

Ed Wicke

**Akayzia Adams
and the
Mirrors
of
Darkness**

BlacknBlue Press UK

For...

For my many lovely friends of recent years...
... especially Helen Long, Maureen O'Boyle,
Jill Hills, Candy Pritchard, Caroline Minshell
and Alex Houston.

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Prologue

In a dark room a spider crouched in the middle of its web, waiting. Its forelegs were extended along the lines of silk, feeling for the slightest vibration. A door opened and a shaft of light fell upon the web. A tall woman's shadow broke the light twice; then someone was standing beside the web, studying it.

The web was bright silver, dazzling even in this dim light. It was stretched between two curved silver posts that rose from the floor. The oval-bodied spider was silver too, its abdomen like liquid metal and its eight jointed legs like glittering pins. It scuttled upwards now to the top of its web and hung there, the light reflecting from its small body.

The woman turned to a rough stone table at her side and took up what seemed to be a black, glassy splinter. Without pausing, she pushed the splinter into the thumb of her left hand.

She held the thumb up above the web and allowed the blood to fall, drop by drop, into the mouth of the waiting spider. Nine drops only.

The bloated spider returned to the centre of its web and began to spin.

~~aa~aa~aa~aa~aa~aa~~

The dark candles flared suddenly in the high cathedral filled with shadows, casting their black light into the crowded corners. Whatever breath the shadows could yet draw was stilled in a moment. The ancient stones hung above them, waiting.

Finally the Being who sat upon the high throne of black silver and cold black stone stirred. For years it had sat there, hardly moving, studying the signs, seeking in the dark whispers of the dark winds some configuration that suited its purpose.

Now it leaned forward and spoke:

The Harvest Awaits. Go; Gather.

Chapter 1 Reflections

A cold wind came from the far north, snaking through the mountain passes. It flowed smoothly over the frozen wastes that lay west of the Silverlode and picked up speed in the bleak valleys that the Shadowmaker filled with his dark magic. It slid between the twin peaks of Marsic un Marbidda – the Beast and His Lady – and crossed the forested hills above Londinium. It drifted south and west of the old, slow city and came upon an ancient school gathered about a large grassy square. The cold wind moaned to itself, whispering evil secrets into the warm May sunlight that beamed down upon Old Winsome’s Academy...

‘Enough, already!’

Akayzia Adams reached across and slammed the sash window down, shutting out the chilling wind. She turned back to the mirror and tried again to fasten her hair with a broad, curving gold clasp that flashed in the sunlight.

Kazy – as she usually called herself – thought of herself as just an ordinary twelve year old girl, with frizzy brown-black hair in dozens of tight plaits tied off with colourful strands of yarn. She had skin the colour of dark honey and eyes that were bright blue: an odd mixture of Jamaica and Ireland, she’d always thought. But she’d discovered only a few weeks ago that her mother had been born here, in the “Inner Lands”.

She stared at herself in the mirror. She could hardly believe she was in this amazing place. Last September she’d lived in the East End of London; now she rubbed shoulders with furry Hrakki, goblins, trolls, dragons and other odd creatures... not all of them friendly, either... the memory of being trapped in a Shade’s maze still made her shiver...

A dark shadow passed across the mirror, swallowing the light from the window. Brown fur. The flash of large, sharp teeth. A six-clawed forepaw fell upon Akayzia’s shoulder and she gasped.

‘You all right, girl?’ a rough voice said in the *Hrakka* language.

It was only Divvi, one of two Hrakkú girls she shared the room with. Marlissa was serious and slender; Divvi was cheerful and broad as a bus. She grinned at Akayzia, showing bright white teeth in a furry brown face. All Hrakkí looked something like bears, but had faces that were somehow surprisingly human.

Divvi rested an enormous paw on Kazy's shoulder again, looking at the girl. 'You still seeing things?' she asked.

Kazy nodded. Since her battle with the Masterdragon Thargrond, everything looked odd to her. Shadows weren't where they should be. Faces kept changing. A weird light surrounded some objects.

