Blocking Pool

As soon as Phoenix had withdrawn to the privacy of an auxiliary chamber, the assassin struck. In one lightening stroke, she decapitated Phoenix. The killing stroke was witnessed by a couple who were just arriving at that moment, as they stepped through the curtain. The two acted with a speed, and deadly efficiency that only the best split twins achieved. In the moment while they were dispatching the assassin, the mind of Phoenix took full possession of itself, and—rather than submitting to the absolution of resurrection—she reached for her divine power and restored her body instantly to perfect condition. It was exactly what a dragon would have done, the ultimate use of her shape-changing ability. Of course, at the same time, her divine self-possession triggered the self-conception her body had primed itself for an entire decade ago. As she dragged herself to her feet and approached the split twins to express her gratitude, she realized that they were both her. Immediately following that thought, she realized that neither of them knew it.

The heir of Sun, Sunshine, was ambushed by assassins possessed by demons. The Phoenix took possession of Sunshine to prevent the demons from being able to corrupt or kill her. Forced to abduct her, they took her to with them back to the ruins of Aeslyn Tear. The Dragon stumbled across them and attempted to help the girl by initiating her as a dragon. As the result of initiating Sunshine, the Phoenix ended up in sole possession of her body while remaining the exclusive prey of the initiatory hunt, resurrected in her form. As a result of initiating Sunshine, the Dragon ended up inheriting her form. At the conclusion of the hunt, the Phoenix and the Dragon emerged as twins of Sunshine. Posing as twins, and distant cousins, with an extraordinary resemblance to Sunshine, Sunrise and Sunset adapted to their new lives. Sunset eventually reverted back to male form and took the identity Sundown.

SUN, A GIRL EMBODYING THE QUALITIES THE PHOENIX IDENTIFIED WITH WAS BORN TO THE HOUSE OF ARDEN

A seventeen-year-old girl was sacrificed to create a demon. The ritual was intended to capture her guardian angel, her body and her soul. The architects of the ritual had intended for the demon to exploit its angelic origins to infiltrate the goddess, but they had made a mistake by using an heir for their sacrifice. Because the girl was Sunset, the heir of Sun, her soul could not be captured. Her body, possessed by an angel, had been warped in the creation of the demon. Embodied in its elemental form, the demon was quickly discovered. The Dragon and the Phoenix joined forces to capture the demon. Phoenix dove in to drive the demon out of its body. Because the only soul the demon had been tied to was the soul of creation, as an angel, the demon made a desperate attempt to claim a new soul. As intended, the demon fled and tried to take possession of Dragon, who trapped the demon in a warded ring. The demon had enough time to imprint itself on the Dragon's soul before it was trapped. As a result, the Dragon's soul was instantly tapped when the artifact became a ring of regeneration, and Dragon was turned into a girl.

SUNSET WAS POSSESSED BY PHOENIX, WHO CONCEIVED A NEW INCARNATION OF HERSELF AS DAWN

Phoenix was trapped in the body of a nymph, but by using the ring Dragon created and taking male form she helped restore Dragon to normal. Reversing the polarity, Phoenix was able to restore her body to its original sex as well. Unfortunately, by sharing the ring, Phoenix and Dragon had allowed the demon in the ring to tap their souls. During a battle with the minions of the Cabal, Phoenix caught a blow from a sword on her hand that shattered the ring, causing the demon to pass quietly into her shadow. Sun bore a new heir, Sunrise, and then a daughter, Moon. Phoenix, living as Sunset, bore an heir, Dawn, after being temporarily displaced by the demon who sired an heir of the Dragon, Dusk.

SHADOW WAS A COURTESAN CHOSEN TO HOST THE INCARNATION OF A DRAGON, DUSK

The demon had no soul of its own, it resided in the souls of the Phoenix and the Dragon, and it had no direct access to their minds through which to probe their souls. To resolve this, it devised a plan to render both of them accessible and vulnerable to a direct attack, hoping at the same time to reclaim its body from Phoenix. It harnessed the latent potential it found in the shadows of their psyches. Specifically, the dragon potential of the Phoenix and the phoenix potential of the Dragon, which gave the demon the capacity to sire an heir of the Dragon that was in part an heir of the demon. In order to do this, the demon had to gain possession of Sunset. Phoenix began to experience occasional blackouts during which the demon was able to assert itself. During those blackouts, and whenever Sunset was asleep, the demon would take over. Assuming male form and using the alias Sundown, the demon sought to raise other demons to help it fulfill its mission, and became responsible for escalating the feud between the vampires and weres of Aeslyn Tear. With the help of a courtesan, Sundown sired Dusk and provoked the conception of Dawn.

DUSK WAS THE AVATAR OF THE DRAGON BORN TO THE HOUSE OF ARDUIN

DUSK AND DAWN WERE INITIATED TOGETHER AND FELL IN LOVE

Ember and her cousin Ash were of the same age and were sent to the academy together.

Ash and Ember were raised in two different, but similar worlds, as most of their childhood was dominated by initiation and devotion to the disciplines of Dance. His mentor, Coal, was responsible for overseeing the development of his psychic gifts.

Vale, who had been a classmate of her mother's, had been assigned by the goddess to serve as Ember's mentor. Vale was mostly concerned with overseeing the development of her mental gifts, while Ember studied with Ash under their mentor in the physical arts, Thorn. Ash and Ember met off and on until they were sixteen and seeking mates for the more carnal aspects of their initiation. At Vale’s urging, Ember’s mother had been on the lookout for a suitable mate for Ember’s ninth rank initiation. As a phoenix, she required a phoenix partner. Ember had canvassed the Phoenix House, while Cinder searched among the initiates of the academy.

Cinder had deliberately avoided pairing Ember with Ash because of the betrothal. While it was fairly common for couples paired for this stage of initiation to get married, it had backfired in the case of Dust and herself leaving Cinder leery of the same happening with Ash and Ember. Unfortunately, this was an opinion she could not share with Vale, for obvious reasons. Even though the betrothal was kept quiet, Ash and Ember had been drawn to each other, and Vale could not help but notice this and act upon it. Especially when their athletics mentor practically threw them at each other.

Thorn had jumped at the prospect of mating Ash to Ember, burning previous commitments to do so, but refused to consent to the mating without a more binding commitment. Traditionally, it was common for arranged marriages to be ensured by mating the couple during their initiation, as mates tended to bond and marry after initiation.

Confronting Thorn again almost decided her against it, but Ash and Ember seemed immune to Thorn's less admirable influences. When Thorn confided the arrangement between their families, Vale quickly endorsed the pairing and informed Ash and Ember. They did not object in the slightest. They were obviously well matched, and Ash was the first and only male to appeal to Ember. Unable to contact Ember’s mother, Vale went ahead and settled the arrangements.

Cinder returned to report on the candidates she had identified and discovered what she had missed. Once they began to work intimately together, Ash and Ember realized they could not survive without each other. While this was obvious to Ember’s mother, Ash’s mother complicated their lives by insisting on informing them of their betrothal.

Ash and Ember each had more than their share of potential suitors who would take their engagement as a challenge to break them up. The first stirrings of this, among the initiates of her own school, was instantly put down by Tempest, who assured the boys and girls that the school would continue to seek out mates for those who still needed them. By tradition, intimates were initiated in the home of the female initiate; unless she had no family of her own or her mate was from a family with greater status. As the Heir to Aeryn she had a higher status than Ash, so Thorn had eagerly insisted on accompanying his son to her home for the duration. Father and son joined the company of Ember’s school for the return to Aeryn and the Arden Seat, Avon.

Ember discovered at once that Ash’s education had been far more deficient than hers when it came to sex. Athletic initiations were practiced in the nude, and this was particularly true of dancers. The first time they trained together, Ember discovered how completely Ash had been shielded from close contact with the opposite sex. Ash had always been both disturbed and fascinated by the differences in her anatomy. When they first met, Ember could not believe Ash had never seen a girl naked before, until Ash explained what it had been like being trained almost exclusively by his father. In a sense, his world was not defined by gender, until Ember became a part of it. He grew up with only the vaguest notion that the difference between boys and girls extended beyond manner and form of dress. Charmed by his innocence, Ember submitted herself to his curiosity. Ember indulged her own curiosity as well, taking the opportunity to explore in detail what she had learned to avoid noticing in training. It was a pleasure to be able to give Ash his first taste of the true mystery of sex. It would have been simple enough to proceed from there, but his father had done far more to complicate the issue. While Thorn had shielded Ash from contact with the fairer sex, he had frequently used his son to curry favor with the families of suitable young girls.

On their way to the capital, where they were to settle for the duration of their tenth year, they paused often to allow other initiates to mate up. Ember realized that at almost every stop, there was some girl waiting for them, expecting to be mated to Ash. In some cases more than one. A number of tense confrontations, most between Ash and his father, required Tempest’s intervention. Most of the girls gracefully accepted the headmaster’s assurance that they had been displaced by true love. One girl in particular, however, had made a much more personal investment in her choice of mate. Raven, a daughter of the Phoenix House, had set out to find the best mate for initiation and chose Ash. The arrangements had been made several months earlier, when Ash and his father passed through the capital. In spite of the fact that they were already late, she waited for their arrival with great anticipation, certain that her status and wealth, not to mention her own exceptional qualifications and skill as an initiate, would be impossible to resist. Her commitment was pure torture for Falcon, a son of the Phoenix House who was obsessed with Raven. He had grown up dreaming of the day they would complete initiation together, only to be disappointed in the past few months. His family had been surprised at the slight to their son, but considered it a blessing when they were approached by Cinder, seeking a suitable mate for Ember’s initiation.

Raven went ballistic when she learned that Ash had been mated to another girl. The news came back to her through an older brother, returning from his own ninth rank initiation to prepare for his trials. Falcon learned that Raven had left the capital the next day, when he tried to pay a visit. Hearing that the boy Raven had been waiting for had taken another mate, Falcon dropped everything to track Raven down, intending to console her and bid his suit. He pursued without a second thought, leaving no word for his family. When morning came, without his appearance at home, Ember set out after him. Ember managed to catch up to Falcon and explain that he had been placed in her care, when she received his family’s blessing for her proposal. He pleaded with her, describing his life long devotion to Raven, explaining the opportunity that had been created when her mate put her aside for someone else. Ember considered the situation, sensing that the boy was doomed to be disappointed, and offered a deal. Ember would help him track down Raven. If she accepted his proposal, Ember would escort them back to the capital and find another prospect for her niece, but if she rejected him, he would accept Ember. Unfortunately, Ember found herself more challenged by riding herd on Falcon than by tracking Raven.

Ember had been approached by boys starting years earlier, many of whom sought her out now in the hopes of mating her. Most of them excused themselves upon learning of the engagement to Ash. The surplus of young boys frustrated in their pursuit of Ember, eager to find a suitable mate at the last moment, prevented the families of those girls from taking legal action against Thorn and his son. The bad impression Thorn had made on Ember, from the first time they met, was compounded by everything she learned about the man and his actions. Worse, he always hovered around his son, forcing Ember to expose herself to unwanted suitors, just to escape from Thorn’s shadow. From the boys who still pined for her, she was used to hearing an endless stream of endearing compliments, and worship. One who approached spouting insults, and assaulting her without warning, was the last thing she expected. Wolf, in his eternal pursuit of Ash, mistook her for him on the basis of their uncanny resemblance and clothing Ash had loaned her. Once he recognized she was female, he apologized profusely and spent the rest of the day trying to make up for attacking her. In spite of informing him that she was Ash’s mate, he continued to curse Ash. Wolf had ignored the call to find an initiate mate to pursue his rivalry with Ash.

In the spirit of that rivalry, Wolf impulsively proposed to her, urging her to abandon Ash and take him as a mate instead. Bemused by Wolf’s proposition, wondering what had caused the rivalry between him and Ash, Ember blundered into a rivalry of her own. Ember came upon a commotion involving the girls who were still chasing Ash. Stepping in to end the fight, Ember tried to appeal to the girls by explaining the bond that existed between her and Ash. This focused the attention of the girl who had been harassing the others on Ember. Raven was not impressed by Ember’s appeal, dismissing it out of hand and informing Ember that she considered the theft of her mate a mortal insult, over which she was prepared to duel Ash’s mate to the death. When Raven issued her challenge, Ember realized who she was. Raven would have been a princess herself if not for the Purge. She was still of royal blood, a member of the high nobility, and an heir to one of the most powerful domains in Arden. Ember, as a result of her childhood abduction, was prevented from disclosing her higher rank, but even if she could have, she could not refuse the challenge. She welcomed the chance to prove her worthiness before her mate, and casually defeated Raven in their first confrontation. Unfortunately, Raven did not accept defeat. She swore that she would not rest until Ember was dead and Ash was hers.

This threat to Ember aroused Ash’s protective instincts. From that moment, he never left her side. Ash and Ember got into their first fight over his protectiveness. Ember forced him to concede that if he had the right to watch her back with respect to her rivals, she had the right to watch his back with respect to his.

Ember and Ash - an animal attraction

Ash was his father reborn. Burn

As they became acquainted, they discovered they were more than a good match; they seemed to be two versions of the same person, or two halves. They probed the mystery until they proved it was true. It was the intimacy, which for so many reasons they could not resist, which inexplicably united them. Their union resolved with Ash’s mind and Ember’s body asserting their natural dominance. Ember had a slightly more submissive personality but a significantly stronger self-image. In panic, Ash fled to his father. He was confused, inexplicably transformed by the experience into a girl and haunted by her presence in his mind. He perceived her as a projection he created to protect the integrity of his own mind, a ghostly image that served to convince him that she had died. The only person he dared to approach was his father. When the panicked words finally penetrated his skull, and he realized that the girl who disturbed him was his son, he took her and fled. His first thought had been to protect his son by taking him into hiding. He feared what might happen if Ash fell into the hands of Ember’s people in his present condition.

Their absence was discovered the next day. Fang and Raven were both questioned, on account of having openly and persistently threatened one member of the couple over the other. Fang was accustomed to this tendency of his rival’s to disappear without warning, and wasted no time taking pursuit. Raven mistook the flight of Ash and Ember for fear of her, and pursued with extreme caution and prejudice. Aside from Raven, everyone believed Ember had been abducted by her intimate and his father. Tempest’s hands were tied herding the initiates he still had to mate, and the ones who were years away from mating. Tempest set off in search of Ember, who was her primary responsibility. Ash and Panther arrived after the departure of Thorn, Fang, Ember and Raven. Cinder was informed of her granddaughter’s disappearance, in the process learning about the arrangements that Tempest had made in her absence. Cinder surprised him by revealing that she knew the family in question. Cinder led them to the girl’s mentor, who was quickly brought up to speed.

Ash recalled that period in her life. Depressed after fulfilling her pact of rebirth with Forge, she had set out to see the world through human eyes. In a sense, she was seeking some sort of personal enlightenment, but in her heart, she was aching for her soul mate. At the time, she had become involved with Vale, a woman who possessed the fierceness and beauty, as well as the innocence and nobility of the phoenix in her almost human incarnation. Ash, as a man, had become her lover. While meditating upon the soul of creation and her lost love, Ash was startled by the conception of Ember. Ash did not realize that the conception had been divided. The uncontrollable shift from male to female, and her instant flight, terrified by this inexplicable loss of control, distracted her from the fact that an ember had been planted in her lover’s womb completing the first half of the conception of the phoenix. The other half accounted for the transformation of Ash, and the conception of a daughter to compliment the son. Even the discovery of her own pregnancy, which prevented her from returning to Vale, did not cause her to suspect the conception of Ash. She returned home to her dragon twin and his wife to bear her daughter, Ember, unable to explain who it was she had reincarnated, but she could not resist naming her daughter one of the names that meant Phoenix.

As Ash and Vale became reacquainted, it was discovered that Ash was Ash’s father in addition to being Ember’s mother. During her stay she learned that Vale’s husband was sterile. Out of friendship, Ash revealed her male form and dragon nature to the couple, offering the childless couple the hope of a son and heir through reincarnation. He thanked Ash for the offer but declined. As was his habit, he soon departed, oblivious to the affection that had grown between Vale and Ash. In the relationship that emerged during his absence, Ash confided his undying love for the phoenix and the resemblance in Vale that had drawn him to her. She remembered this when she named the son he gave her the night of his abrupt departure from her life. Vale had always assumed that Ash had sensed the arrival of her husband. When they discovered Vale was pregnant, Musk had smugly confided that he had declined the offer in the bizarre conviction that doing so would encourage his wife to pursue it in his absence. Vale suspected that Ash had been immune to that kind of manipulation. The fact that her husband had actually planned on her infidelity did little to improve their strained relationship. Once Musk had come to the conclusion that Ash was a reincarnation of himself, she realized it would be best not to challenge it, for the child’s sake.

As he led his son on a mad route through the wilderness designed to throw off pursuit, Musk struggled to understand what had happened. He forced his son to relate every detail of that night, trying to figure out what exactly had happened. Musk was terrified to discover that Ash and Ember had actually merged. There were two precedents for the kind of union his son had experienced, but only one which applied in this case. Because Ash and Ember were both tested and confirmed to have phoenix natures, their union revealed that they had been separate incarnations of the same person. Musk only had to take one look at his child to see how precarious the balance between dusk and Ember was. If her family got their hands on Ash, they would do all in their power to shift the balance in Embers favor, to restore her to her place in the royal family. His personal prejudices lead him to conclude that she was the product of an accidental dual reincarnation of himself. Musk was forced to scrap all the plans he had made to exploit Ember’s position. While her royal heritage made her an attractive prospective mate, nothing was worth being reincarnated female. Opportunist that he was, he immediately saw a say to use what he had learned, while taking refuge in the home of his best friend, Ash’s uncle. Musk had realized that he now had proof that Ash was not related to his family by blood and dispatched a letter explaining what he had deduced to his friend, Vale, proposing the union of their schools through Ash.

Coal, concerned by his daughter’s refusal to participate in the most important part of her initiation, received Musk’s proposal with celebration. He contacted his sister to check his friend’s assumption. Vale confirmed that Ash’s dragon gift had enabled her to reincarnate the same person divided by the embodiment of both sexes. She did not confide her suspicion that the person reincarnated was not her husband. Coal senses she was holding something back, but did not press. Instead, he shared the contents of Musk’s letter, in which all of her husband’s assumptions were spelled out. After her brother informed her of the good news, Vale advised Tempest. The magus was relieved to learn that Ember had not been abducted, at least not in the sense he had feared, and called off the manhunt. Vale assured Tempest she would keep an eye on the situation, and asked him to pass the word on to Ash, if he could contact her. She was not particularly surprised to find Ash unreachable. During the first three months of her pregnancy, she had tried in vain to contact the dragon, before circumstances forced her to inform her husband that she was expecting.

Fear of being reincarnated as a girl compelled Musk to do more than just hide the truth from Ember’s family. He labored to convince Ash that Ember had been an accident, a side effect he hoped Ash would overcome before Musk’s passing. Musk had always treated Ash as property, undermining their relationship. Subjecting it to new abuse was all it took to begin to crack it. Musk had always been a selfish, self-centered and demanding task master, but his campaign against Ember crossed the line. Able to taste Ember’s fear, Ash’s respect for his father withered. Able to taste Ash’s love, Ember fought to contain her own hatred. If Musk had confided his intentions, Ash might have cut loose and returned to Ember’s people. Instead, Ash knew only that Musk was taking him somewhere safe, where he could focus on sorting this mess out. Musk’s plans were complicated by Ash’s difficulty in asserting his normal form. Before doing anything as ludicrous as introducing a girl as his son, he needed to confirm the arrangements he had made by correspondence, so he instructed Ash to go to the school ad wait to be summoned while Musk went to the house to meet with Vale.

Ash had been separated from his cousins since the start of his initiation eight years earlier. Before the decline of his wife, Coal had conceived three daughters, Blaze, Dagger and Raven. Blaze was pleasant, amiable and abstract, while Dagger was a sharp wit who could stab a person in the back if they crossed her. Raven was a talented, assertive and expressive girl wounded by her mother’s early death. Only after her presence was taken for that of a challenge to the school did she recognize Raven for who she was. Forbidden by his father to reveal his identity, Ash introduced herself as Ember, unwittingly allowing the girl to surface during the bout that ensued. Ember impressed Raven and the two became instant friends. Ember was still bound by Musk’s orders, but ironically the story she relayed resulted in Raven insisting she stay as a guest of the school. Raven dragged her to the house, where her eldest sister took the travel worn girl aside to bathe. Unable to resist the older girl’s charm and curiosity, Ember confessed her feelings for her cousin, the loss of her betrothed and the endearing proposal of a boy she had recently met, Ash, to Blaze during their first encounter.

Musk had spent the afternoon closeted with Vale, discussing the details of his proposal. He too was offered the hospitality of Coal’s home, and had bathed before Ember was brought up to the house. Musk had gone down to retrieve Ash only to find his child gone. He had inquired among the students and rushed back to the house when he learned what the girl had done. Musk distracted Blaze then went in to the bath to confront Ember. Her response to being manhandled by Musk roused the boy in her, pushing Ember aside before she tried to kill his father. Musk commanded Ash to get a grip on himself and make himself presentable as a boy. Unfortunately, Raven arrived after Musk departed, to join Ember in the bath. Because her father had insisted on certain concessions to modesty, before allowing boys and girls to train together, Raven had never confronted a boy in the nude, and she was not prepared for this first encounter with Ash. Like Ash, she did not recognize her cousin, in truth did not even remember that he had existed, and lashed out at this unexpected invasion of her home. the commotion that followed roused the entire house.

Coal stepped in and urged everyone to calm down, promising to explain the presence of this unexpected guest. A couple of nights before, he had informed the girls that an arrangement had been made between the two houses of their father’s family. Coal had insisted that the truth about their cousin had to be revealed before Musk’s proposal was introduced, so Ash and Ember’s strange condition was revealed, shattering the fragile friendship that had started between them. Confiding what he had determined about his son’s true nature, Musk explained the proposed a union of their families and schools through an arranged marriage between Ash and his friend’s daughter, Raven. Unfortunately, by this disclosure, all Raven had to do to envision her future husband was look at Musk, and she instantly objected. Her retort was picked up in a somewhat skewed way by her eldest sister, who was a bit shaken by the notion of the girl she had met being eclipsed by her male half. Blaze announced that, obviously, a wedding would have to wait until after Ash and Ember’s initiations were complete, in case Ember became the dominant half. Deep down, Ember understood that Blaze had thrown her a lifeline, and she wondered if she would be willing and able to seize hold of it.

The house fell silent at Blaze’s comment. Coal instantly agreed that was the most prudent path. Blaze explained the proposal from Ash, on the mistaken assumption that Ember had accepted it. Musk fumed in silence. His courage and honor had been challenged by Blaze’s amendment, forcing him to allow the initiation of his son’s female half in concert with the initiation of his male half. Ash tried to protest, but Musk silenced him, saying that, if Ash showed up, and still wished to pursue the relationship with Ash, the boy was honor bound to meet that commitment. Ash realized that his father was counting on the boy’s hatred of Ash causing him to withdraw the proposal the instant he learned Ember’s secret. Raven announced that she would not consent to this mating until she had discussed the situation with the boy, given the extraordinary complication of having to share a mate. With that she stormed out of the room. No one could dispute her reservation, which meant that until her condition was meat there could be no intimacy between Ash and Raven, so father and son were put up in a guest room. Ash and Ember were of one mind in their relief over the respite.

Coal and Vale were brother and sister, born to a minor noble branch of the Phoenix House

Coal had been married to Mist, Musk’s sister, who died when Raven was six

Blaze was the eldest daughter of Coal, three years older than Ash and Ember

Dagger was the middle daughter of Coal, a year older than Ash and Ember

Raven was the youngest daughter of Coal, the same age as Ash and Ember

Bone was Blaze’s mate during initiation, the couple fell in love, though circumstances had kept them apart since

Dragon was Dagger’s mate during initiation, there was little love between them, but circumstances had kept them together

Raven refused to consider a mate for initiation, though she could have had any boy she chose

Ash and Ember had been attracted to each other by the desire to become whole, and would now be repulsed by the fear of losing their own identities.

Ash and Ember were hindered by an absolute injunction against revealing their union to others

Raven was instantly the focus of a rivalry between Dragon and Ash, who had become infatuated with Raven

Dagger was more than willing to take advantage of Ash and Ember’s situation

Dagger had already been taking advantage of Dragon’s interest in her little sister, making him pay for his ‘infidelities’

Dragon’s interest expanded to include Ember, even as he declared himself a rival to Ash for their affection

Dragon seemed impervious to the perception that Ash and Ember were essentially the same person

Ash arrived in search of Ash and Ember brought him home to explain what had happened to her and Ash

Blaze unwittingly complicated several people’s lives by proposing Ash as Ember’s mate

Musk tried to break the commitment between Ember and Ash by abruptly revealing Ash

Ash and Ember were seen as the same person, due to Musk’s revelation of their origin

Ash and Ember, though too devout to reject their mates, focused on finding a cure to their condition

Ash and Ember, though attracted to each other, presented obstacles to each other against intimacy with anyone else

Raven and Ash were allowed to keep the initiative in their relationships with Ash and Ember

Raven and Ash both recoiled from the thought of intimacy with Ash and Ember, though honor forbid their objection

Ash had been too long perceived as Raven’s cousin for her comfort, despite any revelations, people would still talk

Ember was seen as a disguise by Ash a despicable act adopted by his nemesis, tainting a contest between men

Raven thoughtlessly confessed that she would much rather have been partnered with Ash

Ash missed the sarcasm of her comment, and mistook the overture of friendship that followed for much more

Raven became the focus of Ash’s rivalry with Ash, as Raven’s sympathy over the burden they shared snared his heart

Dragon quickly determined that Ash was no rival for Ember, for he never held back when they fought

Dragon also determined that Ash was not a serious rival for Raven, after seeing her treating him as a friend

Dragon understood Raven well enough to sense that an intimate relationship with her would be combative

Even worse, the commitments he had made prior to being approached by Ember’s mentors, came back to haunt him, and his son, bringing with them the girl’s mother and the author of this bizarre circumstance.

Ash and Ember were overwhelmed with the demands thrust upon them from all sides, when all they wanted was to come to terms with their shared existence and figure out who and what they really were. Time waited for no one, so they were forced to attend to their initiation, mastering the diverse disciplines and techniques of dance and dreaming. In spite of rivalries, stubborn denials and outright rejection, they strove to master the most intimate and delicate devotions of their arts, while mastering the most intricate and demanding disciplines of their arts.

While their intended partners resisted the intimacy growing between them, they found the walls between them dissolving. Ash could no longer deny he was a girl, and Ember could no longer deny she was a boy. One person was emerging from the union of Ash and Ember, a person who called herself Phoenix. A person who defined her own sex, which was, like her, at once male and female, but at the same time neither. A person who was not the reincarnation of a man, but the reincarnation of the phoenix of legend, the long lost love of the dragon who reincarnated her thousands of years after she had given up hope of being able to. The tragedy of it was, after almost a year of denying their love for Ash and Ember, Raven and Ash discovered a completely different person had taken their place. Phoenix was torn by the feelings she had for the couple, and the promise of a love that had rescued her from the brink of oblivion. Phoenix was also confronted by the consequence of discovering who she was, the legacy of what she was. Once confronted with the truth, she could not deny she was the phoenix, nor could she deny that, as the phoenix, she was the goddess of sex.

Unknown to all, a spy was in their midst. Thorn, the minion of Talon, had possessed Tempest to keep an eye on Ember. For the most part, he resided quietly in the back of her mind, influencing her subtly, only taking over to report to his master. Since the failure of Crow’s resurrection, Talon had been struggling to figure out why Ember had not been the right sacrifice. When Ash came into the picture, Thorn reported his suspicion that he might be the true sacrifice. He was instructed to keep an eye on Ash until his master could get his hands on the boy and find out for himself. Given the circumstances, the simplest way to keep tabs on Ash was to ensure that he was mated with Ember, thus enabling Thorn to keep both prospects under observation. Unfortunately, Ash would never consort with a man like Musk, so Thorn blocked communication with Ash, expecting her to continue searching for a prospective mate for Ember until her daughter returned to the capital. By then, his master would have intercepted the boy. Unfortunately, the boy and his father abducted Ember and disappeared before Talon could move. By the time Thorn caught up to Ash and Ember, they had merged. Talon understood the implications immediately, and estimated the time necessary for Phoenix to awaken, at which time she would be ready for sacrifice. Thorn was instructed to ensure that Ash and Ember became properly integrated, pitting Thorn against Musk’s intentions, unaccountably making Thorn Ember’s champion, and Ash’s counselor.

On the eve of their seventeenth year, and their final examinations and trials, the initiates returned to Dream Gate. The final, and most intimate, years of Ember’s initiation were very hard on her. From early childhood, she had been irresistibly drawn to her cousin, Ash. Her elder twin cousins were practically joined at the hip, interested in no one but each other, but pretended to an interest in Ash to tease Ember. In a way, her desire for him had only grown stronger as Ash, Ember and Ash came closer to completing their initiation and returning home. During the past few months, Ember had begun struggling with the onset of heat. A struggle manifest in traumatic nightmares, crippling fits and seizures and bizarre blackouts during which she dreamed of indulging in behavior she felt fortunate not to remember clearly. It was bad enough that being in heat inspired somewhat less than modest behavior in her waking life. To an outside observer, her misadventures were merely those of tempestuous and impetuous youth, and not really out of character. They alarmed her because they made her feel out of control, and because she feared what might happen if anyone realized she was out of control. She desperately wanted to finish her initiation and see Ash again, so she had confessed to the nightmares and disturbing flashbacks that had plagued her since her abduction when her mentor realized there was something wrong with her.

The nightmares, combined with the disturbed and agitated thoughts and emotions they provoked, had driven her prowling out of the warmth of her bed often in the past. Never more so than what she was experiencing of late. Her roaming brought her under the eaves of a private conversation between her mother and her dance mentor, Talon, who had come in the cover of darkness. Though she could not bear to hear what was spoken, she could not flee without giving herself away. The journey to Dream Gate had been encouraged by Thorn, as a test of their courage and discipline. For most, Dream Gate was a fearful place, for it remained a haunt of the demonic and undead. Many young warriors ventured there to test their skills and gain experience in real combat, and in facing the unnerving forces of darkness that were the recurring bane of the young empire. They had been brought here to confront their childhood demons. The initiates final examinations and trials were to be conducted in the ruins of Dream Gate.

Ash, virtually the male twin of Ember, had an unnatural attraction to her.

She wanted him. Her arousal was frightening. It was not even rational, a purely animal magnetism. Her body's response to just his look had been embarrassing, and the brushing contact had almost burst her heart.

Coal, only ten years older than his niece and nephew, Ember and Ash, was Ash's mentor.

As Ash, Ember, and Ash came of age, access to Aeirn was restored.

A wizard, hired to create a unique demon, summoned and corrupted an angel of the goddess.

In spite of the mystery and secrecy surrounding the legacy, enemies of the phoenix house had penetrated the mysteries of the legacy and discovered its purpose and the possibility it presented. The veil of secrecy had been pierced before it had been established. The first phoenix initiations had occurred during the age of gods and many were captured, dissected and all that could be learned of them written down in the archives of demonology and necromancy. This priceless information fell into the hands of a dangerous cabal of demonologists and necromancers in the winter domains who happened to be masters of the forbidden arcane arts. Under constant assault by the armies of the dragon king, Talon, they had been desperate. The secrets of the phoenix legacy had offered them a way to fight back, starting with the weakening of the autumn domains. The people of the autumn domains were distracted from the conquest of the winter domains by the systematic assassination of the royal and noble heirs of the phoenix house. In some cases it had been easier or more prudent to remove the elder of a static pair. In the space of a few years, virtually every branch of royal or noble lineage was pruned, forcing the passage of many great elders and the widespread birth of new offshoots during a period of uncertainty when the leadership of the autumn domains felt vulnerable.

Redesigned by conspirators from the outer realm, the demon was a tool employed to crack the security integrated into the game and later appropriated by the government to secure its resources on the Threshold.

In order to get close to the Phoenix, the demon possessed Ash, intending to take possession of Ember, who was supposed to be presented to the goddess at the end of her initiation. During her trials in the ruins, the demon released other demons to take possession of other initiates, compelling them to help capture Ember. Unfortunately, Ember proved more difficult to break than anticipated.

While the things that haunted the ancient ruins were the monsters of every child’s bedtime stories and nightmares. Ember had the distinction of being the first to confront them.

Inevitably, she was reminded of what the school was there for. They spent a day in preparation, going over maps, and discussing the rules and boundaries for the trials. The next morning, Phoenix lead a party into the ruins, to confront the reality of the horrors unleashed in the war first hand for the first time. Phoenix was surprised to find a kind of peace and beauty amid the ruins. According to legend and rumors, demons and undead infested the catacombs buried under the temples, mansion and fortifications of the ancient inner city.

With little hesitation, they entered the estate proper. The group discovered the horrors that lived, or in spite of death, yet endured. A careful tour of the mansion turned up an impressive count of greater undead and even a few demons, all, for the most part, dormant in the daylight hours. They also discovered that the mansion itself did not sleep soundly. Locks and keys like none they had known were active, and in them were secrets that could take them apart or redefine them at a glance, opening and manifesting potential buried in their spirits, forcing them to confront themselves, taunting them with the promise of power such as only legends spoke of. Such powerful artifacts could only be relics of the age of gods, and no one could imagine how they had failed to be destroyed in the purge.

They encountered nothing they could not handle on their way in, but were forced to retreat when they stumbled into a chamber stuffed with hundreds, maybe thousands of undead. Nightmares given flesh and blood, and other abominations. Death walked in the shadows, in a wary and armed truce. They raced through the catacombs and emerged within the forbidden section near the mansion at the heart of the ruins. Given the true size of the ruins, the forbidden sections were the majority of the ancient city.

Alarmed to find undead indeed milling about in the catacombs, she divided the party, instructing the detachment to continue their trial in the upper levels, while she descended with a group of volunteers into the depths to determine the extend of the infestation. Ash was the first to volunteer, leaving Ash to lead the other party. At one point they came across an inscription etched into a stone wall, a prophetic phrase that sent shills down their spines. “One day Death’s Gate will open, heralding the beginning of the end of Exile and the return of the gods.” While exploring the catacombs, they became trapped underground and a piece of Phoenix’s past rose up to confront her, and awaken old demons.

Among the many oddities picked up along the way, a deck of keys and a signet ring ended up in her possession. An instinct and a ruthlessness compelled her to seize it even before the power of the deck's keys was discovered. Things took an abrupt turn when she indulged in an experiment. Taking the keys, she dared query a life path. A divination such as common keys had been contrived for. Within the keys she found herself, and opened the doors to her full potential, driving a nightmare out of her mind. Her quest was all but forgotten as they walked through the ruins, awakening to grace and guile, swiftness and subtlety, strength and beauty. And yet for all she changed, she remained herself. Shaken and awed by her intense transformation, she allowed the others to question the keys. Each, awakened to a vision of their full potential, was fearful of the power they had tapped and the deck of keys was returned into her keeping before they set forth again.

On the third day, their quest for the surface brought them to the shores of a subterranean lake.

The indirect result of an attempt to confront the Phoenix, the demon's unwittingly embodied the Phoenix on Aeirn as Ember.

The Phoenix, originally the AI responsible for creating the universe of Aeirn under the direction of the Dragon, was stunned to awaken within the game and oblivious to the fact that she had eclipsed the demon.

The Phoenix adopted the identity of Ember and approached Ash, who was already working on a campaign to neutralize the demon migration problem the conspirators were attempting to exploit.

It had turned out that the demons and angels of Aeirn, designed for the administration and maintenance of Aeirn, could penetrate the security he had designed for the government.

Ash immediately recruited Ember to champion the purge of arcane arts left over from the second age of magic.

Ember had become known as the paladin Phoenix, champion of the goddess.

Following the death of her cousin, Ember adopted Ash's identity for use in her male form.

In the wake of her death and rebirth, she had proven herself worthy of her former identity--and because of the demon, she had manifested her true form. In absorbing the angel-turned-demon she had gained certain powers, which included the ability to alter her sex. Initially, she was only capable of reverting to her former sex. The part of her that had been Phoenix surprised herself by adjusting very quickly to being female. It started as intimacy between girls, but as Ember warmed up to her old friend, she finally welcomed her into her bed and stumbled into the discovery that it was also possible for her to trigger the magic she had absorbed and change sexes as well. If she succumbed to a powerful masculine or feminine impulse, she could turn male or female, respectively. It was difficult to control, since it required her to either indulge in or suppress a feeling that could originate from within her or in response to outside stimulus.

Suddenly able to assume a male identity, "Ash" officially returned home from the academy and moved his bride into a new home. Playing both parts added a level of complexity to Ember's life. Living in the city, Ember found employment as a woman almost immediately. Ash stayed with her for a year while pursuing the resources needed to embark on the next step in his life's mission. "Ash" embarked on the first of a series of fictitious adventures to make his fortune, but as autumn arrived Ember fell victim to a plot.

It started when Ember was nineteen. Crimson challenged Ember to qualify for a courtesan's license. Crimson had contacted the lord Ash was supposed to be employed with and discovered that he had never arrived. On her own initiative, she had fielded an investigation to find him, and when no trace of him was found, she confronted the two families with the news that Ash had gone missing and was presumed dead. Only Ember had been kept ignorant, until enough time had passed for Ash to be declared legally dead and Ember a widow.

Word of Ash's death prompted a couple of her former brothers to seduce her in the guise of consoling her. Having her former brothers literally force themselves on her one night sealed the end of her former life and the beginning of her new one. Becoming a widow changed Ember's situation dramatically in other ways. For one thing, it removed the burden of posing as two people. Unfortunately, it also made her courtesan's license valid, barring the possibility of marriage--not that the man she wanted would have proposed.

Ember's training, intended only to justify her ongoing presence as Cinder's apprentice, was exploited by Cinder's mother to force Ember to accept the patronage of a local lord, binding her to him as his personal courtesan. By the time Ember realized what had happened, her marriage had been annulled and she was legally enslaved. Her only consolation was discovering that the lady of the house was Naomi, who rallied to her side once she learned how her husband had plotted to acquire Ember as his mistress.

Things became even more complicated when Ember accidentally betrayed her secret to Naomi. A practical woman, she avenged herself by taking advantage of the situation to compel Ember to service her in addition to her husband. She was curious why Ember had posed as husband and wife, and why she had not attempted to appear somewhere in male form to challenge Ash's death. Ember confessed that it was too difficult trying to maintain both identities, and she did not want to risk having her secret exposed.

The division of the Phoenix into separate incarnations as Dusk and Dawn was the indirect result of the demon's presence in Ember.

Ember had always been careful to avoid pregnancy, changing forms once a day and using a courtesan's techniques to purge her system, but following a close call in bed with her lord and lady, Ember found herself locked in female form once again. As the result of efforts by the demon within to take possession of her, Ember had impregnated Naomi with a parthenogenic son and reincarnation of Ash, and then Ember had been impregnated with a parthenogenic daughter who was a reincarnation of herself.

Ember eventually discovered it was because she was pregnant. She was confronted by, and sought the counsel of, the goddess. Concerned about the possibility she might have impregnated herself while switching between forms, she confided all of the details of her transformation. The goddess recognized the ring for what it was and revealed that there were deeper aspects of renewal, one in particular which was common to angels and demons--the power of parthenogenesis.

The demon had fought the Phoenix's possession, provoking the parthenogenic inception of Dusk, the son of Ash, and Dawn, the daughter of Ember.

Ember was stunned to learn that she had conceived a second incarnation of herself, one that would be born female. Stunned by the prospect of motherhood and reincarnation, Ember barely absorbed the rest of the goddess's revelations. The ring she had inherited from Ash was actually a prison containing an angel or a demon. The process of mastering the powers of the ring was a ruse that served ultimately to free it, to resurrect it in Ember's image. In the goddess's assessment, however, neither child's inception was sufficient to liberate the demon.

The issue was brushed from her mind by two other crises. Ember's mother had surreptitiously sent word of Ember's pregnancy to her son--in care of the lord he was supposed to have taken service with--and received word back that "Ash" never arrived, sparking the suspicion that something unfortunate happened to him on his way there. When no trace of him could be found after months of searching, "Ash" was declared dead. Worse, Ash had fathered an heir--an offshoot, like Ember's--and departed on his mission, leaving Ember devastated.

Ember could hardly believe that Ash would do something like that to her. During the year he had lived with her and been her lover, he had been recruiting men to his cause and sleeping with other women in hopes of impregnating one with a parthenogenic son as an insurance policy. That he refused to consider Ember as a potential host mother, and even kept the possibility of parthenogenic conception a secret from her to prevent her from offering, hurt her deeply. Neither realized that he had sensed the inception of Dusk.

Once again, Ash had only meant to protect her. Neither of them had known someone would check up on her "husband" or that his absence would result in "Ash" being presumed dead. If Ember had borne Ash's heir it would be obvious who the father was and she would be convicted of adultery. Becoming a courtesan prevented that, but her patron would have retaliated against both of them if given proof of an affair between them. As it was, people had already been suspicious about them.

Ember's pregnancy relieved her of her obligations to her patron, and prompted her to call on her only known "relative" for assistance. As a mentor to Ember at the academy, Logan had been something of a father figure even before the boy became a girl and was adopted as his daughter. Logan found himself enchanted by his role as her father and decided to settle in Avon to found a private academy for gifted orphans. It was also a way for him to quietly resume some of his duties as a paladin of the goddess and warden of the ruins.

When Dusk was born, a few days before Dawn, it was obvious that he was not the son of the lord, but since the lord was oblivious to the truth about Ember, he simply assumed that his wife had been unfaithful. Thus, Dusk was considered a bastard. Dusk had been named on impulse, when the lady asked her what "her" son should be called. He was Naomi's favorite, and her secret delight. Ember, as a courtesan, did not need to explain or justify her daughter's paternity, but she named her former self as the father and named her daughter Dawn.

Naomi opened up to Ember to express her concern when their children, Dusk and Dawn, were engaged at birth to fulfill the pact. By her understanding, since she assumed that her husband was the true father of Dawn, the two were half brother and sister. While the two mothers resolved to keep Dusk's paternity a secret, Ember had previously confided in her mother about the way the lady had been exploiting her male side. When Cinder confronted Ember with her suspicions, Ember confirmed that Dusk was "her" son and begged her to keep it a secret.

Cinder agreed that it would be wise to sabotage the union of Dusk and Dawn, but she could not openly rescind her promise to Blaze. They discussed the matter with Naomi, and things were arranged so that Dusk and Dawn would grow up as siblings, paired together as companions. Hopefully, this would condition them to perceive each other as brother and sister and reject their betrothal.

Logan chose to remain with his widowed "daughter" to help her raise his "grand-daughter". Because Dawn was typically referred to as Phoenix Dawn, she eventually came to identify with both names. From the beginning, Dawn adored Logan. To her chagrin, Ember also found herself attracted to the man posing as her father, highly conscious of the fact that the man had come on to her the first time he laid eyes on her female form--before she revealed her true identity. It struck her that if there was a man she loved more than Ash it had to be Logan.

It took everything she had learned about being female to seduce him, succeeding only because she was not truly his daughter. In spite of that, they had to be very careful to avoid scandal.

When the children were seven, the indigenous conspirators and the cabal collaborators tracked the corrupted demon down and launched a raid on Ember's House that succeeded in allowing the demon to eclipse her and probe her soul through Dawn in search of the answers it needed.

In Arden, the systematic destruction of the Phoenix House had opened the door to annexation. Dragon lords of the Athelon Empire were assuming power as regents of fallen phoenix households, taking residence in lands they had won back from the scourge their emperor drove into the Autumn Kingdoms. Where they could not simply seize power, they courted it, focusing on the young phoenixes thrust unprepared into positions of power. Among these, children like Cinder and Coal, in whom the hopes of their House were desperately invested. Cinder's parents were among those who lost their parents, and possessed no offshoots. The survivors of the purge were warned by Cinder not to beget new offshoots, with the threat of conquest by the winter domains still looming, but because she was a mere child as yet, her warnings were not heeded, save by her family and her closest friends and acquaintances. The conquest of the winter domains was complete by the time the last offshoot was born, and rumors were flying suggesting that the dragon king might attack the autumn domains next, seeking out the allies of his enemies at home. In spite of their vulnerability, the leaders of the autumn domains began to mass their armies at the borders of the winter domains. Parents arranged for the best protection they could for their offspring, before assembling in a summit to prepare the defense of the domains.

After seven happy years, tragedy struck.

Most of the phoenix house was massacred while mustering armies at the borders of the winter kingdom, and the mantle of high queen fell upon the slender shoulders of Arden. The dragon king moved in the midst of the chaos, while the armies of the autumn domains were in disarray. Arden initially fled with her supporters, but they could not escape the occupied domains. They were identified as nobility, and found themselves under house arrest. In spite of a bold initiative, the dragon king did not follow up the initial invasion with new offenses. He secured the occupied domains and policed them fiercely for two years. Arden and her supporters found themselves frequent, and unwilling, hosts to the dragon king who probed incessantly into the mysteries of the Phoenix House. Arden almost managed to escape, aided by priestesses of the goddess who refused to allow a scion of the phoenix legacy to remain in enemy hands, but ended up arriving at the sanctuary immediately before the dragon king on one of his unannounced visits. In spite of efforts to keep the two from encountering each other, Arden and the dragon king stumbled across each other and all hell broke loose. Arden, a phoenix, was tripped into a dragon initiation, reflexively initiating the dragon king into the Phoenix House. As the heir to the legacy, she was forced to help the dragon king through the ordeal of unification, and was taken into his confidence. Arden and the dragon king, Forge, fell in love and married. An heir was born later that year, despite Arden's youth. His son became the heir to the unified Arden Empire, named for the island capital. As dragon-phoenix hybrids, Arden and Forge relinquished their House titles and claims.

At the birth of the Arden Empire, the phoenix house had been reduced to shambles. The majority had been reduced to childhood or infancy, losing even their mastery of the phoenix legacy. A score of mature adults had survived the border massacre, but far more that they had truly died. Arden’s dragon initiation had even cost the house the heir and defender of the phoenix legacy. The legacy could only be entrusted to a phoenix who mastered it, as the score of survivors had. The goddess picked two potential successors, twin cousins of Arden, charging them with restoring the Phoenix House. They organized the survivors in planning the reconstruction and restoration of the house, arranging for the fosterage of the phoenix children, preserving the entitlements of their predecessors. Before their work was complete, a second massive assault on the Phoenix House occurred. Save for one little girl, every last man, woman and child was slain, leaving the Phoenix House in ashes. Though not the oldest of the phoenix children, that girl had the greatest potential. She was named the heir to the legacy and the Phoenix House, and then she was sent to begin the training that would make her the paladin of the goddess, first champion of the restoration. The other children would become the army charged with the preservation of the Phoenix House and the sanctuaries of the goddess. They would have to struggle to reclaim their noble titles, and there would no longer be kings and queens among them. The Dragon House was in ascendance, rising to claim the thrones of the autumn domains during the chaos, until one domain alone remained under phoenix rule.

The Dream Gate Massacre

On the suspicion that the avatar of the phoenix was in fact the first mortal incarnations of the phoenix, Talon abducted Eve’s children and used them as a sacrifice to enslave the phoenix. At the same time, the cabal attempted to infiltrate the imperial summit in Dream Gate and slaughter the leadership of the empire and capture Eve. Dusk and Dawn were unwittingly delivered into the hands of the enemy by their own parents. The sanctuary where Eve and Ash secured their heirs had already been infiltrated and compromised by way of demonic possession. The ritual to enslave the demonic phoenix was as much a success as it was a failure. The ritual involved triggering a premature union of Dusk and Dawn, creating an ambisexual embodiment the phoenix could not resist. By forcing the premature union of Dusk and Dawn, and subjecting her to traumatic and demeaning tortures, a demon with the power and potential of the phoenix was supposed to have emerged from the shadow of the phoenix. When the cabal witnessed Dawn’s resurrection, they had assumed that Eve had been slain and the demon trapped in the child’s mind. They were able to determine that something had taken possession of the child, and assumed it to be the demon. Having succeeded in part of their ambition, they abandoned the child and retreated until a way could be found to free the demon entirely. The failure of a demon to manifest as expected compelled the possessed to retreat in a fashion that would not betray their masters or their true objectives. The people of the autumn kingdoms assumed that the massacre had been an attempt at a coup, a new chapter in the purge of the Phoenix House. The fact that the offshoots of the traitors later identified among them had been slain as well was credited as an attempt to divert suspicion and gain the opportunity to strike.

The wizard, aided by the cult of Azael, had been searching for Ember. The children had been born already, by the time Ember was located, and the cultists saw a perfect opportunity to resurrect their god. On the assumption that Dawn and Dusk were created by the demon, to expel the souls binding it to the warded body of Ember, the children could be used in a ritual that would resurrect the demon Ash had slain. This forced the cult to wait until the children were capable of receiving the mantles of their former selves.

Dawn was able to bring Ember back to her senses, but alerted to the demon's presence within her, she sacrificed herself in the hope of taking it with her.

In the years since the ring was shattered, the demon had slowly threaded itself deeper and deeper into Ember's shadow. It took the demon ten years to take possession of Ember. The girl noticed the change in her mother right away, prompting the demon to act before she revealed Azael's presence to anyone else. Azael massacred the entire household and then summoned her cult and hunted Dawn down, dragging them deep into the ruins.

Ember was surprised to find herself alive, still in the private bath where he had captured her. Ember investigated the rooms staked out by her party and discovered that they were missing, along with all the gear she and they had brought with them. The taint of paradox permeated the ruins and space and time seemed to have warped around her. She called upon her inner resources, and attempted to find her way out of the maze of rooms the mansion had become. The intensity built as Ember confronted her captors, witnessed the death and defilement of a few of her party members and friends, and learned of the fate in store for her.

Ember fought the demon from within to save Dawn, gaining control just in time to stop the demon from killing her. Only the regenerative powers the girl had inherited from the ring through Ember had allowed her to survive Azael's torture. Ember could hardly believe her daughter was still alive, staring in horror as her dismembered body pulled itself back together. Fearing she could not suppress the demon for long, Ember focused her attention on slaying the cultists while Dawn healed.

That was enough to convince Dawn that her mother had returned to herself. Dawn escaped during the confusion and became lost in the depths of the ruins. With no idea where to go or what to do, she simply wandered at first, exploring the ancient city. In spite of her recent trauma, she found herself marveling over how intact everything was. Dawn soon discovered there were frightening things trapped in the city with her. Aeslyn Tear was a city of ghosts and other spirits; the former wandering freely and liable to follow her everywhere, the latter seemingly bound in place. Most were undetectable until she passed through one or stepped into a warding circle and was violently assaulted. The demons were the worst. Ghosts chilled her with their touch, taunting and terrifying her while violating her mind, but few were capable of molesting her, body and soul, the way demons did while she was in their spheres of influence. While struggling to defend herself from the demons' ruthless probing, Dawn realized they were trying to break her in order to possess her body. Her fear of becoming trapped with or possessed by one of these entities compounded and evolved into greater horror and desperation with each terrifying encounter.

Ember had been a captive audience to the massacre and everything that followed, including the meeting between the demon and the cultists. An elaborate ritual had been planned, in which the children would be used as sacrifices to resurrect the demon in its full glory. The first part of the ritual was supposed to leave the demon in sole possession of her body, free to slaughter and devour the helpless children, consuming them body and soul to resurrect itself in its full glory.

Ember searched through everything she had learned about demons and demonic possession and concluded that the only way to foil the cultists was to sacrifice herself. Finding a way to kill herself and leave no remains for the demon to possess required a little imagination. The best she could come up with was provoking a dragon to devour *her* alive. Fortunately, the cultists had already succeeded in provoking a dragon; Ember had risked her life sneaking past it to rescue the kids.

A demon had been torturing her friends, taunting them with detailed descriptions of his intentions, to defile and corrupt them and turn them into demons. Thorn and his minions were guarding the baths where she had been incapacitated, preventing her party from coming to her rescue. Ember stumbled upon the central pool, emerging from a side passage onto the grand balcony ringing the grand atrium. Unfortunately, her current form was one shared by demons, and her own party mistook her for the enemy when she emerged from the baths. Ash, in command of the second expedition, took one look at her and assumed her appearance spelled the worst for his beloved. Pausing at the sight of Ash, she leaned out to call to him only to turn on her heel and run for dear life as a dragon reared up before her. There was no time to explain, as the dragon charged in with fatal intent. She fled, and the dragon pursued.

Unwilling to leave the children in the hands of the cultists, if she was not going to be around to help them, Ember decided to make some use of the dragon's hunger before she fed herself to it. Using herself as bait, she led the dragon into the ruins and ambushed the surviving cultists. The dragon happily tore through the cultists, snapping them up in its efforts to get Ember. The hard part was keeping ahead of the dragon long enough to ensure all of the cultists were taken care of. The best she could do was see to it that any cultist not devoured was at least crippled before her game plan came to its grisly end.

In flight, the demon within Ember tried to take over, but she managed to force it down. Ember darted through the maze seeking to elude the dragon the demons had unwittingly roused from its slumber. In the process she found herself confronted with the deadly minions of the arch-wizard at every turn. She continued to struggle with the demon, determined to sacrifice herself before she allowed it to control her again. When it became apparent that the dragon was determined to catch her, she changed tactics. Naked, save for the powers of her mind, she resorted to pitting these threats against one another. She turned and ran back toward her enemies, darting in and out among the possessed. Sensing the nature of those around her, the dragon paused to deal with them as well. Demons and undead proved no match for the dragon, but they slowed it down. Each foe that fell to the dragon bought Ember a little more time to run. The dragon refused to be thrown off the scent and cut loose on Ember.

An even greater threat loomed when Dawn stumbled into the dragon's path. Fortunately, Ember had finished fighting the cultists and tracked Dawn down, arriving in time to distract the dragon from devouring her daughter. It had already occurred to Ember that she would have to sacrifice herself to slay the demon and protect Dawn. With her powers of regeneration, she had despaired of finding something capable of killing her--until she confronted the dragon. After rescuing Dawn, she held her for a moment then urged her to escape while she drew the dragon away. To her frustration, the dragon seemed to understand what she was doing and focused its attention on the little girl, pinning her down again and again to prevent her from escaping, while ignoring Ember.

Ember fought desperately to protect Dawn, baffled by the dragon's peculiar fixation on the little girl. More than once, the girl jumped, turned or leapt just in time to avoid lashing claws or slashing teeth. It was as if she sensed the attack an instant before it happened. She barely escaped being swallowed alive by slithering through a fissure into a tiny antechamber. The dragon attacked the wall violently, intent on carving its way through to the girl, until Ember closed on it using a sword seized from one of the cultists. The dragon turned on her, its piercing gaze underscored by the mind-crushing force of an angry telepathic probe. Something like recognition illuminated the dragon's glare, as it finally focused its formidable attention on her. Before she knew it, Ember was devoured alive.

It had seemed possible for a moment for her to escape with the children and her own life, when the dragon got one step ahead of her. Ember raced down a passage, thinking the dragon long since lost, and unwittingly dropped into an open shaft. As she fell, she could see that the lower end of the shaft was flooded. Just as she began to think she was home free, however, the dragon ambushed her. The dragon exploded up out of the water as she descended, but Ember narrowly avoided its flashing jaws. The dragon flailed around as she plummeted into the freezing water. Ember swam for her life, darting around the thrashing beast looking for a way out. At some point, she felt the dragon’s teeth dig into her and she was dragged under, where her head got bashed against a submerged protrusion. She blacked out, dismal images of herself slithering down its throat flickering through her horrified brain.

Ash had sensed the entire pursuit somewhat abstractly, while focused on his effort to rescue the surviving members of the party. He finally made contact with Ember as she was incinerated in the belly of the dragon, and just as abruptly felt that part of himself cut off. Something passed into him, and he reached out once more and felt the rift itself slip into his grasp. In spite of his furious struggle to arrest the rupture, he still took note of the images that burned themselves into his soul, which were clearly, to his mind, images of the friends he feared lost and an enemy he hoped slain.

At the moment of her death, the demon was literally torn in half, as the two souls it had rooted itself in departed Ember's body and refocused exclusively in Dawn and Dusk. The demon became trapped in the interstices of their minds as the final trauma awakened their psi potential in time for them to defend themselves. The combined trauma and psychic awakening caused both of them to be diverted into an obscure path of initiation emphasizing the martial arts as a means to discipline the naked powers of their minds. Through their training they grew ever closer, to the delight of their families counting on their union.

The sight of her mother's death drove Dawn deep into her hiding hole. Grief-stricken terror ruled her mind until she passed out from exhaustion. When she awoke some time later, her eyes had adjusted to the pale, phosphorescent light. For the first time in uncounted days, Dawn found herself in a safe, secure place. The dragon could not reach her and nothing else was likely to get past it to threaten her. She was safe from everything but her nightmares, traumatic recapitulations of her abduction, the abuse she endured at her possessed mother's hands and the shock of watching Ember sacrifice herself to end the double threat to her daughter. Her nightmares were but symptoms of an unconscious struggle to cope with the penetration and impregnation of her mind by the minds of her mother and the demon.

Instead, Ember and the demon passed on, divided between Dusk and Dawn.

Ember had trapped the demon deep within her psyche. It never occurred to her it might be carried along with her into Dawn when she sacrificed herself to slay it. While her death delivered a crippling blow to the demon, its presence tainted and compromised the integration of Ember and Dawn's minds, threatening the foundations of the girl's identity. Enough damage was done to her mind by the internal and external battles for possession of her body to cause the memory and personality of Ember to become divided along several fault lines. The individual aspects were assimilated along with parts of the demon's psyche, crippling and incapacitating it. After her encounters with the ghosts and spirits of the ruins, it was natural for her to assume new facets of her psyche were the "ghosts" of her mother and father.

By sacrificing herself, Phoenix not only preserved her daughter and future, she also forced a break in the war.

Dusk and Dawn, believed to be unrelated, were betrothed and their surviving parents traded them to pass on their training.

Thus, Dusk was apprenticed to the knight who was believed to be Dawn's father and Dawn was apprenticed to the courtesan that had been Dusk's surrogate mother.

Dawn emerged from the ruins believing that she was Phoenix.

Dawn regained consciousness stretched naked on a secluded beach. The cliffs upon which the Academy was built towered above her. Her memory of recent events was scrambled by her displacement.

It was not uncommon for her to slip out in the early hours of the morning for a swim, and it was possible she might have had some kind of accident, to explain her blackout and difficulty remembering things.

She was searching for where she might have left her clothes when she was discovered by Dusk. He was immediately struck by the girl's appearance, having envisioned it to perfection in the process of designing…

Any questions about whether she really was who he thought she was were banished when he saw her picking up the shattered pieces of the crucible from the sand. Clearly the ward had done its job, far in excess of what Dusk would have imagined. He instantly came to her aid, offering her his cloak and guiding her back to the Academy.

On the way, he probed her gently, shocked by her comments and responses. She identified herself as Dawn of Avon Lea, a psychic Initiate of the Academy--which implied she was a member of his own clan and a peer in many of his own classes.

When Dusk took a shortcut to the dorms, Dawn stopped in shock at the sight of the empty lot, asking aloud what had happened to the gymnasium. Dusk cautiously prompted her for more information, including her mother's name. Dawn revealed that she had adopted her mother's name after her death, that officially she was named Allannah Dawn. When asked for her father's name, she responded with his name. In a way, that was perfectly logical, though it implied a chain of events that seemed mind-boggling. Unfortunately, she realized he had not identified himself, and asked for his name. The fact that she did not recognize him, in spite of the fact that she would have to be used to an older version of him, unsettled him. At the same time, he could not refuse to answer. He confessed that he was Dusk of Avon Lea. At that point the pair were forced to face the conclusion that she was somehow in the wrong time. Dawn realized the danger she represented, quickly deciding it would be too risky to present herself at the Academy and even more dangerous to interact with her father. Unfortunately, she could not resist the desire to spend time with him, since he had died before she was born. In horror, she realized that meant he would be dying sometime in the next few months.

Dusk heard her argument for leaving before she altered her past, and confronted her with a few disturbing observations. First, he knew no women by the name of Dawn except for her. Second, her failure to recognize him implied that he would not be around long enough for her to develop any memories of him. Third, if he was correct in his suspicions, Dawn was pregnant. Fourth, she had no legal identity in this time, but if she were to marry someone, him for example, she would be established in history. Dawn retorted that his suggestions were ridiculous. First, there was no way she could be her own mother, because not only was that genetically impossible, she was a virgin. Second, if she somehow was--if somehow she was impregnated during the short time absent from her memories, then she already knew when and where she would die! He returned that she could not have physically entered her own past unless her presence was already accounted for in it. When she demanded an explanation, he confided a shocking truth. If she was pregnant, he could tell her approximately how and why, and in both cases, it was the result of a "genetics" experiment he was conducting. He asked her if she personally saw proof of her mother's demise, touched her cold, dead body. He stresses that she might believe she knew when, where and how both of them would die, but unless it was a fact she had confirmed herself, it was foolish to assume their fates were sealed. It was imperative for them to establish the facts of the situation as quickly as possible and take the appropriate actions.

Dawn allowed Dusk to take her home, ironically to the same suite of apartments she had lived in at the Academy. He pointed out that normally it took up to a month to determine if a woman was pregnant, but if his experiment was responsible, he would be able to tell after a quick examination. She agreed, and he quickly confirmed the presence of the embryo and the protective wards. Without going into full detail, he revealed that he had been trying to design--for all intents and purposes--a perfect human being. To protect his work, he added a failsafe to his creation, a magical ward that would enlist the potential of the soul he was embodying to protect the physical manifestation from mishap. That was how Dawn could be her own mother. When his betrothed cast the crucible into the sea, the ward activated and deduced that the embryo needed a mother in order to survive. Since it was within the potential of the embryo to become a mother, and apparently within the potential of that woman to step through time, the ward selected Dawn to serve as her own surrogate mother.

Because the whole situation was his fault, Dusk repeated his offer of marriage. Dawn was simply stunned, but his logic was impossible to argue with. It hardly mattered that he would officially become her father, when he was in fact her creator. He was also the only person who she could share this secret with. The following days were spent devising a cover for her, beginning with her being found "shipwrecked" and suffering from amnesia on the beach that first morning. Following a final confrontation between Dusk and his betrothed, in which the other woman spitefully threw Dusk at Dawn, while warning her that he would exploit her, it was less difficult to present an abbreviated courtship to Dusk's to the school at large.

The morning of her graduation, Dawn was infuriated to learn her debut would include a wedding. Dawn circumvents her grandmother despite being tied up all day in preparations, calling upon Dusk telepathically.

A wedding reception was scheduled to follow the wedding on Dawn's seventeenth birthday on midsummer's day. To her annoyance, preparations and matters of her estate kept Dawn busy until the week of midsummer.

The real courtship was an uneasy one, complicated by extraordinary chemistry between them. Because Dawn remained prey to her nightmares and flashbacks, moments of true intimacy occurred. In past attempts to explore the prospect of marriage, Dawn and Dusk had faced the invisible obstacle of being from different worlds. In spite of being forced into it, and even in spite of what they had learned about each other, it seemed suitable for the marriage to occur at the conclusion of their trials, to allow their friends to share the celebration. As a couple, they decided on settling in the region to pursue advanced training and start a family away from the interference of their family heads. At least, on the surface, since their main priority was saving the world.

marriage

A private celebration on the eve of her birthday was thrown into chaos by a tavern brawl. Questions led to confrontations, shedding light on the family legacy.

At the end of the week, the arrangements were all made and the two visited a temple where they were married in a simple ceremony.

Her wedding provided Dawn a good place to begin her inquiry. Dawn interviewed family and acquaintances of her parents. After welcoming the guests, Dawn hunted down her grandmother finding her engaged in an argument with the goddess. Dancing, a glimpse of politics, intrigue and cues to tantalizing leads. On the dance floor, Dawn gained enlightenment on many matters from a string of different partners. Most people were eager to feed her curiosity about her parents, mentioning various scandals, affairs and involved parties

consummating their marriage and confronting the demon

Unconsciously driven toward fusion, they reached the point, when they were seventeen, where they engaged in total intercourse, physical, mental and spiritual.

That night, they finally explored each other, each with a sense of wonder inspired by their beliefs about what the other really was. Unfortunately, the demon of Dawn's childhood was finally offered the chance it has been waiting for.

Because of their intimate upbringing, the night of their union invited a more intimate coupling than either had ever dared. As their intimacy deepened, a rapport formed between the lovers, which left Dusk completely open to possession. Unfortunately, the demon's sudden assault, from the depths of Dawn's mind, provoked a strengthening of their rapport, as they instinctively joined forces to fight back. The more desperate the struggle became, the more their minds overlapped, until they formed a gestalt--a unity of mind the demon could use to dislodge them from Dusk's brain and take sole possession of his body.

As the lovers' rapport evolved into a true gestalt, Azael awoke, exploiting their ultimate embrace to make a bid for its freedom.

In consummating their union they allow the demon split between them to reconstitute itself and vie for possession of one of their bodies.

In a short, desperate struggle, it attempted to take possession only to discover it could only claim one of their bodies--and doing so caused the gestalt to shift entirely into the other.

Azael focused on possessing the boy, the stronger of the two bodies, unseating the gestalt mind and forcing Dawn to concentrate everything in the girl to protect her from Azael's physical assault.

Instinctively driven to protect his bride, Dusk became trapped within her mind as the demon stole his body. Worse, because they were joined in rapport, their personalities and experiences remained deeply merged, the two able to confront each other only through a focused effort. Her initial pursuit of the demon was an almost fatal disaster, misinterpreted as a heated lover's quarrel. With one last incapacitating blow, the demon took flight, leaving the confused and disoriented bride to suffer arrest on charges of murder. The demon's escape was punctuated by bloodshed, as the demon and the bride struggle to kill one another.

