

Blood Flows Deep in the Empire

The Rise of the Szolites - Part One (A Szolite
Novel)

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Thousands of species had risen and fallen within the Universe by the time humans came along. While many self-aware races came close to emulating the Gods, none did so more than the humans—those creatures that physically came closest to resembling their divine predecessors. Although the humans had none of the Gods' physical strength, they did have godlike powers of creation locked within their minds. From the moment that humans first walked their planet, it was known to the Gods that their corner of the Universe would be pivotal. Their race was destined to become intertwined with Fate on a level no mortal species had before.

PROLOGUE

– *Enzyria, Viewing Chamber*

Salicyar felt warm air caress his cold flesh. He clenched his fists, his nails almost breaking through his gloves and digging into his palms. Stars zoomed past, their white light surrounding him on all sides. The projected image moved at the speed of his thoughts—thoughts that were frenzied and crashing together. His chest tightened, the muscles stiff and aching.

A blink of his eyes brought the image to a halt. All around him, the circular chamber cast a three-dimensional replica of the Universe upon the walls. He refused to turn away, even as the anger in him spread and made his eyes heavy. A planet that had once held life was gone. His jaw ticked as he took in the large rocks left floating in its place.

He told himself not to look any further. Wasn't this proof enough?

His nostrils flared, and his blood boiled hotter. Fuck that. He needed to see more. Not being on the dimension was fueling his denial. A pitiful voice whispered inside his head and reasoned that perhaps *that* corner of the Universe had been spared.

Stop. Do not do this to yourself, you ass. You already know.

He was not good at listening, even to himself. A sharp turn of his head had the image in front of him rotating, spinning. Stars once more flew past. Salicyar took one step closer to the image, the dread inside him turning acidic. His mind raged, tried to stop him. Another quick movement and he was staring at what had been another planet with intelligent life.

Sentient beings, weaker than his kind, but no less aware, destroyed for no reason. He had seen destruction since the beginning of time, but that had been before living creatures had begun to inhabit the planets.

Why the hell would they do this? The waste. The callous destruction of the thing his kind was supposed to hold so sacred.

Energy crackled at the tips of his gloved fingers. He bit through his cheek to keep himself from flinging bolts at the walls of the chamber. Air burned through his lungs. Salicyar reached inside himself for the courage needed to seek out the other planet. The one that was most important to him.

He was a fucking god. There was no way he would let something like fear hold him back.

But still, it roiled inside him, warning him that he might not be able to handle what he was about to see.

Growling under his breath, he focused on the projection before him and willed it to move again. It took mere seconds to find what he was looking for, though it felt like an eternity. The slow muttering of chaos inside his mind, the what-ifs, only served to increase his apprehension.

Would it be as the rumors said, flooded and devastated? Or would it be gone, obliterated like the others?

The moment the image stopped, he stared at the small blue planet on which he'd spent so much time. Horror settled deep. The changes he saw, even from afar, made him feel as if he'd been pummeled by one of the meteors projected in the room.

The reports circling the dimensions had been true. The planet before him had once been mostly land, land which was now missing. He didn't need to look closer to see they had melted the ice caps. The oceans continued to rise, swallowing up whole countries before his eyes.

It had been half a day since those cocksuckers had unleashed this havoc, and the devastation had only begun.

Stop. You have seen enough. You have your proof.

He ran his fingers through his hair, tugged roughly, and blinked away.

That one small motion put him eye-level with Earth's destruction. As if he were standing on the planet itself, the roar of crashing waves filled his ears.

Lingering screams echoed around him as he witnessed the people running, fleeing stone-forged cities with panic written on their faces.

They ran for naught. Even as they tried to find shelter, there was no escaping the ocean. No way to avoid the tsunami that headed toward them. It was so large that, once it was close enough, the sky was no longer visible above it.

The deafening roar it made barreling down on the land was enough to even shake him, a *god*.

Those fucking bastards. I swear to everything . . .

The urge to kill something, anything, was growing. He managed to slide his eyes closed. For a second. Like a masochist, he could not keep from opening them to look again.

“Salicyar?”

Nylicia. Fuck. He didn’t have time to deal with her right now. He growled as the images flickered and then disappeared, leaving the chamber silent. He wasn’t done. He wanted, needed, to see it all. Every last ripple of destruction. He deserved it.

She had willed it off, but the sounds of despair continued to reverberate inside his mind, careening inside his skull.

