Jarah looked her final pupil in the eye and said, "Remember, child: The Gods are under our control."

Slhodin stared, his pale face tear- and sweat-streaked. He swallowed back his fear. "Yes, Jarah-Ko. They are under our control."

She smiled at him, her heart breaking. His death would come soon--everyone's would, eventually, of course, but few would Exalt during the End Times. Without Exaltation, Slhodin would likely die a permanent death. Even if, somehow, he were to survive his Journey and reincarnate, what world would exist for him to return to?

That understanding made her sad.

Overhead, the sky--already a prism of dark colors, each clashing among violent black clouds--seemed to crumble. "Another comes," she said, stepping out from beneath the rock. She clutched the two most important items she had: One, the token with which she controlled the gods; the other, the trimmed curl of Lillah's hair, taken from her just before she had reached the Age of Remembering. How had those ten years gone so quickly? Jarah rarely thought of Lillah as anything other than a babe, nestled against her breast and sleeping the emphatic sleep of the newborn.

Jarah doubted she would see her daughter again. Not when the Gods fought, not when she had so little energy, so little emotion left. She would have to use Slhodin, and that also saddened her. She kicked the thought to one side. Dying now meant she would never make it back to the world. They had too little time left. If she wanted to make a difference, she would have to focus and survive now--with or without Slhodin or Lillah, or anyone else.

That was the cold reality.

The broken sky quivered, then began to realign itself. Wind tore about her and Slhodin, nearly knocking them to the grass-covered hillside as it congealed into a solid form. "Lythra," she whispered, frustrated. "How did they gain sway over you?"

Slhodin stumbled next to his teacher. "What are we supposed to do?"

"Llodan can't be reached. They killed Kurnos," she said, pulling the token up and clicking it from rune to rune as she mused, each a symbol of the emotion she could manipulate. Invoking a God required many factors which, she supposed, was a good thing. The idea of people casually or accidentally Invoking a God chilled her.

"Don't you mean Dismissed?" asked Slhodin. She could hear the desperation in his voice. Gods didn't die...usually.

"Deicide is real," she said with a wry, mirthless smile.

"You never told me that." He sounded deflated.

"It was to be your last lesson." She glanced up at Lythra, who had now pulled enough air to Her to form three legs. "Surprise."

Slhodin pursed his lips, his eyes diamonding with tears. He drew in a deep breath and nodded. He foresaw his own end, she could see that. "Then who else is there to control but Orgos? He's a fourth-tier. Lythra is almost a fifth!"

Jarah watched Lythra's claws shimmer into a windy reality. Fifth-tier Gods didn't actually exist, but Slhodin had a point. He'd always understood deific theory well. A Goddess like Lythra, one that blended fourth-tier emotions, was the most dangerous God one could Invoke. If she were to live, she would have to do something desperate.

"I guess we've no choice." She glanced up, staring at Slhodin. She couldn't get sentimental. He knew what he would have to do.

Both teacher and student spun their tokens to the appropriate rune. When Gods fought, what choice did mortals have? Even the God of Rage would find Himself Invoked and thrust into the world to fight--and maybe even die.

Upon landing on Orgos' rune--a vertical line with two sharp spurs coming off diagonally on each side, the left one slightly higher than the right--they clasped hands and drove their fingernails into the runes. The familiar feeling of resistance and then a *pop* rippled through Jarah's hand. A surge of power burst outward from the seals that the tokens had broken, a sphere of energy that caused the mud-stained clothes to snap and strain. She summoned her own rage. Giving it place in her heart, she resonated with the God, letting His rage pull into her own. She drew on the loss of Lillah--her most frequent focus for Invoking Gods--and let that anger heat to the rage that Orgos would recognize.

Their wills began to meld, and only Jarah's long training allowed her to keep her superior mind in place. Slhodin struggled to help, but his own experience wasn't deep enough to give him the emotional strength he needed to help her.

