

CHAPTER 7: SNAKES ON A CHAIN

by Paul Watson

Latitia Morn hurries through the brick buildings, fewer people here. She doesn't think anyone is following her, but that little voice is keeping her scared. She doesn't look over her shoulder to check. "Where is it? He said it would be..." she finally sees her destination and hurries a little faster towards the glass-fronted cafe, "Madame Eurayle's" in red cursive writing on the white board above.

Pushing on the glass door to the cafe gives a cheery bell ring, quite at odds with her mood. Even at this time, the tables are busy, burly men hunched over steaming cups of coffee and Greek treats. The woman behind the counter looks up, pursing her lips as she sees Latitia before a much more professional smile forces its way through. "What can I get for you?"

"Uhm, Stone said I should..."

The woman's eyes narrow sharply, "Sstone ssent you?" she hisses.

Latitia takes a step back, "He said you'd get me to safety."

"Of coursse he did. Diana!!"

A younger woman pokes her head through the doorway, her black outfit covered in a pale blue and white apron. "What? I'm trying to keep up with the cooking! Like you told me to!"

"Don't talk back. Take thiss...young lady to the ssafehouse. And then come right back here!"

"There? Are you..."

"Yess, I'm ssure. Right back! I don't want you getting into whatever trouble Sstone's caussing!"

"Got it." she yanks off the apron, "Come on, you." Latitia follows along, her shoulder devil admiring the way Diana walks, the sway of her long braids, whispering all sorts of ideas into Latitia's ear. Diana pulls a heavy brass key off the wooden frame near the door. "This way."

The bell out front rings. Mrs Eurayle looks up. A pair of policemen walk in, one tall, back straight, uniform pristine, the other shuffling after, crumpled, looking like they've just got up, stifling a yawn badly. "Madam," the tall one starts, crisply and confidently, staring down his nose, "have you seen this woman?" he thrusts a picture of Latitia out. Mrs Eurayle peers down at it and shakes her head.

"Let me try again. Look hard. She was seen coming into your cafe and has not been observed leaving it. So, do you recognise her?" Mrs Eurayle again calmly shakes her head. The stout policeman yawns. "You are aware she is wanted for murder? And that harbouring her would, in itself, be a criminal offence?"

"That iss an interessting picture. But I sstill don't recognise her. Doess anyone here recognise her?" she holds up the picture.

"She's clearly back there. Now, are you going to let me through, or are you going to keep up this stupid dago act, you cold-blooded snake?!"

The cafe goes silent. So quiet you could hear a pin drop so the scrape of chairs across the floor sounds incredibly loud. A shadow looms over the policemen, rugged hands like ham hocks resting on their shoulders. The taller policeman looks over his shoulder. The man towering over him has a thick mat of dark brown curls hanging around his broad shoulders and thick neck, falling over his forehead. A black bull's head is tattooed on his left biceps "She said she doesn't recognise that photo. It might be best if you went to find this woman, rather than trying to throw your weight around here. No?"

"Minoss..." Mrs Eurayle starts warningly.

"It's ok, Evi. We're just having a friendly discussion, like." There's a muffled slam from deeper in the building. "Now, did you hear that? If she was here, she's gone. Be a good little piggie and snuffle off somewhere else to find her. Before we add bacon to the menu."

"How dare you talk to..." The other officer nudges him, eyeing the not quite as large but more numerous men behind Minos. "Don't you think this is over!" the officer shouts as he departs, jabbing his finger.

Minos gives a snort and turns back to his black coffee.

Out back, Diana grabs Latitia's hand and leads her back into the main streets, "Don't look around. It's suspicious. Don't run. We're just two girls out walking. Nothing to see here. So, why are you here?"

"Stone sent me..." she replies, trying to ignore the heat in her face.

"I heard that. Why?"

"Why did he send me?"

"Why are you in trouble at all?"

"They think I killed someone."

Diana stops dead, "Did you?"

"No! Of course not!"

"Ok. I believe you." she starts up again, her hand closed around Latitia's, "By the way, there are two cops following us. Don't look. Walk a bit faster. Still no running."

"Hey, you two, stop!"

"Ok. Now we run." she starts running, jerking Latitia into motion. Diana pulls them down a sidestreet and skids to a stop, a chain link fence stretching across the exit, "When did they start work down here? Fuck. We'll have to..." they turn, and the policemen are blocking the narrow passageway. Well, one of them is, a hulk of a man squeezed into a uniform that seems more than one size too small, his face beet red in a snarl. The other is crouched behind him, his wide green eyes shining like emeralds, thin and reedy, barely taller than his companion's chest.

"Oh, don't leave so soon. I was so looking forward to making your acquaintance." he fingers a bright yellow taser. "I don't suppose you'll come quietly. I abhor violence, but my friend here...not so much."

"They're not police officers."

"What are they then?"

"Demons." she replies, the taller one looking like an overly-muscular minotaur, snorting licks of fire with every breath. The other has spindly grey limbs, an oversized bald head and a pair of tiny bat wings flapping from his shoulder blades.

"No conferring. I really am going to have to have an answer, before my colleague's patience runs out."

