perform another feat.

Kris knew the answer already, but he had to ask, “Are you going to raise the alarm?”

“I have to,” the guard said, sounding apologetic. “I have a family to take care of. I cannot be an outcast, too.”

A pang of pain spread through Kris at that reminder. Would he ever see Elea again? It was too late to regret his actions, though, and even if there had still been time, he wouldn't have changed anything. Zaren had saved his sister; the least he could do was save her in return.

“Can you give us two hours?” he asked, trying not to sound too hopeful.

The guard started shaking his head, but when his gaze fell on Zaren again, he faltered. “Half an hour,” he said, looking at the floor. “Don't ask for more. Any longer and the other guard will be back, and I can't risk him finding me alone.”

There was nothing more to say. Kris held out his hand toward Zaren, but she didn't take it right away. Instead, she touched the guard's shoulder, drawing his eyes to her. She smiled.

"Thank you," she said in their language, and the guard's face lit up with surprise. Unless Kris was really mistaken, she had just bought them a little more time.

Finally taking Kris' hand, she looked at him. "I'm ready."

They ran out, and didn't stop until Zaren was completely out of breath. Only then did she tell him her people were on their way to take her home.

Only then did she break his heart.