



The Snake (Messenger of Fear 1.50)

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Category: Paranormal, Fantasy, Young Adult, Mystery, Horror

Description: The Messenger and Mara witness a crime. Someone is dead. Someone has to pay. But when they travel back through space and time to uncover the truth, they come to learn that two people had wicked intentions. They had seen an act of revenge. In a twisted web of lust and vengeance, only Mara, as Messenger's apprentice, can decide who will play a game for redemption.

Two wrongs don't make a right. . . . Only one will pay the ultimate price.

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THE FACTS WERE THESE: A TWENTY-SIX-YEAR-OLD woman named Lisa Bayless was dead. The cause of her death had been officially listed as “anaphylaxis caused by severe allergic reaction.”

The specific cause was shrimp.

Shrimp.

Lisa Bayless had died of shrimp. Case closed, as far as the coroner, the police, and even Lisa’s family were concerned.

She left behind a grieving husband, a three-year-old son named Abel, and a number of very sad students at Hayfield Secondary School in Alexandria, Virginia. Lisa Bayless was a good history teacher; everyone said so, and they said it even before her tragic death, although they said it more frequently now that she was gone and no longer able to assign homework.

“I don’t understand,” I told Messenger. I was grumpy because he had come to my abode—I can’t call it home, and I can barely refer to it as mine—when I was just falling asleep. My eyes were literally closing, weighed down by a long day of work with Messenger.

He appeared outside my bedroom and knocked softly but insistently on my door. Softly enough that it wouldn’t make me jump, but with sufficient confidence and persistence that I knew I could not ignore him.

Not that I could conceivably ignore Messenger. I don't think anyone who has met him has ever ignored him.

First, Messenger is idiosyncratically dressed in a long black coat over a steel-gray shirt and black pants, and he wears tall boots. Thus far he might seem merely eccentric, or perhaps stylish. But then you notice that his buttons are small silver skulls. And then, now that you are looking with some focus, you see the rings.

The ring on his right hand is in the shape of a stately female figure who holds a sword. This is Isthil, goddess of justice and wickedness. This detail, along with his odd mode of dress, definitely draws your attention.

But it's the other ring, the one on his left hand, that causes your attention to go from wary curiosity to real nervousness. For this is the ring of the shrieking face. It renders in silver the face of a young person screaming, face distorted, eyes bulging in abject terror.

And then there is the fact that Messenger is as beautiful as any male person I have ever seen or imagined. His hair is long and black, and his skin—the visible parts—is pale. His eyes are blue and perhaps judgmental—yes, judgmental—but not pitiless, though Messenger's duties often require him to inflict punishments the likes of which no civilized government would ever allow.

Here is what I know about Messenger: He is, or at least was, human. He has a name, something other than Messenger, but I know not what it is. He is perhaps the least talkative person I have ever met.

His full title is Messenger of Fear. I am Mara, and I am apprentice to this Messenger of Fear.

"Isn't it late? Or early?" I was confused. There are no timepieces in this abode; even

the display on the microwave just blinks an eternal 00:00.

“We are summoned to our duty,” Messenger said.

This is the kind of sharing, giving, easygoing relationship we have. He says words like duty without a hint of ironic distance. And I suppose the truth is that I have come to have a similar attitude. I have certain duties. These are punishment duties, ones I took on voluntarily—a punishment I deserved.

So I wasn’t going to argue. I was, however, going to look grumpy. I reserve the right not to enjoy everything duty requires of me.

Messenger filled me in on the basic facts—the public facts, at least.

“So she had a severe shrimp allergy and she ate a shrimp. That’s a mistake, not a deliberate evil act.”

“Not if someone gave her the shrimp knowing it would make her sick and quite possibly kill her,” Messenger said.

“Ah.” I thought for a moment, but had not yet had my morning (evening? midday?) coffee, so my capacity for reason was not at its peak. I started a pot. “But allergies like that hit fast. So the coroner would know what was in her stomach and thus what had killed her.”

“Indeed. The answer was chocolate.”

“Chocolate shrimp?”

“Shrimp inside a chocolate.”