The earth to Jarah's left split with a gut-watering crack. Slhodin flinched and almost fell. Jarah tightened her grip. Breaking contact now would prove fatal for both, with Neverwhere as the only result. Slhodin steadied. He met her gaze, then nodded. "I'll be all right," he said, staring at the chasm they'd made.

She didn't believe him. He knew the End of Times meant he could never come back. He had only just passed his own Age of Remembering. How could she ask him to do this?

She followed his eyes, her own widening as the ground roiled with what looked like maggots, all a fiery orange. They spasmed, cracking the stones nearby. It sounded like a pot of grease sizzling, only louder. Dust drifted up from each new abuse, only to whip away toward Lythra. The Goddess of Despair--where terror and grief intersected-- had finished her formation. It would only take Her a few moments to recognize the energy of another arriving God.

In more than one way they had run out of time.

"Slhodin!"

The pupil gritted his teeth. He knew what he had to do. Jarah pushed away any emotion of watching her last student suicide. When mortals fought, creation died. It was one of the Virtues. She had to let him go. At least this way, he could begin his Journey to reincarnate. Perhaps he'd come back as her great-great grandchild. She'd like that.

His blonde hair, darkened by the mud and blood they'd waded through, whipped about as he redirected his energy. His brown eyes darkened and a black mist leaked from his mouth. Somehow, despite his thinness, his face contracted, as though his skeleton planned on tearing through him.

A guttural groan tore through the air, louder than the whirling wind or the crushing rocks. In a burst of sound that she felt more than heard, Jarah slipped and tumbled over, her token bouncing and spinning away.

The spiritual energy of Slhodin's sacrifice spurred Orgos' arrival, spiking Jarah's ability to Invoke and ensuring the fourth-tier God would bow to her will. In a hiss of orange light, the God erupted from the fissure.

Orgos did not look human-like, though all Gods were made in the general mold of mortals. Jarah, though revolted, knew better than to look away from Orgos' nauseating form. By finding that aspect of the almost-human, she would know how to control the God.

Like a mound of writhing snakes, each a searing orange that turned and writhed on top of each other, Orgos rose. She thought, for a moment, she saw the pseudopodia congeal into a nose, but that proved only a trick of the light. An ear? No, not that either. Then, at last, she saw it: A mouth, with tongue and teeth. She could control Orgos with her words. What she needed to say, however, she didn't know.

Orgos, having gorged on the soul of Slhodin, could now engage with His hated enemy, Lythra. In fact, *all* Gods hated each other, regardless of how their mortal summoned Them. This protected the mortals, and Jarah whispered thanks to her own blood for that. Lythra had noticed her, but the death of Slhodin had prevented Her from reaching down with Her massive pincers of air and cutting Jarah in two. Now that Orgos had arrived, Lythra would ignore Jarah, fighting until either Dismissed by Her mortal, or Orgos drove all of the energy from Her form, thus sending Her back.

Or, if Jarah could find the mortal who had brought forth Lythra and kill that person, the Goddess would die.

Deicide.

Jarah swallowed. She'd never done that before.

Lythra reached out with one of Her right hands and grabbed Orgos. Her left claw sharpened and drove itself into Orgos' main mass. The mouth Jarah had seen earlier opened in surprise and pain--and rage, of course. Orgos could do nothing but that He did it with rage. The Goddess of Despair wrenched her claw free--a two-pronged claw with a joint in the middle at least as tall as Jarah--tearing a gash in Orgos' writhing body. A spray of orange worms and the dark ichor of a God cascaded down, drenching the area with its viscous fluids. Jarah gasped and covered her head, the heat from the ichor burning at her flesh.

In a panic, Jarah hurled herself from the rocky precipice, leaving Slhodin's body to melt in the puddle of a God's blood. Not too far away, Jarah had crossed a shallow stream to get to where she thought she and Slhodin might be safe. She returned to that same stream now, splashing in, heedless of the possibility of a gunarcher from the Empire sighting her and taking a shot. The pain drove her on.