He couldn’t blink, couldn’t process. The gods be damned, he needed to tear into something.

Dimithinia was gone. He had no choice but to admit it to himself. The one mortal he’d truly cared for was gone. As were millions. Millions had been wiped out with her. How many innocents had been amongst the dead? He could imagine the fear, the panic—the faces of the children and their parents as they realized there was nowhere to go. No escape.

Everything. They’d almost destroyed everything. *Why?*

“Salicyar?”

He stared off into space, barely able to control the violence inside him, let

alone give Nylicia his attention.

She repeated his name.

“What!”

The Watcher of Destinies moved closer. “Things will get worse.”

“How much worse can they get? The Aviraji said they intended to punish

a few beings. This . . . this was an apocalypse!”

“Not quite. An apocalypse would have killed all the humans and almost

every living thing in the Universe.” Nylicia sounded way too calm for his liking.

“Why?”

She responded softly, her voice near a whisper. “This was not about punishment of the mortals. It’s about war, Salicyar.”

“War?” Although he should have not been surprised.

“This is nothing compared to what the Aviraji plan to do.”

It was enough to make him turn toward her. His eyes landed on her see-

through form, her body as much of a projection as the one he had been viewing. He had met Nylicia, the self-proclaimed Watcher of Destinies, a few hundred years before. To an immortal, it was a short acquaintance, but he’d already come to trust her. From the moment she’d made herself known to the Szolites, everything she had foretold had come to pass.

“Salicyar—”

“I do not wish to be called by that name anymore. That is the name the Aviraji gave me, along with my duties, and they have betrayed me.” His tone was harsh, but it was only a fraction of the bitterness consuming him.

“They have not only betrayed you. They have betrayed thousands. Perhaps even millions. But come sunrise, they plan something worse.”

“Worse than this?”

“I told you. War. Many of your friends and allies are destined to die—”

“More death!” His body flared, white light surging through his veins. It lit

up his skin, his eyes. Even the ends of his hair glowed with the intensity of the anger he felt. He looked down at himself, sneering. Disgusted. The light flowing through his veins reminded him of who had given him those powers in the first place. The very beings he now ached to destroy.

He'd been faithful to what they'd asked of him. As God of Fertility, he'd practically whored the hell out of himself in order to help the human species survive. He had given his body to any human female who had asked, for the sake of fulfilling the purpose the Aviraji had given him. All that, yet the moment he actually came to care about one of them, she'd been murdered.

“Yes, more death. This is why we need you to get yourself together and fight —”

“No!”

Nylicia tilted her head, piercing him with a stare. “And if I told you there is a way you can find your true happiness? That you can have that *and* bring Dimithinia back?”

The question intrigued him. Just as she knew it would.

He stormed up to her. Whatever she was, her form wasn't really there — no one had seen Nylicia “in the flesh” — but he still sneered down at her. He stared into her multicolored eyes and let her see every bit of the rage churning inside him, trying to intimidate her.

“Explain.”

She gave him a look that clearly told him such tactics were not going to work.

He gritted his teeth together as she deflected his demand in that airy, frustrating way she possessed. “First off, what do you wish to be called now?”

“Damn it, that does not matter to me —”

“It does to *me*. Hmm, perhaps I shall name you then? Let me see . . .” She tilted her head, one finger tapping on her small chin. “Oh, I know. You strike me as a Dyletri!”

“Which means I am destined to be named that. So be it. I could not care less about that.”

“Are you not even going to ask me what the name means?”

His teeth ground together, and his patience dwindled rapidly. He could find out the meaning of that name himself, if he so chose, but he knew to indulge her. At least for a few seconds. After that, he might just snap and treat her to the sight of him tearing apart the chamber.

“What does it mean?”

“The handler of change. Constant change, to be exact.”

He had no idea why that applied to him, and he did not really care. His brows tensed, his patience shrinking down to one atom’s worth. “As I said, that does not mat—”

“I have a talent for naming. I think I shall stick to it. Name a few more.” Nylicia’s expression was gleeful, although she had come with news of disaster.

“Focus, female!” he snapped. “Bringing Dimithinia back? How? It is already said that she will not be allowed to reincarnate. The Aviraji made sure of that.”

Nylicia waved her hand, appearing utterly unconcerned. “Eleven thousand years from now, give or take a few hundred, her soul twin will be given life. This twin can, and *should*, be sacrificed to the Higher Fates—”

“You can’t be serious! The Higher Fates? Why would I want to fuck with them?”