This unappetizing thought stopped me from insisting on breakfast. I did, however, drink my coffee. I took it black because he did, or maybe just because in this world I now inhabited, cream and sugar seemed trivial. We had very serious business, and somehow I felt that demanded black coffee.

I had managed four blessed sips before Messenger relocated us. Messengers are given certain powers that they are to use only in pursuit of their duty, which is a very good limit to impose, since among those powers is the ability to move effortlessly from place to place, and even from time to time.

Thus did I find myself in a two-story brick Colonial in a pleasant but not wealthy suburban neighborhood in Alexandria, which is just outside Washington, DC.

I saw a woman with straight blond hair parted in the middle—a cadaverously thin woman, but not anorexic, more just like one of those people who are very into exercise. She had a high, intelligent forehead and wore oval glasses.

She was alone, in a tiny home office, hunched over a laptop, in the act of reading what looked like essays. To her right was an open box of See's Candies. About half the box was gone, and my first thought was to wonder how this woman could manage to be this thin with such an appetite for sweets. I admit the idea made me jealous.

Understand that Messenger and I were not visible or audible to Lisa Bayless. And the office was so cramped that Messenger and I stood with half our bodies literally inside the wall, so that only our faces, chests, and hands were in the room. Understand as well that yes, this was extremely weird for me, but I was slowly adjusting to the oddness of my occupation, and since I had moved through solid objects before, this was merely a new wrinkle on an existing weirdness.

As we watched, Lisa reached without taking her eyes off the screen, fumbled for and then found a roundish dark chocolate, and popped it into her mouth.

She chewed, then made a face, obviously tasting something odd, something unexpected. But then she continued working for another few minutes.

And then, I saw her mouth working as though she was still tasting something unpleasant. She felt her lips with her tongue, and then touched her fingers to her lips, and all at once: panic.

Lisa leaped up from her chair, pushed open the door, and raced through the kitchen. But by the time she reached the stairs she was wheezing, and her face was puffy, as if her skin was a balloon being slowly inflated.

Halfway up the stairs she tripped and gasped, and her face turned pink. She sucked air with all her might but nothing came. Yet she climbed and turned onto the upper landing. But now walking, let alone running, was no longer possible. Still, she crawled, hands and knees along the carpeted hallway, into the master bedroom, and from there across the tile of her bathroom floor.

The medicine cabinet was above her, and she was desperate by this point, desperate and terrified. Her eyes were squeezing shut, and I don't believe that by the time she managed to drag herself to her feet she could see at all. It was with blind fumbling that she ransacked the medicine cabinet, knocking pill bottles and toothpaste onto the floor.

I saw the moment when she realized that what she was looking for was not there.

"An EpiPen," I muttered. "She's looking for an EpiPen, the injectable adrenaline you keep if you're severely allergic."

Messenger said nothing. When words are not absolutely necessary, Messenger does not like

to spend them.

I have by now seen death, most terribly the suicide of Samantha Early. This death lacked the blood and gore of that earlier one, but no amount of exposure can ever really prepare you for the terrible sight of a human being dying before your eyes.

I looked away. I heard rather than saw her slip to the floor. I heard grunted efforts at breathing. I heard a surrendering moan. And when I looked again, Lisa Bayless, history teacher, was dead.

Perhaps ten minutes had passed.

“Someone put that shrimp in that chocolate,” I said, because unlike Messenger, I will occasionally say the obvious. Perhaps it’s a weakness on my part; I can be verbose, but I find that putting awful events into words makes them more manageable. It gives me a little distance.

I did not know this woman, but she was a human being, a human being with life yet to live. And now her life had been stolen from her.

“Murder,” I said. “But how . . . Her family would have seen the chocolates and . . .” I frowned, trying to work it out. But Messenger has more direct means of explaining events. He walked away and I followed.

We walked back through the bedroom, down the hallway, and down the stairs.

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We stood in the empty foyer. I had time enough to look at the usual family pictures hung on the wall. Lisa and her husband. Lisa and her son.

And then, a key turned the front-door lock, and in stepped a boy.

He was perhaps my age, sixteen, or close enough. I think he was good-looking, though constant exposure to Messenger has raised my standards in that regard. But good-looking by normal standards.

He wore a Lorde T-shirt, and I approved since I like her music. He carried a canvas bag slung over one shoulder. He closed the door behind him and stood, listening, wary.

