

Ed Wicke

(A taster of...)

**Akayzia Adams
and the
Masterdragon's Secret**

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blacknbluepress@hotmail.com

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Prologue

When the deep bell sounded distantly, the taller of the two boys looked up from the slab of wood he had been carving with a chisel. The other boy, the one with mousy hair and gold-rimmed glasses, began unscrewing the clamps that held the wood to the workbench. He listened to the number of chimes.

'We're going to be late again!' he groaned. They hurriedly cleared the bench, throwing items into an old cabinet. The tall boy with dark, curly hair wrapped the wood carefully in a cloth and stored it under the workbench. He snatched up the remains of a fruitcake and scattered it outside for the birds.

The boy with glasses paused before the door. A large, round stone set on a little shelf there was glowing with a cold and gentle light that filled the room with soft shadows. He took a last look around the tiny hut and touched the stone. The light ceased. Stepping outside, he shut the door and clicked his fingers. A lock turned.

'Conceal,' he said, and the stone hut disappeared into shadow behind the mass of brambles and vines that overgrew it. He paused a moment, looking to make sure that all was well hidden.

They took from their backpacks small wooden boards like the one they had been working on. Dropping them to the ground, they stepped onto them and glided off through the woods. The shorter boy flew carefully while the other swooped around trees and performed extravagant loops in the air. They left the wood and began to cross a meadow, the tall boy in front. Ancient buildings about a broad square could be seen in the distance.

Suddenly the tall boy stopped. His friend pulled up beside him.

'What's wrong?'

The other stared into the western sky, a troubled look on

his face. 'Don't know. But can't you feel it? Something's happening.'

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

The thin, manshaped creature bent over the broad stone table, scrabbling at it with long clawlike fingers. Its dark shadow fell across the table, blunting the hazy sunlight. You could not have said if the creature was male or female, or whether it was young or very old. It wore loose grey robes and its black hair hung about its shoulders. Its smooth skin was tanned and hairless. It was studying the creased grey stone with bright blue eyes that seemed to burn with some great emotion, though whether of anger or hatred or devout love, it was impossible to tell. It had small ears and no nose, simply nostrils that opened into its face.

Suddenly the hand of its shadow moved, pointing down to the left. The hands of the creature however had not changed their position at all. The shadow had its own gruesome shape and was continually twisting and pulling to one side or another, as if trying to free itself. Now it gave a shuddering sigh and the crone turned its head slightly, hissing at it.

The shadow moved again and thrust its other hand inside the head of the creature. The crone's head turned in little jerks, resisting, dragged down to the place that the shade's left hand was pointing to. Its burning eyes focussed on a web of lines that floated above the stone, like strands of water weed in a pond.

The network of filaments seemed to be a map of some kind, a map in several dimensions, forming coloured patterns with some unguessable purpose. Upon the strands were tiny specks that, if you looked closely, seemed to be moving. And for a moment a scarcely visible fleck of light could be seen there, a microscopic flicker upon a miniscule speck of dust.

'Ahhhhh!' the crone breathed. 'Dimnás unpresca emta-

borium Hrakkú mas inturba. Ahhhh!

And it bent over another part of the map and poked with one long nail at a tiny maggot-like creature suspended on another filament. This slimy spicule began climbing through the mesh, so slowly that it hardly seemed to be moving. Another maggot was prodded into action, then another. The shadow grew and rose behind the crone, whispering something to the darkening air, something heavy with evil and nameless fear.

The crone watched the maggots. 'Urrek!' it commanded with a harsh, urgent cry. 'Urrek!'

Chapter 1 London Zoo

It was going to be a bad day for bullies. They didn't know this yet. And they wouldn't have guessed that the cause of it would be Akayzia Adams.

As for Kazy Adams herself, she didn't know how brave she was until five o'clock in the afternoon on Friday, October 11, 2002. Nor did she suspect that she had any magical talents.

Kazy Adams' assessment of herself at 4:59 pm: Average height for her age (almost 12). Slender. Shoulder length hair, brown but almost black, naturally in ringlets but currently in tight plaits tied with colourful bits of yarn. Skin a honey colour, with clear blue eyes from her Irish father and a delicate nose like her Jamaican mother's. Has her father's wicked sense of humour and her mother's laugh. Enjoys racing down the right wing at hockey. Plays the piano well. Likes hip-hop, R&B, rock, classical – well, just about all music. Favourite artist at the moment: Ms Dynamite. Likes skateboarding, can't afford a board of her own. Wishes her parents were still alive. Quiet, a little shy, kind. Okay, a bit sassy at times. Not a pushover, but definitely not brave.

