Ember, the girl

Phoenix, the girl’s mother (deceased)

Ash, the boy

Rowan, the boy’s mother (host)

Brand, the boy’s father (presumed)

Aspen, Rowan and Brand’s first daughter

Willow, Rowan and Brand’s second daughter

Clay, the rival

Shale, the shocked witness

Rain, the thoughtful witness

Finch, the academy adept (consulted about the ring)

Thorn, the girl’s athletics master (at the academy and in the underworld)

Lane, the boy’s second cousin

Heather, the second cousin’s friend (and fellow muse)

Reed, a minor underlord and handler for Ember’s body guard contracts

Coil, one of Reed’s lieutenants (involved in a plot against Reed)

Briar, an underworld liaison (an agent of Coil’s secret patron)

Fang, an assassin occasionally contracted by Reed

Salt, the friend who asked Ember to help him catch a girl

The most critical event in the girl’s life came in the autumn of her seventh year. The adversary sent a force of demon assassins to raid a gathering of the order at the host’s manor. The host’s daughter watched helplessly as her parents were slain in the massacre, along with their friends and the children they had brought to the city for testing at the academy.

Amid the slaughter, the girl came across one of her friends and the two of them tried to escape together. They watched in horror as a demon assassin attempted to possess the girl’s mother and provoked the demon of the realm into defending its host. After crushing the assassin, killing the girl’s father, and flinging the girl’s friend into a wall, the demon god confronted the girl and discovered that she was a reincarnation of its host. As the demon probed her mind, the girl sensed her mother fighting the demon’s control and took possession of the demon to free her. Unaware of what the girl had done, the mother picked up the wounded friend, grabbed her daughter and fled into the depths of the ruins, where they became caught between a dragon and the pursuing assassins. Urging the girl to take her friend and hide, the mother used herself to bait the dragon into slaughtering the assassins, but ultimately could not escape from the trap she put herself in. When searching assassins closed in on their hiding place, the girl was forced to move, struggling to bring her along, unconsciously forming a telepathic rapport in her attempt to wake the other girl and keep her alert. When her friend finally succumbed to internal bleeding, the girl shared the experience of her death. Only her assimilation of the demon of the realm saved her from a sympathetic death. Drawn to the sound of her mother’s voice, the girl witnessed the dragon devouring her mother. Her cry of loss caught the dragon’s attention, forcing her to flee deeper into the ruins, blind with fear and horror.

Ember had assimilated the demon of the realm almost unconsciously. It never occurred to her to wonder what happened to it, once she succeeded in freeing her mother’s mind from it. The sense of knowledge and power unlocked within her had encouraged her to try helping her mother against the dragon and demons pursuing them. The death of her mother delivered a crippling blow to the girl’s psyche, forced to assimilate her mother’s mind so soon after embracing the demon; its presence tainted and compromised the integration of Phoenix and Ember’s minds, threatening the foundations of the girl's identity.

Enough damage was done to cause the memory and personality of Phoenix to become divided along several fault lines before they were assimilated along with parts of the demon's psyche, crippling and incapacitating the girl, as a goddess. 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 the friend she felt die in her mind.

Into the Ruins I – She should have died right there, paralyzed by grief and horror as the dragon turned its attention to her. As the dragon approached, a grim sense of self preservation seized the girl, forcing her to dive for cover. The girl twisted, contorted and slithered for all she was worth to escape the flashing teeth and slashing claws of the dragon. Slashed, scraped and bruised, the girl dragged herself out of the dragon's lair and resumed her quest for the surface.

When the girl discovered there was no other way back to the surface she had no choice but to go deeper into the ruins. While swimming across a flooded chamber, Ember was sucked suddenly into an underground channel of the Avon River. Caught in a current, Ember was dragged into the depths of the city’s underworld. It was a wild ride and the girl 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.

The girl gradually recovered from the shock and horror. For the first time in uncounted hours, Ember found herself in a safe, secure place. 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 struggle to save her mother’s soul before her could be ripped out. Her nightmares forced her to relive the penetration of her mind by the demon.

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 chose to swim 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, the girl 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 encounter.

Unlike the ghosts, the demons could molest her, mentally and physically, as long as she was in their sphere of influence. The girl sensed the demons wanted to break her in order to possess her body. But that was nothing compared to seeing her mother devoured alive by a dragon.

In a daze, in the dark, she made her way up through the underworld. By the time she emerged from the underworld on the streets of Avon, her wounds had begun to heal—but along the way she had begun to suffer from starvation and dehydration. The traumatized girl was incapable of trusting anyone big enough to pose a threat, so she found shelter in the ruins, stealing what she needed to survive. Within a few days, she had fully recovered. After a while, she noticed that she was not the only street orphan.

The girl eventually fell in with a group of street orphans—and under the influence of their vampire patron. Months passed before she was discovered and taken in by the boy’s mother. Unaware of the girl’s relationship to the boy, his mother became her guardian—raising the girl with the intention of marrying her to the boy. Unfortunately, the vampire had plans of his own for the girl.

The girl had been trapped underground long enough for even the most optimistic adult to declare her dead. After the massacre, it was rumored that the attack was in retaliation for an expedition the group had taken into the ruins of the underworld.

When the girl described her ordeal, revealing 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.

Her parent’s peers in the Order of Aeslyn Tear thought it was amazing that the girl had survived in the depths of the ruins for as long as she had.

Provoked by her traumatic experiences, the girl's latent aptitude for magic evolved into a natural, if modest, psychic ability. The discipline to use it emerged under the influence of her training. Compared to the abilities of a powerful magic user or a trained psychic, her 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, the girl became keenly sensitive to the mechanisms of magic, making it difficult for her to learn even basic spells. Intimidated by magic, she became wary of anyone proficient with magic. When she discovered that her psychic abilities gave her an edge in protecting herself from--and dispelling--magic, she regained her confidence.

Coming of Age – The girl's first lover was the boy, Ash. After some intense, initial rivalry, they became close, intimate friends, their friendship spiced by good-natured competition and an uncanny knack for misadventure.

Their first summer together was one of the few times the girl had ever been encouraged to spend her time as she pleased. As a child, her training had been intense, if informal, private tutoring in academic, artistic and athletic disciplines other children learned in school. An adventurous and athletic young girl, Ember was a natural born tomboy. Sensitive to discrimination, the girl approached her early education with a determination to prove that she was as capable as any boy. Fearless and curious, it was inevitable that she would get into serious trouble. She devoted most of the summer to exploring the countryside and playing with Ash. Neither looked forward to the end of their time together, so it came as a pleasant surprise when they discovered that the girl had already qualified to attend the academy before the massacre.

On taking possession of the demon of the realm, the girl became vulnerable to invasion from within by any of the inner gods. Only the most ruthless and determined of the gods would risk their sanity trying to infiltrate the demon’s mind, but there were a few willing to do so in order to catch a glimpse of its host in the outer realm.

When the girl assimilated the demon, an unconscious connection to her incarnation in the outer realm was forged. She essentially, if unconsciously, regained possession of that incarnation—becoming the new core to his identity as he effectively became the god of the inner realm. He also became a layer of psychic defense standing between the girl and the rogue gods. They would spend years searching in vain for an incarnation of god like him instead of a girl like her. Only when they began to suspect that the demon had been conquered did they dare to probe deeper, blindly seeking to attack him from within. This gave the girl ten years in which to grow and learn before she was confronted by the threat from within. Unfortunately, her parents were no longer there to ensure that she was prepared for the threat when it finally came.

Although neither of them was truly gender dysphoric, the boy and the girl both balked at the limitations of their genders. The girl was athletic and adventurous, determined to prove that she could do anything a boy could do. The boy was empathic and emotive, frustrated by trouble he got into doing things a boy was not supposed to do.

The girl provided the boy with opportunities to go places and do things only girls were allowed to, and the boy helped the girl fit in as one of the guys. It was common for people to assume they were brother and sister, based on their resemblance, but they instinctively considered themselves compliments—equals and opposites. Although the girl was taken in by the boy’s family, it did not take long for the Order of Aeslyn Tear to identify her. The boy’s mother was made her official guardian, and the girl’s mother’s estate made a respectable dowry. As the girl’s guardian, the boy’s mother had no need to consult with anyone about the arranged marriage. It was assumed by many that was the woman’s intentions, however, since she had not simply adopted the girl outright. It was not uncommon for girls to be fostered in the homes of boys they were expected to marry.

The girl was made to feel welcome by the family, but not encouraged to think of herself as part of the family. When they were nine, the girl was offered a choice between an apprenticeship under the boy’s mother to become a muse, or initiation at the academy to become an artist. The one thing the girl had left from before the massacre was her aspiration to go to the academy, so she chose the latter without hesitation. So she was sent to the academy with the boy, where she became friends—and he became rivals—with the reincarnation of the intermediary. The three of them were grouped together as the most talented initiates of their generation. They were separated for their training in magic and psychic disciplines, but shared most of the same classes in academic and athletic disciplines.

The best part about going to the academy, was that it took the girl away from the influence of her underworld associates—her friends from the streets, who got her into constant trouble, and her patron and mentor, who were setting her up for a life of crime. The underworld was always there, when she came home from the academy, however. To increase his hold on the girl, her patron brought the boy’s mother under his influence using vampiric charms and the rejuvenating effects of his bites. As a muse, she was as vulnerable as a prostitute or courtesan to the predation of the undead—a legitimate target. Vampires were tolerated as members of society on the grounds that they were—willing or not—the gods’ angels of death. They were permitted to feed on the damned or the willing; and there were always those who became willing in exchange for profit or pleasure. Once she realized why the vampire bound her, however, she responded by encouraging the girl—and the boy—to learn as much as they could about vampires and their roles in the underworld.

Only later did the girl realize she had turned down the path that would have assured her independence as a woman. A muse was a surrogate of the goddess, something between a priestess and courtesan. Although she could not marry, she was an independent woman; any children she had would be considered legitimate—by the grace of the goddess. As an artist, she had a chance to achieve both independence and authority, but there would be no guarantees—and she would still need to receive the same basic training as a muse.

Orphan & Initiate – At age seven, the girl had been selected for initiation at the academy. When she arrived, the girl was put under a master's supervision. He initially focused on mentoring her psychic abilities, cultivating mental discipline through physical training in dance and gymnastics. An athletic girl, she responded very well to her physical training, and the discipline helped her to contain her psychic abilities and master the basics of telepathy and telekinesis.

Her studies and workouts offered Thorn a glimpse into her capabilities, while her conversations hinted at a few pieces of her past. In particular, the strong bond between Ember and Ash.

As soon as her psychic discipline was up to it, the girl’s training was turned over to her mentor. In her own way, the girl’s mentor was as stern a mistress and taskmaster as the girl’s master.

While living on the streets, the girl discovered she could avoid more trouble by posing as a boy. She made friends with the orphans of the streets, and unwittingly involved herself in their criminal exploitation playing the games of adventure and daring that prepared and conditioned them for life in the underworld.

Orphans at the academy were easy targets for abuse by the other students, so the girl began teaching herself to fight, to defend herself and protect others. After seeing her in a few fights, the girl’s master decided she had the potential to become adept and began training her in armed and unarmed combat. It was easy to amend and expand her training in dance and gymnastics to include aerial acrobatics and martial arts. On her visits home, her street friends were used to maneuver her into spying, casing and eventually cat burglary. The girl responded to the challenges, blending her formal and informal training to best effect.