Her fur-lined hat slipped off her head. The thick fibers of the fur had caught a great deal of the scarring ichor, protecting much of her face. The large overskirt that went from shoulders to her knees likewise absorbed the danger. She had not put her hands back into their leather gloves after using her token--a mistake she now suffered for. The pain in her hands glowed, and she could swear she heard her skin hiss.

The water calmed the pain and washed the ichor away easily, though all of the dead fibers touched by the God's blood dissolved, leaving her skin mottled and the dark hair on her head patchy. Not for the first time, Jarah thanked her own blood for the slanted shape of her eyes, which had prevented the ichor from burning out her eyes.

Standing up from the stream, Jarah felt much of her outer clothing slough off, molting into the stream with a gurgle as the ichor choked in the water. She ignored it. The cold bite of the wind made her teeth chatter, but she chose to focus on her God instead. A God demanded her attention more than the lost silks.

Scarred hands balled into fists and she hurried back to where she could see the Gods' battle. Theomancy relied on proximity and manipulation via the component part. She could see Orgos losing another chunk of Himself to Lythra's claws--Her other five hands swung down in punishing arcs, smashing away more and more of Orgos' form--and she knew He would lose if she didn't do something quickly.

Drawing in a ragged breath, Jarah began to think as loudly as she could. Before long, she shouted it, too. "My mouth is Yours! I speak the rage of Your existence! Do not bow before Her!" Whatever encouragement she could create, Jarah delivered. She willed her mouth to be His mouth, for her will to be His.

Slowly, the feeling of control poured over her. She steadied herself on a boulder not too far from where the remains of Slhodin steamed, watching the theopolemic explode before her.

Orgos's devotion to the mortal improved and focused His rage. Yes, He had lost a lot of ichor, and much of His worm-like form had broken free and shriveled on the ground. Now, however, Jarah could feel through Him and her pain, desire, and ambition drove Orgos into a frenzy.

Lythra lunged at him, her two forefeet landing with an earth-trembling crash. Her human-like hands reached out, grasping. The large claw, each snap sending a miniature gale outward, thundered as it swung in.

Orgos opened a hole in Himself, letting the claw pass through uninhibited.

The lack of connection threw Lythra off balance, and She fell into Orgos' multi-tendril embrace. Hot pseudopodia, like flaming tongs of a whip, spun about the Goddess of Despair, catching themselves in Her wind and burning Her form. The hole in Orgos' center sealed tightly, burning through Her arm and sending the claw crashing toward the earth in a mist of dark ichor.

Just as it collided, the Goddess' ceased to control the matter that had formed Her, and the claw dissolved into a massive rush of air. Fortunately for Jarah, Orgos' form blocked the hurricane-like winds.

Though Lythra had no voice--Her hands made the connection with Her mortal, Jarah could see--the ground vibrated with the Goddess' pain and fury. Hands, each finger longer than a horse, grasped at Orgos' amorphous being, tearing away chunks in geysers of ichor. Jarah took greater care to avoid any falling drops by ducking beneath a boulder with a slight overhang. The amount of ichor that cascaded about her could, had she bothered to harvest it, give her enough money to retire for two lifetimes--possibly three, depending on inflation. But the idea of stooping to the level of an Akathar kept the thought firmly in the realm of whimsy. A Teka like her, stooping to try to preserve the ichor of a God, was a revolting image. She shouldered it from her mind and focused on a continued manipulation of the God.

Far away, armies raged, cannon belched, gunarchers fletched, and soldiers speared through ranks of enemies. On this hillock, only the howling of the wind, the mourning of the Gods, and the tremors of their power could be felt.

Jarah had never been more alive, nor more frightened, in all her life. She shivered, her water-drenched body reacting poorly to the wind. "No time, no worry for that," she said under her breath.

