

Zoraida Grey and Pictish Runes

Part 1: Before We Continue Our Regularly Scheduled Broadcast.....

Chapter 1 Red-Handed

Zhu Morgan's red silk poodle robe slid across the solid wood panels lining the Castle Logan foyer with barely a whisper. She pressed her back against the wall and concentrated on being quiet. From high above the parquet floor of the foyer, crystal prisms on the massive chandelier plinked together like shimmering shards of ice. Zhu shivered. If those crystals could talk, she bet they could tell some gruesome stories.

Each solemn chime of a distant clock vibrated along her spine. Midnight. The Witching hour. Or is the witching hour three a.m. Didn't matter. Every hour in Castle Logan was a witching hour. She swallowed hard, held her breath, and edged closer to the solid wood drawing room doors. Just a few more feet and she might be able to hear the words instead of only muffled voices.

This, she considered, must be what a mouse feels like in a house full of hungry cats. A cascade of increasingly unpleasant images resulted from that thought, so she fixated on the low muttering of male voices behind the heavy pocket doors.

Her plush orange giraffe slippers scuffed on the floor and she froze against the smooth, cold wall. Any servant who caught her snooping would turn her over to Michael Logan and two days of playacting would be for nothing.

She glanced up the double staircase to the gloom of the second floor landing. Flickering light from wall sconces cast erratic shadows in the empty room. Was something moving up there? This place was so full of shadows she couldn't be certain what was real and what wasn't—or which was worse.

On the opposite side of the foyer, a distant rattle of platters drifted from the doors leading through the dining room to the kitchen, a reassuring sign the servants were otherwise occupied. During the two days of her captivity, she'd watched guests arrive by the limousine-full. The kitchen crew must be working later to accommodate increased numbers.

Only two days since Michael caught her snooping in his suite. She'd had to think fast. The drawer on Michael's desk—a huge black walnut affair with scrollwork designs around the edges and dragon claws for feet—lay open and she had a wad of his private papers in her hands. He couldn't mistake what was going on. She was caught dead to rights.

"Don't be frightened, my dear," he'd said when she'd spun around to face him, her benumbed fingers tucking the slender lock pick in her pocket. "Did you really expect I wouldn't know what you were up to?"

Michael grasped her arm, his black Logan eyes glittering. His cold eyes held hers and the words he whispered--oddly compelling words meant to enchant and enslave--nearly pulled her into a soft web of ensorcellment.

But not quite. She'd had just enough wits to let him think he'd succeeded.

Even when Michael dragged Zoraida to the brink of the oubliette and tossed her in, Zhu clinched her fists inside her pockets and held her silence. The only way to fight these Logans was to beat them at their own witchy game and she didn't have the skills to do that. Even Zoraida couldn't manage that. One quick peek at Zoraida in the bottom of the deep hole to make sure she was alive, one quick wink to let her know the truth, was all Zhu had dared risk.

Then Michael took Zhu through the labyrinthine hallways of Castle Logan to a seldom-used room high above the family's posh suites. In that dusty, quiet place, he questioned her, tried to extract everything she knew about the Stone of Adamantine and what Zoraida and her granny were really up to.

In those hours, Zhu learned the color and taste and smell of magic. It skittered across her skin with the light touch of a spider's claws. It coiled like smoke from a dead candle, threatened to invade her lungs and choke the life out of her. A sentient spark fled her body and hovered between this world and the next--amongst the dust and spiders in the rafters. Safe in the shadows, she watched herself through a piece of clear, blue crystal, somehow in two places at once: alive and inside the body she called Zhu but also free and whole and solid in the darkness high above the scene.

Michael's hard black eyes never blinked, never showed a sign of compassion. In fact, the corners of his lips curled a tiny bit and those devastating dimples deepened as he worked. Whispered promises turned to muttered threats and soft caresses became brutal blows aimed with methodical precision.

