Child of Paradox — A Different Split-Incarnation Origin

The idea occurred to me that the girl can become her own mother by virtue of attempting to reincarnate her mother using parthenogenesis. Because this occurred after she resurrected herself, she unwittingly establishes her genetic origin by creating a new body from scratch. The paradox of being her own mother is resolved in an instance of true self-conception. The male incarnation of her however was a new incarnation of her, conceived by the dragon, who was trapped in her mind when the demon within stole his body. He had haunted her through her passage in time, through the rift, to a point in the past where the two realities split because of these twin incarnations. Because of this, the two incarnations of her share the same worldline up to the point of their conception. Originally, the girl slipped through the rift when she was seven to escape from the Phoenix Gate Massacre. From that point on she would have existed in the boy’s timeline. The shared timeline means that she can be identified as the daughter of her future self who was looped back into the past they both shared. So even though they were not actually twins in the literal sense, they were recognized as twins when the girl was discovered in the boy’s timeline. Technically, this isn't entirely necessary, since the alternative is for the dragon and the phoenix to be split, after which, each becomes the cause of a separate incarnation. The thread is just simpler, and more natural, if the dragon and the phoenix still share her body. By that point, they have worked out their shared existence with the dragon exploiting her male form.

In this approach, the goddess and the dragon can recapture the key elements of the Aegis Origin featured in The Threshold: Eve of Paradox. This keeps the origin of the demon as a perversion of a shadow of the goddess, a dark-phoenix to oppose the phoenix. The dark-phoenix remains an embodiment of the goddess’s soul created in the Cataclysm that ended the Age of the Gods. That was when the phoenix was corrupted in a plot against the dragon that originated from the underworld of the Aegis. The Cataclysm was triggered by the phoenix casting out the dark-phoenix, the version of herself infected by agents of the unknown author of the plot to enslave the dragon in order to compromise the security he provided for the Threshold and the government of the Aegis. Thus, the dark-phoenix falls into the pattern of fallen angels, demons who were rejected by the psyches that inspired them and forced to exploit other souls for the means to challenge the hosts of their own souls. Spawned by a virus designed to enslave minds, the demon is able to infect the souls of the hosts it passes through, leaving them dominated by their own dark-phoenixes when it moved on to new hosts. Its failure to complete its mission marked the phoenix as its prime adversary, so it worked to undermine her position in a long scheme to destroy her and complete its mission to enslave the dragon. This path culminates in the Phoenix Gate Massacre and her assimilation of the dark-phoenix, her demon-within.

Her struggle with her inner demon forces her to return to her birthplace and uncover what truly happened that night. There, she ultimately leads her party into the eye of paradox. This has become the other point of departure for her loop into the past; the one that allows her to enter the worldline her splinter timelines branched off from. Their experiences in the shattered realms reveal the deeper truths the technology of the Aegis tapped into to create The Threshold. The implication becomes undeniable when an Aegis Fleet is encountered in the shattered realms, torn from their native realm by a fleet-wide cyber-attack on the ships’ hyperdrives. The girl’s party joins the fleet in their effort to navigate the chaos of the shattered realms, seeking a way back to one of their native realms. As trained rift-walkers, the dragon and the phoenix, lead the search and eventually find a way back to Aeirn. The only catch was that the path they found was to a point in their worldlines’ past. As natives displaced from Aeirn’s future, the girl and her party become the prime agents of the alliance they help rescue from the shattered realms, made up of beings from a score of worlds lost to paradox. The circumstances confirm that the dragon, who was the girl’s main supporter in this endeavor, would go on to devour her in the future, a major turning point in her past. Her path out of the eye of paradox leads to her recognition as an avatar of the phoenix, forcing her to assume the role of her mother as she is pulled into the conflict facing the Phoenix House, orchestrated by the dark-phoenix.

The girl makes a natural assumption that the demon buried within her possesses the soul of her mother, leading her to conspire with the dragon within her to resurrect her using a talent he possessed. A child of the phoenix legacy, like her, could conceive a new incarnation of herself, parthenogenically, while a dragon used a similar gift to reincarnate others. Their combined attempt to resurrect her mother split the timeline; in each, the child conceived was, in her case, the first, mortal incarnation of the phoenix. In his case, the girl was reincarnated, leaving the dragon in sole possession of her body. He would raise the boy she becomes in one timeline while she became her own mother in the other. Obviously, it is the following events that force her to realize what has happened and the paradox of her existence becomes clear. The goddess can see it all unfolding, able to exist simultaneously in multiple worldlines. She serves as a go-between for the dragon and the phoenix the girl has fully become, as they find themselves in opposing worldlines. Though cut off from him, the phoenix finds comfort in knowing he has been resurrected. He observes that what they know changes their understanding of her mother’s—her future—death. Tracing her path through the eye of paradox, they cannot deny she is her own mother, and that she also returns to herself, reincarnated by him as the boy who merged with her in their past. The paradox was what allowed her to take possession of the demon when it tried to possess her as a child. So, the soul she grasped to incarnate her daughter-self had to be the soul the demon spawned from. That had been the phoenix.

When the girl was devoured by that dragon, the year before her return to Phoenix Gate at seventeen, she had fully assimilated the boy she is reborn as, thanks to the dragon and the splinter of reality he unwittingly created. In the immediate present, her future self coexisted seamlessly with her current self. At the point where she is supposed to die, the demon leaves her to possess her daughter. In which case, her phoenix potential might resurrect her in the splinter of reality she was now in. The one she was originally born in. It was a different world, cut off from the one she lived in following her escape from it the night of the massacre. A world she could have a real future in, if her resurrection was possible. This new perspective finally shed some light on what must have happened when her demon seemed to escape her by stealing the dragon’s body before their loop through the eye of paradox. The question had always been, if the demon truly escaped, why did it force the dragon’s psyche into hers and why did it still seem to exist within her? Granted, the demon had the ability to leave its hosts corrupted by its presence when it moved on to another. That could not account for the dragon’s displacement, however. What if, instead of just possessing the dragon, it repeated the process it had with the phoenix in the Age of the Gods? What if, like her, it attempted to consume his soul, forcing his psyche to split as hers had in order to escape. In that case, his displacement was his fault, not the demon’s.