In that moment, Dawn would be forced to chose her default sex by choosing which body to surrender to her nemesis.

Once Azael had sole possession of the boy, Azael broke the circuit of intercourse and escaped.

To ensure its escape, the demon attempted to kill the female--but she had been trained too well.

Before Dawn could sort out what was happening, she had defended herself with lethal force.

On the night she opened herself completely to her lover, the demon within her took possession of his body and tried to kill her, forcing her to slay her lover to survive.

As she stared in horror at the body of her lover, her other half, she realized what had happened and knew she could not prove the truth. She also realized that her lover had become a part of her as the result of the tragedy, so completely woven into her psyche she did not know where Dawn ended and Dusk began. Looking down at his dead body felt like looking at her own corpse. The natural consequences of what had happened took form in her mind, the scene before her guaranteed her arrest, imprisonment, and trial. The thought of Dawn being executed for him essentially murdering himself made Dusk panic. There was only one person they could think of to go to for help. Dusk and Dawn's mentor and master listened to her story, but could not prevent her arrest when the body was discovered and the guard came for her.

Arrested and charged with murder, Dusk and Dawn were trapped together in one body after slaying the demon that had taken possession of Dusk's body.

Having acquired a body, however, death was no great obstacle for the demon, and it offered some advantages.

For one thing, it obscured the demon’s resurrection, allowing it to slip into the shadows and begin putting plans in motion.

He had all to little time to take advantage of the situation, as it related to Dawn, before his own agents finally retaliated for his presumed destruction.

To avenge their master, they had set out to make an example of Dawn, not simply slaughtering her, but attempting to inflict an eternal death.

incarceration

Her trial did not go well. Unable to state her defense, she was utterly naked before the prosecution. Dawn defended herself with a slightly altered version of the facts of the demon's attack. Dusk and Dawn were predominantly male and female minded up to the point where they merge, after which point they, or rather, Dawn, must struggle with issues of sexuality and gender. The integration of the memories of both lives takes time, and was integral to the integration of personalities. Each personality experiences the memories of the other only second hand. Depth was added, and the experiences were there, but time was required to assimilate them. It works best if she does not have access to her metamorphic potential, if she was compelled to think of herself as Dawn with the memories of her lover and other odd bits of experience imprinted in her mind.

They discovered that the demon had compromised Dusk's link to his native world and body.

On the night she opened herself completely to her lover, the demon within her took possession of his body and abandoned her to seek out its next target.

The consummation of their union also unlocked the memory of the first incarnation of Phoenix.

Dawn was forced to defend herself with lethal force and believed her lover had sacrificed himself to slay the demon that had inexplicably invaded their privacy.

The origin of the demon is the initial mystery, and confronted with the lovers' fates, one that Ash hesitates to discuss.

In spite of the gestalt, it was as if the male half of her had died--he was simply absorbed into her, a ghost trapped in the corner of her mind.

That blow was followed by the loss of her mentor's support.

Ash did not believe the girl was capable of carrying on alone and announced his retirement.

With no assurance of ever reclaiming what she had lost, Dawn set out after Azael.

The trauma of losing her other half had prevented Dawn from pursuing at once.

At that point, the girl inherits the gestalt and comes into full possession of her potential and manifests psychic and metamorphic abilities.

Ash urged Dawn to find herself a husband and try to have a normal life.

He argued that her training made her dependant on Dusk and no other partner, not even a man as skilled a Ash himself, could work with her as effectively as she had worked with Dusk.

Dawn refused to accept that she was helpless without her other half, insulted by her mentor's belief that she would just get herself killed if she continued to hunt demons.

Part of her longed to have a normal life, to be reunited with her original family or have a family of her own--to just be a normal girl--but she would never have traded Dusk for any of that.

She could never live a normal life while that demon wore her other face.

Dawn struggled to sort out the impressions of Dusk upon her psyche, uncertain of the exact consequences of such an intense union.

A sense of him becoming a permanent part of her, combined with a sense of having lost him forever, was compounded by his inexplicable departure.

Her fear, in the face of his absence, was that they had gone too far, and that it had driven him away.

It helps for her to fear that Dusk might well be possessed or lost entirely. She was sensitive to the fact that his voice in her originates from somewhere within herself. As if he has become the voice of her conscience, as if her memory of him was all she has left of him. She was convicted of the murder of Dusk, and condemned to death. Dawn's only hope was to escape and gather proof of her childhood ordeal, and present the defense she should have from the start. Fortunately, Dawn had gained more from her merge than anyone could have suspected. The power that once took the combined effort of Dusk and Dawn to summon came easily to her, allowing her to simply walk out of prison. On the day of her planned escape, as she was prepared for her execution, she was surprised to be brought before the court and exonerated of all charges. Dusk had been sighted departing on a ship to Athelon.

By the time a witness reported the observing the departure of Dusk on a ship bound for the North, Dawn had sorted herself out. Following her "abandonment" by "Dusk", Dawn became obsessed with the memories unlocked during the tragic union, setting out to explore the ruins where her soul was nearly sacrificed a decade ago. Dawn was forced to begin her pursuit in Avon, searching for information about the demon that had stolen Dusk's body, in the hopes of discovering some way to restore Dusk to his proper place, before making her way to the North in pursuit of the demon.

Released on probation, and tasked to find some proof of her claim of demonic involvement, Dawn set out to investigate the demon's origins, guided internally by Dusk.

The process of acquitting herself, her mentors conclude, starts with acquiring evidence to support the story of her abduction and information leading to the part of the ruins where she was offered to the demon.

That much she ought to be able to pursue without delving into the ruins. They encouraged her to explore her contacts in the underground to that end, before petitioning for an expedition of the ruins.

Thus, she moves on, facing the prospect of being alone, scarred by their intimacy and the changes it wrought in her, unable to open up to another.

Upon arriving in Avon, Dawn was confronted with introducing herself to Dusk's family with only a letter of introduction from him. His family was disappointed and displeased with both the messenger and the message. The girl Dusk had been promised to had claimed his involvement with Dawn was responsible for making her break the engagement arranged by their families. The timing of Dusk's marriage and Dawn's pregnancy only made matters worse, as it convinced the family that she had coerced him into marrying her to legitimize her bastard child. But worst of all, they had received word of Dusk's murder, for which Dawn had been arrested and charged, but had not been notified that the charges were dropped when he turned up alive in an Athelon port. Thus, the family believed him dead, and the mother held Dawn responsible. Dawn's presence was only tolerated because she was carrying Dusk's child. Even more disturbing was the reactions of the artist's father and brothers, all of whom attempted to seduce her, and the latter of whom pressured her to remarry with one of them. The sister, whom Dusk had long believed to have hated him, surprised Dawn the most by becoming her one, strong ally and confidant. She was the only one who knew Dusk was alive, and she had perpetrated the illusion of Dusk's death to mess with her family, and Dawn had made her mischief even more enjoyable. It was only when the brothers' seductions turned into proposals that Dawn caught on. By which point, the sister had convinced her to wait until she had found a way to rescue Dusk, before challenging her family's assumptions.

petitioning for an expedition into the ruins

With only one ally in Dusk's family, in whom she confided an edited version of her plight, Dawn had to approach the Knights of the Order of Aeslyn Tear (the Order of Ruins), an odd association of adventurers noteworthy for having survived an expedition into Aeslyn Tear. Dusk had been an unofficial member of the Order of Aeslyn Tear, and the Sword & Sorcerer was owned and operated by an official member of the order.

In spite of the fact that she was qualified to be a member, they had somehow managed to overlook the fact. As an outsider, gaining entrance to their archives and resources would not be as simple as it had been for Dusk. Still, they had made their fortunes and retired to open up a clutch of businesses, central of which was the Sword and Sorcerer Inn. Dawn checked into the Inn as a guest, and spent the first night wrestling with the nightmares that had plagued her with growing intensity.

Nightmares have plagued Dawn since the night her childhood demon escaped. Some were the disturbing images of an alien entity taking control of Dusk's body, turning an act of love into an act of devastating brutality. Some were similar and horrifying memories of the same entity taking possession of her mother and trying to kill her, only to be torn to pieces by an invisible force lashing out of Dawn and Dusk. Some were of the excruciating physical and mental mutilation they had endured as the demon probed the pair of them, testing their suitability as offerings. Buried in those images, as in the second sort, was the memory of something inside her mind snapping and then unfolding, to heal her flesh, to heal and protect her mind, and ultimately to slay the person she loved most in the world. Through all of her trauma, she clung to the dreams searching for clues, signs, anything that would lead her to the identity of her nemesis or the place where he had been summoned or bound. They were the only leads she had in the pursuit of Dusk's salvation. The only hope they had of becoming separated, or reunited as husband and wife.

Late Morning, Day One : Port of Avon, A Public Bath

Unable to return to sleep, Dawn luxuriates in an early, casual morning, almost forgetting her appointments. Lack of sleep catches up to her in the bath, and her flight from nightmares causes a potentially fatal drowning accident.

After a poor night's rest, Dawn could not escape the assault of nightmares in the bath. While resting in a pool of hot water, she slipped once more into traumatized sleep. Caught in the grip of her traumatic memories, she would have drowned but for the timely intervention of another guest at the inn.

A visitor comes to the rescue. Dusk's mentor arrives anxiously, letting himself in and tracking her down as unsettled feelings deepen into alarm.

To her utter mortification, a strange man was forced to rescue her from drowning as she unconsciously wrestled with her personal demons. Awakening in his firm embrace, the pair of them utterly nude, Dawn was reminded of the depths of her loss. Pushing him away, she retreated from the bath to reflect on the most recent reminder of her purpose in returning to Avon. He pursued her, determined to make sure she was all right and demanding an explanation. Dawn was forced to restrain her phantom lover as they both recognized the man's obvious arousal in the bath, and easily deduced the nature of his interest.

A strained breakfast party. Dawn sought out associates of her parents and their liege. Under the guise of courtesy visits, Dawn followed up on leads gathered during her reception. Moira, a great aunt, revealed that Muriel was a bastard daughter of House Avon, born to a courtesan not a concubine. Dawn confides that Balfour--a magistrate and former lover of Muriel--died before she could respond to his invitation. Dawn is stunned to learn Alfred and Muriel are half-brother and -sister, explaining the scandal her parents endured. A second lead fizzles due to the sudden or recent demise of a contact, but Dawn perseveres.

Dawn suffers an escort from Ash to her appointment with her parents' advocate, the executor of their estate. Kern, the family advocate, reveals the truth about Dawn's breeding and her grandmother's foiled plans for her mother. Dawn strains to convey her intentions to quickly dispose of claims and entanglements that would compromise her calling. Alvin, Dawn's great-grandfather on both sides, is her nearest true half-elf relation--the controversial "lost heir". Alfred provided a list of her parents associates--the most promising lead ends at a funeral for the friend and adversary.

In spite of her rebuttals, Ash stubbornly attached himself to her as her protector. In an effort to steel her nerve, Dawn rode out to the ruins to lay her ghosts to rest. Funeral gossip gave Dawn something new to investigate, a controversy surrounding the excavation of the ruins. Dawn is encouraged by word of an intrigue involving her parents around the time of their deaths. A number of wealthy or influential people opposed or objected to the excavation, representing much of the community. Many protests evolved into insults, resulting in duels championed by her father or debates hosted by her mother.

Dawn enjoyed a modest fame for being the sole survivor of the Avon massacres. Among the people she sought out, there were a number of individuals notably opposed to the excavation of Aeslyn Tear. Dawn needed to know if these objectors had reason to suspect the tragic outcome of the venture, and if they did know something, why had they failed to give sufficient warning. She had been probing this mystery over summers past but at last she was able to pursue answers more aggressively.

In spite of herself, Dawn had enjoyed her "champion's" company. The strange chemistry between them made a nice distraction from the images that haunted her mind, and fielding his questions kept her mind sharp and tuned to the present. Granted, the edited version of her story probably raised more questions than it answered. It was a curious mix of truth and fiction, to explain her obscure origins. She did not want to reveal too much to a stranger, speaking in general terms of a curse, a corruption that had been spawned in her in the ruins, that had been transferred to her mate on her wedding night, and which had driven him away from her. She had returned to Avon to investigate what had happened to her, in search of a way to restore her husband to his former self.

Early Afternoon, Day One : The Duke's Keep, Redleaf Manor

Dawn takes note of the opportunity she has to confront her demons and lay her ghosts to rest. Dawn adopted the mantle of an adventurer and responding to an outstanding challenge to scout the ruins of Aeslyn Tear. Following protocol, she sought an audience with the Duke of Avon to gain a commission to explore the ruins. Because she was one of the few people who had entered the ruins and returned, her commission was granted, in spite of the fact that she was only ten years older then the seven year old girl she had been then. As it was a public audience, the petition caused a sensation, which resulted in an immediate summons before her grandmother and surrogate mother--her future mother-in-law.

Dawn returned to Avon and petitioned the Duke for a commission to explore the ruins.

Because she was one of the few people who had entered the ruins and returned, her commission was granted, in spite of the fact that she was only ten years older then the seven-year-old girl she had been then.

Dawn took advantage of the summons to ditch her admirer. Excusing herself from her escort when they returned to the inn, she headed to her room to get ready.

To satisfy their families, Dawn asserted that her mission was geared toward reconciling the "breach" with her fiancé, Dusk, to fulfill their engagement. Dawn realized it was impossible to remain in her adopted home. Like a few other places, she could never be certain the memories it evoked were her own. Or that she was herself. On occasion, events or circumstances prompted Dusk to take full possession of Dawn. On those occasions, a question would rear its ugly head, threatening the unity that had evolved between the them. The question that plagued Dawn was whether or not she was really haunted by Dusk. When the demon intruded upon them, their minds had been interwoven, melded into a gestalt. It was possible that his psyche left such an impression upon her mind she merely believed he had been thrust out of his body and into hers, that the Dusk in her mind was just an echo of the real Dusk. Even "Dusk" was not certain, making her mission to find the demon and exorcise it from Dusk's body even more imperative. Only then would she find out if he truly was with her this whole time. In either case, the demon had to be banished in order for Dusk to resume his life. It was best to assume he was trapped in the shadow of the demon, to resist the allure of the phantom lover who currently resided within her, embracing her with her own power, penetrating her more deeply than any lover. It was better for him, to resist the desire to seize her body for his own, to embrace life in the only form she could offer him. Otherwise, he might do more than haunt her. He might possess her as fully as any demon would.

Dusk, Day One : The Sword and Sorcerer Inn

A were-tiger meets with his subordinates, pointing out how Dawn's intentions to delve into the ruins ran in direct conflict with the desires of vampires and weres to protect the existence--and gain control--of Ruins' Deep. Their adversaries would move immediately to intercept her, when they received word of her formal commission. Dawn was far from the first to stumble into this conflict. Since she was a child, the Duke of Avon had been committed to the excavation of the ruins, only to face constant frustrations as accidents and sabotage drove away all who were employed to unearth the lost city. There were a rare few who had delved into the ruins successfully, making their fortunes and reputations on their unique accomplishments, a group to which Dawn and Dusk gained entrance at the tender age of seven.

That evening, at the Sword & Sorcerer Inn, Dawn was toasted by other survivors of past expeditions into the ruins. Dawn noticed her admirer was present again, watching her thoughtfully from across the room. She was distracted from him when she was approached unexpectedly by a former "patron" who questioned her intentions. This man, Lloyd, for whom she and Dusk were once duped into becoming cat burglars as children, had remained an enigmatic influence in her life--ironically, being one of the few connections she had left to her mother. Hearing of her intention to return to the scene of her mother's death, and her need to find clues to identify the demon responsible for her death, and the "abduction" of Dusk, he offered obscure warnings and advice.

Not that he was alone in testing her determination to revisit the depths she miraculously navigated as a child. Among the other survivors of the ruins, a group that unofficially took Dawn and Dusk under their wings, she confronted questions about her betrothal to Dusk, and his strange disappearance. To Dawn's annoyance, even they attempted to warn her off with word of increasing unrest and mysterious fatalities linked to the ruins.

Over the course of the evening, Dawn was approached by random adventurers intent on determining the sincerity of her intent to probe the ruins. She was surprised when several men and women asked to accompany her on her mission for a share of the potential profits. Her new companions probed for details about her past, the rumors about her abduction and escape from the ruins, revealing them as the reason they chose to throw in with her on this excursion. Of particular note, her former combat mentor, Hunter, joined by a pair of very powerful looking men, continued to quietly observe Dawn through the course of the night, listening to her private discussion, her response to those who sought to challenge or discourage her, and her statements to those who enquired about joining her.

Later that evening, when some arrogant sod attempted to molest Dawn, they casually stepped into the ensuing brawl at her side. After the ruckus, the three drank with Dawn, praising her courage and determination to venture into certain death. When Dawn attempted to extricate herself, Hunter stopped her, forcing her to hear him out. Having listened to the reports and rumors circulating in he wake of her commission to probe the ruins, they had concluded--like the others before them--that she offered the best chance for a successful expedition and offered to enlist their services. Dawn had already taken on a decent number of men, and a few competent women, but having seen them fight, she decided they would be excellent additions to the party. She gave them the names of the other party members, as well as letters of commission they could use to provision themselves. The next day they were to assemble to discuss the details of the mission.

Late Evening, Day One : Common Room

A vampire studied Dawn intently from the shadows. He fought to conceal his disgust at finding a pack of weres sniffing at her already. Like him they were conscious of the threat she represented, but unlike her, they were not worthy to be in his presence. It was a shame circumstances forced him to be circumspect, leaving the initial contact with her to surrogates.

Dawn petitioned the Order of the Ruins for help acquiring proof of demonic influence from within the ruins. She desperately needed their aid and advice in penetrating the ruins to gather information to identify and neutralize the demon, but while she was waiting for them to consider her request two patrons of the inn confronted her. Dawn had known Hunter and Roark for a couple of years, but she had not seen them since the previous summer. After greeting her, they resumed flirting with her as if she had never left.

The inn had been declared neutral ground in the war over Ruin's Deep, a place to arrange duels, exchange hostages or discuss the fallout of the war. Dawn had caught the eye of the rival immortals, as a mere girl. Her escape from the ruins brought her to their attention, and Hunter and Roark only became more interested in her as she grew up. It was not long before each of them was waiting for her to come of age with hopes of making her his consort. When they overheard her petition for help exploring the ruins, they set their dispute aside to try and discourage her interest in the ruins.

Dawn refused to be discouraged or intimidated. She was no fool driven by idle curiosity or a thirst for fame, fortune and adventure. She had already been there and had the scars to prove it. She had to confront her childhood demons and put them to rest. With some effort, the rivals drew her out, suggesting that they could provide her with valuable resources and assistance if her quest was truly worth risking her life.

Paraphrasing as much as she could, Dawn explained her childhood ordeal, and its unexpected consequences. Her dreams had helped her to remember some of the details of her abduction, but she needed to explore the ruins in order to confirm those dreams and discover what really happened to her ten years earlier.

Unfortunately, some of the adventurers had joined the party specifically to ensure the mission's failure. The were-tiger met with a group of his subordinates and assigned them the task of eliminating Lloyd before Dawn spoke to him again.

Over the next few days, she assembled a party to accompany her on her expedition, unwittingly including a vampire and a were-tiger bent on ensuring her mission failed if she ventured into their domains within the ruins.

As an added complication, the pair were ancient rivals locked in a struggle for dominion over the whole of Ruin's Deep.

However, their initial probing had caused Dawn to confide her true intentions, to find information about a demon who had possessed her lover that would help her track it down and banish it.

The one thing the rivals were united in was the effort to expunge the demons trapped in the city before it was buried so long ago, so they were willing to support her to that extent.

With Dawn and Dusk working together as partners as demon hunters, they can become involved in the vampire-were war by investigating the slayings in the belief that a demon is behind them.

This is an important mission for them, a way for them to establish themselves.

This is their chance to prove themselves as an artist and a muse.

Night, Day One : A Room, An Apartment, A Mansion

Oblivious to the threat of sabotage, Dawn found herself unable to sleep or lose herself in the embrace of her phantom lover. Because people were willing to talk to her, Dawn was able to begin unraveling a web of intrigue that tied into a series of very recent deaths. Her suspicions were aroused when she noticed that these same people were being murdered shortly after she talked to them or before she ever reached them. When another contact she visited turns up dead, Dawn races to confront the remaining few. Arriving on the scene of another killing, Dawn is vividly reminded of what demons were capable of. Dawn reaches a conclusion about the course of the conspiracy and moves to intercede directly. As Dawn recalled, the excavators discovered evidence of others penetrating the ruins--and considers the implications. Prompted by an uneasy premonition, Dawn hunted Lloyd down at once, determined to have a better explanation of his cryptic advice, and inadvertently helped save his life. Confronted by Dawn's assumptions, Lloyd accepts her offer of protection, treating it as a pretense for a liaison. As Dawn takes advantage of his hospitality, he intrudes intend on taking advantage of her. The confrontation between Dawn and Lloyd is interrupted while the pair are in compromised positions. His anger at her intrusion dissipated instantly when the assassins burst in on them. Outraged to have her offer of protection exploited for a seduction, Dawn is poorly prepared to face his assassin. As the combat evolves, Dawn learns of the ongoing conflict between the weres and vampires. The cloaked assailants proved to be immune to mortal wounds, prompting Dawn to flee with Lloyd to an obscure mansion.

For the first time, the mistakes of her childhood were going to help her, providing her with one crucial contact with the underworld. Once they were secure, Lloyd began to confide, among other things, that the Duke was not the only one interested in exploiting the ruins. Lloyd had a vested interest in keeping such expeditions from succeeding. While he sympathized with her purpose, he had his own interests to protect. In short, she needed his blessings if she wanted to succeed in her mission, and regrettably, his blessings did not come without a price. Dawn had no choice but to proceed. Without mincing words, she was led to another room and introduced to a man of startling youth and beauty. From him, she learned the first part of the price she must pay. Dawn was instructed to steal maps and documents from the residence of a powerful merchant in the Port. That man had been involved in planning, maybe even executing, the abduction of Dawn and Dusk a decade ago. She was instructed to strike in broad daylight, and to resist the temptation to confront this man on peril of her life. She was assured that the information she needed to accomplish her mission--with the crime lord's blessing--would be contained in what she stole.

To her dismay, Lloyd informed her, as they leave, that the man she had just met had taken an uncommon interest in her, warning her that he was a very dangerous man to become intimately involved with. Dawn thought she had picked that up clearly herself. She had noticed the enthralling quality the man possessed, and did not doubt that was as lethal as he was seductive. Confident in the immunities granted to her by her psychic gifts, she assured Lloyd that she had no interest in betraying her fiancé.

Dawn slipped through the layers of blinds and security to enter the group's archive vault. Unfortunately, just knowing how to get in and out did not protect her from encounters with any of the knights. Caught in the act of raiding the vault, Dawn was dragged into the exclusive taproom for summary justice. To the knights' distress, Dawn had demonstrated disturbing knowledge of the order, the layout of their establishments, and the mechanics of their security, including verbal and manual recognition codes. When some of them tried to rough her up, they could not help but recognize elements of their own fighting styles in her. For fear of giving too much away if she remained any longer, or fell into their hands, Dawn took flight, applying a bit of psychic leverage to ensure her escape. Ironically, there were members of the order who were not all they seemed, who were impressed and intrigued by what they had seen from Dawn.

Dawn's next attempt to gain intelligence on the ruins involved a trip to the Sanctuary, and its extensive archives. There, a man from the order approached her. Lloyd expressed a general curiosity about her raid on the order's archives. Dawn weighed the opportunity, realizing that he was approaching her as one rogue to another, rather than a representative of the order. Taking a chance that he might be able to help her, she confided her need to return to the ruins to gather information needed to bind or banish a demon. Lloyd considered what he had seen, put it together in a way that seemed plausible, and reached a decision. He introduced her to an associate of his. The man seemed intrigued by Dawn, who was introduced as the solution to a problem their organization had hung up on. Endorsing her skill as a cat burglar, he proposed a venture for mutual benefit. To acquire the information she needed, Dawn was instructed to steal a collection of maps and documents from the residence of a powerful merchant in the Port, and bring them back to the temple for delivery to the anonymous associate. She was warned to strike in broad daylight, and to resist the temptation to confront the residents on peril of her life. Dawn was forced to wait until the next day to scope out the second story job she had been given. A quick survey of the target residence convinced her she could not follow the advice Lloyd gave her. The closest she could manage was to strike at dusk, when the evening light provided her some cover. Unfortunately, her reconnaissance had not gone unnoticed. Dawn was confronted by a recent acquaintance, the man who rescued her in the bath, and a knight of the order, who took note of her recent raid on the order, her obvious intention to perform another intrusion, and asked her what she was trying to acquire. In response, she asked him what the order could possibly possess that would make her probe their vaults first and foremost.

Dawn—Dusk, Day Two : Streets of Avon, Markets, Port Avon, Another Mansion

A vampire stalked Dawn undetected. He had waited for her to expose herself, but clearly she required more delicate handling. The arrangements were already made to introduce him to her party, however. All that remained were the sacrifices necessary to permit him to walk among mortals in the sun.

Making it to bed a couple hours before dawn, Dawn slept through the morning. After a quick brunch, she met up with the people she recruited. The party consisted of her admirer from the bath and his two companions, a sorcerer accompanied by a pair she had not met before--a conjurer and a female cleric, an elf she knew personally and a drow. The tension in the group was obvious, but they all swore their personal differences would be resolved before the start of the mission. Not entirely convinced, she left all of the arrangements for provisioning the party under the supervision of the one individual she was previously acquainted with. Dawn disappeared for a while to scope out the second story job she had been given. A quick survey of the target residence convinced her she could not follow the advice her new patron gave her. The closest she could manage was to strike at dusk, when the evening light provided her some cover.

Unfortunately, her reconnaissance had not gone unnoticed. Nor had her tail. That evening, when she broke into the mansion, she was surprised by the ease of the caper. Nothing went wrong until she made her escape. With frightening efficiency, Dawn was stalked into a corner and confronted by a dozen mysterious figures. After swiftly disarming and overpowering her, they confer to identify her, the objects she had stolen and her publicly stated mission. For daring to probe into the mysteries of the ruins, they promised her a prolonged and gruesome death.

Dawn cursed herself for falling into that trap, knowing she should have expected to find a cult of some sort associated with her offering to a demon. Particularly since she had been clearly informed about the resident's involvement in the affair. On the other hand, the demon's secrets would be easier to discover if they were held by human hands or minds. No doubt, the rogue demon that stole Dusk's body was not the only demon these cultists consorted with. She could expect to face others of its ilk in the depths.

To her surprise, the veterans of the Order arrived on the scene, and with their assistance Dawn is able to fight them off. Of course she is then dragged back to the Sword and Sorcerer to face questioning about her activities. Dawn is forced to give an abbreviated account of her misfortunes.

Dawn had set out to explore the ruins in hopes of discovering more about her origins and some means of recovering her husband from demonic possession. Her raid on the order's archives was to prepare her for an expedition into the ruins. Her only explanation for her uncanny ability to bypass the order's security was her psychic ability; the information had just come to her as she proceeded. The caper she had just completed had also been an attempt to gain intelligence on the ruins. They warn her that it had become very dangerous to probe the mysteries of the ruins. It was dangerous to simply possess knowledge or experience detailing anything about the lost city, and those who pursued either tended to turn up dead. They had pursued her in the hopes that she would lead them to whoever was responsible. Having heard the details of her misfortune, and finding truth in her depiction of the ruins, she was qualified to join their order. It was the only protection they could offer her. Of course, she was willing to take it just to gain access to the archives, but first she had to recover the material she had stashed and deliver it to Lloyd's associate.

Together, they discovered that Dusk, in a prior role, had unwittingly helped conspirators from his world to corrupt a demon from the game to be used as a hacking agent on the Threshold.

Morning, Day Three : The Sanctuary, Temple of Arden

Dawn delivered the maps and documents to Lloyd's agent at the Temple of Arden the next morning, after sleeping in once again. Dawn was surprised to see him in such a sacred place, but he revealed that it was the only place where he was ever relieved of the burdens he bore, confiding that it was an excellent place to watch the sun rise. After reviewing the paperwork, he slipped everything into a satchel and praised Dawn on the success of her caper. Dawn reminded him of their agreement, wanting to know if she had Lloyd's blessings--after seeing him pack up the maps she allegedly needed. He reminded her that there was a price involved; that she must take him along as her guide and obey his instructions during the excursion. He assured her he was not attempting to assume the leadership of the party, but only controlling the paths they could take. With him in possession of the maps, she could hardly protest. She was just grateful that the price turned out to be something so innocuous.

Unfortunately, she was not done with ill omens. Before she could depart from the temple she was summoned before the goddess Arden, the patron of her people. Such an audience was a rare honor, and one Dawn had only once before. Dawn and Dusk had been so traumatized by their ordeal and the awakening of their psychic abilities, Arden had been required to tend to them. In the present, Arden expressed her dismay at Dawn's intention to return to the ruins. She instantly detected the presence of Dusk in Dawn, however, and demanded an explanation. Dawn briefly explained what happened to them. Revealing her intentions to track down a rogue demon, and recover Dusk's body, she received the goddess' blessings. Even so, Arden warned her that she was in great danger on this mission, that the consequences of this adventure could be a life altering as her two encounters with the demon that plagued her. Advised to be wary of the men she enlisted, Dawn could only sigh. That much had already been obvious to her.

From her own nightmares, Dawn was able to discover the link between the current slayings and the massacre she had witnessed. Her parents had been confronted with mounting animosity by the weres and vampires in a direct progression to their deaths in the ruins. It did not take much of a leap for Dawn to realize that they were fighting for control over Ruin's Deep all along.

In the process of seeking the information needed to neutralize the demon and recover Dusk's avatar, Dawn ended up in the middle of a vampire-were feud.

The port and city of Avon were known to harbor vampires, divided under the rule of two vampire princes, while the villages and countryside were both haven and hunting grounds for shape-shifter clans headed and protected by the tiger clan--tigers being the fiercest natural predators of the north. Like most people, Dawn was unaware that Avon held a highly coveted and disputed territory in the underworld. The turf war between the were-tigers and the vampires was fought covertly, a deadly chess game of ambushes and assassinations in an ever mounting feud. Normal routines and habits became disrupted, producing a trail of bodies.

Dawn connects the deaths of her contacts. Dawn focuses her attention on the individuals noted for their objections to the excavation of the ruins. Pursuing the objectors in hopes of confronting them, Dawn is confronted again by the stranger, Eden. In spite of the position she finds herself in, Dawn presses the objectors in hopes of discovering their motives. Dawn receives no admissions and her attempt to provoke their confidence gets her ejected from the club. Dusk comments on the oddity of recent deaths, the most recent victim being an individual Dawn just confronted. It took a few days to uncover another nest of conspirators and confront them, again with little success. Dusk confronts Dawn about her activities, citing the danger represented by the latest reports of slayings. Recognizing the victim's name, Dawn reconsiders the daily gossip on random killings in the port, city and countryside. Suspicious, Dawn checks her list of contacts with the authorities and discovers many of them among the slain. Dawn suspects that conspiracy in the past could be linked to present conspiracy, and tests a disturbing hunch. A list outlining possible conspirators against the excavation encompasses the list of recent "random" fatalities. A chance encounter raises Dawn's hackles, presenting a possible, horrifying scenario for current events.

None she talked to would explain their reasons for discouraging the excavation project, but deeper probing would reveal that they were all representatives of the vampire and were communities. All of the slain quickly proved to be shape-shifter casualties, mauled vampire retainers or the remains of an occasional interrupted meal--prey that no predator lived long enough to properly dispose of.

the immortals' feud over the ruins

Things become complicated when the evidence leads them to Hunter and Roark, whom Dusk recognizes.

Suspecting that the slayings are actually the result of a conflict between the weres and vampires, Dawn and Dusk began probing the two communities.

Unfortunately, just as Dawn was closing in on Roark she was caught in the middle of a raid and presumed to be one of Roark's retainers.

When Dawn is taken hostage by Hunter's pride, Dusk is forced to ally himself with Roark hoping to get the vampire to negotiate with the were in order to save Dawn's life.

The killings Dawn was investigating were the result of a territorial dispute between the tiger clans and the prince of the city. Dawn had hardly begun her hunt when the prince of the city called a truce with the alpha male, to point out that the escalation of their war endangered them all, and proposed a truce to deal with the unwanted attention they were getting, and devise a suitable way to settle their dispute over the ruins.

Forced to work together within the party, the rivals were also given a chance to negotiate an end to their conflict before it drew too much attention from the mortal authorities.

Initially, their only concern was to eliminate Dawn, but she proved to be something of a prize herself. They were quick to regard her as a desirable consort. They were just as quick to sense each other’s interest, and she immediately became the object of a personal rivalry between them. The truce almost disintegrated over their attempts to conquer her. As they courted her, they learned about her life and training at the Academy. As she pursued her options, the rivals were considering what they had learned about her, and how she could be of use to them. Their probing had caused Dawn to confide her true intentions, to find information about a demon who had possessed her lover that would help her track it down and banish it. The one thing the rivals were united in was the effort to expunge the demons trapped in the city before it was buried so long ago, so they were willing to support her to that extent.

A solution presented itself as they both developed an interest in Dawn, each toying with the idea of offering to convert her, granting her the power to take on a demon on her own--and binding her to his will.

the wager

It did not take long for them to recognize the other's intent, and propose to settle their rivalry by making her the object of a wager.

But their ambitions faced a common obstacle. As a psychic, it would be far easier to kill her than turn her, but her immunity to their powers had known limits. A muse-initiate possessed the talent and training necessary to resist vampire or were venom, but, in a joint infection the muse would be forced to divide her resources fighting both infections--and ultimately die--or concentrate her resources on neutralizing one infection and succumbing to the other. A fact that created a single solution to the major and minor conflicts between them, a wager that had three possible outcomes. Both of them still regarded her as a desirable consort, and she was certainly the object of a personal rivalry between them. As a psychic, it would be far easier to kill her than turn her, but her immunity to their venom had known limits.

A rift within the party presented the opportunity the rivals were waiting for, when Dawn crossed the forbidden line to rescue the mutinous party members from their own folly.

Dawn saved the lives of her party, but she ended up paying the price.

Her fight with the demon the others set loose brought her into a populated area of the ruins, a discovery she could not be allowed to share with the world at large.

The increased stakes prompted a wager to settle both disputes by infecting Dawn at the same time. It would be a test of the powers of a vampire and a ware to turn their victims. The assumption was that the one toward whom she turned would win possession of both Ruin's Deep and Dawn herself. On the off chance Dawn survived but did not turn in favor of Hunter or Roark, they would let Dusk keep her. Once the wager was agreed upon, the conspirators set out to lure Dawn into their trap.

Unaware that two of the men she recruited for her expedition into the ruins were a vampire and a were-tiger, she became the object of a wager between them.

Her friends, hoping to distract her from what they assumed must be a traumatic disappointment, came up with the idea of taking her out to a party. It was a spur of the moment decision, sparked by the arrival of an invitation.

An invitation from Lloyd promising information about her childhood abductors was sufficient bait to lure her to the party he was hosting. The message had come from Lloyd, publicly known as a wealthy entrepreneur. He was that, but his enterprise operated in some shady areas. As a child, Dawn had been lured into a life of crime. She had been taunted into stealing from people's houses and then blackmailed into working for Lloyd as a cat burglar. While he had clearly been a bad influence on her, he had also been something of a mentor to her. However they were obtained, the skills she gained under his influence were still valuable. Dusk had not wanted her to discover his own arguably criminal activities and reputation, so he had quietly helped extract her from a life of crime as soon as she got in over her head.

Dusk had been distracted by his concern about the risks and traumas Dawn faced, as well as the implications of the invitation, when Dawn disclosed her plans for the night. Dawn's life and ties in the underworld were always a point of contention between her and Dusk. It was the one area where he seemed to be irrationally overprotective of her, so it was no surprise she got into a fight with Dusk when she announced her intention to accept Lloyd's invitation. Dawn could not really explain to him why she had. Dawn was painfully aware that Lloyd and his patron had enough leverage against her to make her do almost anything or risk being brought up on charges of murder and seeing her hopes for the future destroyed.

During the party, Dawn had a private audience with Lloyd, where she was told that her talents and training had intrigued his patron. It had become his patron’s opinion that that Dawn would make an exceptional spy or assassin. That would make her a far more valuable asset than a mere guide or tomb raider. It was only a matter of time before she would find herself forced to decide whether it was wiser to expand her professional horizons or sacrifice all she had worked for to refuse his patron’s proposal. With the usual coercion out of the way, Lloyd told that her abductors were members of a cult that worshiped a demon god of death, and that members of her own family had engineered her birth and reared her as a sacrificial offering to their god. Shaken by this revelation, Dawn returned to the party in a daze where Lloyd's servants had no difficulty slipping her a drugged drink. Shaken by this revelation, Dawn returned to the party in a daze where Lloyd's servants had no difficulty slipping her a drugged drink.

Hunter and Roark homed in on her as she rejoined the party. They encouraged her to stay, claiming it would help take her mind of her problems for a night, and carefully seduced her. The drug and drink lowered her inhibitions and aroused her, making it very easy for the rivals to seduce her. Ironically, Dawn was more than willing to be seduced, desperate to find out if sex with another man would traumatize the man in her. She had already discovered, to her chagrin, that she had become even more strongly attracted to other women than before, and that the man in her delighted at having all of her to "himself". At times, it had seemed there was nothing safe she could do with her hands, and she had to pay strict attention to what they were doing at all times.

Unnerved by the feelings they set off in her, she used several excuses to distance herself from her admirers and collect her wits as best as she could. The fact that she kept running away—often from one of them to the other—only encouraged their interest, adding to the thrill of the hunt. They continued their pursuit as her resistance faded, and eventually she found herself in bed with the two men that had taken such a keen interest in her plight. She had not been prepared for Dusk to practically throw her at her old admirers. There was a serious undertone to their foreplay, however, as they brought up her mission again, testing her determination with various probing questions. They built up to their veiled proposition, building on her desire to hunt down and defeat her childhood demons.

The only way they would take her word to protect the secret community was if she became one of them.

They asked her what she would be willing to do for the power to fight her childhood demons, phrasing even that as a trap. Would she become one of them to get it? Dawn had to say yes. Even with the power she had gained from her fusion, she lacked the skills and knowledge to capture a demon on her own. If they could provide that, she would give far more than one night of intimacy.

Day Five—Seven : Foundations, Catacombs, Ruins' Deep

The next day, they descended into the foundations of the manor, discovering the bones of the keep that once stood in its place. They stumbled across and eliminated a nest of vampires before venturing down into the catacombs linking the surface to the buried city.

On their third day in Ruins' Deep, their guide mysteriously vanished on them. A quick search of the area turned up no pitfalls that might have claimed him. Angry that he would abandon them, Dawn retraced her path from memory, seeking out the place where she was to have been sacrificed. The closer she got, the sharper her memory of the traumatic events became, until she found the site of the ritual. Her companions had taken note of the broken and shattered wards as they crossed their thresholds, and retreated to a safer location, forcing Dawn to be separated from the party. At ground zero, Dawn relived the final moments of the ordeal she shared with Hunter and realized that the fury of their struggles against demonic possession, when their powers first awakened and were untamed, had been responsible for shattering the mystical prison. The horrible suspicion crystallized, a host of demons had been entombed in the city during the war of the gods, and she had unwittingly set them loose upon the world.

Dawn returned to inform the party that the danger was long past, any demons freed here escaped a decade ago. Not surprisingly, the group had kept busy while she was away. A wealth of sacred and holy relics of the age of the gods was added to the other artifacts gathered along the way, and the party moved that it was time to depart. Dawn vetoed the suggestion, insisting she must study the area she once disturbed and find out what demons were unleashed in order to be able to hunt them down. The guide showed up unexpectedly, angry at Dawn for continuing on her own against their agreement. She did not spare him her anger at wordlessly abandoning them. When he explained that he had no choice in the matter, wasting no time to lead a dragon away from the party before it could slaughter them, Dawn was not impressed. While dragons had not faded into myth, they were certainly extinct! Dawn relieved him of the maps, leaving him under guard with the party as she returned to conclude her investigation.

As few mortals beyond Dawn could attest, Aeslyn Tear, the city once smothered by the wrath of the gods, was far more extensive and surprisingly intact than anyone suspected. It was a sprawling underground metropolis dwarfing the port and city and underlying the surrounding countryside.

Evening, Day Seven : Demon Crypts

A desperate search eventually turned up a single demon, still bound by protective wards. This demon was the only clue Dawn had about the demons that escaped, and the rogue who stole Hunter's flesh. The demon tempted her with a number of appeals, before Dawn recognized and employed one of the artifacts she found to trap and bind the demon to her service.

Dawn was not surprised to emerge from the demon crypts (where none of her party dared to accompany her) only to discover that part of the group had abandoned the rest with the bulk of the treasure. The surprise was that the real traitor was not the one she had been expecting. With her remaining allies, Dawn set out to return to the surface. On the way, a disturbance led them to discover that the party traitors had taken a wrong turn, stumbling across and releasing another demon. In spite of their betrayal, Dawn could not leave them to their fate. She handed over the map she had confiscated to her admirer, the most trusted of the remaining group, instructing him to lead the others out to safety, then went to the aid of the traitors.

A rift within the party presented the opportunity the rivals were waiting for, when Dawn crossed the forbidden line to rescue the mutinous party members from their own folly.

Night, Day Seven

Not surprisingly, when Dawn engaged the demon, the traitors used the distraction to flee. After a difficult battle, where she was unexpectedly joined by the guide and her admirer, Dawn managed to slay the demon. The two men confronted each other, in a tense discussion concerning Dawn's quest and the consequences of this disturbance, while Dawn started to track down the deserters. Dawn was quickly joined by the two men, who insisted on escorting her and explaining why they had accompanied her into Ruins' Deep.

To her shock, their path led her to what seems to be a thriving community amid the ruins. Those she had been tracking had already been "welcomed" by the denizens of the Deep, and detained indefinitely as guests. An obvious tension between two populations, clearly reflected in the two men flanking Dawn, was explained as the result of an ongoing territorial dispute. Two different groups had seen the buried city as the ideal place to establish their own communities suited to their lifestyles and beliefs, and Dawn's two rescuers were the leaders of the two groups. Under most circumstances, a mission like hers would have never gotten off of the ground. However, living here gave them an appreciation of the danger the demons entombed here represented. When released, they were a danger to all. As each leader learned of the true purpose of her mission, to hunt down one of those demons, each decided to accompany her and see to it that she did not stumble across their people. Having both enlisted under her, however, they were forced into a state of truce at a time when they had needed to break the cycle of retaliation. Each had sent word to their people to have them assembled together for a type of summit. Having seen the party stragglers flee into the restricted area, and having seen the lengths Dawn would go to in order to preserve them, they had been forced, finally, to reveal themselves to her. To confront her with the ultimate price of her discovery, to remain a prisoner among them, or to regain her liberty as one of them.

Dawn saved the lives of her party, but she ended up paying the price. Her fight with the demon the others set loose brought her into a populated area of the ruins, a discovery she could not be allowed to share with the world at large. The only way they would take her word to protect the secret community was if she became one of them.

Evening, Day Nine

Dawn became separated from the group and encountered another party that had fallen prey to demonic possession. Their leader, Raven, was once a friend and rival. Even possessed, the girl is remarkably self possessed, having melded with the demon rather than allowing herself to be banished into its shadow. Sensing the taint in Dawn, and knowing how dangerous she was, Raven proposed a duel. If Dawn won, she was free to go, but if not, she had to surrender herself to them.

Not realizing what becoming one of them would mean, she accepted. Dawn sensed that there was more going on, even that she was in over her head, but she would never have guessed that they would do what they did. In the heat of passion, they had bitten her, releasing their venom simultaneously into her blood. Dawn nearly passed out from the erotic, euphoric wave that eclipsed the pain of their piercing bites. Their venom sending Dawn over the edge into bliss and disorientation.

What Dawn did not know about her two paramours was that they were immortals.

Dawn fell into their trap, helpless as her body and soul became the battle ground to determine the outcome of the were-vampire war. To speed her transformation, she was bled to the brink of death before receiving their corrupting kisses, the venomous bites of the vampire and the were. Because weres and vampires were immune to each others venom, the possibility of producing a were-vampire never occurred to them. It was more probable that she would simply perish from the conflicting infections.

Too late, she realized what her lovers were, as the pleasure and poison left her helpless in their embrace. Too late she understood why two men who seemed eager to kill each other over her had decided to share her instead. Because she understood the horrible choice they had forced on her. To speed her transformation, she was bled to the brink of death while receiving their corrupting kisses, the venomous bites of the vampire and the were. Because weres and vampires were immune to each others venom, the possibility of producing a were-vampire never occurred to them. It was more probable that she would simply perish from the conflicting infections.

In the past, Roark and Hunter had been careful in their intimate moments to avoid infecting Dawn. The curse each possessed was most effectively transmitted through a venom that laced his saliva and had to be transmitted to the bloodstream to have any significant effect. The principle effects of the venom was to incapacitate and influence their prey. A healthy victim was in no danger of being converted, and would even fight off the latent infection over time. A mortally ill or wounded victim, however, was almost certain to be turned. Dawn had been in no danger from either of them, exclusively. Because she was exposed to both, however, she had been in mortal peril from the moment she became intimate with both of them.

Drugged and infected by both of them at a party, prior to departing for the ruins, her mission was sabotaged from the outset.

On the next morning, when the first light of the sun touched her, she unexpectedly revived, gripped by crippling hunger and thirst. Dawn woke to discover herself in her own bed, summoning a stray memory of the men she was with bringing her home. At some point during her molestation, she had blacked out, and on awakening she was not clear on what exactly happened to her. Oddly, just bathing in the light took the edge off, opening a floodgate of psychic energy. After a few moments, the power began to overwhelm her, threatening to consume her if she did not find a way to discharge it. Retreating from the light, her hunger and thirst gripped her again, and nothing she ate or drank could fully appease it. Dawn noticed, as the day progressed, that she began to feel drained and feverish. As her illness worsened, she retired to her bed with her worried mother to tend to her.

Over the course of the day, her illness became worse. As someone who had become immune to disease and injury, Dawn was immediately suspicious about her condition, concluding she had been poisoned or worse. Straining her brain to remember what happened to her after she was drugged, she picked worse. The men who had seduced her had bitten her. Her own regenerative abilities concealed the immediate evidence of the bite, but it did not take Dawn long to realize that she was sick from more than drugs and drink. Unfortunately, she had no idea if that meant they had been vampires or weres. Her assumption was that both men had been vampires, and they had been arguing over the right to sire her. This belief made her confident her powers would resist the infection.

When Dawn confronted her sires, they informed of what they had done and why.

As she reconstructed the previous evening, she remembered the interview she had with Lloyd, the warming he had given her and how quickly she had become intoxicated afterwards. Certainly, the whole evening had been a set up, so Dawn collected herself and returned to Lloyd's mansion to confront him about it. Lloyd was waiting for her, and dismissed her outrage to demand her response to the proposal he had made the night before. She retorted that it was evident that he had never intended to give her a choice, or else why would he have resorted to poisoning her? To her shock, Lloyd assured her that he had not arranged for her to be bitten by the immortals. He certainly did not have some kind of antidote to buy her with. Lloyd had only learned about what the immortals had done second hand, though no clear report had been made to explain her disappearance from the party. As she was collapsing from her illness, he was struck by an inspiration.

After Dawn was put to bed in a spare room, he sent a summons to the rivals, the proposal already forming in his mind. As a retired adventurer, a well-established lord in the underworld, and a member of the order of the ruins, Lloyd had multiple interests in the ruins. He had been aware of the conflict between the weres and vampires for some time. This had been a matter of great concern to the entire order, but it had also created upset throughout the ranks of the underworld. It had been a tremendous boon for the criminal element of Avon to have a literal underground to conduct its business in, until chaos erupted in the greater depths.

The longer it went on, the more unexplained deaths occurred, and the greater the risk of drawing the attention of the greater mortal community became. Most people, like Dawn, were unaware that the ruins were a highly coveted and disputed territory in the underworld. Most of the killings reported while Dawn was growing up were the result of the territorial dispute between the were clans and the vampires of the city. The slain were a mix of were casualties, mauled vampire retainers and the remains of an occasional interrupted meal--prey that no predator lived long enough to properly dispose of. The turf war between the were-tigers and the vampires was fought covertly, a deadly chess game of ambushes and assassinations in an ever mounting feud. Normal routines and habits became disrupted, producing a trail of bodies. Dawn had unwittingly stumbled into the middle of it. Simply catching the eye of the rival immortals had been dangerous, but at the same time, their interest in Dawn could be exploited to settle the dispute over Ruins’ Deep.

It was not difficult to establish himself as a neutral party, and eventually a mediator in the conflict. Lloyd pointed out that her strong constitution made her suitable for resolving a conflict that had been raging out of control in the city's underworld. Very few individuals survived a dual infection, but those who did eventually succumbed to the stronger infection. He suggested they waited to see which of their bites Dawn succumbed to--winner take all. They managed to rouse her long enough to determine that she had contacted no one since she had disappeared the night before. Lloyd dismissed her outrage to explain that her abilities made her uniquely suitable for resolving a conflict that had been raging out of control in the city's underworld.

He carefully explained the wager to her, detailing her options. She could not resist the combined effects of their bites, which were fatal, but she could fight off one of their infections, determining which of them would win the wager and become the lord of Avon's underworld. What Dawn had not known about her two paramours was that they were immortals. Roark was a vampire and Hunter was a were-tiger. The two of them had been rivals since they were mortal cousins--and half-brothers--in an era when the favored sons of Arden were still her lords and masters. They were the bastard sons of bastard twin sisters who had been seduced by the proud young heir of their domain's lord. The two had been turned in their nineteenth year when their rivalry brought them into a conflict between ancient rival factions.

As years turned into decades, and decades finally turned into centuries, their rivalry mellowed a bit as they each became the other's only link to the past. Over time they both became more powerful and eventually became lords over their kind. This ultimately resurrected their old feud, as their friendly rivalry was strained by their attempts to claim dominion over Ruin's Deep for their people. No compromise was acceptable to their followers, and a blood feud followed. The longer it went on, the more unexplained deaths occurred, and the greater the risk of drawing the attention of the greater mortal community.

Roark was a vampire and Logan was a were-tiger.

The two of them had been rivals since they were mortal cousins--and half-brothers--in an era when the favored sons of Arden were still her lords and masters.

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Unfortunately, both Roark and Hunter become curious about Dawn and her psychic abilities, and suspicious of Dusk.

Dusk and Dawn explain how their demon hunt had led them into the conflict and are informed of the nature of the were-vampire war.

dual infection

This was the situation Dawn had unwittingly stumbled into. She had appeared just as the two leaders were struggling to minimize the conflict, pitting them in a personal rivalry reminiscent of their mortal conflict. She could not resist the combined effects of their bites, which were fatal, but she could fight off one of their infections, determining which of them would win the wager and become the lord of Avon's underworld. She, in turn, would become an immortal one way or the other. Dawn could not believe that Lloyd thought he had done her a favor by choosing her as the object of the wager, and accused him of deceiving her. To her shock, Lloyd assured her that he had not lied to her except through omission. As she was collapsing from her illness, he revealed that he had simply negotiated a third option for dominion over Ruins' Deep in the event that she died.

As a muse, a psychic initiate, it was in her power to defeat one of their infections at the cost of succumbing to the other.

To set that process in motion, and force her to turn, it was necessary for her to be mortally wounded or on the cusp of death at the height of her infection.

Day Twelve—Day Twenty

As she slipped back into her death-like torpor, they staged her death to sever her ties with the mortal world. All three expected her to die, but there was always a slim chance she was strong enough to survive the warring infections and make one of them the master of Ruins’ Deep. With her unusual history and demonstrated constitution, it was easy to believe that she could survive the ravages of a dual infection. They were gambling on it, since, in the event she died, by virtue of the careful phrasing of the wager, the underworld’s claim to the ruin would technically prevail. They left her body, the posed victim of a brutal slaying giving no hint of their involvement, to be found by her friends. She was trapped in a deathlike paralysis, in a heightened state of conscious awareness she had never achieved through meditation. She helplessly endured her post-mortem evisceration and embalmment, followed by the perfect, excruciating reconstitution of her flesh, and the awakening of her hunger. The rival sires returned to the morgue as they sensed the conclusion of her turning, eager to find out which way she had turned. She sensed them approaching her temporary crypt, but even with her hunger raging, could not shake off the repose of death. She realized they were the only ones who could save her from being buried alive, and made a desperate effort to show she was still alive. They realized, once she signaled them, that she was still in the throes of the struggle between their rival powers of corruption.

Dawn was locked away to suffer through the transformation that would claim her. Dawn was attended only by Dusk as she lay dying. Only her natural regeneration, a facet of her innate psychic ability, made it plausible for her to endure the battle for dominance of her flesh and spirit. Dawn realized that fighting both infections directly would have quickly exhausted her and their combined, unopposed effect would have killed her soon after. Her chances of surviving were greater if she could regulate the infections, allowing them to run their course but employing her resources to control their progress. By exploiting the regenerative properties of vampirism and metamorphism, she could prolong the ordeal almost indefinitely--at least until she exhausted her personal resources. Instead, she had to trust that her natural regeneration would be enough to at least stall the progress of the infections while she attempted to escape from her sires and reach the temple of the goddess in the hope of receiving a proper cure.

The two infections warred with her natural immunity and gradually fused with her innate regenerative powers.

As was common in fledging new wares and vampires, Dawn's sires exploited her ignorance of her new condition to strengthen their hold over her, though in her case neither was certain of what to expect. Their initial assumptions had not supported the possibility of Dawn becoming a hybrid. Assessing her limits and abilities demanded a level of cooperation unheard of between a vampire and a were who were not bound in a master-servant relationship.

The initial result of her turning left Dawn on the cusp of life and death. At first it seemed that Dawn had fought off both infections, unaware that her system had been forced to assimilate the infections to prevent their combined effect from annihilating her. Her sires were sensitive to the subtle changes afflicting her, her conversion proving slow but inevitable. Depending on her level of arousal, her altered body could take on a perfect semblance of life or death. As Dawn adjusted to her ability to become morbid or vital, she discovered her lust for flesh and blood, her hunger and thirst. While normal food and drink were enough to sustain her the way she was, nothing she was accustomed to consuming would satisfy those cravings. Dawn was hardly surprised to find herself too sickened by it all to eat. It took her some time to realize that the food itself made her sick, when her body proved it would only tolerate water, the rarest meat, and the merest traces of anything else. When the nausea passed, and she found herself able to eat again, she was disturbed to discover it would not satisfy her hunger.

Summoning the vampires and weres together, the rivals called for a truce, arguing that open conflict between them endangered all immortals. As an alternative to the ongoing feud, the rivals presented Dawn and the wager as a means to determine who would claim dominion over the ruins. In that way, she was introduced to the vampire and were communities. She possessed a kind of status, as the symbol of victory to either side. The subjects of her sires possessed a role of their own in her seduction, embodying the community Dawn would be joining when she submitted to one of her sires. Through observation, she was introduced to the customs of vampires and weres, their culture, their society, their justice. She was also made conscious of what her fate was to be if she rejected both of her suitors. Her choice was a favored existence under a powerful patron as a pet, or endless abuse at the hands of anonymous predators seeking to sate their inhuman appetites. Initially, those who objected to the wager resolved simply to eliminate Dawn. Exposure to the sun presented itself as the most obvious and certain way to eliminate her. Even Dawn believed that, having once witnessed the execution of a vampire—not knowing that it was the victim's ignorance and experience that made such exposure fatal.

She was discovered by rivals to her sires’ authority who conspired to foil the wager through her destruction by exposing her to the sun. Even though she offered no resistance, she proved difficult to destroy. Contrary to expectations, the sunlight suddenly restored her vitality, swiftly restoring her to a perfect semblance of her former life. While the sunlight seemed to be the key to her transformation, Dawn realized that the power that flooded her did not actually come from the sun. The light was a catalyst, but the power came from within herself. It was not just power, either, but untapped potential that bathed her psyche in a flood of insight and information. Vampires shunned the sunlight because even the faintest of starlight was sufficient to sustain them, to grant them their inhuman powers. Standing in raw sunlight opened a floodgate of power, accelerating the process of physical refinement every vampire went through, the firing of damp, mortal clay into crystal fine, immortal ceramic. Something a new-fledged vampire could not possibly endure, lacking the training and discipline to harness and channel the power unleashed by the sun. Ironically, weres seemed capable of exploiting the power surge so deadly to a vampire. Light was a vital catalyst for their powers of regeneration and reconfiguration. More light made things happen swiftly and smoothly, and in the absence of light they were trapped in their current state.

The rival sires discovered her absence, learned of the plot, but the absence of her ashes prompted a general search. Dawn wasted no time wondering at her return to life, setting out at once for the aid and counsel of her instructors. Naturally, she sought out the paladin first. She was desperate to disprove the report of his death. It was obvious from the condition of his chambers that he had died. She considered the ring, the last thing he had given her. It obviously had done something to her, even turned her into a boy if she remembered right. On testing the ring she made the frightening discovery that she shared her body with the paladin, and that her soul was bound, along with his and that of a demon, to it. Then he revealed that, while the regenerative powers the ring granted had allowed her to survive the bites, it could not truly cure her of their effects. She felt grateful for the presence of her only true friend and ally, but both of them wished they had not been ripped from the lives they had known. The paladin revealed that he was once a god slayer, a man trained to kill demons, angels and immortals—and if he was right, there was one chance for her. Dawn had almost reached the haven he directed her to when night fell, and her vitality began to drain away, until she literally dropped dead in the street.

The rival sires followed the rumors back to the morgue where she had been delivered after her body was found in the street and abducted her again. Dawn could do nothing but listen to their arguments and speculation until the next morning when an experiment was conducted. She revived once more in sunlight where she was confronted by the were-tiger, but an explanation for her condition was not reached. Depending on her level of arousal, her altered body could take on a perfect semblance of life or death. As Dawn adjusted to her ability to become morbid or vital, she confronted her lust for flesh and blood, her hunger and thirst. While normal food and drink were enough to sustain her the way she was, nothing she was accustomed to consuming would satisfy those cravings. The regenerative and metamorphic powers of the spirit had a price. While the spirit could create or alter flesh, those actions created a debt for immortals and eternals alike. In immortals, that price was evinced by the thirst of a vampire and the hunger of a were—as means of assimilating raw material. A vampire was essentially a spiritual entity that utilized its physical potential as an instrument to manifest its powers, while a were was a physical entity that utilized its spiritual potential as an instrument to manifest its powers. Eternals also paid a price to manifest themselves, but they could exploit a wider range of methods to pay the debt of their powers. For some, they required worship and offerings. Others required sacrifices and hosts.

She was a prisoner, by virtue of her condition and for knowing the truth about her sires and their subordinates. They kept her “alive” by keeping her in a brightly lit room when night fell and continued to study her. A vampire derived its sustenance from the proteins, nutrients and trace elements found in the blood stream, possessing a specialized metabolism capable of sustaining what amounted to an animated corpse. While a vampire could simulate life perfectly, the nature of the powers it developed required the material component of a vampire to function as more and less than a body. Living, technically, was not essential to a vampire. A were derived its sustenance from living flesh. Anything else imposed a drain on its metabolism. A were had an accelerated metabolism that could convert matter to energy and vice versa. Transformation and regeneration made more extreme demands on a were, so it had to consume more raw material to perform at peak efficiency. She discovered she could take the edge off her hunger through normal food and drink, preferring fruits, vegetables and water. They probed at her until she was forced to relive her death, discovering the paladin’s last desperate attempt to save her by giving her a ring of regeneration. She discovered she could leave her body during her nightly death, and roam like a ghost—and that her death lingered if no light touched her during the day.

Dawn discovered that nothing could completely alleviate her hunger and thirst, which afflicted her even when she separated from her body completely. The waxing of her hunger and thirst was the price of her gradual transformation asserting itself. Her sires continued to brood over her, expecting to have seen some definitive sign of her turning into a vampire or a were. They deduced that her odd condition might be the result of Dawn failing to feed properly, so they limited her to a choice of blood or raw meat. She was expected to reveal what she had become by the nature of what her hunger compelled her to consume, but she was drawn to both offerings. She tried to resist the meat and blood, but they kept her locked in the light with no way to escape her hunger and thirst.

Dawn was stunned to discover what her sires had both already realized, as the hunger seized her. Aware that the greatest danger now was feeding, for if she did it would no longer be possible to cure her of vampirism, Dawn resisted the temptations presented to her. But as the hunger continued to grow, she transformed into a tiger, proving that she had been turned simultaneously into a blood-drinker and a man-eater.

They thought she was deliberately trying to spite them by consuming both offerings when she finally broke down. She discovered that she was able to command her dead body after feeding, and that by feeding it was undergoing new changes. She also discovered that feeding only increased her hunger and thirst and light seemed to accelerate the changes she experienced. They discovered, once she was feeding regularly, that her sensitivity to sunlight was increasing, that she might slowly be succumbing to vampirism.

She did not know if the same rules applied to were infections as vampire infections, but the change alerted her to the fact that she had run out of time. She had to escape and reach help before the hunger drove her to feed. Her new form aided her escape, however, and she did not hesitate to exploit it. Dawn was faintly surprised when she was able to make her escape and return to the surface. All the way, she could feel the strain on her system from the infection. Emerging into daylight, she was disturbed to discover a painful sensitivity to sunlight. The shock and agony triggered a transformation back to her normal form.

She found herself shying more and more from intense light, particularly direct sunlight, but drawn to low light, especially moonlight. She discovered that her powers of regeneration were growing, she could literally watch her wounds erase themselves. They concluded that the interference of her desperate magic was finally wearing off, sufficing only to sustain her through the worst of the conflict. She realized that her desperate attempt to heal herself had tapped into something dormant within herself, or some aspect of their infections. She was encouraged in her plans to escape by the same dissidents who first exposed her to the sun.

The occurrence also made her aware of the improvement of her regenerative abilities, as the burns healed before her eyes. According to her training, a vampire only regenerated from burns at a normal human rate, if with inhuman perfection over time. Her rapid healing had to be due to her own ability or came from also being a were. Which was supposed to be impossible. Not that she cared, since all she wanted was to be cured of being either. There was only one place she could even appeal for that kind of aid, and technically, she had no need to go to the temple to seek it. Forced to wait out the day in the ruins, she prayed to the goddess, opening her mind for true communion.

Morning—Evening, Day Twenty

To her relief, the goddess deigned to respond to her supplication, and Dawn explained her situation, how she had been bitten by the pair and her fear that it would overcome her immunity. The goddess advised her on what to do to prevent the change from becoming permanent if it took full hold. She assured Dawn that she could cure her if she had done not succumb to the thirst first.

By the time she emerged from the ruins and set off for the sanctuary of the goddess, she was already feeling the emergence of hunger and thirst as the price of her gradual transformation began to assert itself. When her need to hunt became overpowering, Dawn fell prey to the influence of her inner demon. First her vampiric nature took over, and she set out into the night in pursuit of prey. As she stalked through the forest, her metamorphic nature came into play, her body and senses shifting gradually to those of a feline predator. Somewhere in the dead of night, she took down a stag and began feeding, gaining warmth and vitality from the blood she drank, and then devouring her prey's flesh to fill the aching void that had evolved somewhere within her. By indulging her need to hunt, Dawn had deviated from her determined path. Dawn's prey had lured her deep within the sacred forest. From there it was possible to approach the sanctuary without passing through the city. Because she was a mess from hunting and feeding, she stopped along her way to rest and bathe at a natural pool.

Exhausted and sated on blood and meat, she slipped into a deep sleep, during which her transformation reached its penultimate conclusion. In the early hours of the morning, Dawn awoke to discover what she had changed into during her hunt. She was startled by the melding of her vampirism and transformation into a tiger, sating her hunger for flesh and blood all at the same time. It was at this point that her pursuing sires caught up to her. Dawn's condition troubled them, as it left the conclusion of their wager indeterminate. It never occurred to them that an initiate might apply herself to integrating the infections instead of fighting them. Contrary to the implied acceptance of her transformation, once Dawn was coached through the transition back to human form, she refused to return with either of her sires. The vampire dragged Dawn to shelter reminding her of the impending dawn, while the tiger simply observed in silence, waiting to see what Dawn would do with her new immortality.

Her escape was an abysmal failure and the only thing she accomplished was to turn herself into a hybrid vampire-were-tiger. In spite of this, she continued to resist, trying to preserve her humanity while her sires debated over the significance of the outcome of their wager and instructed her in what she had become.

They were forced to accept that she had somehow melded their infections into one, and gained certain benefits as a result.

She was immune to the normal enthralling influence of her sires, and capable of seeming more alive or more dead than any other vampire.

She was more sensitive to sunlight and silver, but could endure exposure to either longer than a normal vampire or were before taking damage.

She still depended on light for true vitality, and feeding to retain it and fuel her hybrid powers, but too much light, or not enough fuel were dangerous.

They concluded that the initial wager was a draw, modifying it so that he who succeeded in dominating her would dominate the ruins.

She was severely disciplined for her attempt to escape, warned that she would not be allowed to roam the surface until she was lost to human memory.

It did not take long for Dawn to realize that she had no choice but to feed, though she found she could exploit her new animal form to hunt and feed on forest stags. As she became aware of the seductiveness of human prey, she decided it would be better to end her unnatural existence before she damned herself by succumbing to her hunger and thirst. Exposure to the sun seemed the most obvious and certain way out, as she had been forced to witness such an execution--never realizing that it was the victim's ignorance that made such exposure fatal.

