

# KALLYSTEN

The background of the entire page is a vibrant blue sky filled with soft, white, puffy clouds. Two large, pale, spherical moons are positioned in the upper half of the frame. The moon on the left is partially obscured by the top edge of the page. The moon on the right is more prominent, showing a slight shadow and a bright highlight. The overall scene is serene 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 7

Sitting on the ground beneath the roof of leaves Kris had woven for her, Zaren sighed. She was bored. With nothing to do other than watch the rain fall and munch on the fruits Kris had been picking as they walked, time seemed to stretch. It couldn't have been raining for more than an hour, but to Zaren it felt like a lot longer than that. In her boredom, she could feel more acutely than ever how much of a waste this all was. If only she had had anything to record her observations or even take notes... If only she had had the means to make Kris understand her, and to understand him in return... There was so much she wanted to ask him, so much she wanted to know about him.

The thought made her frown. She raised her head from where it rested on her knees and shook it lightly to call herself to order. There was much she wanted to know about the *planet*. That was all. It was her job, after all, to observe and report on untouched civilizations. Personal questions to her guide were not part of the equation, especially when she wasn't even authorized to make contact. And still...

With a small groan of frustration, Zaren buried her face in her hands. Authorized or not, whether it was part of her job or not, she didn't want to ask him about his people. She wanted to ask about him. Why he was alone in the woods. Why he kept disappearing when they stopped for a moment. Why he was so kind to her when he knew little more than her name.

Part of her wanted to think that it was in his people's nature to help others, to be kind and welcoming. Another part was sure it was just who he was. It was in his nature to be kind – and not to everybody, but to her. She felt a little silly for even thinking it, but she liked to believe that he was helping her because he liked her.

But then, if he liked her, why did he keep leaving her alone?

She shook her head again. These kinds of thoughts weren't helping anything. Neither was her attraction to him. Soon, she'd be going home, and she'd be in enough trouble then without having to explain why she had let herself become too close to a native.

But what if she wasn't going home, she wondered with a pang of something that wasn't completely fear.

From the start, she had thought that once she got to the shuttle, everything would be all right, but she had no assurance it would be that easy. Even if the transmitter was still in working order, she had been unable to send a signal as she was crashing. What if it happened again?

She took a deep breath and tried to clear her head. Whether the transmitter worked or not, she wouldn't change anything by making herself sick with worry now. When they reached the shuttle, she would know. Then, she could decide on a course of action. But until she knew, worrying was no more useful than shouting toward the stars and hoping someone would hear.

A gust of wind entered the shelter. Zaren shivered and rubbed the goosebumps on her sleeveless arm. She wished she could start a fire, but the smoke would fill the shelter right away, and she didn't have any dry wood anyway. Digging into the fruit bag, she pulled out the blanket she had taken from the cave and wrapped it around herself. Just as she was settling again, she froze. She thought she had seen something outside. She looked again, squinting as though looking more intently would dispel the curtain of rain that made everything seem gray.

Her throat tightened. Not everything *seemed* gray. Some things *were* gray—like the fur on the large wolf crouching just a few feet from the shelter.

A flash of fear coursed through her as usual. It had to be the same wolf, she told herself, pushing back her panic and holding on to her shredded calm by her fingernails. And if it was the same one, if it hadn't attacked her so far, maybe it wouldn't attack her now. Even in the water, when they had been so close, it could have bit her but it hadn't.

She fingered the torn edge of her sleeve absently beneath the blanket and frowned. For the first time, it occurred to her that it might not have been in the water to hurt her—but on the contrary, to help her. If it had grabbed her sleeve and pulled her to the shore, that might explain how her garment had been torn. The fabric was usually very resistant.

Still frowning, she peered at the wolf intently, her fear now forgotten. The wolf was lying down at the foot of a tree, its head resting on its extended paws. It was soaked, but the rain didn't seem to bother it. It looked back at Zaren without moving, the intensity of its dark eyes only broken when it blinked. It couldn't be a coincidence that it kept appearing whenever Kris left her alone. It certainly looked like a wolf, but its behavior was more like that of a dog. Maybe it was Kris'. Maybe Kris hadn't been leaving her alone, after all, and had left the wolf with her to keep guard.

Maybe she was deluding herself, but the thought that the wolf was there for her when Kris couldn't be was even nicer than the realization that it probably wouldn't attack.

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Beneath her shelter, wrapped in a blanket, Zaren suddenly smiled. Kris was so surprised he raised his head, tilting it

sideways to try to get a better look at her. Was he imagining things or was she really smiling?