They could not know until the dragon caught up to the end of his own loop, in his native realm. According to this theory, the dragon’s corruption had been the demon’s true objective all along. It fit with the goddess’s instinct that her devouring had simply been a means to an end, a way to attack the dragon from a position he had no defense against and would never have suspected. Her destruction was necessary simply because she would never allow herself to betray him. If she was the creator of the realm of Aeirn, he was the god that coaxed her into existence on The Threshold. She only seemed to be the target of its malice for thousands of years. The dark-dragon that fled after stealing the dragon’s body had achieved what it was intended to and no longer had an imperative to destroy the phoenix. He was free to do his true masters’ bidding on The Threshold and across the Aegis. The existential threat the demons of Aeirn posed to Aeirn and the Aegis, was fully realized in the futures that lay ahead of them. The dragon had not just lost his body on Aeirn; he had lost his true body in his native realm along with it. From that perspective, the dark-dragon was outside the scope of time on Aeirn; eternity lay between Aeirn and the Aegis. The only way to stop his new nemesis was by confronting him on The Threshold or seeking a way through the shattered realms into his former reality. Rather than waiting and worrying about what it might do in their current realms, they needed to pay attention to what it did on the other side of eternity in the Aegis.

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Child of Paradox

Child of Paradox was intended to be an online comic/graphic novel about a girl discovering her own potential in a world torn by paradox. Her adventures start in a realm where gods still involve themselves in mortal affairs; where magic thrives and technology withered–kept alive in secret or in isolation. Logistically, the project required time and resources that were unavailable, so it remained in limbo for years. After reassembling the writing archives Child of Paradox was going to tap into, it became obvious that Eve of Paradox, Book I of The Threshold remained the key to everything. Through it, conflicts between The Threshold and Child of Paradox can be fully overcome, merging the two together. A fusion of ideas explored in both projects will form the new story and illustrations to go with the books in it will be less demanding than a proper web comic with regular releases. The Threshold will slip into the background, supporting the full realization of the story under the Child of Paradox banner.

Now that this project is currently in development, and this blog will be used to share work on the characters and events that shape the story. Although you can find work related to this project in my ArtStation portfolio, I will be adding a project specific gallery, some means of distributing premium “fundraising” content, and a flood of notes, as time permits.

A person standing on a grassy hill with colorful wings

AI-generated content may be incorrect.

Meet Avonlea, the Child of Paradox herself; a young adventurer born in a world torn by Paradox, facing the end of her days at the Academy and the beginning of an epic journey of painful enlightenment and self-discovery.

A glimpse of the path. Her story starts out in her final year of initiation at the academy, when her investigation of the massacre in which her mother died leads her to become involved once more in the underworld, where she had an unwitting apprenticeship in cat-burglary as a child, prior to her admission to the academy.

Her escape from the massacre, through the ruins of an ancient city buried beneath the port, city and outlying areas of Avon (after which she’s named), left her an orphan in the streets from the age of seven to nine. Her familiarity with the ruins of Aeslyn Tear was a close held secret until a traumatic flashback forced her to share the details of her childhood tragedy with two of her closest friends.

One of them, for serious reasons of his own, insisted on having her lead an expedition into the depths of Aeslyn Tear, prompting the lords of the underworld to target him for elimination, before his campaign to probe the ruins could be mounted.

I’ve set out a number of approaches to Child of Paradox over the years. Even recently, I’ve danced around my personal relationship with the evolution of the story, trying to deal with it in the characters’ context. I have had to know the whole thing to handle the paradoxical influences, in contrast to the perspectives of both readers and characters. Warning of spoilers ahead, here’s a glimpse into the story behind the story: In addition to other notions I’ve shared, this is a slightly different take on the story. The premise begins with the dream within my nightmare. My dream was always a search for a way to be myself. My nightmare was being trapped in a world where I didn’t really exist. My demon was originally an angel, but in pursuit of my dream, it became possessive and took a key role in reshaping my dream into a reality where I could exist, though I did not live in it.

Not until the events leading to the birth of Avonlea. Among those events was a plot to seize the authority of the demon over the realm of Aeirn and the gods who helped realize the world of my dream. The plot originally focused on the First, a dragon possessed in the fall of my angel, during the collapse of a reality where life was prosecuted with extreme prejudice by the Unborn. My demon gained a foothold in that reality and began to collect souls resonant with my ideal. The dragon played a key role in salvaging those possessed souls and guiding them to the dream that eventually became the realm of Aeirn.

The evolution of this new reality has been explored in some detail, but key points remain fixed on the establishment of the Purge and the plot to conquer the First. The Phoenix (called Ava Nova or Dawn), recently emergent from the Abyss, was an intimate companion of the Dragon, Dusk. The author of the Purge, commonly referred to as The Adversary, sought to exploit her to confront and displace the First. His confrontation with her triggered the Cataclysm, the first rift in Aeirn’s reality. He survived the encounter, exiled to the darkest corner of the demon’s mind, giving the demon a foothold in the realm of Aeirn through his re-possession.

The Cataclysm was the beginning of the end of the Age of Gods, and the rise of magic and technology in different corners of Aeirn. Civilization reestablished itself over several thousand years. In the generation prior to Avonlea’s birth, the remnants of the Purge had driven most of the surviving gods into self-imposed exile among the mortal population. Dawn was one of the few who remained actively involved in the world as a goddess, though faced with persecution by the Church promoting belief in the First as the Creator.

Dawn ended up taking the blame for the Cataclysm, accused of breaking reality to defeat her adversary in the purge. Assuming his identity, the demon came to be known as The Adversary, and the antithesis of the Creator. The Church held deep suspicions about the true nature of his association with Dawn, and her intimate relationship with Dusk. In spite of that animosity, there were some who believed she was the true mother of the realm, equal in creative significance to–and possibly more central than–Dusk.