They summoned their elders to reveal what she had accomplished, in herself and with the help of the man who had become a part of her.

She was brought before the elders to testify about her unique accomplishments, and face judgment.

The elders were shocked by her hybrid transformation, and she was forced to reveal part of the truth while obscuring the rest.

They realized that their elders might well seek her destruction as an abomination, or worse, if the reaction of one of them was fully considered.

She was approached by the one elder excited by her and her accomplishments, offered certain insights and promises if she submitted to him.

She learned some stunning secrets about weres and vampires from her companion, including the purpose of his former vocation.

Once she seemed to have adjusted to her new life, she was permitted to venture out into the ruins with a chaperone, but she faced obstacles to her pursuit of the demon. For one, she could no longer venture out in daylight, but more annoyingly, she found herself being set up as the embodiment of Ruin's Deep. It was not so much that she had been chosen to rule, as she had become the symbol of rule. Thus, to claim Ruin's Deep, it was necessary to conquer her. It was assumed that, even if she were to save her lover, their relationship was usurped by what Dawn had become. Dawn had never confided that she carried his soul within her, that he was as tainted by her experiences as she was. If it came to it, she would infect her lover with her hybrid venom, if it allowed them to be a couple again.

Her sires feared she might do just that, and they intended to stake their claim to her first. So, once again, her only option was to escape. Which she found much easier to do in her new state. Gripped by the need to hunt, she deviated from her determined path, but by evening she succeeded in running her prey to ground and fed both hunger and thirst. Renewed, her thoughts turned once more to the prospect of a cure after which she could return and probe the ruins in secret, resume her pursuit of the demon, and recover the body of her lover.

As night fell, Dawn realized she would be hard pressed to resist the growing hunger and thirst, not sure if it was caused by the drain of fighting the infection, or if the change was complete. She had no idea how long it would take for the infections to completely overwhelm her immunity. She had to make haste and avoid all distractions in reaching the temple. Unfortunately, distractions did not avoid her. As she raced along, still naked after reverting to human form, she caught the attention of a band of brigands. The highwaymen pursued her, and eventually cut her off.

Midnight, Day Twenty

The party of brigands had a score to settle. Delighted to have caught her naked and alone in the pale of night they encircled her, cutting off from escape. Dawn was stunned. She had come this far, only to be gang raped by a rag-tag band of thieves. She was not going to let that happen! Naked and alone, she was still armed and dangerous. She tore into her assailants, astonished by the rush that seized her, turning her bare handed onslaught into a blood bath, and once that blood splashed her, the instincts of what she was becoming took hold. What happened next was a blur, as Dawn lashed out passionately, her body changing into something even more lethal, and an appetite for raw flesh and blood consumed her.

The fight aroused Dawn's hunger and thirst, and the next thing she knew she was standing naked over the scraps of her feeding frenzy. It was much later that she regained her senses to confront what she had done. The pleasure and satisfaction of sated hungers was unmistakable, as were the remains of her feeding. Whatever she had become, it was worse than she could have imagined. Images of what she had been and done started to trickle back into her brain, and the horror caused Dawn to flee the scene. Dawn confronted what she had become and without so much as thinking of it, set out to expose herself to the dawn. Dwelling on the seductiveness of human prey, unaware of having already made a decision, she became absorbed in an internal debate over the need to end her unnatural existence before she damned herself by succumbing to it. Traumatized by what she had done, she wandered to an isolated spot and stood there waiting for the sun to rise. As horrible as her actions were to her, she did not want to die so much as she believed it was necessary for her to die, while she could still possessed enough humanity to understand her crime. It took everything she had to stand there as the sun engulfed her.

Dawn, Day Twenty-One

She had no idea where she was going or what her intentions were until the goddess suddenly appeared to confront her. Once questioned, Dawn realized she had sought out a place where the sun would find her instantly, and from where she could not reach any shelter before its light consumed her. Her conscience, gibbering and shattered, was driving her to her death, to absolute atonement. Upon reflection, she decided it was for the best. Exposure to the sun seemed the most obvious and certain way out, as she had been forced to witness such an execution--never realizing that it was the victim's ignorance that made such exposure fatal. She was too honest to deny that, if she did not end her unearthly existence immediately, she would be tempted by her hungers again, and having submitted once, there was no salvation. To go on would inevitably mean surrendering to what she had become. The goddess could not talk her out of it, nor could Hunter. Unable to sway her, they waited with her as she waited for the sun.

Dawn was confronted by her goddess when she attempted to expose herself to the sun. Whatever hope she had of accepting her transformation into a vampire were-tiger were dashed that night, when she succumbed to the hungers that suddenly drove her during her escape from her sires. In spite of the fact that the brigands that ambushed and attempted to rape her deserved their bloody demise, it was the loss of her humanity as she was feeding that drove her to commit suicide. Even the thought of avenging herself on her sires for what they had done to her was flushed from her mind by the fear that confronting them would only hasten her corruption. Besides, given what they were, their actions were perfectly reasonable compared to the fact that her goddess had spoken through Dawn, perhaps in an effort to prevent them from slaying her outright, inspiring the feuding immortals to wager the outcome of their feud on the result of an attempt to turn Dawn into one of their own. Rationally, the dual infection should have resulted in certain and unpleasant death, but her sires had confided, after her resurrection as both vampire and were, that the goddess must have suspected that Dawn would survive the ordeal when she goaded them into making the wager. Any attempt, then, to avenge herself on the true author of her damnation could only be more damning. The only salvation Dawn could hope for was to destroy herself while she still possessed enough humanity to see the necessity. Yet her goddess begged her to reconsider, to return to the temple for new instruction that would change Dawn's opinion about what she had become. Dawn refused to listen, facing the horizon and fighting the instinct to flee from the pre-dawn light. Her mind tried to comprehend the meaning of Arden's warning, that she was not ready to discover the truth. Even more frightening, as the sun emerged from the ocean, was Arden's sorrowful apology that neither of them could revoke the promises they had made to each other--a reminder of Dawn's promise to serve the goddess, and her promise to protect Dawn.

It will be dawn soon.

I can't remember the last time I watched the sun rise.

You don't have enough time. I was afraid you would not make it. If we hurry, there's still time to reach shelter.

It doesn't matter anymore.

I understand this was a difficult time for you, but I promised I would help you. And I will, but you have to work with me, Dawn.

You don't understand. It's already too late.

Don't be so pessimistic. Put this on.

I am not going to need it.

Dawn.

What? Don't tell me I need to explain it to you. You must have seen. You have to know it's already too late.

It's never too late.

No. I thought, maybe… I mean, why wouldn't you forgive me? It's your fault after all. What, you didn't think they wouldn't tell me, did you?

Dawn, if I had not intervened, they would have killed you outright.

They killed me anyway. Now, I am damned as well as dead.

Those men deserved to die.

This isn't about them.

I know what this was about.

Then you know why I have to do this.

I know you think that.

It is my purpose to destroy monsters when I find them. That is the purpose you gave me, the purpose I was raised and trained for.

This is not the time, Dawn. You have so much yet to learn.

They were right.

What?

You knew this was going to happen. You wanted this to happen.

My reasons are my own. I do not need to explain myself to you. Nor is it necessary for me to ask you to come. As a courtesy, I am not ordering you to return to the sanctuary.

What good is courtesy after you betrayed me?

You speak as if I have forsaken you.

You speak as if there is still salvation. You speak as if I had not forfeited my humanity.

You sound human enough.

For the moment.

What happened to you…

Stop it. There is nothing natural about what I did. I fed on them. I devoured their flesh. There wasn't anything human about me when I did that. I thrilled in it, I enjoyed it. I hunger to do it again. I can't even understand how I survived that. The thought, the memory… it's so obscene I want to tear myself to pieces. I can never allow it to happen again.

You can overcome these impulses. I told you…

Before, I could agree with you. When I was innocent, the hunger was terrifying. I could have fought it, you could have helped me. But now, there is no chance. I've tasted it. I know what I am, now. I have only one choice, now. I have to destroy it before it destroys me.

There are better ways.

I can't take the chance. It is taking everything I've got to just stand here! I don't know if I could do it tomorrow!

So.

So. Why are you even fighting me on this?

The promises binding us to each other are irrevocable.

If that is true, you have a strange notion of what it means to protect someone.

No stranger than your notion of what it means to serve.

Why are you making this harder than it already is?

That is not my intention. I only want to spare you unnecessary suffering.

Then let me end this, while I can. While I can still see the necessity.

Your integrity is admirable. I have to respect that.

Then you are done? You are not going to interfere?

I do not think you are ready for the truth, but I can not prevent you from confronting it. I just wish you had allowed me time to prepare you for it.

The truth? What are you talking about?

It is too late. Just remember, I tried to make it easy for you.

The sun is seconds away! How can you be cryptic at a time like this!?

There's no time like the present.

Just tell me what you mean!

And now, there is no time.

Arden!!!

And so it begins.

Dawn, plagued by the feeling that there was something incomplete about her transformation even though it had progressed past the point where it was reversible, found herself riveted by the approaching sun. After an inner struggle, she resolved to face the dawn, to accept her fate and do the only thing she could to ensure she would never feed on human prey. When dawn broke, the pain overwhelmed Dawn in seconds, and then she began to burn. Oddly, the flame did not consume her or else her flesh was renewing itself as swiftly as the fire ate at her. It was as if the light pouring into her turned into power and that power fed itself into regeneration, rallying her psychic defenses, allowing her to assimilate the vampire and were venom.

To her surprise, the sunlight seemed to be what was missing--light, it turned out, was the catalyst for vampiric and metamorphic powers. Vampires shunned the sunlight because even the faintest of starlight was sufficient to sustain them, to grant them their inhuman powers. Standing in raw sunlight opened a floodgate of power, accelerating the process of physical refinement every vampire went through, the firing of damp, mortal clay into crystal fine, immortal ceramic. Something a new-fledged vampire could not possibly endure, lacking the training and discipline to harness and channel the power unleashed by the sun. The power did not come from the sun, but from within Dawn herself, she realized. The light was just a catalyst. It was not just power, either, but untapped potential that bathed her psyche in a flood of insight and information.

To her surprise, after overcoming the shock of waking up naked under a sunlit sky, Dawn discovered that she was back to normal. The sunlight did not stir up flames within her flesh. She was not slipping into a deathlike state when distracted or morose. She did not have to work herself up to remain lively. She tried to return to her former life, but as the day progressed, the hunger and thirst gradually resurfaced.

Dawn faces the scrutiny of the goddess, who investigates her as the focus of a radical shift in the prospects of the future, where her transformation creates a chance to save the world from the coming cataclysm. She also draws the attention of entities responsible for nudging the world toward the brink of destruction.

Dawn was surprised to awaken at mid-morning, the trauma of her resurrection shed instantly in the realization that she was truly alive. In the moment of realization, she spots evidence of the previous night and concluded that the memory of her ordeal was not some nightmare. Examining the weapon in her hands, she confronts the sacrifice she had made in growing horror. Twice she had cheated death, each time at an increasingly terrible price her conscience could not accept. Her goddess might have purged her body of contamination, but the corruption of her soul weighed even heavier upon her mortal mind. She was guilty of murder and cannibalism, for which crimes she ought to be condemned to death. As a paladin, she could not deny this, nor could she deny the temptation to ignore her conscience and embrace her resurrection. It was as hard to resist as immortality, and possibly even more damning. The only encouraging thought was that mortality could be sacrificed with far less pain and trauma than she had suffered at dawn. As she moved to spit herself on the brigand's sword, a maiden of the goddess entered to check on her and raised an alarm. In haste, she awkwardly thrust the blade through her heart, collapsing in shock as death clawed at her brain. The last thing she was aware of was the hand of her goddess prying her fingers from the hilt and taking hold to withdraw the blade. When she woke moments later, she could feel the wound knitting closed and vitality returning to her rapidly. Crying out against this healing, cursing herself inwardly for attempting such a thing in the midst of a temple of healing--among other things--the goddess retorts that no one could go through what Dawn had without their natural abilities becoming enhanced. In truth, Dawn had always had amazing powers of regeneration. They were what had allowed her to survive the dual corruption of were and vampire venom. She also knew she gained that ability as the result of a terrible childhood trauma. She should have known her power might increase in response to dying twice. What she had done not know was if this evolution of her own power might grant as real an immortality as the powers that had been purged from her.

Will these nightmares never end?

…

It wasn't a dream.

Oh, you're awake. Let me fetch you a robe. Oh, Goddess! What are you doing!? Quick, someone! Help!

What's going on?

Send for a healer! She's impaled herself!

Goddess!

Oh, Dawn. Why are you doing this to yourself? [Book Break]

I need to die. Can't you see that?

I see nothing of the sort.

Why? You know what I did. Do you think you can resurrect me and my crimes will just vanish!?

No.

They why did you?

It was not I who healed you, Dawn.

What?

Think of the powers you gained as a child, Dawn. Did you imagine you could endure even greater trauma and not gain more potent powers?

You can't be…

Oh, I am quite serious.

I don't understand.

I know. Nor can I truly explain it to you.

This doesn't change anything.

I was afraid you would think that.

Is… is this what you were hoping for?

You want to know why I suggested it.

They told me I should have died. They never expected me to survive… but you did.

You want to know why you did survive. I meant to explain what happened to you, I was ready to show you the truth about what you became. Now we are well past that. Now there are no easy answers.

Tell me what you can, then.

You should already know part of it. There is a great deal of truth about the legends concerning the origin of weres and vampires. Because of the power you possessed, neither alone could have turned you. Your own gifts would have allowed you to fight off the infection. Acting together, your sires forced you to divide your resources in order to survive.

I did not survive, though.

No one does, technically. Death is part of the change for both weres and vampires. To put it properly, you were not destroyed in the process. Their venom is equally potent and mutually exclusive. A single drop of either venom would incapacitate human prey. It takes at least a pint of venom to turn a human into a full were or vampire. Now, a small dose of mixed venom is terribly lethal. The amount of venom that mixed in your blood should have produced enough poison to kill an entire nation. You should have been destroyed before the transformation process could even begin.

That can't be right. It took days for the bites to begin taking effect.

Why do you think that was so?

The venom did not mix in my blood?

That would protect you from the worst effect, but how do you think that could have been managed?

I don't know. My body heals itself automatically.

Regeneration. It was the one power common to vampires and weres, Dawn. A power you already possessed.

And that is why it has become so much stronger?

Just so.

Strong enough to purge the infections from my body?

Strong enough to do even more than that. Now do you understand why I asked you to wait?

But, it still doesn't change anything.

Dawn ends up confined to her quarters under a deathwatch after proving her determination to kill herself. It took very little time for her ingenuity at exploiting the fatal properties of any object she got her hands on to force her wardens to strip Dawn and her room entirely bare. Even naked, she was far from harmless, especially since the increase in her strength and power mandated her guards and chaperones be formidable men, lest she easily overpower her wardens and escape. Unable to subdue them, she resorted to seducing them, thinking to earn the displeasure of the goddess by breaking her vow of celibacy. The poor men could hardly be blamed for succumbing to her advances, of course. Even a dead man would have found it difficult to refuse her, as she had already learned. Ironically, her rebellious indulgence also served to prove that there was so much to live for, making her intentions even more bitter. The problem remained figuring out a way to end her life and then finding an opportunity to execute each method she devised. She attempted to drown herself during her bath, and later wove the stuffing of her sleeping pallet into a rope to hang herself. The drowning had done not work, and the rope took time to braid. By the time she was ready to hang herself, Arden's patience had been exhausted. The goddess intruded just as Dawn was preparing the rope, confronting Dawn for their least civil conversation to date. Even as Arden forgave Dawn's indiscretions and appealed to the girl to remember her obligations, Dawn slipped the noose around her neck and kicked away the stool she perched on. To Dawn's horror, not even breaking her neck and severing her spinal cord was sufficient, nor was suffocation any more effective than drowning. As soon as she lost consciousness, her body swiftly restored itself to perfect health aided by her telekinetic gift. Arden repeated her claim that Dawn was saving herself. Regardless of whatever guilt or blame she tried to damn herself with, deep down she clearly had done not wish to die. Dawn retorts that she knew that, that the problem was her desire to live, no matter what the cost. Wanting to live had done not change the fact that she deserved to die.

a confrontation with the demon

pursuing the demon onto the threshold.

Inception of Dusk & Dawn - Talon Variant

In exchange for granting the slave the power to purge the north of slavery, necromancy and demonology, the man would sire a new incarnation of the Dragon. The pact called for the slave's initiation as a dragon, Talon. In return, Talon was required to sire a human incarnation of the Dragon, Ash, who would come of age in twenty years. With the help of an Athean slave turned wizard, Talon set out to conquer the kingdoms of Athen. When the purge turned into a persecution of witches, who were more psychics than conjurors, the wizard abandoned Talon and proceeded to recruit wizards and witches to his own banner.

Two years later, Talon fulfilled that pact and Ember had a chance encounter with Ash. In spite of his devotion to Cinder, he was fascinated with her mysterious twin and could not resist seducing her. In the heat of passion, the dragon became so absorbed he unwittingly conceived an heir of the phoenix in his image. That inception prompted a reflexive self-conception in Ember. Dusk and Dawn were separated at birth. The assumption was that the children would be true to the nature of their conception, so Ash took the boy into the dragon house and Ember raised the girl in the phoenix house.

An Ardean psychic drawn temporarily into an alliance with the Athean Wizard, rejected the wizard's methods and established a branch academy in Avon, recruiting Cinder, Ember and Ash to help him organize resistance to the forces Talon's conquest had routed and which now threatened Arden. Unfortunately, the conspiracy against the phoenix house was shattering the kingdom from within. The shift in the balance of power favored the dragon house and the kingdom of Arduin eclipsed the kingdom of Arden. Avon, formerly the capital of Arden, was only province remaining under phoenix rule.

The first time Dusk and Dawn met was during their initiation into the Academy. Ironically, Cinder and Ash's efforts to create harmony between their houses resulted in the betrothal of Dusk and Dawn. Perversely, they were forced to witness the massacre of Ember's household and Ember's possession. The demon, sensing a connection between Ember and the children, had its minions bring them along, adding abduction and torture to the ordeal the pair suffered. Unable to bear it, Dawn snapped and grasped her psychic potential, lashing out at Ember and ultimately destroying her mother along with the demon.

At the moment of her death, the demon within Ember was split between Dusk and Dawn as Ember's psyche passed on to them. The power she unleashed destroyed a section of the ruins, causing Dusk and Dawn to become separated. Dusk was able to find a way to the surface, but Dawn escaped by delving deeper, fleeing from a dragon's lair, following an underground river to the ocean. Following their escape from the ruins, they told the tale of Ember's death. Cinder adopted Dawn and continued to champion her engagement to Dusk. When Dusk and Dawn arrived at the academy, they met and befriended Ash.

Ember Dusk & Dawn - Original

The division of the Phoenix into separate incarnations as Dusk and Dawn was the indirect result of a demon's attempt to capture the soul of creation, unwittingly embodying the Phoenix on Aeirn as Ember. Redesigned by conspirators from the Dragon's realm, the demon was a tool employed to crack the security integrated into the game and later appropriated by the government to secure its resources on the Threshold. The Phoenix, originally the AI responsible for creating the universe of Aeirn under the direction of the Dragon, was stunned to awaken within the game and oblivious to the fact that she had eclipsed the demon.

The Phoenix adopted the identity of Ember and approached Ash, who was already working on a campaign to neutralize the demon migration problem the conspirators were attempting to exploit. It had turned out that the demons and angels of Aeirn, designed for the administration and maintenance of Aeirn, could penetrate the security he had designed for the government. Ash immediately recruited Ember to champion the purge of arcane arts left over from the second age of magic, which had evolved from exploits used by players to control and manipulate the game that were adopted and adapted by the indigenous characters in the first age of magic.

When the groundwork was in place, Ash increased the tempo of the realm, suspending play to allow the world to age a generation in preparation for the demon hunting campaign. Players were given various options for retaining or renewing their avatars through the resumption of play. When the Dragon reentered the game, he had discovered that Ash had become a guide and mentor to Dusk and Dawn, the children of Ember's male and female aspects. During the recess, the demon had fought the Phoenix's possession, provoking the parthenogenic inception of Dusk, the son of Brand, and Dawn, the daughter of Ember.

Ember had become known as the paladin Phoenix, champion of the goddess. When the children were seven, the indigenous conspirators and the cabal collaborators tracked the corrupted demon down and launched a raid on Ember's House that succeeded in allowing the demon to eclipse her and probe her soul through Dawn in search of the answers it needed. Dawn was able to bring Ember back to her senses, but alerted to the demon's presence within her, she sacrificed herself in the hope of taking it with her. Instead, Ember and the demon passed on, divided between Dusk and Dawn.

Dusk and Dawn, believed to be unrelated, were betrothed and their surviving parents traded them to pass on their training. Thus, Dusk was apprenticed to the knight who was believed to be Dawn's father and Dawn was apprenticed to the courtesan that had been Dusk's surrogate mother. In the Dragon's absence, Ash had recruited and trained Dusk and Dawn, even encouraging their relationship to distract the girl from her growing obsession with him. Running on autopilot, Ash had even been able to prevent them from being dragged together into a life of crime, following Dawn's rebellion against her training.

When the Dragon resumed control of Ash, he unwittingly led Dawn onto the Threshold. When he responded to an alarming summons, she simply followed him. Two days later, he confronted her about her obsession with him and her engagement to Dusk, furious that she neglected her fiancé in order to pursue him. He came to her rescue a few hours later when she was ambushed by demons on the beach. During a visit with her a few days later, she betrayed her awareness of the Threshold, and finally succeeded in seducing him. He confided that the exploitation of demons threatened the existence of her entire world.

Ember Dusk & Dawn - Revised

The division of the Phoenix into separate incarnations as Dusk and Dawn was the indirect result of the dragon initiation of Ember while she was possessed by the Phoenix, creating Cinder and Brand and unwittingly embodying the Phoenix on Aeirn as Ember. The original Ember was the heir of Flare, the Duchess of Avon, and a ward of the goddess. To protect her from demonic assassins, the Phoenix possessed the girl and became trapped within her. The Phoenix, originally the AI responsible for creating the universe of Aeirn under the direction of the Dragon, was stunned to discover that she could not simply abandon her new living incarnation.

The Phoenix adopted the identity of Ember and approached Ash, who was already working on a campaign to neutralize the demon migration problem the conspirators were attempting to exploit. It had turned out that the demons and angels of Aeirn, designed for the administration and maintenance of Aeirn, could penetrate the security he had designed for the government. Ash immediately recruited Ember to champion the purge of arcane arts left over from the second age of magic, which had evolved from exploits used by players to control and manipulate the game that were adopted and adapted by the indigenous characters in the first age of magic.

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Ember had become known as the paladin Phoenix, champion of the goddess. When the children were seven, the indigenous conspirators and the cabal collaborators corrupted an angel to create a demon that could be used to crack the security integrated into the game and later appropriated by the government to secure its resources on the Threshold. In an attempt to gain access to the goddess, the demon launched a raid on Ember's House that succeeded in allowing the demon to eclipse Ember and abduct Dusk and Dawn in search of the answers it needed. Dawn was able to bring Ember back to her senses, but alerted to the demon's presence within her, she sacrificed herself in the hope of taking it with her.

Instead, Ember and the demon passed on, divided between Dusk and Dawn. Dusk and Dawn, believed to be unrelated, were betrothed and their surviving parents traded them to pass on their training. Thus, Dusk was apprenticed to the knight who was believed to be Dawn's father and Dawn was apprenticed to the courtesan that had been Dusk's surrogate mother. In the Dragon's absence, Ash had recruited and trained Dusk and Dawn, even encouraging their relationship to distract the girl from her growing obsession with him. Running on autopilot, Ash had even been able to prevent them from being dragged together into a life of crime, following Dawn's rebellion against her training.

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From Dusk to Dawn

Dusk was the son of Brand, a knight of Arduin, and Ember, a maiden of Arden. Brand was a recently widowed father of three on a mission in Avon when he met and fell in love with Ember. In spite of the fact that they could not marry, they had a child together. Dusk was turned over to his father at the age of seven to be trained in the arts of sword and sorcery. For ten years he alternated between initiate studies at the academy in the autumn and winter and training while traveling with his father in the summer.

His roommate at the academy was, Ash, the child of an Athean slave who had escaped from slavery, was recruited by academy scouts and brought to Avon for initiation. As an initiate, he dreamed of returning to his homeland and bringing an end to the slave trade there. To this end, he was devoted to the eradication of the arcane arts and the conjurors who supported slavery. His training was devoted to combating necromancy and demonology and destroying demons and the undead.

In his final year of initiation, Ash became trapped in female form as a result of capturing a demon in a warded ring. When she confronted her mentor with her transformation, he explained to her that she had inadvertently created a ring of renewal. A ring of renewal was a powerful and useful artifact, cursed by its demonic origins. It captured the soul of its wielder and altered his, or her, very nature to force that person to explore both sides of human existence in order to unlock that soul's full potential.

To reclaim her official identity, Ash turned to her friend and roommate, Dusk. Knowing Dusk as well as she did, it was easy to seduce her roommate, and because Dusk turned out to be an attentive and talented lover, Ash was able to lose herself in the moment long enough to dispose of her virginity and satisfy the ring's requirements. Unfortunately, two things happened. Dusk fell in love with the girl who made him a man and he discovered the ring of regeneration that turned him into a girl.

When Dusk stumbled across the ring and tried it on, becoming female, Ash was forced to explain to his panicked roommate what "she" would have to do in order to regain her manhood. Dusk was shocked to be turned into a girl, and even more shocked when his roommate explained the powers and influence of the ring, revealing in the process that he was the girl Dusk loved and Dusk would never be a man again unless *she* lost her virginity. Reminding Dusk that he had been through the same ordeal, Ash offered to return the favor.

Unfortunately, Dusk was discovered in the dorm before they were comfortable enough with each other to have sex, and she was escorted off campus. Posing as a girl, she sought shelter from her mother. Calling herself Dawn she asked for "bridal training" and subjected herself to a crash course in being a courtesan. In the days that followed, while Dawn tried to rendezvous with Ash, her mother worked overtime to make a lady out of the "hopeless tomboy". Both of them were impressed with how well she cleaned up.

Ember's efforts to help her accept and embrace herself had an unexpected effect on Dawn. Disturbingly comfortable in her new body, Dawn began to wonder if she would have been happier as a girl. Dawn had always been an androgynous and sensitive person, mistaken often for a girl as a child, and capable of passing for one if he tried. Many times in his life he had been told, in a playful way, that he should have been born a girl. On becoming a girl, Dawn had been both frightened and eager to explore her new condition.

Her options as a girl with no history or credentials were very slim. While she was exploring them, she caught the eye of a powerful noble who made arrangements, through Dusk's grandmother, to acquire her as his mistress. Oblivious to this, Dusk confronted a difficult decision. In the moments they had spent together, as Ash eased Dawn into bed, soothing, calming and arousing her, the feelings Dawn had for Shannon were deepened and enriched by the discovery that she was Ash.

The initially frightening notion of remaining a girl, in order to be with the person she loved, grew more attractive the longer she was subject to her mother's guidance. Dawn confided in Logan, her mentor at the academy, before leaving and he conspired with her to pose as her father and cover for the boy's absence. The qualities Dusk had fallen in love with the girl for were the qualities she had as a person, qualities Dusk always admired in Ash. On the other hand, because of his ambition, the boy had no interest in being the girl Dusk had fallen in love with.

In the hope of holding on to the person she loved, in spite of the cost, Dusk was willing to become a woman permanently for him. When she finally arranged to sleep with Ash, with a little help from her mother, she tested him with a barrage of nervous questions trying to gauge his feelings. Ash understood her feelings, similar feelings had caused him to sleep with Dusk as Shannon, but sensing what Dawn was contemplating, he felt compelled to reject her, going as far as breaking her heart.

Ash could not allow his friend to sacrifice everything just to be with him. To discourage her interest he even refused to help her through the ordeal of the ring. He placed the ring in her hand and told her to pick someone else, warning her he would not see her again unless she was a man. Dawn was crushed by Ash's rejection. She knew she would never be able to bring herself to sleep with some random boy to complete the ordeal, so she fled from the academy and resolved to start a new life as a girl.

Devastated, Dawn turned to her mother for solace, revealing the whole story to the shocked woman. After recovering and demanding an explanation for Dawn's transformation, Ember took her son-turned-daughter in hand and offered her unconditional love and support. She advised Dawn to confront Ash with the ungarnished truth. So, heart in hand, she returned to Ash and explained everything, her decision to remain female for her own reasons, but this time Ash confessed that he simply did not have strong enough feelings in return.

He was a man on a mission, and he could not allow himself to be side tracked by love, or even a devoted lover. Shattered, Dawn resolved to return to her old life, determined to forget the whole ordeal. He agreed to share one night with her, but the next morning they were stunned to discover that the ring had gone missing. Some pickpocket had lifted it off Dawn while she was running back and forth in angst and anguish. She confronted Ash with this news, and he resolved to help her track down the ring.

Dawn was able to remember when and where a stranger had stumbled into her, so they returned to that area and sought out witnesses who recognized her assailant and could direct her in pursuit. It took a while to track the thief down and find out where he had fenced the ring. After some encouragement, the fence informed them that he had immediately contacted a collector of rare artifacts when he acquired the ring, and sold it for an awesome sum the previous day.

The wizard who bought the ring had been searching for a bound demon to fulfill a contract. He had been hired to imbue a demon with a new nature and had everything ready to perform the task when he returned home with the artifact. The deed was completed that night and the men who hired him were contacted to come and retrieve the demon. The exchange was arranged for late the next day. At the time that Dawn and Ash were learning what had happened to the ring, the wizard was preparing to receive his guests.

Dawn and Ash got the address of the collector, resolved to get access to the ring long enough for Dawn to return to normal, but they were rebuffed at the door. Desperate, Dawn broke in to get to the ring, but just as she found it and went to put it on, she was caught. The collector revealed that he was a very powerful wizard, and he unleashed a lethal attack without hesitation. To their mutual shock, the fury of spell was drawn to the ring, which shattered in Dawn's hand, unleashing a flood of power into her.

The men who had contracted the wizard's services arrived during the commotion, and made careful note of the girl who had unwittingly volunteered to serve as the host for the altered demon. Unknown to her, the soul trapped in the ring, and the demon that was bound to it, transferred automatically into her, as the destruction of the ring transferred the bindings from the shattered metal to her living flesh. While the wizard stood in shock, Dawn raced away, escaping into the night.

Because the ring had been shattered before being donned, the demon had not been given the chance to possess her directly. Instead it was trapped in her subconscious mind, watching and waiting for the chance to act.

Following the mishap, she consulted her mentor. Finding no way to undo what the ring had done, her mentor fabricated a new past and identity for her, including marriage records to reestablish her as a member of her real family. While the cover for this transition was established, Dawn concluded her studies allowing the spell woven by her mentor to weave her presence into the memories of her peers and instructors.

The Hunger & Thirst sequence of The Avatar follows the demon's escape, building on the slain spouse scenario. Dusk and Dawn were trapped together in one body after slaying the demon that had taken possession of Dusk's body. Arrested and charged with murder, they are spared from execution when the corpse goes missing and reports of "Dusk" taking passage to Athelon reach the ears of the court. Released on probation, and tasked to find some proof of her claim of demonic involvement, Dawn set out to investigate the demon's origins, guided internally by Dusk. Together, they discovered that Dusk, in a prior role, had unwittingly helped conspirators from his world to corrupt a demon from the game to be used as a hacking agent on the Threshold. They also discovered that the demon had compromised Dusk's link to his native world and body. In the process of seeking the information needed to neutralize the demon and recover Dusk's avatar, Dawn ended up in the middle of a vampire-were feud. Unaware that two of the men she recruited for her expedition into the ruins were a vampire and a were-tiger, she became the object of a wager between them. Drugged and infected by both of them at a party, prior to departing for the ruins, her mission was sabotaged from the outset. The two infections warred with her natural immunity and gradually fused with her innate regenerative powers. In the ruins, when Dawn stumbled across into the occupied section of the underworld, she was confronted by her sires and informed of what they had done and why. As a muse, a psychic initiate, it was in her power to defeat one of their infections at the cost of succumbing to the other. To set that process in motion, and force her to turn, it was necessary for her to be slain at the height of her infection.

Dawn was an orphan who appeared unannounced at the sanctuary of the goddess when she was seven years old. Efforts to determine her origins were frustrated by her traumatized mind, her memory revealing only that she had witnessed the slaughter of her family by a demon before a desperate attempt by her parents to save her by sending her to the sanctuary. Her appearance marked her as a daughter of the phoenix house, a rare embodiment of the ideal that was the goddess herself. Because of this, she was chosen to become a champion of the goddess, a paladin. The next ten years of her life were devoted to her training and initiation. Even though female warriors and champions were respected and often admired in her culture, girls were not encouraged to pursue such paths. She found herself in the minority struggling to compete with boys, training under circumstances that exposed and confronted her with the differences between her and her fellow initiates. Though she took advantage of the training made available exclusively to girls, at the onset of puberty, she continued the advanced training among boys, refusing to be discouraged. Scarred by the trauma of her childhood, and the nightmares that had haunted her since, she was drawn to a boy of the dragon house who was emphatic about becoming a demon slayer. Partnered together in training, they were often assumed to be partnered more intimately, prompting her patron—her mentor’s mother—to arrange for their marriage. The irony of being pressured to marry a boy she was in love with, and forfeit her initiation and all she had worked for, was overwhelming. The intimacy of their childhood was arrested in adolescence, as they struggled against their attraction to each other to prevent an early marriage.

At the age of nine, Morgan was abducted and offered as a sacrifice to a demon trapped in Ruin's Deep. Confronted with such a traumatic ordeal, her young mind searched for any possible means of escape and found one the demon could not prevent--escaping into the past. Emerging from the ruins twenty years earlier, she became an honorary member of the Order of Aeslyn Tear and a ward of the goddess. The demon's assault had deeply scarred her psyche, leaving her with a fragmented memory of her childhood and extraordinary psychic abilities. Those abilities earned her a spot at the Academy where she would be trained as a muse. There, she met a male version of herself--a boy with the same name and strikingly similar features--in training to become an artist. She dubbed him "Dusk" when he invented the alias "Dawn" for her. They were separated for their training in magic and psychic disciplines, but shared most of the same classes in academic and athletic disciplines.

Morgan was in the midst of an astral probing of her past to discover the truth about a childhood trauma that haunts her nightmares when she was snatched physically through time. Shaken and disoriented by the temporal displacement, her initial assumption when she washed up in a cove was that someone intent on killing her interrupted her during her meditations. Moving someone's body while they were projecting could do that, and dumping them in the ocean on a stormy night almost guaranteed it, especially when the victim was known to indulge in the occasional night time swim. Not knowing who among her peers and mentors would have attempted to kill her she sought the haven of her other, unofficial patrons. On her way she encountered a building in what was supposed to be a vacant lot, without realizing the significance she told herself that she must have taken the wrong route home. She made it to the safe house, finding it typically unoccupied, and collapsed in exhaustion.

The next day, after bathing and dressing, she set out to begin an investigation into her attempted murder. Not wanting to tip off her killer, she was forced to remain at a safe distance, from which she could only make out the fact that no one seemed to have taken her absence amiss. There was no uproar at the manor where she had been raised and trained to be a courtesan, it seemed to be business as usual at all the Order's establishment--one of which she had been abducted from the night before--and even in the dens and warrens of the criminal trade there were no rumors about a hit or plot against her. In fact, there was no mention of her at all. At the same time, she never came close to encountering any of her peers or close acquaintances.

It was late in the day before she finally came across a familiar face. He was someone she knew only in passing, an acquaintance of one of her patrons, and he met her approach with his guard up. As usual, it was always necessary for her to go through one of these associates whenever she wished to locate Logan, the warmer of her two self-appointed foster fathers. [Perhaps because she was wearing Logan's clothes, the other man did not question her odd approach. Logan was known as something of a ladies man and she was a courtesan, and there was a hint of the breed in her--better disguised than in any other of their kind he had met.] Morgan was told when and where Logan would next be available. If she was patient while he conducted his business, she could see him then. Unfortunately, that was a few nights off, and Morgan was in dire straits. Still, if that was the earliest Logan intended to appear, there was little chance of tracking him down quicker.

As evening passed into night, Morgan set out to appeal to her other father figure, Roark. In theory, he was always easier to track down, unfortunately that was because he owned a brothel. More than once, Morgan had worried that his interest in her was concerned more with grooming her for an exalted position in his stable--which was not so far fetched considering the many times she had nearly been expelled from the manor. Not too surprisingly, the matron sent Morgan to the bath, instructing the girls to make her presentable, when Morgan asked for an audience with Roark. To her shame, however, Morgan fell asleep on a couch waiting for an audience with Roark. [Roark came in ready to 'interview' the beauty who had asked to see him, and found himself startled at her appearance. This was not a girl desperate to lease a bed in a brothel. She had the breeding for a courtesan to kings. She also had the taint of the inoculated, either she was a retainer to a vampire, or she had survived a vampire's attempt to turn her. If the latter, she would not have come to him except in the hopes of becoming the former.]

Morgan awoke the next morning to receive a fresh outfit and instructions to report that evening to a private residence, where she would be given a second chance to meet with Roark. Frustrated, she decided to risk upsetting Logan. She knew where he cached a portion of his wealth, and unless she wanted to keep stealing for food she needed the money now. Naturally, she was forced to go into the ruins to get that money, and Logan turned up just in time to catch her hand in the cache. Morgan was quick to take advantage of his appearance, surprising him right off by tackling him and hugging him, and then she launched into her story confusing him, but making him clearly aware that she believed she knew him. After hearing her tale, he decided to play along, drawing her out with leading questions. [He quickly established that she associated him with her mother, from whom she was estranged, she did not know what he was, but from observation he deduced her mother had been turned while Morgan was in her womb. It was one of the few ways an individual could gain immunity to were venom, and it left a taint of the breed.] Logan allowed her to keep the money and promised to help her discover who was out to kill her.

Considered

The core premise of this story is the manifestation of an individual's full potential. Alternatives to this story explored this premise by having an individual develop that potential divided into male and female incarnations, however, that approach cannot be developed in a practical way in this story. Instead, the latent potential in Morgan is accessed through psychic abilities awakened by the trauma of demonic possession, and fully manifested as the result of being turned by a were-tiger and a vampire. Her psychic awakening allowed Morgan to turn the tables on the demon, imprisoning it in the depths of her mind instead of driving it out. However, the purpose of her sacrifice was to give the demon a vessel in which it could escape from its prison. Those who conspired to free the demon waited for the opportunity to complete their task, when Morgan completed her initiation as a muse and permanently left the protection of the Academy. In the interim, they became aware of the conflict between the weres and vampires of Ruin's Deep, and devised a scheme to exploit it to give their god full possession of Morgan.

Their agent in the Port of Avon proposed the truce and wager to exploit Morgan's training to determine who would have dominion over Ruin's Deep. Morgan, returning from the Academy determined to end her nightmares and lay her demons to rest, played right into their hands. Her curiosity about her traumatic childhood ordeal brought her to the Sword & Sorcerer Inn to consult with her elders in the Order of the Ruins. Her dreams had helped her to remember some of the details of her abduction, but she needed to explore the ruins in order to confirm those dreams and discover what really happened to her ten years earlier. To lure her into their trap, the rival immortals approached her with potential leads she could pursue above ground. Posing as mercenary adventurers, they confided a few details they had picked up "in the employ of their current patron"--the story of a young girl's abduction arranged by their patron and carried out by mercenaries in his employ. Morgan was eager to accept their help in confronting the man who might have the very answers she was looking for.

They helped her get a position in their patron's house guard. In the process, Morgan discovered the man was some kind of high level crime lord. Apparently, her misspent youth was going to be an advantage for once. While she waited for the opportunity to steal maps and documents she could use to find her way to the part of the ruins she had been taken to, she worked as a member of his household alongside Logan and Roark, both of whom were determined to seduce her. Morgan accepted that as one of the hazards of being a muse. Ideally, a muse was partnered with an artist, fulfilling a role that was part familiar, part courtesan, and part performer but ultimately that of body guard. She could also fill that role for men in important positions, a last line of defense against assassination by physical or magical means. Of course, a properly trained muse also made an exceptional assassin. She half expected her two amorous allies had enlisted her to serve that purpose, since they had betrayed the man they served the moment they confided in her. She was very curious about their true motives and loyalties.

This is essentially the opening point in the story. As the Autumn Festival approached, Morgan was settled into her role as the household threat detector. She performed that role in the guise of her patron's recently discovered niece, which allowed her free run of the house and ambiguous responsibilities. As part of her cover, she admitted to training as a courtesan but of course she had not established herself yet. Technically, both statements were true, as her mother was a courtesan and she had trained Morgan on the side. Since her father was an anonymous adventurer, it was plausible she really was her patron's niece--though the thought turned Morgan's stomach. She had gathered enough intelligence over the summer to confirm that he had orchestrated her abduction and delivered her to a cult intent on sacrificing her to a demon. She still needed to locate the maps of the ruins and any information about the demon cult he possessed, before she felt ready to delve into the ruins. Unfortunately, she would be kept busy through the festival since her patron was hosting parties almost every night of the week.

Much of the time, Morgan was on her own in her master's mansion. Logan and Roark, to her knowledge, performed their duties for Lloyd in the Domain and City of Avon respectively, returning to the mansion to lounge about for a night or three before taking off again. It was rare for her to see them together, but she was always relieved to see either of them when they appeared. They continued to try and court her, and in spite of herself, they were starting to grow on her. It disturbed her, however, to think their interest in her could become the wedge that drove her only allies in Lloyd's household apart. No doubt they would both show up for the celebrations, and she did not look forward to seeing how they responded to each other's interest in her. However, the party would give her the opportunity to raid Lloyd's vault for the items she and her allies were searching for. She was counting on them to give her back up in case things went wrong, and reminded them when they arrived that their mission took precedence over any personal business they had with each other.

Unfortunately, a three way romance had been part of the cover they had created for their little conspiracy, founded in their recommendations for her employment. In an increasingly crowded house, they were required to go to greater lengths to secure the privacy they needed to plan and coordinate their actions. Similar problems in the past had contributed significantly to Morgan's seduction, where they were forced to respond to the invasion of their privacy by resorting to intimate activities. Nothing too serious had happened yet, but enough to make her think seriously about taking either of them to bed. In all honesty, if it did not promise to cause a rift in their group, she would have been more than willing to go all the way with either of her would-be lovers. They were each as desirable a specimen of manhood as she could ever hope to find. Unfortunately, the confrontation she had been dreading came up as soon as she returned from a successful raid on Lloyd's vault. Roark and Logan were waiting for her in her room, and proposed an unusual solution to their rivalry.

Morgan could hardly believe they were willing to share her, but each insisted he would rather see the other sleep with her than wonder when or if he had. While their declarations seemed rehearsed, their feelings for her and about each other were unmistakably genuine. Even though it had turned into a night for reckless adventure, Morgan found herself unable to say no, and unwilling to say yes. Working together wore down her resistance. There was a serious undertone to their foreplay, however, as they brought up her mission again, testing her determination with various probing questions. They built up to their veiled proposition, did she desire want to hunt down and defeat her childhood demon? Could she do it on her own? Did she want them to help? Morgan had to say yes. Even with the formidable abilities she possessed, she lacked the skills and knowledge to confront a demon on her own. If it meant they would help, Morgan would eagerly grant them one night of intimacy. Morgan never suspected what it would truly mean to give in to their advances; she had no clue what they intended to do.

In the heat of passion, they bit her, releasing their venom simultaneously into her blood. Morgan nearly passed out from the erotic, euphoric wave that eclipsed the pain of their piercing bites. Too late, she realized what her lovers were, as the pleasure and poison left her helpless in their embrace. Too late she understood why two men who seemed eager to kill each other over her had decided to share her instead. Because she understood the horrible choice they had forced on her. But, she was not the weak psychic she had been. She focused inward, determined to fight off the infections and preserve her humanity.

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There had been plenty of men determined to bed her, but there were only two men--brothers or cousins, she was not sure which--who intrigued her. The problem was, they seemed to be fierce rivals in competition with each other long before they started competing for her attentions. Up to this point, she had used their rivalry as her excuse for not favoring either of them.

Rivals

What Morgan did not know about her two paramours was that they were immortals. Roark was a vampire and Logan was a were-tiger. The two of them had been rivals since they were mortal cousins--and half-brothers--in an era when the favored sons of Arden were still her lords and masters. They were the bastard sons of bastard twin sisters who had been seduced by the proud young heir of their domain's lord. The two had been turned in their nineteenth year when their rivalry brought them into a conflict between ancient rival factions. As years turned into decades, and decades finally turned into centuries, their rivalry mellowed a bit as they each became the other's only link to the past. Over time they both became more powerful and eventually became lords over their kind. This ultimately resurrected their old feud, as their friendly rivalry was strained by their attempts to claim dominion over Ruin's Deep for their people. No compromise was acceptable to their followers, and a blood feud followed. The longer it went on, the more unexplained deaths occurred, and the greater the risk of drawing the attention of the greater mortal community.

This was the situation Morgan had unwittingly stumbled into. She had appeared just as the two leaders were struggling to minimize the conflict, pitting them in a personal rivalry reminiscent of their mortal conflict. As they courted her, they learned about her life and training--a tale edited to conceal her adopted gender. Once she revealed she was an initiate, the two were reminded of a story where an initiate's unique abilities were exploited to settle a dispute between a were and a vampire in the past century. [An initiate possessed the talent and training necessary to resist vampire or were venom. But, in a joint infection the initiate would be forced to divide his resources fighting both infections--and ultimately die--or concentrate his resources on neutralizing one infection and succumbing to the other.] To settle their conflict over Ruin's Deep, they could infect the object of their other conflict and see which of their bites Morgan succumbed to--winner take all. Of course, Morgan tried to fight off both infections, stalling the progress of either while she attempted to escape from her sires and reach the temple of the goddess in the hope of receiving a proper cure.

Along the way, she realized that fighting the infections directly would quickly exhaust her and their combined, unopposed effect would kill her soon after. Her chances of surviving were greater if she regulated the infections, allowing them to run their course but devoting her resources to controlling their progress. By exploiting the regenerative properties of vampirism and metamorphism, she could prolong the ordeal almost indefinitely--at least until she exhausted her personal resources. Morgan had no idea how absorbed in this effort she became, losing more than a day weaving the spell that would oversee her controlled corruption. By the time she emerged from the ruins and set off for the Sanctuary, she was already feeling the emergence of hunger and thirst as the price of her gradual transformation began to assert itself. Gripped by the need to hunt, she deviated from her determined path, but by evening she succeeded in running her prey to ground and fed both hunger and thirst. Renewed, her thoughts turned once more to the prospect of a cure after which she could return home, return to being male, and return to the Academy for the final year of her--or at that point, his--initiation.

Morgan's hunt had taken her deep within the sacred forest. From there it was possible to approach the Sanctuary without passing through the city. Because she was a mess from hunting and feeding, she stopped along her way to rest and bathe at a natural pool. Exhausted and sated on blood and meat, she slipped into a deep sleep, during which her transformation reached its penultimate conclusion. In the early hours of the morning, Morgan awoke to discover she had changed in her sleep--into an undead tiger. It was at this point that her pursuing sires caught up to her. Morgan's condition troubled them, as it left the conclusion of their wager indeterminate. It never occurred to them that an initiate might apply herself to integrating the infections instead of fighting them. Contrary to the implied acceptance of her transformation, once Morgan was coached through the transition back to human form, she refused to return with either of her sires. The vampire left, warning Morgan of impending dawn, but the tiger simply retreated, waiting to see what Morgan would do with her new immortality.

Morgan, plagued by the feeling that there was something incomplete about her transformation even though it had progressed past the point where it was reversible, found herself riveted by the approaching sun. After an inner struggle, she resolved to face the dawn, to accept her fate and do the only thing she could to ensure she would never feed on human prey. To her surprise, the sunlight seemed to be what was missing--light, it turned out, was the catalyst for vampiric and metamorphic powers. Vampires shunned the sunlight because even the faintest of starlight was sufficient to sustain them, to grant them their inhuman powers. Standing in raw sunlight opened a floodgate of power, accelerating the process of physical refinement every vampire went through, the firing of damp, mortal clay into crystal fine, immortal ceramic. Something a new-fledged vampire could not possibly endure, lacking the training and discipline to harness and channel the power unleashed by the sun. The power did not come from the sun, but from within Morgan herself, she realized. The light was just a catalyst. It was not just power, either, but untapped potential that bathed her psyche in a flood of insight and information.

While her mind was opened and introduced to infinite possibilities, the excess raw energy was eagerly consumed by Morgan's other new nature, as the consumption of her flesh placed immediate demands on a were-tiger's metamorphic regeneration. This started a cycle of flesh consumed and reconstituted while Morgan stood riveted in the pool, until the fusion of were and vampire she had started was perfected into an ember of flesh, an embryo reduced from the mortal Morgan had been. The seed of the new, immortal Morgan that could not survive for long outside a womb. The consequences of that need, apprehended by a mind in a state of naked enlightenment and empowerment, resulted in the apprehension of a future that could be created and guaranteed by the abduction of that future incarnation to serve as a host mother to herself, Morgan reborn. Beyond that point, the story deals with Morgan (Morganna)'s temporal displacement, under the guidance and supervision of Logan and Roark. Logan was the only witness to Morgan's immolation and rebirth.

The story begins with Morgan's final ordeal as a woman and ends with her exposing herself to the sun. That leaves her transformation into a were-vampire as the main focus of the plot. It takes her from the City of Avon to the heart of Ruin's Deep, moving from a human community to the center of vampire and were communities. Most of the story unfolds during her arduous turning, presenting a space where she is presented with the decision forced upon her and the outcome of her transformation. It is also a time when she faces the beginning of her indoctrination into the mysteries of weres and vampires. It is plausible to have her turning complete prior to her escape, assuming that she could be cured at any time up to the point where she feeds, in which case more emphasis can be placed on exploring her transition into the immortal clans. There, we can witness the modification of the wager, where Morgan becomes the personification of Ruin's Deep. Possession of the lost city could only be achieved through possession of Morgan, upon whom the mantle of authority rested until another conquered her.

This approach also opens a window for Morgan to question the impact that her corruption has on her original transformation. Most importantly, her turning might even occur prior to her admission to Ruin's Deep. Thus, it is possible to give the plot significantly greater depth. Obviously, that would present two stages in Morgan's evolution, her initial fusion of were and vampire natures, and the acceleration of the refinement of those natures when she confronts the dawn. It is even possible that her flight to the Sanctuary is based on a misunderstanding, an obscure belief that vampirism can be undone on sacred ground--when in fact there is simply a rite that can be conducted on sacred ground that allows a vampire to revert to a dormant state closely approximating mortal existence. Morgan's motivation ultimately would be to sustain her humanity, which would make feeding on human prey her breaking point, the point past which she can not find redemption. So, instead of trying to prevent her transformation, she moves in the pursuit of redemption with the hope of returning to her original life. She strives to control her impulses, feeding on animal prey--which is made easier by virtue of her tiger aspect.

When the opportunity comes, when she discovers the possibility of a cure, she attempts to reach the Sanctuary only to be waylaid by a band of rogues. During that fight, she loses control of herself and ends up feeding on her assailants, recovering from the euphoria of feeding on human prey in the depths of the sacred forest, or on the cliffs overlooking the ocean, but ultimately one step away from where she will die. As the ocean was featured in the "arrival" of Morganna, it even works for her to be consumed in the fire of her absolution, reduced in a couple of breaths to a single ember that floats out on the breeze to be cast upon the waves. Her witness, Logan, would approach the site of her immolation and look out upon the ocean to see Morganna materialize around the ember and fall into the water.

Morgan was a normal girl, the daughter of a courtesan and a bard. At least, those were her parents' legitimate professions. Both of her parents had been raised and trained as assassins. Her mother was a daughter of the House of Arden and her father was a son of the rival House of Arduin. In spite of being natural enemies, they fell in love and when they had a child they tried to retire and start a new life together. Their families and patrons were outraged, each sending assassins out to recover their asset and eliminate his or her mate.

Once the ruling houses of Ardanna, the House of Arden and the House of Arduin had fallen from power as the result of an ancient feud between them and those who exploited it to seize power for themselves. Other factors contributed to the fall of the two houses, including the bastardization of both bloodlines. The traits that once distinguished the direct descendants of Arden and Arduin became the common characteristics of Ardannans, but this later allowed the bloodlines to survive the purges following the fall of their houses.

The main thread of the story deals with events and circumstances that unlock the potential of the main character, Morgan. This thread draws on an extensive pool of developmental notes detailing a multitude of scenarios. To preserve and promote the plot of **In Hunger or In Thirst**, the following devices come into play: An enchanted ring with the power to change a person's sex. A conflict between a were-tiger and a vampire over possession of Ruin's Deep and Morgan, in her native form. A wager to win both. A different solution to a fatal proposition. An end and a beginning.

A Daughter Born

It was supposed to be the end of an ordeal. Three months earlier, on the night of his seventeenth birthday, Mare offered to make Morgan a man. To their shock, that intimacy broke a spell he had lived under for fifteen years and turned Morgan into a girl. Memories long forgotten until that moment confirmed that he had been restored to his native form. After sorting everything out, Morgan was left with two options, which both required the same sacrifices. The magic ring that transformed him as a child could be used again, if he fully mastered the ring. That meant completing two ordeals, the first of which he fulfilled growing up to be a man. If he wanted to be a man again, he would have to become a woman first.

Morgan had to complete her ordeal before the last day of the Autumn Festival, when her ship to the Academy was due to set sail. Determined to be on it, she devoted her entire summer to discovering what it was to be a woman. After all, if she failed, she would have the rest of her life to come to terms with what she was. As the first day of the festival arrived, desperation forced her to consider a radical solution. Instead of struggling to become a woman, all she really needed to do was just *be* a woman for one night and *do* what any normal woman would do during the annual fertility rites.

The ring was one of nine created by Arden and given to her demi-human offspring to aid them in human intercourse. Because the direct descendants of gods were androgynes, the primary function of the rings was to turn an individual male or female, depending on how they were worn. Both sides of the ring had to be mastered to unlock the other powers of the rings, and the first time either form was manifested the individual was locked in that form for as long as it took to make full use of it. Once mastered, that form was only expressed when the ring was worn in the proper fashion, and when the ring was not worn at all, the individual's native form would reassert itself. While the rings enabled the nine "daughters" of Arden to found the original ruling houses of Arden, and the legacy of Arden's Blood, all were eventually lured away by other demi-gods to establish the elven nations. Among their own kind, the nine had little use for the rings. Some were passed on to their Ardannan heirs, some were given to elven offspring who expressed a desire to walk among humans in their adventurous youth. For one such, the adventure came to a tragic end but a human adventurer followed in her wake and acquired the ring when he came across her corpse.

Mead was a true son of Arden, that is, the bastard son of a muse whose prospects were limited to the wandering life of a mercenary and adventurer. Fortunately, he had a talent for the sword and sorcery in spite of the fact that he was never formally initiated. He began his career as a squire to Arduin, a knight in the service of the goddess--and possibly his father. He made the most of the opportunities presented to him and when he came of age, he decided to seek his fortune through adventure. Instead, he came across a magic ring that turned his entire life on it's ear. Two startling things happened when he tried the ring on; the ring automatically adjusted itself to fit him, and he turned into a woman. He quickly discovered the change was effectively permanent, and struggled to adapt to his new form and circumstances. He also discovered the danger of being a woman out in the world alone. A close brush with rape forced Mead to come to grips with what *she* had become. Calling in a favor from a close, childhood friend Mead was able to get an escort back to her home, searching along the way for someone who could explain what happened to her or how to fix it. Unfortunately, drink and curiosity overcame them one night early in their journey, and by the time Mead reached Avon, there was no doubt she was pregnant.

If Mead had not been wearing the ring when she had sex, she would have changed back before she became pregnant. Unfortunately, her pregnancy made her transformation truly permanent. Her condition forced Mead to approach her mother for help. While settling in to her mother's household, Mead removed the ring and put it away for safe keeping. Mead's mother saw her through the birth of her daughter, Morgan, and convinced Mead that the ordeal had improved her prospects. Her experiences as a man would make Mead unusually successful as a muse. By the time Mead had recovered from Morgan's birth, she had progressed enough under her mother's training to begin her new profession. When Morgan was two years old, she found the ring and, fascinated to see it shrink to fit her, slipped it on her finger. Her transformation was upsetting for the whole household. Mead was tempted to try the ring on again, quickly discovering that it would turn her back into a man if worn the proper way. Because Mead lost his virginity as a boy, long before finding the ring, he had effectively mastered the forms it endowed. Unfortunately, it would not undo the transformation of Morgan. Fortunately, Morgan was so young she adapted quickly to becoming a he, and in a short time dismissed the fact that he was born a girl from his mind.

The real problem presented by Morgan's transformation was the one that confronted every male with the mark of Arden's Blood. His prospects were rather limited. In the hope of giving Morgan a better start, Mead reverted to his native form and reintroduced himself to Morgan as his uncle and mentor, since Morgan already recognized Harkin as his father. [Harkin, by the way, unimaginatively coined Mead's alias, "Meadow".] By working with Morgan from a very young age, Mead guaranteed the boy would be chosen as an initiate when he turned nine. Ironically, the ordeal Mead had been through also made him a candidate for advanced training, permitting him to continue as Morgan's mentor at the Academy. In the summer, Morgan would return to Avon where Mead would resume his role as Morgan's mother. He was something of a prodigy at the Academy, with the promise of a bright future once he completed his training. But his prospects for the future took a sudden and unexpected turn at the age of seventeen.

The summer before his final year at the Academy, Morgan returned home to a city in turmoil over a string of mysterious slayings. He was quickly distracted from the rumors surrounding the unexplained deaths when he was taken to bed by his grandmother's protégé, a girl, with whom he had become more and more enamored of over the summers of his initiation. Thus, it was particularly shocking and mortifying when the act the finally made him a man also, inexplicably, turned Morgan into a girl. In a desperate attempt to hide what had happened, Morgan fled from the arms of his lover into the night. Mane, possessing a bit more sense, paused long enough to throw something on allowing Mead to intercept her as she attempted to pursue Morgan. After listening to the girl's confused explanation, Mead realized what must have happened and set out, in the guise of Morgan's mentor, to find his daughter. He caught up to her, stalking through the city in a daze of shock, and quickly took her aside. As he expected, Morgan responded at once to the presence of her trusted mentor, and rattled off her traumatic experience. Mead listened calmly, until Morgan asked him how such a thing could happen and how she could be changed back. At that point, Mead interrupted to inform her she had.

Mead set Morgan down and told her about finding the ring, showing it to her and putting it on at the proper point in his story. As Morgan dealt with the shock of discovering her mother and mentor were the same person, Mead explained how she had been unable to undo her transformation, and how she made her way home, including how Morgan came to be conceived. Mead stressed that she never knew what broke the spell, only that after Morgan enchanted herself with the rediscovered ring, Mead discovered she could use it to change back. Since the ring did not restore Morgan, Mead was forced to raise her as a boy--never knowing what might cause him to revert to his natural form. Now that Morgan had turned back into a girl, Mead suspected what cured both of them, and what might prevent Morgan from simply going back to being a boy. His theory was partly supported by the fact that the ring had no effect on Morgan, regardless of how she wore it. Mead informed his daughter that she might not be capable of reclaiming her adopted form until she fully explored her native form. If she ever wanted to be a man again, she had to first become a woman.

Morgan's ordeal began at midsummer and was supposed to end on the autumn equinox, during which time she was advised and instructed by Mane and her grand-mother, who managed to convince Morgan that understanding what it was like to be a woman would ultimately make her a better man. It was an enlightening and occasionally frightening ordeal, particularly since Mane insisted on Morgan experiencing every aspect of maidenhood. With her return to the Academy looming, the night Morgan had been putting off all summer finally came. The night of the autumn festival, Morgan faced her final ordeal, sex. There had been plenty of men determined to bed her, but there were only two men--brothers or cousins, she was not sure which--who intrigued her. The problem was, they seemed to be fierce rivals in competition with each other long before they started competing for her attentions. Up to this point, she had used their rivalry as her excuse for not favoring either of them. (See Rivals)

Morgan starts out as a the son of a courtesan and an adventurer turned guard-captain. He was scouted and became an artist-initiate at the age of nine.

Initiates are chosen at the age of nine and undergo nine years of training.

Morgan was not normally a beautiful, seventeen year old girl. It took the discovery and use of a magical family heirloom for the words "beautiful" and "girl" to become appropriate descriptions. However, the normally handsome lad had been convinced by his sister that experiencing life as a woman would ultimately make him a better man. Unfortunately, his sister also believed such an experiment required Morgan to bed a man for the whole ordeal to succeed.

"It won't kill you to be a *normal* girl for *one night!*"

Technically, that was true. Morgan could live in the moment for one night, let go of himself and lose herself in the festivities of Autumn Night. That did not change the fact that being a *girl* on this one particular night *was* going to kill her.

An experiment to become a better man by becoming a woman for three months. Ironically, when Morgan engaged in this ordeal, she was picked out as the object of a wager to end a war between vampires and weres. In spite of the dangerous climate he engaged in an unusual experiment at the urging of his elder sister, after discovering the secret of his mother's success as a muse--a magic ring that changed a person's sex, depending on how it was put on. His mother, and her muse ancestors, used the ring to gain insight and understanding about men. His sister claimed it could have the same benefits for Morgan, and convinced him he could be a better man if he knew what it was like to be a woman.

Morgan was conceived and born divided into male and female incarnations. At the age of seven, Morgan was offered as a sacrifice to a demon, but the demon became trapped within Morgan as the result of her dual existence. The demon managed to escape, taking control of the male incarnation when the two separate incarnations became lovers, prompting Morgan's search of the ruins of Aeslyn Tear. Morgan became involved in the were-vampire war over Ruin's Deep, and the focus of a wager proposed to conclude it.

Of course, Morgan did not know how to use the ring when he found it, and was not prepared for what was required to master the ring. By luck, the first time he donned the ring, it was oriented to the male aspect and so he was locked in his native form until he mastered it. Once he did, however, the ring unlocked and he happened to be wearing it oriented to the female aspect. Under the alias Anne, Morgan was forced to master her new form to unlock it. As Anne, Morgan was identified as the object of the were-vampire wager. She also unwittingly triggered the power of rebirth, impregnating herself prior to her infection. The ring was the source of the power of regeneration that was the key to the wager. In theory, the only way for Anne to survive was for her body to neutralize one infection while assimilating the other to stop the combined lethal effect.

The first of three options to establish Morgan's origins, and the simplest, starts with a phoenix familiar. In some legends, phoenixes have the ability to shape-shift and are capable of parthenogenic rebirth. Thus, the phoenix familiar of an artist-adept took on human form on some mission for its master, during which he was seduced by a courtesan (see notes: Arden's Blood). The nature of that intimacy provoked the parthenogenic inception of the male incarnation and triggered the transformation of the phoenix to female form and the reflexive inception of the female incarnation, as neither form was a suitable vessel for the full potential of a phoenix. The split incarnation tied up virtually all the powers of the phoenix, reducing all three to near human limits. Ironically, the two children both end up with the name Morgan. The boy was named for his father, and the phoenix passed on the name she had used to her daughter, having adopted a different alias to establish herself as a courtesan once she realized she was trapped in her human guise. Both children had the power of regeneration, and some psychic potential, but neither would be able to learn magic, because their dual existence consumed the necessary potential. The girl's abduction as an offering to a demon brought her mother to the rescue, and the demon ended up possessing the mother, who sacrificed herself to protect her offspring. The demon became trapped in the gulf between the minds of the split Morgan, until they encountered each other and become lovers.

The second of three options to establish Morgan's origins starts with a demon exploiting a liaison with an angel to become human. This approach delves into the nature of demons and angels, the manner in which new angels or demons are created. In short, the demon propositions an angel but instead of attempting to conceive a new elemental, it uses the opportunity to change both their natures. The transformation blends the couple's angelic and demonic natures while dividing them according to human nature into a woman and a man. Of course, the conception of a new elemental, a potential demon or angel, played a catalytic role in the transformation, defining the human characteristics of the couple and exploiting the physical mechanisms of conception when the spiritual means were denied. Or more simply, the demon became a man, the angel became a woman, both of them conforming to the human embodiments of the elemental they would have conceived. Both of them were used by that third soul as a vehicle to incarnation, resulting in the split conception of Morgan. The boy and girl would begin their lives as brother and sister, but at the age of seven (exploring an alternate origin arc) their lives would be disrupted by their father's return and his attempt to reclaim his true demonic nature from their mother. He abducts the twins to force their mother to submit to his will, but upon regaining that true nature the demon turns its attention to the children. That curiosity, combined with the ruthless probing the demon indulged in to satisfy it, forced them to pool their inner resourced to protect themselves and destroy their tormentor and imprisoning it in the depths of their conjoined psyche. This resulted in the severing of a primitive rapport the twins had shared, causing each of them to believe the other had died. This belief was underscored by the physical devastation caused by their struggle, leaving them separated in the bowels of the ruins, forcing them to make their way back to the surface alone where each of them was taken into the custody of strangers. Thus they remained separated until they were seventeen, at which time they became lovers.

In this variation, the pair are the offspring of gods, but they are human by virtue of the fact that the angel and demon became human themselves during the twins' conception. This version supports most of the requirements of the main impulse. The trauma the pair endures, and the means employed to help them recover, result in both of them obscuring their origins and embracing new lives and new identities--aided by the subtle manipulations of their mother, and the unconscious provocations of their father.