Barely sentient, the energies which compromised the Fates were barbaric. Simplistic and vicious. As such, the laws that governed them, and the rest of the Universe by extension, could be just as brutal. One didn’t make sacrifices or pledges to the Fates lightly. Fail to follow through and they would do what

they did best. Those energies would destroy everything, and in a way even the Aviraji would never be able to accomplish.

“As I was saying. Sacrifice this girl to the Higher Fates, a soul for a soul, and when it’s complete, Dimithinia will be returned.”

“You said eleven thousand years? I am supposed to wait—”

The sadness in Nylicia’s tone was unlike her. The resolve behind it, however, was quite familiar. “Yes, *Dyletri*. You are supposed to wait. And survive. Do you understand? If you do not, the Universe is lost. You are too important to perish. Do not ask me why, because I cannot tell you. Not yet.”

Taking deep breaths, Dyletri tried to imagine what could possibly be waiting for them on the morrow. Not that he couldn’t guess. When it came to the Gods and war, things tended to get destructive.

As evidenced by what those bastards had already done.

“Is that why they killed so many?” he asked.

“Yes. To weaken you all. This suffering is feeding them. They have been planning this for a long time, I assure you.” Nylicia stared at him, seeming to be gauging his reaction.

“Where is Dimithinia’s soul?”

“With Crius, inside *Renentr*. He will keep her safe. He has already volunteered to fight at the gates of the Underworld, if he must, to keep them out, should you fail up here. Much rests on you making it through this.”

With that, Nylicia turned to leave.

“Wait, dammit!” He started after her. “Where are you going? What will the girl’s name be?”

Nylicia stopped and looked over her shoulder. “Her name will be Ismini. And you will know when the time is right. Farewell, Dyletri.” Her form faded into nothingness, leaving him alone in the chamber once more.

He thought about his new name and the odd meaning attached to it. He would have never chosen it for himself, but he found that he liked it. Hell, he would have liked anything, as long as it wasn't the name those bastards had given him. He wanted nothing to do with them or his duty.

Another decision that was painfully simple. His powers had to go, too. He would not give the Aviraji any control over him any longer, nor would he give himself to another woman for them ever again. No, never for them. From then on, it would be *his* choice.

As was his choice to fight back.

It was clear the Aviraji had lied about their reasons for doing what they did. In reality, they'd done it all to weaken the Szolites so they could start a war.

So be it. He would kill as many as he was able, and he would relish every moment. Even though his powers were already beginning to decline, he would do as Nylicia had said and survive. He would survive and wait, repay the Aviraji for taking Dimithinia's life, and then get her back. He should have protected her. He had failed.

He would not do so again.

CHAPTER 1

Nearly eleven thousand years later. – Renentr. The Underworld.

Dyletri's rapid steps echoed throughout the dark cavern as he made his way deep into a place he'd been many times before. He was always in a hurry when he came here, but this time there was an extra edge to each step. Dyletri had received the news he'd been waiting what seemed like an eternity for, and if Crius didn't have his damned powers saturated all over the place, he would have flashed himself into the main chamber the moment he'd entered the cavern.

"Always complaining about what I do in my own home."

Dyletri raised an eyebrow as he came to a stop before the *Sivigh*—a portal masquerading as a large set of doors that transformed into a giant face whenever anyone approached.

"Good evening, Salicyar."

"How many times am I going to tell you not to address me by that name? It's not my name any more, hasn't been for a long time."

"It is your real name."

"No, it is not. Not any longer."

"Just like you're really a hundred-something thousand years old instead

of two million and four. Why do you lie to the younger gods about your age, anyway? Afraid they'll call you an old man?"

Dyletri licked his lips, determined not to lose his temper with Crius. *As usual.*

"Like you're so much fucking younger. Actually, aren't you older than me? Have you ever stopped to think that the reason you're so annoying is because you need to go out there and live? Perhaps experience life? I don't know . . . a little thing called *sex*?"

“I choose to remain a virgin, Salicyar. You will do well to remember that. Just like you’ve decided to forgo your calling for . . . how long has it been? Roughly ten thousand years? More?”

Bastard. He knew damned well why Dyletri had forsaken his calling.

He’d been faithful for millennia upon millennia, and all it had done was cost him the one woman he’d ever truly cared for.

He wouldn’t risk a repeat of what had happened with Dimithinia, nor give that bitch called Fate the satisfaction of screwing with him again.