The more familiar she became with the street kids, the harder it became for her to successfully pose as a boy. It was simply a matter of time before her true gender was exposed through horseplay and fighting. She tried in vain to keep the revelation from changing her status among the street kids, only to have her pride and stubbornness exploited. She was molested by the boys, and while the experience was oddly pleasant the loss of respect hurt her. She attempted to cut her ties with the gangs only to face threats and blackmail from their bosses. For the first time she saw life in the underworld for the trap it was.

The friends the girl made while she was living on the streets continued to play a part in her life after she tried to withdraw, keeping her tied to the underworld throughout her initiation. Unable to escape, she focused on keeping a low profile. The girl obscured her life as a thief so well that she gained a reputation in the underworld as an unusually competent assassin-in-training. Her amazing agility and her unwitting, street-wise apprenticeship in cat burglary, helped her excel in her study of the naked dance—a combination of dance, gymnastics, acrobatics and unarmed fighting.

After menarche, in spite of her academy initiation, girl began training formally under her foster mother to become a muse. It did not take her long to realize that she did not want to end up like her foster mother, the property of some nobleman. Unfortunately, she did not realize that the training was coming at the insistence of her underworld patron—or that it was intended to make her a better thief, spy or assassin. Nor was she aware that she had been taken under the wing of an underworld agent at the academy. Her master in athletic disciplines had been encouraged by her underworld patron to make her adept at the arts of armed and unarmed combat. That, combined with her own aptitude, allowed her to be included training generally offered only to boys.

The girl's combat master did not spare her modesty, and that often encouraged unwanted attention and interest from boys. Her training as was initially limited by what her master could teach in their free time, but she applied herself passionately to his instruction and demonstrated a natural talent for fencing with a long sword.

The girl discovered that the best way to escape from the demands of her muse training, each summer, was to slip away from the manor and explore the city in the guise of a boy. She still had friends among the street orphans, and 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.

Clay, Ash’s academy roommate, insisted on tagging along whenever he met with the girl. He was a solid and reliable sort—for a practical joker and troublemaker. The girl introduced Ash and Clay to her gang of friends, once they promised to keep her true gender a secret. Ember, Ash and Clay 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 only child, Clay had no trouble commandeering the girl’s gang of friends. A penchant for exploration and exhibition caused them to embark on grand adventures.

The girl responded to her friends’ challenges, blending her formal and informal training to best effect. Her formal training as a gymnast, a dancer and a muse came courtesy of and at the insistence of her grandmother, while childhood adventures and misadventures granted her an unusual knowledge of the ruins of Aeslyn Tear and an informal apprenticeship in crime. She developed her skills as a fencer, fighter and thief by posing as a boy while growing up. Among those who observed her upbringing, the unique mix of abilities she possessed marked her as an exceptional prospective spy or assassin.

Into the Ruins II – The existence of underground passages was a well known secret among the youth of Avon, and the girl’s friends, Clay 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 Ash and Clay almost as much as it did her. In order to conquer her fear and prove herself she delved deep into the underground. When she found herself in a familiar area, she realized that the ruins of Aeslyn Tear undermined the entire city and surrounding wilderness of Avon.

Just a Girl – 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. The day finally came when a couple of the boys recognized her in her normal guise as the poised and polite protégé of her foster mother. 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.

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.

The girl’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, the girl never said anything about being molested by the boys. The girl 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. The boys who had molested her had been not up to it. If they had intended to provoke her into having sex, their nerve had been broken. They had touched her intimately, and probed her secrets with naked curiosity, but wilted in the face of her arousing inspections. All things considered, the experience had not been entirely unpleasant, but the loss of friendship and respect hurt her deeply.

Going Straight – 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 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.

Trials of Maidenhood – As time passed, the girl found herself under increasing pressure to commit herself to her muse training. Her rebellion was noticed by her foster mother, who concluded that her straying was coming directly into conflict with her calling. She increased the demands of the girl's training to leave her no time or energy for adventures. This made escaping her fate as a muse an even greater priority. As a result, she became even more devoted to her studies under her athletics master. He had become her true mentor and confidant.

Psychic abilities on the order displayed by Ember typically manifested as the result of studying magic for a decade or more. In order for her to even learn magic, it had been necessary to suppress her natural psychic talent. To teach her the mental discipline she needed to cope with her psychic gift, Ember had been trained in several rigorous physical disciplines. She lacked the level of magical training and discipline most initiates had, but she had enough natural talent and experience to fit into the most advanced group.

At her present age, Ember finally had the opportunity to try and integrate her magic and psychic abilities. While Ember had been trained in the basic arts of sword and sorcery, she had always had difficulty with magic as the result of her psychic sensitivity. Her psychic abilities, primarily regeneration, telepathy and telekinesis, had first manifested in response to the traumatic experiences she had as a child lost in the ruins of Aeslyn Tear. This was unfortunate, because psychic ability was far more difficult to train and develop than magic ability.

Ember's training included the study of certain aspects of healing, the magic that was the most compatible with psychic ability.

Her relationship with Ash and Clay was suffering from the evolution of their rivalry over her. The girl had become infatuated with her athletics master. Worse, he became fascinated with her, impressed with her potential, her quick and open mind, and feline amorality. He had taken the girl under his wing, dispensing practical wisdom and discipline like a father. Unfortunately, he could never tell her he was an agent of the underworld. But, because he thought of her as the daughter he never had, he misinterpreted her feelings for him. It never occurred to him how she would respond to his guidance and nurturing, particularly during the onslaught of puberty. One night he returned to his room to find her naked in his bed, determined to lose her virginity to him.

A Girl’s Quirks – In the winter of her fifteenth year, the girl came close to being expelled from the academy. The girl’s master never counted on her developing an intense crush on him and was troubled by the thought of her lusting after him. It was obvious in the way she responded to his guidance and nurturing, particularly during the onslaught of puberty. The girl had no qualms or reservations about sex. Always a sensual creature, sex promised to become her favorite activity and her training was designed to prepare her very well for it.

The girl’s guardian had unwittingly compounded the issue by educating her about sex, explaining the risks and instructing her in the essential precautions against pregnancy, disease, injury and entanglements, particularly legal entanglements.

There was a reason for her guardian’s precautions, and they saved the girl from serious trouble on several occasions. More than once, a patron or peer in the underworld tried to take advantage of her, or exploit her—attempting to rape her or force her into prostitution.

The girl was relentless in her innocent efforts to seduce her master, but he refused to compromise his integrity. He finally confronted her and told her they could never know each other as a man and a woman while she was an initiate—and especially not while he was a master at the academy.

The girl fled from him in mortification. Unable to bring herself to face him again, she collected her things and left the academy. He was furious when he learned that the girl had vanished—and worried that her actions might get her expelled.

Believing she had burned all of her bridges, the girl caught the first ship home. Unfortunately, she did not dare return to her foster home. Her guardian would try to take her back to the academy, where she would discover the girl’s humiliation. Hoping to establish herself as a muse, she took up residence at an inn to begin searching for a mentor.

As spirited and athletic as ever, she was frequently drawn to the parks and sacred forest to explore, swim and work out. Mornings or evenings often found her at a park or pool or exploring the ruins in the outskirts where she had been born. The were tiger found himself drawn to her after several close encounters with her in his tiger form. When he confronted her in human form, he discovered she was a shameless as she was fearless.

Unwilling to work as a thief to support herself, Ember started out with a job at the inn where she was staying. To help earn her keep, while seeking a mentor, she also found work modeling, dancing, acting or singing. With her hormones balked by a broken heart, she discouraged sexual advances by engaging her patrons in philosophical debates. With her curious and agile mind, she particularly enjoyed staying up late discussing philosophy and art with the patrons of the inn. The vampire found himself drawn into one of her debates and became intrigued by her.

Things were difficult until she discovered she could make a better living contracting her services as bodyguard posing as an escort or personal companion. A man she refused to be intimate with framed her on a charge of prostitution. He slipped his money into her pocket and then reported her to an underlord for taking his money and refusing him the pleasure of her company. When she found the money in her pocket, she assumed he was framing him for theft and stubbornly pursued him to return the money. As a result, she caught up to him in time to save him from a pair of cutthroats. Having performed a legitimate service, she decided to keep the money, informing the guards who arrived on the scene that she was a paid bodyguard defending her client. When confronted by the underlord on the charge of unsanctioned prostitution, she suggested that the accusation had been made in a moment of buyer’s remorse. Witnesses’ descriptions of the beating she had handed out supported her claim that she had certainly earned whatever the man had paid her.

Unfortunately, the incident came to the attention of her underworld patron and gave him a new use for her, besides the occasional cat burglary. Given how easy it was for people to underestimate her, the girl had extraordinary value as a body guard.

That remained true even after her academy master tracked her down and convinced her to return to the academy. The girl’s master had tracked her down upon hearing rumors about the two pirates beaten unconscious by a teenage girl. He turned those rumors into an excuse for their absence from the academy, claiming they had been off on a training mission.

The incident that inspired Ember to work as a body guard also introduced her to Reed, a minor or merchant noble who was also a lord of the underworld. Ember explained her situation and Reed agreed to give her chance. It did not take long for Ember to prove herself, and both were mildly surprised by the fee she was able to command.

Fronted by Reed, and in spite of the demand for her services, Ember was careful to maintain a low profile to keep her foster family in the dark about her underworld activities. As far as she was concerned, being asked to provide protection was better than being asked to steal, but it would still get her into trouble if the wrong people found out. Ironically, keeping her involvement in the underworld obscure was what prompted the rumors about her began to circulate among his men, as they speculated about whether she was his under aged mistress or a juvenile assassin.

Reed took great care handling her contracts, carefully screening her clients to ensure she was never in great danger of being abused or exploited, while keeping her out of trouble with the authorities. The first time she was seen by the assassin, Fang, she was emerging from a private meeting with Reed. When he asked about her, Reed told the story of how she became a freelance bodyguard and confided that she was a vampire underlord’s pet project.

The one thing Reed could not protect Ember from was a threat even he did not know about. An ambitious subordinate was scheming to take over Reed's organization and elevate himself within the underworld. Reed and Coil had both started out on the streets. As the two advanced in the organization Coil had gradually became resentful of Reed's seniority. An opportunity to depose Reed came when Coil gained a powerful patron, a vampire lord. The vampire had encouraged Coil to seize control and expand his territory as a cover for the expansion of his own territory in the city and a front for certain offensives against the local nobility.

By the end of her sixteenth year, the girl had matured into a street savvy body guard and become an honorary member of the Order of Aeslyn Tear—the group of adventurers, vigilantes and bounty hunters renowned for surviving the exploration of the ruins of the ancient city.

More than a few people expected her to become a demon hunter or ghost hunter. A few had even proposed the idea of her working with a hunting party as combination bait and trap, based on her reputation as a talented psychic with excellent fighting skills and a deadly grudge against supernatural beings. The girl hesitated to respond to such proposals, uncertain that she was capable of going into a vampire's lair intent on assassination. Such thoughts triggered traumatic memories of the massacre she survived as a child.

Having been forced to recognize that she was becoming a desirable young woman, her athletic master resumed her training with strained patience and self-restraint. As he suspected, the girl’s feelings for him had not changed. In her opinion, as her mentor, he ought to be the one to instruct her in the most intimate art. He strained to resist temptation, but his resolve threatened to crumble before her seductive logic. To deflect her, he encouraged her to explore her options with boys closer to her own age and reminded her of her relationship with Ash.

Unfortunately, the girl feared sleeping with Ash might bring about the end of their friendship. Besides, Ash lacked the older man’s wisdom and experience. Frustrated at his rebuke, she found her attention straying to the boy’s rival. The rival had something of a reputation among the girls at the academy and he certainly seemed to have an interest in her.

