To Augustine, the induction ceremony sounded like a sermon. Three thousand bodies sat in three hundred pews, each bench hewn from rock. Newly issued robes hung from their frames. Most were well nourished. Some were fat. That would change soon enough. To Vulf, the robes were the color of a winter fog rolling off the water. A heavy outer layer covered the rough clothing beneath -- pants and a shirt, both rendered in the same black fabric. It stretched when you moved and remained tight to your skin. It didn't scratch, or itch, or smell. Nonetheless, Allura found it restricting. A few of the prospects had raised their hoods, casting their faces in a deep shadow. Some sought to hide disfigurements; even with magic such as theirs, some scars refused to heal. Some were not meant to be healed. Others wished to keep warm. Three thousand bodies produce quite a bit of heat, yet the monolithic hall was almost as frigid as the gesticulating figure at its head. Tiresias merely wished to remain unnoticed. The hood was large, and he knew he could not be seen within it. That was to his liking. Simple leather boots, every one just like every other, adorned their feet. Under the tide of the Archwizard's words, you could hear them scuffing against the basalt. Morrigan had laced and unlaced his thrice since the ceremony had begun. One moment they were too constricting; the next too loose. Sitting still was taxing, and movement, *any* movement, was a release.

And while the students at and contemplated their lot, the Archwizard spoke with finality, each syllable sounding the end of an eternity: "Each and every one of you has been born a wizard. From the realm of uncreation you were brought forth as vessels of immense power, capable of drawing upon the energies of a thousand worlds. You are torches in the dark, stars in the night; you have a purpose higher than yourselves, and a strength greater than you know. You are also a danger. Danger to yourself, danger to those you love, danger to those you know and to those you do not. We live with danger. To drive a car is to embrace it. To love is to surrender to it. To live is to immerse yourself within it, to breathe it, to become one with it." Robes the color of a summer night roiled as he began to stalk back and forth at the front of the hall. "Yet you represent a danger that cannot be borne in such a manner. You are necessary, but not as you are. You must become something greater, something superior to who you are. Using your magic, as wizard or mage, is not enough. You must become a *magician.*" At this he stopped in his tracks. His voice carried unnaturally, echoing off of wall and ceiling alike, reverberating in hearts and stomach and other, less sophisticated things. "You dabble with things beyond your ken, beings with which there can be no bargains, forces that have never learned the concept of 'mercy.' You hold more than your life in your hands, of that you must be certain. Your eternal soul is at stake, and many of you have already gambled." And indeed they had. Here and there, hoods were obstructed by horns. Tails swished among the pews. Reptilian eyes clicked open and closed, set in normal (if sleep deprived) faces. They had gambled, and they had lost. A few sported scars of hellfire, reeked of brimstone. When you look up at the night sky, the stars shine like diamonds. A meager few are born to seize them in one hand, to wring the power from within them, and in so doing become stronger. It is easy to forget that stars are made of fire. Getting burned is a simple matter. Immolation is but a step further.

The rest of the ceremony passed in irrelevance. Other, less spirited figures took the podium and delivered their say. The audience was regaled with calls to bravery, beseeched to be dutiful, reminded to be cautious. Vulf coughed. Morrigan laughed. It was a strange sound, in such a forbidding chamber. It seemed swallowed by the solemnity. Morrigan contented himself with a smirk. Augustine waited. Allura adjusted something behind her back, underneath her robes. It was important, but not quite yet. Lots of things were important in that moment. Few of them were remembered. Fewer continued to be important after that moment.

A hush fell over the congregation, a lull in the sermon. Their occupation was soon to give way to their education. Soon, they begun to rise, individually or in groups. Turning to the rear of the hall, they exited. A pair of oaken doors, scarred with age, stood open. Hinges wide as barrels were adjoined to walls thicker than any castle's. Morrigan was impressed. Vulf wondered why a place of learning would be built like a fortress. It was a question of import, and one Augustine knew the answer to. Yet they did not speak, and so no question was posed, no answer given. The moment rose, faltered, fell by the wayside, left like so many yesterdays.

They had no more time for yesterdays. They were running out of tomorrows. And todays would soon be in short supply.