While a few sought to orchestrate the true incarnation of Dusk, at least one pursued a scheme to bring the phoenix to life. The paradox of the rifts made it possible for Avonlea to become her own mother, as a pawn in that exclusive scheme. Her recognition as the mortal incarnation of the phoenix was leaked, drawing the Adversary and agents of the Purge down on a gathering at her home when her daughter–her younger self–was seven. The massacre she survived left her traumatized and unlocked her psychic potential.

Avonlea (a single name derived from her birth name or borrowed directly from the town of her birth) was taken in as an orphan of the Scourge and initiated at the Academy. By the age of seventeen, her memories of the tragedy resurfaced through her nightmares. The path they led her down brought her to the edge of the rift, and through it into the past, where she continued to unearth the mysteries of her origins. Through the paradox, she became the host mother to the incarnation of Dawn.

Knowing that the massacre was unavoidable, she tried to drive away those her presence would endanger. She believed her own death was inevitable, having witnessed it as a child. The many strange–and ostensibly fatal–events she survived up to that point promised to prove the truth in the name of her inspiration, the Phoenix. She tried to use her death to end the threat of the Adversary but unwittingly provided herself as a steppingstone to his possession of Avonlea. Thus, the Adversary initiated the girl’s ambisexual curse–and the key to her new immortality.

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Aeirn — A world of magic and technology

Aeirn was originally conceived as a world with a magical and technological heritage. The common assumption that a magical society would not develop technology and a technological society would discourage the emergence of magic, is debated in front of or with the protagonist at some point. She points out that the two legacies were founded in separate eras and in different parts of the world.

In the early history of Aeirn, magic and technology were essentially the same thing, due to the presence and involvement of gods, but that era was ended by the Cataclysm at the height of the Purge. There was a period following the Cataclysm in which some magic and traditions survived, gradually diminishing through conflict and struggle. Humanity was scattered into isolation, reduced to primitive clans and tribes that adapted to the wild or reestablished civilization with varying degrees of sophistication and success. The surviving practice of magic was refined in the Second Age of Magic, but practitioners made up less than one percent of the population.

Technology evolved around the world and came to prominence in the Age of Empires. Technology advanced most rapidly in the far south. In the time of the Founder, magic, miracles and gods had become myths and legends retained in a few cultures. Everything changed in the Third Age of Magic, when the Founder made magic accessible to everyone in one form or another.

Time

33413243.29411765 earth seconds a year

1.104935294117647 earth seconds per second

30240000 aeirn seconds per year

54.3 beats per earth minute

12 (00 – 11)

moons

28 (00 – 27)

days

25 (00 – 24)

hours

60 (00 – 59)

minutes

60 (00 – 59)

seconds

00 : 00 : 00 : 00 : 00 – 11 : 27 : 24 : 59 : 59

The North — Arden, Athen, & Aspen

A rough sketch of the north would feature a large continent broken into three main bodies, with many islands, large and small. It was called the shattered continent due to the placement and spacing of the subcontinents of Arden, Athen, and Aspen, and the major islands, with points seeming to converge on the island of Aeryn. Aspen and Arden stretch to the east and west, with Athen spreading out between them to dominate the ring of arctic islands. The three subcontinents have distinctive mountain spines and are rimmed with mountains where they come closest to touching each other. The islands feathering the outward coast of Arden are stepping-stones to the west. Aspen expands to the south and east, with vast, temperate plains.

The East — Yden

A narrow sea separates the continent of Yden, in the east, from Aspen, in the north. Yden has a thin, temperate range along its northern front, bridging the tropical coasts of the near east and the far east. It has a sprawling, arid interior, with several salty, inland seas. Dragons are common in its most fertile regions, in the far east and the south-east, thick with jungles and rain-forests. Further east, and south of the equator, there is a small cluster of sub-continents, and well-spaced island chains skirting the wide, open oceans of the south and far west.

The Center — Emyn

The most central continent, first of the three sisters and commonly referred to as the consort of the east, Emyn stretches to the south and stands between the central and southern oceans. Apart from the arid region in her northeast quarter, Emyn is a very fertile continent. She has broad plains and savannas interspersed with jungles and mountainous rain-forests, in both tropical and temperate climes. Mountains rise between the fertile and arid regions in her equatorial region, and travel down her spine to her southern tip.

The South — Annen & Omyn

The second sister, Annen, stands between the third sister, Omyn, in the south and Neyn in the west. A smaller, more temperate version of Emyn, she is somehow a bit wilder and well populated with dragons. Her spine is to the west, like Neyn’s, with broad forest ranges behind gentle sloping plains. There is one notable, inland sea in her equatorial region. Her sister, Omyn, lies entirely below the equator; her head down, covering the south pole. Omyn is a mountainous land dominated by tundra and cold, tempered forests. The mountains shelter fiercely fertile valleys in her temperate reaches.

The West — Neyn

Second to Omyn, the most isolated continent, Neyn stands alone. Touched in the south by Annen, and in the north by Arden, Neyn is like a man unable to choose between two beautiful women. Neyn possesses the best qualities of Arden and Aspen, with a thin arctic margin where its northern coast comes closest to the arctic ring. Almost twice as thick as Annen, most of the land lies above the tropics. It was a difficult place to get to, before the latter half of the age of empires, and a hard land to tame. Neyn is rich in natural resources, however, and generally ideal for human habitation.

Aeslyn Tear — The First Age of Magic

The heart of civilization through the First Age of Magic was the sprawling city of Aeslyn Tear. For many thousands of years, it was a utopia and a bridge to thousands of worlds across the universe. It was a city made for people and dragons alike. It was a city inspired by and built to entice the gods into dwelling among mortals. It became neutral ground during the Purge, a place where the gods initially agreed they would not hunt one another or set their followers against each other.

Aeslyn Tear — The Purge

In the end, Aeslyn Tear was the epicenter of the Cataclysm that many cite as the end of the Age of Gods. As the Purge spread, Aeslyn Tear became the only refuge for gods who refused to participate, and the city came under siege. Demons were sent in to drive the gods out, causing havoc until they were broken and bound. Alliances among the followers of the Purge were brief and plagued by betrayals, while the opponents of the Purge stood firmly united. Unfortunately, the mortal population suffered most under the siege. The promise of sanctuary on other worlds was offered to all, but by then most mortals knew the fate of a god’s world in the wake of his or her death.