The rival found her very attractive, when he forgot to think of her as one of the guys. On the other hand, she was best friends with Ash, and they were obviously afraid to risk that friendship to become more. Intending to provoke Ash into stepping up or stepping aside, the rival became relentless in his efforts to seduce her, but Ash refused to rise to the bait. When Ash saw the girl responding to Clay’s planned, close encounters—-typically when she was in the nude, bathing, swimming or athletic training—he would pretend not to notice or leave, whichever was appropriate.

When the rival finally confronted her with a serious sexual overture, he discovered she truly had no shame or fear. Everything was going well until she realized that Clay was deliberately trying to provoke Ash. When she realized that Ash was not objecting out of respect for what she wanted, and that Ash was deliberately hiding his resentment and regret, she decided to test Clay. Posing as Ash, Ember confronted Clay, learning that his interest in her was mostly sexual—and less personal than his rivalry with Ash. Dropping the illusion, she admitted that she had been interested in him mostly for sex, and would have been okay if that had been all he wanted, but she drew the line at being used to hurt one of her friends.

Following their breakup, Ash turned Ember away. He had already guessed why she had picked Clay instead of him. He pointed out that he had as much experience as she did, reminding her they had explored it together, but she obviously did not want an awkward first time to come between them so she had planned to get it out of the way with someone else. The problem was not that she doubted his prowess, but that she had doubted their friendship too much to risk it.

While neither boy would talk to her, a mutual friend came to her for help and advice. He was madly in love with a girl, but in his infatuation succeeded only in driving her away. He wanted them to be a couple for the final and most intimate year of their initiation, but he had no idea how to win her over. Ember thought about how she got into her own relationship mess, and told him that the best way she knew of to make a girl think a boy was desirable was for another girl to appear to find him desirable. She offered to pose as his girlfriend, show him how to interact properly with a girl, point out his strengths to the other girl and her friends, and see if that changed the girl’s opinion of him enough to catch her interest.

The most practical beginning of the story, from the perspective of the boy and the girl, is when the nightmares associated with the girl’s childhood trauma began to offer clues about what happened, showing her events she had blocked from her memory.

Over the past year, the girl had become plagued by nightmares. As the end of her eighth year at the academy approached, the girl was approached by a friend for help catching a girl. While packing to go home, the boy discovered a secret compartment in his dorm containing a ring and a journal. They all returned home for the summer, where they set out on a little adventure, became trapped in the underground and the girl was reminded of her childhood tragedy.

On her birthday, the boy and the girl finally embraced as lovers, though they had to keep quiet about it until the girl fulfilled her promise. Which she did during the midsummer’s eve celebration, with the help of the boy’s rival.

The day after, the girl was confronted with an inheritance and a betrothal. The prospect of returning to the scene of the massacre prompted a host of nightmares. The girl woke from the last to discover a rift storm had turned summer into winter at the inn near her family estate.

The nightmares blinded her to a threat from within that caused her to black out and nearly drown in the bath. The rival, staying at the inn to visit the ruins, came to her rescue and accompanied her on her visit to her childhood home.

The girl did not know how she would be affected, if the very thought of visiting the site of the massacre had provoked the worst nightmare she could remember. She had endured them frequently over the years, but it was far worse now that the details had started surfacing in her waking hours with traumatic side effects.

The barriers her mind had erected around the memories had been shattered from within by a rogue god boring though her subconscious to make contact with her conscious mind. To identify the girl, the rogue needed to catch a glimpse of her through her own eyes, ideally when she was in view of her reflection. The girl’s apprehension over inheriting her mother’s estate provided the crack the rogue had been waiting to exploit. Unconsciously recognizing the threat, she shattered the mirror a moment too late to prevent her identification by a rogue god. The rogue watched through her eyes, and once he found the best place to ambush her, he planned to send demon to capture her and begin the process of devouring her mind.

The girl loved to roam through fields and forests, scale rocks and mountains, explore ruins and the underworld, and swim in rivers, pools and the ocean. Usually, she went with her friends, but when she had a great deal on her mind, she would start walking and often ended up alone on the beaches below the cliffs of the sanctuary or the academy. By the start of summer, the rogue was confident enough of her habits to dispatch his demonic minions.

The summer the reincarnations turned seventeen they faced the time of choosing, often referred to as mating season, when the initiates were encouraged to pick a partner for their final year of initiation. Of course, most started looking for a mate as early as winter.

One of the girl’s friends asked her for help catching the interest of a girl he had a profound crush on, which she did—unfortunately, the night she accomplished her task, she also caught the interest of the boy’s rival. He had gotten used to thinking of her as one of the guys through the misadventures the boy, the girl and he had gotten into—a useful guide through the underworld when needed. That night at the party, however, he suddenly saw her as a very beautiful girl—and she had gravitated to him to put the final touches on her “break up” with the friend she had done the favor for.

The girl unwittingly saved his life that night, since the boy, well known for his interest in exploring the underworld, had been marked for assassination to stop his campaign to hold the initiates’ final trials in the ruins. Recognizing her from passing encounters in the home or offices of her underworld patron, the assassin took her aside to discover her intentions and interpreted her responses to mean that she was working the same contract.

Baffled by, and suspicious of, the stranger who pulled her away from the rival to inquire about her intentions and issue a cryptic warning, the girl pointed out that she was there as a favor to a friend, assuring the stranger that she was perfectly capable of handling him. She was just waiting for the “idiot” to escort her from the party and take her to a nice, private spot where she could strangle him, possibly after beating him into a pulp.

The paladin’s ring is retained as the device that transforms the boy into the tomboy. The manner in which it is found, understood and used needs no alteration. The ring was brought to the academy by an escaped slave girl who used it to pose as a boy for initiation.

The boy found the ring before spring break, along with a journal containing an account of the slave’s ordeal under the ring’s curse. The boy did not read the account until after his transformation. The tomboy’s friends—and even the girl—offered their help to break the curse, but the tomboy doubted she could to go back to being a boy after having sex as a girl. Since the tomboy was a perfect double, the girl asked the tomboy to cover for her while she investigated the massacre of her family. The tomboy was forced to see a different side of her academy rival while posing as the girl. In spite of herself, the tomboy was responding to his slow seduction, but the ring was stolen before she could give in to the temptation to sleep with him. When the girl set out to recover the ring, determined to use it to force the tomboy to break the curse, the tomboy decided to let her rival bed her first. Unfortunately, the tomboy realized that the girl would be stuck with the consequences and tried to drive the rival away by revealing her true identity. When he insisted that he loved her anyway, she could not deal with it and tried to flee. The rival pursued and plunged to his death trying to catch her. The authorities initially believed that it was an accident and allowed her to return home.

The girl arrived home after recovering the ring and confronted the tomboy as a boy. They completed the ordeal and returned to their normal selves. A few days later, the girl was arrested on suspicion of murder due to a rumor that she had fulfilled a contract on the rival’s life. Armed with the ring, the boy went to the island prison where the girl had been detained awaiting trial intent on taking her place to face the judgment of the goddess. Unfortunately, the wizard the girl had stolen the ring back from had weakened the binding of the ring to warp the demon within. Wearing the ring for longer than it took to transform gave the demon time to break free and possess the boy. The demon was also determined to find the girl, intending to kill her and take her place. Unfortunately for the demon, and to the girl’s utter shock, she did not die when it finished raping her and tried to kill her. As it probed her mind to find out what she was, it realized that she was the goddess of the realm and that the boy it possessed was an incarnation of her soul. In the instant the girl’s mind was preparing to rip the demon from the boy’s mind, the demon recoiled, shoving the boy—mind and soul—out of his body and into the girl to escape. The demon warned its allies that the girl was a demon eater and instructed them to hold her captive while it finished its mission, changing sex to do so.

From the boy within her, the girl learned that the demon was on a mission to destroy the goddess. The boy had encountered the paladin while possessed and learned that the demon had once been an angel of the goddess that had fallen trying to save the life of a mortal it had fallen in love with and could not bear to see die. Instead, it had turned the mortal into a vampire, seizing his soul and becoming a demon. The paladin of the goddess had used his own soul to bait a trap, binding the demon to the ring and using its power to face other immortal threats. When the paladin died, however, he became trapped in the ring with the demon. As others acquired the ring and passed the ordeal necessary to access the demon’s powers, each had become virtually immortal—but once something did manage to kill them, their souls had been captured as well. While the ring was in the wizard’s possession, however, the demon was warped into a weapon capable of destroying its creator.

The plot against the goddess was intended to provoke the demon of the realm and cause it become moored in her body. The plot assumed that the goddess would fight her demon and be destroyed. It never occurred to them that she did not dare.

When confronted with the demon posing as the girl, the goddess realized that it had been given the capacity to completely devour her. Unfortunately, if she fought, there was a chance the entire Inner Realm could be destroyed along with her. Even though the mortal inhabitants of the realm helped to stabilize it, she was still the focus of that reality—in spite of being displaced as the focus of the demon god when the girl took possession of it. So, she allowed herself to be devoured, on the slim hope that she would be resurrected from the ashes of their mutual destruction once the demon gained possession of her soul. The goddess was surprised not to have been displaced to the abyss by the demon of the realm. Normally, a direct assault on her provoked it to defend its claim on her, even from threats from within. As a result of her destruction and resurrection, the goddess awoke in possession of the boy’s body—which was still in female form—instead. She was no longer the focus of the realm, however. The destruction of the goddess was a shattering blow to reality, but one it was able to survive—not only because the goddess did not put up a struggle. By embracing her demon, she had become the goddess of the realm created by the souls of its victims—including the former paladin of the goddess. To confirm her suspicions, about how she had been displaced, she set out to confront the girl.

The eve of paradox created a rift across space and time, exposing the infinite and eternal foundations upon which all realities rested—what the demon of the realm had described as its creator, the universal mind. The goddess suspected that this was the origin of the rifts that had opened in the past, at times when the fabric of reality had become stressed.

An initiate's training included an education in intimacy, explored as an extension of athletics, specifically gymnastics and dance. This comprehensive form of sex education was considered essential for healthy development, involving practice as well as theory. The time when ninth year initiates paired up was euphemistically known as "mating season".

A favor – As mating season approached, one of the girl’s friends had asked her to help him win the interest of a girl he loved. Ember had promised to help Salt catch the girl, but to avoid arousing the other girl's suspicions, she had to be careful to make the entire affair appear perfectly natural. The trick was to make it look like Salt was winning her over charismatically, rather than through base seduction. Then she had to teach him when and how to be appropriately seductive. At the same time, she needed to find casual ways to bring the details of their relationship to the other girl’s attention.

The most difficult part of the task was becoming his girlfriend without becoming his lover. Fortunately, Salt was fully obsessed with his love interest, and Ember was careful to keep his interest focused on her. Ember had to make it look like they were growing intimate, but constantly reminded him to imagine he was with the other girl. As their final days at the academy approached, Salt became convinced that the ruse was not working, but Ember assured him that going home “as a couple” would make it more convincing. The best time to break things off would be the midsummer’s eve celebration.

The boy discovered a secret hiding place in his room containing items left by a previous occupant. The boy went through the items, finding a journal and an enchanted ring. The ring had no effect on the boy when he tried it on since he was still a virgin. The boy stuck the ring in a pocket and forgot about it by the end of the day.

The largest port and third largest city in the kingdom, Avon was also the home of the goddess. The Avon House had been founded by the goddess to maintain her Sanctuary and defend the throne of Arden, so the original Seat of Arden had been built on the coastal plateau opposite from the Sanctuary.

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

The expeditions – during their initiation, the rival encouraged the girl to lead several expeditions into the ruins and the underworld. Suspicious of the rival's true intentions, the boy always accompanied them.