Orgos roared in rage, His primary emotion fueling his counterattack. A tendril the width and length of a tree formed off to one side, sweeping toward Lythra at a speed that Jarah could hardly see. The Goddess took the blow with one arm, the limb severing at the shoulder. The mass of whirling colors and wind from which the limbs came shuddered at the impact, and a gush of ichor spiraled away from the lost arm. This limb, too, dissolved in a gush of air upon striking the ground. Puddles of ichor hissed as they bubbled and eroded the battlefield, chewing at rock and grass with equal relish.

Orgos' tendril, however, had not finished the attack without damage to it. Where the pseudopod had connected, a massive crack formed, shattering the length of the stiffened form. From each crack jetted more ichor, the dark fluid falling like rain. Jarah scooted back, her fur-lined boots hissing as they absorbed the God's blood.

If she didn't end this quickly, she'd drown in an acidic flood.

Redoubling her intention, she forced Orgos to lurch forward, spreading His tendrils outward as much as possible.

This proved foolish, as Lythra countered by punching through Him--each strike a thunderclap--perforating the God like a gunarcher's practice dummy. Orgos collapsed to one side, a heap of angry orange worms, bleeding from each hole.

Jarah thanked her blood that He fell on the far side of where she hid.

Jumping onto the boulder, she focused on the fallen God. Wind whipped her hair and made her shiver again, but she ignored it--ignored where the ichor had melted through her clothing, leaving sensitive skin exposed, ignored the cold heat in her hands where she could almost feel the scars forming--and shouted at her God. "Get up. Get up and *bite*." In an expression of empathy, she gnashed her own teeth. "Bite!"

Orgos' mouth quivered in pain. He wanted to be Dismissed.

Jarah refused.

The God begged and pleaded.

The mortal refused to grant Him mercy.

"Stand up and *bite!"*

Lythra spun toward Jarah.

The movement broke Jarah's concentration. Gods couldn't do that. They couldn't stop their hatred for each other and focus on the Teka nearby. Jarah refused to believe it, until the hand--the palm bigger than her home tent--reached toward her, the edges shimmering as air created the form.

"What?" was all she could think to say.

Then the hand closed around her and Jarah felt the air rush free of her lungs.

The swirling vortex that enveloped her tore into her eyes, freeing tears from them and robbing her mouth of air. She felt the pressure of suffocation pushing into her chest. Panic accompanied the feeling of weightlessness as her world started to fade.

The darkness lifted as Lythra soundlessly screeched and disappeared, Her form trembling once before returning the crumbled sky to its proper place. Jarah landed with a teeth-crunching thud, her lungs abused and forgetful. It took a moment to regain her breath and her feet. As she did, Orgos, a mass of ichor pouring down his jaws, roared his victory. His rage thundered through Jarah's mind, and the familiar devotion to a mortal bound the two together more strongly. She had never Invoked Orgos before, as she feared His rage too great for her.

Remembering Slhodin's sacrifice, she knew her fears were well founded. Without her pupil's willingness to die, she never would have survived. His loss picked at her, and she allowed herself, now that the theopolemic had ended, a long moment of silence to wish him well through the AfterWorld. Her last visit there had been surprisingly brief, and she hoped the same for Slhodin. His sacrifice had saved her, and for that she was grateful.

And how had she survived? Now that she and Orgos had some devotion to each other, she could pick through what she loosely considered His memories. She did so now, letting the pride at His victory quell His desire for her to Dismiss Him.

Yes, there...she saw it. Lythra had scooped her up and removed all of the air from Jarah's lungs. Too distracted, Lythra failed to notice Orgos regaining his form and unhinging His jaws. With a mouth large enough to swallow half a dozen horses, Orgos had bitten through Lythra's turbulent midsection. The massive damage had overpowered Her manipulator and the Goddess Herself, Dismissing Her just as Jarah had regained consciousness. Jarah had only missed a few moments of the battle.

That explained why she still lived. Passing out during a theopolemic usually meant death--and not one that would lend itself toward Exaltation.

Jarah thanked her blood for the mercy.

Orgos, His body leaking ichor from countless wounds, emoted to His mortal the desire for Dismissal. Jarah sighed, then cast about for her token. She needed that to put Orgos back whence He came.

