



WHEN THEIR PASSIONS  
& GOALS COLLIDE,  
THE CRASH WILL BE  
VOLATILE.

# Scapulimancist

SEVEN FORBIDDEN ARTS #7

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**Scapulimancist**

**Seven Forbidden Arts  
Book 7**

**Charmaine Pauls**



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*For Hestie*

## Chapter One

Wayne West looked up from his oxtail stew when the female walked into the bar. Her ponytail bounced as she approached the counter where Jack lifted a wary head. A few brown tendrils had escaped the elastic and feathered over her cheeks. Green eyes, the color of a new leaf caught in the morning sun, sparked with life. The smile on her full lips wasn't aimed at anyone in particular, because she wasn't looking at any of the three regulars. She seemed oblivious to their existence, never mind the stares from Nelis and Thinus in the corner at their table facing the TV screen.

Khaki pants stretched over a tight ass as she propped one cheek onto a barstool and rested a hiking boot on the foot bar. It was the green vest with the SANParks emblem on the breast that held Wayne's attention.

"Diet Coke, please," she said to Jack, dropping a day backpack at her feet.

Thinus nudged Nelis, his lips peeling into a grin under his moustache. Jack tore his eyes away from the rugby match and straightened his heavy frame. No doubt Jack had seen the logo too, even if he was already watching the game again before he banged a can of Coke down on the counter and slid a glass her way. For a mammoth sloth, the barman was deceptively perceptive.

"Thanks."

The husky voice was too old for her young body. She cracked open the can and took a long swig without bothering with the glass. There was something poetic about the arc of her neck and the swallows that rippled her throat, like the graceful cast of a fishing line and the peaceful bob of the fly on the stream.

She rested her arms on the counter. "What's on the menu?"

Charmaine Pauls

“Oxtail,” Jack said, his eyes glued on the screen.

“Do you have anything vegetarian?”

Jack graced her with an incredulous glare and said, “Oxtail,” before turning back to the game.

“Sandwich? Salad? Anything that hasn’t been killed?”

Thinus’s voice rose from the corner. “This ain’t no fancy pansy roadhouse in the city, darlin’.”

Wisely, she ignored him. “What do you serve with the oxtail?”

“Rice.” Jack popped a matchstick in his mouth.

“Haven’t had that in a while,” she said with sarcasm, but not without humor. “I guess I’ll have the rice.”

Jack turned his head an inch and called, “One special, no meat,” to Johannes at the back.

The woman either didn’t notice the hostility or decided to ignore it. Either way, she was a fool walking into the Quteniqua Woodcutters Bar with a South African National Parks Board jacket. Wayne brought the fork to his mouth, watching Nelis and Thinus from hooded eyes. The cousins giggled like high school girls.

“Where’s the bathroom?” she asked.

Jack threw a thumb over his shoulder.

She picked up her backpack and made her way to the washroom at the end of the short corridor.

Nelis and Thinus exchanged a look. After a second, Thinus got up and headed for the toilet. Wayne wiped his mouth on a napkin. This was what he’d hoped wouldn’t happen. His chair scraped over the hardwood floor. When Thinus reached the corridor, Wayne was already there, blocking his way.

Thinus planted his feet wide and hooked his thumbs into his belt. “Whazup, West?”

“I don’t know, Thinus,” Wayne drawled. “Was just about to ask you the same thing.”

“Stand aside, man.”

Instead of moving, Wayne braced his shoulder on the wall. “Need the can so bad you’re going to piss in your pants?”

Thinus took a step forward. “I’m warning you, man.”

Wayne smirked. Thinus didn’t bully people when their fists were

## Scapulimancist

free. He only punched when they were tied up.

“The lady’s busy. You’ll wait.”

“It’s urgent.” Thinus grinned, exposing the perfect white teeth that had cost his daddy a fortune. “The lady may enjoy it.”

“Outside,” Wayne said with a flick of his head.

Thinus’s fingers clenched on his belt. “What?”

“I said piss outside, or the only thing the lady will enjoy is how far you’ll fly when I use you for discus practice.”

