



EVERYTHING IS NOT
ALWAYS AS IT SEEMS

Chronomancerist

SEVEN FORBIDDEN ARTS #8

CHARMAINE PAULS

Chiromancist

**Seven Forbidden Arts
Book 8**

Charmaine Pauls



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Chapter One

Bono Black flicked up his collar and ducked his head as he followed his boss, Joss, into the Red-Light District in Amsterdam. As far as he could tell, they weren't being followed. He kept vigilant, watching out for danger from under hooded eyes. Not a breeze ruffled the summer night, too much like the quiet before the storm. The red lights from the windows turned the water canal into a river of ruby on which boats lay tranquil, except for the occasional thud-thud as they rubbed shoulders with the stonewall of the pavement. Far-off laughter sounded down the cobblestone street. He dragged in a breath and exhaled slowly. Behind the eye patch, his empty socket itched, always a bad sign. Two more steps and they were in front of a gunmetal door with a black arum lily engraving.

Joss gave him a quick glance from over his shoulder, his mercury eyes reflecting the menace Bono felt in his bones, and rang the bell. A plate on the inside of the door squeaked with rusty protest to reveal a peephole.

“We have an appointment with your fortune teller,” Joss said.

Bolts sounded from the inside and then the door swung open. A man in a white T-shirt with the same arum lily emblem as the one on the door waved them through.

“Follow me,” he said after he'd patted them down for weapons.

The interior was painted black with red bulbs hanging overhead. They passed several doors, each fitted with a window through which Bono could see the occupants—girls waiting, some working. A smell of disinfectant softened by air freshener created a sterile feel that was out of tune with what he'd expected from a sex club. They were taken

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past the peep shows and fuck rooms straight to the office at the back.

Doumar—he recognized him from the reconnaissance photo—sat behind a desk, wearing a military Steampunk style vest. Behind him stood a tall woman dressed in a matching outfit. She had a delicate bone structure and wheat-colored hair to match a striking, pale-skinned face. What held his attention were her eyes. They were a magnificent blue, clear like a cloudless sky over the Sambaya, and profoundly sad.

“Right on time,” Doumar said with a heavy Dutch accent. “I appreciate a punctual man.” He motioned at the two chairs facing the desk. When they’d taken their seats, he leaned forward. “What’s your fetish?” He grinned, revealing unevenly spaced teeth. “After your future has been predicted, you may crave another form of entertainment. Sometimes knowing what lies ahead makes us realize how short life is. It makes men want to seize the moment, and what better way to seize the moment than to bury your dick in a warm cunt? Fucking makes us feel alive, doesn’t it?”

“The future is all I’m here to seize,” Joss said.

Doumar’s eyes tightened. “This is a legal club, gentlemen. You can take your pick from the menu. There won’t be repercussions. No fear, no limits.” His lips stretched wide. “That’s our motto.”

Joss’s gaze trailed over the woman dispassionately, as if he was assessing goods rather than a person. “How about her?”

“The only thing she’ll do for money is read your palm.”

“You misunderstood. I meant something more permanent than renting.”

“She’s not for sale.”

“Everything has a price,” Joss said, not taking his eyes off the woman.

Doumar turned to the female and patted his knee. “Come here, baby.” When she’d obliged, he reached across and opened the flap of her jacket. Underneath, she wore a leather corset. A black arum lily was tattooed on the upper curve of her breast. He brushed his thumb over the flower. “She’s property.”

Joss returned his attention to the man and got to his feet. “Then we’ll stick to the art of divining the future.”

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“Why her?” the Dutchman asked, not thrown off his game. “I’ve got plenty of prettier girls for a ... permanent ... deal, if you know what I mean. You’re not the first man who wants to go home with a new possession.”

“It’s not for me.” Joss cocked his head at Bono. “It’s for my friend. She’s exactly his type.”

The woman regarded Bono with a scorn that would have any honest man cower, but he managed to hold the sizzling look meant to reduce him to a worm at her feet.

Doumar twisted her hair around his fist, coiling it tight. “Sorry to disappoint you, but she’s not on the menu.”

“In that case,” Joss said, “we’ll stick to what we paid for.”

Doumar pulled her to her feet by her hair. “A word of warning—she’s never wrong.”

Joss gave him a humorless smile. “That’s the reputation that brought us here.”

Doumar released her hair and swatted her ass. “Do your thing, baby.” He cast a warning look at Bono. “Try anything you’re not paying for, and I’ll cut off your hand.”

Before Bono could conjure a reply, the woman was already on her way to the door, swaying a tight ass hugged by leather pants. Her gait wasn’t as provocative as it was cat-like, much like a small feline on the prowl. She led them to a room next door draped with red and gold curtains and sat down behind a round table with a velvet tablecloth, its only ornament a crystal ball. A trail of smoke curled from a stick of incense, but it didn’t mask the scent of disinfectant that clung to the polished floor and patterned wallpaper.

