A cool breeze blew through the open window, carrying the scent of salt and fish from the harbor far below. The mountains of papers on Colette's desk caught in the wind, fluttering and tossing about, one catching on her face. She bolted upright in her chair, coming out of a dream where she had been flying across the waves of the Great Tear, watching fishing boats and merchant vessels hurriedly navigate the shifting tides. She rubbed her eyes and blinked away the grogginess that often accompanied an unexpected nap.

Rearranging the displaced parchment, Colette resumed her work on the Arcane equations she'd been assembling before she'd dozed off. Her mind moved with a frustrating sluggishness.

"If I can just get the Air and Water runes to play nice with each other…" she mumbled as she scribbled ancient symbols and words of the First Tongue on a new sheet of parchment. She was anxious to make up for the time her momentary slumber had cost her.

Colette glanced outside, relieved to find it was still the middle of the night. The large celestial body of Aeria — Ios' only moon —filled the night sky. Dark blue light reflected off its pockmarked surface and bathed all of Fayre, making the city appear as though it were deep underwater.

She turned back to her notes, consumed by her most recent hypothesis. She was meant to be preparing for the Maecole Arcanium entrance exams: the most prestigious school for Arcanists on the continent, if not all of Ios.

Colette knew enough to pass the exams on her first attempt now that she was old enough to take them, and her mother had taught at the school for over a decade. But it wasn't about merely gaining admittance; it was about being the *best.* She would leave her mark on the vaunted halls of Maecole and join the ranks of Master Arcanists like her mother before her.

She went over the formuli she had arranged on the page, double, then triple checking that the equation was balanced. Nodding to herself in content, she stood and knocked her reading chair to the ground without noticing.

Colette clapped her hands together and interlaced her index fingers and thumbs while keeping the other six fingers extended and pressed together. "*Vettukonen*," she breathed the word out, pushing it forward with nearly all of the air in her lungs. Before her, moisture pulled from the air, condensing into a familiar pattern. The tiny droplets arranged themselves into the shape of the Water rune: a continuous line that looped upon itself three times.

She maintained her concentration and quickly rearranged her hands into fists, sweat already breaking on her brow. "*Paivil*!" she cried as her knuckles came together.

Translucent strands of air snaked through the suspended water droplets, slightly displacing the moisture and shifting the papers on her desk. Colette's mind and body strained as she forced the runes to fully integrate. Her eyes grew wide as the Air runes tied themselves off around the droplets, beginning to condense and grow dark. Satisfied, she released the casting.

A small, pulsing rain cloud hung suspended over her desk.

“Yes!” she gasped, almost collapsing as lightheadedness crashed through her skull. Arcane casting took a significant toll on the user’s mental and physical energy. She needed to be mindful not to overwork herself again.

Colette jotted a note next to the equation she had used and studied the cloud with fascination. It was about a cubic foot in size, and grew increasingly pregnant with rainwater until a single droplet fell from it, leaving a large dark mark on one of her stacks of notes.

“No,” she said, a stern warning to the cloud, and let out a startled shout as it burst in defiance, sheets of rain driving from the localized storm and soaking into her hours of research. “No, no, no! Stop!” She gathered as much marked parchment as she could and held it close to her breast; a mother shielding her children in a squall.

Eventually, the tiny storm petered itself out, a tiny lake of conjured water now spilled off her desk.

“Well, that’s certainly a start,” she muttered. If she could harness the ability to summon or even control the weather, then maybe influencing the tides wasn’t as far out of reach as she had initially thought.

It was a hypothetical solution to a problem that had plagued Ios since its creation. Due to the close orbit of Aeria, civilization had built itself around oceans that receded and resurged across the world daily. Fishing and naval operations were conducted in a tight window during the night when Aeria was overhead, after the evening tidal wave crashed and settled against the mile-high Seawall on the western side of the city.