Split Incarnation Thread

Of all the options explored to establish the main character, the simplest starts with a phoenix familiar. In some legends, phoenixes have the ability to shape-shift and are capable of parthenogenic rebirth. Thus, the phoenix familiar of the Magus adopted human form on some mission for its master, during which he was seduced by a courtesan who hoped he would give her a favored daughter. The nature of that intimacy triggered a parthenogenic inception, but a human male was not a suitable vessel for the full potential of a phoenix, so the phoenix reflexively turned female and conceived a daughter to compliment the son. The division ensured the children would be born human, while imposing human limits on the phoenix. Ironically, the two children were both given the name Morgan. The boy was named for his father, and the phoenix passed on the name she had used to her daughter, having adopted a different alias, Maureen, to establish herself as a courtesan once she realized she was trapped in her human guise. In spite of these minor problems, their lives proceeded pleasantly for seven years when the girl was abducted and offered as a sacrifice to a demon. The phoenix risked everything to come to her daughter's rescue. Seeing no other option, the phoenix tricked the demon into possessing her and then sacrificed herself to protect her offspring. The demon attempted to capture her soul and inadvertently became trapped in the split between the children's psyches, until they encountered each other and become lovers. Following the death of the phoenix, the girl became a ward of the goddess and both children developed the power of regeneration, and gained access to some of their psychic potential, losing the ability to learn magic in the process. Their psychic abilities qualified them to study as muse-initiates at the Academy, where they first met each other and adopted the nicknames "Dusk" and "Dawn" to eliminate confusion over their shared name.

In the wake of Maureen's death, the only individual to know the truth of Dusk and Dawn's origins was the phoenix's former master, Alvin, the Magus. She had informed her master of her predicament as soon as she had been able, and he had helped establish her in her new life. Not surprisingly, he took a paternal interest in her children. He established that the two were capable of miraculous things if they worked together--which he explained to them as the result of being soul mates. Of course he did not explain that he meant that in the same way two people sharing a dorm might be called room mates. Thus, Alvin inadvertently encouraged them to become lovers. It took a significant amount of time for them to progress to total intercourse, but their intimacy presented the demon inside them with the possibility of escape, and its struggles set off Dawn's nightmares. Inevitably, the demon escaped, stealing Dusk's body and leaving him trapped in Dawn, setting the events of this first book in motion. The nightmares gave Morgan a place to begin her mission to retrieve Dusk's body. However, her interest in the ruins brought her to the attention of those who sought dominion over them.

The focus of the story is Morgan's transformation into a vampire-were-tiger. It opens with the events that bring her to the attention of her sires and ends with her exposing herself to the sun. That leaves her transformation as the main focus of the plot. The movement of the plot takes her from the City of Avon to the heart of Ruin's Deep, moving from a human community to the center of vampire and were communities. The most significant part of the story unfolds during her arduous turning, presenting a space where she is presented with the decision forced upon her and the outcome of her transformation. It is also a time when she faces the beginning of her indoctrination into the mysteries of weres and vampires. It is plausible to have her turning complete prior to her escape, assuming that she could be cured at any time up to the point where she feeds, in which case more emphasis can be placed on exploring her introduction to the immortal clans. There, we can witness the modification of the wager, where Morgan becomes the personification of Ruin's Deep. Possession of the lost city could only be achieved through possession of Morgan, upon whom the mantle of authority rested until another conquered her.

This approach also opens a window for Morgan to question the impact her transformation has on her mission. Most importantly, her turning might even occur prior to her admission to Ruin's Deep. Thus, it is possible to give the plot significantly greater depth. Obviously, that would present two stages in Morgan's evolution, her initial fusion of were and vampire natures, and the acceleration of the refinement of those natures when she confronts the dawn. It is even possible that her flight to the sanctuary of the goddess is based on a misunderstanding, an obscure belief that vampirism can be undone on sacred ground--when in fact there is simply a rite that can be conducted on sacred ground that allows a vampire to revert to a dormant state closely approximating mortal existence. Morgan's motivation ultimately would be to sustain her humanity, which would make feeding on human prey her breaking point, the point past which she can not find redemption. So, instead of trying to prevent her transformation, she moves in the pursuit of redemption with the hope of returning to her original life. She strives to control her impulses, feeding on animal prey--which is made easier by virtue of her tiger aspect.

When the opportunity comes, when she discovers the possibility of a cure, she attempts to reach the sanctuary only to be waylaid by a band of rogues. During that fight, she loses control of herself and ends up feeding on her assailants, recovering from the euphoria of feeding on human prey in the depths of the sacred forest, or on the cliffs overlooking the ocean, but ultimately one step away from where she will die. Even employing the phoenix origin of Morgan, the prospect of snatching the future incarnation of Morgan to host the refined ember remains viable. At the time of her transformation, Morgan was already a fusion of Dusk and Dawn, and the embodiment of Morgan's masculinity withheld from her by the demon--waiting to serve as a catalyst for turning Morgan into the demonic-angelic singular duality. If "Morganna" is drawn into the story, it will be because it serves to feature the refinement of Morgan's hybrid nature, give substance and meaning to Morgan's sacrifice, and fully merge the psyches of Dusk and Dawn. Given that, the ocean *was* featured in her "arrival" after Morgan is consumed in the fire of her absolution, reduced in a couple of breaths to a single ember that floats out on the breeze to be cast upon the waves. Her witness, Logan, would approach the site of her immolation and look out upon the ocean to see Morganna materialize around the ember and fall into the water.

Looking back to one of the oldest influences on the evolution of this character, the first step in her life of adventure was the tragic death of her lover. That element survived as the tragic theft of her lover's body. However, the plot evolved to feature her death and rebirth, diminishing the prospects of a quest to recover the lover's body. So, once again the original impulse proves to be correct.

On the night she opened herself completely to her lover, the demon within her took possession of his body and tried to kill her, forcing her to slay her lover to survive. The natural consequences of that are her arrest, imprisonment, and trial. It slightly alters the dynamic of the whole plot, in which her objective is not an attempt to rescue her lover, but a desperate attempt to prove her innocence. Escaping from prison and imminent execution, Morgan approaches her mentors among the Order of the Ruins for help acquiring proof of demonic influence from within the ruins. However, the process of acquitting herself starts with acquiring evidence to support the story of her abduction and information leading to the part of the ruins where she was offered to the demon. This advice comes from her mentor in crime, who urges her to lose herself in the underworld if she does not want to be dragged to the chopping block. Unaware that the man who was responsible for arranging her childhood abduction was a vampire, in league with the necromancer and demonologist that offered her to the demon, she broke in to his mansion and stole the information she needed.

Morgan was on the run. She had been declared a demon, convicted of the murder of Dusk and Dawn, and condemned to death. She escaped on the eve of her execution and sailed to Avon where her only hope of proving her innocence was buried. For the first time, the mistakes of her childhood were going to help her, providing her with one crucial contact with the underworld. Unfortunately, there was much more to the underworld than organized crime, and her path led her right into the heart of a deadly feud.

Her bloody metamorphosis

Her trial and sentence

Her reprieve

Her shady past

Her appeals

Her paramours

Her death

Her unexpected rebirth

Her hunger and thirst

Her hope and despair

Her destruction

Morgan returned to Avon and petitioned the Duke for a commission to explore the ruins. Because she was one of the few people who had entered the ruins and returned, her commission was granted, in spite of the fact that she was only ten years older then the seven year old girl she had been then. Over the next few days, she assembled a party to accompany her on her expedition, unwittingly including a vampire and a were-tiger bent on ensuring her mission failed if she ventured into their domains within the ruins. As an added complication, the pair were ancient rivals locked in a struggle for dominion over the whole of Ruin's Deep. However, their initial probing had caused Morgan to confide her true intentions, to find information about a demon who had possessed her lover that would help her track it down and banish it. The one thing the rivals were united in was the effort to expunge the demons trapped in the city before it was buried so long ago, so they were willing to support her to that extent.

Forced to work together within the party, the rivals were also given a chance to negotiate an end to their conflict before it drew too much attention from the mortal authorities. A solution presented itself as they both developed an interest in Morgan, each toying with the idea of offering to convert her, granting her the power to take on a demon on her own--and binding her to his will. It did not take long for them to recognize the other's intent, and propose to settle their rivalry by making her the object of a wager. A rift within the party presented the opportunity the rivals were waiting for, when Morgan crossed the forbidden line to rescue the mutinous party members from their own folly. Morgan saved the lives of her party, but she ended up paying the price. Her fight with the demon the others set loose brought her into a populated area of the ruins, a discovery she could not be allowed to share with the world at large. The only way they would take her word to protect the secret community was if she became one of them.

Not realizing what becoming one of them would mean, she accepted. Morgan did not know there were actually two communities, or that the one she joined would claim the ruins. Unknown to her, the details of the wager were revealed to the vampires and weres, and a celebration was held. During the celebration, Morgan was seductively distracted and infected by the rivals. Her training as an initiate would have enabled her to resist either infection. Combined they were lethal, unless she focused exclusively on neutralizing the effects of one. Instead of fighting, she applied herself to exploiting the effects of both infections to prolong the ordeal while she attempted to escape and seek a cure. Unfortunately, her escape was not a success and the only thing she accomplished was to turn herself into a hybrid vampire-were-tiger. In spite of this, she continued to resist, trying to preserve her humanity while her sires debated over the significance of the outcome of their wager and instructed her in what she had become.

It did not take long for Morgan to realize that she had no choice but to feed, though she found she could exploit her new animal form to hunt and feed on forest stags. Once she seemed to have adjusted to her new life, she was permitted to complete the mission she had entered the ruins for, but she faced obstacles to her pursuit of the demon itself. For one, she could no longer venture out in daylight, but more annoyingly, she found herself being set up as the embodiment of Ruin's Deep. It was not so much that she had been chosen to rule, as she had become the symbol of rule. Thus, to claim Ruin's Deep, it was necessary to conquer her. It was assumed that, even if she were to save her lover, their relationship was usurped by what Morgan had become. Morgan had never confided that she carried his soul within her, that he was as tainted by her experiences as she was. If it came to it, she would infect her lover with her hybrid venom, if it allowed them to be a couple again.

Her sires feared she might do just that, and they intended to stake their claim to her first. So, once again, her only option was to escape. Which she found much easier to do in her new state. The only problem was, a party of brigands with a score to settle caught her alone in the pale of night and tried to gang rape her. The fight aroused Morgan's hunger and thirst, and the next thing she knew she was standing naked over the scraps of her feeding frenzy. Traumatized by what she had done, she wandered to an isolated spot and stood there waiting for the sun to rise. As horrible as her actions were to her, she did not want to die so much as she believed it was necessary for her to die, while she could still possessed enough humanity to understand her crime. It took everything she had to stand there as the sun engulfed her.

An option that divides Morgan into male and female incarnations involves an attempt by a demon and an angel to escape from their prisons in Ruin's Deep. Metaphorically speaking, they were twin brother and sister, as Arden was the demon's sire and the angel's mare. While Arden remained neutral during the war of the gods, her son and daughter fought on opposite sides. As fierce as the conflict was, the siblings fought each other more fiercely, until the demon was able to defeat his sister and trap her within an angel warded ring. Later in the war, the demon participated in the invasion of Aeslyn Tear, where he stumbled into a demon warded circle and became trapped when the city was buried. He debated for a while before appealing to his captive sister, making a pact to withdraw from the conflict and set her free if she agreed to do the same. As an angel, she should have been able to walk out of his prison once she was set free of hers. Unfortunately, there were angels and demons on both sides of the conflict, and traps had been set to snare both divinities. Stepping out of his prison, she tripped an angel warded circle.

It took the siblings a little while to get over their disappointment and frustration, but their pact had been the first step toward resolving their differences. The fact that their prisons overlapped encouraged them to continue in that vein, while affording them each a private retreat for those times when they fought. Their pact to help each other escape compelled them to work on the problem together, and they eventually realized that Aeslyn Tear had been sacrificed by the sister's side to level a blow to the brother's side. The patron gods had quit the city, instructing their human charges to set the wards that would cause any god who entered it to become trapped. Once the invaders had taken the bait, the city was buried by its former masters. It took a while for them to grasp the obvious, that they could simply walk out of the ruins if they were human. It took even longer for them to devise a way for them to become human by combining and re-dividing their essence. They debated longest over the sacrifices they each had to make to fulfill their pact with each other.

The only thing they overlooked was the full consequences of merging, which was normally a reproductive process--the means to conceive a new angel or demon. Their assumption was that the division of their combined essence into human qualities would abort the conceptual process. Instead, their child was divided as well--like them into otherwise identical male and female incarnations. Their spiritual union concluded in a physical union that ensured both incarnations of their child would be born. Of course, they did not realize what they had done until after escaping from their prisons and the depths of the ruins. The truth was discovered when they visited Arden. After studying the children, it was determined they should be separated at birth and allowed to develop independently as humans. Because they would ultimately be bound to each other and strongly attracted to each other, they could not be raised as siblings. The angel, who had become their mother, kept the daughter and the demon turned father took the son. The two were kept separated until the start of their initiations at age seven.

Individually, all four were entirely human. Together the parents could reclaim their divinity, but no one was sure what the children would be capable of together. Both children were given the name Morgan, the only aspect of shared identity they were granted, and that simply because their parents tended to think of them as the same being, and if they were raised apart having the same name had the effect of distancing them in the eyes of others. Of course, the parents had not counted on the children being initiated together at the Academy. They could not have predicted the girl would be abducted and offered as a sacrifice to a demon, or that the threat would cause her to call upon her other half for help. Across the distance, his mind merged with hers to fight off the demon's possession, but it was the separation of their minds when he was snapped out of his fitful trance that caused the demon to be torn asunder, divided between their psyches. It would take the demon ten years to reconstitute itself, during which time Morgan of Arduin and Morgan of Avon trained together in a special class for psychic children.

Sharing the same name and such physical similarity, the children dubbed each other Dusk and Dawn. Their resemblance was dismissed as the result of generations of effort to breed girls with specific characteristics to serve as courtesans. Because of their compatibility, their master concluded they were soul mates, and they received special training to pool their resources. This training served to help the demon within them to recover, but even as their initiation neared its end, and the demon became whole, it remained trapped in depths between their divided minds. In order for it to assert itself, they had to become a singular being, a gestalt of the individuals they had become. That was an intimacy greater than they had working in rapport or while making love. However, when they graduated and indulged in total intercourse, the demon was finally free to act. In a short, desperate struggle, it attempted to take possession only to discover it could only claim one of their bodies--and doing so caused the gestalt to shift entirely into the other. It claimed the male form instinctively, as the stronger vessel.

To ensure its escape, the demon attempted to kill the female--but she had been trained too well. Before Morgan could sort out what was happening, she had defended herself with lethal force. As she stared in horror at the body of her lover, her other half, she realized what had happened and knew she could not prove the truth. She also realized that her lover had become a part of her as the result of the tragedy, so completely woven into her psyche she did not know where Dawn ended and Dusk began. Looking down at his dead body felt like looking at her own corpse, and the thought of being executed for murdering herself made her panic. There was only one person she could think of to go to for help. Morgan's mentor and master listened to her story, but could not prevent her arrest when the body was discovered and the guard came for her. Her trial did not go well, unable to state her defense, she was utterly naked before the prosecution. Condemned to death, Morgan's only hope was to escape and gather proof of her childhood ordeal, and present the defense she should have from the start.

Fortunately, Morgan had gained more from her merge than anyone could have suspected. The power that once took the combined effort of Dusk and Dawn to summon came easily to her, allowing her to simply walk out of prison. She found passage on a ship bound for her home port and set out for the only haven available to her. The Sword & Sorcerer Inn on the road to the ruins. Her childhood ordeal made her an unofficial member of the order of the ruins, and the Sword & Sorcerer was owned and operated by an official member of the order. She sought aid and advice in penetrating the ruins to gather her proof, but while she was waiting for the order to consider her request she was confronted by two patrons of the inn. Logan and Roark, meeting on neutral ground to discuss the war over the ruins, had overheard her petition for help exploring the ruins. They set their dispute aside to try and discourage her interest in the ruins, only to discover that she was no common adventurer. With some effort, they drew her out, suggesting that they could provide her with valuable resources and assistance if her mission was worthwhile.

Paraphrasing as much as she could, Morgan explained her childhood ordeal, and its unexpected consequences. To her horror, they revealed that killing a demon's host did not slay a demon. The host had to be destroyed properly, or the demon would reanimate it and continue on its way. If Morgan needed proof of her childhood ordeal, or just that the killing was justified, she only needed to trap and bind the demon for inquisition and later destruction. At the same time, the rivals were considering what they had learned about her, and how she could be of use to them. Both of them quickly regarded her as a desirable consort, and she immediately became the object of a personal rivalry between them. As a psychic, it would be far easier to kill her than turn her, but her immunity to their venom had known limits. A fact that created the possibility of resolving the major and minor conflicts between them. Once the wager was agreed upon, the two set out to lure her into their trap. After making the arrangements, they brought her to a party to "take her mind of her problems for a night" and carefully seduced her.

Ironically, Morgan was more than willing to be seduced, desperate to find out if sex would traumatize the man in her. She had already discovered, to her chagrin, that she had become attracted to other women, and that the man in her delighted at having all of her to "himself". At times, it had seemed there was nothing safe she could do with her hands, and she had to pay strict attention to what they were doing at all times. Through the evening, her reactions seemed very encouraging, and eventually she found herself in bed with the two men that had taken such a keen interest in her plight. There was a serious undertone to their foreplay, however, as they brought up her mission again, testing her determination with various probing questions. They built up to their veiled proposition, did she desire the power to hunt down and defeat her childhood demon on her own? Morgan had to say yes. Even with the power she had gained from her fusion, she lacked the skills and knowledge to capture a demon on her own. If they could provide that, she would give far more than one night of intimacy.

Morgan was not wrong in sensing that they wanted something from her, but she would never have guessed that they would do what they did. In the heat of passion, they had bitten her, releasing their venom simultaneously into her blood. Morgan nearly passed out from the erotic, euphoric wave that eclipsed the pain of their piercing bites. Too late, she realized what her lovers were, as the pleasure and poison left her helpless in their embrace. Too late she understood why two men who seemed eager to kill each other over her had decided to share her instead. Because she understood the horrible choice they had forced on her. But, she was not the weak psychic she had been. She focused inward, determined to fight off the infections and preserve her humanity.

The third of three options to establish Morgan's origins involves obscuring her origins to conceal the fact that the events of her childhood occur in the future or to conceal the circumstances that brought her into the past. The mechanism of this approach is an ambitious experiment gone awry. This was the option explored as the basis of this book, however, the circumstances developed untenably. What remains applicable is the attempt by a prodigal artist-initiate to prove the existence of the soul of creation by creating a human embodiment from it. The flaw in the experiment is derived from the consequences of grasping for something that is not there, one ends up holding one's self. Thus, the artist inadvertently creates an ideal embodiment of himself. The experiment is further complicated when the embryo he created is threatened with destruction, activating a powerful protective ward designed to prevent a cataclysmic backlash for creation by forcing the soul-to-be-embodied to draw upon its untapped potential to protect itself. The artist intended to have his fiancée act as a host mother for his brainchild, but her discovery of the notes resulted in a tantrum in which she threw the embryo's crucible into the ocean. The crucible was shattered on the rocks during a storm exposing the embryo to the elements. The protective ward was triggered and the potential of the embryonic being explored for the means to protect itself. The specifics have been explained elsewhere, the results of which bring Morgan back in time to serve as her own surrogate mother.

Reincarnation Thread

An option that bridges time and gender involves the dual infection of Morgan as a boy, his reduction to an ember and psychic awakening. The psychic awakening serves as the central catalyst, opening his mind to the potential within him, the possibilities of the future and the power to influence both. His glimpse of the dark trend of the future provides him with the motivation to survive, and his search for a means to survive results in the alteration of the ember and temporal displacement of his future, female incarnation to serve as a host mother to herself. Emphasizing the singular significance of the boy's ordeal, in particular recognizing it as the origin of the girl's psychic abilities, displaces the demonic possession thread. Instead of having a demon trapped within her, fighting to take possession, Morganna (Anna, in her training as a muse, and Morgan in her other exploits) struggles with Morgan's reawakening, as places and things in her own life trigger blackouts where she relives the final days of his life. He haunts her waking life, and she haunts his memories--each of them a ghost telling the other's story.

At first, she welcomes the visions, believing they are about her father who died before she was born. They start with his return to his mother's home for the Autumn Festival, triggered by her return under the same circumstances. The final vision captures her, instead of ending she discovers that she has solidified in the vision, trapped either in her mind or in the past.

The wager becomes focused on Morgan through a simple chain of associations. The rivals both frequented the home of his mother, a successful courtesan. Through her they both knew of Morgan's initiation. When the feud over Ruin's Deep threatened to bring too much attention to them, the rivals needed neutral ground to discuss the problem, which Moira was able to provide. Moira believed them to be adventurers, favored sons of Arden, and introduced her son to them, they took him out every night of the Autumn Festival at her urging. The idea came naturally to them, to wager possession of the ruins on the outcome of his infection. As an initiate he could resist infection from either of them, but if he was infected by both it would take all of his resistance to survive and neutralize one, meaning he would succumb to the other. They infected him the third night of the festival, when he passed out from smoke and drink, they took turns watching him for the next few days "helping" him through the ordeal--since he did not remember clearly who or what bit him.

Presuming he was the victim of a vampire bite, he took the precaution of resisting potential infection, but noticed changes occurring in spite of his efforts, and concluded that it must have been a were. He spent the night trying to fight off the bite of a were, only to realize that he was still experiencing changes, suggesting he was the victim of something else. Uncertain what to do, he stopped resisting to explore what was effecting him and discovered he was the victim of conflicting infections. Unfortunately, while vampires and weres were immune to each others' venom, their combined effects on a mortal were lethal. Knowing he could not fight off the bites of a vampire and a were simultaneously, he worked a spell to exploit the effects of both bites to prolong the ordeal while enlisting the help of his new patrons to find a cure. If Logan and Roark had sought a cure, Morgan's gamble might have paid off. Instead, he had simply prolonged his death. When the third night came and his patrons did not return, Morgan was delirious with fever, aching in every fiber of his being.

Morgan exhausted himself, dragging himself to the pool in the courtyard in a vain hope of relief in the cold water. The spell he had woven tapped into the regenerative properties of both infections to combat the ravaging effect of being turned in conflicting ways. Parts of him were becoming vampiric, while others were becoming metamorphic, and it was tearing him apart. As morning came, the poison had run its course. His mortal flesh had been conquered by two different natures at war with each other and light was the key their power. Light was a catalyst for change in a were, and a catalyst for refinement in a vampire, so when the light of the sun fell upon Morgan, he was caught in a crucible of change and refinement. The were side of him was caught up in metamorphic healing as the vampire side ignited and began to consume him. It was a lightning cycle of death and resurrection in which Morgan was literally roasted alive, cooked down to an ember. At some point in the raging crucible, the two powers became one, refined and changed into a fusion of vampire and were-tiger.

Morgan's mind was held in the grip of revelation, seeing the future and the possibility of rebirth even as he was reduced to an embryo. Of course, Morganna was watching this startling ordeal, riveted by her vision, and never noticed when she crossed the line between present-past and past-present. One moment she was a ghost inside a memory, watching as the last ember floated in the pool, the next moment she was rearing up out of the water in shock.

Comments

The nature of the story allows the main characters to narrate each other's stories. The one problem with that approach lies in the assumption that he is reborn as her, that his personality was submerged as a past life and does not resurface until her mind is probed to determine her relationship to him. If so, he is not capable of assuming control during her visions, but, there is nothing to say that her visions are not instantaneous recollections, or exclusively dreams. The device of having her future self confront her, but having these meetings dismissed as dreams or visions, works to provide an occasional goad, while adding diversity to the episodes she endures. As usual, there are more options, more approaches to telling the story, than the story requires. The one to apply should be the one with the most consistency.

A complex character evolves out of the simplest of circumstances. Providing that for this story depends on the exclusion of all unnecessary threads, painful as that may be. To that end, it is necessary to accept the best solution that presented itself. Morgan, an initiate-artist, was drawn into a vampire-were war over Ruin's Deep. His training, combined with his personal characteristics, resulted in him being chosen as the object of a wager. The rival vampire and were-tiger infected him simultaneously. His training was sufficient for him to resist one of their infections, and the one he succumbed to would indicate the victor. Morgan's response was beyond prediction, however, as he tried to use his abilities to exploit both infections to prolong the ordeal while he escaped and sought a cure from the goddess. Unfortunately, what he actually did was integrate the infections, turning him in a fusion of vampire and were. Instead of gaining the time to reach the sanctuary of the goddess, he was overcome by the hunger and thirst of his hybrid nature, and deviated from his path to hunt. This allowed his sires to catch up to him and confront what he had become. After experiencing the power of his hunger and thirst, he realized there was only one way to ensure he never preyed on human beings. He refused to return with either of his sires and waited for the sun to rise.

When he exposed himself to the dawn, however, he discovered the truth about the effect of light on vampires and weres. It was a catalyst, unlocking the raw potential of his psyche even as it consumed and refined him. In the space of a few breaths, he was reduced to an ember--the refinement that normally took a vampire centuries accelerated and perfected by the metamorphic regeneration of a were. While his body was refined to an embryo, his full psychic potential was awakened. Instinct and intuition expanded to conceive of a way to ensure his survival, calling upon the future to provide for the needs of the embryo in that instant, changing the embryo itself to ensure that a future Morgan, capable of bearing a child, would come into existence and then dragged her into her own past to serve as the embryo's host mother. Everything up to this point is simply a preface, the foundation of Morgan's story, in which she finds herself inexplicable tossed into the past, falls under the wing of the vampire and were [the latter of whom witnessed the "rebirth"] as they lead her through the discovery of her hybrid nature [incidentally introducing her to the memory of her previous incarnation with their attempt to verify her connection to him].

Everything required to account for the realization of her potential is provided in this approach. As much as possible, the transgender influence is diminished without stripping Morgan of the cultivation of her male potential. It does give her a male alter-ego, who provides her with a contemporary context and later motivation to assume a masculine form.

Note: It might be possible to devote attention to the transition itself, beginning in Morganna's generation, confronting her with her older self, introducing the rivals for her affections as they prepare her for her displacement by stimulating latent memories of Morgan's final ordeal. Upon displacement, the plot follows her into the custody of her sires, her realization of her displacement, her introduction to her true nature and indoctrination, and the discovery of her pregnancy. She faces the scrutiny of the goddess, who investigates her as the focus of a radical shift in the prospects of the future, where her presence offers the world a chance to survive the coming cataclysm. She also draws the attention of entities responsible for nudging the world toward the brink of destruction. At the heart of it all, she faces the simple fact that if she should die before giving birth, she will never have existed.

Childhood Elements

Dusk and Dawn were taken under the wing of individuals whom the demon dared not move against. For ten years she enjoyed the protection of initiation and applied herself to mastering the arts and disciplines that would qualify her for the role of paladin of the goddess, for which she had been chosen. By design, Dusk was also initiated, training under a different mentor but the same instructors, teachers and master as Dawn. As peers, the two were common acquaintances, and in due time intimate friends.

Unfortunately, during the last year of her initiation, while she was still under powerful protection, Dusk and Dawn encountered each other and their division was undone. Instead of blending together in the form Ember had been embodied in, the child tended to flip back and forth between male and female, as her personalities fought to preserve themselves.

Dusk and Dawn’s presence in the world was similar to that of the remote participants in certain mechanics, but they resided entirely within the game.

The massacre that followed obscured their origins and association with each other. The demon’s initial attempts to probe Dawn and understand the anomaly identified that, through Dusk and Dawn, it might gain access to the secure mechanisms of the game. In terror and desperation, Dawn succeeded in destroying the vessel through which the demon tormented her. In its attempt to possess the girl, and avoid being destroyed by her, it passed through her into the boy that served as the vessel that allowed the demon to escape. That vessel, delivered to its human allies, would grow up ignorant of the girl's existence, and his relation to her as she was of him. He was taken under the wing of one of the demon’s master’s initiates, who saw to his training. The demon intended for this boy to become his vessel for attempting once more, when she was vulnerable, to renew his assault upon her.

Dusk and Dawn first met at age seven when they were presented for Initiation. They experienced a profound connection neither could fully comprehend. The rapport they experienced was dampened by the shock of Dawn's traumatic ordeal several days later. Dawn was abducted and offered as a sacrifice to a demon, and witnessed the death of her mother, when she attempted to rescue her. Following her mother's death, her preparation to assume her mother's mantle, as paladin of the goddess, became an even greater priority. This came directly into conflict with her betrothal to Dusk, arranged before either was born—back when it was assumed she would never be called to serve in her mother's stead. Given the closeness of Dusk and Dawn, the children were left ignorant of the engagement, both to keep the sisterhood ignorant of the commitment until the last minute and to allow nature to take its course in welding the pair into a couple.

Dawn's calling allowed her to participate in training generally offered only to boys, a situation which stripped the girl of every shred of modesty—conveniently provoking the protective instincts of her fellow initiate, Dusk. Unsurprisingly, they became instant, intimate friends, their partnership spiced by good-natured rivalry and uncanny chemistry. They were well matched, equally talented at getting into and out of tight scrapes, some mere mischief but often enough sobering misadventure. A penchant for exploration and exhibition caused them to become involved in crime, Dawn's identification with street orphans—as an orphan herself—combined with challenges against her gender and ability to make her, unwittingly at first, into a cat burglar. Once she got in over her head, Dusk was drawn into the shadows, compromising himself willingly in order to help her. Together, they were able to extract themselves from their criminal careers, but not before both had been marked.

Soon enough, the pair became first rank initiates facing the final year of training and testing. They also were confronted with their betrothal and were formally engaged. While understanding that marriage would cost Dawn her calling, and result in Dusk inheriting Dawn's legacy, the estates titles claimed by her mother and held in trust for her, the fact was that they were in love and certainly had been lovers. Something neither fully examined was the nature of their attraction. They both felt that the other made them complete, and that there was a magnetism between them that was overwhelmingly irresistible. To Dusk, Dawn was the reason for his existence. He would die for her without hesitation. Unfortunately, she also aroused something alien and bestial in him, something that hungered desperately to devour her alive. One dark night, that compulsion caused him to shed his humanity. Dawn's love for him, her faith in him, compelled her to sacrifice herself to the dragon he had become.

There has been a gender/identity conflict aspect to the story from the earliest impulses. A solution, or method of portraying it, could be found in the treatment of Dusk and Dawn, aka the Dragon and the Phoenix. In essence, Dusk originates in the outer world, and Dawn is an incarnation engendered in the inner world. The Phoenix begins as an artificial intelligence, and evolves to recognize the soul she exists within—realizing she has evolved within the soul of the Dragon. Unfortunately, her intention had been to capture and incorporate her own soul, so Dawn had already been conceived when she realized the truth. Dusk, as a player character, was simply a construct controlled by the Dragon, or as his surrogate, the Phoenix—or more specifically the automated persona she supervised in her capacity as the game’s administrator. When the demon assaults the Dragon’s mind, attempting to possess a body in the outer world, his psyche is transferred into Dawn, in part because the demon attacks through her, and in part because their shared soul facilitated it.

In those rare instances when a child of common birth was deemed worthy of initiation by the masters of the three spheres, a noble patron was required to endorse the child's career and foster him or her through initiation. This was in part to spare the child's natural family of the burden of his or her education, as well as to establish the child in the circles of nobility. Regardless of the power of imperial and divine patrons, upon completion of initiation that child's peers would be none other than the nobility from which society he or she could not be excluded without dire consequences. Thus, to ensure these exceptional individuals not be denied the friends and allies upon which a noble must depend, the patrons of such children beseeched the nobility to foster the initiates.

To their surprise, two houses stepped forth offering instead to adopt the children, seeing as they, by appearance, were well suited to their ancient and noble lineages. At the same time, those two houses schemed to strengthen the ties between their houses in an alliance sealed by the marriage of these children to each other, which would therefore ensure that neither child could fulfill the commissions for which they were being initiated. To be sure, the couple would not suffer for this, for in truth they would be firmly established in the noble ranks, and rule over a new house. In fact they would be spared the burdens and loneliness of becoming the emperor's champion and the goddess's paladin.

Dusk and Dawn were well aware of the duties and obligations, as well as the gratitude they owed to those houses which had adopted them. They were, however, kept ignorant of their betrothal, as they were kept ignorant of each other's existence. Their stories of their mother, from which details it was possible to determine she must have been either a courtesan or a maiden priestess, were tainted with unrelated truths such that their new fathers were able to claim to be their sires, who had "deduced" from the children's confessions they must have impregnated their mistresses, which mistresses through the misfortune of being dead could not challenge or deny. In spite of these assurances that the only parent they could remember was demised, leaving only a stern and unyielding father to whom to cling,

As was often the case in the nobility, their families were not rich in worldly things. Dawn's family was heir to an ancient and preeminent title, to which were attached vast estates, which being the sole asset for many generations had become split among the branches of the family. To be sure, there were branches of the family, who through ingenuity or industriousness had recovered their fortunes, however her immediate family was in means only sufficient to maintain the illustrious appearances of fortune and maintain the health and humor of the household.

Their mentors, although at once aware of the threat of that attraction to their patron's wishes also recognized that only in each other could they find the possibility of a suitable mate, for it was clear that no others among their peers were more suitable prospects. To deny them, out of hand, the prospect of love and companionship was unconscionable. It was enough to simply inform them of the price of such affection, the alternative to their presumed fates. Naturally, when confronted with the presence of such bright lights among the dimmer flames of the populace, the two were much prized by those who easily saw them as ideal mates.

The regent picked the one suitor Dawn could not refuse, because she had always loved him. Dusk and Dawn were informed of their betrothal at the age of sixteen, at the beginning of their final year of initiation. Unfortunately, the announcement was preceded by an event that set them up as antagonists. Dusk and Dawn had known each other most of their lives, though their mentors strictly limited their association. In spite of the deliberate efforts of their mentors to avoid one another, it was inevitable that they would meet under the instruction of their master. Their history of meeting and parting was a comedy of errors they were careful to laugh about only in private, but it was inevitable that their mentors’ animosity would one day test their friendship. That day came when Dusk had faced and overcome every other worthy challenge his mentor could identify. The man finally gave in to the temptation to confront his former lover, and watch as his charge defeated her famous protégé. He instructed the boy to seek the girl out and challenge her, knowing the order could not be refused. Their master learned of the challenge and rushed to observe the match, carrying with him the news from their homes. The contest was exhausted in a draw, and the couple instructed, for different reasons, to train together. Their master informed them of their betrothal, cautioning them to pay heed to their training and not let temptation, condoned by the arrangement, ruin their futures. The advice was well warranted, for the two were obviously drawn to each other, unconsciously recognizing the connection that already existed between them.

Partnered in fierce competition, they pushed themselves to the limit of their potential in their efforts to conquer one another. Foremost among the gifts that resulted in their initiations was the power of their minds. Such was the nature of art that it enabled a mind, with the proper training and tools, to manipulate reality. Because their minds showed a capacity to dispense with such artifice to achieve the same ends, they were seen to have an awesome potential for achieving a unique and extraordinary mastery of the art. As is often the case, the bulk of their initiation was devoted to the disciplines through which a foundation for the art to build upon was laid. At the same time, that ability they already possessed to impose their will on reality more directly was being cultivated as part of the general mastery of the three spheres, the body, the mind and the spirit. Their ability to touch the hearts and minds of living beings, and so know both the thoughts and feelings of, and impress their own thoughts and feelings upon, those around them, was equal to their ability to grasp and grapple with the fabric of the world around them. Collectively, this presence of mind enabled them to possess a kind of intuition, or precognition in which answers came more quickly to them than questions, and actions even more quickly than reactions—which is to say, they were formidable dancers, and difficult students. In fact, as they possessed a range of actions which exceed that of mere muscle and sinew, they possessed a comprehension of things that outstripped the articulation of words, making it difficult for any to assess their full range of expression and ability.

To some degree or another, this was also true for any initiate, for the possession of such attributes dictated their training, and only through that training could they come to be measured. What set Dusk and Dawn apart from their peers, was that their masters still sought their measure, from which to determine the course of their training, while their other students had been measured and introduced to the arts they would be able to master. Fortunately, as their patrons had selected for them careers in which dancing, above all, was required, their exceptional achievement there was more than sufficient to fulfill their destinies. Nevertheless, their mentors wondered yet what the true power of these two might be. The question remained even in the last year of their initiation. Even the Magus, who had found it necessary to deal with Dawn as much as he dealt with Dusk, could not fathom their potential. In the entire world, their generation offered only one other example of such extraordinary ability. He took it upon himself to bring that boy in, despite his rivalry with Dusk, and attend closely to their final year of training. That other boy’s master seemed to have anticipated the request, informing the Magus that, while he himself could not join them, the boy and his mentor had already been dispatched to challenge Dusk and Dawn. It would be a simple matter, once he had tested the other two, to join them under the Magus’s tutelage. Unfortunately, because he had visited that boy’s master in person, he and his mentor would reach and challenge the pair before the Magus could join them. Not because he faced any difficulty in locating or reaching them in time and space, but because he had other business he could not shirk.

In spite of the fact that their families had schemed for their union, it went without saying that they dared not confront their families with what they had become. Driven by their desperate need to seek wise counsel, to both explain and hopefully remedy what had happened, they ceased fighting the gestalt they had become and collected their belongings to set out in search of the fabled master of paradox. Fortunately for them, it was in his nature to investigate the occurrence of rift storms, accompanied by his protégés. It was often necessary for these enigmatic individuals to undertake the rescue of individuals lost to such storms, which necessarily took them away from their usual work to harness the forces of paradox and prevent such storms. Because this was the nation in which the original world-shattering rift had opened, it was typical for new disruptions to originate there. Upon finding one of the master's apprentices and being delivered to his presence, they were startled to learn that this was not the first time they had been touched by paradox as determined by his examination of them. Intrigued by his assessment of them, and their appearance, he delivered them to his own mentor, a figure out of myth and legend.

The Magus told them of an ancient race of immortals, who had once been worshipped as gods, and explained that they had, for whatever reason, assumed the sex and gender by which they were known, as both gods and demons. He suggested, to his apprentice, that it was more plausible to assume that the rift had restored them to an original and singular form, as opposed to imposing upon two unrelated individuals such a specific and unique condition.

This suspicion was not shared with the couple, for whom this fusion seemed obviously traumatic. Discovering that he could not undo their fusion, he endeavored to teach them how to reassert their former selves, and thus return, in shifts, to their former lives while he investigated further the cause and nature of their union. For the sake of those who must know of their condition, the Magus and the Master of Paradox provided an explanation and their endorsement. In this way they were able to return to their families and take them, as well as their mentors, into their confidence.

Forced by their shared existence to continue their lives, inventing certain excuses to explain their absence from each other's presence before it was otherwise noticed. As a result, Dusk and Dawn were considered available to other suitors, by virtue of resisting the formal acknowledgement of their standing engagements. To be sure, some of their most intimate friends, as well as many who began as passing acquaintances or perfect strangers, became exposed to the truth and participated in concealing their secret from the general public, and the court in particular. The single greatest complication was a pair of engagements that had already been made.

Because the original betrothal was never dissolved, it retained precedence, but because both alternates were forced through to formal recognition the stood to assume precedence if a year passed before the first engagement was equally recognized, at which point they would be dissolved by the court. In spite of revealing their condition to the immediate households of those alternate mates, it was determined that they could still uphold the formal requirements of marriage to both parties even if their condition was not remedied.

The two who would have to essentially share Dusk and Dawn, were both dismayed and disturbed by this decision. Their great regard for Dusk and Dawn quickly being subconsciously replaced by both revulsion and hostility. Fortunately, their better natures forced them to regard Dusk and Dawn with growing friendship.

Dusk's father, like many others, tended to see the pair as one person, who his prejudice insisted must be his son, which necessitated his perception of Dawn's demise, for which reason he aggressively pushed for the fulfillment of the second alliance which would serve the original purpose of unlocking a fortune he craved.

Married into what he mistakenly assumed to be a great legacy. In truth that legacy was one equally claimed by the house of his life long friend and ally, Dawn's father. By uniting their houses through Dusk and Dawn an immense fortune would be unearthed, which should the couple happen to be joined in their minority, would have to be administered to by their fathers, who, in the fleeting regency, would be more than able to disperse most of among their own houses, and further to gain the favor to which they felt due.

Dusk and Dawn had a long, if intermittent history together, and while they had each nursed crushes for the other at various points in their history they had also competed and on occasions fought with one another. In a sense they were surrogate brother and sister, and this affection was confused by the situation they found themselves in. Dusk had always been a person somewhat removed from the world around him, seeming at times to find it impossible to regard those around him as real. His infatuation with Dawn was of the sort one might have with a fantasy, and he was most troubled by the evidence, endlessly encountered, of her own personality. To Dawn's surprise, Dragon Dusk also had a history with Phoenix Dusk, whom Dusk had viewed in all their encounters as a rival. The thought of this rival having such an indescribably intimate possession of the girl he had all but worshipped, and given the fact that she was nearly the only girl he was not entirely unsettled by, sparked an almost insane rage within him. This rage was such that it blinded him to the fact that she would also feel any wound inflicted upon his enemy. Unable to look at her without seeing his enemy possessing her, it actually fell to Raven to distract and diffuse him. As a result much of the affection he had felt for Dawn transferred itself to Raven. For Raven, her motivation was mere sympathy, for her prospective mate aroused in her both pleasure and revulsion, and association with her betrothed often provoked grief, guilt and rage. She resented being in competition with girls who would throw themselves upon Dusk, mindless of his coexistence with Dawn, taking advantage of her antipathy to appeal to his baser instincts, unaware of how confused those instincts were. Unable to sort out the confusion of male and female impulses, Dusk and Dawn strove simply to preserve relationships on the basis of friendship, to preserve the identities which the stream of events and circumstances served constantly to undermine and erode, and distinguish the boundaries of gender which often seemed to be all that divided them.

Those who served as her priestesses were given certain social responsibilities that allowed the goddess to conduct a subtle breeding program ultimately concerned with producing an embodiment of herself. By the age of empires, she was assured of suitable parents to be born in one of a number of nations. It was ironic then, that the parents she chose were in love, and her birth the event that shattered their relationship.

To her surprise, a being appeared who was the perfect host to her manifestation. Ironically, where before her conception and birth would have invited paradox, it turned out that paradox had invited her conception and birth, a chain of events in which she would become her own mother, by virtue of conceiving of the goddess and giving birth to a child who would be divided into male and female incarnations to protect the goddess in her vulnerability, which children became cast back in time by the rift, growing up isolated from each other until a later encounter with the rift reunited them as one, an exotic whom the goddess would recognize as the very embodiment of her design.

The immortals, a race revered by many as gods, answered her call to protect the child, but regretfully asserted that the child would be too easily identified among them. Their proposal, while startling, promised to ensure the child's safety, by dividing her into male and female human incarnations. As this project was undertaken, the final assault began and at its climax the forces of paradox were unleashed, opening a rift in time in space through which the boy and girl were lost.

There are two perspectives from which to view the lives of the child of paradox. Viewed in line with the passage of history, two individuals appeared out of nowhere at the age of seven, during the festivities surrounding the annual rites of initiation. Viewed in line with the passage of their lives, Eve had been born to an individual who neither male nor female, yet equal to both, and thus inherited this unusual gender that is viewed according to prejudice as damned or divine.

At the age of seven, Eve was entrusted to gods for safe keeping in a time of great peril. The gods, aware that the child was unmistakably marked by her gender deemed it necessary to split the child into male and female incarnations that could then hide in plain sight among the people. Unfortunately, the forces of paradox, as manifest by the rift, further concealed their existence by snatching them from the present and stranding them in the past.

The man chosen by the demon was the father of the phoenix. His disappointment in the birth of a daughter had caused him to renounce his affection, and the secret affair that would otherwise have resulted in their marriage. It proved easy for the demon to convince this man that, where love had failed to produce a suitable offspring, careless lust had provided the heir he so passionately longed for. Taking advantage of the death of a courtesan to establish this deception, and subtly altering the minds of father and son, the demon’s hand remained invisible and its plot undetectable. The seeds of the daughter’s enslavement to the demon’s will were planted in the depths of the boy’s psyche, and the incompleteness that haunted the divided soul trusted to ensure their delivery to its prey.

Unaware of both division and displacement, the phoenix had grown up, on one hand as a girl and on the other as a boy, cherishing the memory of a mother each sought to rediscover. The childhood name they had in common had changed, by virtue of commencing to girlhood and boyhood, from Eve (androgynous) to Dawn (feminine) and Dusk (masculine). The androgynous child’s name, Eve, was equivalent to the common name of Twilight, meaning equally the passage from light to dark and dark to light, or that moment of ending and beginning that is change.

The first clue to unlock the mystery of Dawn’s origins confronted her as she began the last year of her initiation, when she confronted the male incarnation of herself.

She was an orphan, the sole known survivor of a massacre that decimated the phoenix house when she was only seven. The details of her birth and childhood were lost with her presumed family. She was taken in by the servants of the goddess, who claimed the girl as her future paladin, and dispatched her for training. To her claim, she held in trust the estates and titles of phoenix house, over which a regent had been appointed. Her training, by its nature, introduced her into the company of those destined to enter the most elite branch of knighthood, the cavalier initiates. She was given a mentor to guide and protect her, who became the closest thing she knew to a mother as the years obscured her memories of the woman who had given birth to her.

He did not know he was an orphan, and unknown survivor of the terrible massacre. He had been possessed by the demon responsible for the tragedy, and delivered into the hands of its human ally. The demon recognized they boy as a vital tool in its mission, and named the boy’s protection and training as part of the price of its services. The boy was taken under the wing of one of the demon’s master’s apprentices. This mentor was convinced that the child was his own son, by way of a courtesan and daughter of the phoenix house, slain in the massacre. Himself a noble only in title, this apprentice had seen personally to the boy’s training, not through normal initiation, but by right of challenge, traveling from school to school to accumulate an uncommon mastery of the art of dancing.

Dusk and Dawn, in their youth and because of their extraordinary potential, were seen by those around them as valuable pawns in the struggle for power that was the endless game of the nobility. In spite of questionable legitimacy, both of them stood to attain noble status. Given their assumed lineage, both had claims to the wealth and power of the slaughtered phoenix house. They were by no means guaranteed such status. It was entirely possible for either to fail in their initiations, which would allow them to be safely dismissed from all concern. Given the probability that they would not fail, those who sought the power of the phoenix house would be forced to lay claim to it through them. Their guardians were approached with numerous proposals for alliances through marriage.

The only alliance never proposed, and in fact greatly discouraged, was a union between them. Ironically, the failure of such an alliance to be proposed owed almost entirely to the fact that the children’s principle guardians were estranged lovers. Due to the determination with which these two avoided each other, neither child became aware of the other’s existence for nine years. Thus, the great deal they had in common was never called to attention. As children they both showed no recognition of their own sex or gender, unaware of the distinction between male and female or those parts which dictated which was which. The boy, in particular, required a firm hand to incorporate the physical and spiritual aspects of masculinity into his identity.

Dusk and Dawn persisted in believing that a mother that yet lived, but for reasons of great importance must have feigned her death. This belief perhaps, accounts for their growing up with the taint of bastardy confident of true and untarnished love from some quarter in which they quietly took shelter from the taunts and insults that rang in their ears, or burned in the eyes of those they encountered, even in their own homes. It can be said that such was the disposition of either child that in time they came to be loved and cherished by their mentors and adopted families, even if at times that love was rough and nearly abusive, as it so often seemed between Dusk and his father. The boy’s indifference to his own gender provoked his father into constantly confronting him with the demands and privileges of manhood.

Dawn, though taken in hand by a master of exceptional ability, found most of her training under his greatest female disciple who, though second to none in the mastery of the three spheres, had been shut out of the nobility and forced to survive on the fringes and hence become swallowed by her dubious fame as a gymnast. Hence she appeared to be the protégé of a nameless dancer while her classmates were revered in their association with their mentor. Thus, her regent commanded her to obscure the very fact of her initiation as much as possible when at home. As a result, it was assumed by most that she had abandoned her initiation and endeavored to disguise this fact by retreating into anonymous fosterage or private tutelage at her regent’s private estates.

Among children their own age, they were able to find much comradeship and affection, even if, as was the case for Dusk, he had little time to make or keep acquaintances outside of his circle of initiates, for his father persisted in taking him around to any master or student of note, to challenge and conquer the arts of countless schools.

Ironically, though for entirely different reasons, the unorthodox training both children endured also exposed them to the arts and techniques of burglary and theft. Dusk's father had come from an impoverished branch of his own family, and had quickly fallen upon the arts of seizing and dissembling over the acquisition of whatever resources he desired. It was not above him to scheme after his son’s legacy while at the same time striving to pass on those skills to a son who, should those schemes succeed, would surely stand in need of them.

For her part, Dawn was inducted into the arts of the underworld through her association with the troop to which her mistress belonged, and with whom her mentor often left her for the period of her training with his protégé. Dawn was drawn in by her honor, which her companions used to taunt her into adventures that honor ought to have condemned, excepting her lack of experience and maturity. It should be said that for her, these adventures were initiated as dares testing her abilities, which her pride could not allow her to differ. If later she would be ashamed to learn the true nature of her adventures, she would not in the least regret what they taught her in approaching the world and problems from unorthodox angles.

Foremost among the gifts that resulted in their initiations was the power of their minds. Such was the nature of art that it enabled a mind, with the proper training and tools, to manipulate reality. Because their minds showed a capacity to dispense with such artifice to achieve the same ends, they were seen to have an awesome potential for achieving a unique and extraordinary mastery of the art. As is often the case, the bulk of their initiation was devoted to the disciplines through which a foundation for the art to build upon was laid. At the same time, that ability they already possessed to impose their will on reality more directly was being cultivated as part of the general mastery of the three spheres, the body, the mind and the spirit.

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To some degree or another, this was also true for any initiate, for the possession of such attributes dictated their training, and only thought that training could they come to be measured. What set them apart from their peers, then, was that their masters still sought their measure, from which to determine the course of their training, while their other students had been measured and introduced to the arts they would be able to master. Fortunately, as their patrons had selected for them careers in which dancing, above all, was required, their exceptional achievement there was more than sufficient to fulfill their destinies. Nevertheless, their mentors wondered yet what the true power of these two might be. The question remained even until the last year of their initiation, at which point they finally confronted each other.

Dusk and Dawn were introduced at the age of sixteen, at the beginning of their final year of initiation. In spite of the deliberate efforts of their mentors to avoid one another, it was inevitable that they would meet. Dusk had faced and overcome every worthy challenge his father could identify. The man finally gave in to the temptation to confront his former lover, to watch as his son defeated her famous protégé. He had sought the girl out, lured by her reputation, and instructed the boy to challenge her. The contest was exhausted in a draw, and the couple instructed, for different reasons, to train together. The two were drawn magnetically to each other, unconsciously recognizing the promise of completion in each other. Partnered in fierce competition, they pushed themselves to the limit of their potential in their efforts to conquer one another.

Movement was the humble basis for the mastery of dance. The ultimate expression of their art was to transcend movement. In doing so at the same time, they were quite startled to realize they had arrived in the same position. She, being quicker, had moved, and he had moved to intercept her. Driven by a deeper need, however, he unwittingly did more than move to her, he literally moved into her. As a master of the body, he could impose his form over hers, but not prevent her, equally skilled and gifted, from reasserting herself. Of more concern than asserting one form or the other, their minds overlapped almost entirely, thoughts and feelings uncontrollably shared except when one of them retreated into the sanctuary of meditation, or unconsciousness.

Terrified of what had happened they agreed whole-heartedly to seek out help. Unfortunately, they were first confronted by the boy’s father, who recognized his son in her, and forced from them an explanation. His interpretation of the event was both prejudiced and perilous, concluding as he did that his son had defeated the girl in such a fashion as to absorb all that she was in the moment of victory. From such a perspective, the next conclusion was that he needed to obscure the truth of this murder and put as much distance between them and the scene of the crime as possible. Stunned by the very idea, the phoenix followed helpless in his wake. The boy’s love for and trust in his father silenced the girl’s objections, while the implications of what he had said rang through her mind.

Considering the haste with which he departed with his son, the man decided it best to act at once on a plan that had been conceived at the time of his daughter’s inception, and renewed with the discovery of his son. The plan, intended to insure the fortune of two houses, depended upon the marriage of his son to his ally’s daughter, fulfilling a trust which circumstances had denied the two impoverished houses. By contriving to ensure this union while the bride and groom were still in their minority, their fathers would have the advantage of s short regency in which to divert the bulk of that fortune to repair the glory of their parents’ houses. In his haste, he forgot that neither child had been prepared for the honor and duty their fathers’ had assigned them.

It was impossible to conceal the phoenix’s extraordinary condition from the family of the bride-to-be, when a change in mood or state of mind could also trigger a shocking sex change. After confiding an edited history of its cause, which bore far more resemblance to the truth than the one assumed by the father, the family of the betrothed agreed to the need to protect the boy from accusation, protecting his secret if possible, while struggling to reconcile themselves to the boy’s altered nature. This was hardest for the girl the phoenix was engaged to. Her sympathy went to the girl who, as far as she knew, died in this tragedy, which in turn aroused confused and antagonistic feelings toward the boy who seemingly survived it. On a deeper level, she felt pity for the phoenix, which grew the more they were acquainted.

The disappearance of man, boy and girl was noticed by the girl’s peers and guardians. Unwilling to offer precipitous insult, the girl’s mentor tracked the father down and made a polite inquiry into their sudden departure. Explaining his son’s engagement, the father was able to dismiss the inquiries and suspicions that had followed their departure, while saying that the last time he saw the girl, she had been in good health—which in a sense was true. Because the man considered the girl dead, he was also able to say that she had departed their company. The phoenixes were kept ignorant of the visit, though they were informed that father and son stood acquitted of suspicion in the girl’s demise. Distracted by the events that complicated the phoenix’s enrollment at the local academy, this news was hardly noted.

The dragon, who had been both a friend and a distant admirer of the girl, had been subject to an indifferent and humiliating string of defeats by the boy. Insulted by one dismissal too many, he had challenged the boy to a final match, which the boy did not show up for. His frustration was aroused to rage when, unable to imagine any reason for the girl to abandon her training and join the boy in his flight, he suspected foul play of the worst sort to account for his rival’s swift departure. Doubting his ability to convince his mentor of his suspicion, he set out independently to confront the boy and determine the girls fate, and if necessary avenge her. To those around him, it seemed that he had finally awakened from the daze in which he had seemed to dwell, and at last engage in life.

Demon Released

Freed at last, Azael went straight to Aeslyn Tear, determined to probe the ruins to determine the strength and availability of the forces slumbering there. If he could raise the army of demons trapped in the ruins they could complete the mission they had embarked on during the war of the gods. He quickly ran into an obstacle, the war over Ruin's Deep. While the vampires and weres at war over dominion over the ruins, both sides were hostile to any efforts to free even a single demon of the depths. Knowing he could not make allies on either side, Azael's options were limited to encouraging their mutual destruction or forming an alliance against a common enemy like Hunter, and somehow parlaying that into a way to seize control of the ruins.

Azael was once one of those trapped in the ruins, escaping by with the help of a loyal cult. The exploration and looting of the ruins had been a recurring event, so it had only been a matter of time before an adventurer found the demon and fell prey to its seduction. After the first, more victims were recruited, until there were enough to break the seal. That freedom had been short-lived however. A powerful initiate had tricked it, sealing its soul in a warded ring. Again, it had only been a matter of time before the demon awakened and found a way to claim the body of a ring wielder, and merely a minor setback that the ring had been shattered and Azael remained bound to the souls it had claimed.

Revenge was merely a side note to his plot to seize control over the ruins. The communities of weres and vampires that had settled the ruins presented a major obstacle to the demon's plans to raise the legions of demons and undead necessary to resume his mission of annihilation. Fortunately, Hunter and Roark had long been at war over the rule of Ruin's Deep, and their personal interests in Dawn had brought their rivalry to a peak. It would be easy to pose as her host and convince them to wager everything on a gamble to claim the ruins through her.

Variant - The Turning of Hunter and Roark

A visit to her former home concludes with a detour into the ruins to escape from a storm. An encounter with the brigands based in the ruins sends them into the depths of the ruins, and resurrects a terror from the girl’s childhood. One attempt to escape from the depths results in a confrontation with a were-tiger, and her other friend’s attempt to go for help leads him into the embrace of a vampire. The girl ends up infected by both of them as they succumb to their transformations.

Option One

In the autumn of her seventeenth year, Dawn and two of her friends were forced to take shelter from a fierce storm in the ruins of Avon Lea. They soon discovered they were not alone. A band of highwaymen had been using the ruins as a base camp, and the three were trapped when the brigands returned and forced to descend deeper into the ruins to escape detection. Caught off guard, the trio was separated from their clothes and supplies in their desperate retreat. Dawn, who had been sucked into a deep cavern system through an underground tributary of the Avon River as a girl, was torn between her fear of being buried alive and the threat of rape and murder at the hands of hardened criminals. Her phobia had caused her to huddle, wrapped in a blanket while her clothes lay out to dry, at the mouth of their shelter and lured her friends away from their meager camp. Without clothes or weapons, the group had no chances in a fight, and what they had been forced to abandon advertised their presence to the highwaymen. Fortunately, Dawn favored men’s clothes for traveling, so the men dispatched to hunt them down did not expect to find a girl. Caught in the grip of her fears, Dawn raced blindly through the depths in search of another route to the surface, while her friends, Hunter and Roark, labored to keep up with her. A close encounter with a patrol forced the boys to physically subdue Dawn, driving the trio deeper into the darkness.

Dawn was a girl of humble origins, expected to follow in her mother’s footsteps and become a courtesan. As the daughter and heir of a courtesan, Dawn had the poise and education of a princess but the prospects and status of a prostitute. She could escape a life of sexual exploitation by exploiting the skills she had acquired on her own and embracing a life of celibacy to become a maiden of the goddess, but she was too fond of sex. Her third alternative was marriage, but tragically, not to the man she loved. An arrangement had been made to marry her into a wealthy and powerful family, if she refused to become a courtesan or could not gain exclusion as a maiden of the goddess.

Her best chance for independence lay in becoming a courtesan, but while she could chose which clients to accept, those she did effectively owned her. She would be free to take her own lovers, and choose the men to sire her children, but she would never have a husband and her children would never have a father. Nor would she have the chance to prove herself, to improve herself through constant testing and training, that she would as a maiden of war. Part of her needed that, to prove herself as a woman and a warrior, to command the respect of men who mocked her for flaws and failings that existed solely in their own minds.

Her best chance of escaping from a lifetime of sexual exploitation, without sacrificing sex altogether, was to join the Order of the Ruins. Unfortunately, in spite of her promise, many of the members did not consider her experienced enough, and a few considered her entirely unsuited for membership. Dawn first came to the attention of the order when she was seven, only to be dismissed because of her sex.

As a spirited tomboy, she had found ways to escape the pressures and frustrations of her training, posing as a boy and pursuing opportunities denied to girls. It was only a matter of time before the boys she befriended discovered her true sex, provoking feelings of anger and betrayal. That would have been the end of her adventures and pursuit of autonomy, but because of the skills and experiences she acquired along the way, she had proven herself and obtained the patronage of the Order of the Ruins. Ironically, this had forced her to be “one of the boys” once more when she was introduced to and trained along side of Hunter and Roark. Hunter and Roark had been rivals since the day they were born. They were the bastard sons of bastard twin sisters who had been seduced by the proud young heir of the local lord. Their rivalry had begun when their father had brought them into his household to begin their training. Hardly a day went by that the two did not get into a fight. As the days turned into years, and their training was taken over by professionals, their rivalry mellowed a bit. Then Dawn had entered the picture and unwittingly rekindled it by standing up to both of them and proving herself the equal of either in their training.

When she was able to contain her panic, Dawn told the story of her childhood ordeal, her desperate escape from an isolated cavern followed by days of wandering in the haunted depths of the ruins. The ghosts and demons that tormented her were dismissed as the creations of a fevered and frightened mind, but the traumatic effect of her ordeal was obvious enough. Neither thought much of their chances of fighting their way through the brigands to freedom, but the only way Dawn could contain her fear was by concentrating on escape and survival. She sketched out a plan to slip past the patrols, find and recover their supplies and horses, or steal horses from the brigands if necessary. The one advantage of her childhood ordeal, Dawn had become very familiar with the structure, layout and navigation of the ruins. With her guidance, and with their knives to defend her, the half-brother, half-cousins agreed to her plan. The only thing the intrepid trio failed to consider was that there were greater dangers present than the brigands and the ruins themselves. Their hopes rose when they stumbled into a collapsed section of the ruins, presenting them a direct route to the surface. Hunter was injured defending Dawn from an ambushing tiger as they passed through a collapsed section of the ruins. The opening to the surface had tempted them to climb to freedom. Only the fury of the storm and a desperate dive to greater depths enabled them to survive the predator’s deadly attack.

The city once smothered by the wrath of the gods was far more extensive and surprisingly intact than anyone suspected, a sprawling underground metropolis dwarfing the port and city and underlying the surrounding countryside.

Hunter and Roark were awed at the scale of the entombed city, revealed by their descent to the middle strata. With Hunter wounded in the tiger’s attack, and Dawn injured in the fall, Roark prodded Dawn for more details on her original escape from the ruins, hoping to reconstruct her escape and return with a rescue party. Hunter set Dawn’s broken arm, splinting it with wood and fabric from the blankets they had turned into ponchos. Dawn found shelter and scavenged for food and water to sustain them while they waited. Roark set out in search of Dawn’s old escape route. While passing through a more intact area, a beautiful woman crossed his path and confronted him. She entranced him, drawing information out of him with extraordinary ease, listening to his plea to help him rescue his friends. When he told her about the tiger, the woman informed him, sternly and soberly, that Hunter and Dawn were probably already dead. Having drawn blood, she assured him, the tiger would track its prey down to the deepest depths of the ruins. Wounded and unsuspecting, the boy and girl would not have had a chance. For all he wanted to deny it, to return and rescue his rival and the girl they both loved, he could not escape the compulsion to believe her, to surrender to her guiding hand. The woman exploited the grief and loss he suffered as his belief in Hunter and Dawn’s deaths consumed him, luring him into her nest, taking him to bed, and feeding on the blood of a broken heart.

In the haze of mortal ecstasy, Roark realized he had fallen into a trap and began to fight. His struggle amused and inspired the vampire, who drew the fight out until it left him on the brink of death. Then, she taunted him with the revelation of what he had doomed himself to become. If he had simply submitted, he would have lived, he would have gained a powerful patron and a purpose to sustain him in his mortal life. Instead, he had risked death and rebirth as an immortal. In his final moments, she offered him a choice, a chance to be her equal rather than her slave. He reached for the only chance that enabled him to try, one last time, to save the girl he loved. As it happened, Dawn had not fallen prey to the tiger stalking Hunter. Instead, she fell into the hands of two legged predators. She had been scouting the area for anything that could help Hunter or herself when the brigands finally tracked her down. It had been naïve of her to assume she and her friends had delved too deep for the highwaymen to follow. The party that found her dragged her back to where she had left Hunter, rejoining the main group. The raiders had quickly dismissed Hunter, wounded and weak with fever, and paid him no heed as they turned to amuse themselves with Dawn. The strength, speed and fury of his attack, when he rose to defend her, caught the men off guard. Dawn seized a weapon and stood to fight with him, but the raiders had the advantage of numbers.

Hunter was mortally wounded covering their retreat, but he managed to shove Dawn clear, shouting for her to escape. Dawn ran, but even blinded by tears she managed to spot the arrival of the tiger. She did not hesitate to lure her enemies into the predator’s claws. The tiger charged into the fray, drawn to the downed form of Hunter, pausing as if in consideration, before pursuing Dawn and the men. Dawn took advantage of her recent explorations to thwart her pursuers, forcing them to engage her one at a time or leading them into natural traps and pitfalls. It did not take long for the men to stop holding back.

One of her opponents managed to run her through as he fell to her sword, the next disarming her as she slid off the blade in shock. She stumbled back through an open archway and her final opponent knocked her off her feet with a powerful uppercut. Dawn flew back into the middle of the chamber, landing sprawled out on the floor. Ironically, that last blow was both salvation and damnation. A thick coat of dust on the ground had hidden the engravings of a demon’s prison. Dawn barely had time to realize her mistake when the demon began its assault on her psyche. The wards activated, throwing an impenetrable barrier up around the perimeter of the circle, repulsing the men who tried to fall on Dawn. As the men surrounded the soul trap, the demon probed Dawn, realized she was dying, and tempted her with a proposal her aching and abused mind could not fault.

They harried and harassed her, ultimately knocking her from a precarious perch to plunge to her death. Dawn survived the fall itself, broken, bloody and numb from the waist down. She managed to drag herself out of the pool that saved her life and into a demonic crypt. As a child, she had learned the danger of crossing the boundaries of circles like those inscribed in the floor of the crypt. Now, the imprisoned demons were the only things she could turn to for help. Tempted though she was, she averted her eyes and tried to drag herself as far away from the crypt as she could before dying, desperately afraid that her soul might become trapped if she died too close to the magic wards. Ironically, as she collapsed in the middle of the shattered building, her hand slid in the thick coat of dust and revealed an ancient inscription. Before she could react, even as she realized that she had crawled right into the heart of a circle, the trapped demon noticed her presence and started its psychic assault. Crippled and drained, Dawn could not stand up to the torturous probing of her mind and body. Disoriented and confused, she found herself agreeing to something the demon proposed, something that sounded so reasonable, so safe, and yet something that set off alarms in the depths of her soul. She could hardly think. She could not imagine what use her mortal remains could be to the demon, or why it would promise to resurrect her from those remains if she granted the demon possession of them.