If you had asked Augustine to describe the Academy later that day, she would have used the word "barbaric," along with a few other choice statements. The walls looked as if they had been carved out by hand, the floors sloped unexpectedly, all of the doors creaked. The few windows that existed were invariably set too high to look out of, towering panes of glass letting in precious little light. Her bed felt as if it were made of stone; gods knew that everything else in the place was. Granite in a thousand shades, basalt and slate and sandstone too. That morning, she had cut her palm on a jagged outcropping of mica while searching in her "closet" for her materials. Healing it had been simple enough, she thought, but that wasn't the point. The place was in horrid disrepair! The world's foremost magical Academy, and it looked like something out of a twelfth-century peasant's dreams. Or perhaps their nightmares.

She'd left the introduction ceremony concerned but still hopeful. A few ominous remarks were to be expected—and, given the degeneracy of some of her classmates, she could see how they were called for. And yes, this particular institution had a history of dangerous incidents, but they occurred only periodically. So what if the hinges were monstrous, if all the walls seemed designed to withstand a siege? That was just prudence. Besides, it meant she didn't have to worry about her classmates overhearing her when she was doing her homework.

That was the other thing: her classmates. The worst of them was sitting at the desk in front of Augustine now, making it impossible to see what the Numerology professor wrote on the board. He was of middling height, his short hair frazzled, fingers too restless and eyes too bright; in other words, the spitting image of a mage. How he'd gotten into the Academy, Augustine couldn't fathom. Mages couldn't pull power from other dimensions; everyone knew that! He'd be forced to complete each of the tasks by using whatever magic happened to be in the vicinity at that moment. And the *smell.* Like metal, almost, but there was fire there too, or maybe ammonia? Whatever it was, the boy reeked of it. He was sure to flunk out- Augustine gave him one task, maybe two. Three would require astronomical fortune, and the boy was no astrologist. He could be a summoner, maybe. If he had any talent at all. That's the thing with magic. It requires talent. Any student could sit there all day, all year, memorize spells and reagents and rituals- but if they didn't have talent, it wouldn't do them any good. Augustine absentmindedly flicked through one of her textbooks with a smirk while the professor droned on. She most certainly *did* have talent. Six generations of it, despite the potential for wizardry not being passed via heredity. She could

make flames dance, make stone run like water, grow a tree into a stool and a stool into a tree. She was *powerful.* And here she was, suffering through the same lectures she'd been hearing back at the estate since before she could walk.

Augustine was bored, but that wasn't so bad. She was, however, beginning to become impatient, which was quite dangerous indeed.

The golem was on fire, and for once it *wasn't* Vulf's fault. He also couldn't put it out without possibly extinguishing the golem's anima as well, and then he'd have to start all over. Why did elemental copper have to be so tricky? He'd been working with constructs for as long as he could remember. Before he'd been forcibly enrolled in the academy, walking to school with a face full of rust and breath like heartstrings had been normal for him. His own pet project, a Hellenic hoplite-golem from four hundred thirty-three B.C.E., had finally been finished three months ago. It'd taken four years of hard work, scouring the patina from aged binding runes that had been old when Norway was still just a concept. The shield arm had been particularly tricky; for the longest time, it kept on wanting to raise the shield whenever a certain wrench was within twenty feet or so -- the exact measurement escaped him. He still remembered the feeling when it had *worked,* when the eternal fire behind the Corinthian helm flickered to brilliance and stayed lit. Granted, the next moment it had almost speared him with its pike, but it *worked!*

This golem, however, was not working, and unless Vulf acted quickly it would probably never work again. The workshop was big, and the roar of the foundries was saving him for the moment, but people were starting to notice, and if he didn't fix the issue before an instructor came over he would be set back for the first task big time and- the fire flared, going from something about four times the size of a decent lighter to a seven-foot tall solid wall of flame. Soot was sucked into the air, sending Vulf scurrying for cover behind a quenching trough. *Okay, you can do this, all you've gotta do is… oh hell.* The mess had started when he'd reactivated one of the golem's recognition runes; evidently the heating rune on one arm had been scratched. Instead of a nice domestic servant that could cook you meals, it had become a hellish domestic servant that could cook you. Deactivating a rune was pretty simple for a wizard- just touch it, draw out the power, and voilà. Naturally, Vulf did the one thing that made sense to him at the time: he tackled the four-hundred-pound flaming golem.