He then went room by room, through the kitchen, the living room, the breakfast nook, and last, the tiny office.

He stared, transfixed, at the box of chocolates.

Then, his face alight with an expression of excitement and fear, he continued searching until he found Lisa's cooling body. He stared at her for a while, too, but made no move to touch her, no move to help; and he did not call 911.

Instead he pulled latex gloves from his bag and put them on. He ripped a paper towel from a roll on the bathroom counter, knelt down, and clumsily wiped the inside of her mouth with it. The paper towel came out brown with chocolate and wet with saliva. He stuck the towel in a plastic ziplock, which went into his bag.

The boy looked in the bag, found what he was looking for, and pulled out the last thing I would have expected: an egg roll. This he stuck into Lisa's mouth, and twisted it in half to leave part of it in her mouth. He took her jaw and moved it up and down, back and forth, in a macabre chewing motion.

Now he put the rest of the egg roll in his bag and trotted downstairs to the kitchen. From his bag he pulled out a box of spring rolls no different from those you'd find in any supermarket. The box had been opened. He stuck it in the freezer.

The second half of the egg roll he placed on a small plate, carried it to the office, and set it beside the box of chocolates.

Any person looking at the scene would see clear evidence that Lisa had been eating an egg roll and chocolate.

"Very clever," I said. "But if she was allergic to shrimp, why would she have bought shrimp egg rolls?"

"She didn't. The ingredients will show no shrimp listed. But the box does not match the contents. Thus the obvious explanation is that the egg roll company made a mistake, boxing its shrimp rolls in a package meant for a less dangerous product. The producer will be seen as responsible."

"Very clever," I said again. "But who is he? And why is he doing this? And how did he get a key to the front door?"

"He does not have a key, but he knows where the spare key is kept. And his name is Barton Jones. As to why . . ."

I should be used to it by now, but it's still unsettling to find yourself in a completely different place at a completely different time. It had been day. Now it was night. And

this was not a home but a hotel room.

I walked over to a window and looked out, but the street scene didn't tell me very much. The flyer on the desk did: Hilton Hotel, Boston.

Lisa was in the bed watching TV. She had a glass of wine in her hand and a mostly empty bottle on the nightstand. There was a knock at the door, and with a puzzled look she went to answer it. Framed in the doorway was Barton Jones.

"Hey, Mrs. Bayless."

"What's up there, Barton?" She slurred her words slightly, and the boy noticed. He also noticed that she was wearing a hotel robe and that the robe was not entirely closed.

"Um, the kids were asking what time we had to be ready in the morning," he said.

Lisa saw him looking where he should not have looked, and her hand jerked toward the opening of her robe . . . and then dropped back to her side.

"Eight a.m.," she said.

"Good wine?" he asked, nodding at the glass.

"Good enough. You like wine?"

He shrugged. "I won't know unless I try some."

She hesitated, and even glanced down the hotel hallway, which was empty. "Well, you're old enough to try just a sip," she said.

She turned away and walked slowly back toward the bed. “Close the door,” she said.

He seemed a little unsure whether she meant he should close it from the outside . . . or from inside. Now he glanced down the hallway, slipped inside, and shut the door behind him.

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“I think I see where this is going,” I said, curling my lip in distaste.

“Yes,” Messenger agreed.

We did not stay for what came next. Nor did we pursue a greater understanding of just how this illegal relationship—if you can call the seduction of a child by an adult a relationship—progressed. I was not familiar with the laws of Massachusetts, but in California we called it rape.

Yes, society treats it differently when a woman is the adult, but a crime it is; and though he smirked and went very willingly, this boy was still just a boy, not a man.

Messenger and I discreetly left the room.

“They’re on a class trip,” I said, figuring it out as I spoke. “She’s one of the chaperones. I suppose things became less, um, um . . . cooperative?” That wasn’t quite the right word, but I didn’t know how to describe it.

Without any sense of movement or the passage of time, we were back in Lisa’s bedroom in her home.

A shirtless Barton and a barely covered Lisa were arguing.

“This is bs,” Barton was saying heatedly.