While society had adapted over the millenia, if she could find the correct Water runes and balance the resulting equations… Colette tore a fresh sheet of parchment and began scribbling again in her tight, looping handwriting. She tried not to let the soggy notes bother her; she had most of the prototypical equations memorized.

A sharp knock on her door made her jump as her quill jerked down the page in a sharp line.

“Colette? Are you alright? I heard a scream.”

She cursed under her breath and used a rumpled dress nearby to mop up as much of the water as she could before running to the door.

She yanked it open. The tall, serene figure of Esam Gladclaire filled the doorway, full-moon spectacles perched atop his prominent nose. He was still on the earlier side of his middle years, although his dark, medium-length hair had shocks of grey throughout. His tan skin sported many patches of brown freckles, much like her own.

“I’m fine, Father. Everything’s great. I’m just studying.”

He peered over her shoulder into her catastrophe of a room. One of his thick eyebrows shot up his creased forehead. “Studying, or solving Ios’ ecological conundrums?”

Colette grinned up at him; there was never any point trying to deceive her father.

“It’s just… the entrance exams are so *simple*, Father. They’re not worth my time right now. I don’t need to think about how to get in, but how to jump ahead of the others once I do. Why bother with lighting a candle when I can already summon a bonfire?”

Her father smiled down at her, a bittersweet thing that struggled to reach his eyes. “When you get like this, you remind me so much of her,” he said softly, pulling her into an embrace and kissing the top of her head.

He pushed her away, feigning displeasure. “Gah! You’re soaking wet, Colette! At least put on a dry nightgown. Or summon one of your wonderful ‘bonfires’ to dry off, if you can do so without burning our house down.” He smiled teasingly at her, retreating out of the doorway. “I’ll bring you some tea. We both know you’ll be at this until Lowtide.”

Esam closed the door behind him, and Colette stared at the polished wood for a long moment. Although nineteen eclipses had passed, she knew a part of him couldn’t move past her mother’s death. He did a good job of hiding it, but how could you not resent the child who took your wife from you?

Another, equally disgusting thought came to her. How could a Master Arcanist of such renown, the great Neriyana herself, die in childbirth? Did the gods not wish to help her that day? Did she not have any Arcane equation that could have made the process safer? Common women had children every day with minimal complications. Why was Colette the one damned to live without a mother?

She drew in a deep breath, attempting to banish the thoughts. She instead focused on the sounds of the capital city that floated through her open bay windows, the clanging of ship’s bells and labored shouts of dock workers. A sharp *clack* sounded from the windowsill, causing her attention to snap from the closed door. In the center of her room, nestled in the plush maroon rug, sat a perfectly smooth pebble. She narrowed her eyes and scooped it up, walking to the open window to investigate its source.

Colette leaned out into the chilly night air. Despite the budding pink and yellow flowers arranged in neat boxes on the street below, spring had not yet been able to overthrow winter’s rule.

She didn’t care that she was still in a damp nightgown until she registered the familiar blonde hair and mischievous grin of Doxam, her childhood friend. He stood in the middle of the cobblestone street, face half shadowed in the moonlight. She immediately jumped back, a blush warming her face. It was too dark for him to have seen anything scandalous, but it was still *improper.* She threw her thick down blanket around herself and marched back to the window.

“Doxam!” she hissed down to him. “What are you doing here this late?”

He laughed, a soft, tinkling sound. “I knew you’d be awake! Can’t sleep either, hmm?”

“I’m studying.”

Another laugh. “Colette, weren’t you just telling me this morning that you could pass the exams—quite literally—in your sleep?”

“It doesn’t hurt to be overprepared, Dox. Shouldn’t you be studying too?”

He waved a large hand dismissively. “Kteis said my Illusions would be more than enough.”