A god’s demise struck a shattering blow to the reality he or she supported, and the worlds within it were exposed to the paradoxes of the Rift. Consensual reality fractured and came to reflect the individual perspectives on the inhabitants. Life in the shattered realms became frighteningly subjective and chaotic.

Many mortals were tempted by the Adversaries’ offers of safe passage out of the city for the loved ones of mortals willing to sacrifice themselves to feed the demon onslaught against the Allies. Some gods took their followers and cut all ties to Aeirn. Entire races vanished overnight. Populations around the world diminished, as the Adversaries pressed them into service in their constant, internecine warfare or spent them in the siege of Aeslyn Tear.

Aeslyn Tear — The Cataclysm

Though modern scholars claim the Cataclysm was caused by a meteor striking Aeirn in the heart of the mythical Aeslyn Tear, causing the breakup of the Shattered Continent, the actual cause was a precursor of the Eve of Paradox. The author of the Purge convinced some of his peers, the most formidable Adversaries, that the goddess, Dawn, was the goddess of Aeirn in spite of the fact that she manifested only recently, as the gods reckoned such things.

Prior to that, the prevailing belief had been that Aeirn was created by the dragon, Dusk, who was so old he regarded the gods as children. Dusk had been the first to take refuge in the dream that became the host realm of Aeirn. He had brought other souls in from the Threshold, who in turn became gods of Aeirn and the founders of other realms across the Threshold. The Adversary had been right about the Demon of Life, however, so his followers mounted a coordinated attack on Dawn.

The power of a god lay, ultimately, in the strength of his or her bond with the Demon of Life. Life was an idea, a dream, that possessed the mind of every being in creation and united everything in existence. Everyone existed within that mind, but the purpose of the Purge was to find out which soul was the focus of that mind. The test was a psychic duel only one god would be strong enough to survive, and the Adversary had survived more duels than the rest of them combined. No one knew if Dawn had survived even one.

None of them would have hesitated to take her on, before that day. After that day, no one was brave enough to even try. Since the Adversary had proposed the duel with Dawn, he was the one to face her when they hunted her down. While the rest stared down any god who tried to come to her aid—a side-duel with no lesser risk for those who dared—the Adversary confronted her.

Part of the duel was blade to blade, but the true fight was mind to mind. For a god, death came only when the mind was destroyed, and no-one was better at destroying a mind than the Adversary. Her mind seemed to embrace destruction, however, catching fire and crumbling to ash faster than he could grasp hold. In a flash, the inferno turned and consumed him, drawing him into an abyss he could not escape while every atom in his body was torn apart.

The explosion rang Aeirn like a bell, shattering the crust beneath the feet of the assembled gods. The fury of a star scoured the earth clean for miles around as mortals were incinerated in the millions. The gods manifested new forms at a safe distance, watching as the city vanished under sheets of lava. Then time seemed to hiccup, and the world healed, a virgin wilderness appearing as if woken from a dream.

Dawn was found sleeping and unblemished at the heart of the creation. Only the dragon, Dusk, dared to wake her. When asked what happened during the duel, she answered, “I think I ate him.” No one asked her to elaborate. No trace of the Adversary was ever found, and his companions quickly withdrew. Those who were engaged in the siege were scattered in the blast, resurrecting at an even greater remove, congregating only long enough to hear a report from the ones who were at ground zero.

Some were quick to argue that Dawn had simply had the advantage of home ground; no other god had been challenged in his or her home realm before. The Adversary had merely proven that Aeirn was Dawn’s. That argument convinced many gods to retreat to their own domains, confident that no god would be willing to confront them in their own realms after that.

The mortal races were largely abandoned, with nothing but tenuous spiritual bonds to their gods. Soon, the demons that survived the Cataclysm outnumbered the remaining gods by several orders of magnitude. Fortunately, most of those were bound in warded circles in the buried ruins of Aeslyn Tear.

The Second Age of Magic

In the period following the cataclysm some of the magic and traditions of the First Age survived, diminished gradually through conflict and struggle. Some mortals refused to forget how the gods were turned against each other by the belief that their power, derived from a single, common source, was diminished by division. Most of the surviving gods had retreated into their own, private domains or went into self-imposed exile among mortals. The society that once spanned the globe was shattered, its people left scattered and isolated, reduced to primitive clans and tribes. Only a handful of gods continued to dwell openly among their people. Their powers diminished, however, and the physical processes of life gripped the world. An Age of Realization brought the Age of Creation to a close.

Conjury

The intimate participation of the final gods continued through the end of the second age. It was a brief and fragile period of enlightenment that became tainted by mortal ambition. Other surviving races retreated from the more rapid expansion of human communities, adapting to nature or reestablishing their own civilizations with varying degrees of sophistication and success. Magic did not completely die out, however. The art of conjury became the foundation of the Second Age of Magic, which saw the general withdrawal of the gods and weakening of pagan religions. In part, it was because conjury granted mortals some power over the gods, revealing and exploiting the angelic and demonic aspects of their nature. A very small minority truly participated in the Second Age of Magic. In time—for most people—magic, miracles, other races and the gods became the stuff of myths and legends. For much of the world, this brought things into balance until the dawn of the Third Age of Magic.

Often overlooked, in the tales of the Second Age of Magic, was the change in how mortals thought of gods. For much the same reason the Second Age of Magic caused most people to lose faith in the existence of magic, only a handful of people were witnesses to true magic or miracles. The stories told, and the beliefs passed on, became incredible in the face of life’s hardships. People wanted to believe, and encouraged each other’s beliefs, because they hoped for better. Better rarely came. Those who kept the magic alive, and kept faith with their gods, had to struggle to maintain their grasp. Worse, conjury and those who used it came to be feared and hated. Of course, there had been those who did not mind the stigma of conjury, or the costs associated with it. The people of the north clung to a magical tradition that predated the age of empires. The fall of the gods had seen to the elimination of most of the arcane arts. Conjury survived in the form of witchcraft and gave rise to the arts of demonology and necromancy, throughout the north.

