

KALLYSTEN

The background of the entire page is a vibrant blue sky filled with soft, white, puffy clouds. Two large, pale, spherical moons are visible in the upper half of the frame. The moon on the left is a thin crescent, while the moon on the right is a larger gibbous phase. The overall scene is serene and celestial.

**BENEATH THE
TWIN MOONS
OF HALDAE**

Beneath the Twin Moons of Haldae - Kallysten

Beneath the Twin Moons of Haldae Kallysten

Chapter 9

Before crashing to the planet, Zaren had thought she was in good shape. She was in no way an athlete, but she took care of herself. On what felt like her hundredth day in the forest, only the thought that they were getting close to the shuttle pushed her forward, painful step after painful step. After sleeping on the ground and walking almost non-stop for two days straight, her body ached in ways she had never imagined.

And that was before her shoes fell apart.

They had been walking for two hours that morning, going more slowly than before because Zaren simply couldn't keep up, when she tripped yet again. She didn't have time to throw her hands in front of her to cushion her fall, but she was lucky enough to land on a carpet of thick, dewy moss.

With a groan, she turned and sat up, looking straight up while she caught her breath. The forest was less dense here, and she could see a patch of light blue sky high above her and the edge of a pale moon slowly drifting into view.

Kris said a few words, drawing her eyes to him. He looked on edge as he walked back to her. Maybe he was getting frustrated that she was slowing their pace so much. How long would he indulge her before getting tired of the entire situation? Would he leave her to find her way to the shuttle then? She couldn't believe he would abandon her, but just the same, she couldn't stop worry from creeping inside her when his frown deepened.

He crouched in front of her and picked up something brown and limp from the ground. It took Zaren a few seconds to recognize her shoe, and realize that her left foot was now bare. Dampness had permeated both her shoes long before,

and there was little difference between the damp moss beneath her left foot and the damp material beneath her right.

Kris turned what was left of her shoe between his hands. Stained by grass and mud, the top of it was torn in two places, while the sole had come apart. Dropping it on the ground, Kris touched her other shoe. The sole pulled off under his fingers; it wouldn't take much for this shoe to come apart like the other one.

“Great,” Zaren muttered. “How am I going to walk now?”

She eyed Kris' bare feet morosely. He was clearly used to hiking through the woods like this, but she wasn't. Rocks, mud, slippery leaves or thorny plants—this promised to be rough.

Kris said a few words. He sounded a little pensive, though Zaren had no idea what he could be saying. Encouragements? Was he telling her it wouldn't be that bad? Was he promising her they were almost there? Or was he simply telling her to get a grip or he'd wash his hands of her?

That last option, as improbable as it may be, almost made walking barefoot seem like a pleasant adventure.

“Zaren?” Kris said, and from the tone of his voice it wasn't the first time he had said her name. She looked at him and saw that he was holding out his empty hand to her. “Knife?”

She blinked at him once before recognizing the word and nodding. She pulled the knife from the fruit bag and gave it to him hilt first, then watched as he dug it into the soft moss, cutting a square sheet of it, then a second one. Next, he stood and gathered a few thick, shiny leaves as wide as both of Zaren's hands put together. Under her widening eyes, he used vines to bind the leaves and moss together, fashioning them into a small boot directly around her left foot. Without a word, he tugged her remaining shoe off and proceeded to

cover that foot the same way. When he was done, he stood up and held out his hand to Zaren. She clasped it, and he helped her to her feet. He didn't let go immediately and held on to her as she took a few careful steps. The makeshift shoes seemed secure on her feet and were more comfortable than she would have expected.

"Thank you," she said, smiling at him and squeezing his fingers.

He returned the smile, though it seemed a little forced, and dropped her hand. A muscle in his jaw clenched several times, and Zaren found herself wondering if he was angry—and if so, why. What had she done? What could she do?

She said his name questioningly, wishing she could ask him what was wrong. He shook his head just once and said one familiar word: "Shuttle."

She picked up her broken shoes—don't leave anything behind, her instructor's voice trilled in her mind—and stuffed them in the fruit bag along with the knife. They started walking again.

Kris was still picking fruit, edibles leaves and roots as they walked, but the playfulness was gone. It seemed more like a chore than anything else, and when they stopped at midday, he seemed impatient to be on his way again. Zaren wished she could have asked what had changed, whether she had done something wrong. She also wished she could have asked about the wolf, about where Kris went every night and why, and why the wolf kept at bay during the day. Finally, she wished that she could have told him she was grateful; her smiles didn't seem enough anymore, and Kris didn't react to them as he had before.

As the afternoon waned, the vegetation around them grew thinner, the trees both smaller and growing further apart. Excitement slowly replaced tiredness inside Zaren, and she

found herself walking faster to catch up with Kris and walk by his side.

“The shuttle?” she asked, hoping the tone of her voice would convey the meaning of her words. “Are we getting closer?”