He didn’t owe them anything. After the last eleven thousand years, the Fates owed *him*.

“Are you going to let me in or not?”

The giant gray face in front of him, which didn’t resemble Crius at all, rolled its eyes and let out a longsuffering sigh.

“As if I really have a choice.”

“Damn straight.” A moment later, Dyletri watched as the face melted into the doors. They swung open and slowly disappeared, allowing him to walk deeper into the underworld that was Crius’s personal domain.

Once inside the main hall, Dyletri felt Crius ease up on the energy barrier. The air grew light enough for his powers to spread out. He dematerialized, appearing inside the Chamber of Souls, the *Abideos*.

The walls glowed bright with the souls contained inside them, each one held within a tiny glowing orb known as an *Aristi*. Billions upon billions of spirits existed in this place, despite the fact that they’d died a long time ago.

Their kind had been long forgotten by humanity. The Aviraji had seen to that, and as such, there hadn’t been any new additions to Crius’s collection in a long, long time.

The *Abideos* was unlike anything else in *Renentr*, its light a complete contradiction to the darkness of the underworld. It was probably why Crius spent so much time there.

Dyletri would, too, if he had to be stuck in that hell for an eternity. “This *hell*, as you call it, is my home. You were always so disrespectful.” Dyletri walked toward the raised dais on the other side of the chamber.

“I’m not the one invading someone else’s thoughts and listening in on them.”

Crius glanced at Dyletri over his shoulder, his expression insolent. “We both know I don’t have a choice and why you, who does have a choice, won’t dare step into my mind.”

“Well, no shit. The last time I was in there, it took me thousands of years before I was normal again.” Dyletri eyes fell to the one *Aristi* that was kept outside of the walls.

“We both know my trauma, as you so sensitively put it, isn’t the only reason you stay out of there.”

Crius was right. Dyletri couldn’t even bring himself to think about what he’d seen in Crius’s head the last time he’d dared trespass there. It had filled him with ire. It was the real reason that one specific *Aristi* sat in a place of honor when none of the others did.

A reason that had very little to do with Dyletri’s request to Crius.

He decided to ignore the tension between them. “How is she?”

Crius’s voice was regretful as he turned to Dyletri. “As she has been for the last eleven millennia. Enraged. And in agony.”

Together they walked toward the pedestal in front of Crius’s throne. They

stopped on either side of it, and Dyletri stared at the god before him—a god that had once been his friend. He still considered him as such, but the very thing standing between them had become just that: the thing that divided them.

Dyletri’s brow furrowed as he stared down into the *Aristi*. “It’s almost time.”

The *Aristi* was a mess of light and dark, unlike the rest of the orbs in the chamber. The majority of the souls there glowed mostly white, little spots of darkness the only remnants of whatever evil was done by them in their mortal lives.

Dyletri's guilt was unbearable, as always. Most souls found some semblance of peace after death. But not Dimithinia. She hadn't been allowed peace in her human life, and her pain had stayed with her in death. Pain he was partly responsible for. Pain he was determined to do anything to get rid of.

Dyletri looked up just as Crius pierced him with a pupiless, silver stare. Even with that physical deformity, Dyletri knew Crius had no problem seeing what was before him. "And you are still determined to go through with this?"

Dyletri glared at him, jaw twitching. "The *Prophexia* is being born as we speak."

Crius's tone was hard. "She is an innocent. Are you really determined to sacrifice an innocent, who has *never* lived before, for a soul that is stained?"

Dyletri's temper snapped. He felt enough guilt without the reminder. It wasn't as if he had a choice. He'd made a decision born of grief and anger.

The sacrifice had to be followed through now or else the Fates would do what they did best. They would destroy in a way even the Aviraji would never be able to accomplish. He'd promised those energies a life. A soul for a soul. It was the most binding promise he'd ever made.

Succeed and Dimithinia's return would be realized. Fail and watch millions of innocents get killed because of his idiocy.

Fuck.

He had condemned a girl before she'd even come into existence, and there was nothing he could do to stop it. The unfairness of it all caused him to lash out.

“How dare you question me? The only reason Dimithinia did what she did was because of me. She killed because I failed to help her. I would think, given how you fucking feel about her, that you would understand!”

Crius’s face was impassive, and his arms were crossed behind his back. “I never knew her as you did. All I know is the soul.”

Dyletri looked away, feeling the heaviness of his burden. “If Dimithinia stays in there, she will always be tormented. She will always suffer.”