“It is not bs,” she shot back. “Your paper is still due. I may be your lover, but I’m also your teacher. And if you don’t hand in your paper, on time, I have no choice but

to flunk you.”

And there it was: motive.

The argument went on for a while, round and round in increasingly acrimonious circles, until at last Lisa said, “My husband will be home soon; you have to get out of here.”

“He murdered her over a history paper?” I asked, incredulous, and since the two of them were still shouting not five feet from where I stood, the urge to demand an explanation of both of them was hard to resist.

But that time was not yet, and in any case, it doesn’t matter much. She had molested a minor. He had committed murder.

It is our duty as Messengers (and apprentices to same) to understand what has happened. And so we spent some time sifting through the details of her life and his. I suppose each had their reasons or excuses, but neither had an excuse that amounted to excusing the rape of a minor or cold-blooded murder.

Lisa had paid for her crime. Barton had not.

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WE FOUND BARTON AT SCHOOL. HE WAS WORKING his way with swift confidence through a precalc test. It seemed he preferred math to history. At least his math teacher was still alive.

Messenger froze the class. It took Barton a few minutes to realize that no one around him was moving. He glanc

ed left, glanced right, frowned at the teacher, who sat frozen, bending down to take something from a low bookshelf. And finally, he turned in his seat and saw us.

I don't know what he thought at that moment; we were obviously not the police, but a guilty conscience is a powerful thing, so he leaped to his feet, scattering the test paper and pencils, and made a dash toward the door.

The door did not open. He tugged and twisted the knob, kicked at it, and finally, shoulders slumped, turned to face us.

“Who are you?” Barton demanded.

“Barton Jones,” Messenger said, “you have done wrong. You must first acknowledge the wrong, and then you must atone.”

Barton's brown eyes darted to the left, then the right, and lingered on the windows, as if he might be preparing to jump. Out there the day was gray and overcast but must have looked like a better bet than standing around waiting for Messenger to explain. But in the end he calculated that it was hopeless and went back to asking belligerent questions.

“Who are you? What are you doing? What the hell, man?”

“This wrong you have committed demands punishment. I offer you a game. If you win, you will go free, unbothered by me or my apprentice.”

Barton blinked. “What the hell? This is bull, man. This is not right. I don't even know what you're talking about.”

“We're talking about murder,” I said.

That got his full and undivided attention. “You’re crazy. I didn’t murder anyone! You mean Mrs. Bayless, right? Yeah, well, that wasn’t me, she wasn’t even murdered, she just ate a bad shrimp.”

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Messenger waited patiently as Barton denied with increasing vehemence and a lot of repetition, before saying, “I offer you a game. You must accept or reject the offer.”

“I don’t must do a damn thing!”

“If you do not answer, it will be assumed that you have rejected the game and are choosing to go ahead with punishment.” Messenger had, by this point in his life as a Messenger of Fear, encountered every kind of denial. He heard nothing unusual here. Barton started another round of angry denials and then Messenger said, “I give you seven seconds. Seven. Six.”

Barton looked imploringly at me. I suppose I looked less intimidating than Messenger. “What is this? You people have no right to go around—”

“Five. Four.”

“If you say yes, you may escape punishment,” I said. I don’t know why I urged him to play. I dreaded the appearance of the Master of the Game. And I harbored no goodwill toward Barton. He had been poorly used, abused indeed, exploited. But the punishment for molestation is not death. And if it were, then that punishment would have to come from a court of law.

Barton could have gone to his parents. He could have gone to a school counselor. He could have simply gone straight to the police by picking up a phone and calling 911.

He had done none of those things. Instead he had ruthlessly plotted murder.

“Three. Two.”

“I’ll play!” he shouted. Then, almost as an afterthought, “What is the punishment supposed to be?”

“The very worst thing you can imagine,” I said.

His eyes narrowed, and I knew he was running through a catalog of fears in his mind. But here is what I have learned: people are seldom consciously aware of their deepest fear. It is in the nature of most minds to avoid the worst fears, to wall them off, to ignore them and instead imagine that only more benign things can ever occur.

Barton did not know what he feared, but if he lost the game, I would know that fear. I would drag that fear into daylight.

“I summon the Master of the Game,” Messenger said.

