With Ash as the first incarnation, he is the one with natural parents and his transition into a girl begins with a secret desire to be one. He takes advantage of his time at the academy to find a way to change into the girl he wants to be.

As a reincarnation of the girl, the boy had an unconscious desire to be her. His spirit was responsive to many masculine influences, but he was naturally predisposed toward feminine influences. It was an ordeal for him to be attracted to her and believe she was the girl he wanted to be with, in spite of the fact that she was the girl he wanted to be. It was more a case that, if he could not be her, he had to be with her—until he had been with her and discoverd the agony of loving her and hating himself for it.

In the northwest kingdoms, women had a respectable degree of equality and independence in spite of having slightly less opportunity and authority than men. It was still a male–dominated society, but one where a transgendered person could quietly resolve the problem using magic to disguise or transform as needed—and thus remain unnoticed by society if they were careful. Many lived dual lives, forced to maintain the lives and obligations they were born to and compelled to create the lives they wanted. They often found the answers they were looking for hidden where only those with similar problems would go looking for them.

The boy followed the pattern, as an academy initiate, seeking out magic that allowed him to experiment, with varing degrees of delight and dissatisfaction. He discovered that it made a significant difference to be perceived as a girl, but even more to perceive himself as a girl, to actually be female; but even that was not enough. By simply becoming female, he turned into an uncanny twin of the girl and ran a high risk of being mistaken for her.

The main benefit of starting with a male incarnation intent on becoming female is the opportunity to explore the full implications of his identity conflict. Feeling that he had been born the wrong sex leads him to consider that everything about him might be wrong, if a detail as important as that was incorrect. This would prompt him to explore the question and confront his true feelings about the girl of his dreams. Though the paladin’s ring serves to introduce a demon of the goddess and facilitate the boy’s transformation, if he does not start out as the male version of the girl he ought to be, it would not provide him with the means to change any other physical traits.

In a few ways, the girl was a threat to his self image; he had no choice but to struggle with his conscience and search his soul to determine that the only way to be true to himself was to become her twin.

Because so much of the plot is dependent upon the paladin’s ring, it makes more sense to present the implications of his identity conflict as a deterrent. It is enough that his parents conceived an almost perfect embodiment of his soul—and the problem was not that he was born a boy, but that he could only realize half of his human potential as a boy. The ordeal of the ring simply proves that he had to be a girl to reach his full potential. The other problem was one that troubled him before, turning into a girl was not the same as being born and growing up as one. Ash could never be Ember—or so he had every reason to believe. He needed to finish the ordeal and go back to being Ash.

So, Ash accepts Ember’s proposal to complete the ordeal, and they return to normal. When Ember is arrested on suspicion of Clay’s murder, Ash retrieves the ring and seeks her out on the island prison, determined to trade places with her. The demon usurps his plan, but is distracted from simply killing her to take her place when it tastes her mind. This buys Ash time to get the paladin’s help to seize control of the demon. As it happens, by taking possession of the demon warped into a weapon against the goddess, Ash inherited the compulsion to devour the mind of the goddess, effectively making herself the focus of the demon of the realm.

The boy was confronted with the news that his mother had arranged for him to marry a distant cousin about the same time his ordeal with the ring began. As an infant, he had spent a fair amount of his time in the home of his mother’s mentor—her aunt, and also the girl’s grandmother. As cousins, the boy’s mother and the girl’s mother were the heirs to the titles and legacy that had been divided between their parents. A union between the boy and the girl was proposed to restore their house.

A male incarnation.

Ash was the son of a muse.

As a child, Ash had a feminine predisposition and suffered for his tendency to act like a girl.

At the academy, Ash was taunted by the boys for being mistaken for a girl.

Ash was torn, part of him was furious over the taunts but part of him wished he was was one.

Ember was sympathetic, taking his side and becoming his best friend.

Ash took advantage of opportunities his friendship with Ember gave him to explore being a girl.

It was not enough to be perceived as a girl, though it was easy to convince people he was one by simply dressing the part.

Even an illusion good enough to pass as a girl, naked, was disappointing; it only made him more conscious of what he was.

A spell to perfectly immitate the form of a real girl only caused him to be mistaken for the girl he posed as.

As Ash and Ember grew older, their friendship evolved into courtship.

In spite of himself, Ash could not decide if he truly wanted Ember, or if he just wanted to be Ember.