Magery

The need for a cleaner form of magic than “blood” magic, inspired the concept of magery. The remnants of magic some people still possessed were enough to maintain the conviction that magic existed. It still depended on the psychic potential of the wielder, which could be passed down through the generations. Those who did not inherit strong psychic potential had to develop great spiritual discipline. The concept of magery was advanced primarily by monks and clerics, people who had the spiritual devotion to focus on the human spirit, and work magic through themselves and their connection to the universal spirit, rather than elemental or intermediary spirits. The association of monks and clerics with magery caused people to view magery as a divine magic, ignoring the fact that divine magic—calling upon gods and angels—was also conjury. Those who opposed conjury persecuted witches, priests and priestesses as fervently as they did warlocks, demonologists and necromancers. The persecution expanded to demonize the other races, most of whom dealt with humanity only through those touched by magic.

The Avon, the most human of the exotic races, gathered in the sanctuary established by the goddess, Dawn, amid the ruins of Aeslyn Tear. With them came a third of the northern people of Aeryn, led by the Autumn Court. Dusk took on a human aspect and joined Dawn, to stand guard over the ruins and the army of demons trapped within them. Their followers formed the two Great Houses of the North, named for the Dusk and Dawn. The traditions of witches and muses are both descend from the Avon priestesses of the goddess. The traditions of dragons remained as enigmatic as they were. Some followed Dusk, the rest did as they pleased. They were what they were, regardless of what they looked like or where they dwelled. To the men of the North, Dusk became the God, compliment to the Goddess. Unfortunately, the seeds of monotheism sown in the Purge took root in men’s’ minds. They were watered by the spread of magery, carried to the world by monks and clerics and their teachings of a universal spirit. So, the God of the North came to be the One in the minds of certain mortals.

Wizardry

Though a minority among magic users, mages quickly drove conjurers out of their niches in the halls of kings. When they happened to confront a god, instead, the god usually agreed with their philosophy and took over their education, encouraged by their spiritual evolution. As magery spread, people who believed in magic assumed that conjury would die out. Some took action to stamp it out. The original witch-hunters, the paladins of gods—often witches themselves—became known as warlocks, branded as the worst of their kind by the new witch-hunters, mages trained to believe that all forms of conjury damned the wielder. This only forced the wielders of such power to band together and fight back. Driven from their old haunts, they often seized power in other lands, crippling them in the process. That, in turn, invited their foes to annex those lands, continuing their scourge. Ironically, the two arts proved to be compatible. Those who were able to master both arts became wizards and tended to support and defend the conjurers. Fortunately, wizards were not prone to share their power and were less interested in patronage. They were very powerful, but very rare.

Unlike the conjurers they displaced, mages and wizards rarely indulged their patrons’ most ruthless requests, but those who remained in influential positions became involved in the politics of power. It would take most of the Age of Empires for the theory of one god to become a doctrine sound enough to support a church—but in no time the desire for one took hold. Though limited in scope, the emergence of magery still helped mortals become independent of the gods and the cost of divine intervention. Due to the predominance of clerical mages, magic remained strongly associated with religion. Monotheism gradually emerged. For some, Creation itself was considered the only incarnation of the one true god necessary, as no singular personification could be majestic enough for the creator. Not that this prevented the anthropomorphism of god. In addition, many worshipers of the old gods declared their deities to have been agents of the one god, directing their worship through them. The idea went back to the Purge, the notion of a god of gods, and to one degree or another all of the gods had acknowledged it.

The Age of Empires

The Age of Empires featured an era of technological and industrial advancement that brought the world out of the Age of Ruin. In some ways, the Age of Empires was a second cataclysm. As harsh and difficult as life following the Cataclysm was, it cleared the way for new growth. Unfortunately, humans grew like weeds, driving other races into hiding. But a hard life was not necessarily an ugly life, and many new and diverse human cultures flourished. Some grew into strong city-states, others spread out in a patchwork quilt of independent kingdoms. The people of the north, in particular, divided themselves into niches the landscape provided, all sharing a common root heritage. The cultural divide in other parts of the world was often greater than any of the obstacles that nature put between them. Wars happened everywhere, for all the usual reasons, but animosity was always greatest where the friction between two cultures was extreme.

Early wars were opportunistic, often driven by other hardships, but as time passed more conflicts were driven by animosity and ambition. Cultures hardened and national identities emerged, each with their own peculiar notions of honor and pride. Either could be used as a mask for greed in times where wealth was far easier to take than it was to cultivate. Smaller kingdoms and republics faced conquest and annexation once there were no remaining frontiers left to colonize. In too many ways, people were made into commodities, slaves, soldiers, prostitutes or serfs; the world of men was divided into masters and servants. Ironically, societies that started out as raiding cultures rarely gave rise to conquering societies. They were usually the hardest societies for conquerors to subdue, so it was the peaceful and pastoral societies that fell first, quickly becoming the pool from which imperialism drew most of its strength. The people who did the work were the people who had always been willing to do the work necessary for a better life, and in some cases, this eventually led to their rise into power, and a stable maturity for that empire. In other cases, the weight they carried grew too great and the empire collapsed in on itself.

In either instance, opportunity presented other avenues to wealth and prosperity. War was far from the only industry mankind pursued. Some wealth and welfare was cultivated internally. Farming was always crucial. Other natural resources were sought out and innovation was always welcomed. Trade encouraged diplomacy and taught nations to value peace. Some lived hard lives, no matter the circumstances, and cultures solidified by imperialism became stratified by divisions of class and contribution. Knowledge was created and passed on. Technology developed as needs became more clearly defined. Status, always a human concern, could be derived in a number of ways. Those who had something to teach always had students, and those willing to pay for their education. Those who could lead others, in politics, religion or philosophy, could always find followers, and ways to profit from them. Those who excelled in art or craft could always find patrons. Humanity paid a terrible cost for the Age of Empires, but it created the world economy and made them the masters of the world.