Mega-bully Killer Babs' assessment of Akayzia Adams at 4:59: A skinny little twerp who laughs too much. A bit too cheeky for her own good, too. Needs a good kicking. And she's going to get one *very* soon...

Kazy was on a school trip to London Zoo. They had just finished the guided tour and were wandering about in small groups. She and a few classmates were standing by the cage of a new exhibit that the guide couldn't tell them much about.

The red-furred creature was the shape and size of a small, slender bear but its gentle, rounded face and intelligent brown eyes were almost human. It reminded Kazy of the time she'd gone to see the play "Cats" in London, when the costumes made the actors look like animals and people at

the same time.

Its movements were graceful and it seemed just as comfortable on two legs as it was on four. It was standing on its rear legs now and was nearly as tall as the three girls looking at it. The forepaws with which it gripped the bars of its cage had six furred fingers tipped with short black claws that could be retracted, like a cat's. Yet it was somehow larger, wilder, stronger than this description suggests. It had a bear's solid animal calmness and a bear's strong legs and forearms; and like a bear, there was something powerful and even savage about it.

Between Kazy's group and the animal's cage was a security ditch, with a low fence on their side of the ditch. As she stood there, a large older girl and a tall boy pushed in front of her and leaned over the fence. The boy took a wooden catapult from his pocket and passed it to the girl.

'Your turn, Killer,' he said.

Killer Babs, the most feared girl in the school, smirked at her little audience as she took the catapult – her own brand new catapult, "*The Zappo 100, now with super-strong elastic, guaranteed to hit people, pets and wild birds up to 100 metres away*". She pulled a stone from her pocket, loaded it and took aim. She fired the shot quickly and hit the animal on the chest. It didn't move except to turn its head and look sadly at its tormentors.

'You're rubbish!' sneered the boy. Kazy didn't know his name because she'd started at this school only a few weeks before, but she knew he wasn't someone to tangle with. 'Only five points for that,' he said. 'My go. *I'll* knock that stupid smile off his face!'

He charged the catapult with a stone, looked about to check he wasn't being watched, and shot. The stone flew at the animal's head but struck one of the bars of the cage and bounced away harmlessly.

'You're rubbish, too!' said Babs, snatching back the catapult. She took another stone from her pocket and began loading the weapon.

'Stop that!' Kazy cried. Then she put her hand to her mouth. She hadn't meant to say anything, but the words had just tumbled out.

Babs and the boy turned to look at her. They were astounded. Babs asked threateningly, 'You gonna stop me?'

Kazy nearly walked away. Why make two massive enemies at the start of a school year? But something stopped her.

'You shouldn't do that,' she said. 'It's cruel.' Her voice shook a little, but she stood firm.

The other girl laughed at her.

'You're such a *baby*, Adams. It's just a bit of fun. It's what they're here for – fun! *My* fun. Now shove off!'

She raised the catapult again. Kazy leapt forward and knocked the weapon from the large girl's brawny hand. It sailed over the fence and landed in the ditch with a splash.

There was an astonished silence. The only noise to be heard was the sound of Kazy's classmates creeping away as quietly as they could. Kazy herself stood motionless, surprised at what she'd just done. Her heart was pounding and her knees shook.

The boy grabbed one of Kazy's arms and twisted it behind her back so hard that it seemed about to break. She gasped with pain. She tried to say something but couldn't draw enough breath to make a sound.

The other girl slapped her hard across the face and said through clenched teeth, '*You're* going to climb over that fence and pick it up! And *then* you're gonna stand here and keep score for us. Go on! Get it! *Now!*'

They pushed Kazy over the fence and she fell to the ground. She picked herself up and stood there rubbing her right arm, looking up at their taunting faces. Her cheek was burning with the slap.

'Pick it up!' hissed the boy. 'Or we'll break every stupid bone in your stupid body!'

Kazy bent down and fished the catapult out of the ditch. She smiled shakily at the two of them and held out the

weapon towards Killer Babs.

'Is this yours?' she asked in an uneven voice.

Killer Babs didn't notice that the small girl's eyes flashed as she said this. She reached confidently for the catapult. But Kazy pulled her arm away and flipped the catapult back over her own head, so that it landed inside the animal's enclosure.

'Get it yourself, then!' she shouted. Then she ran.