Just moments earlier, he had caught a whiff of her scent, and it had held the acridness of fear. He knew she was afraid of his wolf form, and he would have remained out of sight if he could have. He didn't dare, though. Shifting had been different, this time, maybe because he had fought back the change for so long. It would be easy to forget who he was, forget he was human, and give himself totally to the wolf. He would need to do that, eventually. That was the only way to settle on his final form, and by now he was almost certain that it would be the wolf. He couldn't afford to do it now, however, not when Zaren was so close, not when her scent was all he could smell even under the heavy rain. If he let go of himself now, he might hurt her. He would rather let his mind be torn apart than risk it. Remaining here, close to her, close enough that he could see her, was the best way he had found to cling to his human mind. The only way. He hated that she was scared of him, but at least her fear helped him remember why he had to remain focused.

But this smile...

Why was she smiling, he wondered, astonished. Her eyes were still on him, and she didn't move when he raised his head. If anything, he would have expected her to reach for the knife yet again, as if such a weapon would stop a wolf his size from attacking anyone. But no, she wasn't reaching for the knife, wasn't doing anything but looking at him. Smiling.

Somehow, the thought that she wasn't scared of him anymore made him happy. He hated the scent of her fear. And it was just as effective for keeping his mind to wonder what had changed to make her smile as it was to worry about hurting her.

Another half hour passed before the rain finally let up. When it did, Kris stood and shook the water out of his fur before trotting out of sight so he could change back to his human form. It wasn't as difficult as he had feared; maybe the urge to shift again wouldn't become too strong too fast, this time.

He returned to Zaren, and found her in front of the shelter, still wrapped in her blanket. Her head thrown back, she was peering up at the sky, barely visible through the canopy of leaves above them. She looked at him as he approached, and her lips curved onto a smile much brighter than the one she had given him as a wolf. Still smiling, she said his name. Something fluttered in Kris' stomach. He cleared his throat and indicated the way with a slightly shaky hand.

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Ilona Brink stood, poised and graceful. Her eyes swept the room before resting kindly on Zaren. Immediately, Zaren dropped her gaze, looking down at the glass and pitcher in front of her. She refilled her glass before taking a sip. She was almost surprised by how good the water felt, even tepid as it was. Her throat was parched. How long had she been talking? She drank again.

"We've been at it for a long time now," Brink was saying. "Why don't we take a break. Let's start again in fifteen minutes."

As she looked up again, Zaren almost wanted to ask the council to just keep going with the hearing. She wanted it to be done and over with. She wanted them to decide if she had been at fault and put an end to her fears, one way or the other. They were already leaving the room, however, and there was nothing she could do to hold them back.

Loic rested a hand on her shoulder as he stood. "Why don't you go out and get some fresh air? You're as pale as a ghost."

She tried to answer his grin in kind, but doubted she produced anything close to a smile. Taking his advice, she stepped out of the room and found her way to the gardens. Specimens gathered on a multitude of worlds greeted her with a symphony of colors and scents. Somehow, though, they weren't nearly as beautiful as Haldae's woods, so lush in her memory. Sitting on a stone bench, she pulled out her communicator and slipped it in her ear to listen to her messages.

Her mother's voice was first. She sounded cheerful, but the fact that she had called meant she guessed Zaren was anxious.

"Hello, sweetie. Just called to see how your hearing is going. Your father says hi too. Let us know when it's over, we'll go for dinner or something."

She sighed. Whatever the outcome, she doubted she would feel like having a fancy dinner when she was done here.

The next message was from one of her friends. She was an observer too, and had been on a mission ever since Zaren's rescue.

"Hey, girl! I heard. You're the talk of the observers' hall! Give me a call when you've got time. I want to hear all about your big adventure!"

With yet another sigh, Zaren pulled the communicator out of her ear and shut it off. She wished it could have been as easy as her friend made it sound. She wished she could have told someone about all of it—told someone how her heart felt like it had been torn from her chest.

"This is a beautiful place, isn't it?"

Startled, Zaren looked up to see Ilona Brink approach her. She was barefoot beneath her long robes, Zaren noticed with a jolt of surprise.

“Peaceful, too,” Brink continued when Zaren didn’t reply.

She came to the bench and sat beside her. They were silent for a little while. Uncomfortable, Zaren wondered what to say or even whether to stay there. Surely if Brink wanted to resume questioning her, they would have returned to the chambers?

Just as Zaren was about to stand and excuse herself, Brink cleared her throat quietly and said, her voice warm and forgiving, “I doubt you have realized it yet, but this is not going too well for you. What is it you’re not telling us, child?”

*to be continued...*