He arrived preceded by a yellow mist, a mist the color of urine, a vile, sentient mist that can close around you, make it hard to breathe, and whisper wordlessly of dread. The mist blanketed the dozen students and the frozen teacher and formed a rough circle around the three of us. I could feel rather than see that the classroom was extending, spreading out to make room for the Master of the Game and whatever game he had brought with him.

He has a flair for the dramatic, the Game Master. And he did not disappoint.

I won’t go into describing the hideous guises in which I had previously seen this creature, but will confine myself to telling what I saw on this day at this time and place.

He did not so much emerge from the yellow mist as form himself from it. Tendrils of

that diseased cloud swirled to the center, twisted around like a small tornado, and slowly solidified into something that might be flesh and was very definitely blood.

He was roughly human in shape—two arms, two legs, and a head—but was taller than any human outside of the NBA. And from the top of his head, blood flowed down to coat his entire body in red gore. It was as if he were a sort of volcano, with a caldera opening the crown of his head, with the viscous red slicking down across his face and down his neck, and spreading across every inch of him.

I had steeled myself; I thought I had prepared myself, yet I took a step back and turned my face away and cast my eyes to one side, seeking the reassurance of Messenger's calm face. I had been prepared for a creature of horror, but the smell, that primal, salty smell of blood, massive quantities of human blood, that smell . . .

I did not faint. I did not vomit. Both threatened, but by looking away until the gag reflex was lessened, I avoided shaming myself.

Yet when I turned back, jaw set, muscles all clenched, I saw still worse, for the Master of the Game is never truly singular but comes with other creatures attached, an infestation almost, a sort of ant colony that crawled and swam against the eternal flow of blood.

Not ants of course, but tiny human creatures, men and women, young and old, all of the same race now, a red, red race.

I had avoided disgracing myself. Barton did not. I smelled urine and vomit and yes, indeed, young Barton Jones had collapsed on the floor and was whimpering. No trace of the cool, calculating killer could be seen on that tearstained, vomit-flecked face.

Those with tender hearts would probably imagine that mere exposure to the Master of the Game constituted punishment enough. But while Messengers of Fear may have

their own individual emotions, including compassion, their duty is not to bend the world toward mercy, but to correct the balance that is harmed when terrible crimes go unpunished.

As for the Master of the Game, whether he is unique or one of several of his ilk, there is no pity within him.

Upon completing his dramatic and mind-shattering appearance, the Master of the Game asked in a voice like corpses speaking, “You summon me, Messenger?”

“This is Barton Jones, a murderer. He has chosen to play the game.”

Barton did not voice an objection to being called a murderer. I doubt very much he was capable of speech at all.

I heard tiny cries and choking sounds coming from the creatures that swam and crawled and drowned in the blood that flowed down the Game Master’s form.

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“The game is this,” said the Master of the Game. “I shall summon twenty-one creatures. You must cut the head completely from each one and fill that bag”—whereupon a large canvas sack appeared—“and complete this gruesome task within five minutes. If you do this, you will have won. If you lack even one head, you will have lost and be subject to punishment.”

“What?” Barton asked pitiably. He looked to me, eyes drowning in tears. “What is happening to me? You have to help me. Can’t you help me? Call my mom. I want my mom!”

I knew to remain silent.

Beside the sack now lay a machete. I looked meaningfully at the machete, hoping Barton would get the clue and ready himself for the game. But he was unprepared when the first of the creatures appeared.

And oh, oh, oh, the cunning creativity, the wicked sadism of the Game Master. For the creatures that ran one by one, screaming from the mist, were very much like pigs, with one essential difference: each had Lisa Bayless’s head.

Barton made no move to attack the first Lisa pig until that monstrosity, that violation of nature’s laws, attacked him, snapping at him with his erstwhile teacher’s teeth and emitting the outraged squeals of a pig.

Only after suffering numerous bites, and only after wasting thirty seconds on the big clock that conveniently hovered in the air just before the chalkboard, did Barton seize the machete and, with a scream of rage and frustration, hack at the animal’s neck.

The first blow was poorly aimed and bit into the pig's back, eliciting squeals of pain. Barton had risen to weakened legs and seemed already to be at the end of his strength. Yet he drew back the machete and aimed his next blow more carefully.