Both bullies leapt the fence and ran after her. They were pushing each other aside so as to get to Kazy first.

They didn't see the bear creature do something odd. It waved one forearm and seemed to be making some animal noises. Just then the boy tripped, Killer Babs fell over him, and they both tumbled into the ditch.

The ditch was deep and wet and choked with a thick green slime. Beneath the slime was a brown sludgy mud. In the mud was five years' worth of banana skins, peanuts, dead slugs, crisp packets and the fish heads that the seal keeper had dropped there long ago, all rotting slowly while the earwigs and millipedes and fly larvae and beetle grubs crawled in and out.

The two bullies pulled themselves out of the stinking ditch and punched each other. They looked around for smaller people to punch. But Kazy had gone.

Half an hour later, she was again standing in front of the same cage, alone this time. The Zoo would be closing soon. The autumn sunlight that slanted through the tall trees behind her was fading quickly and she ought to be boarding the coach along with the rest of her school party. But she had stayed on, drawn by the solitary figure leaning against its cage, its body crowded against the bars as if to get as close to freedom as possible.

She looked again at the temporary sign attached to this fence - a few paragraphs handwritten in thick green paint on a white board.

'*Pseudomarsupalis ruber*,' she said thoughtfully, sounding

out the syllables in a soft, clear voice. She spoke in a musical accent that was her very own, a mixture of Ireland, London and the Caribbean. She looked at the creature. *Ruber* meant red, and this was a creature with deep ruby fur. And *Pseudomarsupalis* must mean that it had a pouch like a kangaroo's, but not for keeping its babies in.

'You look so unhappy here,' she said to the creature. 'Well, all of you look sad I think, but you're different, like you *know* you shouldn't be here. I wish I could set you free. Sometimes... sometimes I want to let you *all* out.'

She looked over her shoulder, worried that someone had heard her. But there was no one in sight except an elderly couple several cages down.

Earlier that day the creature had been pacing its enclosure on all fours, stopping occasionally and raising itself upright to peer at the onlookers, as if searching for someone it recognised. Now it was staring blankly into the distance, unaware of everything around it, like a man pondering desperate actions. But as the girl spoke it turned to look at her and its eyes were suddenly alive. It began to make noises – rapid, urgent, repeated sounds in a soft, lilting voice.

The girl gasped. The noises weren't animal noises at all. They were words. Words that made no sense and yet almost made sense, floating just beyond the reach of her comprehension.

The creature stopped its torrent of musical sounds. It appeared to be puzzled. Then it spoke again, in a whisper:

'Child – human child – please help me. Help me.'

Chapter 2 Escape

The creature had pushed its head up against the bars it was gripping between its forepaws.

'You are not like the other Outlanders,' it said. 'I know you will help me.'

She continued to stare at it, wondering.

'Near the litter bin to your right,' it continued, 'there is a metal wire of the type that humans use to hang clothes upon. Do you see it? If you pass it to me, I can escape.'

She studied the sign again. *Fierce animal!* she read. *Do not approach!* She looked across at the animal's sharp teeth and curved claws. Then she looked into its urgent, sad face. She walked over to the litter bin and retrieved the coat hanger.

'Please throw it to me.'

She looked around to check that no one was watching. The elderly couple were approaching from her right, but they weren't looking in her direction. She leaned over the fence and tossed the loop of metal. The animal reached through the bars and caught it.

The creature pulled the coat hanger apart in half a second and then its fingers worked busily, twisting it into a new shape. It scurried to the side of its cage, where there was a locked metal gate. She saw it insert both ends of the wire into the lock. It worked the mechanism feverishly for almost a minute, while the girl watched the old couple move slowly from cage to cage on their way towards her and the exit.

The gate swung open, screeching on its rusty hinges. A reddish streak of fur passed along the side of the cage and leapt into the ditch, carefully avoiding the slimy mud at the bottom.

A quiet voice came to her from the depths of the ditch.

'Thank you, child.' The creature's head appeared for a fraction of a second, then was gone. 'Have you a name?'

'Akayzia Adams.'

'Are you walking to the exit, Miss Adams?'

'Yes. My school coach is outside. I'm kinda late -'

'Be my eyes as we progress. Is anyone close by?' It began to crawl towards the exit, its furred back just visible.

'There's two old folk coming up from the right - the opposite way from the exit,' she said. 'Ain't no one between us and the gates. Oh - but there's one guard at the turnstile.'

'No keepers anywhere?'

'None.'