Somewhere, a clock struck the half hour. Divvi heard it and said, 'Shouldn't you be -'

'I know!' Kazy exclaimed. She finally secured the clasp with a scrap of electric blue yarn. She hesitated a moment, glanced out at the trees being blown by the harsh wind, and snatched up a scarf which she fastened over her head as she ran down the steps and out the front door of Andromeda, her boarding house.

She ran along the short road that led to the rectangle of ancient stone buildings rising three, four and even five levels high, with spires soaring far above the patterned roofs. Stone gargoyles above ornate ironwork windows gazed down upon a broad square of grass - "Main Quad" - which was broken into eight sections by paths that crisscrossed it.

Kazy ran up one sloping diagonal to the central fountain that spouted water high into the air. Here she turned slightly to the left to run towards the tall black front gates set within white stone pillars. The school term didn't start until tomorrow: that meant she could get away with running across Main Quad. She bounded up the steps to the porter's lodge and across the flagstones to the gates. She hesitated for a split second, and...

'Ohhhh! You *stupid* gates!'

The gates had shut in her face, as they usually did. She turned to bang on the door of the porter's lodge but saw the ancient head porter fast asleep in his chair. The little porter's assistant was nowhere to be seen.

'Sorry about this,' she whispered towards the sleeping porter as she felt around the stonework until she found the hidden lever that students were forbidden to use. The gates swung open and she slipped out. An alarm bell began to ring. She put her head

down, ran down the nine steps before her and passed into the long, tree-bordered lane which ran due east through the school grounds towards the village of Winsome's Heath.

She ran along the broad white lane a few metres before turning off into a curving path on her right, leading to the headmaster's Lodge. A slightly built boy wearing glasses, roughly her age, was walking towards her and she stopped.

It was Digby Weedon, son of the disgraced and injured Headmaster. Professor Weedon was still in hospital but Digby and his half-brother Raggs had come back for the start of summer term.

The boys had been friends for years, not knowing until a few weeks ago that they were half-brothers, both sons of Professor Weedon. But whereas Digby's mother was Professor Weedon's dull, plump, frumpish wife, Raggs' mother was the glamorous witch Haggitta.

'You ready for this, Akayzia?' Digby asked.

'Not really,' Kazy said. 'Where's Raggs?'

Digby shook his head. 'He didn't want to come.'

'But she's his mother.'

'Yes. And that annoys him. He said to tell you it "really, really, really" annoys him.' Digby smiled.

'Oh. That bad!'

'We'd better get to the Lodge. They're waiting for us.' And they hurried around the curved drive to the Headmaster's Lodge.

The "Professor in Chief" of the Inner Lands, Professor MacDonald, was standing by the large white front door. His untidy grey beard and his plume of grey hair above a tall, wiry body gave him the appearance of a mad scientist or a wild religious leader. But his voice was kind and his eyes twinkled with an irrepressible humour. He was a good friend to Kazy and her grandmother.

'Ah, *there* you are, Akayzia!' he exclaimed. 'Thought you'd taken off on that battleboard of yours, seeking new dragons to slay! How are you, child? Recovered yet?'

She smiled up at him. 'I'm getting better, Professor MacDonald,' she said. 'I'm even looking forward to lessons now - that must mean something.'

MacDonald dropped into broad Scots, from his days visiting Glasgow. 'It means you're crazy as a loon! Ay, worse than - you're K-K-Krazy!'

They laughed at the nickname she'd earned at her very first

Academy lesson. 'Anyway, you two,' he continued in Common, the standard language of the Inner Lands, 'Hiffa will be with us in a moment. He wanted to do a bit of prowling, he said: *casing the joint* as they would put it in the Outlands.'

Even as Professor MacDonald spoke, Hiffa Ammiti came into view. He was a short Hrakkú, just over Kazy's height. Around his tidy, red-furred body he wore a light brown robe which was gathered at his waist by a silken cord. He paused to peer at a window and sniff the air.