At first, Zhu winced every time he slapped her--cringed with every cruel impact and every terrifying curse he thrust into her mind. It should hurt, shouldn't it, when someone hits you like that? And worse, his spells wrapped around her body, green and livid, like some kind of soul-eating cocoon. Shouldn't she be helplessly ensnared?

The Zhu who floated above the scene swung her legs over a handy beam and settled her back comfortably against the solid stone wall, pondering the situation. In her entire life, she'd thought of this persistent inability to experience even the hint of the supernatural as more a curse than a blessing. And she'd just assumed it was one of those inexplicable things that happen--like how some people are able to paint masterpieces or compose a classic sonata while others barely manage stick figures and off key hums. Just a kind of inherent ability some people had and some people did not.

As she watched Michael's systematic and barbaric interrogation, she realized there was more at work than chance. Zoraida's granny was a witch--one of the Logan witches and Michael's near kin. Had she somehow wrapped even Zhu in protection?

Zhu shook her head. That didn't feel right. A gleam of red light flickered at the edge of her sight--a Chinese lantern in her mother's garden reflecting in the koi pond. The soft tug of a hairbrush as her

mother spoke the old words. She remembered these things from her childhood. Chinese magic, she realized, went deeper than the soothing teas and gentle yoga positions she'd learned at her mother's knee.

The silken threads of her mother's protective spell encased her so securely, nothing could get inside. She was immune to magic.

"Thanks, Mom," she whispered.

Mystery solved at last, but that didn't explain what she was supposed to do if Michael moved on to more stringent and permanent damage.

With the slightest shift, she moved from the ether, slipped inside her body. She didn't need to read minds to know what Michael expected. As far as he knew, she was a puny mortal—a fly caught by a sorcerous spider. He'd done this before and she knew how it always had gone. Funny how people—even high-powered Scottish witch people-- sometimes see exactly what they expect to see. Michael expected to see terror in Zhu's eyes. He failed to understand the similarities between terror and profound, fervid fury.

By morning, Michael was satisfied Zhu didn't know anything of use and Zhu was satisfied she couldn't call her life a success until she saw Michael broken on the rack—or drawn and quartered—or roasted on a spit—or maybe all three at once. At last, he hoisted her across his shoulders and carried her back to her room.

Through half-closed eyes, she glimpsed the rosy glimmers of dawn as he tucked her into the soft silken sheets in the Jade room.

"Now that wasn't so bad, was it?" he'd whispered. "You'll be useful just as long as Zoraida is alive. We'll let her think about her choices at the bottom of the oubliette for a few days, shall we? If she brings me the Stone of Adamantine, I may let *you* live."

His parting spell smelled of musty rooms and cold earth—binding and confining and dead. When his footsteps receded down the hallway, Zhu took a deep breath. The thick gray enchantment swirled around the drafty room but avoided the bed where she lay. With a whoosh and a sigh, it exited by way of a crack around the window casing. It almost seemed anxious to escape.

That was the day before yesterday and Zhu had been frantic to escape ever since. Michael would be dragging Zoraida out of the oubliette soon and Zhu didn't want to think about what he would do next. She couldn't defeat the lock on the door to her room—something about those crystal doorknobs and the shifting shapes inside turned her stomach. So when the servant girl brought supper, Zhu selected a Hapkido joint lock and restraint from the arsenal of martial arts moves she learned from her father. The maid didn't know what hit her.

Perhaps she had been a bit too zealous or perhaps the maid was simple already terrified—and who wouldn't be terrified to work in a castle full of crazy witches? Whatever the reason, the girl fainted as

soon as Zhu touched her. The result was the ruination of a textbook demonstration but also a quiet and successfully restrained maid.

Zhu tied the girl up with shreds of her silken bed sheets and hoisted her into a comfortable position on the bed. In retrospect, she realized it might have been a mistake not to take time and change into something more suited for the job at hand. Her giraffe slippers weren't the best footwear for a headlong sprint down the road.