The rivalry between Ash and Clay began the day they met as initiates, when Clay mistook Ash for Ember and set him on a path to the girl's dorm. Other's made the same mistake, directing Ash to Ember's room.

Ash was taunted and mocked by the other boys when he moved into the boy's dorm. The boy's attempt to explain blew up in his face when Clay defended himself by saying "it's not my fault he looks like a girl!"

Popular with the other boys, Clay seemed cruel and arrogant to Ash, and Clay's apparent interest in dark and forbidden subjects made Ash even more wary.

Ash was a natural at the arts, but nowhere near as driven as Clay, who found it infuriating that Ash could show him up effortlessly and not even seem to notice.

Ember and Ash grew closer, and she developed an aversion to Clay based on his treatment of Ash and a general dislike of the group Clay effectively led. In spite of that, they often got into mishaps and adventure with—often, because of—Clay.

An approaching storm drove the girl and her friends underground, forcing her to confront traumatic memories of being lost in the ruins.

The girl lost her cool when her friends dragged her down into the ruins. While exploring the ruins, the girl found her way to the scene of one part of her ordeal and began to relive it in greater detail. The girl snapped and fled, leading her friends deep into the underworld. It was difficult to forgive one of her friends for luring them down there. The experience had pushed her even closer to the other friend, however. The girl resolved to take advantage of the opportunity to confront her demons and lay her ghosts to rest while she was back home for the summer.

Arriving at her foster home, the girl found a summons to visit her family advocate. A night alone in her foster home was relieved by a visit from the boy.

The boy announced that he had confronted his true feelings for her as a result of the rival's interference. She confessed her own feelings to the boy and they agreed to be intimates. Unfortunately, for the boy, the rival’s interest in the girl had been renewed upon learning of her childhood misadventure in the ruins and the underworld.

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

On her birthday, the boy and the girl finally embraced as lovers. Ember responded as Ash pulled her close. It started as something they had done many times before, but somewhere in the midst of kissing and caressing, it became so much more.

Later that morning, the girl was infuriated to learn her birthday celebration had been turned into an engagement party. The girl and the boy had become best friends at the academy, and explored everything together, even intimate things—confident enough with each other to brave each other’s curiosity. Even though she had thought of marrying him, she was not sure how she felt about learning the boy’s mother had fostered her for that purpose. The girl circumvented her foster mother, despite being tied up all day in preparations, calling upon the boy telepathically. Even though they were already a couple, they had to keep quiet about it until the girl fulfilled her promise. The midsummer’s eve celebration would be perfect to pull off her plan, but she needed to be the one being dumped for it to work.

The girl got in over her head at a mid-summer’s eve party, catching the interest of an unwanted admirer—and an assassin.

The party that overshadowed the girl’s birthday every year also provides a good place to begin her investigation of the past, a chance to meet people who had known her parents.

After welcoming the guests, the girl hunted down her guardian, finding her engaged in an argument with her underworld patron. Dancing, a glimpse of politics, intrigue and cues to tantalizing leads kept the girl busy. True to his word, the boy derailed his mother's plot—without explaining how to the girl. In private, he had informed his mother that he had been informed by his rival’s father that the girl had been betrothed to his son. That had not prevented the girl from choosing him of her own free will, prior to learning about either engagement. A formal announcement of their engagement would be publically challenged by the rival’s family.

The night of the party, Ember grew worried until she noticed that the girl Salt liked was present. One look at Salt with Ember on his arm, and the girl became jealous. Finally convinced that her plan would succeed, and the girl would respond well to Salt’s attention, Ember gave him the signal to go talk to her. When he got her out on the dance floor, Ember turned her attention to her other task—finding a way to lay her nightmares to rest.

Returning to the dance floor, the girl gained enlightenment on many different 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.

Ember was surprised when Clay abruptly cut into her conversation with a friend of her parents. Clay had overheard Ember talking about the time she was trapped in the ruins as a child, and he wanted to know if she had remembered more about her experience in the ruins. In spite of her normal reluctance to discuss her ordeal in the ruins, he was one of the few people who seemed to understand that her experiences in the ruins had been both terrifying and wonderful. In contrast to the way most people reacted, Clay took her account seriously. Unfortunately, his presence drove away the people she needed to talk to.

Clay had gotten used to thinking of Ember as one of the guys—a useful guide through the underworld when needed. That night at the party, however, he saw her as a very beautiful girl—and she had unconsciously gravitated to him while looking for Ash to help her put the final touches on her “break up” with Salt. The rival insisted that he was only interested in learning about her experiences in the underworld ruins, privately viewing it as common ground he could use to pursue a deeper relationship with her. The rival had tried to seduce her before—after making the wrong assumptions about her relationship with the boy—but succeeded only in provoking her dislike and distrust.

Because he was the heir of a lord, the other guests had assumed Ember must be someone important if

Clay was so interested in her. When she tried to slip away, someone would corner her before she could find one of the people she wanted to talk to. The second time she was stopped by someone determined to figure out who she was or what Clay was talking with her about, she realized her own curiosity would be just as annoying to the people she was after. Ember allowed Clay to occupy her attention until she caught Salt sneaking off with the girl he admired. Seeing that her mission was accomplished, she began looking for a way to excuse herself from Clay's company. Ash was not available to come to her rescue, but always sensitive to being observed, Ember picked up on the presence of someone studying her a little too intently.

In Ember's experience, a man who stared that hard at a girl in another man's company simply had to be willing to take her off his hands. When she met his gaze, he came forward and asked her to dance. To her surprise, he announced that Reed did not mention that she would be here playing bodyguard to an heir. Immediately on guard, she led him out onto a private balcony to “get some air” and confronted him. She explained that as far as most of the people present were concerned, she was an eighth circle initiate whose only ties to the underworld were a handful of street orphans she befriended as a kid. As for Clay, he not only did not know she worked as a body guard, he would not believe it if he was told. It did not matter, though, because she did not intend for him to find out.

Baffled by, and suspicious of, the stranger who pulled her away from the rival to inquire about her intentions and issue a cryptic warning, the girl pointed out that she was there as a favor to a friend, assuring the stranger that she was perfectly capable of handling him. Deciding that her presence was a coincidence, he asked if they were involved. Ember sighed, admitting that they could have been, if he had not always been more interested in her knowledge of the ruins. Fang asked her to explain and she told him that Clay petitioned the Duke for a commission to mount an expedition and been told to find a guide first. If she had known ahead of time, she would have warned him that the whole underworld would be after his head for proposing an official probe into their domain. Now that he had asked her to play guide, she had to deal with the problem. Fang considered that and asked her what she intended to do. Venting an evening’s worth of frustration, Ember replied, “I'm going to break his neck; or maybe just strangle him. Right after I beat him into a pulp..."

She was just waiting for the “idiot” to escort her from the party and take her to a nice, private spot where she could strangle him, possibly after beating him into a pulp.

The girl unwittingly saved Clay’s life that night. The assassin had attempted to maneuver the girl away from the rival to get a clear shot at him on his way home. As Ember noted, Clay’s petition to mount an official excavation of the ruins threatened the interests of the criminal, exile and immortal denizens of the underworld. A contract to assassinate the rival had been issued to punish him for repeated intrusions into the underworld and discourage others from probing the underworld. Recognizing her from passing encounters in the home and office of her underworld handler, the assassin took her aside to discover her intentions and interpreted her responses to mean that she was working the same contract.

Ember returned to Clay, resolved to endure his probing in order to see if his plans could be modified to her advantage. The direction the conversation was going suggested that Clay might be receptive to her tale in a way others had not been. He had been in the ruins and must have encountered some of the things she had. While worrying about the trouble she would face if she agreed to be Clay’s guide, she continued to wonder what had happened to Ash. She had intended to spend the rest of the party with Ash, but instead she was torn between resisting Clay's advances and being tempted by his proposal.

The next day, she was summoned by her regent, a woman she had not seen since she was seven. That night, while she slept at the local inn, a rift storm hit the area, turning summer into winter. Tormented by nightmares, the girl spent a fitful night recording the details and straining to weed her memories out of the mayhem.

The girl returned to her childhood home to confront the demons of her childhood. An only child, the girl 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. The girl recovered quickly, healing from the trauma and adapting to the strange powers it awakened.

The girl was sent to the Aeryn Tear Academy for training in the physical and psychic disciplines necessary for her to become a true member of the Order of Aeslyn Tear.

Unable to return to sleep, the girl drifted through the morning, almost forgetting her appointments. A traumatic flashback struck her in the bath, and caused her to black out and almost drown. The boy’s rival, compelled to visit by an uncomfortable premonition, let himself in and tracking her down as unsettled feelings deepened into alarm.

The girl was mortified by her rescue, but the power of the vision she had convinced her it was time to begin a serious investigation of the massacre.

The girl suffered an unwanted escort to her appointment with her regent and her parents' advocate, the executor of their estate.

The manor – When the girl arrived at the manor, she assumed the old woman simply wanted to give her the keys to the estate. At the strained breakfast party, the girl was disturbed to learn of her inheritance—and betrothal to the boy’s rival. It was a shock to learn of it by being told how fortunate she was to have such a handsome dowry for her marriage.

While at the manor, the eerie familiarity of the place gave her traumatic memories new strength and clarity. The girl tested her nerve while Clay plead his suit. Clay dogged the girl's heels as she visited the ruins to firm her resolve. The girl considered his pleas, stunned to realize she had unwittingly encouraged his interest. The girl had explored a bit of intimacy with him out of friendship and occasionally flirted with him for fun. Unfortunately, he was not the boy she had chosen.

The girl attempted to restate her position, referring back to the start of intimacy in their relationship. He had taken advantage of her innocent, sensual and curious nature to hurt his rival. The girl named her priorities, and the couple made an informal pact. He would not fight with the boy over her, and give her time to think about being his guide through the ruins of the underworld; but sorting out her past still came first.

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 must have 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 her reputation and honorary membership in the order, the girl hoped to discover who her parents had been, find out why they had died and lay their ghosts to rest.

Reed summoned Ember to his home the next day to issue a warning. He had learned that Clay had become infatuated with her, and urged her, for several reasons, not to become involved with him. Ember was forced to explain that she already was more involved than she wanted to be. For one thing, her parents had arranged for her to marry him before they died. For another, they had been friends and rivals at the academy for years, and almost been lovers. Then she confided that she had also been engaged to her current lover, but her best chance of getting out of marrying Clay was by agreeing to guide his expedition. Before Reed could voice his objections, she pointed out that it was also in the underworld’s best interest to have her guiding the expedition. She would keep the party from discovering something they should not.

Reed told her the lords of the underworld would object to her knowing enough to perform such a task even if they trusted her enough to let her do it. It was not a bad idea, however. The underlords could appoint an agent to advise her covertly or simply dictate the path she could lead them on. He promised to look into it and get back to her, but in the meantime she was instructed to keep Clay at arm’s length.

Clay was not discouraged. If anything, he seemed to become more infatuated with Ember the more she put him off. Even when he agreed to give her time to consider his request, he still pursued her for information about the ruins. Ember had cursed herself for being stupid enough to get involved with Clay in the first place. Her life was already complicated enough, but Clay seemed determined to complicate it further. He had gone to the trouble of having her followed, and began showing up to confront her at all the places she usually hung out. Ember tried to drive him off, but often that just was not possible.

Over the course of the next day, Ember was distracted from further thoughts about Clay, trying to learn more about the events leading up to the massacre. As had become her habit, Ember woke up early, worked out and had breakfast with Ash. In the course of their conversation, while musing over recent events and situations, Ash asked her if she planned to join him and his father on their trip to his father’s home town. Ember told him she was looking into the death of her parents and would be busy trying to gather information about the massacre while dodging Clay.