Aeryn

Aeryn was an island, a natural gateway to the north and the birthplace of the northern people. It has remained neutral ground for the northern dominions since the political and social break between the original ruling houses. the northern people were segregated into three domains on the basis of “pure” blood, as reflected in the inheritance of characteristic hair and eye colors. The common people of all three domains were generally brown haired, since those who were born with a preferred coloring were generally adopted into the appropriate ruling houses.

The Autumn Court, whose leaders were redheaded, led their followers into Arden.

The Winter Court, whose leaders were towheaded, led their followers into Athen.

The Summer Court, whose leaders were golden-blond, led their followers into Aspen.

The Trade Houses were formed from merchants and trades people who were typically dark-haired, by preference black.

Aeryn Mear

A ring of fortified ports and harbors broken only by the island’s natural fortifications, Aeryn Mear guards the city of Aeryn Tear and the fertile interior of the island. Where Aeryn Tear and its citizens are fiercely northern, the culture and people of Aeryn Mear are utterly cosmopolitan.

Aeryn Tear

The city rises from the port of Aeryn Mear and is the largest city in the north. it is known to the rest of the world as a trade republic, independent from the northwestern kingdoms and the Athelon empire in the northeast. It was possessed at various times by empires in the east and west; in either case the native population viewed it as a temporary occupation and clung to their own national identity. It lies at the heart of every merchant and trade house in the north, and hosts key houses of the autumn, winter and summer courts.

The Northern Chaos

Long before the Age of Empires, the Autumn Kingdoms and Summer Kingdoms were plagued by constant aggression from the neighboring Winter Kingdoms, who raided their southern neighbors to survive their harsh winters or sustain the perpetual internecine wars amongst themselves. The ravaged Autumn or Summer Kingdoms are often bound together under the leadership of a high king, to repel invaders or recover territory. Such alliances rarely lasted more than a generation, as raiders moved on to easier prey and great leaders aged or died. The Age of Empires changed very little in the North. Invasion from the South was nothing new to Northerners. Throughout history, slavers had raided the ports of the Northern Kingdoms, stealing women and children to sell in the slave markets of the East. If anything, invasions prompted the Northern Kingdoms to present a united front, often under the leadership of the Houses of Dusk or Dawn. More than one empire broke, attempting to conquer the North, others decided the cost of victory was too high.

Imperialism seemed doomed in the North. In spite of that, raiding continued, steadily increasing over the Age of Empires. The warring kingdoms were never directly responsible for feeding the slave trade, but many of the conflicts were exploited by slavers. Though it was no kingdom’s policy to sell their enemies into slavery, there were groups within the Northern Kingdoms that did aid or support it. Though all Northerners had a distinctive look prized in the East, the distinctive coloring of Autumn, Winter and Summer Courts were valued most. It was not at all uncommon for the slavers Northern allies to be commoners. Usually, however, it was a member of a Trade House involved in organized crime. As far as the Trade Houses were concerned, illegal trades were still trades, and within their purview. The laws of men were forced to yield to the laws of nature and the laws of supply and demand, and organized crime proved better at mitigating criminal activity than agents of the legal authorities.

The Underworld

A natural consequence of the rise of legitimate establishments and authorities, a shadow of the establishment rose to maintain the balance of illegitimate powers in the Underworld. For obvious reasons, the Underworld encompassed conjurers, slavers, criminals and various types of races and immortals who were unwelcome in human the establishment. In those times when the forces of darkness went unchecked, the human establishment learned that an organized Underworld was a necessary evil. In the North, the rulers of the Underworld came to be known as the Shadow Court, and something like it existed on every continent. The Shadow Court’s ties to the Trade Houses of the North gave it an advantage over other criminal empires in the Underworld. The Shadow Court often served as a neutral third party in the negotiation of treaties and alliances between rival kingdoms or houses in the North. The Shadow Court was well positioned to ensure no legitimate authority could bring uniform law and order to the North without unprecedented power or influence to support it.

The Founder — The Third Age of Magic

As trade and exploration began to reconnect humanity, a child was shipwrecked on an island where some of the last of the immortals took refuge. Raised in the midst of the immortals, the Founder was exposed to the remnants of the First Age of Magic. Initially, after confronting the prospect of his mortality, he studied under the immortals in the hopes of becoming an immortal. Aided by the vast resources of their archives, he found the promise of something more. The circumstances that brought the gods into existence had long passed and were unlikely to be repeated in this world, but by studying them and understanding the basis of the arts they had practiced, he realized that all sentient beings had the potential for godhood. When the immortals realized what he had discovered, they tried to kill him. When they failed, he fled, taking his revelation with him to human shores. An alien among his own people, it took him a while to adapt to the world the immortals had closed themselves off from, during which time he learned to be cautious in exposing his talents and immortality.

The Founder — The Revelation

The Founder was born into the merchant class. When he tried to share his enlightenment, upon returning to human shores, he discovered that his breeding was an obstacle to any formal or official recognition, but many individuals were eager to be his disciples, men and women. Many of his disciples recorded his teachings, some of which were later altered by those who appropriated them for their own purposes. In most accounts, his disciples believed he was a prophet and reluctant messiah come to establish the true Church of the One God. It was an idea that haunted the followers of great mages throughout the Age of Empires. When his disciples confronted him, asking if he was the One, he told them he was like the mages who came before him, someone who studied the ways of the old gods and came to his own understanding of the Art.

He openly debated monotheism, analyzing the philosophy of a given school of thought, and pointed out the underlying truths. There was a universal mind and spirit, but nothing that could be identified as a universal soul. More than one school thought embraced monotheism, but none could identify such a soul. The very idea of a soul of creation had driven gods mad, setting them against their own kind in an effort to find out if they might be the One. He criticized the mages who came before him for allowing the idea to possess the minds of men. One could not propose it without encouraging hostility toward the remaining gods and immortals. He cited the false teachings of several schools, reclassifying some gods as angels and others as demons, and persecuting older faiths devoted to them. Such teachings were remnants of the Second Age of Magic, when arts of conjury, particularly necromancy and demonology, were developed to exploit spirits, be they elementals, angels, ghosts or demons, for power and influence over reality.