She couldn't find it.

Spinning, she scoured the dusty hillock on which she had conducted the battle. The sounds of distant Gods fighting and the numbing rumble of war failed to draw her attention away from her search. Without Lythra summoning more and more wind to keep Her form, the boulder-strewn hill was almost peaceful.

Nevertheless, Jarah felt more panic than anything else. Orgos sensed her distress and began to pressure her, making for a larger distraction than she needed. At last, she snapped her jaws closed, the effect hurting her jaw and causing a spasm of pain through Orgos. The God's rage flared, but mortal pain cowed the Gods; They rarely needed more than one direct reminder of what a mortal could do to Them before They obeyed readily.

Orgos tamed--for the nonce--Jarah focused again on her search. She began patting down her pouches, seeking the token where she normally stored it.

She couldn't find it.

The panic grew, yet it did nothing to help her. She had lost her token.

Then, with a fist of regret that drove her to her knees, Jarah realized that she had lost Lillah's hair.

"The stream..." she said, retracing all that had happened in the battle. "Oh, my blood! Oh, mercy..." Stumbling, she half ran, half fell toward the stream. Orgos towered behind her, sensing her emotions and feeling only confusion in His Godly mind.

The water didn't flow very quickly, nor had the theopolemic lasted long. Yet the ichor she'd washed off herself didn't remain. Further downstream from where she'd entered, a sticky remnant of her overskirt and some of her hair had gotten clumped in the grass. Frantic, she dug through it, ignoring the residual pain the ichor dealt her traumatized fingers.

"No, please," she said, her mind awash with memories of Lillah, her laugh, her perfectly shaped eyes--just like her mother's--her acres of dark hair and warm brown skin. All she had of the girl was that curl. "No! Blood's mercy, no!"

Sobs overcame her exhaustion and stress, and Jarah sank into the cold stream, hot tears coursing down her now-scarred cheeks. A wordless scream of rage at the injustices of the world broke from her, a cry that echoed and reverberated over the battlefield.

For a moment, Jarah couldn't imagine what had moved with her so deeply. Then she saw Orgos, far away yet, in His immense height, seemingly so close. His orange flesh flickered. His faceless head looked at her, and around the enormous, ichor-flecked jaws, she thought she saw a pitying frown.

The confusion overpowered her emotions, and she stood, water dripping off the tatters of her silken tunic. "Did...did you...?" She didn't even know how to ask the question.

Shaking her head, she headed back to Slhodin's body. "What am I thinking? Gods can't feel what mortals do."

Mud squishing through the holes in her shoes, Jarah climbed back to the boulder-built hillock. There, next to Slhodin's skeletal hand, lay his token. Since he had used it to Invoke Orgos, it would work to Dismiss the God now.

She looked at the token for a long moment. Orgos had approached, His rage quelled without another God to battle, His fifty-horse-lengths' height towering over her. The earth shifted a little whenever he moved, as he did now, in preparation for returning to the chasm.

The emptiness of knowing she'd lost Lillah again crept into her heart. She had long ago given up on loving anyone else. But Lillah--the girl had been her mother's breath, her heart's heart. Losing the lock of hair had been like losing her again.

Tears crept into her eyes and, in her own pique of rage, she snapped the token closed, Dismissing the God.

As Orgos slid back into His home chasm, she thought she heard Him speak. "Jarah."

Gasping, she raised her eyes. Gods didn't talk. They couldn't--They weren't mortal, so how could They? She stared at the immense jaws passing down into the earth. Then the mouth moved, His words throbbing over the hurt of her heartache:

"I'm sorry."

The chasm puckered over, a massive, stony scar on the hillock's side. The kaleidoscope of colors above her battle faded, as the Invocation of a God no longer happened there. A trickle of sunlight leaked over the scene.

Jarah-Ko, the teacher, the mother, the Teka, stood, bewildered and alone. "But...Gods can't talk."