

The Patron

There was no way Cleo could have known it would start with an email. Worse yet, it had started on a Tuesday.

It was a regular Tuesday, for better or worse. Cleo would have preferred anything else than a regular day at school. Tuesdays were the worst of all since most of her friends were in classes while she was stuck in study hall. With no one else to talk to, she logged into her email on the school computer. If nothing else, she could pretend that something new would be in her inbox. As it happened, there was. It was an email she'd never seen before: no name, no address, an icon of some kind of symbol. She didn't even remember opening it when the message popped up on her screen.

"Dear Miss Cleo Jones," the message said, "you are to take the entrance exam to Terian's School for Young Warlocks. Your assigned patron will be contacting you shortly to provide you with more details."

Cleo rolled her eyes at the junk mail, but at least it wasn't going to infect her email. She deleted it and looked up at the clock. Fourteen minutes left until lunch and she could see her friends again. It would be a relief to be with other—

"You got plans for that clock?"

Cleo turned quickly and saw a young woman sitting on the computer table. She had long, green hair that hung like fine moss and bits of lichen growing under her eyes. The dress she was wearing was a deep green of leaves and accented with a myriad of bird feathers and what looked like real bugs crawling around the seams. Her eyes were such a deep blue that Cleo wondered how the girl could see and there were no pupils. She almost didn't realize that she was staring until the girl snapped her fingers and brought Cleo out of her trance.

"Are you deaf? I can work with deaf, but I don't want to waste my time talking if you can't even hear it."

"I...what?"

"Oh good! You can hear me!" The girl smiled, unfolding her long, spidery limbs and standing over seven feet tall. No one else in the room reacted to the tower, slender woman that was dominating the computer lab. "I am Argona," the woman bowed, almost bending in half so her

nose almost touched the floor, “and I am your patron!”

“Me...what?”

“Miss Jones,” a bored lab supervisor said. “If you need to make a phone call, please take it during lunch...”

“Perfect!” Argona grinned, hopping up and down. “We’ll make an example of this one. Shall we turn him into an animal? Maybe a nice tree? I know that redwoods aren’t local to the area, but it would be such a great honor to have a redwood where there aren’t supposed to be any!”

“Bathroom?” Cleo asked, looking around Argona to meet his eye. The teacher nodded and Cleo rushed out of the room with her backpack.

“Wait!” Argona scrambled after her, striding over tables and chairs. “Wait for me!”

Cleo rushed to the bathroom and locked the door. She checked under the stalls to make sure she was alone before turning on the faucet and splashing her face with water. She figured it was stress. She hadn’t slept a lot last night and she’d eaten questionable eggs this morning. Maybe it was just her overactive imagination. As she rubbed under her eyes, a stall door opened and Argona strode, brushing off her dress, but carefully avoiding the bugs. “Always such a rush, you young people!”

“What is this?” Cleo asked, waving her hands. “Who are you?”

“Didn’t you get the invitation?” Argona asked. She sighed and clapped her hands together. She pulled her hands apart and unfurled a long scroll with Cleo’s email address at the top. “Are you Cleo Jones?”

“Yes, but—“

“And this is your electrical mail...thingy?”

“Well, yeah—“

“Then you should have read the invitation!” Argona snapped, clapping her hands together again before Cleo could skim the message. “You have your entrance exam in seven days and I won’t have one of my warlocks miss out on an opportunity to be great!”

“Great?” Cleo asked, almost laughing. “I don’t even have my driver’s license yet!”

“Something we can fix, for sure!” Argona said. “Firstly, we need to get the paperwork squared away.”

Argona reached back into the stall and dropped a tall stack of paper documents in front of Cleo on the bathroom counter. A bright blue beetle skittered across the pages, dragging a bird's feather and trailing ink along the top page. Cleo skimmed the top page, reading a few passages aloud. "The warlock, known hereafter as Cleo, will be bound to the entity, known hereafter as Argona...exchange of loyalties and amicability...exchange of magic for—oath offerings?"