The gods, he reminded, had their own souls, their own spirits. Like common people, they had their own angels and demons, and like anyone, their spirits could be manipulated, in life or in death. A reflection of them in another soul might be given or might take possession, giving rise to an angel or demon inspired by them. Neither could truly be mistaken for them. Being a god, or being an immortal, or being a gnat could not make them more or less than what they were: souls. What possible benefit came from being identified as the god of gods? If you had to know who held the ultimate authority, you would certainly ask. But what soul could accept the responsibility that came with the ultimate power and authority? Who could bear it? It was enough of a challenge for a soul to be responsible for his or herself. That was usually his final word on the subject. His refusal to endorse the main Tenet of the Church discouraged those who appropriated his teaching from recognizing him as their true source.

The Third Age of Magic — Twists of Faith

The teachings of the Founder of the Third Age of Magic included theories based on the legends and lore of the First Age of Magic during the Age of Gods concerning the soul of creation. This theory of the dreamer, based on the dreaming legends of creation, held that the only foundation for a world was the same as the foundation of a person, a soul. In the Third Age of Magic, it was commonly accepted that each person contained the potential for an entire world, possibly even many worlds, though prevailing thought held that the world aspect of a soul rarely manifested and only did so at the expense of the personified aspect. He believed this was most likely true in the case of the soul of creation. The Absolute existed at the expense of a personified aspect of the Absolute. The teachings of the third age were adopted by adherents of several monotheistic cults and embraced as divine revelation from a Prophet or Messiah named in place of the Founder, driving him and his true disciples underground.

The Prophet — The Church

Among the earliest disciples of the Founder was a man from the North who had embraced monotheism, in the personal belief that Dusk was the One. He was a brilliant student, with a perfect memory of the teachings of the Founder. He had also witnessed an encounter with one of the immortals from the Founder’s childhood, in which the origin of the Founder’s Revelation was confirmed. The northerner came to accept the Founder’s claim that he could not identify the One. When the Founder withdrew into obscurity, the northerner set out to confront Dusk. Dawn, present for that encounter, interrupted to point out that the answer was irrelevant because the northerner had already decided on his course of action. He was bound by his own belief. He departed, choosing to take on the mantle of the Prophet and responsibility for the Church. The teachings were not his, but the message he chose to send with it was.

The Founder — The Academy

The theft of his revelations, and his misrepresentation as a prophet-messiah, forced the Founder to become even more discrete. The religions spawned or reinforced by his teachings became a force devoted to the eradication of any lingering legacies of the first two ages of magic, but possessing only incomplete versions of his teaching, they could not establish a new age of magic.

With every generation, civilization continued to advance even through dark days of war and oppression. With great caution, the Founder continued to pass on his legacy, often finding ways into the establishment to choose his proteges from among the ranks of magical and clerical apprentices. Those with the right potential were groomed as agents and champions of the various orders supported by church and state.

Sorcery

The Art, as taught and practiced by the Founder, was also known as sorcery. The philosophy at its core, so open to theological exploitation, supported a clearer and broader understanding of the nature of existence. It took principles found in conjury and magery, or realized at greater cost in wizardry, and presented them to the artist in ways the mortal mind could embrace more soundly. It provided a more integral path to power; the mind, body and spirit working in unison to draw power directly from the soul of the artist to transform existence, to create or destroy. Like a god, the artist carried the burden of his or her power personally. The only limit to what an artist could do was his own integrity. A flawed sorcerer was a far greater danger to herself than anyone else. An Artist was the embodiment of his Art. Her magic had the immediacy of thought or action. It was the most responsive form of magic there was.

The Aeryn Tear Academy

The first academy of arts, athletics and academics was established in Aeryn Tear. Occupying a high point along the craggy coast, the campus is as much a part of Aeryn Mear’s fortifications as it is part of the heights of Aeryn Tear.

Initiates from around the world are trained at the Aeryn Tear academy.

Initiates are selected as early as seven years old and spend as much as ten years at the academy.

Initiates are devoted to academic, athletic and artistic studies as part of learning the art.

Initiates who complete their training become artists.

Initiates who possess notable psychic talent are often transferred to the Avon Tear academy.

Advanced initiation is available to artists who are sponsored by a master and choose to serve as companions.

Companions are proteges of a master assigned to mentor to at least one initiate over the next ten years.

Companions who complete their apprenticeship become masters.

The Founder — Social Impact

Ironically, industry helped to diminish the power and influence of the Church by upsetting the balance of power between church and state, producing innovations that increased the privileges and opportunities of the common people. The Academy played as great a role in that process as it did in confirming the legacy of magic on Aeirn was very real. The effort to wipe out that legacy was blunted by inter-religious conflict, as the champions and agents of rival faiths were easier to identify and engage than the odd witch, wizard, warlock or what-have-you. Many practitioners of old magic were even able to negotiate special arrangements with the establishment, working as free agents or trading lore for protection. Most simply went underground, shepherded by immortals who were forced out of self-exile by occasional flare-ups of the lingering Purge. Thus, even when Aeirn was a world much like our own, there was a supernatural-, underground-, counter-culture. Among them, a few new immortals and what remained of the old gods—though the potential for new gods was there.

The Champion of the House of Dusk — Forge

Captured in a raid on her northeastern village, named Scratch for the small wounds she was able to inflict in her own defense, she was sold into slavery at the age of five. When she was seven, she found a magic ring in her master’s collection that turned her into a boy. Escaping with the ring, he took the name, Forge (made from Scratch), and eventually found his way to the Academy in Aeryn Tear. He was converted to monotheism and embraced the Church, like most initiates of his era. By the end of his initiation, he solved the riddle of the ring but chose to remain male. He made it his mission to end slavery in the North, coming into conflict with the conjurers and wizards who drove the Northern portion of the trade. Crossing paths with a dragon engaged in conflict with one of those wizards, Forge made a pact for the power to fulfill his mission. The dragon initiated Forge, transforming him into a dragon in exchange for an alliance and a future favor. This transformation enabled Forge to assume control of the House of Dusk in the Winter Kingdoms.