It was this that always threw her: the way that the Hrakkí suddenly acted like... well, like animals. The first time she'd met Hiffa, he had been on all fours in a cage in London Zoo. She couldn't have guessed then that he was a ruler in another land.

He was Proconsul Ammiti; and he was the kindest, gentlest creature imaginable. Like Akayzia, he had fought and killed a Masterdragon. That was during the Umbrabellum, the "War of Shadows". He knew what it was like for her, and how for months afterwards there would be this odd, unreal feeling, these visions, these distortions of reality, these nightmares....

'One moment,' Hiffa Ammiti murmured as they walked up. He paused, troubled.

'Something is wrong here,' he said softly. 'Very wrong. But we have no choice. We must go in now.'

They entered the Lodge and walked down the main hallway lined with pictures. Kazy stopped to look at the portrait of Tharg, the Masterdragon headmaster of 25 years ago. Tharg looked back at her with his calm, other-worldly eyes. Deep, sly secrets slept behind that unblinking gaze.

She found it hard to tear herself away. The face of Tharg was of course unlike the enormous head of his son Thargrond, the Masterdragon that had nearly swallowed her whole, only a few weeks before; and yet... And yet, even though Tharg had compressed himself and taken on an upright form so as to become Headmaster, there was something in the eyes – and in the set of the brow, and in the subtle, toothy dragon's smile – that made Kazy's heart pound at the evil memories awakened.

'In here.' MacDonald was at the door to the Head's study. They filed inside and crossed the wood-panelled room to a second door set in the wall to their left. MacDonald took a key from his pocket and turned the lock.

Chapter 2 The Mirror of Sight

There was something odd about the windowless room. Even after several candles had been lit the room remained dark, brooding, oppressive. A numbing coldness crept up from the wooden floorboards. It was as if they'd descended into an underground tomb.

There were dark, heavy tapestries on the wall, into which were stitched grotesque insect-like figures and twisted designs with some hidden meaning. MacDonald pushed the door shut behind him and went to lock it but changed his mind, as if he wished them to have the chance of an easy escape.

'Look here,' whispered Hiffa Ammiti.

He was looking at the wall opposite the door. The room was empty except for the tapestries, one disturbing picture of a snake that stared at them from the wall to their right, a desk with brass corners, a wooden chair... and the mirror which faced them.

It was an oval mirror, its silver frame lavishly decorated with a mesh of silver eyes.

Eyes. Animal, fish, human, insect or totally alien; large, small, slanted, squinting, glaring or glowing; sly, vicious, bold, despairing. But all of them somehow evil. They watched you. They appraised you. They mocked you.

Kazy was drawn by the eyes. She felt she was in some great pool and the water was spiralling down, down, down to a deep, sucking darkness that called her insistently. She found herself stepping towards the mirror, her hand stretched out -

'Don't touch it!' MacDonald ordered, and at the same moment Digby grabbed Kazy's shoulder and pulled her back.

'Sorry. Didn't know I'd moved,' she said. She shut her eyes for a moment. When she opened them again, the room had stopped spinning.

But then the mirror did something that took their breath away.

It went black.

Not the blackness of a funeral dress, nor the blackness of a starless night. It was a deeper blackness, as if it came from a place where darkness was more than just the absence of light, where

darkness was some vile, clinging substance spat out by the fundaments of the universe.

This time they all took a step back. The candles flared and then went out. The room filled with blackness. Then a voice spoke.

'Where is he?'

It was the silvery, tinkling voice that Akayzia had heard twice before. The voice of the witch Haggritta. Raggs' mother.

The mirror lit up with a gentle light, revealing a face. It seemed to be very much the face Kazy had seen long ago through the swirling fog in Regents Park in London: young and pretty, with long ringlets of blond hair, soft features, a kind smile, with good teeth and full lips that turned up a bit at the corner. The face was turning from side to side, the eyes seeking something.