Vulf wasn't small- he filled out his six foot seven frame like a bear. So it came as something of a shock when his tackle terminated prematurely with his teeth clicking together and stars in his eyes. Well, he *meant* to tackle it- in all honesty, it felt more like giving a pillar an aggressive hug. He could feel his muscles (or were they ligaments?) protest as he strained, toppling the golem onto the floor, plunging a hand clad in thick leather into the heart of the inferno, probing for the rune. The leather began to melt and crack, baring his skin to the outrageous heat. Gritting his teeth, Vulf searched for a moment longer, screwed his nose, and clamped onto a vaguely knoblike shape. The fire went out with a *whumpf.* Rolling off of the now-doused construct, Vulf took a moment to survey the damage. All of his tools were in working order, more or less; one glove looked like it had been submerged in molten copper (only part right- the copper hadn't been *quite* molten yet) and he was missing a solid strip of skin up by his neck, but

really it had all turned out quite well. With a groan he rocked to his feet, grabbing a chisel and a small hammer. *Let's see if we can't modify that output rune…*

Four sweat-filled hours later, it worked. It wasn't much, but he had fixed it, which almost made up for the fact that it wasn't *actually* his. Its anima could follow basic directions. It fetched tools when prompted, emptied oil reservoirs, restocked supply lockers—the perfect workshop companion. It'd taken six feet of heartstring to replace the linkages destroyed in the fire and two hours to reforge a broken rune focus, but now it *worked.*

"Hey, idiot. You realize you're supposed to call for help when you get hurt, right?" Vulf was tinkering with one of the construct's ankle assemblies and managed to bang his head on its knee while locating the source of the voice.

"Yes, you. You've been burnt, or are you too stupid to tell?" A short girl, raven-dark hair pulled into a savage ponytail. In one hand she held a simple runestone; in the other, a textbook on basic healing.

"You're awful abrasive for a healer, you know that?" Vulf rubbed at the back of his head with his good hand as he carefully stood up, putting a hammer down on the workbench.

"Yeah, and you're pretty thick for an enchanter. Next time you decide to tackle a golem while it's on fire, you call a healer over to take a look at you before you continue work. Better yet, put the golem out first. Now hold still."

"How did you-" His voice cut out midsentence, throttled by surprise. He could feel the skin on his neck *flowing.* It felt like being burned in reverse. A sharp pain, followed by an expanding dullness. Spiders crawled up his spine, causing his hair to stand on end.

"There. All better." The healer sounded smug, confident in her ability to heal basic surface burns. "Let's try not to get scorched too hard next time, okay, big fella?"

"Thank you?" Vulf scratched absentmindedly at his neck, exploring the healed skin. It was hard to tell beneath the gloves, but it felt different somehow, smoother than the surrounding material. Perhaps it was just cleaner. "And who are you, anyhow? I'm new here, so it'd be great if I got to know someone-"

"My name's Allura. I'm stuck on shift here for the next three hours, figured I might as well get some practical practice in."

"Thank you, Allura. I'm- "

"You're a massive idiot who barely noticed he had burnt off a quarter pound of flesh. Let's not get too friendly, hm?" And with that she turned and left, already barking at some other student who was clutching at an injured hand.

Tiresias didn't remember much about his life before the Academy. As far as he *could* remember, it had been fairly lonely and not nearly as entertaining. There was the studio apartment where he lived with his family, the creak of the window panes as they flexed in their frames, the flashing lights of cars as they streamed underneath his window. He wasn't a luddite, but technology had always seemed so incredibly *limited.* Instead, he made dimensions dance between his fingertips by day, filling that airless, white-walled bedroom with expanses beyond measure. At night he traveled. He danced on pyramids made of stardust, swam up crystalline waterfalls, dived off trees taller than any mountain. Eyes flickering lifelessly at a decrepit ceiling fan, his body wasting away, he *lived.* The world- no, the *worlds*- were his playground. He made comets into slides. The rings of a planet became his monkey bars. He had reached

out as far as he could go, feeding his adventures with the lifeblood of a dozen stars. As his body starved, he thrived. How could such a feeble form contain one such as him? He was a god made manifest in a man's body, constrained, confined. Imprisoned by its restraints, imperiled by its weaknesses, enraged by its failings. He wanted *more.*

Out there among the infinite cosmos, there were beings willing to give him just that. For a price.