Crius’s expression became harsh. “What do you plan to do to ease her suffering? What *can* you possibly do when you’re the very thing that pushed her over the edge? Do you not think it bothers me to see her like that? *I* can hear her. *I* am the one who bears her pain, and has for thousands of years.”

Dyletri swallowed back aggravation at that statement. It wasn’t Crius’s fault he had the ability to hear her while Dyletri could not. After all, he was lord of this realm. Dimithinia’s voice wasn’t the only voice he was able to hear. Crius heard the voices of all the dead and most of the living—and it was definitely not something he’d asked for.

Dyletri knew Crius would give anything to rid himself of that ability on most days.

“The child is innocent, Dyletri,” Crius said, his voice softening.

Dyletri stared at the *Aristi* holding Dimithinia’s soul. “I know. But I have to go through with this, Crius. We both know I’m bound by my promise and what will happen if I fail to do this. Besides, I am free now, and I can give Dimithinia everything I couldn’t give her before. I can give her my affections without her having to share me with anyone.”

“The only reason you are free is because you, like so many others, have turned your back on your duties.”

“And because the ones who gave me my damned purpose in the first place betrayed us all!”

“Be that as it may, I still think it’s wrong. I can see your thoughts in ways even you cannot, and I can guarantee that you’re doing this for the wrong reasons. You don’t feel as you think you do. But for your sake, I hope that this works out for the best, my friend.”

CHAPTER 2

Present day

-Earth. Astoria, Queens, NY. (USA)

“Heading home to enjoy the vibe I got you for your b-day? It’s been three days, woman. When am I getting that rambling, delighted review? I got you the best bullet in the whole damned store.”

Ismini leveled a glare at her best friend, Evesse, as she slipped on her hoodie. Evesse was unapologetic, raising an eyebrow and waiting for an answer.

“Leave her alone, Eve.” Soleria, Ismini’s second closest friend and boss, stepped out of the back of her restaurant smiling. “The girl is just awakening to the marvels of the ‘electric’ world.” She winked at Ismini, her baby blues playful against the backdrop of her perfect skin and dark red hair.

Evesse laughed as well, earning another scowl from Ismini. It was moments like these that she felt transparent. Straight-up gossamer. She felt as if Eve could see every hidden fantasy inside her and the *god* that they revolved around, even though she didn’t know anything about Ismini’s secrets.

Ismini had been seeing Dyletri’s image since she was a child, almost going back as far as she could remember. Back then—when Nylicia, Watcher of Destinies, had first come to Ismini in her dreams—she’d had an odd fascination with the being who had long ago sealed her fate. Obviously, that fascination had morphed into something different once she’d become a woman.

He was the one her fantasies featured whenever she used the damned vibe, much to her shame and embarrassment. It wasn’t as if she could control it, though. The man was delicious in a way only a real god could be, and he haunted her despite her attempts to forget him.

Having orgasms while thinking about the man who’s not only supposed to kill you, but who is doing it to resurrect the love of his life. Real nice, Iss. Real nice.

“I swear, you’re happier about me having that vibe than I am.”

“You’re such a liar.” Eve flipped her off, then turned to head back toward the cash register.

Ismini returned the gesture and threw a little kiss to the brunette’s back as she walked away. Soleria laughed and waved goodbye.

She walked through the door and paused right outside, knowing this would be the last time she saw them. And she couldn’t even tell them. Dyletri would be coming for her tonight and he was going to use her as a freaking sacrifice.

Evesse and Soleria would never know that she’d died. Or how it had happened. They would worry and probably call the FBI to try and find her. Her breath hitched for a brief second at the thought. She had to fight the urge to run back in and hug them both. Thank them for being two of the few people who’d ever really cared for her. They had done so much for her.

Don’t think about it. Just act like everything’s normal. Let it go.

She tried. Hard. She tried to remind herself that, thanks to Nylicia, she knew what her future entailed. Or more accurately, that she wouldn’t have one. She just walked down the street and pretended she wasn’t heading home to wait for god who would lead her to her death.

Fear threatened to overwhelm her thoughts, but she was determined to ignore it. She crossed the street, fighting the tremors that wanted to break forth. A shiver slid along her back, making her stop.

What the hell? Ismini peeked over her shoulder, and her eyes widened. Two tall men were coming toward her, and one had . . . blue skin? And the other one had *leathery* beige skin. What the fuck? She looked from side to side, but no one else was around. No way to tell if she was the only one seeing those things or not. One more look at what was heading toward her was all it took. Every instinct in her body screamed at her to flee. She wasn’t stupid enough to ignore her gut. No way. Adrenaline rushed through her. One breath later, she took off, running as fast as she was able in the opposite direction. Away from her apartment building.