'Professor Weedon is injured,' said MacDonald, stepping forward. The eyes seemed to see him now; they hardened and the lips thinned.

Haggritta tossed her head impatiently. 'That's not what I meant,' she said. 'I already know about that.'

She looked at them, one by one. Her eyes lingered long on Kazy. Kazy could almost feel the heat of that penetrating gaze as it passed across her face, scornfully dismissing the headscarf with braids sticking out from it, puzzling at the odd mixture of school blouse and a lopsided bright tie made from a strip of ragged material, resting a second upon the thin truegold ring Kazy wore upon her right hand, then sweeping down to the scruffy shoes and back up to the face, searching for something - as if there were some sign she sought.

The witch looked away from Kazy and spoke again, accusingly:

'Where is he? Where is my son?'

'He doesn't want to see you,' said Digby Weedon. Kazy was surprised to hear how calm his voice was. He continued:

'He asked me to give you a message.'

The image in the mirror shook her head. 'I will hear no message except from his own lips,' she said. 'Bring me my son! What unnatural cruelty is this, to keep a son from his mother?'

Digby Weedon did something even more surprising: he laughed. This seemed to enrage the witch. Her face grew pale and she raised one hand as if to strike out. But she paused, troubled.

Digby asked, 'Do you think we could have stopped Raggs if he'd wanted to come? You don't know your own son! And I *will* tell you his message, because I promised. You don't have to listen

to it. He says he wishes to see you... but he wishes to see you *here*, in this land, as a friend to us all, not an enemy.'

'You lie! My son would say no such thing!'

Digby made no reply.

The queenly head bowed slightly and the silvery voice spoke once more, slowly this time. 'He is a child. There are many things he does not understand. But perhaps... perhaps he sees something *I* do not understand. Perhaps - ah, but perhaps if he came to me, he would be able to persuade me to - to change?' She looked at them with a shy smile fluttering upon her face.

Now it was MacDonald who laughed. 'Won't work, Haggritta!' he cried. 'Indeed, *none* of your little games will work. Raggs has learned from the mistakes of his father and won't expose himself to your power. Professor Weedon himself has seen the error of his ways. He doesn't want see you either, though he says - he says -'

MacDonald found it difficult to get the words out. Hiffa Am-miti said it for him:

'Professor Weedon says he - ah - loves you but must not see you again.'

'Love?' Haggritta laughed scornfully. 'What would that dry stick know of *love*? You will tell my spy that he was nothing to me - nothing! It was only his information I loved! The fool!'

Now it was Digby's turn to be angry. 'You will not speak of my father like that!' he cried.

She shot back, 'I will speak as I wish! I will *do* as I wish! Whereas *you*, Digby Weedon: *you* will forever stumble in the half-light, never becoming what you were called to be. Like your father perhaps: clever but too cautious. And like your mother as well: silly and petty. My boy will not be like that. Send my boy to me! Let me talk with him! It is my *right*!'

MacDonald waved that aside. 'He won't see you, Haggritta. Not unless you return in peace, abandoning your powers to me.'

She snarled, 'To you? You, who are weak and pitiful? You, who have wasted your talents on trivial things? You, who will soon be pulling the spears from your side and begging for death? Never!'

MacDonald stepped forward and peered at the mirror.

The witch asked, 'What? What is it, you bumbling old fool, you half-wit hat-rack?'

MacDonald stroked his beard. He looked truly puzzled. 'Tell me, Haggritta,' he said calmly. 'Is that a grey hair I see?'

'*Ohhhhhhhh!*' The witch drew herself up and her arm went

back and then forward, as if hurling something at them. A cloud of blackness exploded from the mirror, and then the mirror itself burst into a million fragments. Kazy shut her eyes against the glass splinters rushing towards her.

She opened her eyes again. All was quiet in the darkened room. MacDonald was still standing in front of them, his right hand upraised towards the mirror. In front of that firm right hand, the shards of glass and silver had halted in mid-air. They glowed as if they had come direct from the fiery core of the earth itself. Then, as if suddenly turned to liquid, they began dripping to the floor.