"You can climb, can't you?"

"A little, but..."

"Close enough. Run."

"What? What about you?"

"I'll be fine. Go!" she gives Latitia a push towards the fence, stepping forward.

"Tragic decision, ladies. Truly tragic. And you made such a cute couple, too." The hulk lumbers forward, swinging his baton broadly.

Diana ducks under the swing, kicking out at his knee. There's a crunch. He stumbles and falls. She rolls aside to avoid him crushing her, his baton skittering along the floor. "You were saying?"

"Oh, dear, you really should be dealing with my brother. He'd love you. So full of yourself."

The other rises with a roar of rage, swinging his meaty fist at Diana. She rolls with the punch but still ends up flying into the wall. He steps up, his splayed hand pressing her chest into the brickwork. He draws back his fist. Diana struggles against his grip. Her hair bites at his exposed fingers and a pale whiteness spreads along his arm. His scowl turns to a look of puzzlement that freezes on his face, his fist in mid throw. Diana struggles to free herself from the stony grip.

"Well, that's just rude. Granted his conversational skills were tragically lacking, but he had some admirable qualities in the direction of violence."

Diana manages to squirm free, panting a little. "Well, you can take your garden statue and fuck off. Unless you'd like to be a matched pair?"

He pulls the trigger on the taser, the two barbs firing thousands of volts through her. "Let's not. In fact, let's play a little game." he shocks her again, her body jerking and twitching on the ground, her reptilian hair tearing free of its band. "You, Morn, bastard spawn of a great bloodline, get your arse back here, or I keep shocking this one until you do." he gives another shock. "I know gorgons are

tougher than humans, but even they have limits. I'm rather curious to find out what they are. Aren't you? I mean, I could watch someone I have feelings for be tortured all day. And don't try to deny it. I might not be as good as my sister, but even I can tell there's a spark of something between you." he pulls the trigger "And not just that kind."

Latitia stays frozen on the fence. Her little voice nags her, pointing out it's her fault, her failure, that's led to this, that she's the reason Diana's being tortured, and that she could do something about it, if she was just a little less fearful, a little braver, a little more powerful. Of course, as she's just a weak, cowardly nothing, the gorgon is going to have her brain tasered out. And that will be such a waste of a fine arse if nothing else. Of course, if she bends just a little, accepts a fraction of the dark power chained inside of her, maybe there'll be a different outcome. Not that she will, of course. She's far too much of a coward to take that risk. Even if it means Diana will die. Latitia drops from the fence. "Oh, you are giving up. How disappointing." he pulls the trigger again.

There's a very faint sound of metal cracking, a lingering crackle of flames. Latitia's square pupils narrow. A forked tongue licks her lips as she stalks forward, pulling them back from her sharpened teeth in a sneer. A pair of small, pointed horns push through her forehead. Her nails darken, thickening into black iron talons, her stride undulating sensuously as she walks towards the demon. "Ah, ah, that's far enurk!" he chokes as Latitia's far too warm hand grips his throat, lifting him up, his legs kicking uselessly.

"Envious little wretch. Do you think you can talk to me like that? To me? To the blood of the Morning Star?"

"Oh, no, mistress, no, no, I was just joking, you see."

"Oh, I see. Very amusing." she looks over at Diana, still quivering on the floor, "And you saw fit to harm something that was mine, did you? Was that also a joke?"

"Yes, mistress, yes, it was a joke, just a joke, I didn't mean anything..."

"Don't worry. I appreciate a good joke as much as the next girl. In fact, that was so funny, I think it should get an encore performance."

The demon breathes a sigh of relief. Latitia smiles sinisterly as she lowers it to the floor, picking up the discarded taser.

"May I?"

"Oh, yes, mistress, please dourggg..." he gags as she thrusts the thick square barrel into his mouth.

"Why, thank you." her talons snip the wires and she pulls the trigger. The wires spark. The demon dances in the shock. "Yes, that was quite amusing." she smiles, "Let's do it again." She pulls the trigger and holds it down. The demon jerks spasmodically until smoke curls up from its mouth. She pulls back hard enough to break the trigger, forcing it on, and drops the demon to the floor, smoking and spasmodically jerking. She turns her goat-pupil gaze on the small crowd of onlookers still outside in the main street, phones recording. She hisses at them, taking a step forward and the crowd disperses quickly, or possibly it would be better to say it flees in all directions.

"Humans." she shakes her head, walking over to Diana and the petrified demon. "Hmmm, it's an interesting artistic choice, but it looks so unstable." she gives it a push. The petrified demon sways unsteadily and finally topples over. "I knew it." The outstretched arm breaks off as it crashes to the floor. "Oh, that will never do. It's uneven now." she breaks the other arm off with her talons, before proceeding to hack the head apart into chips of stone. "There. That's so much better." She turns her back on the shattered body and puts her arm around Diana, pulling her to her feet, "Now, let's get to this safehouse of yours." she puts Diana's arm over her shoulder, practically lifting her up as she moves her along on shuddering steps. Latitia slashes through the fence with a single swipe of her claws and makes their way onward, a tattooed band of dark flames around her wrists in place of the first link in her chains.