The girl sought audiences with associates of her parents and their liege. Under the guise of courtesy visits, the girl followed up on leads gathered during the midsummer’s eve party. At an inn founded by a member of the order, a slain friend’s great aunt revealed that a magistrate and former member of the Order of Aeslyn Tear had died rather mysteriously on his way home on midsummer’s eve. Something had killed the man before she could respond to his invitation. The girl was stunned to learn that both of her parents had ho history prior to their arrival in Avon, explaining the speculative rumors she often heard about her parents.

Memories continued to be unlocked by her traumatic nightmares and spurred her investigation on. In her nightmares, the girl relived the massacre—each one providing additional clues she pursued down the path leading up to a confrontation with those responsible for the raid on the manor.

A second lead was frustrated by the sudden or recent demise of another contact, but the girl persevered. The family advocate informed the girl of a controversy over her breeding and about her foster grandmother's foiled plans for her mother. The woman believed that the girl and her mother had been bred to be muses, and insisted that the girl had not been conceived by the man she thought of as her father. He was just a man she had married, breaking the law to escape her calling.

The advocate provided a list of her parents’ associates—many of whom she could expect to find at the funeral of the magistrate. The girl was encouraged by word of an intrigue involving her parents around the time of their deaths. Funeral gossip gave the girl 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.

The girl was famous in certain circles for being the sole survivor of the Tegal Massacre. Among the people she encountered at the funeral, there were a number of individuals who had been opposed to the excavation of Aeslyn Tear. The girl 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.

The mysterious slayings – The girl's mentor was tasked to investigate a series of mysterious slayings and called upon the girl for assistance.

The boy and the girl joined their mentors on a demon hunt and stumbled upon the scene of a massacre.

The investigation led the girl and her friends into the underworld and dangerous association with its criminal and immortal elements.

The girl wondered if something connected the deaths of her contacts. The girl focused her attention on the individuals noted for their objections to the excavation of the ruins. Pursuing the objectors in hopes of confronting them, the girl was confronted again by the stranger from the midsummer’s eve party. In spite of the position she found herself in, the girl pressed the objectors in hopes of discovering their motives. The girl received no admissions and her attempt to evoke them only got her ejected by bouncers or escorted away by guards.

It took a few days to uncover another nest of conspirators and confront them, again with little success. Clay confronted the girl about her activities, citing the danger represented by the latest reports of slayings. Clay commented on the oddity of the recent deaths, the most recent victim being an individual the girl just confronted. Recognizing the victim's name, the girl reconsidered the daily gossip on random killings in the port, city and countryside. Suspicious, the girl checked her list of potential contacts with the authorities and discovered many of them among the slain. The girl suspected that a conspiracy in the past could be linked to a present conspiracy, and tested a disturbing hunch. A complete list of possible conspirators against the excavation encompassed the complete list of recent "random" fatalities. A chance encounter raised the girl's hackles, presenting a possible, horrifying scenario for current events.

Because people were willing to talk to her, the girl was able to begin unraveling a web of intrigue that tied into the series of 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.

A reputation in the underworld—The girl's mistaken identification by some as an assassin was based in part upon who she was associated with in the underworld. Although she had obscured her activities as a thief, her association with her mother’s sire gave many the impression that she was being prepared for a career as an assassin. Those rumors, combined with attempts on her life and suspicious deaths associated with her, proved convincing to some members of the underworld.

The girl got caught in the middle of an assassination attempt. As the girl recalled, the excavators discovered evidence of others penetrating the ruins—and considered the implications. Fearing that the people she had most recently visited were in immediate danger, the girl raced to confront the remaining few. Arriving on the scene of another killing, the girl was vividly reminded of what demons were capable of. The girl reached a conclusion about the course of the conspiracy and moved to intercede directly.

It was a relief to find the next contact still alive. Outraged to have her offer of protection taken for a proposition, the girl was poorly prepared to face his assassin. While the girl's explained her theory, Reed encouraged her to take advantage of his hospitality, offering her a drink strong enough to make her easy to take advantage of. The man was edging the girl into a compromising position when they were interrupted. As the combat evolved, the girl overheard enough to realize that some kind of ongoing conflict between the weres and vampires was involved.

The girl encountered old acquaintances in the underworld and confronted new threats and challenges to her investigation. The girl's underworld patron, an ally in her investigation who knew she was no assassin, warned her that the underworld was too dangerous a place for her admirer to be poking around and urged her to not to get personally involved. Her patron was not free to explain his warning, for fear of giving the real assassin a reason to silence her.

The girl agreed to "take care of it" in exchange for information she sought in her investigation. The girl interpreted the double talk to mean she was supposed to seduce him away from his objective for his own good. The girl believed that she had promised to guide and protect the rival during his explorations, without encouraging his interest in her.

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.

Unlike most people, the girl should have realized that the ruins under the city were a highly coveted and disputed territory in the underworld. As few mortals beyond the girl 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. The turf war between the were-tigers and the vampires had been fought covertly, a deadly chess game of ambushes and assassinations in an ever mounting feud. It had only been a matter of time before normal routines and habits became disrupted, producing a trail of bodies.

None of the people she talked to would explain their reasons for discouraging the excavation project, but deeper probing revealed that they were all members or 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.

From examining her nightmares, the girl was able to confirm 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 the girl to realize that the she had stumbled into a territorial dispute between immortal factions in the underworld.

Ash went rock jumping with his friends on a river tributary in the mountains north of Avon, near the town where his father was born. They had made their decision on the fly, heading for their favorite spot, with the huge boulders and deep pools, without bothering to go back for bathing suits or towels. It was a secluded spot, so they felt free to indulge in a bit of skinny-dipping too.

As Ash undressed, the ring he had found in his dorm fell out of his pocket, unnoticed. A while later, one of his friends found the ring lying among the rocks edging the pool. When his friend asked if anyone had lost a ring, Ash remembered putting it in his pocket and claimed it. His friend tossed it up to where he was perched to jump. Having no pockets, he slipped the ring on and leapt. The transformation hit him as he was falling into the pool.

Unfortunately, because he was naked, his friends saw everything when he turned into a girl in mid jump. At first, his friends could not believe what they saw; until the boy came out of the water as a girl. When they brought the transformation to Ash’s attention, he passed out in shock and had to be rescued by his friends.

All three of them were stunned. It took Ash a while, under the circumstances, to notice the absence of the headache that had always been there, growing worse each day. He told them about finding it at the academy, while packing to come home, but it had done nothing to him the first time he tried it on. He could not understand why it would suddenly turn him into a girl now.

The boy confronted the prospect of being a tomboy. She did not begin to panic until she discovered that the change was permanent. One of his friends was fascinated by the transformation and startled his friends by offering to try the ring on himself. The other friend advised against it, suggesting they learn what they were dealing with first.

He went directly to his father, on the edge of a screaming panic. Brand was about to ask the two boys and the wild eyed girl to go right back out the door and wait until the class he was working with was dismissed—when he recognized the girl. This was clearly an emergency; he dismissed the class early, admonishing them to get in extra practice at home, and took his son turned daughter aside. She told him exactly what had happened and what she had already confided in her friends, and Brand knew he had a serious problem on his hands.

In addition to handling her crisis, the other two boys were facing a crisis of their own. They had just discovered that magic could change even a person’s sex, and it was sinking in.

His friends asked in amazement if she really had turned into a girl, permanently. He examined Ash and confirmed that the transformation was complete and permanent. To her shock, he confessed that there was nothing he could do to reverse the process. On a hunch, however, he reversed the ring and slipped it onto the girl’s finger—and she turned back into a boy. Unfortunately, Ash turned right back into a girl when he pulled the ring off again. The transformation into a girl was permanent without the ring to reverse it. He suspected that it was some kind of mechanism designed to make the wearer dependent on the ring, which was obviously cursed.

Before Ash could get her hopes up, he warned her that it would endanger her soul to wear a cursed ring. He offered to turn her over to his mother, to learn how to function as a girl while they looked for a better solution. She protested in near panic that if he allowed her mother to have anything to do with it, she would be forced to think and act like a girl. She pleaded with him not to send her to her mother, who devoted half her career to turning tomboys into ladies.

She was frantic, she had not always liked being a guy, she had even pretended to be a girl from time to time—as a kid, running around with Ember—but she loved being Ember’s boyfriend. Ash could not stand the thought of losing that forever. Besides, being a girl was sort of terrifying. She barely knew the first thing about it, but she knew enough about boys and men to feel extremely vulnerable.

Her father held her until she stopped trembling and offered her one hope. He would have the ring looked at, and if it had been made well enough it should be safe enough to use at least part of the time. Ash would not be completely trapped as a girl if she could not stand it.

After assuring himself that the two boys had gotten over their shock and apparently returned to their normal lives, Brand turned his attention to his daughter. Ash had been adamant about avoiding her mother, and insisting that they continue with their normal training. She had been studying martial arts under him since she was six years old, devoting herself to mastering her body as well as her mind. All that time she had been a boy, and they had reached the point where there was not much more to master—as a boy. As a girl, there was quite a lot for her to learn. The female body had different strengths and weaknesses, and a girl required greater skill and ran a far greater risk in martial arts than a boy.

Ash quickly redefined herself as a tomboy—accepting her female body, but retaining her male outlook. There was a good chance that the only way to keep Ash from inevitably becoming a real girl was by keeping her close to the girl she loved as a boy. Ember would be a constant reminder of what Ash stood to lose.

The journals they found with the ring contained an account of the ring's former owner and his experiences with it. The ring was designed to unlock latent human potential associated with the alternate sex. The ring could be used to change back temporarily, by wearing it reversed, but if she wanted to be a man without wearing the ring, she would have to break the curse by having sex as a woman. The boy’s friends offer their services to help the tomboy break the spell, prompting another panic attack.

On arriving home, a week later, no one was home. Brand left her there in the front yard and went to have the ring and journal examined. She took a turn about the yard and settled on the front steps to wait. A few minutes after her father vanished around the corner, his mother and eldest sister arrived by car.

They were overwhelmed with baggage, and asked her to help them carry everything in. Obviously mistaken for Ember, Ash responded obediently, hoping to slip away before Ember showed up and forced her to reveal her true identity. When they sized her up and sent her to try on some of the clothes they had purchased, she tried to protest and was silenced rather soundly. She surrendered, wishing her father would show up soon and give her an excuse to slip away, and tried on a number of outfits, parading them for their approval.

Ash’s other sister showed up, and joined their critique, showering her with all kinds of friendly sarcasm. Some of her comments cut pretty deep, particularly in a girl who was so new to everything female, and she turned deep red between restrained anger and profound embarrassment.

Finally, Ember showed up, and all of them turned to confront Ash. Ember could not believe her foster family had not suspected the other girl was an imposter, however identical she appeared. Fortunately, she realized it had to be Ash and dragged her off to her room to find out why Ash was posing as her.

While growing up, Ash had occasionally had to pose as a girl to accompany Ember into a girls-only situation. Dressed as a girl, Ash could easily pass as Ember’s sister or cousin. Disguised, anatomically, as a girl—by illusion or temporary transformation spell—Ash became Ember’s twin. That had been useful when Ember needed someone to cover for her while she dealt with problems in the underworld, but this was the first time Ash had posed as her on his own. Now she wondered how often he had pretended to be her without her knowledge.

Ash had barely stumbled through her story when Brand walked in the house, laughing and joking with an academy adept. As Ash and Ember debated what to do, Brand continued the conversation, telling the adept, “I don’t know how we’ll be able to tell them apart. I tell you, it’s uncanny. Like twins from different mothers.” Ash lost her temper and stormed out to confront her father, “I told you not to tell anyone!”