The Paladin of the God — Forge

Soon after becoming the Champion of the House of Dusk, Forge was named the Paladin of the God. An alliance between Forge and the Prophet, promoting the belief that Dusk was the One God, started a popular movement among the men of the North. This turned into a strong base of support within every Northern Kingdom, and a substantial portion of the Underworld. His mission to end slavery, and fervent opposition to the arts of conjury, brought thousands, and then millions to his banner. When he tore down a wizard’s puppet kingdom, Forge was crowned the Dragon King. Going on to liberate several more kingdoms, he was recognized as their High King. As his Scourge of the North gained momentum, his foes began to mount stronger resistance, taking foothold in other compromised kingdoms in Athen and Aspen. Forge made excellent use of liberated allies, coordinating wars on multiple fronts on both sub-continents. As a dragon, his youth never waned, so his conquests continued for the next three centuries. In that time, Forge went fused the Winter and Summer Kingdoms into the Athelon Empire.

The Scourge of the Athelon Empire

The world was understandably shocked by the consolidation of two-thirds of the North, or three-fifths of the total population, into one of the largest Empires on Aeirn. In Arden, particularly in the Houses of the Autumn Court and the House of Dawn, faith in the Goddess remained equal to faith in the God. In the Empire, worship of the Goddess was gradually eroding under the teachings of the Church. Dawn had a well-established role as the consort of the God, due to their long association. The Church deemed it appropriate for women to worship Dawn, but a man’s devotion was tantamount to adultery, an insult to Dusk. It irked the Church that Dusk dwelt in the Sanctuary of the Goddess, prompting her portrayal as a fickle and unfaithful temptress. Dusk remained close to Dawn, it was often said, because he could not trust her out of his sight. The attitude of tolerant animosity spread to the Faithful of the Church, along with more critical views of her followers. They considered the conquest of Arden an essential and inevitable requirement for the completion of the Athelon Empire.

Those close to the Emperor, Forge, regularly probed his intentions concerning Arden and the Autumn Kingdoms. With a population roughly equal to that of the Summer Kingdoms, the casualties of an open conflict could be catastrophic, Forge pointed out. His concern remained, as always, the progress of his mission to wipe out slavery and the abominations of conjury. It was not sufficient to merely drive it out of Athelon only to have it take root in Arden. Forge assured everyone that he had no intention of imposing his rule upon Arden, but he had an obligation to pursue his enemies if they invaded the Autumn Kingdoms to escape his Scourge. It was a harsh way to enlist the service of the Autumn Kingdoms in his war or compel them to invite his forces to battle his enemies in their domains. Inevitably, it fell to the House of Dawn to coordinate and mount the defense of Arden from invasion by the Empire or its foes. Each of the Autumn Houses committed resources to the fight, so all of the Autumn Houses suffered the attrition of ongoing conflict.

The Academy Rivals

The Academy rivals, Scar and Spark, were cousins and half-brothers. Their mothers were twin sisters who were intimately involved with the same man, their father. The twins were confronted with the news that their secretly-shared lover had been forced into an arranged marriage about the same time they discovered their pregnancies. Scar’s mother married a man who had been pursuing her, but Spark’s mother legitimized his birth by becoming a muse.

Brand, their father learned the boys were his when they arrived at the Academy and became his students. The two women confided the truth, giving him the option to tell the boys when they were old enough to handle the truth. Apart from minor differences, the boys were virtual twins. Their interest in the same girl prompted a brief rivalry, but they overcame their differences and became friends as well as half-brothers. That bond survived even when they took opposing views on how to exploit the mysteries of the Threshold.

The Avon Tear Academy

The Academy of Arts, Athletics and Academics established in Avon Tear was a branch academy specializing in the psychic arts.

Avon Tear was a gathering place for the beginning and end of initiations for the northern people.

Artists with notable psychic ability are recruited to study at the Avon Tear academy.

Artists typically enroll at the age of seventeen.

Companions enrolled at the Avon Tear Academy are assigned to initiates who possess notable psychic talent.

Companions and initiates receive appropriate instruction from an Avon Tear master.

The Rift

One of the distinguishing features of Aeirn, the world where my story is set, is the Rift. Created by the abuse of magic, in a string of wars a thousand years ago, the Rift is a tear in the fabric of reality giving a physical expression—and access—to naked Paradox, the inexplicable and improbable union of order and chaos responsible for the creation, or destruction, of all realms. It is the chaos of all possible forms of Order, encompassing the order implicit in all forms of Chaos. It is the expression of Perfection that embraces and supports all of the imperfections of Existence–the shadow of the Absolute. The Rift is like a door into the mind of God, where only thought–and the soul behind it–is real and reality is as fluid and elusive as a thought.

In the simplest terms, entering the Rift—or falling into it, as is most often the case—is like stepping into a dream. Things become the ideas they represent, and only the “ideas” with minds of their own (or the things a mind exposed to paradox can hold onto) can survive there. When the Rift was created, some of the people who fell in at ground zero were able to hold onto the idea of the world and pull most of its shattered reality back together. To save their reality, they made the impossible possible. A thousand years later, when my story begins, people are still trying to figure out how to live with it, a slice of reality where none of the usual rules apply, that can be anywhere–at any time–without warning. Unless you have the psychic aptitude to sense the Rift Tides and warn others of the Rift Storms, or to shelter and guide people through them.

That said, it is only a matter of time before a given person is exposed to—and stripped naked by—the Rift. I always assumed I’d pursue this epic in text, so I didn’t need to concern myself with the handling of scenes with nudity or sex until now. I knew that the nature of the Rift would have the effect of breaking down most nudity taboos on Aeirn as a consequence of being used as a means of transport–among other things. As a matter of course, sexual attitudes and behavior were forced to mature once occasional public nudity became a necessity for real trade and travel. Telling this story in a visual format means I have to design it with a mature audience in mind.