As if to prove his point, he wove his hands together and muttered the First Tongue under his breath, voice too soft to make out the words. A fluorescent purple triangle materialized

before him, a spinning circle of the same color in its center: the rune of Illusion. The rune twisted and inverted on itself, then expanded and changed in hue and shape until it became a lifelike image of Colette in her *nightgown*. Fiery red hair streamed out behind the Illusion in long waves, its light green eyes and tan skin a perfect replica of her own. He took its hand and began dancing with it as if the two were in Alfire Keep's ballroom. Even her body was almost accurate—

Her face reignited, and she hurled the pebble at the image, dispelling it to mist.

"Dox!" she chided him, embarrassed. *Tides,* she cursed, *if only that grin of his wasn't so infectious*.

He laughed and was on the verge of saying something undoubtedly quick-witted when Colette heard another knock at her door. Her eyes grew wide in panic and she slammed her window closed, cutting off whatever Dox was about to say. Her father was very lenient with her, a common trait of a single parent, but if Esam saw her talking to a boy in her nightgown in the middle of the night…

The door opened before she could reach it, her father entering with a silver tray and finely decorated teacup that billowed steam. He carefully stacked the notes that had survived the rain, making room on her study desk for the tray. Esam set it down and crossed her room. Her large, four-poster bed creaked in protest as he settled his broad frame on its edge. He shot a curious glance at the blanket wrapped around her.

"Colette, if you're cold—"

"I'm fine!" she squeaked, taking the warm cup in her hands. The aroma of Estrian black tea wafted up to her nose: lemons and cinnamon.

Esam's attention slid to her desk of notes. "So, what are you working on tonight, Master Arcanist?"

Colette rolled her eyes. "It's nothing revolutionary, at least not yet. I'm trying to combine Air and Water runes to make a continuous, self-sustaining storm cloud. I figured your farmers could use it to water their crops during Lowtide without tying up Arcanists to summon a constant supply of water for them."

Esam looked over her work with a studious expression, pretending to understand the complex equations and cramped runes. He was an intelligent man in his own right, but his skills lay in administration instead of the Arcane. Esam served as the city's expert on agriculture and land distribution, a part of King Estran's advisory circle. His most recent project had been transplanting new crops from further inland to the farms outside of the northern city walls.

"Why would we need this if we already have the tidal basins?"

"Well…" Colette wilted under his bluntness. "If I'm being honest, it's less about watering crops, and more about using a similar, but much more complex equation to control the tides."

Her father held her eyes for a long moment. "Dear, even your mother-"

"I know!" she shouted before she could stop herself, wincing at her raised voice. Esam frowned, looking hurt. Her hands balled into fists and she took a shuddering breath.

"I know," she continued softly. "But I swear to you Father, I will work ten times harder than anybody else. I *will* surpass her. I will solve the problems she left unfinished."

Even after nineteen eclipses, no other Arcanist had been able to make heads or tails of Neriyana's final equations.

Tears brimmed in Esam's tan eyes, magnified by his spectacles. He stood, reaching her in two long steps, and wrapped her in a tight hug. When he released her, he smiled, this one managing to reach his eyes, filling Colette with warmth.

"I know you will, Colette. So does your mother. She's counting on it, I'm sure." He cleared his throat, trying and failing at subtlety as he wiped his eyes.

"Well!" He clapped his hands together, looking away. "I think this old man is awake far past his bedtime. Goodnight, dear. I love you."

"I love you too, Father."

He stooped out of the room, the door swinging shut behind him. Before it latched, however, his head poked back into the room.

"I almost forgot, I ran into Kteis at the Keep today. She said she has something important to discuss with you. No-" he cut her off as a question formed on her lips. "It isn't about the entrance exams. Something about the orphan you two have been watching."

An excited buzz formed in her chest, a current of electric anticipation. Kteis was Colette's Arcanist mentor, although at this point they were more colleagues than teacher and pupil. That was one of the things she appreciated about the woman. She had recognized Colette's talents from a young age and was quick to stop treating her like a novice.

"Oh, and Colette?"

"Hmm?" she hummed, her mind already wandering to the orphan in question.

"Please tell young Doxam to go home. I would hate to inform his mother he was standing around outside my house all night."