When Rowan demanded an explanation, Brand handed the question to Ash, who burned brightly as she was forced to explain what had happened. Then she asked what her father had learned. As Brand returned the ring to her, the adept confirmed what they had learned examining the ring and the journal. It would be safe to wear the ring during the day, when Ash needed to be male—or to change back permanently, if Ash could endure that ordeal.

On assuring the rest of her family that she had every intention of reclaiming her manhood, they relaxed and talked about the effects this might have on the couple’s marriage. The elder sisters managed to sink axes into both girls—commenting on the effect this might have on the couple’s marriage bed.

The tomboy’s mother suggests that the boy’s obvious resemblance to the girl, as a girl, was probably due to the selective breeding practiced in muse bloodlines—intended to embody the traits of the goddess. The tomboy sensed that his mother knew something she was not telling her.

The tomboy was advised to exploit the opportunity to develop feminine potential and insights as required by the curse.

While they were warming up to spar, Ash confided her fear that she would not be able to go back to being a guy after having sex with a guy as a girl. At least, not if she did it willingly. She honestly did not know how she would deal with being raped.

Ember stopped and faced her squarely. As far as she was concerned, rape had very little to do with sex. It was vicious, violent and violating—but so was a kick in the balls. From what she had seen, a boy spent as much time in helpless agony from such a blow as a girl spent in helpless, terrified rage during the act of rape. Besides, she added, everyone was vulnerable to rape.

Ember then asked if the real problem was that having sex with a man—as a guy or a girl—made him less of a man—or was Ash worried she would not want to go back?

When Ash could not answer, Ember sighed and pointed out the crux of the problem; Ash had been given a choice about something that most people never got. The curse, if it really was a curse, was that it had to be an informed choice. Thanks to the ring, Ash would never really be a man again unless she experienced what it was to be a woman.

Besides, she pointed out, she had gone through what Ash was going through. Ash could benefit from her experience and spare herself a lot of frustration and embarrassment, with her help. For now, she suggested, they should not even worry about it. Before stepping onto the mat and attempting to beat each other up, they shook hands and made an agreement to deal with things one step at a time.

Ash and Ember entered the bath together after their workout. Ash had been a bit shy, but shared Ember’s curiosity to find out how deep the resemblance between them was. Ember conferred with herself, amazed at the juxtaposition of foreign and familiar in the scene. Habit compelled her to regard Ash’s body as her own, and the liberties she took with herself startled and put the neo-girl a bit off guard. Ember was shocked to learn Ash had resisted the temptation to explore her new condition. Ash found it easier to submit to Ember’s attention than her own. Ember offered her curiosity a less threatening outlet.

The boy’s mother confronted the girl when she came out of the bath. She was concerned how the girl would react to the boy’s condition, worried that it would give the boy’s rival the opportunity to seduce her away. Until the boy completed the ordeal, the boy could only become male wearing the ring in the masculine orientation. The boy’s mother pointed out that was enough to fulfill a husband’s duties, and tried to determine how the girl felt about an intimate relationship with a virtual twin.

On the excuse that the two were both girls, and engaged to each other in any case, Ash was told she should sleep in Ember’s room, rather than share his room with his father. That first night in bed, Ember assured Ash that she would teach her everything she could about being a girl. At the same time, admitting that she would not mind if Ash offered to return the favor. When Ash just stared at her in confusion, the girl explained that she was offering to use the ring and help the tomboy break the curse. Ember argued that there was no reason for Ash to endure this ordeal alone. They were already lovers, and she would at least be female on the inside to compliment—and console—Ash’s inner masculinity.

The tomboy needed time to think about it, so the girl asked her to stand in for her when she needed to slip away to pursue her investigation.

Ember cuddled with Ash in the late morning hours, while each contemplated the future of their relationship. Ash and Ember agreed that they were still in love, and might even still be lovers; but even more important, they were unlikely to ever stop being friends. Thoughts of friendship reminded Ash of the two boys who had witnessed her change. She composed a letter to them while Ember was drawing a bath. Then she joined her in the tub.

When they came out for breakfast, and everyone saw Ash dressed and styled by Ember, Brand declared she looked even more like Ember’s twin. Ash explained that Ember thought of it, in order to begin developing her girl side. Ash got the address for Shale from Brand and mailed the letter she had written before breakfast on the way to the merchant and market districts with Ember. She was going to be busy over the next few days getting a crash course in girl things.

In the afternoon, Ash accompanied Ember to her gymnastics practice. Ember explained that arrangements had been made to use the gym for practice through the summer break. Those with the potential to become adapts were going to be trying out that day. She was lucky to still be in the program, on account of her height.

While Ember was changing in the locker room, Ash wandered into the gym. She was wearing just a bathing suit under a light cotton dress, since Ember had suggested she could use the pool during practice. There was no one else in the gym. Ember liked to arrive early and get in a little extra time warming up and trying out bits of choreography. Finding herself alone, Ash slipped the dress—which she could not help thinking of as a big, oversized shirt—over her head, limbered up a bit, and worked through a few katas on the big mat.

He slipped up on her completely unnoticed and clapped a hand on her shoulder. Surprised, her reflexes took over. She grabbed his hand, twisted and threw him to the mat—just as she would at any unprovoked attack. Her guard was up, ready to meet his attack as he bounced off the mat and came at her feet and fists, elbows and knees. Initially, she had the full confidence of her exceptional experience and training, but she quickly realized that her styles had picked up many flaws and lost much of their effectiveness, thanks to her change. Her opponent, however, moved flawlessly, breaking through her guard repeatedly, and landing blows solid enough to really hurt if she had not known how to deal with them. She made some quick adjustments, and managed to penetrate his defenses at least three times before he took her down and delivered the killing blow—that would have killed her had he not stopped a hair away from her throat.

He was smiling and looking pleased as he gave her a hand back up. She understood that he had simply tested her, like a real master would, without preamble. She bowed at once and grinned at the two things his opening comment revealed. He obviously mistook her for Ember, saying he had no idea she had that level of training, and that she fought like a boy. He found it disappointing that a master with so much skill to teach had failed to adapt it to a female body. She agreed with him, and then pointed out that when she had started she had been built like any other child, boy or girl, and then physically grew out of her skills—it was essentially the truth.

He told her to stay after gymnastics practice if she wanted to correct her deficit. Ash retreated to the locker room, explaining that she still had time to get in a swim before the class began, and confronted Ember. Ember told Ash that Dancer would have to be told about the ordeal; he probably already suspected something. Dancer proved it, interrupting them to say he had been suspicious from the first look. Ember would have worn a leotard on the mats, even if she intended to follow up with a swim before practice. Ash and Ember explained what was going on, and Dancer spoke with Ember in private for a moment before repeating his offer to Ash.

The first condition, however, was that Ash had to demonstrate the skill needed to stand in for Ember in gymnastics. Martial artists often developed some gymnastic ability, but applied it so differently that she might not be able to match Ember. He put her through a second test, following Ember’s lead, and Ash was surprised at the agility and range of motion her new body allowed her. As a boy she had tried gymnastics, but only as a girl did it come naturally to her. She was nowhere near Ember’s level of ability, but was limber enough, and coordinated enough to adapt the abilities she had to perform at an exceptional level with a little training.

She was so delighted at her discovery that the prospect of joining the gymnastics class was suddenly as attractive as the prospect of retraining in martial arts. Dancer seemed just as excited.

By the end of practice, Ash had gotten used to being called Ember. By letting Dancer in on the secret, he was able to coach Ash along without raising the suspicions of the other girls present for practice and try-outs. Ember used the opportunity to slip away to take care of an errand she had been putting off. It was past time for her to pay a visit to her parent’s colleagues in the Order of Aeslyn Tear.

Her curiosity about her traumatic childhood ordeal brought her to the Sword & Sorcerer Inn to consult with her elders in the Order of Aeslyn Tear. 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.

The girl sought aid and advice in penetrating the ruins to probe her past. As a group of her elders debated over mounting such an expedition, she was confronted by two patrons of the inn. The girl first met the were and the vampire the winter she ran away from the academy, and they resumed flirting with her whenever she was home from the academy. The inn had been declared neutral ground in the war over the ruins, a place to arrange duels, exchange hostages or discuss the fallout of the war.

The girl had caught the eye of the rival immortals, as a mere girl. Her escape from the ruins brought her to their attention, and the were and the vampire 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.

The girl 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, the girl 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. The rival caught up to her in mid tale and added his side of the story, while silently asserting that the girl belonged to him.

As they questioned her, they learned about her life and training at the Academy. 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 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.

When Ash and Ember arrived home, they discovered that Ash’s older sisters had gotten permission to throw a party at the manor to celebrate the girl’s inheritance. They had spent the day setting the empty house up. Ash was instructed to attend as a boy. Ash and Ember went out together, touring the estate and marveling at the unusual design of the entire property.

The girl’s mother had been the architect, turning the ancient ruin into a dream home, the masterpiece of her chosen art. It was a palace, and it reminded them of the Sanctuary of the Goddess. The house proper was nested in a structure that used an atrium and aquarium complex to seamlessly blend indoors with outdoors. It was nested in a little meadow between steep hills, at the mouth of a narrow ravine atop cliffs overlooking the ocean. Set below the hilltops, the house was surrounded by trees. The hills themselves were a thick layer of dirt and sod grafted to solid humps of bedrock, cut in two by a stream with the patience and endurance of saints. The property would have cost a fortune, but the girl’s mother had won it in a hand of cards.

She had cleared out the ruins and rebuilt them to take advantage of the effect nature had on them over the centuries, developing her skills as an architect in the process. It was obvious that she loved employing stone in construction, for the design was rife with columns and fixtures hewn from granite, for the exteriors, and marble, for the interiors. The entire foundation and the pool system had actually been carved out of—or into—the native bedrock. Tons of natural rock had been used landscaping the atrium-aquarium complex, skillfully mimicking nature in a fit of inspiration.

The aquarium was actually an interlocking pool system riddled with connecting passages, but it was still dry. They slipped off their shoes and toured the system, easily spotting all of the secrets that water would submerge. The veins, arteries and heart that would keep the water alive and circulating branched along the rims and bottoms under removable dressed stones that seated themselves almost seamlessly.

The atrium—like the house itself—was bounded by stone walls and a colonnaded walk. The columns supported a broad lip overhanging the walk. It was clear that the girl’s mother had wanted to create more than a home, but an environment that begged to be explored. The living area had three floors, but the entire structure was built on nine levels.

The aquarium had three levels, each accessible from its associated floor. The upper pools were connected to the lower pools by waterfalls and diving rocks—two short falls and one long fall. Because the pools provided alternate routes through the structure, sections of each floor were offset from the one below and safely undermined by waterways.

Aspen came out and accosted them. They intended to commemorate the girl’s inheritance by filling the pools, so they were asked to try to finish their tour before guests arrived. They were roped into helping Aspen and Willow play hosts, since the party also served as a debut for Ember—as the new lady of the manor—so she was at least able to get out of indentured servitude. Or almost, between them, Aspen and Willow were a tough team to outsmart and evade.

For the most part, the guests were selected exclusively from the families of academy peers in the region. Ember introduced her to Lane and Heather, and Ash bit his tongue as they pressed Ember to confirm her engagement to Ash *and* Clay.

A short while later, the champagne came out and the water started flowing. Willow was capitalizing on the girls’ interest in Ash the boy, working them into a froth of envy and desire in front of Ash and Ember. Games and dancing, organized by Willow, preceded dinner, after which the party thinned out a bit. What remained was a predominantly younger crowd. The music changed and people began to break off to claim the little nooks and crannies they had spotted earlier to talk, neck and do a little horizontal dancing.