Kris breathed in deeply, keeping his eyes straight ahead of him. Yet again, a muscle twitched in his clenched jaw. “Shuttle,” he repeated, adding a few more incomprehensible words.

Zaren tried to hang on to her hope, as difficult as it was when Kris’ charming personality had all but disappeared. The language barrier was hard on her, but as long as he had smiled with every word, she had been able to carry on. Whatever was affecting his mood now made everything that much more difficult to endure.

Her heart jumped when they reached the edge of the forest. Straight ahead of her, the moons were slowly gliding toward the horizon, two thin crescents, clearer than they had been when she crashed. They weren’t what caught her eyes, though. To her left, not very far, the light of the setting sun reflected over what could not be anything other than her shuttle. It was some distance still, maybe a mile, but as far as she could tell, it was in good shape. Maybe the emergency landing systems had come back online in time, maybe all she needed was to climb into the shuttle and fly, maybe—

Kris’ hand closed on her wrist and brought her to an abrupt halt.

“Rest,” he said, pointing at the forest behind them.

“Rest?” Her voice climbed almost to a shriek. “But the shuttle is right there!” She looked at the gleaming metal, so close now. Couldn’t he see it? She tried to free her hand to point, but Kris’ hold tightened until she could feel his nails digging into her skin. She yelped in pain. “You’re hurting me!”

He let go of her wrist and raised his hands, palms out toward her, murmuring a few words that sounded apologetic. She shook her head and gestured toward the shuttle. She didn't care about apologies, not now.

“We could get there before night falls! We could—”

He shook his head and covered her mouth with two of his fingers, cutting her off. “Rest,” he said again. His tone was cold and unyielding, but his fingers trembled against her lips.

With that, he walked back into the forest and started gathering leaves. Zaren watched him as he built another shelter. Her excitement had disappeared, giving way to frustration. Why didn't he want to go to the shuttle now? What could possibly stop him? He must have had a reason.

She joined him, and although annoyed, she started helping him. She hoped it was a *good* reason. Just like she hoped he had a reason for not building a fire even after she struggled to make him understand she was cold.

Letting her tiredness and bad mood take over, she refused the food he offered her, just like she refused to come inside the shelter. Instead, she sat outside, at the foot of a tree, arms around her raised knees and her eyes in the direction of the shuttle. It was too dark for her to see it anymore, but it was there, close enough to touch. In the morning, whether Kris accompanied her or not, she would go.

She wasn't sure how much time had passed before the wolf appeared. She scowled at it when it curled at her feet like she had scowled at Kris, but after a moment, she couldn't help but relax. Without thinking, she reached to caress the thick fur. The wolf raised his head and flicked his tongue at her wrist, where Kris had held her tight enough to hurt earlier.

“I’m sure he had a reason,” she murmured. “He’s helped me so far and nothing forced him to. He must have a reason.”

The wolf stared at her with eyes that sometimes seemed to glow. She fell asleep hoping that Kris would come with her to the shuttle in the morning. She didn’t want to say goodbye before she really had to.

* * * *

Kris didn’t sleep that night. He didn’t dare to sleep. Twice that day he had barely managed to stop himself from shifting in front of Zaren: the first time when he had turned to see her lying on the ground, despair wafting off her in sour waves, and the second time when she had started shouting at the edge of the forest.

He wished he could have told her that where the forest ended, the Ushias’ territory began. He wished he could have conveyed just how dangerous they were, and that caution was now their best ally.

As he rested, curled at her feet, he tried to hold on to words, the best way he knew to keep his human mind a little longer. He repeated in his mind the few words of Zaren’s language he had learned, and wondered what else she might teach him, if she stayed with him a little longer. He doubted she would, though. He had seen that thing – her shuttle – fly. He knew, with a certainty anchored deep inside him, that she would leave when he returned her to the gleaming object.

If he was totally honest with himself, it was another reason why he hadn’t wanted to enter the Ushias’ territory as night was falling. The sooner they found the shuttle, he feared, the sooner she would say goodbye. He’d be free to shift, then, and settle on his final form, but he didn’t want to lose her, not quite yet.

The litany of words in his head shifted, turning to words that described Zaren. Beautiful. Fire. Smile. Bold. Smart. Stranger. Beautiful.

Morning came both too soon and not soon enough. Before Zaren awakened, Kris trotted away and, hidden behind a large tree, focused on his human form.

Nothing happened.

With panic twisting like a living thing inside his belly, he shut his eyes and tried again. He *had* to change. He had to. Zaren would be waking up soon, and if he understood her at all, she wouldn't hesitate to go to the shuttle alone now that she knew where it was. He had to accompany her, he had to keep her safe, he *had* to.

He finally did.

Panting, sweat pearling on his forehead, he returned to Zaren, and found her awake and apparently ready to go.

"Shuttle," she said on a decisive tone, and he knew that he wouldn't be able to hold her back anymore.