"I'll probably be barefoot before we get to the edge of BlackBridge," she muttered ruefully. The thought of the cold, jagged cobblestones of the village streets made her wince and curl her toes inside the plush house shoes.

But the die was cast. Two days of pretending to be hexed would be for nothing if she couldn't get Zoraida out of the oubliette. If all went well, they could be away from this witch-infested castle before the servant regained consciousness.

As she tiptoed across the foyer intent on gaining access to the hallway leading to the old part of the castle, voices from the drawing room tempted her. Maybe she could find out more about who murdered Rolf and what the Stone of Adamantine had to do with it and exactly what side Shea was on—or anything about the mysterious goings on in Castle Logan.

Goosebumps prickled on her arms under the sleeves of her red poodle pajamas. A shiver started at the base of her spine and crawled up to her neck. Castle Logan wasn't the kind of place you wanted to be trapped in nor the kind of place you wanted to get caught snooping around in—not again. A cold draft wrapped around her ankles and she couldn't shake the feeling that someone watched her from the shadowy hallway.

Only two weeks ago, she'd been elated to join Zoraida on an adventure to Scotland to steal the healing crystal for Zoraida's Granny. Anything had seemed better than boring old Arkansas and if it took an adventure to save the old lady's life—so much the better. Now Zoraida was at the bottom of the oubliette and the cost of adventure seemed too high.

The silky fabric of her pajamas slid across unicorns and dragons carved in bas-relief on the polished wood. Every instinct told her to run in the opposite direction, down the steps, and out of the gates of Castle Logan—to put as many miles between herself and BlackBridge, Scotland, as possible.

The strange glow of a summer night in northern Scotland filtered through the etched windows. She'd have no trouble seeing her way across the courtyard to the East Tower, past the mysterious blue standing stone, and down to the oubliette despite the hour. She'd traced it in her mind endlessly for the last two days. Then out the gates, down the road to the village, and into the first car they could find. No one at Castle Logan could be trusted nor could she hope for help in the village where the Logans held sway. If she and Zoraida wanted to escape, they'd be on their own.

Rescue Zoraida or find out secrets? Zhu knew what her choice *should* be but she also knew exactly what her choice *would* be. She edged closer to the closed doors and pressed her ear against the wooden panel.

She ever so carefully tugged the handle of one drawing room door. It slid open silently on well-oiled runners. The voices became clear and Zhu peeked through the slit, wishing her ears were bigger.

“. . . idiotic things to do. She’s unskilled and naïve. Don’t tell me you weren’t distracted—I’ve seen the moon-pie eyes you’ve been making at her.” Michael Logan, dapper and sophisticated—except for the swollen nose and blooming blue-gray bruises around both eyes—paced the tiled floor in front of the fireplace.

The object of Michael’s ire, Shea Logan, leaned against the mantelpiece. Though his posture was contrite, Zhu didn’t miss the occasional flash of black eyes as he watched Michael.

There’s no love lost between those two, for sure, she whispered to herself and slid ever so slightly along the smooth wood, finding a comfortable position. This might take some time.

“Unskilled and naïve, she may be, but she left a mark on you, Cousin,” Shea said clearly and pointedly.

Oh, good one. Zhu giggled to herself at the thought of the sharp crack Zoraida’s hand had made against Michael’s nose.

Michael stopped pacing, his lips pressed in a ferocious line, and the muscles in his jaw clenched in tight knots. The bruises on his face, placed there by Zoraida’s well-timed punches, would be a reminder for several days.

“You’d be well served to consider why you’ve been exiled these past five years and what would happen to you if I withdrew my protection.” He glared at Shea.

“Don’t threaten me, Cousin.” Shea glared back. Zhu made a mental note to avoid getting on Shea’s bad side. He looked every inch the cold-blooded murderer town gossip said he was. Exiled because he murdered his own uncle, Michael’s father—that was the story told in the village.

“This is a waste of time.” Michael resumed his pacing, but the anger did not leave his voice. “She’s on her way home, or I’m no judge of country girls. How she got out of the oubliette is beyond me. I could almost be persuaded she had help.”