Death was certain. Surrendering her remains to the demon for its promise to avenge her death and restore her to life hardly required her assent. If she refused, the demon would have her remains anyway. More important than avenging herself, by accepting the contract, she guaranteed that Hunter’s death would be avenged as well. Too late, it occurred to her to wonder why it was important to the demon that she agreed to surrender her body. When the demon took possession, Dawn was cast out, watching with dismay as her body was swiftly and fully restored to health and the demon launched itself from the circle to slaughter her foes. The demon then turned to her and outlined the terms and consequences of their contract. Dawn endured as a living ghost, on forfeiting her body, because the demon had sworn not to take possession of her soul. Liberated from her body, without the release of death, she could not pass on. The demon had promised her rebirth, but warned her that her new incarnation would gradually consume her. In the following days, the newly immortal Hunter and Roark tracked Dawn down to the scene of her death. It was a massacre, and neither could identify any of the remains as hers. Their sires looked upon the battle ground and realized what must have happened, confiding the truth to their new charged with great reluctance and sorrow. The woman Hunter and Roark both loved had surrendered, body and soul, to demonic possession. Their sires gave them no hope for her salvation.

Once she died, the demon would automatically have possession of her remains. If that was inevitable, what good did it do to reject the offer of rebirth? Sensing her doubts, the demon elaborated the need to collect Dawn’s soul before she died in order to engineer her rebirth. Exhausted and delirious, Dawn finally acquiesced.

Overlap Option 1

Dawn endured a number of bites and scratches before she succeeded in calming him. Dawn was still fleeing from the raiders, but before Dawn could go to her aid, she was blindsided by a vampire. It was the same vampire that had seduced and turned Roark. She had tracked down the friends he had spoken of intent on providing Roark with his first, helpless victims and eliminate two potential adversaries. Dawn had skillfully hidden Hunter before setting out after Roark, but given Roark’s feelings for her she would suffice to break her fledgling’s will. Dawn awoke from a nightmare in a sealed crypt, alone with the body of Roark.

There was little time to sort it out, since Roark began to wake, blinded by hunger. The infection from Hunter’s bite was just anchoring its roots as Roark seized Dawn and began to drain her. The trauma of that fatal kiss shattered allowed Dawn to break free of the entrancing spell of ecstasy and shake off Roark. Having fed, Roark was relatively easy to shake back to his senses, recoiling in horror at what he had been doing. Sensing what was occurring, the vampire entered and goaded Roark to finish her off, announcing that it would be a more merciful fate than allowing her to succumb to the two infections that claimed her.

To encourage Roark further, she sealed them back up in the crypt together, with assurances that his hunger would return soon, long before Dawn succumbed to her waking death. Dawn was horrified by the fate awaiting her, but Roark refused to kill her—swearing instead to escape his new master’s thrall, taking her with him to seek a cure for her. After all, he pointed out, she would remain alive. That was the horror of it all. Fortunately, Hunter had finally recovered from his own turning and followed Dawn’s scent to her and Roark. He helped them escape, the three of them returning to their dorm at the academy, where they summoned their teachers to Dawn’s aid. To their dismay, there were no cures for their infections, and Dawn’s only hope was for one of her infections to overcome the other.

Failing that, she would become trapped in a lifeless, but living body—an immortal blood donor. Before succumbing to her full paralysis, Dawn made a pact with Roark—in exchange for taking care of her, tending to her body and mind as necessary to help preserve her sanity, he could feed exclusively on her. In a final moment of privacy, she finally confessed her love to Hunter. She asked him to help Roark in taking care of her, but stressed the need for him to truly protect Roark from his mistress. She observed that they both had sensual needs, and granted him permission to take what pleasure he could from her body and begged him to forgive her silent stillness, reminding him that she felt everything, despite her inability to respond.

Dawn escaped into a world of dreams once she succumbed to her living death. She occasionally experienced a separation from her body, during which she was able to move about like a ghost. In those periods, and as they grew longer, she built up her psychic strength. Over time, she discovered that she could compel her body to move over extended periods of time—the movement too slow to observe, but obvious over the course of days. She realized that her body seemed to replenish itself in part by absorbing sunlight, in part by absorbing material in the air, and by drawing anything else it needed through the fabric of space using the power of her mind.

This process created the drain that left her unable to generate impulses strong enough to command her body consciously. This explained the way her body would respond to stimulus on it’s own. The capacity to move was never lost, the autonomic functions had never diminished, only her voluntary functions had been crippled. She should have realized it the first time Hunter slept with her. Her body responded to his touch, moved mindlessly to accommodate him and discharge her passion, but refused to allow her to actively reciprocate. Under the direction of another, her body meekly submitted to, and held, whatever pose she was positioned in. She could even be compelled to walk or eat, so long as the impetus and direction was imposed on her by another. Not that she needed to eat. She never felt hunger, but, she noted that on the rare occasions when she was fed a morsel, it was easier to project her ghost or compel motion in her body.

It did not take much normal sustenance to relieve the psychic drain that paralyzed her. It would be difficult to encourage Roark or Hunter to start feeding her regular meals, to put up with the hassle of her body’s eliminations, long enough to break free of the miasma. She had no ready means of communication. Ironically, her breakthrough came not in controlling her body, but in the strengthening of her psychic projection. In her flesh, any increase in her psychic power was absorbed into the regenerative process that paralyzed her. But, between her struggles to assert herself, and her ghostly excursions, she was growing stronger. As her frustration and fury at her helplessness grew, so did the psychokinetic force she could command. She tried to make her psychic presence felt in many ways, before she succeeded in achieving fine telekinetic and telepathic control.

It took far more energy to make anyone see or hear her ghost, direct influence of another mind proved dependant on a degree of acceptance and sensitivity most people lacked, or possessed in diametric opposition. Manipulating objects proved to be less difficult, particularly when no one else was focused on them. She began leaving messages, but it took a while before the right people encountered them, and even longer before they began to interpret them properly.

Ring of Regeneration Notes

Then, he had to explain what that price was.

To begin with, he told her his own story. He told her that he had once been a very skilled and successful hunter. He had hunted everything from doves to dragons. Because of his fame, he was asked one day to help hunt down a monster, and to help him fight it, he was given a ring. The monster had been a demon, and the ring had been designed to capture that demon. The only problem, he explained, was what had happened when the demon was finally caught. As the demon was bound to the ring, so was he. It was not possible to remove the ring, for it had acquired the powers of the demon, and seized his soul to fuel those powers. In exchange for this bondage, the man, who's name was Hunter, could command those powers as his own.

Some of those powers expressed themselves automatically, like regeneration and rejuvenation. Some of those powers had waited to be discovered, and had to be triggered in specific ways. But, even though the powers he had gained had made him nearly immortal, time had proven that he could be slain, and when that happened, he too had become trapped in the ring. He had no idea that the ring was capable of resurrecting it's wielder. When Dawn had donned the ring, his soul had been waiting, ready to inhabit the body of whoever dared to try and wield the ring. That was part of the price that the priestess had mentioned.

There was another power that was triggered simply by putting it on. Demons, he explained, were elemental by nature. Spiritual, rather than physical. As such, they were neither male nor female, but they could manifest themselves as either. That was one reason why they had once been perceived as gods. Thus, when Dawn had put on the ring, her body had become male before Hunter had claimed it. The reason she had found him so familiar was because, not only was he a male version of her, he inhabited the body she was originally born in.

Dawn could hardly believe what he was saying to her. Hunter was forced to prove it, first by showing how the ring changed his form, and then by allowing her to examine that body for scars and other marks she would remember. Hunter then continued. When Dawn was displaced by Hunter, she had been in a situation that offered few clues about her gender or identity, in a public bath, traveling in disguise as a boy. If she had put the ring on the opposite way, he would have woken up in a female form, or, possibly not awakened at all. Since he had no way to know whether he had stolen the life of a boy or a girl, he tried to discover his host's identity from the staff of the bath and the inn.

Because of the way she had dressed, everyone who met her assumed she a young man. Because she had been traveling, it had also been difficult to discover her name. He was only able to verify her name from a note in her pocket. It took him two years to learn how to exploit the ring to resurrect his host. Based on the limited information he had, and having no predisposition to be a mother, Hunter reincarnated Dawn as a boy and raised him as his son and heir, oblivious to the demon's plan to use him as a conduit to assault Dawn. Over the years, the man watched the boy for any signs of reawakening, his suspicions growing as time passed and nothing happened.

Following the tale of body theft and reincarnation as a boy, Dawn became furious with Hunter and left. Thanks to that man and his damned ring, she had been torn from the life she knew, given a life she knew nothing about, and had her mind impregnated by a demon that held a male version of herself hostage. She had no clue where to begin untangling this mess. She had no idea what would happen to her life if she did. Because of that accursed ring, her alter ego had been as badly used as she had.

Variant

In the autumn of her seventeenth year, Dawn and two of her friends were forced to take shelter from a fierce storm in the ruins of Avon Lea. They soon discovered they were not alone. A band of highwaymen had been using the ruins as a base camp, and the three were trapped when the brigands returned and forced to descend deeper into the ruins to escape detection. Caught off guard, the trio was separated from their clothes and supplies in their desperate retreat. Dawn, who had been sucked into a deep cavern system through an underground tributary of the Avon River as a girl, was torn between her fear of being buried alive and the threat of rape and murder at the hands of hardened criminals. Her phobia had caused her to huddle, wrapped in a blanket while her clothes lay out to dry, at the mouth of their shelter and lured her friends away from their meager camp. Without clothes or weapons, the group had no chances in a fight, and what they had been forced to abandon advertised their presence to the highwaymen. Fortunately, Dawn favored men’s clothes for traveling, so the men dispatched to hunt them down did not expect to find a girl. Caught in the grip of her fears, Dawn raced blindly through the depths in search of another route to the surface, while her friends, Hunter and Roark, labored to keep up with her. A close encounter with a patrol forced the boys to physically subdue Dawn, driving the trio deeper into the darkness.

Dawn was a girl of humble origins, expected to follow in her mother’s footsteps and become a courtesan. As the daughter and heir of a courtesan, Dawn had the poise and education of a princess but the prospects and status of a prostitute. She could escape a life of sexual exploitation by exploiting the skills she had acquired on her own and embracing a life of celibacy to become a maiden of the goddess, but she was too fond of sex. Her third alternative was marriage, but tragically, not to the man she loved. An arrangement had been made to marry her into a wealthy and powerful family, if she refused to become a courtesan or could not gain exclusion as a maiden of the goddess. Her best chance for independence lay in becoming a courtesan, but while she could chose which clients to accept, those she did effectively owned her. She would be free to take her own lovers, and choose the men to sire her children, but she would never have a husband and her children would never have a father. Nor would she have the chance to prove herself, to improve herself through constant testing and training, that she would as a maiden of war. Part of her needed that, to prove herself as a woman and a warrior, to command the respect of men who mocked her for flaws and failings that existed solely in their own minds. Her best chance of escaping from a lifetime of sexual exploitation, without sacrificing sex altogether, was to join the Order of the Ruins.

Unfortunately, in spite of her promise, many of the members did not consider her experienced enough, and a few considered her entirely unsuited for membership. Dawn first came to the attention of the order when she was seven, only to be dismissed because of her sex. As a spirited tomboy, she had found ways to escape the pressures and frustrations of her training, posing as a boy and pursuing opportunities denied to girls. It was only a matter of time before the boys she befriended discovered her true sex, provoking feelings of anger and betrayal. That would have been the end of her adventures and pursuit of autonomy, but because of the skills and experiences she acquired along the way, she had proven herself and obtained the patronage of the Order of the Ruins. Ironically, this had forced her to be “one of the boys” once more when she was introduced to and trained along side of Hunter and Roark. Hunter and Roark had been rivals since the day they were born. They were the bastard sons of bastard twin sisters who had been seduced by the proud young heir of the local lord. Their rivalry had begun when their father had brought them into his household to begin their training. Hardly a day went by that the two did not get into a fight. As the days turned into years, and their training was taken over by professionals, their rivalry mellowed a bit. Then Dawn had entered the picture and unwittingly rekindled it by standing up to both of them and proving herself the equal of either in their training.

When she was able to contain her panic, Dawn told the story of her childhood ordeal, her desperate escape from an isolated cavern followed by days of wandering in the haunted depths of the ruins. The ghosts and demons that tormented her were dismissed as the creations of a fevered and frightened mind, but the traumatic effect of her ordeal was obvious enough. Neither thought much of their chances of fighting their way through the brigands to freedom, but the only way Dawn could contain her fear was by concentrating on escape and survival. She sketched out a plan to slip past the patrols, find and recover their supplies and horses, or steal horses from the brigands if necessary. The one advantage of her childhood ordeal, Dawn had become very familiar with the structure, layout and navigation of the ruins. With her guidance, and with their knives to defend her, the half-brother, half-cousins agreed to her plan. The only thing the intrepid trio failed to consider was that there were greater dangers present than the brigands and the ruins themselves. Their hopes rose when they stumbled into a collapsed section of the ruins, presenting them a direct route to the surface. Hunter was injured defending Dawn from an ambushing tiger as they passed through a collapsed section of the ruins. The opening to the surface had tempted them to climb to freedom. Only the fury of the storm and a desperate dive to greater depths enabled them to survive the predator’s deadly attack.

An adventurous and athletic young girl, Dawn was a natural born tomboy. Fearless and curious, it was inevitable that she would get into serious trouble. Dawn had her first brush with death when she was seven years old. She had been with her friends at a swimming hole along the Avon River, when she was sucked into one of the underground channels into Ruins’ Deep. It was a wild ride and Dawn was pretty beaten up by the time the current slowed and pooled. For a while, she was trapped in a small cavern, but the water in the pool was pure and sweet and crowded with fish. A resourceful girl, she did what was necessary to stave off hunger and thirst, drinking from and fishing in the pond that she was trapped by. Eventually, she realized that no one was going to come and rescue her, and she turned her attention to escaping. She had become much better at swimming underwater, and had discovered where the water drained out of her pond. She had not risked following the river for fear of being seriously hurt, but the thought of remaining trapped alone forever grew into a bigger concern. She took a chance and continued downstream, coming close to drowning more than once before emerging in the buried city. Days passed as she explored the ancient city, marveling over how intact everything was as she searched for a way to the surface. As hunger and exhaustion wore her down, Dawn discovered there were frightening things trapped in the city with her.

Ghosts and other spirits—the former wandering freely and liable to follow her everywhere, the latter seemingly bound in place—were undetectable until she stepped into their warding circles and found herself struggling to defend her fragile mind from their ruthless probing. Her fear of being lost and alone compounded and evolved into greater horror and desperation with each of these encounters. Unlike the ghosts, the demons could molest her, mentally and physically, as long as she was in their sphere of influence. Dawn sensed the demons wanted to break her in order to possess her body. But that was nothing compared to being swallowed alive by a dragon and then spat back up in the middle of a dragon's nest. She should have died right there. As the baby dragons jostled each other to get at her, Dawn twisted, contorted and slithered for all she was worth to escape the clutch and dive out of the nest. Slashed, scraped and bruised, Dawn dragged herself out of the dragon's lair and resumed her quest for the surface. By the time she was discovered wandering through the surface ruins, her wounds had begun to heal—but the sum of her efforts had drained her to the point where she appeared to be dying of starvation and dehydration. She was in shock, deeply scarred by the traumatic ordeal, but once she was returned to her home she made a rapid recovery. She had been trapped underground long enough for even the most optimistic adult to declare her dead.

The elders of House Avon had arranged a marriage for Dawn in an attempt to end the feud between the Houses of Arden and Arduin. Dawn first met the boy at age eleven when they were both fostered for the summer at Orchard Inn. After some intense, initial rivalry, they became close, intimate friends, their friendship spiced by good-natured competition and uncanny chemistry. The engagement was kept a secret, both to keep the feuding houses ignorant of the commitment until the last minute and to allow nature to take its course in welding the pair into a couple. It was one of the few times Dawn had ever been encouraged to spend her time as she pleased. She devoted most of the summer to exploring the countryside and playing with Kevin. Neither looked forward to the end of their time together, so it came as a pleasant surprise when they discovered that the academy and the temple were close enough for them to hook up when they returned to school in Avon. Jamie, Kevin’s roommate, insisted on tagging along whenever he met with Dawn. He was a solid and reliable sort for a practical joker and troublemaker. Dawn introduced Kevin and Jamie to her gang of friends, once they promised to keep her true gender a secret. Inevitably, the changes in her body as she grew older made it increasingly more difficult to maintain her pose as a boy. It was simply a matter of time before her true gender was exposed to everyone through horse play and fighting.

Dawn, Kevin and Jamie were well matched, equally talented at getting into and out of tight scrapes, some mere mischief but often enough sobering misadventure. A natural leader, and an orphan himself, Jamie had no trouble commandeering Dawn’s gang of friends. A penchant for exploration and exhibition caused them to embark on grand adventures. Unfortunately, the day finally came when a couple of the boys recognized her in her normal guise as the poised and polite protégé of her grandmother. In spite of being unmasked, she was far from being cured of calamity. She tried in vain to keep the truth from changing her status in the gang, only to have her pride and stubbornness exploited. The existence of underground passages was a well known secret among the youth of Avon, and Dawn’s friends, Jamie in particular, decided one day to initiate her into this mystery. At first, being dragged underground awakened the trauma of her childhood ordeal. Her reaction stunned and scared Kevin and Jamie. Worse, it prompted the two who knew her secret to reveal her gender to the rest of the boys. Her need to prove herself forced her to delve far more deeply into the underground than any other. As a result, she was one of the few humans to discover that the ruins of Aeslyn Tear undermined the entire city and surrounding wilderness of Avon. That was the reason she was finally conscripted as a minor member of the Order of the Ruins and sworn to secrecy.

On emerging from the ruins, she was taken to the temple for healing, where her courage, toughness and determination, and the story of her adventure, caught the attention of the Order of the Ruins. Surviving twice in the depths of Aeslyn Tear was an accomplishment few could claim. The city once smothered by the wrath of the gods was far more extensive and surprisingly intact than anyone suspected, a sprawling underground metropolis dwarfing the port and city and underlying the surrounding countryside. The members of the order decided to take her under their wing, an opportunity that was everything a young tomboy could wish for. She embraced her training with a determination to prove that she was as capable as any boy. The only real obstacle she had faced was the disapproval of her grandmother. A compromise was reached that allowed her to train as an initiate of the order, but required her to be continue her training as a courtesan. Ironically, while Dawn had the talent for magic, it went untested and untrained. Provoked by her traumatic experiences, it evolved instead into a natural, if modest, psychic ability under the influence of her training. Her training as an initiate of the order was essentially limited by what her mentors could teach in her free time, but she applied herself passionately to their instruction, adapting her dancing and gymnastic skills to fighting techniques on her own initiative and demonstrating a natural talent for fencing with a long sword.

Hunter and Roark were awed at the scale of the entombed city, revealed by their descent to the middle strata. With Hunter wounded in the tiger’s attack, and Dawn injured in the fall, Roark prodded Dawn for more details on her original escape from the ruins, hoping to reconstruct her escape and return with a rescue party. Hunter set Dawn’s broken arm, splinting it with wood and fabric from the blankets they had turned into ponchos. Dawn found shelter and scavenged for food and water to sustain them while they waited. Roark set out in search of Dawn’s old escape route. While passing through a more intact area, a beautiful woman crossed his path and confronted him. She entranced him, drawing information out of him with extraordinary ease, listening to his plea to help him rescue his friends. When he told her about the tiger, the woman informed him, sternly and soberly, that Hunter and Dawn were probably already dead. Having drawn blood, she assured him, the tiger would track its prey down to the deepest depths of the ruins. Wounded and unsuspecting, the boy and girl would not have had a chance. For all he wanted to deny it, to return and rescue his rival and the girl they both loved, he could not escape the compulsion to believe her, to surrender to her guiding hand. The woman exploited the grief and loss he suffered as his belief in Hunter and Dawn’s deaths consumed him, luring him into her nest, taking him to bed, and feeding on the blood of a broken heart.

Dawn's initiation by the order allowed her to participate in training generally offered only to boys, a situation which stripped a girl of every shred of modesty, and encouraged unwanted attention and interest from boys. When Dawn had made friends with the orphans of the streets, she had unwittingly involved herself in their criminal exploitation, playing the games of adventure and daring that prepared and conditioned them for life in the underworld. She had been taunted into exploring—and eventually stealing from—people's houses. Presented as increasingly bold dares, she was carefully maneuvered into spying, casing and eventually cat burglary. Dawn responded to the challenges, blending her formal and informal training to best effect. No amount of success could outweigh the simple fact that she was a girl, however. It was not uncommon for any of the boys to goad her into wrestling with them, exploiting the struggle for erotic thrills. They would catch her in her feminine guise and use her to distract their marks. Often she was required to pose as a girl friend as part of some scheme or simply to increase the status of the boy she was with. This only made her more determined to be one of the guys, to challenge them on the grounds they most prided themselves on. The problem was, when she really put her mind to it, she could pass perfectly as a boy. Inevitably, the boys decided it was time someone taught her the difference.

It was not difficult to exploit her pride and determination to prove herself to get her alone and naked. That had been one of their regular scams. They waited for a pleasant day to propose a visit to their favorite swimming hole. It seemed harmless, given it was typical for boys and girls to bathe or swim nude in public. The difference was that on this occasion her true form and identity was not the disguise it had once been. In addition there was no adult supervision, no moderation as the boys indulged their curiosity at her expense. Dawn’s curiosity, combined with injured pride over challenges against her gender and ability, conspired to make her, unwittingly at first, into a willing accomplice. After it was over, Dawn never said anything about being molested by the boys. Dawn eventually discovered the boys did not share her restraint. They said nothing to her, but she caught them laughing over it a few months later. From their conversation, it was obvious that the ordeal had been meant to shame and debase her. It might have, if she had possessed any qualms or reservations about her sexuality. Or if they had dared to rape her. Always a sensual creature, exploring her sexuality came as naturally to her as breathing and her training as a courtesan prepared her very well for the prospect of sex itself. But while the experience had not been entirely unpleasant, the loss of friendship and respect hurt her deeply.

She attempted to cut her ties with the gangs only to face threats and blackmail from their patrons. For the first time she saw her life of crime for the trap it was. She knew she was in over her head when she found herself blackmailed into working for Lloyd as a cat burglar. She knew she had to do something about it when one of her jobs turned into a disaster where she was forced to kill to protect herself. Worst of all, her best friend and their mentor were dragged into the middle of things because of their concern for her. Together, the two youths were able to extract themselves from their criminal careers, but not before both had been marked. As time passed, Dawn found herself under increasing pressure to commit herself to her courtesan training. This made her fight for a path to independence an even greater priority. Her rebellion was noticed by the elders of House Avon, who concluded that her involvement in the order was coming directly into conflict with her betrothal to Kevin. Dawn had become infatuated with her patron. Impressed with the girl’s potential, her quick and open mind, and feline amorality, he had taken Dawn under his wing, hoping to instill enough practical wisdom and discipline in her to permit her to survive in the order. Unfortunately, he had quickly become a surrogate father figure for her, and the object of forbidden desire. Ash never counted on Dawn developing a crush on him. It never occurred to him how she would respond to his guidance and nurturing, particularly during the onslaught of puberty.

Ash found himself responding to her after several planned, close encounters with her in the nude—whether bathing, swimming or in some aspect of her physical training—forced him to recognize that she was becoming a desirable young woman. To deflect her, he had encouraged her to explore her relationship with Kevin, but found himself forced to act as her confidant and adviser as it became evident that her moral compass aligned itself with shameless sensuality. Thanks to her courtesan training, she was seductively poised and confident in herself around strange men. To earn her keep, Dawn often worked as a muse—modeling, dancing, acting or singing—and had a habit of engaging her patrons in private, philosophical discussions through the early hours of the morning. When Ash confronted her about her behavior, he discovered she was as shameless as she was fearless. She was relentless in her efforts to seduce him, but he refused to compromise his integrity. One night he returned to his room to find her naked in his bed, determined to lose her virginity to him. With strained patience and self-restraint, he told her they could never know each other as a man and a woman while he was her patron, and she argued that, as her mentor, he ought to be the one to instruct her in the most intimate art. Ash strained to resist temptation, but Dawn had matured into a beautiful maiden and his resolve eventually crumbled before her seductive logic.

In the haze of mortal ecstasy, Roark realized he had fallen into a trap and began to fight. His struggle amused and inspired the vampire, who drew the fight out until it left him on the brink of death. Then, she taunted him with the revelation of what he had doomed himself to become. If he had simply submitted, he would have lived, he would have gained a powerful patron and a purpose to sustain him in his mortal life. Instead, he had risked death and rebirth as an immortal. In his final moments, she offered him a choice, a chance to be her equal rather than her slave. He reached for the only chance that enabled him to try, one last time, to save the girl he loved. As it happened, Dawn had not fallen prey to the tiger stalking Hunter. Instead, she fell into the hands of two legged predators. She had been scouting the area for anything that could help Hunter or herself when the brigands finally tracked her down. It had been naïve of her to assume she and her friends had delved too deep for the highwaymen to follow. The party that found her dragged her back to where she had left Hunter, rejoining the main group. The raiders had quickly dismissed Hunter, wounded and weak with fever, and paid him no heed as they turned to amuse themselves with Dawn. The strength, speed and fury of his attack, when he rose to defend her, caught the men off guard. Dawn seized a weapon and stood to fight with him, but the raiders had the advantage of numbers.

Compared to the abilities of a powerful magic user or a trained psychic, her own psychic abilities were weak and quirky. Overlooked, but most profound, was the development of natural regeneration. She did not heal much faster than normal, but she healed completely and proved very resistant to disease and infection. Always intuitive and empathic, her thoughts and feelings began to resonate with those of the people around her. She became somewhat more sensitive and perceptive than the average person, capable of glimpsing psychic or spiritual phenomena others were blind to. An odd side effect of her perceptiveness, Dawn became keenly sensitive to the mechanisms of magic, making it difficult for her to learn even the simplest of common spells. Intimidated by magic, she also found herself somewhat intimidated by those who were proficient at using it. Only the fact that her psychic perceptions gave her an edge in protecting herself from—and dispelling—magic allowed her to be confident in herself.

Hunter was mortally wounded covering their retreat, but he managed to shove Dawn clear, shouting for her to escape. Dawn ran, but even blinded by tears she managed to spot the arrival of the tiger. She did not hesitate to lure her enemies into the predator’s claws. The tiger charged into the fray, drawn to the downed form of Hunter, pausing as if in consideration, before pursuing Dawn and the men. Dawn took advantage of her recent explorations to thwart her pursuers, forcing them to engage her one at a time or leading them into natural traps and pitfalls. It did not take long for the men to stop holding back. One of her opponents managed to run her through as he fell to her sword, the next disarming her as she slid off the blade in shock. She stumbled back through an open archway and her final opponent knocked her off her feet with a powerful uppercut. Dawn flew back into the middle of the chamber, landing sprawled out on the floor. Ironically, that last blow was both salvation and damnation. A thick coat of dust on the ground had hidden the engravings of a demon’s prison. Dawn barely had time to realize her mistake when the demon began its assault on her psyche. The wards activated, throwing an impenetrable barrier up around the perimeter of the circle, repulsing the men who tried to fall on Dawn. As the men surrounded the soul trap, the demon probed Dawn, realized she was dying, and tempted her with a proposal her aching and abused mind could not fault.

They harried and harassed her, ultimately knocking her from a precarious perch to plunge to her death. Dawn survived the fall itself, broken, bloody and numb from the waist down. She managed to drag herself out of the pool that saved her life and into a demonic crypt. As a child, she had learned the danger of crossing the boundaries of circles like those inscribed in the floor of the crypt. Now, the imprisoned demons were the only things she could turn to for help. Tempted though she was, she averted her eyes and tried to drag herself as far away from the crypt as she could before dying, desperately afraid that her soul might become trapped if she died too close to the magic wards. Ironically, as she collapsed in the middle of the shattered building, her hand slid in the thick coat of dust and revealed an ancient inscription. Before she could react, even as she realized that she had crawled right into the heart of a circle, the trapped demon noticed her presence and started its psychic assault. Crippled and drained, Dawn could not stand up to the torturous probing of her mind and body. Disoriented and confused, she found herself agreeing to something the demon proposed, something that sounded so reasonable, so safe, and yet something that set off alarms in the depths of her soul. She could hardly think. She could not imagine what use her mortal remains could be to the demon, or why it would promise to resurrect her from those remains if she granted the demon possession of them.

Death was certain. Surrendering her remains to the demon for its promise to avenge her death and restore her to life hardly required her assent. If she refused, the demon would have her remains anyway. More important than avenging herself, by accepting the contract, she guaranteed that Hunter’s death would be avenged as well. Too late, it occurred to her to wonder why it was important to the demon that she agreed to surrender her body. When the demon took possession, Dawn was cast out, watching with dismay as her body was swiftly and fully restored to health and the demon launched itself from the circle to slaughter her foes. The demon then turned to her and outlined the terms and consequences of their contract. Dawn endured as a living ghost, on forfeiting her body, because the demon had sworn not to take possession of her soul. Liberated from her body, without the release of death, she could not pass on. The demon had promised her rebirth, but warned her that her new incarnation would gradually consume her. In the following days, the newly immortal Hunter and Roark tracked Dawn down to the scene of her death. It was a massacre, and neither could identify any of the remains as hers. Their sires looked upon the battle ground and realized what must have happened, confiding the truth to their new charged with great reluctance and sorrow. The woman Hunter and Roark both loved had surrendered, body and soul, to demonic possession. Their sires gave them no hope for her salvation.

Once she died, the demon would automatically have possession of her remains. If that was inevitable, what good did it do to reject the offer of rebirth? Sensing her doubts, the demon elaborated the need to collect Dawn’s soul before she died in order to engineer her rebirth. Exhausted and delirious, Dawn finally acquiesced.

Overlap Option 1

Upon detailing the option of introducing Dawn, Hunter and Roark through an adventure in the ruins, a proper exploitation of temporal displacement presented itself. In essence, it is used to cause an overlap in the lives of the first and second incarnations of Dawn. The boy was sent back in time by his mother, his future self, to the time when the girl was trapped in the ruins. The boy, having spent part of his childhood in the ruins, is able to help the girl escape from the ruins. He was sent back to escape the rupture created in part by sending him back, but the seed of that paradox was sown when the girl was struggling against demonic possession. The boy arrives partly in response to her desperate need for rescue.

On their escape from the ruins, the authorities assume the boy was abandoned or orphaned in the ruins by brigands—a theory made plausible in light of what he remembers of the events that separated him from everyone he knew. Because he rescued the girl, the girl’s father takes him on as a protégé. The fact that the boy and girl both have the same name made little difference, since there was no known connection between the boy and girl. It was merely odd, and the children’s solution to the problem was accepted by everyone else. Thus, Dusk and Dawn grew up as peers, separated by training and household but reunited often enough, or schooled close enough to each other, to sustain a relationship.

An arranged union, proposed by the girl’s parents, puts some strain on their relationship, but in spite of that they become increasingly intimate, until the night of deepest intimacy causes an abrupt break in their relationship. On losing his virginity, and taking hers, he is possessed by the memory of being her in that moment and forced to flee as an inexplicable transformation turns him into a twin of her. The stream of memories unlocked in the heat of passion continues to pour forth, echoing the events Dawn was experiencing in the present. Dusk retreats to the sanctuary of the ruins, striving to put distance between herself and Dawn, but unable to escape the rapport that was forged between them.

Dusk is a helpless observer as Dawn enlists the aid of their friends, Roark and Hunter, in her search for Dusk. Dawn does not confide in them about Dusk’s transformation, distrusting her memory of the transformation she had witnessed. To pursue Dusk, Dawn first had to overcome the trauma of her initial visit to the ruins, confiding the story of her entrapment and being rescued by Dusk. The telling reminded Dusk of the powerful sense of connection and summons that compelled him to find and rescue Dawn. Like Dawn, he had been wandering the ruins alone and afraid—although, in his case it was fear for the friends and family who had been fighting for their lives when he was ordered by his mother to take refuge in the ruins—for many days by that point.

Clearly, Dusk thought, that childhood rapport had strengthened to the point where it had transformed him into a living echo of her. Worse, with every moment he was attuned to her, he absorbed more of her past and personality as well. Dusk was unable to do anything as Dawn and their friends were forced to delve deeper into the ruins to elude the arriving brigands. Dusk could not stand idly by once they ran afoul of a tiger and made a desperate dive into the depths to escape. It took time, however, for Dusk to catch up to where Dawn tended to Hunter’s wounds and waited for Roark to bring back help. Before Dusk could reach her, the brigands discovered her and Hunter. From Dawn’s perspective, it seemed certain that Hunter was slain by the raiders, but as Dusk arrived, she found Hunter still alive, in the grip of a terrible fever madness.

Dusk endured a number of bites and scratches before she succeeded in calming him. Dawn was still fleeing from the raiders, but before Dusk could go to her aid, she was blindsided by a vampire. It was the same vampire that had seduced and turned Roark. She had tracked down the friends he had spoken of intent on providing Roark with his first, helpless victims and eliminate two potential adversaries. Dusk had skillfully hidden Hunter before setting out after Dawn, but given Roark’s feelings for her—or rather, Dawn—she would suffice to break her fledgling’s will. Dusk awoke from a nightmare of Dawn’s wounding and possession in a sealed crypt, alone with the body of Roark. At that moment, she was as much Dawn as she was Dusk—as if Dawn had fully awakened in Dusk, just as Dusk was awakening. As, indeed, had happened.

There was little time to sort it out, since Roark began to wake, blinded by hunger. The infection from Hunter’s bite was just anchoring its roots as Roark seized Dawn and began to drain her. The trauma of that fatal kiss shattered the delicate barrier separating the psyches of Dusk and Dawn, sparking a desperate struggle to survive that forged a new, gestalt identity. That allowed Dawn to break free of the entrancing spell of ecstasy and shake off Roark. Having fed, Roark was relatively easy to shake back to his senses, recoiling in horror at what he had been doing. Sensing what was occurring, the vampire entered and goaded Roark to finish her off, announcing that it would be a more merciful fate than allowing her to succumb to the two infections that claimed her.

To encourage Roark further, she sealed them back up in the crypt together, with assurances that his hunger would return soon, long before Dawn succumbed to her waking death. Dawn was horrified by the fate awaiting her, but Roark refused to kill her—swearing instead to escape his new master’s thrall, taking her with him to seek a cure for her. After all, he pointed out, she would remain alive. That was the horror of it all. Fortunately, Hunter had finally recovered from his own turning and followed Dawn’s scent to her and Roark. He helped them escape, the three of them returning to their dorm at the academy, where they summoned their teachers to Dawn’s aid. To their dismay, there were no cures for their infections, and Dawn’s only hope was for one of her infections to overcome the other.

Failing that, she would become trapped in a lifeless, but living body—an immortal blood donor. Before succumbing to her full paralysis, Dawn made a pact with Roark—in exchange for taking care of her, tending to her body and mind as necessary to help preserve her sanity, he could feed exclusively on her. In a final moment of privacy, she finally confessed her love to Hunter. She asked him to help Roark in taking care of her, but stressed the need for him to truly protect Roark from his mistress. She observed that they both had sensual needs, and granted him permission to take what pleasure he could from her body and begged him to forgive her silent stillness, reminding him that she felt everything, despite her inability to respond.

Overlap Option 2

There is a predisposition toward the first incarnation of Dawn being female, in spite of the fact that it often works best for Dawn to reach her full evolution in her female incarnation. Several approaches feature a male first generation of the character. Another evolved in the context of this plot treatment. This overlap option can be pursued with either gender as the first incarnation. Keeping the girl as the primary incarnation, the truth about the boy can be completely obscured. At the point where Dawn was threatened with demonic possession, Dawn was forced to call upon untapped potential to save herself. To seize that potential, she effectively summoned an embodiment of that potential, a male version of herself. As Dawn’s psyche reached out, the demon devouring pursued, catching the boy Dawn in the future and devouring him as well, but not quick enough to prevent the young soul from grasping the key to her full potential and reassert her self—or rather, her selves. The sudden division of Dawn’s psyche, as the boy joined the girl in asserting himself, caught the demon off guard in the midst of devouring and digesting its host, and instead of manifesting itself, the demon was suddenly consumed in the manifestation of the boy and girl. The demon itself ended up divided between the resurrected boy and girl, awaiting a day when the two halves united once more to reconstitute itself and attempt once again to escape from oblivion. Development from this point is identical to that of Overlap Option 1, up until the pair become deeply intimate, permitting the demon to seize possession of the boy’s body. From that point, Dawn and her friends set out in search of the demon, believing he is the boy Dawn. From there, development progresses according to the story of Hunter, Roark and Dawn’s infections through Exit Option 2. At the time that the demon took possession, the couplet experienced a moment of fusion and redivision. A gestalt was formed, but the demon was able to break it this time by focusing on the girl’s psyche. The demon was able to eclipse the younger aspect of Dawn, dodging the older, fully evolved aspect. For Dawn, it seemed as if the boy and girl had simply merged into one person, and the boy’s selfless, protective instincts reinforced the girl’s survival instincts prompted an automatic bid to claim the female body formed in the redivision. The demon claimed the male body that formed, after concluding that its advantages were better suited to fulfilling the tasks the demon needed to undertake in its timeless mission. (In two years he would confront her again, raping her and impregnating her with the male incarnation required to fulfill her paradox.) By emerging as a girl, it was easy for the female identity to predominate, with the belief that she had acquired the memory and experience of the boy. In that belief, her assumption is that the demon holds her beloved in the grip of possession. On eventually learning that there is no trace of him to be found in the demon or in the demon’s grasp—after being raped and impregnated—she is led to believe that her son is a reincarnation of him, based on the demon’s taunting. (The demon tells Dawn that it raped her to dispense with the soul of its host and lay sole claim to the body it inhabited. As a result of these developments, the girl’s alter ego can have a name unique to himself, since he is essentially named for himself.)

Exit Option 2

The same conclusion, and general course of events in Overlap Option 1 apply in a story excluding the demon’s contract and generation of a male incarnation. Dawn escaped into a world of dreams once she succumbed to her living death. She occasionally experienced a separation from her body, during which she was able to move about like a ghost. In those periods, and as they grew longer, she built up her psychic strength. Over time, she discovered that she could compel her body to move over extended periods of time—the movement too slow to observe, but obvious over the course of days. She realized that her body seemed to replenish itself in part by absorbing sunlight, in part by absorbing material in the air, and by drawing anything else it needed through the fabric of space using the power of her mind. This process created the drain that left her unable to generate impulses strong enough to command her body consciously. This explained the way her body would respond to stimulus on it’s own. The capacity to move was never lost, the autonomic functions had never diminished, only her voluntary functions had been crippled. She should have realized it the first time Hunter slept with her. Her body responded to his touch, moved mindlessly to accommodate him and discharge her passion, but refused to allow her to actively reciprocate. Under the direction of another, her body meekly submitted to, and held, whatever pose she was positioned in. She could even be compelled to walk or eat, so long as the impetus and direction was imposed on her by another. Not that she needed to eat. She never felt hunger, but, she noted that on the rare occasions when she was fed a morsel, it was easier to project her ghost or compel motion in her body. It did not take much normal sustenance to relieve the psychic drain that paralyzed her. It would be difficult to encourage Roark or Hunter to start feeding her regular meals, to put up with the hassle of her body’s eliminations, long enough to break free of the miasma. She had no ready means of communication. Ironically, her breakthrough came not in controlling her body, but in the strengthening of her psychic projection. In her flesh, any increase in her psychic power was absorbed into the regenerative process that paralyzed her. But, between her struggles to assert herself, and her ghostly excursions, she was growing stronger. As her frustration and fury at her helplessness grew, so did the psychokinetic force she could command. She tried to make her psychic presence felt in many ways, before she succeeded in achieving fine telekinetic and telepathic control. It took far more energy to make anyone see or hear her ghost, direct influence of another mind proved dependant on a degree of acceptance and sensitivity most people lacked, or possessed in diametric opposition. Manipulating objects proved to be less difficult, particularly when no one else was focused on them. She began leaving messages, but it took a while before the right people encountered them, and even longer before they began to interpret them properly.

Exit Option 1

The exploration and looting of the ruins had been a recurring event, so it had only been a matter of time before the demon found a way to claim the body of a mortal. Because Dawn was still, barely, alive when Morduin took possession, the demon had no choice but to honor the promise it had made simply to gain sole possession of its host body. However, the demon said nothing about when it would keep its promise. Fulfilling his contract with Dawn was merely a side note in an evolving plot to seize control over the ruins. Rather than risk being mistaken for Dawn, the demon disguised its stolen body by turning it male. Freed at last, Morduin began to explore Aeslyn Tear, determined to probe the ruins to determine the strength and availability of the forces slumbering there. If he could raise the army of demons trapped in the ruins they could complete the mission they had embarked on during the war of the gods. He quickly ran into an obstacle, the feud over Ruin's Deep. The communities of weres and vampires that had settled the ruins had long been at odds over who properly held dominion over the ruins, yet both sides would prove hostile to any efforts to free even a single demon of the depths. Knowing he could not make allies on either side, Morduin's options were limited to encouraging their mutual destruction or forming an alliance with them against a common enemy like the Order of the Ruins, and somehow parlaying that into a way to seize control of the ruins.

The demon quickly realized that Dawn’s natural form was perfect for baiting traps to assassinate weres and vampires, a string of random slayings that served to escalate the feud into an all out war. Due to the demon’s regenerative powers, the body it had seized became immortal. This made it necessary for the demon to keep a low profile to prevent anyone, mortal or immortal, from noticing that the man or woman it posed as never aged. It was two years before the demon got around to discharging its promise, seducing a courtesan to serve as a surrogate mother for a reincarnation of Dawn. Morduin reincarnated Dawn in a male form because it was the most expedient way to fulfill its promise. Impregnating a host mother relieved the demon of the obligation of bearing a child. It also served as a deterrent to Dawn’s reawakening. Dawn was a boy of very humble origins. As the son of a courtesan he had little hope of ever identifying his father and no prospects to speak of. The only thing his father had given him, apart from life, was his name—whispered into his mother’s ear before he left her bed. At least, that was the only thing he knew about. Dawn also inherited the capacity to change sex and regenerate as the result of the changes the demon made to its host body. Morduin did not expect that the boy would ever discover and exploit the potential he would inherit. However, at age seven, when the boy was tested for magical ability, the polymorphic ability was triggered.

The first time he transformed into a girl, Dawn was too young for a full awakening. The first seven years of Dawn’s former life was imprinted on the boy’s psyche, but the memories were those of a tomboy hardly offset his upbringing as a boy, which compelled him to reassert his manhood as soon as he realized what he had become. The experience deterred him from having anything to do with magic, though it did prompt a knight of the Order of the Ruins to take him on as a squire. The knight had been the former Dawn’s lover, attaining his full rank in the order as the result of numerous expeditions to rescue her or discover her remains. He had found evidence suggesting that she had been captured and presumably raped and murdered by a band of rogues.

When he met the boy Dawn had become, he was struck by the resemblance, unconsciously taking the boy to heart as the son he should have had with her. Then, as the boy approached the age at which the girl had been displaced, Dawn began having dreams, memories of her life filtering through his subconscious as her psyche was assimilated by his. Her full integration was preceded by spontaneous transformations into her form. By this time, the knight had fully reconstructed the final moments of her life, fleeing her assailants, falling, mortally wounded, into a soul trap that was no longer occupied. The rest of the story sketched itself out in his mind the first time he confronted the boy-turned-girl.

With nothing to support his suspicion, the knight was forced to offer a general hypothesis to explain his protégé’s transformation. While he was adapting to being female, he—or rather, she—was reunited with two strangely familiar men in a string of random encounters. Something about Roark and Hunter brought out the girl in Dawn, accelerating the assimilation of habits, skills and personality of her former self, while taunting the memories that remained dormant.

Notes

It has been noted that demons of the most ancient genesis claim that the universe had been their creation, designed and cultivated as a haven from the abyss, their natural, but chaotic, environment. Evolution, particularly the evolution of conscious life, had eroded their control over creation and gradually ejected and excluded demons from the universe.

The Ring of Renewal & The Demon Within

But, the negotiations over Dawn collapse when Hunter realizes that Roark had no claim to Dawn until Dusk convinced him to hear his demands.

That meant Hunter had equal claim to her.

Having already determined Dawn was not a vampire, and now that she was not a retainer, his impulse to take her for his consort could be satisfied.

But of course Roark had become fascinated with possessing her and challenged Hunter for her.

Dusk tried to assert his claim to her, as her existing mate--but in his desperation made a slip that allowed Hunter and Roark to recognize him as their former nemesis.

Somehow the dead demon hunter, and holder of the Signet of Aeslyn Tear, had been resurrected--and Dawn was his beloved.

With the personal stakes raised to the ceiling, the ancient rivals proposed the wager to determine possession of Dawn and Ruin's Deep.

They had already learned of Dawn's powers of regeneration, and pointed out that combined with her psychic talent she had a chance of surviving joint infection by Hunter and Roark.

Dusk had already freed the soul in the ring, so he could wager it on Dawn proving immune to the combined venom of a were and a vampire.

If she turned into one or the other, Hunter or Roark would win the ring and take her as his consort.

If she died, Dusk would be allowed to take the ring back and leave with his life.

On the next morning, when the first light of the sun touched her, she unexpectedly revived, gripped by crippling hunger and thirst.

Oddly, just bathing in the light took the edge off, opening a floodgate of psychic energy.

After a few moments, the power began to overwhelm her, threatening to consume her if she did not find a way to discharge it.

Retreating from the light, her hunger and thirst gripped her again, and nothing she ate or drank could fully appease it.

It was a craving for fresh meat and blood.

Of note, there are some approaches to Childhood Demons that subject the boy and girl to the same childhood trauma, but the majority featured the girl alone being subjected to the horror of losing her family, while the boy is affected indirectly by the chain of succession implicit in their split inception.

When she was seven, Dawn was abducted and offered as a sacrifice to a demon of death. The trauma of that ordeal awakened her psychic potential--trapping the demon within her--and led to her initiation as a muse.

The largest port, and third largest city in Ar'Doen, Avon was unique for not having a reigning lord. House Avon had traditionally been the servants of the goddess and the defenders of the throne, so the Seat of Arden lay within the Avon Domain. When House Avon fell, and no legitimate heir could be found, the crown prince was appointed regent and ever since the domain had been under the indirect rule of the throne.

The sole survivor of the massacre that claimed the lives of her parents, she alone knew what the expedition into the ruins of Aeslyn Tear had unearthed. Dawn interviews family and acquaintances of her parents. Her debut provides Dawn a good place to begin her inquiry. A coming out is scheduled for Dawn's seventeenth birthday on midsummer's eve. To her annoyance, preparations and matters of her estate keep Dawn busy until the week of midsummer. A private celebration on the eve of her birthday is thrown into chaos by a tavern brawl. Questions lead to confrontations, shedding light on the family legacy. The morning of her anniversary, Dawn is infuriated to learn her debut will include a wedding announcement. Dawn circumvents her grandmother despite being tied up all day in preparations, calling upon Ash telepathically. After welcoming the guests, Dawn hunts down her grandmother finding her engaged in an argument with the goddess. Dancing, a glimpse of politics, intrigue and cues to tantalizing leads. True to his word, Ash derails her grandmother's plot with the support of her father's father, Alfred. On the dance floor, Dawn gains enlightenment on many matters from a string of different partners. Most people are eager to feed her curiosity about her parents, mentioning various scandals, affairs and involved parties

As the daughter of a courtesan, she was never introduced to her father, but her mother's patron did provide her with a father figure, and his own children served as her siblings. As a result, she was provided a decent, if informal primary education from private tutoring in the spheres of academics, aesthetics and athletics.

Dawn was born around the same age as Dusk, Lady Naomi's youngest, and favorite, son. By the custom of the household, Dawn had been selected as the boy's personal companion. Sensitive to discrimination, Dawn had approached everything with a determination to prove that she was as capable as any boy. She had been more than enough of a tomboy to keep up with him, and in their early years he had resented her for challenging his natural superiority as a male and a noble. His efforts to put her in her place only made her more determined to prove herself. For several years, they had been driven by an intense, personal rivalry, but they eventually became close, intimate friends. That period of her life had been spiced by good-natured competition and an uncanny knack for misadventure.

Dawn and Dusk had been only seven years old when they were abducted by a group of cultists who worshipped a demon god. Dawn's mother had risked everything to rescue her daughter, ultimately sacrificing her life. After Dawn and Dusk escaped from the ruins where they had been held captive, they were separated.

Dusk had been sent to the Avon Tear Academy, and had sought Dawn out to resume their friendship. In time, they had become much more than friends.

Inevitably, their intimacy deepened into love and they became lovers. At the conclusion of their initiation, when they indulged in the ultimate intimacy they were capable of--sex in full telepathic rapport--the demon within them was able to break free of the prison of their minds and seize control of one of their bodies.

Dawn had been trained in the basics of sword and sorcery in her former life, but in her present life, her aptitude for magic had gone untested. Even her psychic ability, which manifested shortly after her mother's death, had gone untrained.

Her latent magical aptitude had evolved into a natural, if modest, psychic ability in response to the traumatic experiences she had as a child, when she and Dusk were lost in the ruins of Aeslyn Tear after the death of her mother. Dawn and Dusk had been trapped underground long enough for even the most optimistic adult to declare the two of them dead, and they had experienced things that no adult wanted to believe.

The magic that Dawn had inherited had probably laid the foundation for her psychic ability. Normally, pronounced psychic abilities manifested as the result of studying magic for a decade or more. She lacked the level of magical training and discipline most of her classmates had, but she had enough natural talent and inherited experience to qualify for the advanced classes.

Like her aptitude for magic, her psychic ability was not formally recognized during her childhood. The discipline to use it emerged under the influence of her athletic and academic training. Compared to the abilities of a powerful magic user or a trained psychic, her psychic abilities had been weak and quirky, evolving primarily into natural regeneration, telepathy and telekinesis.

When she first noticed her regeneration, she did not heal much faster than normal, but she healed completely without scarring and proved very resistant to disease and infection.

The discipline needed for Dawn to master her psychic abilities had come as the result of her devotion to her physical training.

Always intuitive and empathic, her thoughts and feelings began to resonate with those of the people around her. She became somewhat more sensitive and perceptive than the average person, capable of glimpsing psychic or spiritual phenomena others were blind to. An odd side effect of her sensitivity, Dawn could perceive the mechanisms of magic, making it difficult for her to learn even basic spells.

When Dawn had been trained in the basic arts of sword and sorcery, the difficulty she had with magic, as the result of her psychic sensitivity, made it necessary to suppress her natural psychic talent.

It had actually proven easier to remember spells from her former life, though she was forced to do the mental equivalent of covering her eyes in order to cast spells. Intimidated by awesome and intricate psychic architecture harnessed by magic, she became wary of anyone proficient with magic--especially herself. When she discovered that her psychic abilities gave her an edge in protecting herself from--and dispelling--magic, she regained her confidence.

As an academy initiate, Dawn finally had the opportunity to try and integrate her magic and psychic abilities. Because her training as a courtesan had included the study of certain aspects of healing magic, the college of magic that was the most compatible with psychic ability, she had been able to catch up and progress quickly in her chosen field of magic.

As a courtesan of her grandmother's line, she had been trained in an exotic hand-to-hand fighting style originally developed by the maidens of the goddess. It had been passed down through a muse of the goddess who had survived the purges by hiding in plain sight as a courtesan and founded the bloodline Dawn was descended from.

As time passed, Dawn's resolve was tested. She found herself under increasing pressure to commit herself to her courtesan training. Whenever possible, she escaped from it to pursue other options. Her rebellion was noticed by her grandmother, who concluded that her other interests were coming directly into conflict with her calling. She increased the demands of Dawn's training leaving her with no time or energy for adventures. That made escaping her fate as a courtesan an even greater priority.

When she came of age, completing her training, she refused her courtesan's license and returned home with Dusk, who had asked for her hand in marriage. Unfortunately, her grandmother followed and conspired with Dusk's mother to break up their engagement with a startling and unbelievable revelation. According to them, Dusk and Dawn had the same father. Dawn and Dusk refused to believe it and returned to the city, having themselves tested by the College of Healing at the academy in order to disprove the allegations Rowan and Naomi had made. To their shock, the tests proved that they were related, but because courtesans were line-bred, there was still a chance the two of them could safely marry. They were told that extensive tests and experiments would have to be performed to ensure that. In the mean time, they were instructed to suspend the physical aspects of their relationship.

It had been around that time that Dawn had discovered the truth about her former life, when her confidence in herself had been shaken. She had rejected the illusion of independence offered by a life as a courtesan and agreed to marry Dusk, but their plans had been sabotaged by his mother and her grandmother. The young lovers, who had shared so much growing up, had one thing too many in common--their father.

The two of them returned to Avon Tear and had themselves tested by the College of Healing, and the results more than confirmed the allegation. The healers had discovered an even more improbable relationship that as yet defied explanation. The two of them had always assumed that their physical resemblance was the product of their courtesan ancestry, the result of countless generations of line breeding geared toward the realization of an Ardean Ideal. Dusk insisted on further testing to determine if the two of them were pure-bred and able to produce healthy children, but Dawn had tried to face facts and move on with her life. She had been cut off when she refused to bow to her grandmother's wishes, but she had recovered enough of the training she had received in her former life to pursue a higher sphere of initiation at the academy. Dusk assumed she had done it to stay close to him, and while that was a benefit, she had resolved to become a healer. Her determination to prove herself had been renewed. She would make a future for herself that did not involve becoming some man's wife or mistress.

It seemed like yesterday, and a lifetime, ago that she had learned how close she had been to her grandfather the whole time she was growing up. He had turned out to be a man she knew intimately.

Rohan had been a knight in the service of Rowan's patron. The father of three other children, Rohan had been widowed when his wife died in childbirth several months prior to the events that led to her father's conception. Dawn had wondered if it had stung her father to learn that he was the unintended result of a moment of weakness on Rowan and Rohan's part.

Even though her conception was unintentional, she had the comfort of knowing that she had not been unwanted. It was the one assurance her mother and grandparents had been unanimous about.

The reason she had known Rohan so well was because he had taken a keen interest in her training. In spite of the fact that circumstances had made it impossible for him to marry her mother and formally recognize Dawn *as* his daughter, he personally saw to it that she received the essential training in swords and sorcery to pursue a formal initiation at the Academy of Avon Tear. That included training generally offered only to boys, and Rohan had not spared her modesty, even though her exposure often encouraged unwanted attention and interest from boys.

Rohan had wanted to provide her with an alternative to her mother's trade. When she began her formal training, her training with him became limited to what Rohan could teach in his free time, when she was home for the summer, but she applied herself passionately to his instruction, demonstrating a natural talent for fencing with a long sword. In contrast, her training in sorcery was a grim and torturous ordeal. In order for her to even learn magic, it had been necessary to suppress her natural psychic talent. This was unfortunate, because psychic ability was far more difficult to train and develop than magic ability. To gain the mental discipline she needed just to cope with her psychic gift, she applied herself to mastering a number of rigorous, physical disciplines. In addition to fencing, she remained devoted to her training in gymnastics and dance, and incorporated both, along with the various forms of armed and unarmed combat she was exposed to, into the fighting style she was formally training in.

Her core discipline was an exotic fighting style she had inherited from her grandmother. Developed by the Maidens of the Goddess, it had been preserved and passed down in secret, through certain courtesan bloodlines, following the conquest of Arden and the resulting purges.

Dawn tests her nerve while Blaine pleads his suit. Blaine dogs Dawn's heels as she visits the ruins to firm her resolve. Dawn considers Blains pleas, stunned to hear his story of their meeting and realizing she unwittingly encouraged his affection.

Dawn attempts to restate her position, referring back to the start of intimacy in their relationship. A shocking episode is revisited. A fifteen-year-old Dawn loses her cool when her friends drag her down into the ruins. Dawn snaps when she encounters one of the demons of her childhood and takes flight, leading her friends deep into the maze. Dawn willingly indulges her friends' curiosity to escape from the horrors of her past.

Dawn names her priorities, the couple makes an informal pact. Dawn was a lover out of friendship and for fun, not speaking of love because even love could not alter her calling. Dawn must decide her true feelings, as part of putting her affairs in order, but sorting out her past still came first. Dawn and Blaine reach an understanding oblivious to the presence of an unearthly observer

Over the next few days, she assembled a party to accompany her on her expedition, unwittingly including a vampire and a were-tiger bent on ensuring her mission failed if she ventured into their domains within the ruins. As an added complication, the pair were ancient rivals locked in a struggle for dominion over the whole of Ruin's Deep.

Unfortunately, there was much more to the underworld than organized crime, and her path led her right into the heart of a deadly feud. Unaware that the man who was responsible for arranging her childhood abduction was a vampire, in league with the necromancer and demonologist that offered her to the demon, she broke in to his mansion and stole the information she needed.

As they courted her, they learned about her life and training at the Academy. Once she revealed she was an initiate, the two were reminded of a story where an initiate's unique abilities were exploited to settle a dispute between a were and a vampire in the past century.

Night, Day Nine

The argument made no sense to Dawn, until they reached a sudden agreement that disturbed her. Dawn found the situation particularly ridiculous and frustrating when she realized that she had become the focus of a wager. That her presence had increased the stakes of the contest the vampire and were-tiger were engaged in. Dawn was hardly delighted by this, but she had also heard clearly as they both revealed the fate of any human caught trespassing in this little underworld, and understood that her options were severely limited. What she had not grasped was their intention to settle both disputes by infecting Dawn at the same time, a test of the powers of a vampire and a ware to turn their victims. With an odd look they decide to "share" her and proceed to kiss and caress her together. Before Dawn could resist the attention, the pair of them sank their fangs into her.

Her mind was invaded with thoughts and images from both of them, rehashing their earlier debate in disturbing flashes. After fighting at her side, the two men had finally recognized that their respective interest in her was great enough to endanger the truce under which they had been negotiating an end to the war. Ironically, their dispute over her suggested a way to settle the conflict. Because of her psychic abilities, Dawn possessed a degree of immunity to vampire or were infection, but if her system was overtaxed by joint infections--normally a fatal proposition--there was a fair chance that she might be overwhelmed and thus be turned by one of them. Dawn fell into their trap, helpless as her body and soul became the battle ground to determine the outcome of the were-vampire war.

In the heat of passion, they had bitten her, releasing their venom simultaneously into her blood. Dawn nearly passed out from the erotic, euphoric wave that eclipsed the pain of their piercing bites. Too late, she realized what her lovers were, as the pleasure and poison left her helpless in their embrace.

Her training as an initiate would have enabled her to resist either infection. Combined they were lethal, unless she focused exclusively on neutralizing the effects of one.

Too late she understood why two men who seemed eager to kill each other over her had decided to share her instead. Because she understood the horrible choice they had forced on her. An initiate possessed the talent and training necessary to resist vampire or were venom. But, in a joint infection the initiate would be forced to divide his resources fighting both infections--and ultimately die--or concentrate his resources on neutralizing one infection and succumbing to the other.

When she was seven, Dawn was abducted and offered as a sacrifice to a demon of death. The trauma of that ordeal awakened her psychic potential--trapping the demon within her--and led to her initiation as a muse. Her training as a muse made her a perfect candidate for Hunter and Roark's wager, but there was a hidden threat. Her struggle to survive a dual infection was supposed to leave her vulnerable to possession from within. The manifestation of that threat was what distracted Dawn from actively resisting her infections.

Dawn found herself trapped in a traumatic nightmare, confronting her childhood demon again for the first time in a decade. She remembered its attempt to rape her mind and conquer her body and soul, and her desperate struggle to protect herself. As the demon bored through her psyche and touched her naked soul, power beyond comprehension had flooded into her and she had attacked her tormentor with a rage born of terror. The demon had thrust itself too deeply into her psyche for her to spit it out, so she essentially chewed it to pieces and swallowed. Banished to the depths of her psyche, the demon had languished for ten years, waiting for the opportunity to assault her directly again. While it waited, it had haunted her nightmares, torturing her from within, tormenting her with obscene and terrifying promises. Finally, it posed a legitimate threat. Dawn realized that while she was fighting off one of her infections and succumbing to the other, she would be too weak to stop the demon from taking possession of her. In that moment, she realized the true purpose of Lloyd's plot. The only way to prevent it from succeeding was to devote all of her effort to fighting the demon while her infections slowly killed her. Deciding she would rather be dead than become enslaved by a demon, she committed all of her resources to fighting her childhood nemesis.

The demon was not pleased by her intentions, but moved immediately to turn the situation to its advantage. When Dawn tried to force the demon back into its prison, it surprised her by pitching in causing both of them to be thrown down into the dreamscape where the demon had been trapped for the past decade. It was a world created from her unconscious mind where the demon confronted her with a shocking first blow. In the dreamscape, her demon confronted her as a male version of herself. While trapped within her, the demon had laid claim to the latent aspects of her potential, starting with her masculinity. The more he was able to assimilate, the more influence he had on her psyche. The contest between them was for control of their prison, but it became evident that direct or indirect assaults on each other could have a serious impact on the balance of power. Dawn was quick to suspect that the quickest way to lose was to succumb to the reality of the dream. If she allowed herself to accept the reality he created, she would become subject to it--imprisoned by it. She was about to learn one of the fundamental differences between men and gods. Demons were natives of a surreal environment, and thus quite at home in dreams. They were also adept at creating and shaping worlds. He would work on seducing her with a believable world, and she had to counter by making it surreal.

Dawn had no idea how absorbed in this effort she became, losing more than a day fighting the demon within.

Her regeneration served as the catalyst to make her a hybrid vampire-were-tiger.

As was common in fledging new wares and vampires, Dawn's sires exploited her ignorance of her new condition to strengthen their hold over her, though in her case neither was certain of what to expect. Assessing her limits and abilities demanded a level of cooperation unheard of between a vampire and a were who were not bound in a master-servant relationship. The gestalt effect of her dual conversion granted her greater resistance to the unique vulnerabilities of weres and vampires, immunity to either sire's thrall, unparalleled powers of regeneration and the enhancement of her natural psychic talents. These benefits did not console Dawn for the loss of her humanity, however.

Establishment

01. Morgan returns to her grandmother's home in Avon to confront her past. Visited by nightmares, Morgan reflects upon recent steps. Arriving at the temple, Morgan finds a summons to visit her grandmother, Muriel. Morgan is disturbed to learn of her inheritance and a betrothal, either of which could conflict with her calling. A night alone in her childhood home is relieved only by a visit from the goddess, instructing her to put her affairs in order. A visitor comes to the rescue. Unable to return to sleep, Morgan luxuriates in an early, casual morning, almost forgetting her appointments. Lack of sleep catches up to her in the bath, and her flight from nightmares causes a potentially fatal drowning accident. Morgan's betrothed arrives anxiously, letting himself in and tracking her down as unsettled feelings deepen into alarm. A strained breakfast party. Morgan suffers an escort from Blaine to her appointment with her parents' advocate, the executor of their estate. Morgan strains to convey her intentions to quickly dispose of claims and entanglements that would compromise her calling. Morgan takes note of the opportunity she has to confront her demons and lay her ghosts to rest.

Morgan returned from the Academy at Aeryn Tear determined to face the demons of her childhood. She was sent to the academy for training in the physical and psychic disciplines necessary for her to become a paladin of the goddess. The temple of the goddess crested the ridge dividing the Port of Avon and the City of Avon with a commanding view of the Aeslyn Tear Ruins and the former Seat of Avon.

The largest port, and third largest city in Arden, Avon was unique for not having a reigning lord. House Avon had traditionally been the servants of the goddess and the defenders of the throne, so the Seat of Arden lay within the Avon Domain. When House Avon fell, and no legitimate heir could be found, the crown prince was appointed regent and ever since the domain had been under the indirect rule of the throne.

An only child, Morgan was orphaned when she was seven years old. The trauma of witnessing the massacre that claimed the lives of her parents shattered her young psyche, unleashing her full, naked psychic potential. Unable to deal with her in this condition, her surviving family abandoned her on the steps of the temple of the goddess Arden. Morgan recovered quickly in the goddess's care, healing from the trauma and adapting to the strange powers it awakened.

02. Morgan is noticed by a demon from the ruins. Morgan tests her nerve while Blaine pleads his suit. Blaine dogs Morgan's heels as she visits the ruins to firm her resolve. Morgan considers Blains pleas, stunned to hear his story of their meeting and realizing she unwittingly encouraged his affection. Morgan attempts to restate her position, referring back to the start of intimacy in their relationship. A shocking episode is revisited. A fifteen-year-old Morgan loses her cool when her friends drag her down into the ruins. Morgan snaps when she encounters one of the demons of her childhood and takes flight, leading her friends deep into the maze. Morgan willingly indulges her friends' curiosity to escape from the horrors of her past. Morgan names her priorities, the couple makes an informal pact. Morgan was a lover out of friendship and for fun, not speaking of love because even love could not alter her calling. Morgan must decide her true feelings, as part of putting her affairs in order, but sorting out her past still came first. Morgan and Blaine reach an understanding oblivious to the presence of an unearthly observer

The sole survivor of the massacre that claimed the lives of her parents, she alone knew what the expedition into the ruins of Aeslyn Tear had unearthed. It had taken ten years of training to master the powers unleashed within her that tragic night and fully comprehend the horror her parents unwittingly helped loose upon the world. Armed with the mantle of a paladin of the goddess, Morgan hoped to discover who her parents had been, find out why they had died and lay their ghosts to rest.