It took three tries before he managed to hack the head free and drop it into the sack. Whereupon the second creature came rushing at him.

For a while Barton managed. He hacked and swore, hacked and cried, hacked with snot running from his nose to join the blood that soon covered him.

He reached thirteen heads, but for him the end came with a full minute left on the clock. He just stopped, sank to the ground, sitting in a puddle of gore, and dropped the machete.

He sat weeping, dull eyed, destroyed before the game even ended.

Murder is not so easy when it is face-to-face. Murder is not so easy when you must nearly drown in the blood you shed.

"Have I performed my duty, Messenger of Isthil?" the Master of the Game asked.

"You have. You may withdraw."

The Game Master departed more quickly than he had arrived, perhaps rushing off to test some other wicked person's courage.

"Now, Barton Jones, you will endure the Piercing," Messenger said. "Mara."

I had hoped somehow that it might be Messenger who took on the Piercing, but of course Messenger's time was drawing slowly to a close, while mine was just beginning. I had to learn, to grow into this hideous duty.

I drew Barton, unresisting, to his feet. I moved behind him, reached around, and placed one hand over his heart and the other against his blood-slicked head.

I could feel his heart beating. I could feel the spasms of silent sobs. I glanced at Messenger as though he might yet spare me, but I saw only calm patience in those blue eyes.

Thus, I dived deep within Barton's mind.

It is an almost impossible experience to convey. There is nothing like it in ordinary life, in which the mind is an inviolate sanctuary where others may not intrude. Words fail, because how can you describe what has no counterpart in human experience?

I could say that his fears were like rats fleeing from a flashlight's beam, perhaps, but that is only an inadequate analogy.

I pursued those fears, sensing them one by one, reading their intensity, dismissing the weaker ones, searching always for the darkest place where the last and greatest rat would hide trembling.

At last, knowing my answer, hating that knowledge, hating what I had seen and learned, and hating most what my duty now required, I rose from his mind and drew my red hands away.

"He has one fear greater than all others," I said.

"What is that fear?" Messenger asked solemnly.

"He once saw a YouTube video of a monkey being eaten by a python," I said. "The image has terrified him ever since. The monkey was alive." I hesitated. "The monkey

took a very long time to be slowly, inexorably crushed and finally consumed.”

“What?” This word was a sob. “What? What? WHAT? WHAT?”

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Panic set in and Barton tried to run, but found his feet would not move.

Now Messenger drew a black hood from the pocket of his coat and pulled it over his head so that his face was shadowed and only his mouth could be seen as he said, “You have lost the game. So now, in the name of Isthil and the balance She maintains, I summon the Hooded Wraiths and charge them to carry out the sentence.”

The wraiths lack the Master of the Game’s drama and imagination, appearing simply as tall, hooded shapes, without any opening for a face, without anything visible beyond their sinister clothing. What was beneath that hood? I prayed I would never learn.

They stood before the weeping boy, and one waved a hand above the deepest part of the pool of blood. From that blood it rose, a triangular head as large as a football, slitted eyes incapable of feeling, empty of soul, and then scale upon scale, foot after foot, until the snake, perhaps twelve feet long, lay writhing and twisting, its malevolent gaze focused on its collapsing prey.

“No,” Barton begged. “No, no, this is wrong, you can’t do this. There are laws! You can’t . . . I’ll confess! I’ll go to the cops! I swear to God, I will go to the cops, I’ll tell them everything!”

“That’s what you should have done,” I muttered, angry at him not just for the murder he had committed, but for causing me to endure this helpless witnessing of his agony.

“I’ll do it! I swear, I’ll do it!”

But the serpent was with us, the punishment had been decreed, and there was no hope of escape.

With liquid speed the snake whipped its tail around Barton's legs and pulled him to the ground. That tail held like a rope, indifferent to his kicks, indifferent to his cries.

Then the python's mouth unhinged, allowing that baleful jaw to extend, to widen. Large enough at last to swallow both his feet at the same time.

I saw the feet still kicking, bulging through the scaled skin below the snake's head.