Ash and Ember danced together, with Lane and Heather watching and avoiding boys their own age out of habit. All four of them had one other overriding interest, getting away for a dip in the pool.

The bulk of the water was going in at the top, waiting for the upper pools to fill and spill over the falls to the ones below. They slipped up top and stripped down when they found that the water was already about chest high in the deep end and no one else had bothered to venture up. The system was designed to pump a tremendous amount of water to the upper pools to sustain the waterfalls. In no time they were swimming free as they pleased, watching as the level gradually buoyed them up to the lip. When the water was creeping over the lip, they climbed out on the diving rocks and shouted a warning to those below.

Only then, seeing their wet and naked bodies, did anyone realize that the upper pools were open for business. The four sighed and accepted the intrusion of dozens of naked bodies in their little sanctuary. As they were all initiates, clothing was irrelevant, so no one made a fuss over mixed sexes and ages. Those who wished to be intimate staked out a private pool, more for courtesy than because it could stop any voyeurs among them. Of course they—the younger boys that was—had their eyes firmly glued to the three redheaded girls, and Ash.

On the following morning, Ash and Ember woke early to prepare for school. After listening to Ash complain the day before about how she was not a morning person, and how she dreaded anything that imposed an early start to the day, Ember was surprised at how easily Ash woke and slipped out of bed.

Ash had not been asleep. She had lain awake most of the night, silently debating whether or not to test what she had discovered the night before. Ash had suffered from a raging headache for the whole evening, until removing the ring and changing back to a girl to go to bed.

At some point during the night, she had slipped into the bathroom and turned on the light. She then confronted herself in the mirror and turned into a boy. Within moments, the headache returned. After a long moment, he changed back. She stood there staring at herself for an hour and did not feel the least twinge of ache or discomfort. If anything, she felt aroused.

The arousal could be explained by her feelings for Ember. Her body just had that effect on Ash, so it was no surprise she could get turned on looking at herself. The headache, though, was something Ash had endured and eventually tuned out as a boy, until the ring had given her a break. Now she stared at that familiar face and realized she faced a difficult choice. She had to wonder what the headache meant. Was it just stress caused by the responsibility and expectations she faced as a boy? Or, did she simply find being male to be inherently distressing?

A letter arrived from Ash. Rain and Shale shared the missive updating them about Ash and her adjustment to her new life. Rain observed that he really had turned into a girl. Shale noticed that Rain kept the envelope as he gave back the letter Shale had received. By the end of the day, Rain had vanished. He had told his parents he was going to visit a friend for a while, gotten in his car and driven off. Shale could easily guess where he had gone, but was puzzled about why.

The tomboy spent much of his time as a girl learning how to act like one.

As she bathed with Ember, Ash tried to distract herself from her night long vigil, focusing on the moment she was in, and reflecting on the less conflicted her proximity to Ember evoked. She was as yet far from comfortable with girl’s clothing and make-up. Ember picked out her clothes from her own wardrobe, and did her face. The minimum that she typically settled for put her good looks to best use with the least time wasted, and Ash acquiesced quietly to the same ordeal.

At breakfast, Brand looked stunned at her transformation, and admitted quite freely that if Ash never regained her manhood, she at least had exceptional prospects as a girl. Stung a bit, that her father could openly endorse life as a girl, she retorted that the clothes, face and hair were—once again—Ember’s fault. Ember growled, if she was going to be so ungrateful about it, she could take care of such things herself from now on.

Ember did not talk to her for the rest of the morning except for necessities. Ember rushed Ash through breakfast, storming out of the house and forcing Ash to run to keep up with her. On the long walk, Ash tried to chip through the ice between them. Ember just got madder at the fact that Ash had no clue why she was angry. Realizing that she was not going to relent, Ember sighed and started to explain. Before she got a word out, Ash was in a fight.

A guy had come around the corner behind them, and made a grab for Ember. Ash had noticed and moved instinctively to protect her. As a result, the boy who had been about to molest her put his mitts all over Ash. Catching a glimpse of the molester, Ember covered her mouth and vaulted the wall to get out of sight before he realized there were two of her. As far as fights go, it was short. Ash popped him in the solar plexus and wriggled out of his grasp, fuming and offended. The boy, Clay, looked up in shock, as it finally dawned on him that the girl who decked him was furious.

He and Ash exchanged words, and Ember stared on in annoyance as she realized Ash was carrying on like a boy, protecting his girl, retaliating for the assault on his person, and threatening the other guy. Only, she was a girl, and none of it was having the intended effect. Clay was outright charmed by her, and did not take the threats the least bit seriously. Worse, he clearly mistook Ash for Ember and professed his undying love her. It was a game they had played a million times, but Ash had never seen it. Nor had there been an undercurrent of truth to the declarations he made in the past.

Conjuring up a quick disguise, Ember slipped back onto the walk behind them, grabbed Ash, angry again, and excused both of them. Ash could not believe the guy had gone after her like that, and muttered angrily for a moment before Ember interrupted. He, she explained, was not all that bad. He had not been serious about trying to get in her pants for years. It just happened that he had gained a new interest in her over her time in the ruins and the discovery off their engagement. Thanks to the way Ash had just reacted, Ember added, there was no chance now of shaking him. On that note, she dressed Ash down for acting like a guy.

The two of them had planned to spend the day girl-watching, to give Ash a better idea of how she should act in public. Now that the two of them were both angry at each other, they almost regretted trying to stick to that plan. They argued under their breath through the whole morning. Ember finally got to the heart of her annoyance; she had believed Ash wanted her help with being a girl, and yet now, after one evening back in male form, she was getting defensive at the mere suggestion that being a girl was acceptable, and acting like a jealous boyfriend and macho jerk the instant a boy showed any interest in Ember.

Ash shut up and thought that over. She had become angry at Ember’s terse and cold behavior, but Ember was right, it was her own fault. What Ash had said to her father had been a slap in Ember’s face. When Ember attacked her for acting like a guy, she had felt that Ember was being unreasonable. Ash apologized and explained what had been bothering her that morning, but Ember accepted it only conditionally.

During lunch, Clay approached, bearing his own apologies and asking to make it up to Ash by taking her out on a date. Before Ash could refuse in indignation, Ember—still under a disguise—whispered to her. If Ash wanted Ember to accept her apology, she had better accept Clay’s.

For the rest of the day, Ash was in dread of the date she had been forced to accept. Ember had a ruthless streak, and Ash was beginning to respect that, and the logic she used to support it. She nearly stopped breathing when Ember gave her permission to sleep with him—if she felt she needed to. Ember would not get into a conversation about it, beyond asserting that it would not hurt or offend her—and jealousy was not in her nature. A girl had to have her freedom, she asserted.

Clay came to watch Ash at gymnastics, openly admiring her. It made Ash’s head churn, because part of her was suspicious of and uncomfortable with the scrutiny, and yet there was something extremely flattering about the way he was so enamored of her—even if he did think she was Ember. She found herself actually performing for his benefit, and enjoying his applause. She hardly wanted to jump in the sack with him, but he really had a way of making her feel very good about herself.

In the showers, she begged Ember a favor. Ember considered the matter before deciding, but concluded that it would be best to help Ash keep her judgment. Clay had aroused her with his worshipful attention, and she needed to get it out of her system or she would end up in bed with him in spite of herself. They broke into a storeroom and had sex—for the first time as two girls—then showered and went out to meet Clay. Going along, while he put his arm around her and took her to his car, was the hardest thing she had ever done.

To her surprise, he was really nice. He took her to a park, where they took a long walk and talked. From there, they picked out a restaurant and ate. He suggested seeing a play, and that really was a treat for her. She was always missing the chance to go to the theater, on account of training or traveling.

Everything was going really well, up to the point where he was dropping her off at home, when the morning’s scene suddenly repeated itself.

One of the boys who witnessed the tomboy's transformation tracked her down—this could be a way to retain the ring of sex; the friend brings the ring he found, thinking it could be used to cure the tomboy. Rain had come walking up behind them, and when Clay finally got up the nerve to put a move on her, Rain jumped in to defend her.

Rain was almost as good a martial artist as his friend Shale, and Shale could give Ash a run for her money when she was still a boy. Clay really did not stand a chance, and Ash had to come to his rescue. On Clay’s behalf, he had cunning instincts and great reflexes, and some training. After being jumped once that day, he was a little more alert, and that kept him from getting hurt too bad. Ash realized that Rain was on the defensive the moment he realized who had stepped into the fight.

Clay took advantage of her “distraction” to put Rain down and sit on him. Since neither of them had really spoken, Clay was as certain it was his duty to protect her from Rain as Rain had felt compelled to intercede for little innocent her, naive to the ways of men simply on account of having become a girl. Ash had to put her foot down to keep the two from engaging each other again.

It took a bit, starting with introductions all around, to get them thinking. Ash explained that Rain was a friend and that Clay had just brought her home from a date. Once it was clear that neither one was her boyfriend—the next assumption both of them jumped to—she got them to shake hands and stop bristling at each other. Mostly. Clay still bristled after her assertion that there was nothing between him and her. Rain just shrugged the matter off and announced that he needed to talk to her urgently.

Ash held him off long enough to give Clay a proper kiss good night. She felt she sort of owed it to him, after the trouble, but knew deep down that the next time he would be twice as macho and three times as eager to get her in bed. Once he drove off, she took a quick ride with Rain. He insisted on going somewhere private. She took him to the new house and found a bench in the atrium where they could sit down and talk.

The girl did her best to help the tomboy cope with the consequences of being a female.

The girl did her best to help the tomboy cope with his experiences as a girl. The boy's transition from a male perspective to female perspective occurred in a self-assertive, progressive manner.

The girl gave him every opportunity to prove that he was still a man, in spite of everything he experienced as a girl.

The tomboy inherited the girl's unwanted suitor, his rival. The girl explained that she had been recruited to take care of the rival, explaining her obligation to protect and guide him in the underworld.

Since the tomboy wanted to keep her condition a secret, she had to put up with the rival's advances while posing as her. Strangely, the tomboy found those advances hard to resist. In spite of herself, the tomboy got caught up in an affair with his former rival.

The tomboy was frustrated and flustered by the unwanted and disarming attentions of her former rival. Clay proved to be a genuinely nice guy. In spite of her resolve, his attention was hard to resist. When he managed to corner her, they talked about the ruins and the impulse to live a life of adventurer. Even Shale and Rain found themselves responding to his charm. Ash found her resistance crumbling. Time and again, he had managed to get past her defenses, luring her into animated discussions about the age of gods and related myths and legends. Nothing really seemed to deter him, not even rivals for her affections.

The girl began to lose time during her forays into and under the streets of Avon. Her “guardian angel” was surfacing to strike down threats drawn to her in response to the psychic imprint she inherited from the demon of the realm.

The girl 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, the girl was dragged into the exclusive tap room for summary justice. To the knights' distress, the girl 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, the girl 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 the girl.

The investigation ended up leading the girl into conflict with the underworld's immortals.

While posing as the girl, the tomboy became involved in the plot to assassinate the rival. Rumors about the girl, combined with the odd circumstances of her involvement with the rival, made certain members of the underworld suspicious. The assassin tasked to take the rival out believed "she" had the same contract. The tomboy’s actions were perceived by the underworld as a ploy in her effort to fulfill the contract on the rival. The tomboy was just trying to distract the rival from the girl, while she was engaged in her pursuit of answers.