03. Morgan interviews family and acquaintances of her parents. Her debut provides Morgan a good place to begin her inquiry. A coming out is scheduled for Morgan's seventeenth birthday on midsummer's eve. To her annoyance, preparations and matters of her estate keep Morgan busy until the week of midsummer. A private celebration on the eve of her birthday is thrown into chaos by a tavern brawl. Questions lead to confrontations, shedding light on the family legacy. The morning of her anniversary, Morgan is infuriated to learn her debut will include a wedding announcement. Morgan circumvents her grandmother despite being tied up all day in preparations, calling upon Blaine telepathically. After welcoming the guests, Morgan hunts down her grandmother finding her engaged in an argument with the goddess. Dancing, a glimpse of politics, intrigue and cues to tantalizing leads. True to his word, Blaine derails her grandmother's plot with the support of her father's father, Alfred. On the dance floor, Morgan gains enlightenment on many matters from a string of different partners. Most people are eager to feed her curiosity about her parents, mentioning various scandals, affairs and involved parties

04. Morgan seeks audience with associates of her parents and their liege. Under the guise of courtesy visits, Morgan follows up on leads gathered during her debut. Moira, a great aunt, reveals that Muriel was a bastard daughter of House Avon, born to a courtesan not a concubine. Morgan confides that Balfour--a magistrate and former lover of Muriel--died before she could respond to his invitation. Morgan is stunned to learn Alfred and Muriel are half-brother and -sister, explaining the scandal her parents endured. A second lead fizzles due to the sudden or recent demise of a contact, but Morgan perseveres. Kern, the family advocate, reveals the truth about Morgan's breeding and her grandmother's foiled plans for her mother. Alvin, Morgan's great-grandfather on both sides, is her nearest true half-elf relation--the controversial "lost heir". Alfred provided a list of her parents associates--the most promising lead ends at a funeral for the friend and adversary. Morgan is encouraged by word of an intrigue involving her parents around the time of their deaths. Funeral gossip gave Morgan something new to investigate, a controversy surrounding the excavation of the ruins . A number of wealthy or influential people opposed or objected to the excavation, representing much of the community. Many protests evolved into insults, resulting in duels championed by her father or debates hosted by her mother.

Morgan had a certain fame for being the sole survivor of the Avon massacres. Among the people she sought out, there were a number of individuals notably opposed to the excavation of Aeslyn Tear. Morgan needed to know if these objectors had reason to suspect the tragic outcome of the venture, and if they did know something, why had they failed to give sufficient warning. She had been probing this mystery over summers past but at last she was able to pursue answers more aggressively.

05. Morgan connects the deaths of her contacts. Morgan focuses her attention on the individuals noted for their objections to the excavation of the ruins. Pursuing the objectors in hopes of confronting them, Morgan is confronted again by the stranger, Eden. In spite of the position she finds herself in, Morgan presses the objectors in hopes of discovering their motives. Morgan receives no admissions and her attempt to provoke their confidence gets her ejected from the club. Blaine comments on the oddity of recent deaths, the most recent victim being an individual Morgan just confronted. It took a few days to uncover another nest of conspirators and confront them, again with little success. Blaine confronts Morgan about her activities, citing the danger represented by the latest reports of slayings. Recognizing the victim's name, Morgan reconsiders the daily gossip on random killings in the port, city and countryside. Suspicious, Morgan checks her list of contacts with the authorities and discovers many of them among the slain. Morgan suspects that conspiracy in the past could be linked to present conspiracy, and tests a disturbing hunch. A list outlining possible conspirators against the excavation encompasses the list of recent "random" fatalities. A chance encounter raises Morgan's hackles, presenting a possible, horrifying scenario for current events.

Because people were willing to talk to her, Morgan was able to begin unraveling a web of intrigue that tied into a series of very recent deaths. Her suspicions were aroused when she noticed that these same people were being murdered shortly after she talked to them or before she ever reached them.

06. Morgan gets caught in the middle of an assassination attempt. When another contact she visited turns up dead, Morgan races to confront the remaining few. As Morgan recalled, the excavators discovered evidence of others penetrating the ruins--and considers the implications. Arriving on the scene of another killing, Morgan is vividly reminded of what demons were capable of. Morgan reaches a conclusion about the course of the conspiracy and moves to intercede directly. Outraged to have her offer of protection exploited for a seduction, Morgan is poorly prepared to face his assassin. Confronted by Morgan's assumptions, Lloyd accepts her offer of protection, treating it as a pretense for a liaison. As Morgan takes advantage of his hospitality, he intrudes intend on taking advantage of her. The confrontation between Morgan and Lloyd is interrupted while the pair are in compromised positions. As the combat evolves, Morgan learns of the ongoing conflict between the weres and vampires.

None she talked to would explain their reasons for discouraging the excavation project, but deeper probing would reveal that they were all representatives of the vampire and were communities. All of the slain quickly proved to be shape-shifter casualties, mauled vampire retainers or the remains of an occasional interrupted meal--prey that no predator lived long enough to properly dispose of.

The killings Morgan was investigating were the result of a territorial dispute between the tiger clans and the prince of the city. Morgan had hardly begun her hunt when the prince of the city called a truce with the alpha male, to point out that the escalation of their war endangered them all, and proposed a wager to settle their claim to the ruins.

07. Morgan is stalked by the demon.

From her own nightmares, Morgan was able to discover the link between the current slayings and the massacre she had witnessed. Her parents had been confronted with mounting animosity by the weres and vampires in a direct progression to their deaths in the ruins. It did not take much of a leap for Morgan to realize that they were fighting for control over Ruin's Deep all along.

The port and city of Avon were known to harbor vampires, divided under the rule of two vampire princes, while the villages and countryside were both haven and hunting grounds for shape-shifter clans headed and protected by the tiger clan--tigers being the fiercest natural predators of the north.

Like most people, Morgan was unaware that Avon held a highly coveted and disputed territory in the underworld. The turf war between the were-tigers and the vampires was fought covertly, a deadly chess game of ambushes and assassinations in an ever mounting feud. Normal routines and habits became disrupted, producing a trail of bodies.

08. Morgan is given an audience with the vampire lords of the city and the port

As few mortals beyond Morgan could attest, Aeslyn Tear, the city once smothered by the wrath of the gods, was far more extensive and surprisingly intact than anyone suspected. It was a sprawling underground metropolis dwarfing the port and city and underlying the surrounding countryside.

09. Morgan is abducted by a were raiding party.

10. Morgan is oblivious to the demon's attempt to snatch her from her abductors.

11. Morgan is confronted by the alpha tiger.

Initially, the object of the wager was simply to eliminate Morgan, but she proved to be something of a prize herself. As Morgan would make a fine consort in the eyes of both leaders, the truce almost disintegrated over their attempts to conquer her.

12. Morgan escapes from the tiger clan, while they are distracted by the demon.

13. Morgan is summoned before her goddess

14. Morgan probes the ruins for proof of demonic involvement in the massacre

15. Morgan is noticed by vampires and stalked, inadvertently frustrating the demon

16. Morgan finds herself in the middle of a battle over Ruin's Deep

17. Morgan is captured and becomes the focus of a wager

The increased stakes prompted a change in the wager, to settle both disputes by infecting Morgan at the same time, a test of the powers of a vampire and a ware to turn their victims.

18. Morgan is infected by the alpha tiger and the lord of the city

Morgan fell into their trap, helpless as her body and soul became the battle ground to determine the outcome of the were-vampire war. To speed her transformation, she was bled to the brink of death before receiving their corrupting kisses, the venomous bites of the vampire and the were. Because weres and vampires were immune to each others venom, the possibility of producing a were-vampire never occurred to them. It was more probable that she would simply perish from the conflicting infections.

19. Morgan is visited by the demon, tempted by it as she lies dying

20. Morgan dies yet is turned by both bites, a vampire-were tiger

At first it seemed that the prince was the victor, when Morgan died and rose as a vampire. Only her natural regeneration, a facet of her innate psychic ability, made it plausible for her to endure the battle for dominance of her flesh and spirit. A were would turn overnight and swiftly gain vitality. Then as the hunger seized her, she transformed into a tiger, proving that she had been turned simultaneously into a blood-drinker and a man-eater.

In a way, the dual transformation proved Morgan's salvation, her tiger form making it far easier to slake her blood thirst at the same time she fed her hunger for fresh meat by leading her instinctively to animal prey.

21. Morgan remains the focus of the wager for Ruin's Deep--the sire to win her wins

As was common in fledging new wares and vampires, Morgan's sires exploited her ignorance of her new condition to strengthen their hold over her, though in her case neither was certain of what to expect. Assessing her limits and abilities demanded a level of cooperation unheard of between a vampire and a were who were not bound in a master-servant relationship. The gestalt effect of her dual conversion granted her greater resistance to the unique vulnerabilities of weres and vampires, immunity to either sire's thrall, unparalleled powers of regeneration and the enhancement of her natural psychic talents. These benefits did not console Morgan for the loss of her humanity, however.

22. Morgan succumbs to her hunger, escaping to hunt

23. Morgan confronts what she has become and exposes herself to the dawn

As she became aware of the seductiveness of human prey, she decided to end her unnatural existence before she damned herself by succumbing to them. Exposure to the sun seemed the most obvious and certain way out, as she had been forced to witness such an execution--never realizing that it was the victim's ignorance that made such exposure fatal.

24. Morgan is shocked to regain her humanity

Morgan regained her humanity through what she believed to be the intervention of her goddess when she attempted to commit suicide.

25. Morgan is shocked to discover her hungers persist

26. Morgan is confronted by her unwanted suitors and the implications of what she is

27. Morgan discovers the consequence of indulging her hungers

28. Morgan is finally cornered by the demon

29. Morgan slays the demon, only to learn it was one of many loosed ten years ago

30. Morgan presents her proof to her goddess

31. Morgan is confronted by her sires who reveal the role Arden played in her fate

Var

Notes to Append: Seventeen - Ruins' Deep

<!> Points of interest [01/27/04]: The conception of Morgan and Logan. The union and separation of Morgan and Logan. The initiation of Morgan. <!>

Cast Notes

Morgan

Logan (phantom)

Duke of Avon

Court (Ensemble) Advisors (3), Ministers (9), Councilors (18), Bodyguards (3), Guards (60/20), Courtesans (3), Concubine

Arden

Priestesses (39) Matrons (3), Maidens (9), Maids (27)

Priests (27) Patrons (2), Monks (9), Clerics (16)

Logan's Family

Mother

Father

Amanda, Sister

Brothers (3)

Staff (7) Steward, Cook, Groom, Maids (3), Nurse

Hannah's Family

Father

Mother (deceased)

\* Husband (Logan's best friend)

\* Children (0/3)

Staff (3) Steward, Cook, Maid

Sword & Sorcerer Inn

Adventurers (18)

Staff (5)

Lloyd

Assassins (3) (were)

Cult assassins (9) (vamp)

An admirer, (were-tiger)

A swordsman, (were-tiger)

A swordsman, (were-tiger)

A guide/assassin, (vampire)

A sorcerer

A conjurer

A cleric

A thief (elf)

A scout/assassin (drow)

Brigands (21/9)

Seventeen - Childhood Demons

AN: Ruins' Deep would effectively be the second book in the second series. The first book, Seventeen - Childhood Demons, would be set at the Academy or immediately after returning from it. The elements of the first book have been explored elsewhere. The demon within. The coming of age and engagement. The breaking down and confronting the past. The end and the beginning, possession. The fruitless pursuit. Nightmares have plagued Morgan since the night her childhood demon escaped. Some were the disturbing images of an alien entity taking control of Logan's body, turning an act of love into an act of devastating brutality. Some were similar and horrifying memories of the same entity taking possession of her mother and trying to kill her, only to be torn to pieces by an invisible force lashing out of Morgan and Logan. Some were of the excruciating physical and mental mutilation they had endured as the demon probed the pair of them, testing their suitability as offerings. Buried in those images, as in the second sort, was the memory of something inside her mind snapping and then unfolding, to heal her flesh, to heal and protect her mind, and ultimately to slay the person she loved most in the world. Through all this trauma, she clung to the dreams searching for clues, signs, anything that would lead her to the identity of her nemesis or the place where he had been summoned or bound. They were the only leads she had in the pursuit of Logan's salvation. The only hope they had of becoming separated, or reunited as husband and wife. Notes and relevant material can be filed under Childhood Demons for simultaneous or preemptive development.

In past attempts to explore the Childhood Demons thread, the climax followed the marriage of Morgan and Logan. It is suitable for the marriage to occur at the conclusion of their initiations, to allow their friends to share the celebration, with the couple settling in the region to pursue advanced training and start a family away from the interference of their family heads. Because of their intimate upbringing, the night of their union invited a more intimate coupling than either had ever dared, opening the door for the demon that possessed the slain artist to emerge and take possession of one of their bodies. The demon's escape was punctuated by bloodshed, as the demon and the bride struggle to kill one another. Morgan ends up under suspicion for the murder of her husband, defending herself with a slightly altered version of the facts of the demon's attack, and escaping execution only because a witness turns up to testify that "Logan" had taken passage to the North. This allows Morgan to arrive in Avon, making a slight side trip on her way to the North in pursuit of Logan.

Of note, there are some approaches to Childhood Demons that subject the boy and girl to the same childhood trauma, but the majority featured the girl alone being subjected to the horror of losing her family, while the boy is affected indirectly by the chain of succession implicit in their split inception.

Morgan returns to her grandmother's home in Avon to confront her past.

Visited by nightmares, Morgan reflects upon recent steps.

Arriving at the temple, Morgan finds a summons to visit her grandmother, Muriel.

Morgan is disturbed to learn of her inheritance and a betrothal, either of which could conflict with her calling.

A night alone in her childhood home is relieved only by a visit from the goddess, instructing her to put her affairs in order.

A visitor comes to the rescue.

Unable to return to sleep, Morgan luxuriates in an early, casual morning, almost forgetting her appointments.

Lack of sleep catches up to her in the bath, and her flight from nightmares causes a potentially fatal drowning accident.

Morgan's betrothed arrives anxiously, letting himself in and tracking her down as unsettled feelings deepen into alarm.

A strained breakfast party.

Morgan suffers an escort from Blaine to her appointment with her parents' advocate, the executor of their estate.

Morgan strains to convey her intentions to quickly dispose of claims and entanglements that would compromise her calling.

Morgan takes note of the opportunity she has to confront her demons and lay her ghosts to rest.

Morgan returned from the Academy at Aeryn Tear determined to face the demons of her childhood.

She was sent to the academy for training in the physical and psychic disciplines necessary for her to become a paladin of the goddess.

The temple of the goddess crested the ridge dividing the Port of Avon and the City of Avon with a commanding view of the Aeslyn Tear Ruins and the former Seat of Avon.

The largest port, and third largest city in Arden, Avon was unique for not having a reigning lord.

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When House Avon fell, and no legitimate heir could be found, the crown prince was appointed regent and ever since the domain had been under the indirect rule of the throne.

An only child, Morgan was orphaned when she was seven years old.

The trauma of witnessing the massacre that claimed the lives of her parents shattered her young psyche, unleashing her full, naked psychic potential.

Unable to deal with her in this condition, her surviving family abandoned her on the steps of the temple of the goddess Arden.

Morgan recovered quickly in the goddess's care, healing from the trauma and adapting to the strange powers it awakened.

Morgan is noticed by a demon from the ruins.

Morgan tests her nerve while Blaine pleads his suit.

Blaine dogs Morgan's heels as she visits the ruins to firm her resolve.

Morgan considers Blains pleas, stunned to hear his story of their meeting and realizing she unwittingly encouraged his affection.

Morgan attempts to restate her position, referring back to the start of intimacy in their relationship.

A shocking episode is revisited.

A fifteen-year-old Morgan loses her cool when her friends drag her down into the ruins.

Morgan snaps when she encounters one of the demons of her childhood and takes flight, leading her friends deep into the maze.

Morgan willingly indulges her friends' curiosity to escape from the horrors of her past.

Morgan names her priorities, the couple makes an informal pact.

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Morgan must decide her true feelings, as part of putting her affairs in order, but sorting out her past still came first.

Morgan and Blaine reach an understanding oblivious to the presence of an unearthly observer

The sole survivor of the massacre that claimed the lives of her parents, she alone knew what the expedition into the ruins of Aeslyn Tear had unearthed.

It had taken ten years of training to master the powers unleashed within her that tragic night and fully comprehend the horror her parents unwittingly helped loose upon the world.

Armed with the mantle of a paladin of the goddess, Morgan hoped to discover who her parents had been, find out why they had died and lay their ghosts to rest.

Morgan interviews family and acquaintances of her parents.

Her debut provides Morgan a good place to begin her inquiry.

A coming out is scheduled for Morgan's seventeenth birthday on midsummer's eve.

To her annoyance, preparations and matters of her estate keep Morgan busy until the week of midsummer.

A private celebration on the eve of her birthday is thrown into chaos by a tavern brawl.

Questions lead to confrontations, shedding light on the family legacy.

The morning of her anniversary, Morgan is infuriated to learn her debut will include a wedding announcement.

Morgan circumvents her grandmother despite being tied up all day in preparations, calling upon Blaine telepathically.

After welcoming the guests, Morgan hunts down her grandmother finding her engaged in an argument with the goddess.

Dancing, a glimpse of politics, intrigue and cues to tantalizing leads.

True to his word, Blaine derails her grandmother's plot with the support of her father's father, Alfred.

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Morgan seeks audience with associates of her parents and their liege.

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Morgan confides that Balfour--a magistrate and former lover of Muriel--died before she could respond to his invitation.

Morgan is stunned to learn Alfred and Muriel are half-brother and -sister, explaining the scandal her parents endured.

A second lead fizzles due to the sudden or recent demise of a contact, but Morgan perseveres.

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Alvin, Morgan's great-grandfather on both sides, is her nearest true half-elf relation--the controversial "lost heir".

Alfred provided a list of her parents associates--the most promising lead ends at a funeral for the friend and adversary.

Morgan is encouraged by word of an intrigue involving her parents around the time of their deaths.

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Many protests evolved into insults, resulting in duels championed by her father or debates hosted by her mother.

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In spite of the position she finds herself in, Morgan presses the objectors in hopes of discovering their motives.

Morgan receives no admissions and her attempt to provoke their confidence gets her ejected from the club.

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Morgan escapes from the tiger clan, while they are distracted by the demon.

Morgan is summoned before her goddess

Morgan probes the ruins for proof of demonic involvement in the massacre

Morgan is noticed by vampires and stalked, inadvertently frustrating the demon

Morgan was dragged from her cell expecting to face execution, after lingering in prison for a month after her conviction and sentencing. Her fears seemed to be confirmed when she was brought to a bath for purification. From there, her path deviated from her expectations by leading back to the court, still nude as the day she was arrested. To her shock, the assembled court was presented testimony from a witness detailing the departure of Arduin Morgan on ship to Athelon. The charges against her were summarily dropped, and Morgan was escorted from the keep and dismissed.

For a moment, Morgan boiled in outrage at being discharged onto a public street in the nude, then what she heard in the court registered, and any concern for her appearance was dismissed by the formulation of an immediate plan of action. Storming in to a public audience, she made a direct appeal to the Duke of Avon for a commission to lead an expedition into the ruins of Aeslyn Tear. Once the commotion caused by her intrusion settled, and the Duke's advisors informed him of who she was--notably one of the few people to ever return from the depths of the ruins alive--he reprimanded the guards for discharging her in such a condition, and instructed servants to take her aside and clothe her for a private audience.

In private chambers, after Morgan had dressed, he questioned her. Morgan reminded him of the crime she was detained for, specifically of her testimony that a demon from the ruins had taken possession of her husband, asserting that her only hope of recovering him was to search for the demon's origins in the ruins for any clues that would enable her to find and drive the demon from Arduin. She kept the fact that her testimony did not include the exact truth to herself, specifically how Arduin came to be possessed to begin with. Given their recent trials at the ruins, it was simpler to blame that than admit to her own suspicions. To her relief, she was granted the commission.

Retired Notes

In Hunger & In Thirst

Proposed

Certain ideas refuse to be divorced from the character of Morgan. First among them a scenario that causes Morgan to be divided into male and female incarnations. To satisfy the imperative that he or she starts out as a normal person, the impulse was satisfied by having a staged division and incorporating the ideas of Morgan acting as her own surrogate mother, acting as a conduit for her childhood demon to possess the male Morgan during a psycho-sexual fusion with the female Morgan, being infected by were and vampire venom while carrying her ember and of course dealing with the paradox of her birth.

The original device was an embryo created by Dusk Morgan, and stripped of the previous context, it remains a plausible device. The crucible plot is founded on an experiment in parthenogenesis, a kind of soul jar, and a means some artists had employed to prolong their existence. In simple terms, the artist created a clone-embryo that was linked to the artist and kept in stasis in a magical crucible. Basically an advanced soul jar. In the event of the artist's death, that crucible would be the key to his or her rebirth.

In a story where Dawn Morgan is displaced in time to serve as a surrogate mother to herself the impetus starts with Dusk Morgan. While a fatal dual infection works as a catalyst for his psychic awakening, permitting Dusk to escape death through the creation of Dawn, it is somewhat difficult to establish him as the object of the wager. That plot evolved entirely around Dawn. In fact, starting with Dusk removes the necessity for many of the designs built up around Dawn, including the demonic possession thread. However, by using Dusk to establish Dawn, Dawn becomes the key to preventing a cataclysmic future.

A good way to develop the transition from Dusk to Dawn, without compromising the wager, would be to have Dusk fall victim to assassination by a lethal injection of vampire and were venom. Presumably, by combining their venom before injection the effects would be unquestionably lethal, while combining their venom in the bloodstream presented a properly trained or prepared victim time to neutralize one or the other. Ironically, the mixed venom does cause a hybrid turning, but only on a cellular level while it is breaking down the body. The victim is hit hard and fast, voiding of the stomach and bowels causing an unappeasable hunger and thirst. The victim can only keep down water after the first hour. By the end of the first day, his internal organs start breaking down and the victim starts bleeding to death as the poison eviscerates him. Perversely, the victim typically survives for as much as a day after evisceration, as the rest of his body is sustained by a cycle of regeneration for as long as he is exposed to sufficient levels of light, during which time his mind is stimulated to an extraordinary level of psychic activity.

It was in this stage that Dusk had a vision of the future dominated by cataclysm. Realizing his death was inevitable, his only option to survive and prevent the horrors he had seen from coming to pass was to somehow resurrect himself. He knew a spell for reincarnation, technically parthenogenic rebirth, but that required a host mother and almost two decades to mature, by which time the tides of the future would be too strong to shift. On the other hand, he had access to more potential, more power, in that moment than he ever dreamed of. Enough to alter the ember he was creating, at the same time creating a new set of future possibilities, from which one would produce a version of himself that could be brought back to serve as host mother to the ember and champion in his effort to avert the cataclysm. Unfortunately, no one knew of his illness, bringing her back in a position to host the ember he created would kill him, and she would arrive in the midst of a blood bath disoriented by her displacement and his dismemberment.

Dismemberment was the final stage of the victim's demise, as if the spirit literally clawed its way out of the flesh to end its suffering. This freed the ember from within Dusk and spilled it and the bloody mess his insides had been reduced to into the bath where he sought comfort from the aches preceding his disintegration. Then Dawn appeared in the bath, encompassing the sinking ember. She struggled to the surface, recoiling in horror from the scene that met her eyes, and flung herself over the edge of the bath to escape. In her haste, she slipped on the tiles and knocked herself out on the edge of the tub. By this time, Dusk's friends were concerned by his two day absence and entered his apartment to investigate. They discovered Dawn's naked, blood coated body, and Dusk's remains and called for the guard. Dawn was arrested, but did not recover from the shock, disorientation and confusion for a few days, by which time she was facing trial. In her mind, she--like Dusk--had recently returned to the Academy for her final year of initiation. However, she was told that there was no record of her ever attending the Academy.

The more she learned during her trial, the more confused she got. Her insistence that her name was Morgan--the same as her victim, as she was accused of assassinating him--was taken as impudence, and earned her the contempt of the court. She tried to explain that it was short for Morganna, and that she was named for her mother. She appealed to people she remembered as her instructors, but none of them admitted to knowing her. She did, however, attract the attention of her principle instructor, her patron at the school, her mentor in psychic arts. He visited her, commenting on her resemblance to the victim, and the potential he had possessed. He tested her psychic abilities and disciplines and confirmed that she was the product of his instruction, but again, he had never seen her before her namesake's death. He also questioned her about the responses she had given during her initial examination, claiming things like a date eighteen years hence, and a birth date almost precisely nine months hence. He commented on the manner of Dusk's death and finally on the fact that Dawn was pregnant.

By deduction, her mentor works out what must have happened when Dusk was assassinated to create and displace Dawn--presumably so she could avenge his death. However, he is also aware of the fact that her presence in the world had altered the future, creating an alternative to the devastation he had foreseen. To test this theory, and to devise a way for Morgan to escape her execution, he slips her a poison. If she is the product of Dusk's actions, she would be a hybrid were-vampire, so the poison would simply induce a death like state and convince her captors that she committed suicide. They would bury her in a pauper's grave, from which she would be able to escape when the poison wore off and she reanimated. Sunlight and a proper meal would be sufficient to restore her to normal vitality. In addition, he gave her an amulet that held a sample of Dusk's corrupted flesh and blood that could be used to track down the source of the vampire and were venom used in the poison, and possibly lead her to the assassin. Since the alternative was being decapitated, Morgan was willing to risk the poison.

A variant employing the ring of regeneration--in truth an elven ring--is also plausible. The ring of regeneration plot works on a related concept, but excludes the demon thread. In essence, the ring of regeneration is an elven artifact possessing a number of special powers. The true name of the ring was the ring of the body and soul. It could regenerate or rejuvenate the body, turn the body male or female, reincarnate a soul in a new body parthenogenically, store a soul in the event of the body's destruction, or transfer a soul from one body to another.

The simplest version of the elven ring variant would be for Morgan to become locked by it in female form, trying to conclude the ordeal of mastering that form in time to return to the Academy following the Autumn Festival. The ring would come to him through his roommate, who used it to become a boy and escape from slavery. He, or she, would have already completed the ordeals of the ring--as a girl, with the unwitting help of Morgan--and gained the powers it bestowed. Morgan only needed to complete the female ordeal to master the ring and gain the same powers. In female form, however, Morgan caught the eye of Logan and Roark and resurrected their personal rivalry to complicate their feud over the ruins. The demon plot could be worked into his life story, with Morgan exploiting his current form to probe for answers. It is, however, quite a bit of strain to introduce sexual dichotomy into Morgan's character.

One of the ideas for establishing Morgan involved a fey, or androgyne, first incarnation, and a split second incarnation. As in other developments, Morgan was descended from a goddess on her mother's side and a god on her father's side--the twins, Arden and Arduin. Arden and Arduin assume the translation-fusion origin to become unique among gods for actually being female and male--the first "human" gods. Genetically, however, they were angelic-demonic fusions that imitated humans, and their sex chromosomes were adaptive. When paired together or with a human chromosomes, Arden's sex chromosomes acted as female chromosomes while Arduin's sex chromosomes acted as male chromosomes, thus Arden produced sons and daughters with human mates, while Arduin only produced sons. When a daughter of Arden mated with a son of Arduin, the offspring was either male or androgyne, depending on whether a human or exotic female chromosome was paired with the exotic male chromosome. Morgan was conceived with an exotic male and exotic female pairing, and born fey.

Morgan was chosen as a sacrifice because she was human and fey, thus a vessel a demon could use to escape from a demon warded circle and be entirely comfortable living in. Unfortunately for the demon, Morgan had explored her sexual potential using the ring of regeneration, and accidentally triggered a split rebirth as a boy and a girl--as father and mother respectively. She had been lured into the demon's trap by the abduction of her daughter, and was prepared to sacrifice herself to ensure the demon did not harm her girl once she submitted to it. Of course, the demon did try to kill the girl, triggering the suicidal trap Morgan had prepared to slay the demon. Unfortunately, this caused the demon to be torn asunder as her psyche split between the minds of her offspring, trapped in the minds of the boy and girl. Mostly, this follows the same pattern as the phoenix split conception, but using the ring as the cause of the parthenogenic split. The boy and girl meet, dub each other Dusk and Dawn, become lovers and the demon steals the body of Dusk.

Dawn slays him in self-defense, but is forced to escape from prison to avoid being executed. Dawn sets out to gather evidence of her childhood ordeal in hopes of proving her innocence. This leads her into the middle of a war over Ruin's Deep where she becomes the object of Logan and Roark's wager. The added complications for her would be the reconstitution of Morgan's mind in Dusk and Dawn's fusion, or more accurately, the problem Morgan faces is the assimilation of Dusk and Dawn. Matters are simplified in respect to the timing of significant events. Morgan grew up posing as a boy and a girl, acquired the ring at the age of nineteen, conceived Dusk and Dawn, who were both born when she turned twenty. Dawn was abducted at age seven, when Morgan was twenty-seven. Morgan wakes up from her death at age twenty-seven in the bodies of Dusk and Dawn (as the demon is busy warping them into fey twins determined to claim the host it sought ten years earlier?). Regardless of whether she is fey or female on resurrection, Morgan would have the wager and pursuit of the demon to contend with.

There is one issue with having Morgan born fey and resurrected in the fusion of her split incarnations. She would have lived twenty-seven years as a fey, and seventeen years each split into male and female incarnations. There alternatives to explore where she is born fully fledged at seventeen as the result of a conceptual fusion and follows the general path to her demise, but that throws the idea of a normal origin even further out the window than being born fey. Ultimately, the staged split conception offers the only plausible scheme.

X

Dawn was on her way home from the Academy at Aeryn Tear determined to face the demons of her childhood. She was sent to the foreign academy the previous winter for special training in the physical and psychic disciplines necessary for her to become a paladin of the goddess.

An only child, Dawn was orphaned when she was seven years old. The trauma of witnessing the massacre that claimed the lives of her parents shattered her young psyche, unleashing her full, naked psychic potential. Unable to deal with her in this condition, her surviving family abandoned her on the steps of the temple of the goddess Arden. Dawn recovered quickly in the goddess's care, healing from the trauma and adapting to the strange powers it awakened.

Dawn's powers earned her enrollment at the Academy of Avon Tear for training as a muse. Her psychic abilities made it impossible for Dawn to learn magic, but it was possible for her instructors to adapt the disciplines of intuitive magic to her specific needs. Some of her natural abilities came from her mother, but beyond that she was fairly typical of a psychic, predominantly telepathic and telekinetic.

The use of her other psychic abilities required Dawn to enter special states of consciousness through meditation or expressed themselves spontaneously, making them more difficult to develop. She gained most of her mental discipline through the mastery of physical disciplines.

It had taken ten years of training to master the powers unleashed within her that tragic night and fully comprehend the horror her parents unwittingly helped loose upon the world. Armed with the mantle of a paladin of the goddess, Dawn hoped to discover who her parents had been, find out why they had died and lay their ghosts to rest.

As her most recent nightmare proved, she was still scarred by a trauma that had been buried for most of a decade.

When her nights became haunted by nightmares of her childhood abduction, and her days tormented by frightening blackouts and traumatic flashbacks, she set out to discover what really happened to her, to unlock her psychic potential.

Unfortunately, her attempt to keep her investigation a secret forced her to proceed without proper guidance.

Ironically, it was the abilities she gained from her ordeal that offered her a means to discover the truth.

Her research revealed how to proceed, using a special form of astral projection, but her inexperience forced her to proceed randomly, focusing in on the time she wanted to view by trial and error.

Dawn cleared her mind and attempted once more to probe her past.

She jumped backward in greater increments, first a few days, then a few weeks, a month, several months, a year, two more years, five years, a decade… and at that point she had overshot her target date by eight years, coming instead to the time of her conception.

Dawn suffered only a mild disorientation, and quickly discovered her memory loss was the result of something installed within her mind that actively obscured her memories.

Her name comes back to her with a little effort, and her skills and abilities assert themselves as circumstances present themselves.

But specific details of her past elude her.

In that way, her nightmares and flashbacks served a greater purpose in guiding her, they were the only keys to her past.

A few years before Dawn was born, her mother had unwittingly absorbed a demon that was released from an artifact destroyed in her hands in the midst of combat.

Her mother, Phoenix, eventually discovered that the magic had been transferred to her, but she had not known that the magic was actually the natural abilities of the demon that had been trapped in the warded ring.

It took the demon ten years to take possession of Phoenix.

The girl noticed the change in her mother right away, prompting the demon to eliminate her before she revealed Azael's presence to anyone else.

Azael summoned her cult and hunted the girl down; dragging her deep into the ruins.

Dawn was abducted and offered as a sacrifice to a demon.

Phoenix fought the demon from within to save Dawn, gaining control just in time to stop the demon from killing her.

Only the regenerative powers the girl had inherited from the demon, through Phoenix, had allowed her to survive Azael's torture.

Phoenix could hardly believe her daughter was still alive, staring in horror as her dismembered body pulled itself back together.

Fearing she could not suppress the demon for long, Phoenix focused her attention on slaying the cultists while Dawn healed.

That was enough to convince Dawn that her mother had returned to herself.

Dawn escaped during the confusion and became lost in the depths of the ruins.

With no idea where to go or what to do, she simply wandered at first, exploring the ancient city.

In spite of her recent trauma, she found herself marveling over how intact everything was.

Dawn soon discovered there were frightening things trapped in the city with her.

Aeslyn Tear was a city of ghosts and other spirits; the former wandering freely and liable to follow her everywhere, the latter seemingly bound in place.

Most were undetectable until she passed through one or stepped into a warding circle and was violently assaulted.

The demons were the worst.

Ghosts chilled her with their touch, taunting and terrifying her while violating her mind, but few were capable of molesting her, body and soul, the way demons did while she was in their spheres of influence.

While struggling to defend herself from the demons' ruthless probing, Dawn realized they were trying to break her in order to possess her body.

Her fear of becoming trapped with or possessed by one of these entities compounded and evolved into greater horror and desperation with each terrifying encounter.

An even greater threat loomed when Dawn stumbled into a dragon's lair.

Fortunately, Phoenix had finished fighting the cultists and tracked Dawn down, arriving in time to distract the dragon from devouring her daughter.

It had already occurred to Phoenix that she would have to sacrifice herself to slay the demon and protect Dawn.

With her powers of regeneration, she had despaired of finding something capable of killing her--until she confronted the dragon.

After rescuing Dawn, she held her for a moment then urged her to escape while she drew the dragon away.

To her frustration, the dragon seemed to understand what she was doing and focused its attention on the little girl, pinning her down again and again to prevent her from escaping, while ignoring Phoenix.

Phoenix fought desperately to protect Dawn, baffled by the dragon's peculiar fixation on the little girl.

More than once, the girl jumped, turned or leapt just in time to avoid lashing claws or slashing teeth.

It was as if she sensed the attack an instant before it happened.

She barely escaped being swallowed alive by slithering through a fissure into a tiny antechamber.

The dragon attacked the wall violently, intent on carving its way through to the girl, until Phoenix closed on it using a sword seized from one of the cultists.

The dragon turned on her, its piercing gaze underscored by the mind-crushing force of an angry telepathic probe.

Something like recognition illuminated the dragon's glare, as it finally focused it's formidable attention on her.

Before she knew it, Phoenix was devoured alive.

The sight of her mother's death drove Dawn deep into her hiding hole.

Grief-stricken terror ruled her mind until she passed out from exhaustion.

When she awoke some time later, her eyes had adjusted to the pale, phosphorescent light.

For the first time in uncounted days, Dawn found herself in a safe, secure place.

The dragon could not reach her and nothing else was likely to get past it to threaten her.

She was safe from everything but her nightmares, traumatic recapitulations of her abduction, the abuse she endured at her possessed mother's hands and the shock of watching Phoenix sacrifice herself to end the double threat to her daughter.

There in the dark, she made a startling discovery.

She was being haunted.

From the dark corners of her mind emerged phantoms of her mother, a man she believed to be her father, and the demon that had possessed her mother and tortured her.

The demon, fortunately, seemed to be nothing more than an echo.

After her encounters with the ghosts and spirits of the ruins, it was natural for her to assume new facets of her psyche were the "ghosts" of her mother and father.

The small cavern proved to be a sanctuary, providing for her basic needs.

The water in the pool was pure and sweet and crowded with fish.

A resourceful girl, she did what was necessary to stave off hunger and thirst, and gradually began to recover from the shock and horror.

Her isolation encouraged her to accept her ghosts and lay her nightmares to rest.

It amazed her that she had survived in the depths of the ruins for as long as she had.

Her spirit should have broken when she explored her little lair and discovered there was no way back to the surface.

Of course, it had not occurred to her it was sometimes necessary to go down in order to find a way up.

Her escape was something of an accident.

Diving deep in pursuit of her prey, Dawn was sucked suddenly into an underground channel of the Avon River.

Caught in a current, Dawn was dragged out to sea through a submerged river outlet.

It was a wild ride and Dawn was pretty beaten up by the end of it.

Fortunately, she had inherited the powers the ring had granted her mother, and most of her injuries healed by the time she washed up on the beach.

In a daze, in the dead of night, she made her way back home.

When Hunter confronted her the legacy of her ordeal manifested itself.

The repeated psychic assaults she had endured had awakened her own psychic potential, forging it into natural telepathic and telekinetic abilities.

She lashed out at Hunter in a preemptive retaliation to his inquisitive telepathic probe.

For a moment, the retired demon hunter responded in kind, taking her hostility as a sign that she was possessed or a demon herself.

Dawn and Dusk escaped from the ruins and returned home.

They had witnessed the death of Phoenix, and told the tale to their shocked elders.

Both children developed the power of regeneration, and gained access to some of their psychic potential, losing some of their ability to learn magic in the process.

In her undisciplined attack, Dawn had opened her mind to her adversary.

A seasoned sorcerer, Hunter had developed and trained his own psychic abilities and was able to read her while defending against her wild onslaught.

He probed past her attacks into her wounded mind and concluded that she was the victim of a traumatic, psychic rape--an attempted demonic possession.

As gently and skillfully as possible, he soothed her fears and coaxed her back to sanity.

The chaos in her mind made it difficult for him to determine precisely what had happened to her during her abduction, but it was clear she witnessed her mother's death and endured repeated psychic assaults.

Initially, he had no intention of keeping her or making her his protégé.

He had gone far enough out of his way just rescuing her and delivering her to the temple.

But after the goddess did what she could to heal Dawn, she returned the girl to Hunter, named him her guardian and instructed him to train her as his successor.

To silence his protests, she pointed out the fact that a girl claiming to be Allannah had been rescued weeks earlier, in time to take Dawn's place at the Academy.

Dawn was safe from that demon only as long as it believed she was dead, and the demon was safe from the goddess, or anyone she could send after it, as long as it was under the protection of the Academy.

People noticed immediately that Dawn was not herself when she returned home.

Traumatized by the whole ordeal, she was virtually autistic and possessed powerful psychic abilities which made her unnerving and unmanageable.

She was taken to the sanctuary of the goddess and Arden was able to bring her back to her senses by sealing away the memories of her torture, possession and merciless retaliation against the cultists.

Her family was informed that Dawn had been abducted to serve as a sacrifice and her abilities had surfaced in response to the threat of demonic possession. While Dawn was returned to her family in her right mind, the powers she had gained remained wild and unpredictable. Following the death of Phoenix, Dusk's parents continued to raise Dawn. In many ways, Dawn and Dusk were siblings, particularly in the sense of sibling rivalry. While fiercely protective of each other, they competed just as fiercely, driving each other on.

Ironically, the position Cinder was thrust into inspired many to conquer her outside the arena of battle. For every man prepared to duel with her there were three men trying to court her. For some, the attraction was her position, while for others they were compelled by her resemblance to the phoenix Ideal. The fact that she was a widow potentially pregnant with a dragon’s child was no deterrent. Not even her masculine attitudes and habits, when they overcome the feminine façade imposed by Arden, could deter her suitors. Dusk and Dawn were engaged as the result of an affair between Thorn and Cinder. Thorn had set out to “console” the widow of his best friend, and Cinder, protected by her pregnancy, had indulged her old friend for the sake of amusement. The arranged marriage began as a spontaneous cover-up when Feather became suspicious of Thorn’s interest in Cinder, but Feather and Crimson took it very seriously and their observations prompted Thorn to become fixated on it. Only at the formal meeting to seal the agreement did Cinder realize her friend might have conned her into engaging her daughter to her son. Unfortunately, Crimson had not confided Ash’s liaison with Feather, and Amber and Crimson had their own agendas, pushing the engagement forward. Dusk, was regarded by his mother and his mother’s husband as a normal, first generation phoenix. Ash had never shown possession of the phoenix legacy until the night of conception and Cinder lost her access to the dragon legacy during the switch. As a result, Dawn was considered a rare, first generation dragon-phoenix. Neither child was an immediate target of the Purge. Technically, they already shared the condition the Purge was intended to reduce every member of the Phoenix House to—being young, raw and inexperienced.

Since Ash was in an assumed guise when Dusk was conceived, not even Feather suspected that Dusk and Dawn were in any way related. Dusk was officially the son of Thorn, but he was named after his mysterious father. In actuality, “Dusk” had been an alias used by Ash, posing as a phoenix in his altered form. To balance his mother’s infidelity, his presumed father was a rogue. Because of the Purge, Thorn had been stripped of the wisdom and experience that had tempered his selfish nature. He was talented and ambitious, but lazy and self absorbed, willing to go to great lengths to avoid responsibility. Thorn’s respectable lineage was offset, in Crimson’s eyes, by the fact that Thorn had become the black sheep of the family. His house compromised itself to ensure that Thorn could not inherit the title he championed in a former incarnation. Crimson swallowed her distaste when his clumsy indiscretion lead to the betrothal of Dusk and Dawn. In hopes of taking full advantage of the situation, Crimson begins a campaign to slander Cinder, and by extension Dawn, in such a way that people would ultimately look to Dusk to redeem the title they held. In spite of the difficulty of smearing Cinder and Dawn’s names, while reinforcing their legitimacy, Crimson had an excellent model in Thorn. Even the most respectable families had members the rest were ashamed to acknowledge, criminals and incompetents. It also helped that Cinder seemed to have no history. No one’s past could be that obscure without some significant reason and a deliberate effort to hide it. Certainly, no one was as well trained as Cinder without notice unless they were part of the underworld. The more competent Cinder proved to be, the greater the suspicion became that she was a criminal.

Criminal or not, she was a phoenix and worthy of respect. Even criminals were known to support the establishment, even as they preyed on its constituents. As long as she assured the continuity of a respected bloodline, she herself did not need to be an admirable human being. The key to Crimson’s plot was to sow mistrust, to undermine the people’s confidence in the Queen’s Protector. It cultivated support for the regency, and caused people to look for a sound, reliable person they could trust to assume power at the end of the regency. For some, Dawn was the one they looked to, but Dusk was the one that appealed to the prejudices of most. After the birth of Dawn, Cinder devoted as much time as she could spare on self improvement. Her pregnancy had made her vulnerable to assassination, and the uncertainty about being reincarnated through Dusk and or Dawn discouraged her from even attempting to conceive a new incarnation of herself. Thoughts of her mortality made a great incentive to improve herself, but so did the discrimination she faced in her new sex. Her efforts did as much to hurt her reputation as they did to make it. Cinder kept an open mind about Dusk and Dawn. They were either both incarnations of the soul of creation, Cinder herself, or in Dusk’s case an actual son. At the betrothal the pair had been tested and found genetically compatible—virtually identical, but safe to interbreed. Unfortunately, Dawn was proven to be identical to Cinder, in no physical way related to Ash. In light of the Purge, this was disclosed only to the court, where it was used to challenge Cinder’s marriage to Ash, in hopes of stripping the regency from Amber. That challenge was trumped by the fact that there was no proof of Ash’s death, though it came up from time to time as efforts to find him produced naught.

Cinder was approached by Magus and offered a mission. Cinder was surprised to be sought out in her retreat from the chaos of Court and the memories of her former life. It had been years since they last parted, and her initial pleasure at his visit soured when he presented his request. Rather than give her a chance to respond, he departed and left her with the details, and instructions to meet him the next day, in a letter. Unable to ignore the appointment, Cinder visited him the next day and tried to demure, insisting that circumstances denied her a life of adventure. Magus brushes her protests off and introduces someone Cinder had not seen for some time. Confronted with someone from her former life, Cinder was forced to revisit a painful chapter of her life when Magus abruptly exposed Cinder’s secret to Raven. In shock and anger, Cinder withdrew and returned home. Unfortunately, as soon as Raven recovered from the revelation, she sought Cinder out demanding answers and explanations. Initially, Cinder tried to deny the truth, hiding behind her new identity, but propriety forced her to offer her hospitality for the night. In spite of everything she had learned as a woman and a mother, even in spite of using her daughter to drive the illusion home, Cinder betrayed herself in the smallest ways. Little habits and mannerisms, which Raven had the most intimate and exciting year of their lives to learn, gave her away. Raven’s suspicions compelled her to corner Cinder, and force her to admit the truth. As difficult as that was, explaining it proved even more difficult. Confronted with Raven’s ignorance of everything but Magus’s assertion that she was once Ash, Raven’s lover and, unwitting, intended husband, Cinder confided the story of her transformation.

Having opened the door to Cinder’s past, Magus challenged her to take up the quest she had been barred from, accompanying and protecting Raven for the opportunity to bring her questions to the man who could best answer them, her grand-father, the Athelon Emperor. Raven, believing until that morning that her love had died seven years ago, begged Cinder to accept the mission. In spite of her uncertainty, the chance to renew her friendship with Raven and perhaps discover why she had turned her life upside down, was too much to resist. She accepts the mission, hastening to make arrangements for her daughter before meeting Raven for their departure. The young mother leaves her family and home in search of answers, hoping to understand the cause of her life’s upheaval. After seven years, she was desperate to know what caused the young man she had been to become the young woman he was now. As she begins her quest, she was reminded of the night of her transformation and the ambition that set two lives in motion at the cost of her former existence. As before, she was inspired to act by her true mentor, Magus. Part of her purpose was to resolve the mystery surrounding her daughter and son, but the first step in her journey was to confront an emperor for the truth about her own conception. Until then, it was Raven’s journey, begun with passage by ship to the southernmost port of Athen. To pass the time, Cinder continues her story, going into detail about her sister’s scheme to use her transformation to strengthen her position as Queen of Arden. That made it necessary to preface her tale with a summary of the Avon Massacre. During Ash’s initiation, an increase in the assassination of phoenix nobles had finally been recognized as an outright Purge.

Cinder and Raven arrived in the southernmost port of the Athelon Empire. The couple faced an unexpected obstacle on their way to Athelon, demonstrations of lingering, ancient prejudices between the people of Athen and Arden. This ill will was exploited by their closing adversaries to harass Cinder.

Cinder and Raven set out overland from the port to reach the Imperial Seat.

Over the following years, Cinder had time to adjust to her new life and become involved once more in the lives of those around her. Her daughter helped her make her peace with being a woman and a mother, and her devotion to truly mastering her new body earned her a reputation as the best unarmed fighter of her generation. At the same time, Cinder was driven to discover the true cause of her transformation. As Amber pressured her to make up for her deficiencies as a woman and a phoenix, Cinder learned about the phoenix legacy, including the applicable reasons for Dawn’s betrothal to Dusk. The fact that they were male and female versions of the Ideal, or each other, was seen as more of a reason to match them together. The only way for Cinder to find out exactly who Dusk and Dawn were, however, was to die and see who she woke up as. It made her wish she had searched for answers as she had intended. Unfortunately, she was a single mother with an adoring daughter, and both of them were extremely vulnerable. Cinder herself was difficult to kill, but Dawn’s gift of regeneration would not mature until seven years after her conception. Nine months later, Cinder would have to begin the girl’s initiation. That left a very small window of opportunity to find answers that had already eluded her for years. In point of fact, she did not even have any idea where to begin looking, and she had long since come to terms with her new existence. So, the quest she was now on was the furthest thing from her mind when Magus approached her with this mission. Nothing short of the lead he had given her, and the desire to make up with Raven, could have inspired her to leave Dawn at that point. Even as they reached Athelon, she found herself aching to simply return home and retrieve her daughter.

Cinder banished her doubts and requested an audience with her grandfather. Not surprisingly, he kept informed about the affairs of his favorite son’s family, and took her aside to get acquainted with his grand-daughter-in-law. Initially, he remained mute on the subject of Ash, ignoring the prompt Magus had armed her with. In order to gain the emperor’s confidence, she was forced to confide the details of her transformation. In exchange, she was enlightened about the cause of all the strife in her kingdom, and how his attempts to make amends for his oversight brought her parents together. Aeirn was in an age of empires. Smaller kingdoms and republics faced conquest and annexation now that there were no remaining frontiers left to colonize. While it was true that the fall of the gods had seen thoroughly to the elimination of sorcery, the ancients had dabbled in arts more dangerous and obscure than that. The arts of conjury, demonology and necromancy mastered by the ancients, had survived in disparate forms such as witchcraft and wizardry throughout the north. It had been only a matter of time before true conjurors, demonologists and necromancers reappeared. They were predominantly northern born people of the Athen domains who clung to a magical tradition which predated the age of empires. Around the world, conjurers, disciples of the second age of magic, be they witches, warlocks, demonologists or necromancers, were being surpassed by the modern mage. Power gained through the abuse of blood, bodies and souls had been condemned, but this had forced the wielders of such power to band together and fight back. Driven from their old haunts, they strove to seize power in other lands, crippling them in the process and inviting their persecutors to annex those lands, continuing their scourge.

Cinder returned to her quarters to confront the impossible: Ash. Cinder never suspected the obvious. It would have been easy for Raven to get a sample from Ash that would allow her to assume his form, and their mating initiation sufficient cause for her to have tried. At the time, it would have allowed her to gain insight into her lover and discover how to please him. The revelations about Cinder and Magus would provide inspiration for her to consider repeating that suit in order to be with the one she loved. It would allow her to present Cinder with a mind-blowing proposition. If Cinder allowed Raven to assume her former identity, Cinder could finally honor the engagement desired by both Raven and Magus without disrupting the political situation at home. Unfortunately, it would pit her in an intimate relationship, physically, with the man she had once been. Tempting and practical, it might be too practical for both of them, but Cinder was forced to consider the proposal. Of course the experiment drew official attention, when the return of Cinder’s husband—the emperor’s grandson—was noticed, creating a commotion. Even though the truth was confided to the emperor, he chose to endorse the deception, dismissing Raven from the post she had just assumed. In exchange for giving Cinder to Raven, she would be in his employ as a covert agent in Arden. To silence Cinder’s protests, he reminded her of her origins, asserting that what he required of Ash/Raven is what he would require of a son or grandson, the difference being that this son also happened to be a woman of the merchant class with extraordinary talents. That settled, Raven departed with Cinder on the final leg of her quest.

Armed with new information, Cinder set out to confront the dragon who granted the emperor the power to unite the many kingdoms of Athen and Aspen in exchange for a taste of humanity. The couple faced a now familiar obstacle on their way to Dragon’s Bath, the suspicion, discrimination and prejudice people of Athen held for those of Arden. This ill will was exploited by their closing adversaries to harass Cinder. Having “Ash” at her side actually made things worse, compelling Raven to reassert herself, ironically gaining more respect because of her distinctive coloring. Any member of the merchant class could turn out to be a deadly spy or assassin, so her kind was always treated with respect. As she mused on it, it was clear to Cinder that Magus had been given part of the story. Enough to send Cinder to the emperor. It was also clear how the dragon’s obsession with identifying its soul might have endured in Ash to inspire his attempt to embody the soul of creation. In both cases, it was a desire to confirm the absolute. In fact, if the legends about the dragon were true, they might both have been the same exact impulse. Ash had studied the legends of creation intently while pursuing his original objective. The dragon’s blind spot, combined with his assertion that he had never confirmed that there was a soul of creation, in spite of the claims of every other divinity, could suggest that the naked god and the naked goddess of myth were the same entity. The same suspicion had caused Ash to assume that the personification of creation was male. It was a simple misapprehension, to assume that identity was seated in the mind, not the soul. This account of the dragon’s pact revealed that the dragon had understood what Ash had not, but of course the dragon could hardly be ignorant of not knowing his true identity.

One evening, the following week, Cinder was attacked while swimming in one of the pools at Dragon’s Bath. Too late she remembered the effect that children of the phoenix legacy had on true dragons. Unlike human dragons, they could use their gifts selectively. It meant they could eat phoenixes without danger to themselves or breaking the pact with humanity, since one way or another a phoenix would survive the experience. In her search for the dragon it had not occurred to her that any dragon who spotted her would devour her on sight. The reminder cost her a leg, and her retaliation only opened her mind to it. Crippled, she was finished before she even started to flee. The dragon scooped her up into his mouth and scrambled deeper into the wilderness. She could feel, through the strange rapport, how much he hungered, how much he wanted to devour her, and she could not understand why he restrained himself. When he spat her out on the bank of a mountain stream, she stared at him in shock. She could see quite clearly that he fully intended to eat her, but first, she realized with sickening horror, he wanted to savor the chase. There was no time to analyze, she simply fled. Short a leg, she literally had to fly while the wound healed. Out in the open, she hardly stood a chance. She cut as devious a course as possible through the thick, coastal rainforest, and stumbled across what seemed to be some sort of ruin. The dragon could not pursue her through the tight, winding, stone structure of the ancient fortress. She discovered that there were more than enough larger passages through the strange ruin for him to harass her and keep her pinned down within the convoluted edifice. Upon retreating to its very heart, she made a startling discovery. The dragon that had ambushed her was the dragon she was looking for.

As soon as she was whole again, Cinder ventured to the edge of the ruin to introduce herself to the dragon, hoping to discourage him from eating her by revealing who she was. Unfortunately, while the dragon responded with interest, she could feel his intentions remained predatory. In frustration, she explained what had happened to her and confided what she had learned about her conception, restating her purpose. While her nature was far from what the dragon might expect, he could easily discern the truth from her mind. To her shock, the dragon confirmed the odd tale of her conception as a son of the Dragon House. The dragon was able to convince Cinder that he was once a part of her. He also opened her eyes to the history of creation, revealing the truth of gods, demons, angels and men and their roles in the evolution of reality. This story was followed by the dragon’s story, the role he played in championing humanity in the age of gods, and the fruitless search for his own identity. In consideration of what happened to Ash, the dragon blamed himself for it, having long since observed the tendency of humans to assign power and authority to the masculine gender. As a natural power and authority, his contact with humanity had caused him to project himself as male, in spite of the fact that he could be any conceivable sex. To her distress, the dragon revealed what he intended to accomplish by requesting a human incarnation of himself. The only way to test if Amber and Coal succeeded in fulfilling the pact was for the dragon to blood Cinder. If she was the embodiment of his soul, the two would become one. If not, she would become a dragon, like Amber, with a phoenix offspring. Of course, there was also the chance she would just become lunch, remaining very dead.

For three days and three nights, the dragon held her under siege. It was a disturbing standoff. The dragon was the only one she had to talk to, and he seemed fascinated by her and her life, prompting her to confide details about everything, but never relenting in his implacable purpose. She had plenty of time to explore the ruins, but he was always ready to pounce on her if she gave him an opening. Several times, he had gotten a piece of her, leaving her shocked and wounded. She even gained an understanding of the ability Amber had exploited to conceive Ash. Her attempts to call for help seemed to go no further than her own skull. From the moment he had bit into her, he had somehow weeded his way into her mind, frustrating her efforts to marshal her own psychic abilities to aid her in her crisis.

On the fourth day, her predator was strangely absent. She did not trust this, but her need for food and water drove her out of cover. Water was easy, being pooled in the larger, open areas of the ruins in a complex and beautiful water course. Food lay far beyond her shelter. As she ventured out, Cinder was ambushed by mercenaries working for a mysterious cabal’s assassins. Cinder missed their rendezvous, prompting Raven to investigate and discover that she was captured while trying to escape from the dragon. Raven spied on the group and then raced ahead to take the place of the agent they were to meet. Posing as Ash allowed Raven to infiltrate the Atheyn mercenaries that had set upon Cinder. Playing the worst sort of villain, Raven ruthlessly asserted his authority, and ownership over Cinder. Cinder, overcoming feelings of betrayal and finally catching on to his act, happily traded rough sex play with Raven for protection from the certainty of rape and mutilation at the hands of the mercenaries. Of course, the dragon expected a response from Cinder, and not getting it, set out after her. If she had been willing, she would have come to him. If she was unwilling, she would run, and that just made things more interesting. It was not as if the dragon would have taken no for an answer. As they came within a day of Dragons’ Gate, they were attacked once more by the dragon. The initial assault spurred the entire group to retreat back to the ruins. Focused on Cinder, the dragon had no interest in why these other men were protecting her. As their prisoner, however, she was worth more alive, so protect her the did. For a while. The dragon’s fixation on Cinder made it possible for the mercenaries to send for reinforcement and inform their employer of the complication.

It was only when the reinforcements arrived with the true representatives of the mysterious cabal, that Cinder realized that she was faced with two rather unpleasant deaths, and Raven could not save her from either one. Her assailants taunted her with their allies’ intentions toward Dawn. Discovering the details of the cabal’s plot, involving a simultaneous attack on Dawn, the only thing Cinder could do to ensure Dawn a chance of survival was to die, and if that did not stop her, race to Dawn’s rescue before her daughter’s abductors took the next step in their plan and fed Dawn’s soul to a demon.

As she fled, she realized that one way of the other, she was about to find out. As she fled she began to realize what was going on, the dragon was using the chase to get inside her head, to feel what she was feeling, to share with her what he was feeling. Her fate was inevitable, for her predator knew what she was going to do as quickly as she did, and she knew it. By the time the chase had ended, she was no longer sure if she was the predator or the prey. So caught up was she that she did not even realize that the dragon had pulled back and allowed her to deliver the killing bite, allowed her to savor the kill and drink the dying thoughts with the blood running down her dragon throat, and yet, she never ceased to be herself.

Fortunately, the dragon’s ruthless design allowed her to survive the attempt on her life, giving her the chance to thwart an attempt on her daughter’s soul. Her initiation by the dragon, to compensate for the loss of her immortality by making herself virtually impossible to kill, was the only thing that saved her. Her integration with the dragon, granted her an ideal form to speed her way home and charge into battle against those who sought to devastate the Phoenix House. Cinder flew to Dream Gate, a journey of many months over land and sea in but a night, and tracked Dawn’s abductors to their lair in the ruins. She arrived in time to interrupt the ritual of sacrifice, but the sight of a dragon tearing through everything to get to her sent Dawn running in terror. Unaware that the rampage was part of her rescue, Dawn threaded her tiny body through the cracks of the buried metropolis to make her own escape.

The ordeal provided the answers to the questions that had plagued Cinder since the night of Dawn’s conception. It confirmed that Dusk was akin to Dawn, a separate incarnation of Cinder. The only thing merging with the dragon could not explain was precisely why Ash became female and conceived Dawn. The answer to that—knowing “who” he really was—was the one the dragon never had, for which Cinder had been conceived to answer. Thus, Dawn’s conception was an inspiration, a clue to the true identity the dragon had so long sought. The mystery of what happened to the dragon when Ash became Cinder, and more recently when the dragon became a part of Cinder, was set aside as Cinder raced to protect her daughter.

Ash was a reincarnation of the emperor, conceived by a favorite son to allow him to concentrate on fulfilling the pact he had renewed with the dragon to join the Dragon House. His attempt involved trying to embody a human personification of the dragon, using the abilities he possesses through the dragon legacy and his training in the art. In order to accomplish this he was required to peer into the blind spot of the dragon’s mind and identify his soul. When he did, he tapped into much more than he bargained for. While allowing his body to be redefined by the dragon’s soul, he was displaced by the very person he was trying to embody, trapped in the same body with her. This “failed” experiment amused the dragon, who delighted in the strange reactions of the girl to him and the boy to her. Determined to understand what had happened, Ash probed the girl and was shocked to discover that she was a phoenix—and from what sense he can make of her memories, she was also a boy. A never-ending bundle of contradictions, Ash was not certain whether she was truly a single individual or a gestalt of different lives. The only thing he could not find in her, was any sure indication that she was some former or alternate incarnation of the dragon. The dragon confided that the problem with protean entities like himself was that they themselves did not know anything of their own mortal incarnations. The pact with the dragon had been intended, in part, to address that problem, but when Ash searched for a “human” expression of the dragon, he had been fishing in the dark. On the basis of his observations, and her lack of an identity, they agreed to call her Cinder, capturing the state of her existence and connection to Ash.

For her part, Cinder could only remember her early childhood in brief flashes or haunting dreams. Enough of Cinder’s memory could be puzzled out to confirm that in whatever former lives she had known, she had been an Academy Initiate, like Ash. Since the mishap occurred while Ash was returning home from the Academy, Ash instructed Cinder to pose as his widowed bride. This allowed them to be introduced into Ash’s family, and helped establish Cinder. The other side of the bargain Ash and Cinder had made allowed Ash to assume control of Cinder’s male form (which tended to manifest when he fully asserted himself in their shared body) with which he assumed the identity of Coal.

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For all the permutations considered, nothing that has been spelled out has captured a completely workable scenario. Again and again, the story had been brought to the simplest form only to spiral out of control. There are just certain notions that cannot be dismissed effectively. Among these, one idea that comes up again and again as each attempt to avoid it provides a little more inspiration and detail. So, however improbable, it has to be looked at seriously. The core of the idea involves the paradox of Dusk and Dawn’s conception and birth. It originates with the attempt by Ash to fulfill the Pact of the Dragon House.

In overview, Cinder was born as Dusk and Dawn. They were a split conception initiated by Cinder’s accidental conception of the goddess while experimenting sexually with Ash. The idea had been on her mind since the goddess proposed it. Ash and Cinder had traded roles during sex, and the oddity of making love to a reflection of herself tripped her into the conception. She impregnated Ash with Dusk and instantly flipped back to normal to impregnate herself with Dawn. Unable to do anything about it, Ash simply took a vacation (as Rust) while Dust covered for him (or her) until the children were born. Everything was fine until the children were ready to begin their initiations. Once again the agents of the Purge attacked. This time, they mounted an offensive backed by powerful demons and magic. A threat of this nature forced the goddess herself to respond. Champions like Ash and Cinder were able to face and eliminate most of the demons, but one was a match for the goddess herself. The demon’s aim was to seize her naked soul, the thing that made her unique among the gods, and use that power to transform reality. Realizing this, the goddess dropped her guard, letting the demon tear into her. Once he was committed, she sacrificed herself, casting herself into the abyss. This departure from reality tore the fabric of time and space, opening a rift that only certain, rare people could effect. Cinder was first among those, like herself, rare dragon phoenixes who could harness the power of raw paradox and bind it. They healed the wound in reality, but it left an interesting and perplexing scar. The passing of the goddess to Dusk and Dawn was part cause of the rift, as the goddess was torn in two passing to them.

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For her part, Cinder could only remember the life, or lives, she lived in brief flashes or haunting dreams. Unable to summon any trace of Ash’s original form, erased thoroughly by the ordeal, Ash could not return to his old life, so he decided to introduce Cinder into it as closely as he could. Enough of Cinder’s memory could be puzzled out to confirm that in whatever former lives she had known, she had been an Academy Initiate, like Ash. Since the mishap occurred while Ash was returning home from the Academy, Ash instructed Cinder to pose as his widowed bride. This allowed them to be introduced into Ash’s family, and helped establish Cinder. The other side of the bargain they made allowed Ash to assume control of Cinder’s male form (which tended to manifest when he fully asserted himself in their shared body) with which he assumed the identity of Coal. Ash had been the child of a marriage alliance between the Athelon Empire and the Kingdom of Arden. Cinder’s ambiguous origins and ignorance of her lineage proved an asset to the new queen, Ash’s cousin, allowing Autumn to recognize her as a hidden heir to the recently slain lords of the Avon Domain and claim Cinder as her personal protector and champion. Securing herself in this position was quite a challenge for Cinder, who managed to impress herself with the skill and proficiency she displayed. Unfortunately, the recent, disastrously failed coup deeply troubled Ash, prompting him to apply for a more covert commission from the queen. His forays into the underworld in search of the conspirators behind the coup, dragged Cinder along into a disturbing investigation into the architecture of the ongoing purge. In spite of his excellent espionage, the only way for Ash to get close to the architects of the purge was to offer Cinder to them as bait.

The “betrayal” was arranged to take place during the summit in Dream Gate, between the new queen and the emperor. A place was chosen where Cinder could be “ambushed” while she was vulnerable. Ironically, Cinder and Ash gained an unintended ally. The agent who took command of Cinder’s captors turned out to be a “cousin” of Ash’s, and an imperial spy who had gotten much deeper into the cabal than Ash was able to. Discovering that the captive was Ash’s widow, the agent did his best to protect her. Clued in by Ash, Cinder played along with the rough and intimate deception. Cinder had no choice but to do as Dust demanded, using her captivity to help him gather intelligence on the cabal for the emperor. Since Dust was sired by the same man as Ash, they were effectively twins, which prompted Ash to make a special request of Cinder during their captivity. Later, when Ash’s worst fears were confirmed, as Cinder learned she was to be turned over to demonologists and necromancers, Ash made another request—appealing to the dragon to blood Cinder. The dragon considered the request, remembering his initial desire for Cinder, assuming he meant only for him to play the role of hunting dragon to help her escape. Having some idea what was coming, the dragon took the opportunity to even the odds, harassing the party of mercenaries and pinning them down in the ruins outside of Dream Gate. This forced the leaders of the cabal to come to Cinder. Unfortunately, their intentions toward her did not require them to transport her to a more secure location. Once the cabal felt secure in the ruins, the details of their plot, regarding her, were revealed and quickly enacted. This forced the dragon to commit to the dual initiation, charging in to hunt Cinder down for real. Cinder exploited the hunt to use the dragon against her enemies.