Barton screamed now, no words, just screams. His hands were free, and he pounded on the snake's head; but aside from a few insolent blinks, the snake did not pay his efforts any notice, but pulsed obscenely and drew the boy deeper, up to his knees.

From there to his thighs took perhaps five long, long minutes. Barton's voice was ragged, blown out, a hoarse, rasping, animal sound.

I would not have thought that serpent's jaw could widen any farther, but this is a species able to swallow small cows, given time, so widen it did; and now the snake's teeth were biting into Barton's waist, undulating up and down its length to gorge itself on the living boy.

No human with a shred of humanity within her could possibly watch this without sickening, and I am still only human. I lost the contents of my stomach, retching violently in response to all the chemicals a body releases upon seeing the intolerable.

"We have to stop this," I whispered to Messenger. "It isn't right."

Messenger said nothing.

“It . . . hurts,” Barton managed to say. “I . . . can’t breathe.”

Those were the last words he spoke, for now the snake had his chest, and Barton’s breathing was shallow and desperate. With each exhalation the snake tightened its grip, so that each breath shortened the next.

3

I PRAYED THEN TO MY OWN GOD, NOT TO ISTHIL who I served and despised, but to the God in whom I still believed and hoped was watching, for it all to end.

But there was no succor for Barton Jones, who had murdered.

The snake had swallowed Barton’s entire length with only the head and arms still free.

He looked at me then, Barton did, with eyes that no longer pleaded for mercy but simply needed to see something human and real. I think he believed my face would be the last thing he would ever see.

His body was now a huge bulge in the snake’s body, but he no longer writhed or kicked. The blood was being squeezed from his lower body, and the air from his lungs.

Then, with a final powerful undulation of that snake’s whole twelve-foot length, Barton Jones was gone.

The snake closed its jaws over fingers, and suddenly, without a sound or a warning, it was gone.

Barton Jones lay now on the clean tile floor of his classroom. He was not covered in blood. He was not covered in the bodily fluids that had been squeezed from him. He merely lay, a boy, barely breathing, eyes squeezed shut, motionless and silent.

I knew he was not dead. I knew that all of it had been an illusion. But when an illusion can be seen and smelled and tasted and touched, it ceases to be something even the strongest mind can resist believing.

The snake was real to Barton Jones. It was real to me.

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I felt dirty and ashamed. I was sick in ways that went far beyond a queasy stomach. What I had witnessed had been an atrocity. The fact that Barton Jones was a murderer, that justice demanded punishment for him, or even that this worst of fears was the product of his own imagination did nothing to lessen my own sense of the savagery of this punishment.

Was this truly the price Isthil demanded? Then She was a savage, barbaric creature.

And yet I served Her. As did Messenger.

Daniel was with us; Daniel, that deceptively average young man in the jeans and hoodie.

“Barton Jones,” Messenger said, “your punishment is completed. The balance that you disturbed with your wicked deed has been righted. You are free to go.”

Had I had within me any remaining vestige of humor, I might have laughed. Free to go. He would never be free of this memory, and neither would I.

But was he so destroyed that he had permanently lost his mind? Would he find within himself the strength to go on?

Daniel was watching Messenger, as he does, knowing that Messenger himself has been pushed as far and perhaps further than any feeling creature could endure.

Messenger removed the black hood and stuffed it into his pocket. His face shone with perspiration. He was breathing hard, as was I, almost as if it were we two who had

endured Barton's agony of body and mind.

"Rise if you are able," Daniel said to Barton.

Barton's eyes flicked open. I believe he may have briefly lost consciousness, which could only have been a good thing for him.

He woke screaming in that same ragged, blown-out croak.

Daniel and Messenger and I waited. None of us could help Barton. He was on the cusp between going on with whatever he could now make of his life and being taken away to the Shoals, that mysterious place about which I knew only that the wicked who have been driven mad by their punishment will have a bare possibility of recovering, or else will live out their days in halls echoing with nightmare shouts and mad laughter.

We waited, because we are patient, we who serve the harsh goddess

Isthil.

Slowly, slowly, trembling like an old man with palsy, Barton drew his legs beneath him, came to a crawling position on hands and knees, and finally rose, shaking and weeping, to his feet.

"Good," Daniel said.