“You’re kidding, right?” Joss said, taking in the surroundings.

“Most clients prefer the theatrics. Look at it as my personal stage.” She stretched out her arms and turned her palms up. “Give me your hands.”

They took the stuffed chairs facing her and held out their hands. She took Joss’s in her left, and Bono’s in her right. Her skin was cool and soft.

“What’s your name?” Bono asked.

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She gave him a hard look. “Do you ask the name of every whore you fuck in a place like this?”

It was on the tip of his tongue to say he’d never fucked a whore, but that might blow their cover. “I’m asking for yours.”

“Does it matter?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“It matters to me.” He wanted to hear what it sounded like on her lips.

Her eyes moved to the corner of the ceiling. There was probably a concealed camera. “You can call me Miss Val.”

Sky Val. The pretty girl with the beautiful name who failed miserably at hiding a shitload of sadness under a smokescreen of bravado was Joss’s target. The name suited her perfectly, like the color of her eyes. The brush of her thumb over his palm drew his attention there.

The touch was gentle and her eyes probing as she searched his. “You sure about this?”

He wasn’t sure about anything, not while her soft hand cushioned his, and her eyes consumed him with a cold, blue fire he didn’t understand. He was only a pilot, not a team member, but Joss needed him to stay close, in case they needed a hasty lift-off.

“Are you?” she prompted again.

“Go ahead,” he said. “Don’t hold back.”

Her lips curved slightly, forming a half-smile. Pale lip-gloss accentuated their fullness and set them off against the heavy black eyeliner and mascara. “As you wish.” Her gaze flickered to Joss and then she gave their hands her full attention, tracing the lines that cut across their skins.

He watched her closely. He hoped to God she was a fake. If not, her fate was sealed.

Her voice was clear and musical, her Dutch accent barely audible. “You’re a pilot.”

That didn’t mean anything. In public records, he was registered as a commercial pilot, and Joss as a French businessman with a title and

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castle. Doumar could've researched them before they'd arrived, giving her access to the information. If Doumar was the kind of sex dealer he was said to be, he would've pulled up every piece of information on them before giving them access to his club.

She turned to Joss. "You're the fighter. The leader."

He sensed Joss's tenseness. She should shut up now, before she signed her death warrant.

"There are others ... quite unique." She leaned closer, her breath fanning over his wrist. "You care about them deeply. Their fate is in your hands. I can see their faces, hear their names."

Bono closed his eyes for a second. *Don't say it.*

His silent plea was futile, because she rattled the names off like a chant. "Maya, Lann, Sean, Clelia, Ivan, Sahara... Cain Jones." Her lips parted on a silent gasp. "They're here, in Amsterdam. You're all in danger."

Fuck. No.

Joss's right hand flexed under the ring with the contractible spike, a weapon designed to slip through a search. A puncture in her jugular vein and a flick of his wrist was all it would take to put out the sad fire in those expressive eyes. One code word spoken into the communication system designed to resemble a wristwatch, and the people whose names she'd recited would attack, make sure they got out alive, pull the plug on Doumar's operation, and take down the Dutchman. These were all good things, but her life seemed a too high price to pay.

His fingers closed around her thumb in silent warning, trying to shut her up, but it was too late.

"Your enemy," she paused, "he's close. He's going to..."

Joss pushed back his chair an inch. Before he was on his feet, she jerked away from them as if their hands had caught fire.

With a gasp, she jumped up, knocking down her chair. "You have to go."

Joss grabbed her wrist as she tried to back up, his words coming like a growl through tight lips. "What did you see?"

With his wild hair and eyes, Joss was a frightening bastard, but she

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didn't wilt or fight his hold. Instead, she met his eyes and squared her shoulders. "You don't want to know."

Joss gave her a gentle shake. "What did you see?"

Bono stood and laid a hand on his boss's arm. "Joss."

One by one, Joss opened his fingers, allowing her to pull free, but he wouldn't let the question go. "I won't ask you again."

"Believe me, you're better off with ignorance."

"Ignorance?" Joss gave a wry chuckle. "In my line of business, never a good choice."

"Please, go."

"Not before you tell me what you saw."

She glanced at the corner of the ceiling again. "Doumar's men are on their way."

"Then they die here, today, and so do you."

Her chest rose and fell rapidly, despite the calm she feigned.

"Tell him," Bono urged. "He won't ask if he can't handle it, and he won't leave until you do."

She looked between Bono and Joss. "Have it your way. I hope you're right. I hope you can handle the truth."

"Spit it out," Joss hissed. "What did you see when you recited those names?"

"You're all going to die."