

KALLYSTEN

A blue sky with white clouds and two large, pale moons. The moons are positioned in the upper half of the image, with one slightly higher and further to the left than the other. The clouds are scattered and fluffy, filling the lower half of the image.

**BENEATH THE
TWIN MOONS
OF HALDAE**

Beneath the Twin Moons of Haldae

Kallysten

Chapter 8

With the urgency of shifting pushing at him, Kris kept Zaren walking longer that day, hoping to get as close as possible to the edge of the woods and the Ushias' territory, where he thought the shuttle had disappeared. Once night started falling, however, he had to concede that it was useless. With his final shift now so close, his eyesight was better even in human form, but Zaren did not have such an advantage.

Fatigue and darkness combined to make her trip and stumble. The rain earlier had drenched everything, and more than once her damaged shoes betrayed her over roots, slippery leaves, and rocks. She never complained or asked for rest, as though she could sense that they were getting close, but he could see how exhausted she was, how much slower she walked. After she fell from the third time, the knees of her clothing now stained with grass and dirt, Kris held on to her hand as he helped her up.

“Rest?” he offered, and the look of grateful relief on her face was answer enough.

As long as Kris had kept moving, the wolf was relatively easy to contain. Now that he was standing still, though, threading large leaves together again to build a shelter, his hands—then his entire body—started shaking. He clenched his teeth and focused on his work.

Sitting on a flat rock, Zaren had wrapped her arms around her legs, not offering to help like she had earlier. Her cheek rested on her knee, and she seemed to be struggling to keep her eyes open. She hadn't even unfolded the blanket she carried—too tired, maybe, to think about it—and it wasn't long before she was shivering in the rapidly cooling evening air.

Kris had planned to make a bigger shelter in which she could stretch out to sleep. He had intended to build a fire for her so

she wouldn't get too cold, but he soon had to give up on that notion or risk shifting right there, in front of Zaren.

As quickly as he could, he cut thin, straight branches and planted them in the ground around Zaren before laying the leaves he had collected over them. At least, if it rained again, she would have some cover.

"I'm sorry," he said as he slipped the strap of the fruit bag over his shoulder and placed it on the ground next to her. "I should have stopped earlier to build a better shelter. That's the best I can do now."

She raised her head as he spoke and gave him a slight, tired frown. "Kris?"

"Rest," he said, already backing away. "I'll be back, I promise. Just rest."

She made an aborted gesture, as though to reach for him or follow him, but when he repeated a third time, "Rest," she set her cheek on her knee again. He could have sworn he could feel her eyes following him until he stopped behind a thick tree four times wider than he was. Leaning a shaking hand against the trunk, Kris closed his eyes tight and tried to get a grip on himself.

He was too close to let the wolf take over now; it might be his final shift if he did, and he didn't dare let that happen with Zaren so close—so defenseless. He had to shift of his own accord. Maybe if he tried to take another form, he thought with a sudden rush of desperation, he would be able to push back the moment when his final form seized all that he was. With all his might, he focused on the body of his bird form, imagining already the wind catching his feathers, lifting him up and—

A flash of pain lanced through him, breaking his concentration. Kris gasped. This had happened before, when he had been much younger. It happened to all children who

foolishly tried to force a change into a form that wasn't theirs. Kris knew better than to keep trying. Taking in a deep breath, he let the wolf envelop him, become him. When he opened his eyes again, everything around him seemed clearer, every sound sharper, every scent...

He raised his muzzle and sniffed the air. All he could smell was Zaren.

Slow, silent steps took him back toward the shelter. He advanced with his tail low and his ears flattened over his head, as though to make himself less noticeable. He stopped as soon as he could see her and lay on the ground, his head resting on his extended paws. He would cling to his mind like he had before, by focusing on her, on the idea of not hurting her. He could do this.

He *had* to do this.

For a long while, Zaren was immobile, and so was Kris. He was wondering if she had fallen asleep when she came out from underneath the shelter. Kris' body tensed and he wondered what she would do, where she would go. He hoped she wasn't foolish enough to wander around alone in the dark. There were creatures other than him in the forest, and while they were kept at bay when he was nearby, he didn't want her to stumble upon a sleeping bear. He would fight for her, of course, but such a fight wouldn't be pretty.

To his relief, she only went to the nearest tree and fumbled in the dark for a vine to drink from. Right away, she returned to the shelter and unfolded the blanket. She laid half of it on the ground near the rock she had been sitting on, and curled up on the blanket before drawing the rest of it over her. She rested her head on the rock as though on a pillow. More than ever, Kris berated himself for pushing her so long. He should have made a better shelter. He should have lit a fire. Already, from a hundred paces away, he could see her shivering under the thin blanket.

Without thinking, he stood and started toward her, each step slow and measured. The last thing he wanted was to scare her. When he had crossed half the distance, he realized that, even cold as she had to be, even with an empty stomach since she didn't seem to have touched the bag of fruit, her tiredness had pulled her into sleep. How restful of a night would it be, though, with a rock for a pillow and the cold of the night surrounding her?