“I’m not a dog! Dogs piss outside.”

“Well, then,” Wayne gave him a lazy smile, “you’re going to have to hold it in or it’ll be in your pants.”

“I swear to God, I’ll piss on your shoes,” a red-faced Thinus spat.

“Better take it outside.” Wayne narrowed his gaze. “Because if you soil these boots, you’ll lick them clean and polish them with this nice new shirt your mama ironed for you.” He touched the collar of the spanking white shirt.

A laughing snort came from Jack.

Thinus’s cheeks lit up. He slapped Wayne’s hand away and pushed a bony finger in his face. “Don’t you forget yourself, now.”

Wayne stiffened at the threat. He’d been out on parole for a year, but Thinus still held the conviction like a sword over his head.

“Yeah.” Thinus pulled himself to his full height, his demeanor filling with self-confidence now that he’d sniffed Wayne’s guilt. “That’s right, *murderer*. Remember who you are.”

Thinus wasn’t stupid enough to push it. With that verbal victory he stalked outside. It was best to keep him in sight, in case he got it into his dim-witted skull to fetch a gun from his Land Rover. The woman was still in the loo. What was it with females that took so long?

Leaning in the exit, he waited until Thinus had relieved himself on the tire of *his* truck, like the dog he said he wasn’t. The green Jeep parked next to his battered Land Cruiser had to belong to the woman. Thinus zipped himself up and gave Wayne a triumphant smile as he shouldered him on his way back into the bar. By that time, the food had arrived, and the woman was back on the barstool.

She stared at the plate. “There’s gravy on the rice.”

Jack lifted an eyebrow as if to say, ‘So?’

Charmaine Pauls

“Gravy comes from meat,” she said.

Jack crossed his arms. “Take it or leave it.”

She sighed, mumbled something about being starved, and then dug in with gusto. After two forkfuls, she stopped chewing and frowned. “There’s something wrong with the gravy.”

“Is there something wrong with the gravy, West?” Jack called across the room.

The woman turned in her seat. She could’ve looked at Thinus or Nelis, but she didn’t. She fixed her leafy green eyes on him, assessing him as if she noticed him for the first time. Maybe she didn’t, not that he wanted to be noticed.

“No,” he said, a word cut out of cardboard that didn’t carry meaning or significance.

Two more seconds slurred by, the world moving slower as she probed him in the way people did when they looked for telltale signs of lies. Her gaze wasn’t condescending, judgmental, or the worst—fearful. It was nothing like the looks he usually got. Curious, maybe. Questioning. If the light in those luminescent eyes were any indication, he’d go as far as to say friendly. Finally, she shrugged and went back to her meal.

The sound of cheering from the flat-screen on the wall, and the Saturday vibe had gone flat, like the lukewarm rock shandy in his glass. No longer enjoying the game, he wanted the peace of the farm and the solitude of his cabin, but he didn’t dare leave until the woman was gone.

She finished every morsel on her plate and asked for the bill. When it came, she looked between the piece of paper and Jack. “You can’t charge me full price for a bowl of rice.”

“Not my problem if you don’t eat meat.”

She scoffed but didn’t argue. She left money on the counter and lifted her backpack. “The day trail, where does it start?”

Jack moved the matchstick from one corner of his mouth to the other. “Yellow.”

“Follow the yellow markers,” Nelis chipped in. “The path’s well walked out. Can’t miss it.”

“Thanks.” Without another word, she headed for the forest, leaving her Jeep parked out front.

## *Scapulimancist*

There were still twenty minutes left of the match when the cousins got to their feet and made their way outside, scarcely ten minutes after the woman. Ah, hell, he'd kind of expected it and hoped it wouldn't come to this. Trouble was the last thing he needed.

"It ain't your fight," Jack said as Wayne finished his lukewarm drink and pushed his chair back.

"Who says I'm joining?"

"She's SAN. You saw it."

"Doesn't mean she deserves to get hurt."

Jack nailed him with a hard expression. "You've got enough enemies."

"With friends like you, who needs enemies?" he replied drily.