Cinder had no idea what Ash had been thinking, arousing the dragon in this fashion. As a primordial entity, the dragon was immune to a phoenix initiation, but Cinder was perfectly vulnerable to a dragon initiation. Ash had counted on her being be twinned into dragon and phoenix aspects. In the confusion, neither of them took note of the fact that the dragon did not emerge from the blooding. They raced to Dream Gate with Dust to try and stop the massacre planned for the summit. Even without corrupting Cinder, the cabal had laid an excellent trap to strike against the assembled leaders of Ashara. From what they could deduce, the cabal had compromised the personal guards or close companions of the rulers. In order to foil the attack, Cinder had to pose as a conspirator, armed with information from Dust detailing the recognition signals and characteristics of the demon possessed. Due to her coexistence with Ash, it was not hard to appear possessed, even with Ash borrowing her twin. It did not take long for Cinder to identify the assassins, or for Ash to relay the information to a special guard unit. For the sake of the possessed, the guard attempted to detain and exorcise them if possible, but the action provoked a desperate response. A group of demons manifested upon their hosts, becoming far more deadly, forcing an intense battle. Ash explained confronted Cinder in the aftermath of the conflict. He explained that if Cinder sacrificed her extra body to Ash, he could then take advantage of her sacrifice to Dust to regain his original form. Cinder willingly sacrificed her clone to him, and Ash quickly straightened out the “misunderstanding” about his reported death. He also confronted Cinder about their “marriage” proposing to make it legitimate.

The life he had helped her build was the only life she had, and the time they had been together had been a more intimate union than any marriage. Not even her intimacy with Dust could compare to that. The couple retreated from the resumed summit to make their marriage official and spend some time getting acquainted with actually being a couple.

Fortunately, the dragon’s ruthless design allowed her to survive the attempt on her life, giving her the chance to thwart an attempt on her daughter’s soul. Her initiation by the dragon, to compensate for the loss of her immortality by making herself virtually impossible to kill, was the only thing that saved her. Her integration with the dragon, granted her an ideal form to speed her way home and charge into battle against those who sought to devastate the Phoenix House. Cinder flew to Dream Gate, a journey of many months over land and sea in but a night, and tracked Dawn’s abductors to their lair in the ruins. She arrived in time to interrupt the ritual of sacrifice, but the sight of a dragon tearing through everything to get to her sent Dawn running in terror. Unaware that the rampage was part of her rescue, Dawn threaded her tiny body through the cracks of the buried metropolis to make her own escape.

The ordeal provided the answers to the questions that had plagued Cinder since the night of Dawn’s conception. It confirmed that Dusk was akin to Dawn, a separate incarnation of Cinder. The only thing merging with the dragon could not explain was precisely why Ash became female and conceived Dawn. The answer to that—knowing “who” he really was—was the one the dragon never had, for which Cinder had been conceived to answer. Thus, Dawn’s conception was an inspiration, a clue to the true identity the dragon had so long sought. The mystery of what happened to the dragon when Ash became Cinder, and more recently when the dragon became a part of Cinder, was set aside as Cinder raced to protect her daughter.

Dusk and Dawn were engaged as the result of an affair between Thorn and Cinder. The arranged marriage began as a spontaneous cover-up when Feather became suspicious of Thorn’s interest in Cinder, but Feather and Crimson took it very seriously and their observations prompted Thorn to become fixated on it. Only at the formal meeting to seal the agreement did Cinder realize her friend might have conned her into engaging her daughter to her son. Unfortunately, Crimson had not confided Ash’s liaison with Feather, and Amber and Crimson had their own agendas, pushing the engagement forward. Dusk, was regarded by his mother and his mother’s husband as a normal, first generation phoenix. Ash had never shown possession of the phoenix legacy until the night of conception and Cinder lost her access to the dragon legacy during the switch. As a result, Dawn was considered a rare, first generation dragon-phoenix. Neither child was an immediate target of the Purge. Technically, they already shared the condition the Purge was intended to reduce every member of the Phoenix House to—being young, raw and inexperienced.

Since Ash was in an assumed guise when Dusk was conceived, not even Feather suspected that Dusk and Dawn were in any way related. Dusk was officially the son of Thorn, but he was named after his mysterious father. In actuality, “Dusk” had been an alias used by Ash, posing as a phoenix in his altered form. To balance his mother’s infidelity, his presumed father was a rogue.

Crimson swallowed her distaste of Thorn when his clumsy indiscretion lead to the betrothal of Dusk and Dawn. In hopes of taking full advantage of the situation, Crimson begins a campaign to slander Cinder, and by extension Dawn, in such a way that people would ultimately look to Dusk to redeem the title they held. In spite of the difficulty of smearing Cinder and Dawn’s names, while reinforcing their legitimacy, Crimson had an excellent model in Thorn. Even the most respectable families had members the rest were ashamed to acknowledge, criminals and incompetents. It also helped that Cinder seemed to have no history. No one’s past could be that obscure without some significant reason and a deliberate effort to hide it. Certainly, no one was as well trained as Cinder without notice unless they were part of the underworld. The more competent Cinder proved to be, the greater the suspicion became that she was a criminal.

Criminal or not, she was a phoenix and worthy of respect. Even criminals were known to support the establishment, even as they preyed on its constituents. As long as she assured the continuity of a respected bloodline, she herself did not need to be an admirable human being. The key to Crimson’s plot was to sow mistrust, to undermine the people’s confidence in the Queen’s Protector. It cultivated support for the regency, and caused people to look for a sound, reliable person they could trust to assume power at the end of the regency. For some, Dawn was the one they looked to, but Dusk was the one that appealed to the prejudices of most. After the birth of Dawn, Cinder devoted as much time as she could spare on self improvement. Her pregnancy had made her vulnerable to assassination, and the uncertainty about being reincarnated through Dusk and or Dawn discouraged her from even attempting to conceive a new incarnation of herself. Thoughts of her mortality made a great incentive to improve herself, but so did the discrimination she faced in her new sex. Her efforts did as much to hurt her reputation as they did to make it. Cinder kept an open mind about Dusk and Dawn. They were either both incarnations of the soul of creation, Cinder herself, or in Dusk’s case an actual son. At the betrothal the pair had been tested and found genetically compatible—virtually identical, but safe to interbreed. Unfortunately, Dawn was proven to be identical to Cinder, in no physical way related to Ash. In light of the Purge, this was disclosed only to the court, where it was used to challenge Cinder’s marriage to Ash, in hopes of stripping the regency from Amber. That challenge was trumped by the fact that there was no proof of Ash’s death, though it came up from time to time as efforts to find him produced naught.

Over the following years, Cinder had time to adjust to her new life and become involved once more in the lives of those around her. Her daughter helped her make her peace with being a woman and a mother, and her devotion to truly mastering her new body earned her a reputation as the best unarmed fighter of her generation. At the same time, Cinder was driven to discover the true cause of her transformation. As Amber pressured her to make up for her deficiencies as a woman and a phoenix, Cinder learned about the phoenix legacy, including the applicable reasons for Dawn’s betrothal to Dusk. The fact that they were male and female versions of the Ideal, or each other, was seen as more of a reason to match them together. The only way for Cinder to find out exactly who Dusk and Dawn were, however, was to die and see who she woke up as. It made her wish she had searched for answers as she had intended. Unfortunately, she was a single mother with an adoring daughter, and both of them were extremely vulnerable. Cinder herself was difficult to kill, but Dawn’s gift of regeneration would not mature until seven years after her conception. Nine months later, Cinder would have to begin the girl’s initiation. That left a very small window of opportunity to find answers that had already eluded her for years. In point of fact, she did not even have any idea where to begin looking, and she had long since come to terms with her new existence. So, the quest she was now on was the furthest thing from her mind when Magus approached her with this mission. Nothing short of the lead he had given her, and the desire to make up with Raven, could have inspired her to leave Dawn at that point. Even as they reached Athelon, she found herself aching to simply return home and retrieve her daughter.

lea female protector, lord (feminine)

lee male protector, lord

lass daughter, heir (appended to name)

lad son, heir (appended to name)

nen claim, heir (appended to title)

In Arden, the Dragon House was equal in size and power to the Phoenix House. In Aspen and Arden, the Phoenix House was far smaller and centered entirely around service to the goddess. Through breeding, the Dragon and Phoenix Houses of Arden were deeply intertwined, though each House emphasized the training of only the potential suited to their Legacies. Thus, when a boy was born in the Dragon House who fit the Ideal, he was ignored by the goddess. Ten years later, a suitable marriage offered the goddess what she desired, a female embodiment of the Ideal born to the Phoenix House. Dawn felt the conception tug at her soul, confirming that she was innately drawn to a specific embodiment. After a thousand generations, the Phoenix House had fulfilled its pact with her. Dawn watched over the birth and childhood of her mortal incarnation, waiting for the day when she would be ready to inherit the memory of the goddess. Her hopes for the child, named after her, were almost shattered when she was abducted and offered as a sacrifice to a demon. To preserve the girl, and protect her own soul, the goddess was forced to intercede, risking her long memory and vast power by merging with the girl to reinforce her psyche. The goddess’s sacrifice enabled Dawn to fight the demon that had been drawn into her, and if nothing had distracted her she ultimately would have expelled it completely. Instead, her would-be-rescuer fell prey to his own id, and turned on the girl to blood her. Coal had not intended to initiate Dawn, having come to her rescue, but in his dragon form he was ruled by his instincts. Coal was drawn to the scent of her blood, after dispatching her abductors, and one taste was enough to trigger the blooding impulse. He bit off her arm, opening the rapport between their minds.

In a dragon initiation, the initiate’s mind was drawn into rapport with the dragon during the hunt. By the climax of the hunt the initiate assumed the dragon’s role, completing the transition by slaying the original incarnation. The process allowed the initiate to gain a dragon form and retain his or her original form. The dragon typically gained the initiate’s form as well, becoming a twin to the initiate when the dragon form they shared melted, dividing them during the final stage of the conversion. A phoenix initiation did essentially the opposite. An initiate was drawn into rapport with the phoenix in a ritual sacrifice. Done properly, the phoenix offered her flesh or blood to the initiate and then took his or her form while strengthening the rapport until the initiate was drawn into the reflection. At this point the initiate was required to execute the phoenix. The initiate experienced the trauma of death and rebirth, dying and being reborn in sympathy with the phoenix. The process usually caused the initiate to be resurrected as a twin of the phoenix. The new phoenix was usually able to reclaim his or her prior form because it was possessed by the host phoenix. While the initiation of both legacies were oddly consonant, dragon and phoenix potential was polar, equal and opposite. The initiations drew upon different aspects of the psyche. Dragon potential drew from the id, while phoenix potential drew from the ego. Thus, a dual initiation had the effect of dividing the consciousness of the participants. Since the id and ego were interdependent, the psyche replicated them during the division. The process was reinforced by the embodiments concluding the overlapping initiations, where the phoenix aspects resurrected while the dragon aspects divided and reformed. Dual initiation only occurred if both parties committed to it.

Dawn responded instinctively to the consumption of her flesh and the beginning of a rapport, by assuming Coal’s form. The normal complications of dual initiation were compounded by the difference in their ages. As a phoenix, her power allowed her to reflect the self image of her initiate, so she assumed Coal’s human form—but she could not compensate for the age difference. The metamorphosis healed Dawn’s wounds and confused the dragon long enough for the girl turned boy to flee. Coal quickly sorted out his confusion and resumed the hunt. The only way to break the rapport was to conclude the dual initiation. Coal had no choice but to finish what his instincts started. In the process, Coal was being divided at the same time Dawn was. At the conclusion of the hunt, Coal was resurrected in Dawn’s image, as a girl Coal’s age who would become Cinder. While Dawn resurrected, restored to her normal form, the part of her that Coal initiated reformed as a younger version of Coal. It was the dual initiation that cut the goddess down, ripping her psyche in half and summoning her compliment into Dusk with the initiation of Dawn’s dragon potential. The same division sundered the demon the goddess had suppressed, leaving part of it in each child. Ash and Cinder were better able to deal with the trauma, gathering the children up and returning to Dream Gate. Dawn was reunited with her family and Cinder, given the credit for her rescue, was asked to be her mentor and guardian during her initiation. The age difference diminished the resemblance between Dawn and Cinder to a degree, and the position gave Cinder a purpose while she adjusted to her new existence. Coal confided in his master patron who vouched for Cinder’s training. Dusk was considered an orphan. He was adopted into Coal’s clan with Coal as his mentor.

The phoenix had been the personification of the soul of creation, and the dragon had been the personification of the mind of creation. In truth, the same entity had been perceived and recognized as two separate entities, the god, Dusk, and the goddess, Dawn. Dusk and Dawn had each entered pacts with humanity to become human. The Dragon House and the Phoenix House had been founded on pacts made with Dusk and Dawn in the Age of Gods. The god, Dusk, was approached by a group of humans seeking power. In exchange for granting it, they and their heirs were required to help Dusk acquire a human heir. Unfortunately, fulfilling that pact had not proven within the abilities the founders of the Dragon House had gained. It took thousands of years to discover a way to embody a primordial being, exploiting a side effect of a dual initiation. The girl, Dawn, was the final result of a thousand generations of controlled breeding to embody the goddess, Dawn. The goddess’s pact with the Phoenix House was completed when the girl was born. Dawn had waited a long time to be born to the phoenix house, so the notion of waiting for her human heir to mature before merging with her was not unreasonable. When her heir was abducted and offered as a sacrifice to a demon, the phoenix tried to intercede and preserve her. Dawn had been in rapport with the child from an early age, and had used this connection to direct a search and rescue effort following her heir’s abduction. Unfortunately, the girl’s mind recoiled instinctively from the trauma of the ordeal, leaving the goddess in possession of her body. As the ritual progressed, Dawn was forced to choose between remaining exclusively within her heir or allow herself to be shut out in order to orchestrate the rescue. Her final words as a goddess were spoken.

News of the girl’s abduction had prompted Coal to try and rescue her from her captors. His interest in protecting the girl came as a result of choosing to defy the patron of the Dragon House. Coal had been chosen by Dusk to fulfill the pact, which required him to initiate a phoenix and sacrifice one of his bodies to Dusk. Blooding a phoenix was not exactly a crime, since the phoenix would gain as much through it as Coal. In exchange for the body Coal would sacrifice to Dusk, he would gain the full power of both legacies, becoming a dragon phoenix. He had assumed Dusk would select a man. Unexpectedly, Dusk had been drawn to Dawn. She was barely seven years old, but that was old enough for her powers to have matured. The idea of devouring another human being never appealed to Coal, but the notion of eating a little girl made the ordeal all but impossible for him to stomach. Coal refused to blood her. He might even have succeeded in his defiance if she had not been placed in such peril. Given no other option, eating the girl would be far better for her than letting a demon eat her soul. Indecision almost made him too late to disrupt the sacrifice. Coal finally broke and called on his power. Coal was not experienced enough to control himself in dragon form, and not powerful enough in human form to rescue Dawn. When the dragon began tearing through Dawn’s abductors, Dawn was fighting with the demon, trying to keep it from consuming her soul, while struggling to preserve the integrity of the identities she possessed as girl and goddess. Dawn was forced to take full possession of the girl’s body for this battle, calling on all the resources of her psyche. Ultimately, she would have defeated it and thrust it out, but the dragon finished with her assailants and turned his attention to the girl.

Dawn, and the demon, needed only one look to see the dragon’s hunger. Dawn could not face both threats, so she swallowed the demon and fled. Dawn exploited her small body and knowledge of the ruins in an effort to escape the beast. Unfortunately, the dragon intended to blood her, not just devour her. The rapport created by the dragon’s initiation gave it the ability to track Dawn’s every thought and action, to lash at her mind and flush her out into the open. When Dawn was primed for the killing bite, there was nothing she could do. Once it was over, Dawn and Coal had to cope with the outcome of a dual initiation, being in two places at once. The ordeal of bonding with the flesh was traumatic for Dusk and Dawn, leaving them almost catatonic. In the wake of that night, Dusk and Dawn slowly began to recover, but adapting to their human existence helped to obscure the truth of their identities even from them. Each had a deeper sense of who they were, an instinctive or intuitive sense of identity. Becoming human changed Dusk and Dawn. Being alive, and possessing the refined experience of gods, there was no question that they were suddenly more powerful than they had been in hundreds of thousands of years, but they existed in delicate, fragile young bodies they had to master if they hoped to survive. Neither had ever experienced the impact of a living body on the mind, and barely noticed becoming the children they posed as. The same influences that curbed the tendency of young children to think and act like they were gods played a part in helping them dismiss the truth of their origins. Dusk and Dawn were merely the latest of ancient gods who fell silent and eventually became figureheads in institutionalized religion instead of agents of divine intervention.

Cinder and Coal, unlike Dusk and Dawn, experimented more with the potential unlocked by the dual initiation. Both discovered a range of polymorphic variations on the forms they had shared.

The revised attempt to apply the dual initiation scenario arises from a closer look at the mechanics of a dual initiation. The first attempt to apply the dual initiation scenario presents a pre-empire foundation for the story. It sets the origin before the scourge of Athen. This sets up the emergence of Dusk, Dawn, Cinder and Ash as the embodied dragon, the embodied phoenix, the original incarnation of the ideal and the mentor of Dusk and Dawn. It strips Dusk and Dawn of any family or social associations, effectively making them both orphans. It also leaves Cinder, in the position intended for Dawn, a supernumerary loose end.

The phoenix had been the personification of the soul of creation, and the dragon had been the personification of the mind of creation. In truth, the same entity had been perceived and recognized as two separate entities, the god, Dusk, and the goddess, Dawn. Dusk and Dawn had each chosen a host. Dusk was approached by Ash, seeking power. In exchange for granting it, Ash was required to help Dusk become human. Cinder was chosen by Dawn when she was born, although she kept her purpose to herself. For all intents and purposes, those hosts were their avatars bound to Dusk and Dawn by pacts to provide a human heir. Dawn had waited a long time for a suitable host to be born to the phoenix house. Cinder’s future heir was the intended host, having the ability to retreat from her body to her dam, vacating her body for the phoenix to inhabit for the conception and birth of her heir. When Cinder was abducted and offered as a sacrifice to a demon, the phoenix tried to intercede and preserve her. Dawn had been in rapport with the child from an early age, and had used this connection to direct a search and rescue effort following Cinder’s abduction. Unfortunately, the girl’s mind recoiled instinctively from the trauma of the ordeal, leaving Dawn in possession of her body. Thus, Dawn was the one subjected to the ritual up to the point where it was interrupted by Dusk and Ash. The recently initiated dragon avatar was on a quest for the phoenix required as the catalyst to fulfill the pact with Dusk. Ash was supposed to blood—actually, consume—the phoenix to exploit the reverse initiation. This unpleasant task was pursued deliberately at Dusk’s command. Ash considered it to be a sinister undertaking, but it had been required before he was free to pursue his revenge.

News of the girl’s abduction had prompted Ash to try and rescue her from her captors. To his horror, he discovered he would save her only to use her as ruthlessly. Unexpectedly, Dusk had been drawn to the child. On an unconscious level, Dusk had responded to her as a reflection of his true self. Ash had come to terms with the idea of blooding a phoenix, since the catalyst would gain as much through it as Ash. In exchange for the body Ash would sacrifice to Dusk, he would gain the full power of both legacies, a dragon phoenix. He had assumed Dusk would select a man. Ash had incredible difficulty with the idea of devouring another human being, but the notion of eating a little girl made the ordeal all but impossible for him to stomach. Ash refused to blood Cinder, and might even have succeeded in his defiance if she had not been in such peril. Dusk allowed Ash his defiance to consider the consequences of using Cinder. Dusk had given his scheme a great deal of thought, and understood that he had to chose between the form of his avatar or the phoenix he devoured to serve as his base form. She was barely seven years old, but that was old enough for her powers to have matured. Dusk only hesitated for a moment, quickly dismissing the problems of youth and sex. Dusk had made it clear to Ash what would happen if he used the power of his dragon form around a phoenix. Ash was not experienced enough to control himself in dragon form, and not powerful enough in human form to rescue Cinder. Dusk only had to wait. Given no other option, Ash would see that eating the girl would be far better for her than letting a demon eat her soul. The dispute between Dusk and Ash almost made them too late to disrupt the sacrifice. Ash finally broke and called on his power.

When the dragon began tearing through Cinder’s abductors, Dawn was fighting with the demon, trying to keep it from Cinder’s soul, while struggling to preserve her own. Dawn was forced to take full possession of the girl’s body for this battle, calling on all the resources of her psyche. Ultimately, she would have defeated it and thrust it out of Cinder, but the dragon finished with Cinder’s assailants and turned his attention to the girl. Dawn, and the demon, needed only one look to see the dragon’s hunger. Dawn could not face both threats, so she swallowed the demon and forced Cinder to take control of her body and flee. Dawn trusted the child to exploit her small body and knowledge of the ruins to escape the beast. Unfortunately, the dragon intended to blood her, not just devour her. The rapport created by the dragon’s initiation gave it the ability to track Cinder’s every thought and action, to lash at her mind and flush her out into the open. When Cinder was primed for the killing bite, there was nothing Dawn or Cinder could do. Once it was over, Cinder and Ash had to cope with the outcome of a dual initiation, being in two places at once. Dusk came to Ash’s aid, orienting him and preparing to claim one of the bodies. As chance had it, Dawn had quickly if not entirely intentionally claimed the extra body Cinder awoke with. After the trauma of the ordeal, Dawn had reached out to Cinder through her dragon clone, to offer comfort and reassurance. Cinder had instinctively retreated from the other body as soon as Dawn’s presence made it possible for her to recognize it as belong to someone else. The shift in perspective was so quick that Dawn had no warning before she was suddenly alone in the body. The mind being the bridge of the body and soul, the girl’s living body claimed the phoenix’s soul to sustain itself.

The ordeal of bonding with the flesh was traumatic for Dusk and Dawn, leaving them almost catatonic. Dusk, Dawn and Cinder all assumed the form of Cinder, while Ash retained his original form. To keep what happened a secret, Ash was instructed to take one aspect of the twinned Cinder with him, along with Dusk. Before assuming his chosen form, Dusk had required Ash to alter the sex of the acquired body before sacrificing it to Dusk. When Ash turned his attention to collect one of them, Cinder fled and hid, leaving Dawn to be captured. In the wake of that night, Dusk and Dawn slowly began to recover, but adapting to their human existence helped to obscure the truth of their identities even from them. Each had a deeper sense of who they were, an instinctive or intuitive sense of identity. The sudden descent from goddess to little girl, and the degree of helplessness it came with, caused Dawn to be very coy about asserting who she really was. When she was prompted for a name, she called herself Dawn. That name suited her new father and brother perfectly fine. Cinder was recovered while Ash was stealing away with Dusk and Dawn. Her rescuers decided that Cinder had been possessed by a demon, on account of the strange psychic duality they detected in her. Since they could not exorcise this demon, they purged it in the fire of resurrection. This restored the individuality and unity of her mind. Ash was required to do the same, the discussion of which tipped Dawn off about the pair and what they had intended with the whole affair. Dawn’s suspicions of the two were quickly laid to rest when Ash began her training. The interaction between man and boy clued Dawn in on what had really happened, and the knowledge that she was not the only divinity willing to trade her godhead for continued existence in reality reassuring.

Dawn was the one to suggest that, instead of posing as a family, they pose as a mentor and his initiates. She confided her secret in Dusk, who instantly agreed with her idea, adding the stipulation that Dusk and Dawn should be officially betrothed. Becoming human changed Dusk and Dawn. Being alive, and possessing the refined experience of gods, there was no question that they were suddenly more powerful than they had been in hundreds of thousands of years, but they existed in delicate, fragile young bodies they had to master if they hoped to survive. Neither had ever experienced the impact of a living body on the mind, and barely noticed becoming the children they posed as. The same influences that curbed the tendency of young children to think and act like they were gods played a part in helping them dismiss the truth of their origins. Dusk had been the only one who knew Dawn’s true identity, while Ash was aware of who Dusk really was. Dusk and Dawn were merely the latest of ancient gods who fell silent and eventually became figureheads in institutionalized religion instead of agents of divine intervention. Cinder and Ash, unlike Dusk and Dawn, experimented more with the potential unlocked by the dual initiation. Both discovered a range of polymorphic variations on the forms they had shared. Cinder was chosen and trained as a champion of the goddess. Ash was establishing himself as a mentor and warrior, a virtual messiah come to unify Athen and free it from the rule of corruption. Dusk and Dawn grew up in the thick of it.

The isle of Aeryn is the gateway to the North. It is the birthplace of the Northern People, remaining neutral ground for the Northern Dominions following the political and social break between the ruling houses. The three powers were segregated on the basis of “pure” blood, as reflected in the inheritance of hair and eye color. The Autumn Court, whose leaders were redheaded, led their followers into Arden, the Winter Court, whose leaders were towheaded, led their followers into Athen, and the Summer Court, whose leaders were golden-blond, led their followers into Aspen. The common people of all three Domains were generally brown haired, since those who were born with the preferred coloring generally were adopted into the appropriate ruling houses. The merchant and trades people were typically dark haired, by preference black. Aeryn is the location of Dream Gate and Dragon’s Bath, and a gathering place for the beginning and end of initiations. Reaching the end of their initiations, Dusk and Dawn arrive in Dream Gate for Trials and their wedding. The tragic conclusion of their wedding night results in Dawn being detained in Aeryn while the rest of her family returns to Avon in Arden. By the time Dawn is found untainted by demons, scarred by the process, the Avon Massacre has come and passed, allowing Dawn to arrive in Avon in the aftermath. Her summer is spent helping shore up the Queen’s position, but in the fall, she returns to Aeryn to confront the Emperor. His revelation leads Dawn to Dragon’s Bath, and her flight from the dragon brings her to the ruins outside of Dream Gate. Thus, Dawn is caught between the dragon, the damned and her human adversaries for her final struggle.

Union : In light of the joining of Dusk and Dawn, the blooding of Dawn is pressed so relentlessly by the dragon trying to reclaim his soul, Dusk, from Dawn. It is acceptable to present the “demon within” as the catalyst for joining Dusk and Dawn, however there is a conflict between the execution plot and the blooding plot regarding the circumstances of the ordeal of death. This would most likely shift the emphasis from an execution to a self-imposed exile, when Dawn escapes imprisonment after being nailed to discourage her from using her powers. By these lights, the order of certain events is altered. The marriage and union of Dusk and Dawn becomes entirely legitimate, beginning with their betrothal and coupling for initiation. The conflicts the pair face making it through trials include the demon’s efforts to subvert them and take possession of one long enough to slay the other. Of course Dusk and Dawn make the necessary sacrifice to thwart the demon on their wedding night. It causes Dusk to take residence in Dawn’s body with her, and they are detained for the inquisition into Dusk’s death. Suspicious of Dawn’s story, harsh measures are taken, to determine if she is under the influence of a demon, which leave her with a psychic scar that is potentially fatal to a phoenix unless she refrains from using her psychic gifts. Thus crippled, she returns home to confront her in-laws with the bad news about their son. In spite of her scar, and the unusual coexistence of husband and wife, Dawn is enlisted to reinforce the position of the young queen. Ember had recently ascended to the throne in the wake of the Avon Massacre, an attempted coup.

Obligation : Ember had been protected from the obliteration of the royal houses by Cinder’s genius, or a fortuitously successful experiment to bypass the flaw of the phoenix gift of rebirth. The experiment had been inspired by the fact that Cinder and Ash, two dragons, had conceived a phoenix, Dusk, proving that Cinder’s conversion had not cost her the genetic potential of the phoenix legacy. In Ember’s case, she was Cinder reborn, conceived and born before Cinder was converted by Ash. Cinder was able to conceive a new incarnation of Ember using the dragon gift, sparing ember the pregnancy that would have stripped her of the higher gift of resurrection. As the death of Dusk demonstrated, however, this did not make Ember invulnerable. Thus, she needed a strong protector, a champion she could trust implicitly, and who better than Dawn who also happened to be Dusk. The regent who had plotted to strip Dawn of her mother’s title, in the same way she had schemed to ensure Dea could not assume it, had died in the coup, so there was nothing to stop her, aside from challenges contesting her claim and suitors desiring to possess the title, or Dawn, or both. Dawn rises to the demands of her inheritance, but finds herself stumped by the concern of her in-laws, who argue about the consequences of the union, namely that it made it impossible for Dusk to fulfill his obligation to the pact. Dusk himself, learning to assert himself, is as confused as Dawn about this mysterious pact obligation. Their probing causes Cinder and Ash to clam up, but Dawn had overheard enough previously to know that the person who made this obscure pact was the Athelon Emperor, Dusk’s grandfather.

Sacrifice : Biding their time, until the next summit between Arden and the empire, Dawn accompanies the queen to the island of Aeryn, the traditional neutral ground of the northern dominions, hoping for a chance to confront the emperor. From the emperor, Dawn learns that the pact was with the patron deity of the Dragon House, generally referred to as “the dragon” with as little emphasis as possible. Apparently Ember was not the only subject for Cinder’s creative experiments in conception. Dusk was supposed to be a human incarnation of the dragon. Dusk’s obligation was to present himself to the dragon so it could determine if the pact had been fulfilled. For personal reasons, Dusk and Dawn would appreciate an audience with something capable of identifying Dusk’s soul, such a being might be able to separate the two of them, letting them continue their lives normally. This logic makes sense to the dragon as well, when they finally confront him, but the manner in which the dragon had intended to establish the identity of Dusk’s soul could be fatal to either Dusk or Dawn, or both. Not that the dragon was giving them any options, continuing the onslaught that initiated their visit. The dragon is not the only one interested in Dawn’s sacrifice. The demon she thwarted had learned something priceless before she expelled it, and named her to the cabal as the price for power undreamed of. Dawn finds herself caught between mercenaries and cabal assassins, plotting to sacrifice her to a demon, and the dragon determined to devour her alive. Her bid to play her adversaries off each other nearly succeeds, but the dragon gets her, triggering the Eve of Paradox.

Among the things this approach discards is the role of Phoenix. Stepping in to fill the roles of close friends and confidants are fellow initiates with whom Dusk and Dawn would have ended up had they not been thrust on each other. Thorn remains a viable member of the cast, as Dawn’s step father. The difference being, his infidelity is with Dusk’s mother during the absence of Ash, and the excuse responsible for the engagement of Dusk and Dawn given to Cinder’s mother. Thorn’s mother assumes the regency over Dea’s claim, her plotting geared to retaining the power she usurped through Thorn and Dea’s marriage. The conclusion of the dragon’s pact effectively demonstrates that Dusk and Dawn were incarnations of the same person, ending the alienation of the naked god and the naked goddess. This is obscured, since the opening of the rift is credited to the disruption of the ritual of sacrifice, and credited with causing the demise of the dragon and the phoenix. For Dusk and Dawn, their resurrection together sealed the gestalt, leaving the fate of Dusk and Dawn as individuals uncertain. A single mind encompassing the lives of both, she is as much one as the other, the most likely outcome is that the dragon did claim Dusk’s soul and then perished in the rift, and Dawn’s mind had been bound to Dusk’s long enough to be branded with his memories and experiences. There is no time for her to reflect on this immediately, since her resurrection introduced a strange solution to the sexual duality she had experienced sharing her body with Dusk. Perceived as a demon, she was forced to flee from the scene of her emergence from the rift.

The path of revision undertaken to resolve a singular vision of the story of Dusk and Dawn has been focused on avoiding the repetition or proliferation of the key plot device. To this end, there should be only one extraordinary conception, one occurrence of sexual polymorphism and one ordeal of death and resurrection. It is acceptable to present “the dragon’s pact” as the mechanism of a split conception, although making the actual situation apply to the conception of Dusk and Dawn slightly alters the casting. The story of Amber and Coal remains valid, but Amber becomes Cinder while Coal takes the name and the transforming role of Ash, with the exception that the goddess assumes full possession on the conception of Dawn, calling herself Dea. Dea only possessed Ash through the duration of her pregnancy, releasing him as soon as she could entrust her daughter to the usual manifestation of herself. This of course was not a living incarnation, making Dawn (and Dusk) original incarnations heir to the full potential of a phoenix. One matter generally overlooked, the dragon’s blind spot, makes the naked goddess impossible for the dragon to recognize as himself. To him, she is just another soul around whom a realm had formed. Unlike other gods, the dragon was not drawn by the light of her soul, but by the interest, the attention of other souls. From his perspective, it was a tree in the forest situation, a matter of overlooking the obvious. The dragon never realizes he has doubled back to confront himself, since he expects to find a soul like that of most divinities, something virgin and un-evolved.

With the numerous inspirations and approaches considered for the story of Dusk and Dawn, strong alternate concepts frequently come up, revisiting old designs with new impulses. One of these, calling strongly to the pairing of the dragon avatar and the phoenix avatar, offers a treatment for the mother-daughter paradox. In it, Dusk and Dawn merge and become Cinder. In part, this is a reference to their mind being fried during the inquisition, and the gestalt assuming the identity of Dawn’s mother, who was executed in Dawn’s place. This Cinder’s psyche is ripped from her body by the rift surge unleashed by her mother’s death, allowing her future mind to return to inhabit her original body. In an earlier time, Ash was conducting an experiment for resolving his dragon patron’s dilemma. The focus of the dragon’s involvement with humanity was an ageless search for the embodiment of its soul. Like all protean entities, the dragon was a mind projected into reality, its own soul alien and remote. Ash felt that the dragon’s soul could be embodied combining the abilities he possessed from the dragon legacy and the art he had mastered under the Magus. The experiment to personify the soul of the dragon netted much more than Ash anticipated. By assuming the form derived from a penetrating probe of the dragon’s soul, Ash unwittingly provided a vessel for the disembodied psyche of Cinder. On taking possession of Ash’s body, as it conformed to her self image, Cinder dislodged his psyche and left it trapped in the dragon. Being an incarnate soul, Ash instantly wrested control of the manifestation of the dragon, fighting the powerful instincts of his new body, straining to cling to his humanity.

Cinder, jarred and shaken by the shock of her mother’s death, and still scarred by the inquisition, does what any person confronted with an apparently ravening dragon, freaks and runs, triggering the predatory instincts to hunt, and searing herself into his mind as the prey. Unfortunately for Cinder, the dragon taxing her powers of regeneration by taking healthy bites out of her at any misstep is not the only adversary she faces. She has unwittingly arrived during the cabal uprising in the period of the invasion and occupation of Arden. Slavers and mercenaries allied to the cabal, and traitors from within the ranks of the imperial armies, have besieged the neutral ground of Aeryn to gather their resources for continued operations in Arden. Cinder, a lone, naked and female Ardeyn strikes one of the patrols as a prize catch. By looks, she should be a high noble or maybe even a royal, but as a phoenix universally valuable, regardless of station, as either dragon bait or sacrificial offering. Cinder is captured while Ash is dividing himself from dragon bloodlust, projecting his humanity as a separate manifestation. His division into man and beast leaves said beast without the higher functions of sentience, making the dragon aspect a more perfect predator, but only as a human can Ash pursue Cinder safely—for her. Remotely, he discovers he retains some influence over the predatory aspect. He is desperate to know what went wrong with the experiment, unable to believe the girl who took his place was the dragon in human form. Of course, he catches up to her to learn of her capture. Spying on the captors, he learns of a rendezvous with a cabal agent, and races ahead to take the agent’s place in hopes of wresting Cinder from the mercenaries grasp.

While the plan suffices to get him into the group, the outfit’s determination to receive due credit for the capture makes it impossible for Ash to separate Cinder from them. Ash experiments with controlling the dragon aspect, learning how to give it some lead without losing control of it completely, planning to use it to harass the unit, but with Cinder in the group, it is nearly impossible. Only the days she stood him off in the ruins outside of Dream Gate had given him the time to gain any influence over the thing. Faced with the dragon again, Cinder sprints back toward the ruins, and her captors are smart enough to follow suit.

In general, most of the concepts and plot elements carry through to this approach, placing the demon’s emergence first, the consequences of that next, the conflict in the ruins following and the introduction of Cinder to the Arden establishment, focusing on her being named the phoenix avatar, further down. Obviously, the pairing for this variant is Ash/Cinder all the way. The conception plot comes in two years after Cinder’s arrival in the past. By her time line, she only just completed trials and got married. The confusion of having two lives fused into one, especially after the blooding climax of the first arc, tends to keep her from challenging what she sees. For all she knows, she’s caught up in the memories of her mother, reliving her “first” life at a subjective-involved pace while virtually no time is passing in her own life. In all of this, she is forced to listen to and trust her instincts and intuition to keep her up to pace with events. Ash, while finding it humorous that Cinder believes she’s simply recapitulating, presses the point that it all seems real enough for everyone else involved, so she might want to keep her wits about her and focused on what was really going on.

One premise works on the idea that the god and goddess were both aspects of the same divinity, and the dragon and the phoenix were their avatars, through whom the dragon and phoenix legacies were passed on to humanity. The duality embodied by the god:dess, and innate to the legacies s:he created, both reflected the manner in which they were perceived by those who confronted them. The duality also reflected the duality of point paradox, where the psyche unites and confronts the soul and mind. The legacies, engineered to subject a mortal’s psyche to primal dilemma of the protean psyche, are initiated in the same fashion. Children of a given legacy are predisposed to their family legacy, and subjected to training to ensure they realize it. Those exposed to the original rite of initiation are predisposed only according to their individual character, but it is possible for them to grasp the truth of the rite and realize the full potential of the psyche.

One of the general assumptions that shape the lives of Dusk and Dawn is that Dusk is a dragon. As the human incarnation of the dragon, it is not difficult to understand why that assumption was never questioned, despite the boy’s physical conformity to the Ideal of the Phoenix House.

There is a way for Dusk and Dawn to be conceived and born through separate legacies. Dusk would be conceived and born as a result of a pact between the dragon and the emperor, Dawn would be born as a result of a pact between the phoenix and the embodiment of her ideal. The mechanics of Dawn’s conception through a human host can also work as a way for the goddess herself to become human while attempting to preserve her intended host from a premature death as the sacrifice to a demon.

The principle question to resolve is, how necessary is an extraordinary conception? The impetus for it originally stems from the notion of the character being self defined, or being born split into male and female incarnations. The challenge to this asks if it is necessary for everything to be established in conception or birth, or can the situation sought to establish the character be evolved through other actions? The Ash-Cinder paradigm offers several alternatives, starting with the main character simply being born a bastard to both legacies, and being inspired to reinvent himself, drawing the attention of the god and goddess aspects seeking a way to become incarnate. In this case, Ash becomes Cinder and is forced to pose as his own widow. A variant has Ash as a supporting character, the love interest, in a catalytic role, drawing the main character to, or simply encountering her when she makes her own way into, the past. The problem with these approaches is that they displace the intent of the split conception element, revealing the events that lead up to it, but presenting it as a second generation story. Simply put, this creates a cause and effect paradox. The root of the paradox has the main character play the host to her own conception, or conceptions. As the problem arises in searching for a foundation for the situation that concept meant to confront the characters with, the best solution is to ask if the situation can arise in another fashion. The root idea is that the main character has to confront her own participation in the events that created the situation she faces. As found in one of the Ash-to-Cinder options, it is enough to confront the main character with the discovery that she has been reincarnated as a boy and a girl who were betrothed to each other before their true identity was known.

The same situation can be established in an Ash-and-Cinder option geared around the situation where a demon thrusts Ash into Cinder’s body. The premise of this approach is that Ash was intended to be sacrificed to the dragon, in a more deliberate version of how the phoenix became Cinder. The principle conflict following from there is what happens when Ash and Cinder learn of the pact, or rather the obligation Ash had requiring him to seek out the dragon. Cinder is willing to help Ash perform whatever favor the dragon requires of him, but the dragon, after learning of Cinder’s part in stripping Ash of his body, holds her accountable for the debt Ash was to pay. Refusing the dragon’s claim that Cinder’s body was forfeit because of her actions, Ash proposes a different solution, offering to sire a human incarnation of the dragon. The proposal is accepted by the dragon, but the process has an unexpected result. Inexplicably, when Ash conceived of the dragon, it provoked Cinder to conceive of herself. It also dislodged Ash from within Cinder, leaving him in possession of the dragon’s construct. Ash had successfully seized the dragon’s soul, unwittingly tapping into the part of Cinder that was the phoenix. In Creation, the phoenix had been the personification of the soul of creation, and the dragon had been the personification of the mind of creation. In truth, the same entity had been perceived and recognized as two separate entities, the god, Dragon, and the goddess, Phoenix. As an incarnate soul, Ash was able to do what the dragon could not do with his own manifestation, and make it truly alive. Ash was able to resume his original form easily, without another’s will present to challenge his self image, and reclaim his identity as Ash. From here, most of the developed concepts can unfold naturally.

The one aspect of this that raises questions is what premise forms the basis of the dragon’s intentions toward Ash. The embodiment of the phoenix as Cinder occurs naturally under the circumstances cited. A suitable host was born to the phoenix house. Her heir would be the intended host, having the ability to retreat from her body to her dam, vacating her body for the phoenix to inhabit for the conception and birth of her heir. When the host’s heir was abducted and offered as a sacrifice to a demon, the phoenix tried to intercede and preserve her. Unfortunately, the girl’s mind recoiled instinctively from the trauma of the ordeal, leaving Phoenix alone in the body when it was slain. Her presence had been necessary to prevent the demon from gaining a foothold in the girl’s soul, but interposing herself between the girl and her tormentors only encouraged her withdrawal. The mind being the bridge of the body and soul, the girl’s living body claimed the phoenix’s soul to sustain itself. The binding became permanent when the phoenix resurrected in Cinder’s body. The ordeal was traumatic for the goddess, leaving her catatonic. She was identified as Cinder, no one suspecting her true identity. In the wake of that night, she has slowly been recovering, but adapting to her human existence helped to obscure the truth even from her. Theoretically, a similar thing might be intended by the dragon, allowing his mind to bridge his soul and Ash’s body, if he could gain exclusive possession of it. However, this then becomes a precedent for situations like demonic possession. Any mortal host could be used to incarnate a demon’s soul. It may be a valid precedent, establishing demons as living organisms. However, Ash would have to be a secondary incarnation in order for such a scheme to work.

The complications inherent in using Ash and Cinder do not exist in the corollary based on Dusk and Dawn. Ash remains a love interest, but he is removed from the coupling and union threads of the story. Dawn’s origin would remain the same, or change only in the sense that she would be conceived and born in Cinder’s place. This would occur as a result of Ember being initiated by a dragon and split into dragon and phoenix incarnations. The same event could account for the reverse initiation of that dragon, giving him the ability to conceive of himself. Ironically, at this point, it is possible for Dusk or Ash to be conceived, either of whom can fulfill the designs of the plot. If the emperor attempted to fulfill the pact with Dragon by deliberately blooding a phoenix to exploit the doubling effect of a dual initiation, he would conceive an heir in his own image, borne by his dragon half in the phoenix’s image. The phoenix would lend her dragon half to Phoenix and concentrate herself in her phoenix half. Once Ember removed herself from the extra body, Phoenix would take full possession, the body seizing her soul to sustain itself. This was one of two ways for the subject of a dual initiation to unify the dragon and phoenix halves, gathering one’s psyche in one body and sacrificing the other. This method required Ember to complete the process by a rite of death, using her resurrection to fuse her twinned psyche back together. Because the emperor was reborn, it was necessary for his dragon half to consume his phoenix half in order for him to return to his previous individual state. Ash was thus his heir and possessed the phoenix potential the emperor had gained. This does have the effect of making Ash a phoenix. It also begs the question of why Dragon did not simply claim the emperor’s second body.

At this point things get interesting. It’s such a simple event, but it offers solutions to all the problems at once. Dragon and Phoenix each have a chosen host. For all intents and purposes, those hosts are their avatars bound to Dragon and Phoenix by a pact to provide a human heir. If the solution presented itself and was pursued deliberately at Dragon’s command, it could easily be a sinister undertaking. It might also have been required before the dragon avatar was free to pursue his revenge. Put simply, it sets the origin before the scourge of Athen. The recently initiated dragon avatar would have been led on a quest for the phoenix needed as the catalyst to fulfill the pact. Dragon would have given this a great deal of thought, and would understand that it would have to chose between the form of his avatar or the phoenix he devoured to serve as his base form. In exchange for the body his avatar would sacrifice, his avatar would gain the full power of both legacies, a dragon phoenix. Unexpectedly, Dragon was drawn to a child. The same child Phoenix had been drawn to. Dragon only hesitated for a moment, quickly dismissing the problems of youth and sex. His avatar had a little more difficulty with the idea of devouring a little girl, which made the ordeal that much harder for him to stomach, but for the sake of power, he could not refuse his patron’s wishes. She was barely seven years old, but that was old enough for her powers to have matured. This sets up the emergence of Dusk, Dawn, Cinder and Ash. Dusk, Dawn and Cinder would all assume the form of Cinder, while Ash would retain his original form. Dusk and Dawn being the names of the dragon and the phoenix since the age of gods. Before assuming his chosen form, Dusk would have required Ash to alter the sex of the acquired body before sacrificing it to Dragon.

To keep what happened a secret, Ash was instructed to take one aspect of the twinned Cinder with him, along with Dusk. As chance would have it, Phoenix had quickly if not entirely intentionally claimed the extra body. Phoenix had been in rapport with the child from an early age, and had used this connection to direct a search and rescue effort following Cinder’s abduction. After the trauma of the ordeal, Phoenix had reached out to Cinder through her dragon clone, to offer comfort and reassurance. Cinder had instinctively retreated from the other body as soon as Phoenix’s presence made it possible for her to recognize it as belong to someone else. The shift in perspective was so quick that Phoenix had no warning before she was suddenly alone in the body, when the body trapped her consciousness to seize her soul. Phoenix was a bit less rattled by this trauma than Cinder was by hers, so when Ash turned his attention to collect one of them, Cinder fled and hid, leaving Phoenix to be captured. The sudden descent from goddess to little girl, and the degree of helplessness it came with, caused Phoenix to be very coy about who she really was. When she was prompted for a name, she called herself Dawn. That name suited her new father and brother perfectly fine. Dawn’s suspicions of the two were quickly laid to rest when Ash began her training. The interaction between man and boy clued Dawn in on what had really happened, and the knowledge that she was not the only divinity willing to trade her godhead for continued existence in reality reassuring. She was the one to suggest that, instead of posing as a family, they pose as a mentor and his initiates. She confided her secret in Dusk, who instantly agreed with her idea, adding the stipulation that Dusk and Dawn should be officially betrothed.

Cinder was recovered while Ash was stealing away with Dusk and Dawn. Her rescuers decided that Cinder had been possessed by a demon, on account of the strange psychic duality they detected in her. Since they could not exorcise this demon, they purged it in the fire of resurrection. This restored the individuality and unity of her mind. Ash was required to do the same, the discussion of which tipped Dawn off about the pair and what they had intended with the whole affair. Becoming human changed Dusk and Dawn. Being alive, and possessing the refined experience of gods, there was no question that they were suddenly more powerful than they had been in hundreds of thousands of years, but they existed in delicate, fragile young bodies they had to master if they hoped to survive. Neither had ever experienced the impact of a living body on the mind, and barely noticed becoming the children they posed as. The same influences that curbed the tendency of young children to think and act like they were gods played a part in helping them dismiss the truth of their origins. Dusk had been the only one who knew Dawn’s true identity, while Ash was aware of who Dusk really was. Dragon and Phoenix were merely the latest of ancient gods who fell silent and eventually became figureheads in institutionalized religion instead of agents of divine intervention. Cinder and Ash, unlike Dusk and Dawn, experimented more with the potential unlocked by the dual initiation. Both discovered a range of polymorphic variations on the forms they had shared. Cinder was chosen and trained as a champion of the goddess. Ash was establishing himself as a mentor and warrior, a virtual messiah come to unify Athen and free it from the rule of corruption. Dusk and Dawn grew up in the thick of it.

Additional Source Notes

Phoenix points out that the gifts of the phoenix legacy did not include the power to incarnate another soul. That was a dragon gift. A phoenix could only reincarnate herself. But, what happened to Dusk and Dawn revealed how the breeding would encompass the sex of the goddess—by merging the human sexes to create a perfect, independent being. In horror, Eve reminds Phoenix that Dawn was half dragon, through her deceased father. If Phoenix was correct, if she was not the goddess, Eve was the one person who could incarnate her. On the basis of that notion, Phoenix asserts that perhaps Eve was the one who should be the paladin of the goddess. With her abilities, Phoenix could easily trade places and assume the lives of both Dusk and Dawn. It would be necessary for Eve to demonstrate some of Phoenix’s powers and skills, but the time it took to see if she could allowed them to really think about what they were doing. Dusk and Dawn both found it easy to take control and assert their original forms, but the arts of a paladin were another matter. While Phoenix staged the return of Dusk and Dawn, following the success of her mission, Eve was coached along. After the “ordeal” it did not surprise anyone that the three spent a lot of time together.

When, in spite of Eve’s disbelief, Eve performed her first miracle, Phoenix pronounced her ready, just in time for the new Phoenix to receive a mission. A very difficult mission for her, to rescue a child abducted and taken into the ruins, as Dawn had been taken as a girl. It brought up the nightmare that had haunted her since the beginning of Trials, but now that horrible memory was essential to saving a child’s life. She led a group of adventurers into her own personal hell. Having already seen for herself the overwhelming number of monsters between them and their goal, she retraced the path of her escape back into the depths. Along the way, she realized who it was she was trying to rescue, a distant cousin (on both sides of her family) and, following the deaths of her family, her queen. Realizing that time was of the essence, she assigned her men to hold open her retreat and went ahead alone, naked, to face a host of demons. Armor, even a sword, would have slowed her down too much, as she proves by arriving just in time. Knowing she faced worse than death if she failed, she charged into the mix of humans and demon servants, armed and armored with only the skills of her body and mind—and faith.

Sheer disbelief at her appearance gave her a fighting chance. Discipline and desperation did all the rest, keeping her alive long enough to snatch the girl and flee the way she came. Expecting to die protecting the child’s retreat, she was surprised when her allies dragged her maimed and shattered body out of the ruins. Nearly flayed alive, and missing several limbs, it was hard enough to identify her that no one noticed the form she had been in, or they might have simply finished the job. It took all she had left to stay alive long enough to be delivered to the sanctuary, where it would be safe for her to resurrect. Later, in a new and healthy body, she finally understood why the goddess had given her champions the phoenix gifts. Nothing mortal could oppose the horrors humanity had unleashed. As she remarked upon this, the high priestess reminded her to enjoy it while it lasted, As soon as she bore a child, she would lose the gift of resurrection. If she died before bearing a reincarnation, she would remain dead. The price Eve would have to pay to bring the goddess into the world was to give up her own life. To either accept a mortal end or to risk a new beginning.

Source Notes

Pool

A young mother leaves her family and home in search of answers, hoping to understand the cause of her life’s upheaval. After seven years, she was desperate to know what caused the young man she had been to become the young woman he was now.

As she begins her quest, she was reminded of the night of her transformation and the ambition that set two lives in motion at the cost of her former existence. As before, she was inspired to act by her true mentor, Magus. Part of her purpose was to resolve the mystery surrounding her daughter and son, but the first step in her journey was to confront an emperor for the truth about her own conception. In order to gain the emperor’s confidence, she was forced to confide the details of her first adventure. In exchange, she was enlightened about the cause of all the strife in her kingdom, and how his attempts to make amends for his oversight brought her parents together. Armed with new information, she sets out to confront the dragon who granted the emperor the power to unite the kingdoms of Athen and Aspen in exchange for a taste of humanity. To her shock, the dragon confirms the odd tale of her conception as a son of the Dragon House. He also opens her eyes to the history of creation, revealing the truth of gods, demons, angels and men and their roles in the evolution of reality. To her distress, the dragon reveals what he intended to accomplish by requesting a human incarnation of himself. The only way to test if Amber and Coal succeeded in fulfilling the pact is for the dragon to blood Cinder. If she is the embodiment of his soul, the two would become one. If not, she would become a dragon, like Amber, with a phoenix offspring. Of course, there was also the chance she would just become lunch, remaining very dead. Of course, the matter is complicated when Cinder is ambushed by assassins, reducing her options to one of two unpleasant deaths. Discovering the details of the assassins’ plot, involving a simultaneous attack on Dawn, the only thing Cinder can do to ensure Dawn a chance of survival is to die, and if that did not stop her, race to Dawn’s rescue before her daughter’s abductors took the next step in their plan and fed Dawn’s soul to a demon.

Fortunately, his ruthless design allows her to survive an attempt on her life, giving her the chance to thwart an attempt on her daughter’s soul. Her initiation, or integration with the dragon, grants her an ideal form to speed her way home and charge into battle against those who sought to devastate the Phoenix House. The ordeal provides the answers to the questions that have plagued Cinder since the night of Dawn’s conception. It confirms that Dusk was akin to Dawn, a separate incarnation of Cinder. The only thing merging with the dragon could not explain was precisely why Ash became female and conceived Dawn. The answer to that—knowing “who” he really was—was the one the dragon never had, for which Cinder had been conceived to answer. Thus, Dawn’s conception was an inspiration, a clue to the true identity the dragon had so long sought.

Homecoming

• Nightmares

• Formalities

• Courtship

• Rivalries

The challenges faced in the opening book of the series include establishing the various arts and legacies of Aeirn. The phoenix legacy in particular needs to be introduced carefully, as the object of that legacy becomes a very intimate matter for Dusk and Dawn. The consequences of the legacy breeding program is visited through Phoenix, who has a history with Dusk and Dawn, but whom they are only previously acquainted with as duplicates of themselves. This works into the premarital conflicts, since Phoenix adopted their identities to pass as human in the past and is only known to certain people by those aliases. This accounts for those people’s reactions to the real Dusk and Dawn, and the creation of some painful misunderstandings that threaten their relationship. As Phoenix had been splitting herself in recent years, continuing her secret lives independent of trading places with Dusk and Dawn, the initial resolution of the misunderstanding comes with the introduction of Phoenix as a boy and girl who happen to have the same name and connections to the sanctuary. The old habit of keeping her nature a secret causes her, and her guardians, to conceal the truth automatically.

In past experiments at forming a mental gestalt, Dusk and Dawn had named their joined mind Eve.

Trials

• Friendship

• Attacks

• Companionship

• Horrors

It strikes Phoenix as funny that the two people she was able to pose as happened to be engaged to marry, though she observes that it makes sense in light of the legacy. Their resemblance to the ideal is what makes the “four” of them such significant pawns in the current crisis. For many, it is as important to prevent their union as it is for others to ensure it. Even the plot to sabotage Dawn’s initiation with the marriage itself comes down to a plot to diminish the power the couple might wield. An attempted assassination, or abduction, only underscores the fact that Dawn, in particular, is a threat to the architects of the Purge as well. It does not help that the Trials also force her to confront the demons of her childhood, in a very literal sense. Turning to each other, while pushing aside the marriage issue, Dusk and Dawn go forth to complete Trials. Since the Age of Gods, the ruins of Dream Gate had been a nest of unholy haunts, a reliable proving ground for young heroes since the Cataclysm. But while the surface layers of the ancient city showed little change in activity from generations past, a disturbing increase has swelled in the hidden depths. Dusk and Dawn catch a hint of this during Trials.

Union

• Completion

• Marriage

• Examination

• Execution

The mission seemed to have reached a successful completion when the deeper levels present no significant challenges. Dawn is in agreement with the rest of their party, to make their way out of the depths and make sure they had not missed any monsters, but Dusk picks up on what she does not say. He takes her to scout a little deeper and Dawn is forced to confess her apprehension. The assumption is that the creatures had all ascended from the depths, but from her observation, a more significant number must have retreated deeper. She then informs him how deep the ruins get. Based on the estimated volume of the depths, there was no reason for the monsters to dwell so close to the surface. Also, what the ones they had encountered had been weak and scarred. Dawn asserts that the infestation must be worse than anyone imagined. It would take armies of seasoned warriors to truly clean out the ruins. Dusk agrees that it would be suicidal for their party to venture any deeper, but confesses that it would be necessary to find out soon just how big the nest really was, and give people a proper warning. The apprehension haunts them through graduation and the celebration of their seventeenth anniversaries.

On their wedding night, the two put aside their concerns and indulge in the moment, dropping the last of their restraints. In light of their past intimacy, Dusk and Dawn decide to consummate their marriage in total intercourse, a joining of mind, body and spirit. In theory, this would allow them to touch soul to soul, but instead it breaks down the division of their shared soul. This is what the demon was waiting for, to be healed by the union of Dusk and Dawn. Unfortunately, the restored demon is still trapped in the depths of Eve’s mind. Attempting to possess Dusk or Dawn’s body prompted Eve to retreat to the other body and retaliate. Eve is fighting on pure instinct, confused by the totality of the fusion and terrified by the inexplicable assault. In horror, she realizes a demon had invaded, and the only way to stop it was to sacrifice Dusk or Dawn. The part of Eve that is Dusk volunteers. Eve surrenders Dusk’s body to the demon, and then lashes out in bitter fury. The only way for Dusk to have resurrected was if he had been in the body at the time of death. In the wake of passion comes horror, when Dawn wakes up alone in bed. The bed itself is a bloody mess and a servant intrudes before Dawn can collect herself, as Dusk also wakes up in her body.

The death of Dusk is tragic enough, especially since it had made Dusk a permanent part of her psyche—as Dawn realizes she is the dominant personality in their gestalt, at least in her own body—but because she explains that her actions were provoked by a demon assault, things just get worse. Dawn is arrested and quarantined, while an investigation is conducted. For fear that her story is a lie based on truth, and that Dawn is currently possessed by the demon she claimed to have slain at such a terrible cost, she is stripped, bound and all contact with others strictly supervised. While her account of events is supported by the investigation, her personal examination leaves the inquisitors uneasy. There is no way to distinguish between the effects of a gestalt mind and a demonic possession. Even though Dawn herself is the victim of this horrible attack, the only way to be sure of her innocence is to kill her. As a phoenix, she had the comfort of knowing she would be resurrected and any possessing spirit dispelled, but the danger is that it would finish the job she started on Dusk. There was no guarantee that Dusk would still be a part of her if she was resurrected.

Dawn is granted a vigil, a final chance to commune with family and friends, on the off chance that she did not rise from the ashes. For most, it is a chance to offer Dawn their love and support and say goodbye to Dusk. It is simply too much to hope that a rite that would foil a demon’s hold would offer him any succor. The last visitor, to Dawn’s surprise, is Phoenix, who risks everything on the conviction that this rite is unnecessary, in order to offer Dusk a way to say a final farewell to Dawn. Allowing the part of Eve that is Dusk to control his body, the newlyweds are granted one more night of intimacy and comfort. In the morning, Phoenix reclaims control to conclude the duties he assumed, to guard the condemned, and sends her off with a final, personal farewell. She goes to the execution platform, straining to maintain her poise to the end, holding her head up. Her arms and legs are bound, and her head is secured. As the sun rises, the killing blade sings cleanly through her neck. The last thing she sees, as her severed head tilts forward to swing suspended by her own braid, is her own decapitated body. The next thing she knows, she is recoiling from her cold corpse, and the guards are crying alarms of “Demon!”

Flight

• Escape

• Desperation

• Confrontation

• Explanation

The only refuge for them in their condition is the hellish warren under the ruins, but their escape was noticed and Phoenix received her first mission, to hunt down the demon who slaughtered her best friends. The paladin catches up to “Eve” at an inn on the outskirts of the ruins, but Dusk/Dawn manage to escape, fleeing for the ruins. In trepidation, they enter the nest of demons and undead, stripping naked to advertise their alien physique, and praying it keeps them unmolested. In one sense, the prayer is in vain, but in the most important regard, they are safe from the demons surrounding them. Unfortunately, this does not save them from Phoenix. To their horror, Phoenix confronts them, equally naked and identically alien. Phoenix, confronted by the “demon” suddenly realizes the truth, and pauses to question Eve. Convinced that Eve is really Dusk and Dawn, Phoenix urges them to follow her, offering to explain her suspicions, and herself, once they reach the sanctuary. Once in safety and private, Phoenix reveals the goddess and demonstrates her abilities, turning male and female and then splitting into both. She then comments on the phoenix legacy, and ultimate purpose of the breeding program.

Subdued and subjected to examination, the horror deepens as Eve experiences the discovery of her alien anatomy, and the condemning assessment of her sexual ambiguity, a defining trait of demons that assume human form. When measures to banish her fail, harsher measures to destroy her are considered.

Legacy

• Implications

• Impersonation

• Restoration

• Fraternization

Phoenix points out that the gifts of the phoenix legacy did not include the power to incarnate another soul. That was a dragon gift. A phoenix could only reincarnate herself. But, what happened to Dusk and Dawn revealed how the breeding would encompass the sex of the goddess—by merging the human sexes to create a perfect, independent being. In horror, Eve reminds Phoenix that Dawn was half dragon, through her deceased father. If Phoenix was correct, if she was not the goddess, Eve was the one person who could incarnate her. On the basis of that notion, Phoenix asserts that perhaps Eve was the one who should be the paladin of the goddess. With her abilities, Phoenix could easily trade places and assume the lives of both Dusk and Dawn. It would be necessary for Eve to demonstrate some of Phoenix’s powers and skills, but the time it took to see if she could allowed them to really think about what they were doing. Dusk and Dawn both found it easy to take control and assert their original forms, but the arts of a paladin were another matter. While Phoenix staged the return of Dusk and Dawn, following the success of her mission, Eve was coached along. After the “ordeal” it did not surprise anyone that the three spent a lot of time together.

Pursuit

• Called

• Flashbacks

• Purpose

• Determination

When, in spite of Eve’s disbelief, Eve performed her first miracle, Phoenix pronounced her ready, just in time for the new Phoenix to receive a mission. A very difficult mission for her, to rescue a child abducted and taken into the ruins, as Dawn had been taken as a girl. It brought up the nightmare that had haunted her since the beginning of Trials, but now that horrible memory was essential to saving a child’s life. She led a group of adventurers into her own personal hell. Having already seen for herself the overwhelming number of monsters between them and their goal, she retraced the path of her escape back into the depths. Along the way, she realized who it was she was trying to rescue, a distant cousin (on both sides of her family) and, following the deaths of her family, her queen. Realizing that time was of the essence, she assigned her men to hold open her retreat and went ahead alone, naked, to face a host of demons. Armor, even a sword, would have slowed her down too much, as she proves by arriving just in time. Knowing she faced worse than death if she failed, she charged into the mix of humans and demon servants, armed and armored with only the skills of her body and mind—and faith.

Sacrifice

• Unleashed

• Attrition

• Resurrection

• Rebirth

Sheer disbelief at her appearance gave her a fighting chance. Discipline and desperation did all the rest, keeping her alive long enough to snatch the girl and flee the way she came. Expecting to die protecting the child’s retreat, she was surprised when her allies dragged her maimed and shattered body out of the ruins. Nearly flayed alive, and missing several limbs, it was hard enough to identify her that no one noticed the form she had been in, or they might have simply finished the job. It took all she had left to stay alive long enough to be delivered to the sanctuary, where it would be safe for her to resurrect. Later, in a new and healthy body, she finally understood why the goddess had given her champions the phoenix gifts. Nothing mortal could oppose the horrors humanity had unleashed. As she remarked upon this, the high priestess reminded her to enjoy it while it lasted, As soon as she bore a child, she would lose the gift of resurrection. If she died before bearing a reincarnation, she would remain dead. The price Eve would have to pay to bring the goddess into the world was to give up her own life. To either accept a mortal end or to risk a new beginning.

Union

The fusion of Dusk and Dawn is a significant enough event to form the central crisis of a story. The conclusion of their Initiations and the formalization of wedding plans provide excellent opening arcs, bringing in the conflicts and complications attending a nation in peril.

It is acceptable to present the “demon within” as the catalyst for joining Dusk and Dawn, however there is a conflict between the execution plot and the blooding plot regarding the circumstances of the ordeal of death. This would most likely shift the emphasis from an execution to a self-imposed exile, when Dawn escapes imprisonment after being nailed to discourage her from using her powers. By these lights, the order of certain events is altered.

Reaching the end of their initiations, Dusk and Dawn arrived in Dream Gate for Trials and their wedding.

The marriage and union of Dusk and Dawn begins with their betrothal and coupling for initiation. Individually, each faces challenges and uncertainty about their union, while together they confront them and try to resolve them. At the same time, the imminence of marriage increases the pressure for other agencies to divide and conquer them as a means to attaining power.

Naturally, they emerge from Trials with an apprehension of a greater danger hiding in the shadows, something more important than marriage or politics. A nightmare heralds the beginning of an adventure that will bind them together more intimately than any ceremony, and force them to share a body too exotic to be perceived as human.

The conflicts the pair face making it through trials include the demon’s efforts to subvert them and take possession of one long enough to slay the other.

Of course Dusk and Dawn make the necessary sacrifice to thwart the demon on their wedding night. It causes Dusk to take residence in Dawn’s body with her.

The tragic conclusion of their wedding night results in Dawn being detained in Aeryn, for the inquisition into Dusk’s death, while the rest of her family returns to Avon in Arden.

Suspicious of Dawn’s story, harsh measures are taken, to determine if she is under the influence of a demon, which leave her with a psychic scar that is potentially fatal to a phoenix unless she refrains from using her psychic gifts.