Still slowly, he finished walking over to her and carefully curled down alongside her to share his warmth with her. He kept expecting her to wake, but all she did was shift a little more toward him in her sleep. A small sigh even passed her lips. A few moments later, she stopped shivering.

He would only stay there for a little while, Kris promised himself as he watched her delicate features, so open in her sleep. Just long enough for her to get warm.

That was without counting on his own exhaustion. Within minutes, he was asleep.

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Zaren couldn't have said what woke her up, but she slipped from deep sleep to full awareness in a wink. And discovered, by the still pale light of the early morning, a wolf lying at her side, close enough that she could feel the heat radiating from it.

Pure terror roiled through her, paralyzing her.

It was the same wolf she had seen before. She was sure of it, even if she couldn't explain how she knew. It was the same wolf she had first seen in the river and that had followed her since, the wolf she now thought might belong to Kris. Thinking that did not reassure her in the slightest, however, not when it was so close, and it was all she could do not to scream.

As though sensing her fear, the wolf woke up then. It raised its head and blinked slowly before fixing her with its dark eyes. They were gray, she noticed. Just like Kris’.

Throat tight and heart hammering in her chest, she waited for it to attack her, having forgotten the knife she carried. The wolf didn’t move, watching her back just as intently as she watched it, as though waiting for her to make the first move.

When, after a few minutes, she cautiously sat up and leaned back against the rock behind her, the wolf finally moved, sitting on its hunches, still peering at her. It had never looked more like a dog than in that moment—a very large, very frightening dog. Swallowing her fear, she raised her hand very slowly and held it, palm out, toward the wolf. It observed her fingers for a second before sniffing at them and giving them a small lick. His tongue was rough and warm. Zaren could almost have laughed in relief.

Bolder now, she reached out to lay her hand on the wolf’s flank, holding it still for an instant against the thick, warm fur. The wolf let her do as she pleased. All it did was tilt its head curiously as though asking her why she had been so scared.

“You belong to him, don’t you?” she asked, very low. She needed to hear her own voice and assure herself this was really happening. “Did Kris—”

At the sound of Kris’ name, the wolf abruptly stood and, with a last look at her, trotted away. It had only disappeared for a few moments when Kris returned.

She wanted to ask him about the wolf, wanted to know where he had been all night, wanted to tell him that it would be fine if he stayed with her rather than keeping his distance at night. She wanted to tell him she was glad he was back, and that she had missed him.

It was probably better that she couldn't say any of it.

"Shuttle?" she asked when he reached her.

He smiled.

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The Elders made Zaren sit on a round, grass-filled pillow on the floor while they sat on the same age-old wooden chairs that furnished the Council room. Kris frowned as he realized they were treating her as though she were a child. It displeased him even more that she had no idea what her position in front of them implied.

For a moment, he thought about asking for a pillow and joining her on the floor. If she didn't have his support, she had nothing. A quick look at the rest of the Council changed his mind. Eyebrows were rising in his direction already, silently asking why he was still standing and delaying Zaren's interrogation. If he followed his heart rather than his head now, he would only make things worse—worse for Zaren.

He sat, his fists resting on his thighs, and forced himself to take a deep breath through his nose to calm down. Across from him, Zaren sat cross-legged, the long, wide skirt Elea had given her covering her legs in its folds. Her eyes were flitting between the Elders and Kris, always coming back to him as though hoping for a word of reassurance. Kris would have liked nothing more than to give her that word, but he was forbidden from speaking. All he could do was smile at her and give her a small, encouraging nod. She smiled back, relaxing ever so slightly.

"Do you understand my words?" Elder Sarly asked abruptly, without introducing himself or anyone else.

Zaren's eyes focused on him at once. "I do understand you. My name is Zaren. May I ask—"

A murmur ran over the Council at the unknown words coming from her lips, while the translating machine at her throat spoke their language.

“What witchery is this!” Elder Pala exclaimed, standing and pointing a shaky finger at Zaren.

She raised her hands, palms out in an appeasing gesture. “Not witchery, I swear. This won’t hurt you.” She touched the small device with a finger. “It’s just a means for me to talk to you.”

The Elders conferred in hushed voices. Unable to speak, Kris didn’t bother listening. He wished he could have taught more of his language to Zaren. He should have realized the translating machine would be a problem. Crossing his arms, he scowled at the Elders. If they discussed every word that came out of Zaren’s mouth like this, they would spend the entire night there. He looked back at her, trying to apologize with a look. She gave a little shrug to tell him that she didn’t blame him.

He had warned her this could happen, but even so he felt guilty. She had entered the village for him. If he couldn’t stop the Elders from condemning her, it would be as though he had traded her life for Elea’s.

He’d die trying to free her rather than let than happen.