Zhu literally and figuratively clamped her teeth down on her tongue to keep from squeaking. Had she heard correctly? Had Zoraida somehow managed to get out of the oubliette and away?

“More likely she’s smarter than we thought. After all, she falls from Vera’s side of the family tree. You’re the one who didn’t take precautions.” Shea eyed Michael coldly, but Zhu didn’t think Shea was as heartless as his words indicated. Somebody might have helped Zoraida escape as Michael suggested and Zhu had a suspicion she knew exactly who that had been.

“Five hundred years of diluted blood should have seen to that. Look at my sisters and their pasty-faced offspring. Not a one of them could conjure so much as a bad smell if their lives depended on it. Who would suspect this . . . this colonist would retain so much skill?”

“I imagine Aunt Vera saw to Zoraida’s education, don’t you? Pity someone didn’t kill Vera centuries ago.” Shea chuckled. “But you tried, didn’t you.”

That must have hit a tender spot because Michael spun to face Shea, his right hand extended. Red flame spun from his palm, coalesced into a perfectly round ball, and flew across the room. Shea brushed it aside and the orb smashed into the paneled wall where it sizzled out leaving a darkened blotch in the woodwork.

Even as he parried the attack, Shea flicked the fingers of his left hand. Like lightning, a single spark of blue fire curled just above the sole of Michael’s polished black shoe. With a wisp of smoke, the spark burned through the shoe leather in a trice.

Zhu wished she had her phone to take a video of Michael, powerful witch lord and laird of Castle Logan, hopping around on one foot. Shea sipped whisky until his cousin regained control of himself. Apparently, this sort of thing was the equivalent of a pillow fight in Castle Logan.

“Damn it, Shea. These were my best pair of brogues.” Michael slipped his foot out of the smoking shoe and sank onto the plush wing back chair, massaging the burned foot. “Took the better part of a week to get them broken in.”

“You always forget to protect your feet, Cousin. What have I told you?” Shea refilled his whisky glass and took a sip as Michael peered at the still smoking shoe.

“A soldier’s feet are his most essential pieces of equipment.” Shea and Michael recited together. Their laughter dissolved the tension for the moment.

The smell of singed wood wafted into the hallway. Zhu clapped her hand across her nose, stifling a treacherous sneeze. These two men, so alike in looks and demeanor, went from enemies to friends in a split second.

Families are like that, Zhu thought. One minute pounding each other with closed fists and the next teaming up against the world. But there’s more to it with these two.

“I’ve missed you, Shea,” said Michael, massaging the blossoming boil on his foot. “You’re the only one save Mother who has an ounce of real magic.”

Shea retrieved the bottle of whisky from a shining silver tray and poured Michael a liberal portion.

“Five years isn’t so long that you’ve forgotten exactly why I left, is it?” he said, handing the glass of amber liquid to Michael. “And now you’ve started the whole mess again. Surely, a statesman such as yourself could have found a better way to persuade the Ostergards to your way of thinking than by murdering their eldest son and holding their three daughters hostage.”

“Who says I killed Rolf? It could just as easily have been you. In fact, Constable MacCaig thinks it *was* you.” Michael removed his other shoe and tossed it beside its ruined mate. He leveled a not-so-cousinly eye at Shea. “Maybe I should let nature take its course. He’d have you in leg irons in five minutes if I allowed it.”

Shea sank into one of the plush chairs. “You’re hopelessly out of date, you know. They don’t use leg irons anymore. This plan of yours isn’t quite hatched yet and I’m in a position to smash the entire basket of eggs so don’t threaten me.”

Michael threw his head back and laughed. “If I didn’t know your interests lay with mine, I might take offense. You’re deeply enmeshed in this and you aren’t stupid.”