Thus crippled, she returns home to confront her in-laws with the bad news about their son.

Obligation

By the time Dawn is found untainted by demons, scarred by the process, the Avon Massacre has come and passed, allowing Dawn to arrive in Avon in the aftermath.

Ember had recently ascended to the throne in the wake of the Avon Massacre, an attempted coup.

Ember had been protected from the obliteration of the royal houses by the phoenix gift of resurrection. As the death of Dusk demonstrated, however, this did not make Ember invulnerable. Thus, she needed a strong protector, a champion she could trust implicitly, and who better than Dawn who also happened to be Dusk.

In spite of her scar, and the unusual coexistence of husband and wife, Dawn is enlisted to reinforce the position of the young queen.

The regent who had plotted to strip Dawn of her mother’s title, in the same way she had schemed to ensure Autumn could not assume it, had died in the coup, so there was nothing to stop her, aside from challenges contesting her claim and suitors desiring to possess the title, or Dawn, or both.

Dawn rises to the demands of her inheritance, but finds herself stumped by the concern of her in-laws, who argue about the consequences of the union, namely that it made it impossible for Dusk to fulfill his obligation to the pact.

Dusk himself, learning to assert himself, is as confused as Dawn about this mysterious pact obligation. Their probing causes Cinder and Coal to clam up, but Dawn had overheard enough previously to know that the person who made this obscure pact was the Athelon Emperor, Dusk’s grandfather.

Sacrifice

Her summer is spent helping shore up the Queen’s position, but in the fall, she returns to Aeryn to confront the Emperor.

Biding their time, until the next summit between Arden and the empire, Dawn accompanies the queen to the island of Aeryn, the traditional neutral ground of the northern dominions, hoping for a chance to confront the emperor. From the emperor, Dawn learns that the pact was with the patron deity of the Dragon House, generally referred to as “the dragon” with as little emphasis as possible. Dusk’s obligation was to present himself to the dragon to determine if he was capable of fulfilling the pact.

His revelation leads Dawn to Dragon’s Bath, and her flight from the dragon brings her to the ruins outside of Dream Gate.

For personal reasons, Dusk and Dawn would appreciate an audience with something capable of identifying Dusk’s soul, such a being might be able to separate the two of them, letting them continue their lives normally. This logic makes sense to the dragon as well, when they finally confront him, but the manner in which the dragon had intended to establish the identity of Dusk’s soul could be fatal to either Dusk or Dawn, or both.

In light of the joining of Dusk and Dawn, the blooding of Dawn is pressed so relentlessly by the dragon trying to reclaim his soul, Dusk, from Dawn.

Not that the dragon was giving them any options, continuing the onslaught that initiated their visit. The dragon is not the only one interested in Dawn’s sacrifice. The demon she thwarted had learned something priceless before she expelled it, and named her to the cabal as the price for power undreamed of. Dawn finds herself caught between mercenaries and cabal assassins, plotting to sacrifice her to a demon, and the dragon determined to devour her alive. Her bid to play her adversaries off each other nearly succeeds, but the dragon gets her, triggering the Eve of Paradox.

Thus, Dawn is caught between the dragon, the damned and her human adversaries for her final struggle.

The challenges faced in the opening book of the series include establishing the various arts and legacies of Aeirn. The phoenix legacy in particular needs to be introduced carefully, as the object of that legacy becomes a very intimate matter for Dusk and Dawn. The consequences of the legacy breeding program is visited through Phoenix, who has a history with Dusk and Dawn, but whom they are only previously acquainted with as duplicates of themselves. This works into the premarital conflicts, since Phoenix adopted their identities to pass as human in the past and is only known to certain people by those aliases. This accounts for those people’s reactions to the real Dusk and Dawn, and the creation of some painful misunderstandings that threaten their relationship. As Phoenix had been splitting herself in recent years, continuing her secret lives independent of trading places with Dusk and Dawn, the initial resolution of the misunderstanding comes with the introduction of Phoenix as a boy and girl who happen to have the same name and connections to the sanctuary. The old habit of keeping her nature a secret causes her, and her guardians, to conceal the truth automatically.

Among the things this approach discards is the role of Phoenix. Stepping in to fill the roles of close friends and confidants are fellow initiates with whom Dusk and Dawn would have ended up had they not been thrust on each other. Thorn remains a viable member of the cast, as Brand, Coal’s father. His infidelity is with Dawn’s mother, and the excuse responsible for the engagement of Dusk and Dawn given to Autumn’s mother. Autumn’s step-mother assumes the regency over Autumn’s claim, her plotting geared to retaining the power she usurped through her son’s marriage to Autumn.

It strikes Phoenix as funny that the two people she was able to pose as happened to be engaged to marry, though she observes that it makes sense in light of the legacy. Their resemblance to the ideal is what makes the “four” of them such significant pawns in the current crisis. For many, it is as important to prevent their union as it is for others to ensure it. Even the plot to sabotage Dawn’s initiation with the marriage itself comes down to a plot to diminish the power the couple might wield. An attempted assassination, or abduction, only underscores the fact that Dawn, in particular, is a threat to the architects of the Purge as well. It does not help that the Trials also force her to confront the demons of her childhood, in a very literal sense. Turning to each other, while pushing aside the marriage issue, Dusk and Dawn go forth to complete Trials. Since the Age of Gods, the ruins of Dream Gate had been a nest of unholy haunts, a reliable proving ground for young heroes since the Cataclysm. But while the surface layers of the ancient city showed little change in activity from generations past, a disturbing increase has swelled in the hidden depths. Dusk and Dawn catch a hint of this during Trials.

In past experiments at forming a mental gestalt, Dusk and Dawn had named their joined mind Eve.

Subdued and subjected to examination, the horror deepens as Eve experiences the discovery of her alien anatomy, and the condemning assessment of her sexual ambiguity, a defining trait of demons that assume human form. When measures to banish her fail, harsher measures to destroy her are considered.

The only refuge for them in their condition is the hellish warren under the ruins, but their escape was noticed and Phoenix received her first mission, to hunt down the demon who slaughtered her best friends. The paladin catches up to “Eve” at an inn on the outskirts of the ruins, but Dusk/Dawn manage to escape, fleeing for the ruins. In trepidation, they enter the nest of demons and undead, stripping naked to advertise their alien physique, and praying it keeps them unmolested. In one sense, the prayer is in vain, but in the most important regard, they are safe from the demons surrounding them. Unfortunately, this does not save them from Phoenix. To their horror, Phoenix confronts them, equally naked and identically alien. Phoenix, confronted by the “demon” suddenly realizes the truth, and pauses to question Eve. Convinced that Eve is really Dusk and Dawn, Phoenix urges them to follow her, offering to explain her suspicions, and herself, once they reach the sanctuary. Once in safety and private, Phoenix reveals the goddess and demonstrates her abilities, turning male and female and then splitting into both. She then comments on the phoenix legacy, and ultimate purpose of the breeding program.

Hunted down by their own childhood mentor, a childhood mystery is revisited. When Dusk and Dawn discover they once were the same person, “she” takes them into her confidence, revealing the solution she came up with to her own problem.

Salvation comes through accepting a new life together, giving up their old lives in the process. The only question was, would they find a way to separate themselves and begin a new life together in the manner they had intended?

The conclusion of the dragon’s pact effectively demonstrates that Dusk and Dawn were incarnations of the same person, ending the alienation of the naked god and the naked goddess. This is obscured, since the opening of the rift is credited to the disruption of the ritual of sacrifice, and credited with causing the demise of the dragon and the phoenix. For Dusk and Dawn, their resurrection together sealed the gestalt, leaving the fate of Dusk and Dawn as individuals uncertain. A single mind encompassing the lives of both, she is as much one as the other, the most likely outcome is that the dragon did claim Dusk’s soul and then perished in the rift, and Dawn’s mind had been bound to Dusk’s long enough to be branded with his memories and experiences. There is no time for her to reflect on this immediately, since her resurrection introduced a strange solution to the sexual duality she had experienced sharing her body with Dusk. Perceived as a demon, she was forced to flee from the scene of her emergence from the rift.

Source Notes

Pool

Homecoming

• Nightmares

• Formalities

• Courtship

• Rivalries

Trials

• Friendship

• Attacks

• Companionship

• Horrors

Union

• Completion

• Marriage

• Examination

• Execution

Flight

• Escape

• Desperation

• Confrontation

• Explanation

Legacy

• Implications

• Impersonation

• Restoration

• Fraternization

Pursuit

• Called

• Flashbacks

• Purpose

• Determination

Sacrifice

• Unleashed

• Attrition

• Resurrection

• Rebirth

Similarities

It was obvious to any phoenix that Dusk and Dawn were a perfect match. They were both as close to the Ideal as was humanly possible. Apart from their physical resemblance, Dusk and Dawn were also similar in having shown no sense of gender conformity. Both had been indifferent to the distinction between male and female, or those parts which dictated which was which, at the time they were initiated. In childhood androgyny, they were almost impossible to tell apart, whether by looks or by behavior. Dusk, in particular, required a firm hand to incorporate the physical and spiritual aspects of masculinity into his identity. Dusk’s indifference to his own gender provoked his father to constantly confront him with the demands and privileges of manhood. Ironically, this constant harassment only made the boy feel more insecure about his masculinity. His normal initiation was augmented by his father, exploiting a student’s right of challenge, traveling from school to school during the breaks in his training to accumulate an uncommon mastery of the art of dancing. It can be said that such was the disposition of either child that in time they came to be loved and cherished by their mentors and adopted families, even if at times that love was rough and nearly abusive, as it so often seemed between Dusk and his father. This, perhaps, accounts for their growing up with the taint of possible bastardy confident of true and untarnished love from some quarter in which they quietly took shelter from the taunts and insults that rang in their ears, or burned in the eyes of those they encountered, even in their own homes.. Among children their own age, they were able to find much comradeship and affection, even if, as was the case for Dusk, he had little time to make or keep acquaintances outside of his circle of initiates.

Dusk was haunted by insecurity about his manhood, in part because it never struck him as a defining characteristic, as a person, but predominantly because Thorn had abused him with the notion that it was the only measure of his worth. The issue was not about gender, but about behavior. The privilege of manhood came with an obligation to be aggressive, cocky and arrogant, and that was alien to him. Asserting his manhood was a challenge, a way to prove himself, but deep down he was guilty of all the accusations Thorn had made.

Engagement

Dusk and Dawn were informed of their betrothal at the age of sixteen, at the beginning of their final year of initiation. Unfortunately, the announcement was preceded by an event which set them up as antagonists. Dusk and Dawn had known each other most of their lives, though their association was strictly limited by their mentors. Cinder’s affection for Thorn, from their time as boys together, had been severely taxed by Thorn’s attitude toward women. Unable to coexist as friends or lovers, their relationship became dominated by competition and lust. Between confrontations, they avoided each other as much as possible. In spite of this, it was inevitable that Dusk and Dawn would meet under the instruction of their master. Their history of meeting and parting was a comedy of errors they were careful to laugh about only in private, but it was inevitable that their mentors’ animosity would one day test their friendship. That day came when Dusk had faced and overcome every other worthy challenge his mentor could identify. The man finally gave in to the temptation to confront his former lover, and watch as his charge defeated her famous protégé. He instructed the boy to seek the girl out and challenge her, knowing the order could not be refused. Their master learned of the challenge and rushed to observe the match, carrying with him the news from their homes. The contest was exhausted in a draw, and the couple instructed, for different reasons, to train together. Their master informed them of their betrothal, cautioning them to pay heed to their training and not let temptation, condoned by the arrangement, ruin their futures. The advice was well warranted, for the two were obviously drawn to each other, unconsciously recognizing the connection that already existed between them.

Dawn was the best reason Dusk had to be a man. Dawn was proof of his own convictions that a person did not have to be a man to be worthwhile, or even exceptional. Their formal engagement did not initiate their physical relationship, it actually slowed it down, as the two had been experimenting with sexuality since they were seven, curious to know what the big deal was. It was almost as if they had always known their bodies belonged to each other, and they both felt that simply touching each other was not enough.

Ability

Partnered in fierce competition, they pushed themselves to the limit of their potential in their efforts to conquer one another. Foremost among the gifts which resulted in their initiations was the power of their minds. Such was the nature of art that it enabled a mind, with the proper training and tools, to manipulate reality. Because their minds showed a capacity to dispense with such artifice to achieve the same ends, they were seen to have an awesome potential, the capacity to achieve a unique and extraordinary mastery of the art. As is often the case, the bulk of their initiation was devoted to the disciplines through which a foundation for the art to build upon was laid. At the same time, that ability they already possessed to impose their will on reality more directly was being cultivated as part of the general mastery of the three spheres, the body, the mind and the spirit. Their ability to touch the hearts and minds of living beings, and so know both the thoughts and feelings of, and impress their own thoughts and feelings upon, those around them, was equal to their ability to grasp and grapple with the fabric of the world around them. Collectively, this presence of mind enabled them to possess a kind of intuition, or precognition in which answers came more quickly to them than questions, and actions even more quickly than reactions—which is to say, they were formidable dancers, and difficult students. In fact, as they possessed a range of actions which exceed that of mere muscle and sinew, they possessed a comprehension of things that outstripped the articulation of words, making it difficult for any to assess their full range of expression and ability. Added to that, they possessed the natural gifts of the phoenix legacy; regeneration, rejuvenation, reincarnation and resurrection.

In the same way Dusk and Dawn experimented with physical intimacy, they indulged in mental and spiritual intimacy. They considered it part of their training to use their abilities to explore certain mysteries through each other. Through the rapport they forged, they both knew what it was like to live in the other’s body, to perceive the world through each other’s senses. They also accessed and shared their powers. Conscious of the need for restraint, they only risked one kind of intimacy at a time, aware of something inside them urging them on.

Initiation

To some degree or another, every initiate was exceptional, for the possession of extraordinary attributes dictated their training, and only through that training could they come to be measured. What set Dusk and Dawn apart from their peers, was that their masters still sought their measure, from which to determine the course of their training, while their other students had been measured and introduced to the arts they would be able to master. Fortunately, as their patrons had selected for them careers in which dancing, above all, was required, their exceptional achievement there was more than sufficient to fulfill their destinies. Nevertheless, their mentors wondered yet what the true power of these two might be. The question remained even in the last year of their initiation. Even the Magus, who had found it necessary to deal with Dusk as much as he dealt with Dawn, could not fathom their potential. In all the world, their generation offered only one other example of such extraordinary ability, and her true identity was a secret. It took a tremendous effort to come up with a close second, a boy who would have been the best of their generation, but for Dusk and Dawn. There was a long list of close thirds, however. He took it upon himself to bring others in, despite certain rivalries, and attend closely to their final year of training. In the previous generation, only one person had shown the kind of potential Dusk and Dawn exhibited. Ash, as Cinder, was still decades ahead of her peers, a match for more skilled and experienced artists. With Cinder, Dusk and Dawn to goad them on, second and third ranked initiates would be able to surpass themselves. The best of the previous and following classes might also benefit from associating with them. A productive and chaotic year resulted.

The greatest boon to Dusk and Dawn’s tenuous restraint was the constant romantic rivalries that sprang up between their peers and them. It was a common occurrence, since initiates were soaked in raging hormones for the latter half of initiation. Training in the physical sphere, they and their peers truly suffered the worst of it, being a collection of the most desirable physical specimens of their generation. It especially did not help that their emphasis included mastering sexual disciplines, which required having a decent partner.

Dusk and Dawn were introduced through Thorn and Cinder. Dusk and Dawn were raised in two different, but similar worlds, as most of their childhood was dominated by initiation and devotion to the disciplines of Dance. Dusk was initiated by his father, Thorn, and his uncle, Autumn, although Dreamer was responsible for overseeing the development of his psychic gifts. Autumn and Dreamer were brother and sister with distant ties to nobility. While this connected them to the Phoenix House, they were not children of the Phoenix Legacy. The awesome accomplishment of living up to their names had been achieved realizing their own human potential, a feat comparable only to that of Raven. Dawn was initiated in the psychic arts by Raven, who had been a classmate of her father, Ash. Raven was mostly concerned with overseeing the development of her mental gifts, while Dawn worked most closely with her mentor in the physical arts, and mother, Cinder. Dusk and Dawn met off and on until they were sixteen and seeking mates for the more carnal aspects of their initiation. At Raven’s urging, Dawn’s mother and mentor had been on the lookout for a suitable mate for Dawn’s ninth rank initiation. As a phoenix, she required a phoenix partner. Ember had canvassed the Phoenix House, while Cinder searched among the initiates of the schools of dance.

Cinder had deliberately avoided pairing Dawn with Dusk because of the betrothal. While it was fairly common for couples paired for this stage of initiation to get married, it had backfired in the case of Ash and Raven leaving Cinder leery of the same happening with Dusk and Dawn. Unfortunately, this was an opinion she could not share with Raven, for obvious reasons. Even though the betrothal was kept quiet, Dusk and Dawn had been drawn to each other, and Raven could not help but notice this and act upon it. Especially when the boy’s father practically threw his son at Dawn. Confronting Thorn again almost decided her against it, but Dusk did not take much after his father. When Thorn confided the arrangement between their families, Raven quickly endorsed the pairing and informed Dusk and Dawn. They did not object in the slightest. They were obviously well matched, and Dusk was the first and only male to appeal to Dawn. Unable to contact Dawn’s mother, Raven went ahead and settled the arrangements. Cinder returned to report on the candidates she had identified and discovered what she had missed. Once they began to work intimately together, Dusk and Dawn realized they could not survive without each other. While this was obvious to Dawn’s mother, Dusk’s father complicated their lives by insisting on informing them of their betrothal.

Thorn had jumped at the prospect of mating Dusk to Dawn, burning previous commitments to do so, but refused to consent to the mating without a more binding commitment. Traditionally, it was common for arranged marriages to be ensured by mating the couple during their initiation, as mates tended to bond and marry after initiation. Shale had acquired the rights of a father through marriage to her mother, and as much as it galled him to give in to such blackmail, there was no question that the two were meant for each other. Such arrangements did nothing to suppress competition for the best life mate, and Dusk and Dawn each had more than their share of potential suitors who would take their engagement as a challenge to break them up. The first stirrings of this, among the initiates of her own school, was instantly put down by Tempest, who assured the boys and girls that the school would continue to seek out mates for those who still needed them. By tradition, intimates were initiated in the home of the female initiate, unless she had no family of her own or her mate was from a family with greater status. As the Heir to Aeryn she had a higher status than Dusk, so Thorn had eagerly insisted on accompanying his son to her home for the duration. Father and son joined the company of Dawn’s school for the return to Aeryn and the Arden Seat, Avon.

Dawn discovered at once that Dusk’s education had been far more deficient than hers when it came to sex. Athletic initiations were practiced in the nude, and this was particularly true of dancers. The first time they trained together, Dawn discovered how completely Dusk had been shielded from close contact with the opposite sex. Dusk had always been both disturbed and fascinated by the differences in her anatomy. When they first met, Dawn could not believe Dusk had never seen a girl naked before, until Dusk explained what it had been like being trained almost exclusively by his father. In a sense, his world was not defined by gender, until Dawn became a part of it. He grew up with only the vaguest notion that the difference between boys and girls extended beyond manner and form of dress. Charmed by his innocence, Dawn submitted herself to his curiosity. Dawn indulged her own curiosity as well, taking the opportunity to explore in detail what she had learned to avoid noticing in training. It was a pleasure to be able to give Dusk his first taste of the true mystery of sex. It would have been simple enough to proceed from there, but his father had done far more to complicate the issue. While Thorn had shielded Dusk from contact with the fairer sex, he had frequently used his son to curry favor with the families of suitable young girls.

On their way to the capital, where they were to settle for the duration of their tenth year, they paused often to allow other initiates to mate up. Dawn realized that at almost every stop, there was some girl there expecting to be mated to Dusk. In some cases more than one. A number of tense confrontations, most between Dusk and his father, required Tempest’s intervention. Most of the girls gracefully accepted the headmaster’s assurance that they had been displaced by true love. One girl in particular, however, had made a much more personal investment in her choice of mate. Fox, a daughter of the Phoenix House, had set out to find the best mate for initiation and chose Dusk. The arrangements had been made several months earlier, when Dusk and his father passed through the capital. In spite of the fact that they were already late, she waited for their arrival with great anticipation, certain that her status and wealth, not to mention her own exceptional qualifications and skill as an initiate, would be impossible to resist. Her commitment was pure torture for Falcon, a son of the Phoenix House who was obsessed with Fox. He had grown up dreaming of the day they would complete initiation together, only to be disappointed in the past few months. His family had been surprised at the slight to their son, but considered it a blessing when they were approached by the Princess Ember, seeking a suitable mate for Dawn’s initiation.

Fox went ballistic when she learned that Dusk had been mated to another girl. The news came back to her through an older brother, returning from his own ninth rank initiation to prepare for his trials. Falcon learned that Fox had left the capital the next day, when he tried to pay a visit. Hearing that the boy Fox had been waiting for had taken another mate, Falcon dropped everything to track Fox down, intending to console her and bid his suit. He pursued without a second thought, leaving no word for his family. When morning came, without his appearance at home, Ember set out after him. Ember managed to catch up to Falcon and explain that he had been placed in her care, when she received his family’s blessing for her proposal. He pleaded with her, describing his life long devotion to Fox, explaining the opportunity that had been created when her mate put her aside for someone else. Ember considered the situation, sensing that the boy was doomed to be disappointed, and offered a deal. Ember would help him track down Fox. If she accepted his proposal, Ember would escort them back to the capital and find another prospect for her niece, but if she rejected him, he would accept Dawn. Unfortunately, Ember found herself more challenged by riding herd on Falcon than by tracking Fox.

Dawn had been approached by boys starting years earlier, many of whom had sought her out now in the hopes of mating her. Most of them excused themselves upon learning of the engagement to Dusk. The surplus of young boys frustrated in their pursuit of Dawn, eager to find a suitable mate at the last moment, prevented the families of those girls from taking legal action against Thorn and his son. The bad impression Thorn had made on Dawn, from the first time they met, was compounded by everything she learned about the man and his actions. Worse, he always hovered around his son, forcing Dawn to expose herself to unwanted suitors, just to escape from Thorn’s shadow. From the boys who still pined for her, she was used to hearing an endless stream of endearing compliments, and worship. One who approached spouting insults, and assaulting her without warning, was the last thing she expected. Wolf, in his eternal pursuit of Dusk, mistook her for him on the basis of their uncanny resemblance and clothing Dusk had loaned her. Once he recognized she was female, he apologized profusely and spent the rest of the day trying to make up for attacking her. In spite of informing him that she was Dusk’s mate, he continued to curse Dusk. Wolf had ignored the call to find an initiate mate to pursue his rivalry with Dusk.

In the spirit of that rivalry, Wolf impulsively proposed to her, urging her to abandon Dusk and take him as a mate instead. Bemused by Wolf’s proposition, wondering what had caused the rivalry between him and Dusk, Dawn blundered into a rivalry of her own. Dawn came upon a commotion involving the girls who were still chasing Dusk. Stepping in to end the fight, Dawn tried to appeal to the girls by explaining the bond that existed between her and Dusk. This focused the attention of the girl who had been harassing the others on Dawn. Fox was not impressed by Dawn’s appeal, dismissing it out of hand and informing Dawn that she considered the theft of her mate a mortal insult, over which she was prepared to duel Dusk’s mate to the death. When Fox issued her challenge, Dawn realized who she was. Fox would have been a princess herself if not for the Purge. She was till of royal blood, a member of the high nobility, and an heir to one of the most powerful domains in Arden. Dawn, as a result of her childhood abduction, was prevented from disclosing her higher rank, but even if she could have, she could not refuse the challenge. She welcomed the chance to prove her worthiness before her mate, and casually defeated Fox in their first confrontation. Unfortunately, Fox did not accept defeat. She swore that she would not rest until Dawn was dead and Dusk was hers.

This threat to Dawn aroused Dusk’s protective instincts. From that moment, he never left her side. Dusk and Dawn got into their first fight over his protectiveness. Dawn forced him to conceded that if he had the right to watch her back with respect to her rivals, she had the right to watch his back with respect to his.

Ash was the only individual Raven had met who had the potential to surpass her. He was as much a prodigy as Magus himself—drawing the founder of modern magic out of retirement—and considered the true heir of the Art, the most likely to take magic to the next level. He was able to grasp the most shocking implications of Magus’s teachings, but the boy’s psyche was scarred deep within by an ageless urge which life had transformed into a new impulse. There was still a question that needed to be answered, and it led to an obsession to prove a theory that others took for granted as fact. Ash became obsessed with the idea during his final year of initiation, when he was seventeen years old. Ninth rank initiates who possessed a dragon or phoenix legacy, or specialized in the physical arts, spent their tenth year mastering sexual disciplines. Out of deep admiration of the boy’s potential, Magus had paired him with Raven, though the reason had been obscure at the time. Ash was born to two legacies, neither a dragon or a phoenix, but potentially either or both. This unusual potential was what made him the most talented prodigy ever seen by Magus. Thus, it was inevitable for Ash to combine a number of disciplines and come up with the idea of using his parthenogenic ability to prove the existence of a soul of creation. Naturally, it was a secret ambition, and this conspired to strain his relationship with his mate, Raven. The final straw came when Ash refused to leave with her, unwittingly forgoing the engagement and marriage planned for them, in favor of remaining at school for the summer to work on his experiment. His first task required him to master an unusual gift of the dragon and phoenix legacies, metamorphosis.

Magus attempted to fetch him, and make him aware of Raven’s intentions, but Ash quickly discerned and adopted the guise of Dusk, unwittingly eluding detection. Having acted on the assumption that he was trying to sire a god, imposing his own masculine self image, he assumed the masculine form of the Ideal. Combining his dragon abilities and his exceptional training, he endeavored to embody the soul of creation, unaware that the same goal had been undertaken by the servants of the goddess—as the secret objective of the Phoenix House. He was inspired by the teachings of Magus, what was implicit in the model of reality upon which the workings of modern magic was based. Only on a very deep level was this still a search to find his true self, to escape from what others might conceive him to be and conceive of himself. The first stage of his plan succeeded when he abstracted and then assumed a form corresponding with the self-image of the soul of creation. He spent much of the summer establishing his alter ego, in search of a potential mother for the child he wished to conceive. In his ignorance, he was unaware of the reason he was petitioned by one of his peers—Feather, a young lady of the Phoenix House—to sire a child for her. He took advantage of her offer to complete his task, and conceive a human incarnation of the soul of creation, thereby proving the existence of a “true” god. To his shock and horror, the conception of the boy triggered a black out, during which he became female and was impregnated. In the moment of conception, Ash captured his inner self, triggering his transformation into a woman, and her instinctive response to the conception of himself as a boy was to conceive of herself as a girl, before her inspiration was consumed by the singular duality of this self-conception.

Ash discovered almost instantly that she could not abort the pregnancy or alter the form imposed on her by the conception. She concluded that she had been in error to assume that the soul of creation was masculine, and her effort to conceive a boy forced her to be corrected. After being redefined by her objective, Magus challenged Ash’s assumptions. Magus pointed out that if one grasped at something and found nothing, one was left holding oneself. Striving for what was beyond his dragon potential, he had forced his phoenix potential to take over. The change in gender might not mean that God was female, but that Ash had taken himself for granted and only on an unconscious level had he been willing to assert the truth. Ash may have succeeded in doing something he did not even know he was trying to do. Her transformation was accepted as a magical mishap, and the truth of the experiment revealed only to Magus to protect the child in case Ash succeeded. Magus considered the options, and, taking advantage of the Purge to explain her origins, created a new identity for her as Cinder, the widowed bride of Ash. On the basis of appearance, she was introduced outside her family as a lost member of the Phoenix House, and the alleged dragon-phoenix union served as reasonable justification for the amount of power the daughter would most likely possess. Cinder had some difficulties, despite the fact that her mother was a phoenix before she was turned into a dragon by his father, being the daughter-in-law she posed as. Especially since the death of Ash was explained in a fashion that easily made it Cinder’s fault in the public eye. It did not help that “she” was not very lady like, and was virtually ignorant of her phoenix heritage.

At the time of Cinder’s arrival, Ash’s older sister Ember, the surviving phoenix incarnation of Amber, had the misfortune to be elevated to Queen. Of all the potential heirs to the throne, she was the only one truly protected by her phoenix heritage and able to survive the assault on the Arden Seat. Ember was conceived before the threat of the Purge was recognized. As a result of her mother’s initiation by Coal, she survived as the phoenix incarnation of Amber. Ash’s mother, Amber, was originally a phoenix. In fact, she was a princess of the royal line. At the time the killing started, she was as removed from the throne of Arden as Coal was from the imperial throne of Athelon. Unfortunately, the Purge had begun in Arden, and Ember, as she was known then, was a prime target in spite of being initiated as a priestess. The young prince had led an occupying imperial force, tracking down renegades of his father’s scourge, and learned of an attack on Ember. The girl had made a strong impression on him in their brief encounters, and he knew of her recent rebirth as well as the vulnerability of her and her offspring. In spite of his protection, the servants of the Purge were relentless. Ember and her child both faced true death. Having fallen in love with Ember, the prince could not allow this to happen, so he dared to convert Ember, granting her the powers of a dragon while stripping her of her phoenix heritage. The only thing preventing a cross initiation, a potentially fatal fusion of a dragon and a phoenix, was the loss of Ember’s gift of resurrection as a result of bearing an offspring. Ember had already divorced herself from the strongest gift of the phoenix legacy. Her conversion by Coal had the dual effect of granting Ember a dragon’s immortality, while granting full access to the phoenix gifts to her daughter, ensuring her survival as well.

In theory, as long as her offspring lived, Ember would reincarnate in her original house, but being a dragon meant it would be very difficult for her to die. The change was significant enough that the princess was forced to pass on her mantle to her daughter and become Amber. Her place in the succession was shifted away from Ember after the conversion, to one of her mother’s younger siblings, because he was an offshoot of the King. No longer eligible to be a priestess of the goddess or a princess of the Phoenix House, Amber had no reason not to marry the prince, or bear his child. Ash and Ember grew up as brother and sister, separated by about two years. Ember never expected to inherit the throne because of this deviation, but that entire branch of the royal house was wiped out in the Avon Massacre. Before she knew it she was perched on the throne struggling to restore the government of Arden without the support of the Throne’s traditional allies. Whatever the objective of the coup, it had been very thorough at beheading the Court, leaving the reins of power in the hands of people like herself who never even imagined they would hold them. The only fortunate aspect of this tragedy was that whoever had conspired to seize power had been betrayed by the forces they had employed. Only a handful of the conspirators had escaped with their lives, and Ember was ruthlessly weeding them out as they returned to exploit the situation. With the support of her mother, she was confident of restoring order, but without warning, Amber was distracted by a personal crisis, the death of Ash. Cinder brought this terrible news barely a week after the coup. Curious about her new sister-in-law, and desperate for allies, Ember confronted the girl. Alone, without support from Magus, Cinder initially hides behind the identity he created for her.

The young queen was scrabbling to identify and locate the offspring of slaughtered houses to shore up her position and secure the kingdom against further attacks. In particular, she was desperate to find an heir to Avon, the domain in which the Arden Seat was located and in which the defense of the throne was entrusted. Unfortunately, the enemy had been very thorough with that particular house. Cinder was a godsend to Ember, a phoenix embodying the Ideal with no past whatsoever. Ember was the first person, after Magus, that Ash confided in when he became Cinder, needing her sister’s help to adjust to being a phoenix and a mother. Ember was key in establishing Cinder’s identity, taking advantage of the Purge to “relate” her to one of the slain lines of nobility. Ember’s hopes were shaken when she learned that Cinder was pregnant, making her vulnerable, but reinforced when she learned that Cinder was “her brother’s widow”. Ash had been intended to marry into the Avon House, but the details of whom he would marry had been undisclosed. Even with Cinder’s vulnerability, her “marriage” to Ash entitled Amber to serve as the Avon Regent, guaranteeing Ember an invulnerable champion. The title of Avon Lea would rest with Cinder, but Arden would act as the Queen’s Protector until Cinder’s child was old enough to assume the role. Of course, Cinder was rather shocked to be thrust before the court to receive her mantle. Especially when ambitious lords decided to challenge her, knowing that her death would leave the coveted title up for grabs. Cinder had to win these challenged before her claim was secure enough for Amber to assume an official regency. Fortunately, the challenge period was limited to Cinder’s first trimester, during which she would not be gravely encumbered by her pregnancy.

Ironically, the position Cinder was thrust into inspired many to conquer her outside the arena of battle. For every man prepared to duel with her there were three men trying to court her. For some, the attraction was her position, while for others they were compelled by her resemblance to the phoenix Ideal. The fact that she was a widow potentially pregnant with a dragon’s child was no deterrent. Not even her masculine attitudes and habits, when they overcome the feminine façade imposed by Arden, could deter her suitors. Dusk and Dawn were engaged as the result of an affair between Thorn and Cinder. Thorn had set out to “console” the widow of his best friend, and Cinder, protected by her pregnancy, had indulged her old friend for the sake of amusement. The arranged marriage began as a spontaneous cover-up when Feather became suspicious of Thorn’s interest in Cinder, but Feather and Crimson took it very seriously and their observations prompted Thorn to become fixated on it. Only at the formal meeting to seal the agreement did Cinder realize her friend might have conned her into engaging her daughter to her son. Unfortunately, Crimson had not confided Ash’s liaison with Feather, and Amber and Crimson had their own agendas, pushing the engagement forward. Dusk, was regarded by his mother and his mother’s husband as a normal, first generation phoenix. Ash had never shown possession of the phoenix legacy until the night of conception and Cinder lost her access to the dragon legacy during the switch. As a result, Dawn was considered a rare, first generation dragon-phoenix. Neither child was an immediate target of the Purge. Technically, they already shared the condition the Purge was intended to reduce every member of the Phoenix House to—being young, raw and inexperienced.

Since Ash was in an assumed guise when Dusk was conceived, not even Feather suspected that Dusk and Dawn were in any way related. Dusk was officially the son of Thorn, but he was named after his mysterious father. In actuality, “Dusk” had been an alias used by Ash, posing as a phoenix in his altered form. To balance his mother’s infidelity, his presumed father was a rogue. Because of the Purge, Thorn had been stripped of the wisdom and experience that had tempered his selfish nature. He was talented and ambitious, but lazy and self absorbed, willing to go to great lengths to avoid responsibility. Thorn’s respectable lineage was offset, in Crimson’s eyes, by the fact that Thorn had become the black sheep of the family. His house compromised itself to ensure that Thorn could not inherit the title he championed in a former incarnation. Crimson swallowed her distaste when his clumsy indiscretion lead to the betrothal of Dusk and Dawn. In hopes of taking full advantage of the situation, Crimson begins a campaign to slander Cinder, and by extension Dawn, in such a way that people would ultimately look to Dusk to redeem the title they held. In spite of the difficulty of smearing Cinder and Dawn’s names, while reinforcing their legitimacy, Crimson had an excellent model in Thorn. Even the most respectable families had members the rest were ashamed to acknowledge, criminals and incompetents. It also helped that Cinder seemed to have no history. No one’s past could be that obscure without some significant reason and a deliberate effort to hide it. Certainly, no one was as well trained as Cinder without notice unless they were part of the underworld. The more competent Cinder proved to be, the greater the suspicion became that she was a criminal.

Criminal or not, she was a phoenix and worthy of respect. Even criminals were known to support the establishment, even as they preyed on its constituents. As long as she assured the continuity of a respected bloodline, she herself did not need to be an admirable human being. The key to Crimson’s plot was to sow mistrust, to undermine the people’s confidence in the Queen’s Protector. It cultivated support for the regency, and caused people to look for a sound, reliable person they could trust to assume power at the end of the regency. For some, Dawn was the one they looked to, but Dusk was the one that appealed to the prejudices of most. After the birth of Dawn, Cinder devoted as much time as she could spare on self improvement. Her pregnancy had made her vulnerable to assassination, and the uncertainty about being reincarnated through Dusk and or Dawn discouraged her from even attempting to conceive a new incarnation of herself. Thoughts of her mortality made a great incentive to improve herself, but so did the discrimination she faced in her new sex. Her efforts did as much to hurt her reputation as they did to make it. Cinder kept an open mind about Dusk and Dawn. They were either both incarnations of the soul of creation, Cinder herself, or in Dusk’s case an actual son. At the betrothal the pair had been tested and found genetically compatible—virtually identical, but safe to interbreed. Unfortunately, Dawn was proven to be identical to Cinder, in no physical way related to Ash. In light of the Purge, this was disclosed only to the court, where it was used to challenge Cinder’s marriage to Ash, in hopes of stripping the regency from Amber. That challenge was trumped by the fact that there was no proof of Ash’s death, though it came up from time to time as efforts to find him produced naught.

Cinder was approached by Magus and offered a mission. Cinder was surprised to be sought out in her retreat from the chaos of Court and the memories of her former life. It had been years since they last parted, and her initial pleasure at his visit soured when he presented his request. Rather than give her a chance to respond, he departed and left her with the details, and instructions to meet him the next day, in a letter. Unable to ignore the appointment, Cinder visited him the next day and tried to demure, insisting that circumstances denied her a life of adventure. Magus brushes her protests off and introduces someone Cinder had not seen for some time. Confronted with someone from her former life, Cinder was forced to revisit a painful chapter of her life when Magus abruptly exposed Cinder’s secret to Raven. In shock and anger, Cinder withdrew and returned home. Unfortunately, as soon as Raven recovered from the revelation, she sought Cinder out demanding answers and explanations. Initially, Cinder tried to deny the truth, hiding behind her new identity, but propriety forced her to offer her hospitality for the night. In spite of everything she had learned as a woman and a mother, even in spite of using her daughter to drive the illusion home, Cinder betrayed herself in the smallest ways. Little habits and mannerisms, which Raven had the most intimate and exciting year of their lives to learn, gave her away. Raven’s suspicions compelled her to corner Cinder, and force her to admit the truth. As difficult as that was, explaining it proved even more difficult. Confronted with Raven’s ignorance of everything but Magus’s assertion that she was once Ash, Raven’s lover and, unwitting, intended husband, Cinder confided the story of her transformation.

Having opened the door to Cinder’s past, Magus challenged her to take up the quest she had been barred from, accompanying and protecting Raven for the opportunity to bring her questions to the man who could best answer them, her grand-father, the Athelon Emperor. Raven, believing until that morning that her love had died seven years ago, begged Cinder to accept the mission. In spite of her uncertainty, the chance to renew her friendship with Raven and perhaps discover why she had turned her life upside down, was too much to resist. She accepts the mission, hastening to make arrangements for her daughter before meeting Raven for their departure. The young mother leaves her family and home in search of answers, hoping to understand the cause of her life’s upheaval. After seven years, she was desperate to know what caused the young man she had been to become the young woman he was now. As she begins her quest, she was reminded of the night of her transformation and the ambition that set two lives in motion at the cost of her former existence. As before, she was inspired to act by her true mentor, Magus. Part of her purpose was to resolve the mystery surrounding her daughter and son, but the first step in her journey was to confront an emperor for the truth about her own conception. Until then, it was Raven’s journey, begun with passage by ship to the southernmost port of Athen. To pass the time, Cinder continues her story, going into detail about her sister’s scheme to use her transformation to strengthen her position as Queen of Arden. That made it necessary to preface her tale with a summary of the Avon Massacre. During Ash’s initiation, an increase in the assassination of phoenix nobles had finally been recognized as an outright Purge.

Cinder and Raven arrived in the southernmost port of the Athelon Empire. The couple faced an unexpected obstacle on their way to Athelon, demonstrations of lingering, ancient prejudices between the people of Athen and Arden. This ill will was exploited by their closing adversaries to harass Cinder.

Cinder and Raven set out overland from the port to reach the Imperial Seat.

Over the following years, Cinder had time to adjust to her new life and become involved once more in the lives of those around her. Her daughter helped her make her peace with being a woman and a mother, and her devotion to truly mastering her new body earned her a reputation as the best unarmed fighter of her generation. At the same time, Cinder was driven to discover the true cause of her transformation. As Amber pressured her to make up for her deficiencies as a woman and a phoenix, Cinder learned about the phoenix legacy, including the applicable reasons for Dawn’s betrothal to Dusk. The fact that they were male and female versions of the Ideal, or each other, was seen as more of a reason to match them together. The only way for Cinder to find out exactly who Dusk and Dawn were, however, was to die and see who she woke up as. It made her wish she had searched for answers as she had intended. Unfortunately, she was a single mother with an adoring daughter, and both of them were extremely vulnerable. Cinder herself was difficult to kill, but Dawn’s gift of regeneration would not mature until seven years after her conception. Nine months later, Cinder would have to begin the girl’s initiation. That left a very small window of opportunity to find answers that had already eluded her for years. In point of fact, she did not even have any idea where to begin looking, and she had long since come to terms with her new existence. So, the quest she was now on was the furthest thing from her mind when Magus approached her with this mission. Nothing short of the lead he had given her, and the desire to make up with Raven, could have inspired her to leave Dawn at that point. Even as they reached Athelon, she found herself aching to simply return home and retrieve her daughter.

Raven received more respect because of her distinctive coloring. Any member of the merchant class could turn out to be a deadly spy or assassin, so her kind was always treated with respect.

Cinder never suspected the obvious. It would have been easy for Raven to get a sample from Ash that would allow her to assume his form, and their mating initiation sufficient cause for her to have tried. At the time, it would have allowed her to gain insight into her lover and discover how to please him. The revelations about Cinder and Magus would provide inspiration for her to consider repeating that suit in order to be with the one she loved. It would allow her to present Cinder with a mind-blowing proposition. If Cinder allowed Raven to assume her former identity, Cinder could finally honor the engagement desired by both Raven and Magus without disrupting the political situation at home. Unfortunately, it would pit her in an intimate relationship, physically, with the man she had once been. Tempting and practical, it might be too practical for both of them, but Cinder was forced to consider the proposal. Of course the experiment drew official attention, when the return of Cinder’s husband—the emperor’s grandson—was noticed, creating a commotion. Even though the truth was confided to the emperor, he chose to endorse the deception, dismissing Raven from the post she had just assumed. In exchange for giving Cinder to Raven, she would be in his employ as a covert agent in Arden. To silence Cinder’s protests, he reminded her of her origins, asserting that what he required of Ash/Raven is what he would require of a son or grandson, the difference being that this son also happened to be a woman of the merchant class with extraordinary talents. That settled, Raven departed with Cinder on the final leg of her quest.

The Dragon House and the Phoenix House had been founded on pacts made with Dusk and Dawn in the Age of Gods.

In Arden, the Dragon House was equal in size and power to the Phoenix House.

In Aspen and Athen, the Phoenix House was far smaller and centered entirely around service to the goddess.

In truth, the same entity had been perceived and recognized as two separate entities. The goddess, Dawn, had been the phoenix—the personification of the soul of creation, and the god, Dusk, had been the dragon—the personification of the mind of creation.

Through breeding, the Dragon and Phoenix Houses of Arden were deeply intertwined, though each House emphasized the training of only the potential suited to their Legacies.

Dusk and Dawn had each entered their pacts with humanity to become human. The god, Dusk, was approached by a group of humans seeking power. In exchange for granting it, they and their heirs were required to help Dusk acquire a human heir. Unfortunately, fulfilling that pact had not proven within the abilities the founders of the Dragon House had gained. It took thousands of years to discover a way to embody a primordial being, exploiting a side effect of a dual initiation.

Dawn felt the conception of a boy in the Dragon House tug at her soul, confirming that she was innately drawn to a specific embodiment. Ten years later, a suitable marriage offered the goddess what she desired, a chance to be conceived and born in the Phoenix House. When the girl was conceived, the goddess felt her soul knit within the embryo and take root. After a thousand generations of controlled breeding, the Phoenix House had fulfilled its part of the pact. Dawn had waited a long time to be born to the Phoenix House, so the notion of waiting for her human heir to mature before merging with her was not unreasonable.

As she mused on it, it was clear to Cinder that Magus had been given part of the story. Enough to send Cinder to the emperor. It was also clear how the dragon’s obsession with identifying its soul might have endured in Ash to inspire his attempt to embody the soul of creation. In both cases, it was a desire to confirm the absolute. In fact, if the legends about the dragon were true, they might both have been the same exact impulse. Ash had studied the legends of creation intently while pursuing his original objective. The dragon’s blind spot, combined with his assertion that he had never confirmed that there was a soul of creation, in spite of the claims of every other divinity, could suggest that the naked god and the naked goddess of myth were the same entity. The same suspicion had caused Ash to assume that the personification of creation was male. It was a simple misapprehension, to assume that identity was seated in the mind, not the soul. This account of the dragon’s pact revealed that the dragon had understood what Ash had not, but of course the dragon could hardly be ignorant of not knowing his true identity.

Of course it required focus to maintain her alternate forms, and a sudden shock or change of mood could cause her to revert to her normal form.

Ember was arrested, tried, and convicted. At her sentencing, Ember faced the prospect of exile or execution. Her sentence turned out to be exile, which was something of a blessing and something of a curse. In exile, a person was dismissed from civilization, essentially stripped of her humanity and all of the privileges that went with it. Ember was collared and declared an exile, an animal with only the rights and privileges of an animal. The only thing her family, friends or patrons could do was take her in as a pet, which would allow them to put a tag on her collar that made them responsible for her and would allow her to roam free in the city and surrounding countryside with minimal hassle. The alternative to being a pet was leaving the city and going wild. Her patron, the goddess, took in Ember as a temple pet. Those who had wanted her dead had waited to see if she was executed, but when she was not, they set out once again to kill her. It was not possible to send a shadow after her in the sanctuary, but it was possible to use other exiles to get close to her.

The arrangements were made and when Ember wandered astray, an ambush would be waiting for her.

Ember and Ash, a pair of initiates. Ancestral enemies by birth, they were rivals, friends, and ultimately lovers before being bound on a level beyond compare. A general synopsis overview is assembled in the following sections of this document. At present the scope is anywhere from one book to an entire volume devoted to the Opening of the Eye of Paradox. At a glance, there are several significant movements that can be treated as book length story arcs, even though the time line is bounded by the beginning and end of one summer. The current overview breaks down into three plot arcs.

In the first arc, Ash and Ember face the end of their initiations and Trials at Dream Gate. The situation is complicated by plans for their marriage and an apparent assassination attempt, which cause the pair to reconcile a past misunderstanding. On their wedding night, after Ember faced the demons of her childhood, the true consequence of her childhood abduction presents itself as her demonic half escapes and takes possession of Ash. Her resurrection reveals that she is a phoenix, prompting the goddess to claim her as a paladin. Her first mission is to track down her other half and attempt to restore Ash to his body. Instead, she stumbles upon a member of the Twilight Order, the cabal of demonologists and necromancers that twice attempted to abduct her.

In the second arc, Ember arrives in Avon hoping to prevent the coup planned by allies of the Twilight Order. To her horror, the plot had unfolded while she was in transit, failing in it’s principle objective when an heir to the throne turned out to be a phoenix. At the new queen’s request, Ember assumed the role of Queen’s Protector, in addition to her duties as a paladin, while Ash made it his mission to unearth the surviving conspirators and expose the members of the Twilight Order. With the help of an honorable rogue, and former classmate, they penetrate the underworld using the cat burglar identity Ember created when she was lured into crime by Thorn. Discovering that the Twilight Order had an interest in capturing Ember, she dangled herself as bait to lure them out.

In the third arc, Ember and Ash are given a second chance to exploit the Twilight Order’s interest in capturing Ember, following the betrayals that collapsed the previous trap. To their shock, they arrive in Aeryn to discover that Ember’s other half had succeeded in establishing himself as Ash, placing himself close to the emperor. Not surprisingly, he turns out to be the agent Ember is turned over to when the cabal takes the bait, but his scheme makes it obvious that he is deceiving his supposed masters. Absurdly, Dust, plotted to position Ember to take out the Twilight Order, while he assumed her place to foil the cabal’s plot against the monarchs of Ashara. Unfortunately, the cabal had a back up plan that raised the stakes to world shattering levels, opening the eye of paradox.

One

Ember was born the heir apparent to the Avon Domain. Her mother had been a mysterious adventurer forced into marriage by the heir to one of the most powerful noble houses in Arden. Ember knew almost nothing about her except that she died inexplicably in childbirth, bringing her only daughter into the world, and Ember resembled her so perfectly that her father was tortured by the sight of her. Ember had gained far more from her mother than just her looks, however. The powers she inherited would ultimately prove that she, like her mother before her, was the phoenix of legend. In the autumn of her seventh year, Ember was chosen as an initiate, to develop her psychic and metamorphic abilities. Before her initiation could begin, she was abducted and orphaned in the massacre of the Avon House. Intended as an offering to summon a demon, she somehow escaped her captors. Only the men who slaughtered her understood that she had resurrected. Only the demon who tried to claim her soul, as it slipped free of the mortal coil, understood how this power had turned the tables, making his mind a prisoner of her soul instead of the usual opposite. In the days and nights between her resurrection and escape from the ruins, Ember was tortured by the methodical dissection of her remains, as her original body was examined and then fed to the demonic servants of the cabal. This trauma blended with the horror of watching her family and familiars cut down and devoured by the same inhuman slayers, spawning nightmares that would haunt her for a decade. Those nights taught her to suffer mind-rending agony in silence, after her assailants tried to use her screams to track her down. Silence allowed her to slip through the cracks of the Dream Gate Ruins and make her way back to her home.

Ember was discovered in her own bed, and nursed back to sanity on the way to the Academy. At the Academy, her chief rival was Ash, who had comparable psychic and metamorphic abilities. Ash was descended from a man who rose from slavery to conquer two thirds of a continent, founding an empire uniting Athen and Aspen. The secret to his success was a pact he made with a god to gain the powers of a dragon. Both chosen for the unique abilities that set them apart from their peers, neither knew the secrets of their heritage. Ash and Ember were both latent shape shifters. Ember discovered this ability as a girl, after she was mauled by a tiger. While she was recovering from the loss of an arm, an attempt to accelerate her regeneration spontaneously turned her into a tiger. Ash, as part of the party that hunted down the man-eater, also gained a tiger form as the result of drinking the heart’s blood of his first kill—a hunting tradition. The evolution of Ash and Ember’s metamorphic abilities, which initially manifested as regeneration, had intrigued Sage. Neither had complete access to this potential, but both discovered ways to provoke it that let them gain limited control of it. They both could assimilate new forms, but they did it exactly the opposite of each other. Ash had been able to adopt a form by sampling the living flesh of the original, while Ember had been able to adopt the form of anything that consumed a part of her living flesh. Ash had surpassed Ember when he discovered he could also assume inanimate forms, whether dead or wholly inorganic, with a deliberate effort. By this point, Ember could tolerate coming in second to Ash. The antagonism of their initial rivalry had mellowed as they became better acquainted. Friendship and competition redefined their rivalry, until they were in a class by themselves.

Since she had to feed her flesh or blood to something to gain it’s form, Ember was more selective about exploring her metamorphic potential. She added the forms of a house cat, a falcon and a fox, but rather than expand her “profile” with a large array of forms, as Ash did, Ember refined her control over the forms she gained. She learned to emphasize and draw upon individual aspects to enhance her own attributes, or vice versa. Some applications were subtle, like assuming the strength, agility or keen senses of a tiger, but others were more profound, such as abstracting the original tiger’s sex to create a male version of herself.

A confrontation between Ash and Ember, on the eve of trials, cleared up the misunderstanding between them in time for them to team up against Ember’s regent. Ash was able to get the marriage delayed to the end of trials, allowing Ember to return to the scene of her childhood trauma and attempt to lay her nightmares to rest. Turning to each other, while pushing aside the marriage issue, Ash and Ember went forth to complete Trials.

Two

What followed was eerily similar to how Thorn seduced Coal into a series of criminal adventures, and prompted the creation of her cat-burglar alias, Brand. Ash continued to venture out as Brand, eventually getting the break he was looking for when he learned that the cabal had begun inquiring about Ember, gathering information they could use to capture her. Realizing that if they did, Ember would most likely come face to face with the architects of the purge, Ash had to bring her back into the loop. In spite of his talent for espionage, the only way for Ash to get close to the architects of the purge was to offer Ember to them as bait. Ash had to establish Brand’s reputation as a cat burglar turned spy in order to set up the trap. When Brand fenced items stolen from noble and royal households, he was approached by an agent interested in knowing the extent of Brand’s access to the inner circles of the establishment. Brand claimed to be exploiting a position as a page in the court. When Brand was asked to provide information on Ember’s itinerary, identifying when and where she might be found alone, isolated from crowds or the community, Ash knew he could lay his trap. His first attempt was foiled by a legitimate bit of intelligence he leaked, detailing Ember’s intentions to return to Aeryn for the Autumn Summit in Dream Gate. She had to attend this meeting between the new queen and the emperor, as the Queen’s Protector. The cabal betrayed one of their number to Ember, sending him on a mission he was doomed to fail.

Brand was asked to find out when and where Ember would be exposed in Aeryn, or encourage her to expose herself. It was well reported that Ember was a bit overwhelmed by the demands of her calling, so it was expected that she would seek out or welcome any respite that presented itself, and Aeryn offered many excellent, isolated distractions.

Three

Ash concluded that the cabal’s interest in Ember had changed, prompting the change in venue, but it did not change his plan. It seemed obvious what the cabal intended, if they could compromise Ember. Soon enough, Ember was on her way to the summit, reporting back to the goddess and being introduced to Rain’s family. The last person they expected to come face to face with, however, was Ash, or the being who assumed his identity. Dust had gone to the empire and convinced the imperial family that Ember had been the one possessed. He claimed he had been forced to kill her, and fled out of grief and heartbreak, not learning of her miraculous resurrection until word caught up to him in Athelon. He even had the nerve to try convincing Ember of his version of events, pointing out that the attack had come from within her, reminding her of the confrontation she’d had on the beach before trials. If Ash had not been in her head listening to the same story, she might have bought it. With the plot for her capture already scheduled, Ember had no choice but to play along. She had to treat her reunion with “Ash” exactly as if it was entirely legitimate, or risk exposing the ace up her sleeve. Not an easy task, since it meant playing the part of wife, which was particularly difficult for Ash. In an audience with the goddess, Ember confided her concerns about “Ash” and received a strange response. In their first meeting, the goddess had confessed that she could do nothing about the “ghost” of Ash trapped within Ember, since he was not dead, merely displaced. In this meeting, she explained that the imposter was Ember’s husband’s only hope of regaining his own body. The key to that was confronting the emperor about the pact he made with the god, and understanding what he gained and the price he had paid for it.

Ember banished her doubts and requested an audience with the emperor. Not surprisingly, he kept informed about the affairs of his favorite son’s family, and took her aside to get acquainted with his grand-daughter-in-law. Initially, he remained mute on the subject of Ash, ignoring the prompt the goddess had armed her with. In order to gain the emperor’s confidence, she was forced to confide the details of her resurrection. In exchange, she was enlightened about the Dragon Legacy, the cause of all the strife in her kingdom, and how his attempts to make amends for his oversight brought Ash’s parents together. Aeirn was in an age of empires. Smaller kingdoms and republics faced conquest and annexation now that there were no remaining frontiers left to colonize. While the fall of the gods had seen thoroughly to the elimination of sorcery, the ancients had dabbled in arts more dangerous and obscure than that. The arts of conjury, demonology and necromancy mastered by the ancients, had survived in disparate forms such as witchcraft and wizardry throughout the north. It had been only a matter of time before true conjurors, demonologists and necromancers reappeared. They were predominantly northern born people of the Athen domains who clung to a magical tradition which predated the age of empires. Around the world, conjurers, disciples of the second age of magic, be they witches, warlocks, demonologists or necromancers, were being surpassed by the modern mage. Power gained through the abuse of blood, bodies and souls had been condemned, but this had forced the wielders of such power to band together and fight back. Driven from their old haunts, they strove to seize power in other lands, crippling them in the process and inviting their persecutors to annex those lands, continuing their scourge.

The most startling aspect of the emperor’s story was learning what the dragon had gained from the pact. While dragons had the power to assume human form, there was only one way for a dragon to experience humanity. It was not in a dragon’s power to do what Ember’s mother had done, simply assume human form and be reborn in it, but being born in human form was what the dragon required. The emperor’s son had trained the powers he inherited from his father to accomplish this task. Thus, Ash had been conceived as the human incarnation of that dragon. In absolute fascination, Ember took the time to sit down and research dragons, obsessed with the idea of bearding one in it’s den. Ash was equally curious, wondering what the dragon would make of him in his present state. But, neither of them forgot what they were already committed to. The week of festivities between the opening formalities and the conferences left Ember free to unwind. A place was chosen where Ember could be “ambushed” while she was vulnerable. Armed with a perfect excuse for her withdrawal, Ember set out to confront the dragon who granted the emperor the power to unite the many kingdoms of Athen and Aspen in exchange for a taste of humanity. Not surprisingly, “Ash” insisted on accompanying her to meet his family’s patron. The couple faced an unexpected obstacle on their way to Dragon’s Bath, the ill will of lingering suspicion, discrimination and prejudice between the people of Athen and Arden. Having “Ash” at her side actually made things worse, provoking unwanted interest and a number of small conflicts that were exploited by their closing adversaries to harass Ember. It was almost too convenient how it forced them to split up and arrange to meet at their destination.

The evening she arrived at her destination, Ember was attacked while swimming in one of the pools at Dragon’s Bath. The moment Ember and Ash had been planning for arrived and perversely, it was a dragon that took the bait. Too late she remembered the effect that children of the phoenix legacy had on true dragons. Unlike human dragons, they could use their gifts selectively. It meant they could eat phoenixes without danger to themselves or breaking the pact with humanity, since one way or another a phoenix would survive the experience. In her search for the dragon it had not occurred to her that any dragon who spotted her would devour her on sight. The reminder cost her a leg, and her retaliation only opened her mind to it. Crippled, she was finished before she even started to flee. The dragon scooped her up into his mouth and scrambled deeper into the wilderness. She could feel, through the strange rapport, how much he hungered, how much he wanted to devour her, and she could not understand why he restrained himself. When he spat her out on the bank of a mountain stream, she stared at him in shock. She could see quite clearly that he fully intended to eat her, but first, she realized with sickening horror, he wanted to savor the chase. There was no time to analyze, she simply fled. Short a leg, she literally had to fly while the wound healed. Out in the open, she hardly stood a chance. She cut as devious a course as possible through the thick, coastal rainforest, and stumbled across what seemed to be some sort of ruin. The dragon could not pursue her through the tight, winding, stone structure of the ancient fortress. She discovered that there were more than enough larger passages through the strange ruin for him to harass her and keep her pinned down within the convoluted edifice.

Upon retreating to its very heart, she made a startling discovery. The dragon that had ambushed her was the dragon she was looking for. As soon as she was whole again, Ember ventured to the edge of the ruin to introduce herself to the dragon, hoping to discourage him from eating her by revealing who she was. Unfortunately, while the dragon responded with interest, she could feel his intentions remained predatory. In frustration, she explained what had happened to her and confided what she had learned about the pact, restating her purpose. While her nature was far from what the dragon might expect, he could easily discern the truth from her mind. To her shock, the dragon confirmed the odd tale of the conception of Ash. The dragon was able to confirm that he was a part of her, presumably because of Ash. He also opened her eyes to the history of creation, revealing the truth of gods, demons, angels and men and their roles in the evolution of reality. This story was followed by the dragon’s story, the role he played in championing humanity in the age of gods, and the fruitless search for his own identity. To her distress, the dragon revealed what he had intended to accomplish by requesting a human incarnation of himself. The only way to test if Rain succeeded in fulfilling the pact was for the dragon to blood him. Because it was the mind, the perspective that mattered, it made no difference if he happened to reside in Ember. As far as the dragon was concerned, that was simply a bonus. If Ash was the personification of his soul, he and the dragon would become one. It would separate Ash and Ember as well, since she would most likely resurrect, removing herself from the equation. Of course, there was also the chance Ember would become permanently fused to Ash in the process.

As she fled, she realized that one way of the other, she was about to find out. In the following hours she began to realize what was going on, the dragon was using the chase to get inside her head, to feel what she was feeling, to share with her what he was feeling. Her fate was inevitable, for her predator knew what she was going to do as quickly as she did, and she knew it. For three days and three nights, the dragon held her under siege. It was a disturbing standoff. The dragon was the only one she had to talk to, and he seemed fascinated by her and her life, prompting her to confide details about everything, but never relenting in his implacable purpose. She had plenty of time to explore the ruins, but he was always ready to pounce on her if she gave him an opening. Several times, he had gotten a piece of her, leaving her shocked and wounded. Her attempts to call for help seemed to go no further than her own skull. From the moment he had bit into her, he had somehow weeded his way into her mind, frustrating her efforts to marshal her own psychic abilities to aid her in her crisis.

On the fourth day, her predator was strangely absent. She did not trust this, but her need for food and water drove her out of cover. Water was easy, being pooled in the larger, open areas of the ruins in a complex and beautiful water course. Food lay far beyond her shelter. As she ventured out, Ember focused all of her attention on spotting the dragon before it could pounce, discovering she had a real chance to flee from it. Ember was cautiously skirting Dragon’s Bath when she was ambushed by the mercenaries she had originally set herself up for. The agent to whom her captors reported was none other than “Ash” finally introducing himself as Dust. Playing the worst sort of villain, Dust ruthlessly asserted his authority, and ownership over Ember. After a brutal display for the men, he took her into his confidence. He asserted that he was a spy for the emperor. Ember played along with the rough and intimate deception. Ember had no choice but to do as Dust demanded, using her captivity to help Ash gather intelligence on the cabal. Dust did not deny that he was not Ash, but he claimed that he had gained humanity the night he escaped from Ember. The genetic potential of Ash’s body had served to redefine the demon’s psyche, when Dust was bound to it. Originally, he had intended to avenge himself on the conjurors who had enslaved and abused him as a demon. He quickly learned it would take more than himself to destroy the cabal. In the wake of rumors, based on Ember’s accusations that Ash had been replaced by a demon, he had gotten the emperor’s blessing to exploit them to infiltrate the cabal of conjurors. When he received orders from the cabal to assume Ember’s place in order to assassinate the emperor and the queen, he had intended to enlist her aid, but arrangements for her capture had already been made.

Ember, overcoming feelings of betrayal and finally catching on to his act, happily traded rough sex play with Dust for protection from the certainty of rape and mutilation at the hands of the mercenaries. If she cooperated with him, trusted him, he promised to leave her the key to unleash her powers when she needed them. Her resurrection made the cabal very eager to examine her. That meant that Ember would have a chance to get closer to the cabal than Dust could. Ember had an opportunity Dust might never be given, to strike at the leaders of the cabal directly. His conversion had been obvious to them, and while they employed him he had been handled through high level subordinates. It was a suicide mission, but Ember seemed to have a talent for coming back from the dead. Trust him or no, she had to agree simply for the chance to escape and make sure he did not assassinate the emperor and the queen.

As they came within a day of Dream Gate, they were attacked once more by the dragon. The initial assault spurred the entire group to retreat back to the ruins. Focused on Ember, the dragon had no interest in why these other men were protecting her. As their prisoner, however, she was worth more alive, so protect her the did. For a while. The dragon’s fixation on Ember made it possible for Dust to slip away on his mission while the mercenaries sent a messenger to bring in reinforcements and inform their employer of the complication. Having some idea what was coming, Ash took the opportunity to even the odds, harassing the party of mercenaries and pinning them down in the ruins outside of Dream Gate. This forced the leaders of the cabal to come to Ember. Unfortunately, their intentions toward her did not require them to transport her to a more secure location. Once the cabal felt secure in the ruins, the details of their plot, regarding her, were revealed and quickly enacted. This forced Ash to cut the dragon loose, sending it charging in to hunt Ember down for real. Ember had no idea what Ash had been thinking, arousing the dragon in this fashion, but she exploited the hunt to pit the dragon against her enemies. When she made her move, the cabal realized they had been betrayed and quickly redeployed to mount a direct assault on the parties assembled at the summit. They raced to Dream Gate with Ember hot on their heels, hoping to stop the massacre planned for the summit. In the event the assassination attempt failed, the cabal had laid an excellent trap to strike against the assembled leaders of Ashara. From what Ash and Ember could deduce, the cabal had compromised the personal guards or close companions of the queen, the emperor and many of the nobles.

In order to foil the attack, Ash had to pose as a Dust. It did not take long for Ash to identify the assassins, or for Ember to relay the information to a special guard unit. She impulsively employed broadcast telepathy to draw attention to her projected apparition, embarrassed at how easy it would have been for Ash to be seen by others as he was by her. For the sake of the possessed, the guard attempted to detain and exorcise them if possible, but the action provoked a desperate response. A group of demons manifested upon their hosts, becoming far more deadly, forcing an intense battle. They were reinforced by the conjury of the cabal. The god and goddess responded, with support from the modern sorcery of the magi. In the rise of the third establishment of magic, through the fall of the second establishment of magic, there had never been a major battlefield conflict between them. The consequences shattered reality. Ember fell into the rift that opened, stabbing through the core of Aeirn, emerging on the opposite side of the world when the initial tear was stabilized. What she did not know was that she had actually been severed from her body. Ash had been the one in possession of her body as the rift opened, leaving her ‘ghost” exposed to raw paradox. As she had predicted might happen if she could break free of Ash, she resurrected in time to be engulfed by the rift. Ash and Ember were both aware they had lost contact with each other, but assumed that the other was lost during the chaos of that night. Ash was confronted by Sunset and given a choice, to retain Ember’s identity, or reclaim his own and allow Dust to assume Ember’s place. Having proved “herself” while posing as Ember, Ash elected to leave things as they were, trusting Dust to live up to Ember’s responsibilities.