The girl’s next attempt to gain intelligence on the ruins involved a trip to the Sanctuary, and its extensive archives. There, she was approached by a man from the order. Reed expressed a general curiosity about her raid on the order's archives. The girl 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.

Reed 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 the girl, 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, the girl 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.

The girl's old underworld "patron" urged the girl to break off her relationship with the rival. The girl was advised to sleep with the rival, if that was what it took to end his obsession with her.

The girl 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 Reed 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. The girl was confronted by the man who confronted her at the party, followed by 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.

The tomboy shocked herself by volunteering for the break-up date with the rival. The girl promised she would "do the deed" herself when it came down to it, trusting the tomboy to play hard to get until she was ready. She emphasized that she had forced to accept payment to bed Clay, specifically to end his obsession with her and drive him away. She was professionally obligated to have nothing to do with him beyond that point.

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, the girl was stalked into a corner and confronted by a dozen mysterious figures. After swiftly disarming and overpowering her, The girl's assailants attempted to question her.

To her surprise, the veterans of the Order arrived on the scene, and with their assistance the girl was able to fight them off. Of course she was then dragged back to the Sword and Sorcerer to face questioning about her activities. The girl was forced to give an abbreviated account of her misfortunes. The girl explained her plan to explore the ruins in hopes of discovering more about her past ordeal and the true cause of her parents’ deaths.

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 Reed's associate.

The girl was investigated by the immortals in connection with recent slayings perpetrated by her “guardian angel” during her blackouts.

The tomboy was gradually being seduced by the rival. The tomboy had been tempted to take advantage of the rival's interest, to do what was necessary to regain her manhood. Unfortunately, the tomboy had a hard time working up the nerve to go through with it.

Confused by her reactions to the rival, her love for the girl, and the fear that she would be obligated to return to her old life once the curse was broken, the tomboy remained hesitant to complete the ordeal of the ring's curse, until the ring was stolen.

The next morning they were stunned to discover that the ring had gone missing. Some pickpocket had lifted it off the tomboy while she was running back and forth in angst and anguish. She confronted the girl with this news, and she resolved to help her track down the ring.

The girl went to extremes to find the missing ring, using her underworld contacts to help track it down and recover it.

The tomboy 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.

The girl confronted the fence and assured him she would go to any length to recover it. 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 tomboy and the girl got the address of the collector, resolved to get access to the ring long enough for the tomboy to return to normal, but they were rebuffed at the door. 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 of the goddess with a self-destructive compulsion and had everything ready to perform the task when he returned home with the artifact. The men who hired the wizard had devised a plan to exploit the demon within as a weapon against the goddess. The wizard weakened and warped the bindings, releasing the souls of those captured after the paladin and bending the demon to its fatal task. 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 the tomboy and the girl were learning what had happened to the ring, the wizard was preparing to receive his guests.

The girl told the tomboy to go home, staying to devise a plan to break in and get to the ring. The tomboy knew that the girl had been putting off ending “her” affair with the rival, distracted by the hunt for the ring. The promise to use the ring to help end the tomboy’s ordeal encouraged her to reconsider her procrastination and consider sleeping with her rival. That way, the girl would not be forced to sleep with a man she did not want, nor would she have to become a man to sleep with her. While the girl carried out her break in, the tomboy went out on a date with the rival.

Ash prepared for her date with Clay. As she bathed and dressed, she reflected on the events that led to her current involvement with Clay, posing as Ember.

The date began with an elegant meal, followed by a show. At dinner, she noticed Fang and Briar, the former sparking a recollection, the latter simply arousing her curiosity—there was something familiar about him, but nothing she could place her finger on. During the play, Ash found herself brooding on the events leading to her date with Clay, starting with his pursuit of Ember and Reed's objections.

After the show, Clay took her to a gathering of young nobility for an evening of dancing, and again she spotted Fang and Briar in the crowd. In a brief exchange with Fang, when he asked if she was finished “playing around” with Clay, she alluded to her commitment “do it” at the end of their date. Ash carefully allowed things to escalate.

At the end of the evening, the rival lured the tomboy into bed. The tomboy hesitated, however, when she realized why she wanted to give in. In spite of everything, she had fallen in love, but if he loved her at all, it could only be because of who he thought she was.

Ash ran Clay a bath, to buy time to consider what to do. Seeing no alternative, she decided to end it, telling him the truth to drive him away and spare the girl his unwanted attentions. Her life was already too complicated, so she dropped the bomb. Ash was surprised by his reaction to her confession. Instead of recoiling, he asked her what she planned to do once the ordeal was over.

She strained to convince him they had no future together. When he was not at all discouraged, she panicked and fled. Unable to believe he loved her, she fought to escape when he pursued her. Clay refused to let her go. He pressed her to explain why she did it, and made a proposal. This was more than Ash could cope with, stunned by his acceptance, but frightened by what he demanded. So, she fled. Unable to explain herself, she simply put on her dress and left, chanting apologetic denials. This was too much for Clay. He raced out after her, naked and wet, desperate to catch her and force her to explain. Racing out after her as she fled, skidding on wet, soapy feet, he crashed into her as he caught up to her at the stairwell landing.

The collision sent both of them over the edge of the balcony, and she barely managed to catch the rail and grasp his hand. Unfortunately, with the film of soap covering his body, she could not keep her grip and he fell to his death. As the host of the demon of the realm, however, he simply woke up on the threshold.

There were hundreds of witnesses, and not a single person, apart from those who had come to witness an assassination, would have suggested that the tragedy had been anything but an accident. As Ash reeled from the tragic accident, she spotted Fang and Briar once more in the crowd. Fang, in particular, waited late into the night to approach her and deliver a parting remark.

The girl waited until the middle of the night to break in. After a careful search of the mansion, she found the ring, but just as she closed her hand on it, 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 deflected by one of the men who had contracted the wizard's services. The man observed that the girl was saving them the trouble of finding a host, and the wizard paused to watch the tomboy race away, escaping into the night.

The girl had unwittingly stumbled into a plot designed by the cabal of northern exiles and the adversary.

After she recovered it, the girl donned the ring and was transformed into a boy. She confronted the boy with her original proposal. Other events contributed to the girl's decision to use the ring, but her main reason was to share the ordeal with the boy and break the curse together.

The girl's transformation into the boy's twin confronted them once more with the oddity of their resemblance, but their attention was drawn to more immediate concerns. For the tomboy, there was at least one good reason not to do it. The rival's death had potentially severe consequences for the girl, since the tomboy was using her identity at the time. Although the authorities had initially concluded that the rival’s death had been an accident, the assassin had made it clear that others believed the whole thing had been a set up to take his life. If she went back to being who she was, those consequences would fall on the girl’s shoulders. All it would take was for the investigators to hear the rumors and confirm the girl’s ties to the underworld. Now that the girl had turned male, however, “he” could pose as the boy and remain safe.

In order for the demon to break free, it had to wait until they had completed the ordeal to unlock their full potential. The demon could not get full access to one of them until one of them gained full access to its power. After they had resumed their normal forms, however, they set the ring aside and curled up together to sleep off their intimacy.

In the morning, the authorities barged in to arrest the girl. The tomboy was arraigned for the murder of the rival, stripped and transported to an island prison to await examination and trial before the goddess. Discovering that the girl’s psyche would be probed by the goddess, the boy grabbed the ring and set out take the girl’s place so that the goddess would see that it truly had been an accident. Of course, the instant the boy put the ring on, the demon realized that it could use the same opportunity to “confront” the goddess.

The demon waited until it was able to take possession of the boy’s body. Unaware that the ring’s bindings were warped, the boy was helpless as the demon broke free, possessing him and heading to the island to hunt the girl down in the wild, with every intention of raping, torturing and murdering her to gain the knowledge the boy lacked to pose as the girl under a mind probe and make sure the girl could not surface at the wrong time and complicate things.

While imprisoned in his own mind, the boy encountered the paladin, who confirmed that the ring’s bindings had been damaged. With his help, he believed the boy could regain control of his body. They were still trying when the demon raped and attempted to murder the girl. The paladin was stunned when the demon inexplicably ripped the boy from his body and shoved him into the girl.

When the goddess examined the “girl’s” mind, the demon obeyed its compulsion to attack the goddess.

The girl regained consciousness stretched naked on a secluded beach. The cliffs upon which the sanctuary was built towered above her. Her memory of recent events was cloudy. 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. That would explain her blackout and difficulty remembering things. She was searching for where she might have left her clothes when she encountered a priest. He instantly came to her aid, offering her his cloak and guiding her back to the sanctuary.

Shaken and disoriented, her initial assumption when she washed up in a cove was that she was interrupted during her meditations by someone intending to kill her. 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 tells herself that she must have taken the wrong route home. She makes it to the safe house, finding it typically unoccupied, and collapses 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 of her usual haunts—one of which she might have 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 the were-tiger, the warmer of her two self-appointed foster fathers. The other man did not question her odd approach—perhaps because she was wearing the were-tiger's clothes. The were-tiger 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. The girl was told when and where the were-tiger 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 the girl was in dire straits. Still, if that was the earliest the were-tiger intended to appear, there was little chance of tracking him down quicker.

As evening passed into night, the girl set out to appeal to her other father figure, the vampire. In theory, he was always easier to track down, unfortunately that was because he owned a brothel. More than once, the girl had worried that his interest in her was concerned more with grooming her for an exalted position in his stable—which was not so farfetched considering the many times she had nearly been expelled from the manor. Not too surprisingly, the matron sent the girl to the bath, instructing the servants to make her presentable, when the girl asked for an audience with the vampire. To her shame, however, the girl fell asleep on a couch waiting for an audience with the vampire. The vampire came in ready to “interview” the beauty who had asked to see him, and found himself startled at her appearance. She did not strike him as 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.

The girl 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 the vampire. Frustrated, she decided to risk upsetting the were-tiger. 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 the were-tiger turned up just in time to catch her hand in the cache. The girl 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 the girl 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. The were-tiger allowed her to keep the money and promised to help her discover who was out to kill her.

It was fairly common for vampires to claim were familiars; the familiar would act as the vampire’s agent and provide protection during the day. In most cases, the familiar started out as a human servant or protégé who became infected by a were while acting as the vampire's agent. The establishment of the vampire's patronage prior to the were being turned was the precedent used to overrule the were sire's claim.

infected fighting a were-tiger in tiger form

infected biting a vampire that was trying to drain her dry

When it became apparent that she might be strong enough to survive the battling infections, the rival immortals made a wager to settle their dispute based on which way she turned. To their dismay, she turned into a were-vampire. Her ability to turn into a tiger had inoculated her against that part of the were infection, giving the vampire infection a niche to exploit against the were infection. The reason the two infections merged, however, was because the angel that created the vampire’s bloodline had fallen and become the demon that created the were-tiger’s bloodline. The strength to endure the ordeal had come from possessing the demon of the realm.

Ember took their advice and put everything out of her mind to focus on her investigation.

Reed was not happy with reports about Ash’s activities with Clay. He called Ember aside once more and instructed her to stop flirting with Clay and just put him out of his misery. Ember understood what he meant, Reed was telling her to take Clay out, to give him the ride of his life, and then tell him what she had been paid to do it. To make it easier for her, he drew up a contract and paid her to get rid of him, for once and for all. Ember thought that was too harsh, but when Reed reminded her of her obligations, she relented. In her own mind, she decided it was probably best. If there was any hope of a real relationship with Clay, he had to know the truth and still want to be with her.

A few days passed, occupied by investigations, interrogations and Ember's exoneration, before she heard anything from Reed. Ember had been badly shaken by the tragic outcome of her date. She blamed herself for the death of Clay. She had made a fair amount of money prior to the Autumn Festival, but not enough to quit.