Zhu narrowed her eyes. Though Michael’s words were confident and more than a little derisive, something sounded off to her. *Who are you trying to convince, Michael? You’re more worried about Shea than you want to let on. And when is this conversation going to get back to Zoraida?*

“As you say, Cousin.” Shea drained his glass again. Zhu noted Shea was drinking pretty heavily, even for him. “But many things besides me can interrupt your plot.”

“One of those things rode through BlackBridge on your shiny toy bike. What an idiotic thing to let happen. “

“You told me she was well in hand. Don’t blame me because you allowed an unskilled, naïve girl like Zoraida to break your nose and escape your best dungeon.”

Zhu bit her lip to keep from shouting for joy. Zoraida had indeed escaped. And she’d ridden away on Shea’s motorcycle. Zhu knew for a fact the only other time Zoraida had been on a motorcycle had ended with the bike in pieces. An image of Zoraida, blonde hair frizzed, crouched on Shea’s fancy bike speeding along the highway in nothing but her underwear and her fruity robe passed across the inside of Zhu’s eyelids. She had to bite her lip so hard she nearly drew blood to keep from laughing aloud.

That changed things. Without Zoraida in Castle Logan, Michael wouldn’t be able to use Zhu to pressure her to produce the Stone of Adamantine.

But I’m still stuck here. Zhu chewed her lip some more, but this time in frustration. *Zoraida will come back for me but once that servant girl blabs, he’ll know. I can either run out into the night and scabble around the Highlands on my own or . . . well, I don’t see an alternative.*

“Zoraida won’t trust me now.” Michael stretched his bare feet toward the fire.

“Tossing her in the oubliette probably didn’t help. Why couldn’t you just sleep with her? I thought that was your preferred method of persuasion.” Shea’s jaw hardened and Zhu giggled silently.

This spy business was a lot of fun. Now that she felt better about Zoraida, she could enjoy it.

Shea hated the thought of Zoraida with Michael, didn't he? When Michael wasn't looking, Shea's expressions gave him away as clearly as if his thoughts were embroidered on his leather jacket.

Michael clicked his tongue with impatience. "She proved to be most exasperating. As you say, she must have more skill than we suspected. And if she can counteract me, then what else is she up to?"

"She told me she was after the Healing Stone. Do you suppose there's an ounce of truth in that?"

"Possibly." Michael kicked at the edge of the rug in front of the fireplace with his big toe. "Dammit. I had this under control until those two showed up. The other one is safely bewitched, but I can't have a real Logan witch wandering willy-nilly about the planet. You'll have to go and get her."

"She won't be thrilled to see any Logan. How do you propose I convince her to come back here?"

"Oh, she'll most assuredly come back. She's loyal to her friend—a weakness. I'd rather she come back under supervision. Can't have her showing up at the wrong moment. Not again. Take the Healing Stone with you. Tell her whatever you have to. Get her back here before the Council meeting."

It was Shea's turn to laugh but his eyes glinted like black steel. "What makes you think she'll trust me any more than she trusts you? You roughed her up a bit, didn't you? Women don't put up with that sort of thing anymore."

"I have faith in you, Cousin. For now." Michael leveled a searing frown at Shea. "Pray I don't lose it. I'm fond of you, but, in the end, you're expendable. "

Shea's fingers tightened around the glass of whisky, but he said nothing. Zhu could almost see the waves of anger coming off him. When he did speak, his voice was carefully modulated.

"Of course, Michael. I'll take care of it."

So that was the plan. Well Zoraida had a thing for Shea and if long lingering looks with moony eyes were any indication, Shea had a thing for Zoraida too. Did he like her enough to betray Michael and help them after all? Zhu wasn't sure.

Zhu stuck her head around the doorframe to get both eyes on the scene, hoping something in Shea's expression would give her a clue. Michael's back was to her, but Shea faced the door. When her head cleared the frame, the motion drew his attention. His black eyes widened in recognition. She froze like a rabbit.

At the same instant, a heavy hand gripped her shoulder and spun her around. She found herself scrutinized by the ice-blue eyes of a man she'd never seen before.