She had no idea what they were, but even as she flew down the street, she knew their presence was no coincidence. The fact that this was the day she'd been waiting for—and dreading—for years, was just too convenient. She wondered where the hell Dyletri was. Nobody said shit about monsters coming for her.

“If I told you this was waiting for you on the other side . . . would you follow me through?”

Mm-hmm. Yeah. Smart. Follow her through. Yes, follow Nylicia into the dark portal leading into the dream world all because the goddess had dangled the sexiest thing Ismini had ever seen in front of her. Wonderful idea.

If I told you this was waiting . . .

The words flashed through her head again, a taunting echo.

No, Ismini, she told herself. Don't think back on it. Just keep running!

Her footsteps pounded. Breathing was becoming more difficult. For the

first time since she'd started working out, Ismini was grateful she'd listened to Evesse and had gotten her lazy ass in shape.

A sharp turn almost sent her skidding straight into the asphalt. Ismini crashed into the side of the building and pushed away. Thankful her ribs weren't cramping yet, she pumped her legs harder and tried to keep the panic down.

“I'm sorry, Ismini. But the time is upon you. He draws near,” Nylicia had told her this the night before in her dreams, her voice carrying like the faintest of winds. Was this what Nylicia meant?

Because the two weird motherfuckers who were after her looked nothing like Dyletri. The few times she'd seen him, she'd thought him beyond sexy.

Unreal. The things behind her were *rotten!* They weren't like anything she'd ever seen in her dreams before.

Ismini thought she might be able to take them down thanks to her kickboxing training, but that was wishful thinking. There were two of them and they were huge. Not to mention fuck-ugly and unnatural. Something deep down told her she'd never win against them, and damn it, she was listening.

She cut through an alley and ran headlong into another. *What the fuck is going on?* Her whole life she'd been groomed by Nylicia, visited in her dreams, prepared to wait for Dyletri to come and get her so she could be sacrificed. So why, on the day he was supposed to come, were those *things* coming for her, too?

She had to die in order to prevent the Fates from going rabid on the Universe. She knew this. Wasn't happy about it, but had accepted it.

But really, was it necessary to throw the two puke-inducing things behind her into the mix?

More of Nylicia's words came to mind.

"Remember one thing. Life tends to throw at you the most painful of lessons in order to forge your soul and prepare you for your destiny."

Yeah, well, screw life lessons. This was just unfair. While she ran until she was out of breath, those two things seemed to be merely walking.

Come on, Destiny. Give a girl a break!

With her ribs starting to cramp, Ismini knew it wouldn't be long before running became unbearable. She reconsidered stopping to fight. Should she continue running and put herself at a disadvantage? Or should she just stop and show them they'd just fucked with the wrong girl?

Sure, she was confident in her self-defense abilities and had a few years of sparring under her belt, but could she really hold her own against two whatever-the-fuck-they-weres? Maybe if she wasn't about to double over. But right now?

Probably not.

Out of nowhere, she heard a voice calling out to her. Screaming her name and demanding that she stop.

Her heart lurched in her already heaving chest at the sound. For all she knew, it belonged to one of things following her, but something inside her told her otherwise. Her whole body suddenly screeched, urging her to stop.

Her fear of the things following her faded, and she slowed to a halt. Eyes wide and searching, she braced herself with one hand against a brick wall. The other clutched at her chest as another roar went through her body, nearly knocking her off her feet.

“Ismini!”

That voice. Gods help her, *who* was that?

She could guess. She wasn’t sure how, but she had a feeling she already knew.

With each painful thump of her heart, Ismini became more certain of who was approaching her. Someway, somehow, her body recognized that voice.

A figure appeared right next to her, seeming to poof into existence out of thin air. She gasped in shock, as a large hand landed on her shoulder and she felt a series of short electrical impulses through her. As if a live wire had ripped through her hoodie and gone straight to her skin.

She shivered, the sensation spreading along her flesh. The world tilted, her perception bending in on itself, and her reality morphed. Pain exploded inside her. Whoever, whatever, was holding her turned her, steadying her.

Ismini’s eyes widened in surprise when they met the powerful, blue gaze in front of her. Her tremors doubled. Towering over her was Dyletri.

Dyletri.