"Fuck you. She had no place coming in here."

"Yeah." Wayne planted his hat on his head. "See you."

Outside, he stopped for his eyes to adjust to the bright sunlight. Thinus's Land Rover was still there. A glance through the back window assured him the dickheads hadn't taken their hunting rifles. Good. He jogged toward the path, following the set of small footprints and two pairs of larger ones.

\* \* \* \*

Sahara Graham entered the coolness of the forest. Yellow and blackwood trees stretched thirty yards into the sky, their dense foliage throwing an eternal shadow over the damp soil where delicate ferns uncurled and red-dotted fungi were scattered like pincushions. Moss marked the trunks of the trees. As composting leaves and twigs crunched under her boots, birds fluttered to the sky, calling out her presence in alarm. The deeper into the undergrowth she moved, the darker the forest grew, embracing her with silent isolation. Not a cricket chirped or a frog croaked in the Knysna sanctuary where elephants still wandered wild. Even the air was quiet.

After a ten-minute hike, she cut away from the path and followed the trail of broken shrubs. Not far from the forest border, she found the first stump. The remains of the amputated trunk stood like a severed limb in a small clearing. Raw and open, it was bleeding sap. The wood smugglers had cut away the precious cycads at the foot of the yellowwood to make space for their illegal work. She knelt next to a

## Charmaine Pauls

small heap of dead plants, their roots shriveled and their leaves black. A cycad only grew one inch per year. These had been older than several hundred years, judging by their trunks. Nine hundred years, maybe. Dusting the soil from her knees, she moved to the yellowwood. Her fingers skimmed the rings. Four hundred years.

“Your only fault was your value,” she said into the stillness of the forest.

No sound came in reply. It was as if the trees watching over the massacre held their breath. She turned in a circle, taking in the destruction motivated by greed. How could people be so ignorant, so cruel? Not only were the smugglers destroying plants that had taken a thousand years to grow, but also the last remaining habitat of the elephants.

Like the trees, there were too little of the Knysna elephants left to roam the forest, the last of its kind to live unfenced. Through the years, these graceful and intelligent animals had learned to survive in the deepest and darkest parts of the forest. Despite their massive bodies weighing several tons, survival instinct had taught them to move soundlessly. Hunted mercilessly for their ivory, the animals that had once grazed the western coast had retreated farther into the dense nature, adapting from a diet of grass to one of foliage. Now, the Xhosa tribe living on the north-eastern border of the forest had reported the bull and two calves they’d spotted from time to time were gone, and only the old female, who they’d named The Matriarch, was left.

Her job was to ensure the species would survive. The task was twofold—find out how many elephants were left and protect their habitat. Some would say both goals were impossible. The elephants were too good at hiding, forever on the move, and the smugglers made too much money with the priceless yellowwood to give up their illegal activity without a violent fight. Poachers often murdered parks board members threatening their criminal trade. Elephant trackers before her had always failed, but she had something the trackers didn’t. She had a special gift, an ability to connect with animal spirits.

She left the plundered clearing and ventured back to the path, an uneasiness creeping up on her. The feeling was more than a heaviness of heart because of the destruction she’d witnessed. A sensation of illness

## *Scapulimancist*

took root in her body. It was like a faint nausea that boiled in her stomach. She couldn't put her finger on the root of the malaise.

Usually, she'd be in her element. In nature, she experienced her art the strongest, but for some reason she was disconnected from the animal life. The birds, one of the easier species for her to command, closed themselves to her. They scattered away like she was foe instead of friend. Her body turned heavy, and her steps slowed, as if gravity had increased tenfold. Wiping away the sweat from her forehead, she leaned against the wooden rail that marked the path and tried to rebalance herself. The world tipped, and the landscape crinkled like corrugated iron. She dropped the suddenly too heavy backpack at her feet.