Tiresias didn't remember much about what he had done. What he did remember came to him in bits and pieces, like torn polaroid pictures. A sense of un-being, not painful in and of itself, simply disconcerting. A sense of detachment from the skeletal, white-haired vessel that moved at a mere snail's pace compared to the mind within. Growing concern as he watched fingers ravaged by neglect open his door, revealing something a part of him had known but had yet to divulge. The apartment was empty. His family was gone. So was his cat. He had loved that cat. Had he? Surely he couldn't be that hungry on his own. That pain in his chest, like his heart was destroying itself in an effort to sustain him a single instant longer—that couldn't be real, could it? Of course not. He wasn't crying, he couldn't be, that wasn't him, it *wasn't.*

His next memory was of a park. Given some thought, it was probably the one he had spent his childhood in. The chain-link fence was rusted, the slide warped. The wooden benches were rotted, the trash cans dented. Over by the oak—that was where he had learned to ride a bike. He had cast his first spell on that teeter-totter, pushing the other side down when there were no children willing to play with him. He had learned to swim in that creek, the little concrete brook where the two culverts met, fed by a storm drain. His mother had shouted at him to get out of the water. A few things had changed. A recycling bin sat next to the trash can. A gate had been added to the storm drain to prevent wayward children from getting lost. The streetlight that had always flickered shone steady now. And the pavement was red. So were the monkey bars and the wooden bench. Arterial blood ran through crevices in the concrete, streamed down the slide. His memory skips; a missing photo in the album. He was walking now, stumbling through grass that hadn't been overgrown a moment ago. The teeter-totter. It was crimson as well, painted with a flow that wouldn't come off. At its base was a pile of rags, every bit as red as its surroundings, no bigger than a trash bag. It hadn't responded to his questions, his statements, his shouts. It had whimpered when he nudged it.

That's when they came for him, he thinks. The Academy's 'recruiters.' Getting knocked out was another missing photo, and waking up was a hazy one. It had been in a well-lit room, with a nice bed and a much nicer lady who was there to "introduce him to his new life." She said he was a danger to society. Dangers get eliminated, or marginalized. Not in those words, but Tiresias—dangerous as he may be—was no fool. Still, being marginalized wasn't so bad. Now he got food, a bed, all the classes he could want. In his free time, he was still allowed to dance among the stars. His mind was shackled, though—caged with runes and bound with artifacts, manacles to protect him from the Thing that had scarred him. That had taken him. That's what they told him- he had been taken. Possessed. As payment, for *something.* Some service, some act. They didn't know what, exactly. Neither did Tiresias. Presumably the Thing did, but that wasn't a given.

In any case, he was now at the Academy, and happily so. He kept to himself, and his peers generally kept away from him. The library in was his favorite refuge. Reading, he had found, was almost as good as dancing among the stars. Bound between the leather covers lay worlds beyond measure, some so fantastical they put even his wildest discoveries to shame. There were even books telling him more

about the world in which he lived. How it spun, and why. The secrets of stone and sea were laid bare as he dedicated his free time to the pursuit of knowledge. He wasn't friends with the librarian so much as he was a fixture of her library, seemingly as permanent as the torches, or the centuries-old table that served as her desk, or the spells that kept the books dry. She could always count on his presence in that back corner, enraptured with one book or another. The subject didn't seem to matter; as long as he was learning, he appeared interested. Unicellular biology, enchanting, morality, numerological calendars, calculus, divination, architecture, siegecraft, chemistry, transmutation: all ensnared him equally. Needless to say, Tiresias was less than thrilled when he was pulled away from his beloved books.

The Academy inspired a sense of awe in most. Its stone façade resembled either a fortress or a monastery, depending on who was asked. Gargoyles capered along its curtain walls, snarling at gothic windows and ornate doors. There was some debate over whether it had been carved out of the hill that slumped against its western wall, or if the hill had come later, created by windblown dust come to rest against the monumental edifice. In the midst of sloping fields it sat, uncompromising in its magnificence. It was said that the forest around the Academy was quieter than most, the river that ran beside it a little more subdued, the winds just barely calmer. Not once in living memory had it been struck by lightning, despite the frequent storms that raked the area. Nature itself was forced into subservience by its grandness. Its students saw an institution worthy of respect. Its faculty saw the perfect place to mold the young into the powerful. Its enemies saw a veritable fortress, unassailable from every side. Morrigan saw *profit.*

'Profit' was why he had been enrolled in the Academy, but in his opinion that was only proof of divine apathy. Besides, if they didn't want enterprising mages to take advantage of wizards, they ought to teach them to be more careful. Was it his fault that they couldn't keep their hands off of his product? Crystal Karma was pretty benign, as far as drugs go. Distilled magic, pulled from joy, euphoria, laughter; if it was pleasant, it was fair game. He had charged fifty dollars for half an ounce of the resulting transparent crystals, enough to put anyone on cloud nine for five or six hours. He had been in the feel-good business—and in a dreary place like the Academy, there were a *lot* of people who needed to feel-good.