I saw relief in Messenger's eyes, and knew it shone from mine as well. Barton would survive.

Survive, but whether he could yet make something of his life, I was not to learn then.

“Are we done?” I demanded. And without waiting for an answer or permission, I left that place and returned instantly to my abode.

Some person or magical force unseen by me ensures that my abode is cleaned and stocked with food, and that my dirty clothes are washed and returned. That person or force does not stock my shelves with alcohol. I am not a drinker, but at that moment, with the silence echoing my every slight sound, I would have swallowed alcohol or anything else that would have blanked that memory.

But of course those who serve Isthil are never allowed to forget what they have done in Her service.

I stood before the mirror in my bedroom and waited.

I didn’t see it at first, for it formed on my right side, just where my waistband would be, concealed by my hanging arm.

But then I felt the tingle and the heat as the image appeared. I watched as it was outlined as if by an invisible artist. I watched as the shape became clear and as the livid colors filled in the sketched shape.

And at last, there it was: a boy’s face, contorted in terror, as the snake consumed him. The tattoo Isthil gives has an awful advantage over regular tattoos: it moves. Just a little, just barely enough to perceive, but on my flesh that snake’s body did pulse and writhe.

I had dressed myself by the time Messenger came.

I offered him a soda and took one myself.

“Tell me it’s true,” I said after a long silence had passed.

“What is your question?” he asked.

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“Tell me it’s true. Tell me that this is necessary. Tell me that we are not just carrying out the sadistic games of a cruel being.” When he said nothing, I went on. “Tell me it’s true and vital and that we are saving existence itself from extinction, Messenger. Even if it’s not true, tell me it is true.”

“It is true,” Messenger said.

The day would come when I would see Isthil myself. The day would come when I knew the truth of it all.

The day would never come when I would forget what I had seen, or forgive myself.

“Now I have a question,” Messenger said, surprising me. “For deliberate, calculated murder, what is the usual penalty?”

That caught me off guard. I frowned. “In some states it’s the death penalty. Otherwise it’s life in prison.”

“Yes,” Messenger said. “Death. And yet Barton Jones lives. Or life in prison. For a teenage boy with no great physical strength, no gang to protect him. Decades in a cage, being beaten, raped, degraded, possibly killed or driven to suicide. If Isthil’s justice is savage, what of human justice?”

I had no answer to that. Had I ever given a thought to those we throw into our medieval prisons? No. And given the choice for myself, would I endure what the Master of the Game and Messenger had inflicted on Barton rather than spend thirty or forty or fifty years in a cage?

Yes. Which still did not entirely put to rest my moral doubts.

I hoped Barton would find a way to move on with his life. He was a cold-blooded killer. He had been a victim, as well, of his teacher's predation. But that had not been his motive for murder.

He had murdered over homework.

He had murdered out of laziness.

We wield a great and terrible power, we Messengers of Fear and apprentices. That power is not a gift but a curse. And my duty, the unknown years of it that stretched before me, are a punishment for my own terrible deeds.

Messenger left then.

I don't know how long I stood and just stared blankly at my bare walls. Time has lost much of its meaning for me. Was it an hour? Was it a day?

But like Barton Jones, I now had to find within myself the will to go on. The Shoals could welcome me, too, if I let myself be destroyed by my duty.

I vowed never to let that happen. There was no snake, just as there had been no fire that consumed Derek Grady. All of it was illusion. I knew that. And for all I knew, the Master of the Game was illusion as well.

But terror is terror, whatever the source.

I knew that Lisa Bayless's terror had been as great, and though she deserved punishment, she had not deserved to die choking in her bathroom. Barton still had a life, however traumatized he was, but Lisa would be dead forever.

For me at that moment, no terror was greater than the knowledge that this wouldn't be the last of it for me. I was still only an apprentice. In time, all the weight of my despicable obligation would be on my shoulders alone.

Then two paths would be open to me. In time, I would cease to be Mara the apprentice. I would be the Messenger of Fear. And in that role I would either find a way to harden myself, and thus lose myself, or I would suffer unspeakable agonies in the pursuit of brutal justice, in service to a god that was not my God.

No third way was possible.

There was no escape. . . .

There was no way out for me. . . .

At least, none that I knew then.