Less than an hour later, with the sun lying low on the horizon still and the overly bright moons accompanying its ascent, they reached the gleaming object he had first seen glide in the sky. He didn't do more than glance at it, though; all around it, footprints in the soft ground made it all too clear that the Ushias had been there. He breathed in deeply, but could not catch any scent on the shifting wind other than his own and Zaren's.

He looked for her, and for a second his heart was in his throat when he couldn't see her. She emerged from inside the shuttle with an object in her hand, small and square, that she fastened around her throat with a strip of fabric. She slipped

another object inside the shell of her ear and looked at him in triumph.

She started speaking, the words coming out as fast as they were incomprehensible. He shook his head. She fell silent and took a deep breath, then rested a hand on her chest and said, “Zaren.” She looked at him expectantly. Was she losing her mind? She picked his hand—he shivered at the unexpected contact—and laid it on his chest. “Kris?”

“Yes my name is Kris, what do you want—”

Her face lit up with excitement and she gestured toward his mouth.

“What? You want me to talk?”

She nodded; her smile widened.

“Why? What do you want me to say? It’s not like you can understand what I’m saying. I could tell you you’re beautiful and you wouldn’t know it. I could say I’ll miss you when you leave and that wouldn’t make a difference, now would it?”

Her smile wavered. “Keep talking, Kris.”

He could hear her voice, the words as strange, as meaningless as ever. He could also hear a strangely distorted voice coming from the box against her throat, and *that* voice he could understand. He stared at her, his eyes going wide.

“I... I can understand you. Can you understand me? Do you understand what I’m saying, Zaren? How is that possible, how can you—”

“Not everything. Keep talking.”

He suddenly felt numb. There was so much he wanted to tell her, so much he wanted to ask, he didn’t know where to even

start. Before he could figure it out, he heard something behind him. Footsteps. He turned on his heel to find a group of five Ushias warriors marching closer. The tips of their lances gleamed harshly in the morning sun.

The change took him before he even knew what was happening. He couldn't have stopped it if he had tried. His last thought, before he lost himself to the wolf, was to hope he wouldn't hurt Zaren too badly.

* * * *

Zaren stared at Ilona Brink in shock. Things were not going well for her? What did she mean by that?

"I don't know what you mean." She licked her lips. "I've told the Council everything that happened to me."

For a few seconds, Ilona considered her, her light blue eyes narrowed thoughtfully. Zaren tried not to squirm under her piercing gaze. Looking like she felt guilty would not help anything now.

"Let me tell you a story," Ilona said at last, dropping her gaze to her robes and smoothing them out on her lap. "I was an observer once." Her lips curled into a wry smile, and she looked at Zaren again. "Long ago."

Zaren nodded automatically, only half-listening to what Ilona was saying. How was she going to convince her that she wasn't hiding anything? What would happen if the Council did not believe her?

"One time," Ilona continued, "I touched down on a planet to do some flora sampling, and met an indigenous woman. I was not authorized to make contact, it was an accident, but once she was standing in front of me, it was too late to hide."

Zaren took a sharp breath as Ilona's words permeated her consciousness, and she focused on her, frowning lightly. Ilona noticed her frown and nodded.

"Yes, you heard that right. I had unauthorized contact with indigenous people. Not only that, but I was a guest of the woman and her village for a couple of days. They sang for me. They had beautiful, multi-harmonic chants that dated back hundreds of years, as far as I could figure out." Ilona sighed. "Some songs had been old before their people had come to this world, they said, and I believed them."

Her gaze drifted toward a cluster of flowers a few feet from them, and she fell silent. Her heart hammering in her chest, Zaren tried to wait patiently for the rest of the story, but after a moment she had to ask, "What happened then?"

Ilona gave a small start and blinked very fast two or three times, her attention returning to Zaren. "I was grounded once I came back to the base and reported what had happened, but I expected as much." Her voice began hardening with each word until Zaren wondered if this was truly the same woman in front of her. "I didn't think my superiors would send in more observers, despite the planet being categorized as no-contact. They figured, since I had already breached the natives' isolation, more contact wouldn't hurt. Within the time of a generation, the natives' entire way of life was shattered. There is nothing left of that civilization today but a few holo recordings of their songs."

There was a knot at the back of Zaren's throat, but she pushed a few words past it anyway.

"It's very sad," she murmured. "I'm sorry."

Ilona inclined her head, and for a moment as her shoulders curved, she seemed older, tired. When she looked at Zaren again, it was with the same gentleness that had filled her

words when she had asked her first questions at the start of the hearing.

“Believe me,” she said, taking Zaren’s hand in between both of hers, “the last thing I ever want to see happen is the loss of another civilization. I couldn’t do anything to stop it back then, but I have a little more power today.”

In the end, it was her self-deprecating smile that convinced Zaren. She breathed in deeply and said, very quietly, her eyes begging Ilona not to make her regret this, “His name is Kris.”

A weight lifted off her chest, and the rest was easier to confess.