Unsurprisingly, his first issue was finding a place where people actually enjoyed themselves. The workshops had too much discipline to them, the athletic fields too much exertion. That was no big deal; he'd managed to bring enough with him to sustain any possible clients until he could get a proper operation set up. He wasn't too concerned about finding clients. People had a tendency to find good product, and his was the best there was. Satisfaction guaranteed, with only a minimal chance of side effects. His stuff was pure, undiluted bliss; your first kiss, Christmas, and your birthday, all rolled into a crystal no larger than a tooth.

Sitting through the induction ceremony had been the single most boring period of time in his life. Well, second most boring, if you count the eight-hour ride in the back of a locked van he had been forced on to get to the Academy. No, definitely first—at least then he had been able to try and chat up the guards, deactivate the runes on his manacles, just generally amuse himself. In the hall, though, surrounded by a few hundred grey robes, nobody but that fanatic up front droning on and on about how dangerous magic could be and how there was so much to do and how they had a responsibility to mankind? *That* had been boring. Eventually it had become too much and he had laughed, only to have the

walls swallow the sound. What kind of place does that? Concert halls and interrogation rooms, sure, he could understand why they'd have their walls enchanted for active noise cancelling. A school hall, though? It was ridiculous. Which is why he had smirked when he was finished, despite the pretty blonde glaring at him.

Really, it was a shame the teacher had sat him in front of her in numerology. Enough eye candy could make anything interesting, but without such a pleasant distraction, the class itself was boring beyond all belief. Even just the syllabus was almost enough to bore him out of his mind. Basic kinematics, algebraic cantrips, calculus, arithmetic divination… To call it boring almost seemed an injustice. If someone had taken the very essence of everything that was boring in the entirety of the universe and infused a single A4 sheet of paper with it, they might have gotten a level of boring half as potent as what he had to look forward to. Potentially.

And it wasn't just the class. Even his dorm room seemed designed for austerity. A single closet, set into the wall. A window with white blinds. A bed, seemingly carved out of the floor, with the world's lumpiest mattress atop it. A desk for studying, a lamp with an incandescent bulb, a halogen light in the ceiling. The only shock of color in the room came from a poster he'd mounted on the wall. Mounting the thing had been a pain and a half. No matter what he did, he couldn't seem to bend the wall to his will. Standard adhesive spells slid off of the black stone, runic markings fizzled out of existence, geomancy simply rebounded, pyromancy was a time-consuming dead end—nothing worked. In the end, he went old-fashioned, forming one of his clothes hangers into four nails, with the base of his lamp acting as a hammer. It wasn't much, but it was a start. It was *his.* In this godforsaken place, that counted for more than it should.

Some skins are canvasses. Their owners decorate them, frame them, smooth their wrinkles and ease their stresses. Allura's was a rap sheet. Scars described her life in block text, whorled burns and old cuts telling of her crimes in bolded half-sentences. She was the sort of person who never seemed to be looking, but was always watching. She didn't enter a room so much as she infiltrated it. Her footsteps were short. Stuttered, like an alleycat caught on the wrong side of a bat one too many times. Juxtaposed with the grandness of the Academy, she looked very much like she would be more comfortable on a doorstep, in a shelter, anywhere but this grandiose institution. Black hair obscured her face, guarding a thousand-yard stare from those that might take it as an invitation to inquire as to who she was, what her past had been. As if those two things were different. As if questions were welcome. As if she was.

Nonetheless, she found that she enjoyed being enrolled in the Academy. Shrouded in a grey robe just barely too large, with her hood up and her gaze down, she could be anyone. In her mind she was miles away, staring over verdant fields she had never seen and apartments the color of death that she had. A wizard, even one as destitute as she, has certain advantages over the average beggar. Injuries that may have proven fatal for another were a mild inconvenience to her. Healing was learned as a necessity, not a choice. She scoffed at the syllabus in her restorative magic course—blemish removal? Weight loss? Hair growth? Magic, used for cosmetics. Sacrilege in its purest form. When the teacher had handed each student some basic materials, choosing her workplace was a simple matter.

She found solace in the workshop, even though she didn't know the difference between a spanner and an anvil. The noise reminded her of home. If taken in passing, the clattering of hydraulic hammers could be mistaken for the rattle of poorly repaired cars, passed on from wayward father to indigent son for generations. Flaring foundries had a glare much like stoplights in a downpour, and the damp heat of the quenching troughs were just like those of the steam grates. She felt at home, right down to the overwhelming prevalence of idiocy.