"And you're lucky you got me," Argona folded her arms. "Some warlocks get stuck with one of those elder entities who are all blood and gore...so unsettling! Me, I make you plant a tree every so often and we call it a deal. Oh! And you have to be nice to me, of course!"

"Wait, magic?"

"Did you—? Come on, Cleo, this was in the invitation! Don't you know what a warlock is?"

"No?"

Argona sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. "OK," Argona said, "let's take it from the top. You've been invited to take the entrance exam for the most prestigious magical school in modern history. I am your patron and you are my warlock. I give you magic in exchange for your oath offerings. The more you do for me, the more I do for you. Keeping up so far?"

"I...think so?" Cleo said, furrowing her brow as she flipped through the pages of the massive contract. "I just don't want to sign away something when I can't understand half of this legalese!"

"Fine!" Argona grumbled, annoyed. "The quick and dirty way..."

Argona reached forward and touched Cleo's forehead with her index finger. Cleo almost swatted her hand away, but a calming warmth washed over her. It felt like she'd had her first sip of morning coffee mixed with a slight tingle at the base of her skull. She blinked a couple of times and Argona dropped her hand.

"First one's on the house," Argona said, sitting on the counter. "But you owe me a flower...or some nice moss, at least!"

Cleo turned back to the contract and read the opening paragraphs again. What had previously been a confusing jumble of legal ramblings became clear. She read through it all for the remainder of her study hall as Argona picked under her nails with a bit of a twig. After a while, Cleo reached the end of the contract and the beetle nudged her hand with the pen.

“So...why me?”

“I think you are far too talented not to take the exam,” Argona said. “You are a rare girl, Cleo Jones. And I want to help you hone that talent. Because for every entity like me, there’s one that prefers offerings of blood and violence. So, you need to ask yourself: What would it be worth to save everyone you care about?”

Cleo looked at the contract again. The power still thrummed in her head, almost vibrating in her brain. She wanted more, but she didn’t know what the price would be.

“I don’t want to hurt anyone,” Cleo said. “None of that turning people into trees or animals stuff.”

“I can’t promise the same treatment from the more...violent entities and their warlocks.”

“You said you wanted me? That’s my condition. No one gets hurt if I can avoid it. You give me the power and teach me how to use it, but I decide what to do with it.”

Argona folded her arms, her mouth fighting whether to smile or scowl beneath her pure blue eyes. Finally, she allowed herself a grin and touched the contract. The ink shifted and Cleo read it again, ensuring that the proper changes were made. When she finished reading, the beetle presented the quill again. Cleo took the pen and wrote her name on the last page of the contract. Argona touched the last line of the contract and her name blossomed in a fine curl of moss that formed her signature.

“Also,” Cleo said, “more of a comfort thing? This whole...Queen of the Amazons look has gotta go.”

“You don’t like how I look?” Argona frowned. “I am known in the forests as Argona the Resplendent!”

“And you are,” Cleo said, “but it would be easier to talk to each other—and gain the very important bond for an exchange—if we were a little more...equal? I don’t like looking up at people who are my friends.”

“Well,” Argona frowned. “It might make it easier to walk through your small world.”

Argona folded her arms and closed her eyes. The insects that crawled around her dress all spread their wings and fluttered around her in a whirlwind. The dress unraveled into a cyclone of feathers and leaves. When the hurricane settled, Argona was closer to Cleo’s five foot nine inches

and wearing clothes that Cleo might wear on a hike. Argona's eyes were still pure blue, but she tucked her wild green hair into a dark, golden yellow beanie.

"Better?" Argona asked, adjusting her hat.

"It'll work," Cleo said. "Can other people see you or just me?"

"Just you," Argona said, unlocking the door and opening it. "Lucky duck! Now, let's go!"

"Where?"

"We have four days for you to learn magic!" Argona said, leading Cleo through the bustling halls as everyone went to lunch. "And we can't afford to waste any time here!"