'Mind now - step back!' he whispered as the silver flowed in a stream towards them. They moved aside and watched the liquid fire slither along the rutted boards and then fall through the gaps, hissing and smoking as it disappeared, leaving behind it a bitter, choking reek. A heavy darkness settled upon the room.

'That was a little risky.'

Hiffa Ammiti lit a candle with a whispered command and peered at his friend doubtfully. MacDonald let his outstretched arm relax and looked at his shaking hand.

'Aye. But I'd guessed she was planning to do something dramatic. I thought it best to make sure she did it at a time *I* chose, so that I could have the counter-spell ready.'

'Yes. Well done.' Hiffa nodded. 'And yet...'

'What?'

'And yet something whispers to me that somehow she *wanted* you to goad her... that in some way, she was in control of what happened. I think we have not seen the end of this tussle.'

'How does a mirror like that work?' Digby asked.

MacDonald said, 'Professor Weedon said it's a "lovers' glass". You grow a twinned crystal, then split it. With a coating of fair-silver, you can make the two halves communicate over a fair distance. But getting it to work across to the Outlands... tricky, that.'

'And she was able to destroy this half,' said Hiffa Ammiti. 'That's unusual. But I suppose she's a seventh degree witch now.'

'Ay. And there's other devices a high magician might use to communicate, too. You could set up something in the boundary of the two worlds and connect to that. There are even some magical creatures that live in the boundaries and can provide a connection, though they're scarce - and dangerous! Or you could -'

Suddenly there were footsteps in the next room, and the door was pushed open.

~aa~aa~aa~Marston Masters~aa~aa~aa~

In the doorway to the Head's study stood a tall, broad-shouldered man. Behind him was Andrew "the Mouth" Masters, a boy who had become Kazy's sworn enemy after she and her friends had liberated a wolf-dog he'd been mistreating.

The Mouth's ice-blond hair glinted in the sunlight that flooded the room next door. He was fairly tall; very intelligent; extremely strong. He had magical powers beyond anyone else's in their year and he wasn't afraid to use them to get what he wanted.

Large and strong though Andrew was, he could hardly be seen beyond the stocky, muscular, blond haired man in the doorway.

'Masters! What the -' began MacDonald.

The large man just smiled. Not a pleasant smile. And Kazy realised from the smile just who this was: Marston Masters, the father of Andrew Masters, large, strong and clever like his son. Wealthy, too. And powerful.

Marston Masters had gold and silver rings on most of his large fingers, a chunky gold bracelet around a chunky left wrist, a jewel-studded tie pin and the glint of gold in each neat, enormous shirt cuff. He fiddled with the tie pin as he looked at them, his large, intelligent eyes moving from one face to the next.

'I'll tell you what this is, Professor MacDonald,' he said finally, in a voice as rich as his cufflinks and deep as his smartly-pressed trouser cuffs. 'I'm here to put this Academy on the road to recovery. Now I'll thank you all to leave the Lodge so I can start work.'

'Work?' MacDonald cried. 'What manner of work can you have in mind?'

'As the new Headmaster,' Marston Masters replied calmly.

MacDonald and the Proconsul Ammiti exchanged the same baffled looks that Akayzia and Digby were giving each other.

MacDonald tried again: 'But what - how - on *whose* orders?'

Marston Masters shook his head gravely. 'I worry about you sometimes, MacDonald,' he said. 'You used to know how these things are administered. There is no Head here, no Deputy. Something has to be done. And -'

'Just one moment!' MacDonald cried, his face going red above his grey beard. 'The usual rules apply. For a temporary vacancy, the senior masters run the school. Admiral Dartford and Professor Mabbi are extremely competent and -'

Marston Masters interrupted, '*And* they are friends and sup-

porters of yourself and Ammiti here. Isn't that why you want to see them in charge of one of our most important academies?' He laughed, a great booming, sneering laugh.