Damn, she really didn't feel well. The perspiration on her skin wasn't from the exercise. It was the kind of sweat she broke into before emptying her stomach. Tilting her head back, she sucked in the pure air, but the sky started turning. She looked down quickly to find an anchor for her gaze, only to spot a nest of giant snakes around the base of a tree. Snakes didn't scare her, but these slithered over each other in menacing twirls and loops, loops that looked like a noose meant for strangling. With a loud shriek, she scurried backward, escaping the forked, sizzling tongues that came at her. She reached into the depths of her mind, but her thoughts couldn't reach these Medusa-like creatures. The sound of their rattle vibrated in her skull. It was like sharpening teeth on a metal file.

*Tsssk, tsssk, tsssk.*

Why couldn't she control them? What was wrong with her? What had happened to her art? The bodies advanced on her, a cesspool of squirming, sand-colored snakes. She retreated but stumbled over the roots of a tree and fell right into the lap of a giant oak. She pushed her back up against the trunk, the rough bark biting into her skin with magnified intensity. Her tongue was thick in her dry mouth. The smell of plant decay and wet earth was a cool vapor that filtered through her nose. All of her senses were heightened.

A flash caught her eye. Something sifted down. It was a huge, brown butterfly. No, a moth, a big, fluttering moth. More followed. They flapped around her face, the poisonous powder of their wings becoming dust particles suspended in the wedge of sun that cut through the

Charmaine Pauls

branches. She swatted at them, jerking her head from side to side. The roots around her lifted, no longer solid. They were snakes that writhed under her body.

Her scream punctured the silence, and its echo was a laugh, male laughter.

In the path, surrounded by falling moths, stood two men, the guys from the bar.

She lifted a hand. "Help. Please."

The skinny one with the moustache jabbed his friend in the ribs. "Wow, she's trippin' big time, man."

"How much did you put in?" the friend said.

"Only a quarter of a bankie."

The stickman gurgled and spat on the ground. "This is gonna be fun."

Even in her strange state of mind, her thoughts were clear enough to realize what was happening. They'd drugged her, back at the bar. She pushed to her feet, feeling the effort. Shit, she was heavy. Too slow. They'd catch her before she'd taken two steps.

She held up a finger, backtracking. "Stay away, or else..."

The men glanced at each other and burst out laughing.

"Come, now, darlin'," the stickman said. "We ain't gonna hurt you."

His friend, a thickset man with slits for eyes, took a step forward. "Just gotta stay still and Thinus, here," he pointed at the stickman, "and me will show you a real good time."

She backed away farther. "I work for the government. I'll have you arrested."

The fat guy unbuckled his belt. "Now, where's the crime in sharin'? You gave us your *consent*," he said as if it was a big word. "Didn't she, Thinus?"

"Consent," Thinus echoed.

She kept on putting distance between them. A weapon. She needed a weapon.

"What's with the waitin'?" Thinus said. "Get her, already."

"Nah." His friend started taking off his boots. "I want a good chase."

She didn't wait to hear more. Spotting a rock in the path, she grabbed and hurled it at the fat man. It zinged past his head, missing his

## *Scapulimancist*

ear by an inch.

“Oooh.” Thinus cackled like a scrawny hen. “She’s got claws.”

She couldn’t fight them off, not the two of them, but she was fast. At least, she was fast when not drugged. Still, flight was her only chance. She turned and broke into a sprint.

Her heart protested, and her limbs refused to cooperate. It was like running in place in a big, bad dream. No matter how hard she pushed her body, she wasn’t gaining ground. Too damn slow. Footsteps followed, advancing. Closer.

From somewhere farther behind there was a third voice. “Stop!”

She worked her elbows. A hot breath blew on her neck and then there was a sharp tug on her ponytail. She yanked with all her might. The sting on her scalp caused her eyes to water, mixing with the sweat that ran from her forehead. The tears burned and blinded her, but she was free.

“Stop,” that far-off voice yelled again.

Moths descended and branches reached down with knuckled fingers. Run. She had to run without looking back. She bumped her toe on a rock and stumbled, but before she hit the ground, she managed to correct her balance. Maintaining her momentum, she carried on forward, and then there was nothing under her feet. The nightmare continued as she treaded air. The dream changed from being stuck in place to falling, falling...