In the first hour, she had reattached two dismembered thumbs, healed one broken shin, and popped one dislocated shoulder back into place. Actually, she hadn't used magic for the shoulder- a firm grip and a sharp downward tug had left the wounded student screaming, but functional. Her second hour saw much the same. A torn ear, a severed index finger, a shattered humerus. And then she'd glimpsed that *idiot* off in the distance, the one that had tackled the flaming golem.

She'd shaken her head at the sight, the beginnings of a grin creasing her mouth as he had scurried behind a trough. Bemusement quickly gave way to surprise as he tackled the flaming pillar of steel, wrestled with for a bit, and then quietly went back to work. He had been furtive about it, as if the entire workshop hadn't noticed his stupidity. Talking to him had been curious. There was an accent there, but she couldn't *quite* place it. Watching him work, he seemed far from inept, but in conversation he stumbled, sentences meandering around without a defined purpose. Leaving him to the rest of his work had been a simple matter. The rest of her period had been a simple matter, actually. With the first shift of would-be artificers had come on gone, replaced with their more experienced- and more cautious- upperclassmen, there was less work for her to do. She was free to watch. There were a couple surface burns, but healing those was a simple matter. It had begun to become routine. And if her patients were left with a few scars here and there, all the better. Perhaps they would think twice before injuring themselves, next time.

Healing another had always felt unnatural to Allura. Restoring her own flesh, that was one thing. She had made a mistake, and now she had fixed it. If you dropped a glass, you swept it up. If you cut your calf open jumping a barbwire fence, on the run from the police, you bit down on a part of your shirt and slapped a hasty healing spell on it. Same same. Healing someone *else,* though? That was comparable to atoning for another's sins. She supposed that, perhaps, there may have been people who would be willing to do that. To take the fall for another's faults, suffer for their penalties, gloss over their failings—surely someone would be generous enough to do that. Not her, though. She had enough baggage to last several lifetimes, and nowhere to lay it to rest.

Getting settled in had been a simple matter. Seven class periods had left her weary, and watching her fellows unload chests longer than she was tall was enough to make her grateful for the small duffel which contained her material possessions. A simple oaken door with her name branded into it marked her room, near identical to any other of the fifty such rooms on her floor. The austere copper knob creaked as it twisted, and the room the now-open door revealed appeared austere in the precious little light that seeped in from the hallway. She spent more than a few moments patting along the wall for a light switch, her left hand unconsciously straying towards the small of her back while she searched. A few seconds more and she found it, the single crystal in the ceiling flaring to life. Three cautious steps brought her into

the room, the door closing behind her with a soft *click.* Before her was a bed, a desk, and what appeared to be a closet set into one wall. Throwing open drapes heavy with dust, crimson rays served to accentuate the otherwise ascetic scene, cast by the sun setting over the Academy's western battlement. A thoughtless wave of her hand opened her cabinet and brought a wave of blackness over her vision, a consequence of her abundant use of magic during the day.

All told, her belongings filled perhaps a quarter of the space she had been allotted, with her newly-acquired uniform making up most of the bulk. Two books- one introductory guide to healing, the other a diary full of scrawled notes about streets and closing times- a second pair of boots, a knife and a steel flask. Carefully arranging them in one corner, she hung her robe and folded her two spare uniform sets with martial efficiency. Finally unbuckling the belt that had sat below her undershirt all day, she set it down atop the books. The soft shine of light on worn steel on the belt's cargo faded as she closed the doors gently and slipped into her bed, brown eyes appraising their spare surroundings. A bed, the frame of which flowed into the stone of the floor. A stone desk, surface pitted by the late-night scratches of a thousand students hurriedly cramming in a last-second assignment. A surprisingly spacious closet, situated near the wall which held a window of similar size. The odd green or silver streak lent the sable stone a modicum of color, but the only true color to be found was in the worn door and the sunset, still in progress. Her eyes flickered, watching the sky outside turn from an angry scarlet two the deep black of true nightfall. Finally, she allowed herself a smile, and rolled to one side, burying her face into *her* pillow, relishing the feeling of falling asleep between *her* sheets, in a bed that belonged to *her.*

Allura fell asleep to the sounds of an imaginary city, and woke up to an explosion that was all too real.