'But none of this matters,' he continued. 'There are emergency powers. When there is a grave situation requiring immediate and serious action, a temporary Headmaster can be appointed by the Head of the School Boards.'

'And the Head of the School Boards just happens to be Mrs Masters,' murmured Hiffa Ammiti.

'Exactly,' said Marston Masters, not at all bothered by the suggestion of favouritism. 'My wife is in the ideal position to see the problem - a school falling apart; *and* the solution - myself.'

'What do you mean by "falling apart"?' asked Digby Weedon, his face going pale.

Marston Masters fingered his tie pin again. 'I make no criticism of your father, young Weedon. A fine man. A powerful wizard. No doubt he would even agree with me. Winsome's noble traditions have taken a battering of late. Discipline is poor, academic results are not what they should be, and the great sporting record of a great school has been replaced by failure, failure, failure. There is no school spirit, there is no *commitment* to success.'

He paused and looked hard at Akayzia Adams for a moment.

'No commitment,' he repeated coldly. 'Students are putting their own selfish ideas above the call of loyalty and integrity. And just look at this recent scandal of the Four Schools Tournament! Winsome's has become a joke to other schools. This Master-dragon attack - was it real? A magical creation? Or a schoolboy trick? Some very important people now believe that Winsome's is just that: a joke. A place to which we send our fools and rebels and budding jesters and comedians.'

Hiffa Ammiti spoke again, gently: 'Who is saying this?'

Masters waved an arm vaguely. 'It doesn't matter,' he said. 'What matters is that it's *true*. Your own assistant, that Hakkinski fellow - a Hrakku like yourself - was guilty of the most dreadful pranks here. He turned one of the woodwork tables into cheese one day - made Mr Thompson's chalk write on the board the opposite of what he was saying in class - created a Stickball ball that begged not to be hit. There was a list of crimes as long as my tie. Only after insistence by my wife was he expelled.'

He looked gravely at Kazy and added, 'And now we have the infamous Akayzia Adams. A rule-breaker. Disobedient to her

own housemistress and games captain. Involved in some very odd behaviour during the Four Schools Tournament. *And* linked to the theft of a valuable animal that my son owned -'

'An animal he beat with a stick!' Kazy said suddenly. A red-hot anger had been growing within her. The anger took her by surprise; she couldn't control the flood of furious words.

'And let me tell you,' she cried out, 'if I find him raising his arm against another animal, I'll *break* it for him! I won't just be pushing his ugly face into the mud this time - I'll be kicking his backside all the way from here to whatever new school is stupid enough to take him!'

Marston Masters smiled as if pleased with the girl's outburst. He said calmly, 'You see, Professor MacDonald and Proconsul Ammiti: your prize student openly threatens my own son, unafraid of punishment.'

He turned to Kazy. 'Miss Adams, at twelve noon I assume my powers as Headmaster. In the seven minutes between now and the striking of the clock, I trust that you will learn some respect for my position. And perhaps it's about time you learned some self-control, too?'

As the man spoke, his son - half-hidden behind his bulk - was sneering triumphantly at Kazy.

'Enough of this,' said Hiffa Ammiti quietly. 'Mr Masters, we have something to finish here. If you would be so kind as to give us an hour in which to do it, we would be grateful.'

Marston Masters shook his head. 'I too have things to do. There are changes to be made and I'm not a man to wait around. I'll thank you to leave now.'

'As you wish.'

The new Headmaster stood aside and they all filed out of the side room, through the study, and back down the corridor to the front door. It was shut behind them, firmly.

Hiffa Ammiti stopped just outside the door, sniffing again. He shook his head sadly and turned away.

'Unfinished business,' he said as he led them down the drive.

'We'll ask for permission to return,' MacDonald agreed.

'Which he will deny us for as long as he can. You and I must go back to Londinium after lunch. But we must find a way of getting into the Lodge again, soon...'

Behind them, Akayzia glanced across to Digby. He smiled and nodded his head in agreement.