By now they had come to the lion's cage. The creature paused. Kazy heard a metallic sound and remembered the coat hanger.

'You're not gonna to let the lion out!' she exclaimed.

'That would be very dangerous,' he replied. 'And it would do him no good. London is no place for a lion.'

'Then what -'

'I shall release the owls. Have you not seen what's been done to them? The cramped cages, the pitiless gaze of the sun and the gawking of humans? These are creatures who need the freedom of the skies.'

'But you can't let all the animals out!'

There was a noise from the ditch very like laughter. 'I thought that was what you wanted!'

'Yeah. But some of them won't know how to live in the wild.'

'I will release only the owls. I have spent two weeks listening to their gentle lamentations and have promised myself that I will not leave without giving them their liberty. Besides, it will provide a diversion. Wait here!'

He sprang from the ditch, jumped over a barrier, and with his body flattened against the ground he sped to the aviaries that held the owls. This time each lock took only seconds to pick.

Kazy turned to see the elderly couple staring open-mouthed as each cage door in turn was flung open and the owls emerged, pushing past one another, launching them-

selves into the air and flying smoothly, circling once and dipping their great wings towards their liberator before disappearing over the high walls of the zoo. The creature waved his arm once more and called to them musically as they flew over the coach park.

The guard seated by the turnstile heard a whirring of wings above him and looked up to see owls, a skyful of owls, rising and vanishing. He dropped the notebook he had been writing in and picked up a two-way radio. He spoke a few quick words into this as he stood up, looking about. He leaned out of his booth and pointed at Kazy, still standing near the empty cages.

'You! Girl! Come over here!' he ordered.

She walked slowly towards the turnstile. He hurried across and grabbed her by the shoulder.

'Did you do that? Did you? Answer me!'

Kazy took a long time before answering, while the animal moved stealthily towards the gates.

'No. Wasn't me!' She put her hands on her hips and stared him down. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a reddish blur as the creature regained the ditch. It was poised within a few metres of the turnstile now.

The guard had seen something, too. He pushed Kazy to one side and started towards where the creature was hiding, his hand going into an inside pocket of his jacket.

Kazy didn't hesitate a moment. She stuck out a foot and the guard fell headlong as the creature sprang from the ditch. It ducked under the turnstile arms and shot out through the gates.

By now the elderly couple were running towards them – and to Kazy's mind there was something odd about this, odd that two old people should run so fast and so well. But she had no time to consider the thought. She followed the creature under the turnstile and ran towards her coach.

'Child.' It was waiting just outside the gates, behind a tree. She paused. It continued, its voice serious, urgent even:

'I should not have spoken to you. But I cannot leave you here: you must come with me. Besides, there is something about you. You are not like the others.'

Kazy shook her head. 'I've gotta go home to my grandmother now,' she said. 'I'm all she has, you see.'

There was a moment's silence as the creature considered this. In that pause, Kazy could hear quiet footfalls approaching the gates behind her.

'I understand,' it said. 'But you will ask your grandmother?'

Kazy frowned. Her grandmother would think she'd gone mad.

'Come to Regents Park tomorrow. At about this time. Wait by the third missing tree. Repeat the instruction, please.'

'The third missing tree. Tomorrow, at this time.' She glanced back towards the gate. When she looked around again, the creature was gone.

The elderly couple peered around the gates but withdrew as a loud voice hailed Kazy from the opposite direction.

'Akayzia Adams! Get over here, *now!*'

Kazy scurried over to the coach, apologising to the teacher. She took the seat the teacher pointed to, which unfortunately was just across the aisle from Killer Babs and bang in front of the boy who had been with her.

'You're dead, Adams,' Babs said gleefully, rubbing her large hands together. She looked a sight – mud on her jumper and ditch slime streaked across her face, soggy socks stained green and brown, sticky hair decorated by one earwig crawling cautiously towards her left ear. 'I'm gonna make you regret this day for the rest of your life. I'm gonna smash your ugly black face into an ugly black pulp. I'm gonna - Adams! Are you listening to me?'

Kazy's thoughts had been full of the creature. Now she turned in her seat and looked across at the bully.

'No. Sorry, I wasn't listening. What'd you say?'

Babs' jaw dropped. There was something about this girl that she didn't understand, and it bothered her. 'You're making me angry, Adams,' she said through clenched teeth. 'First you steal my catapult, then you ignore me. *And* you've made us late getting back. What were you doing? Letting the animals out?' She sneered.

'Only one of them,' Kazy said with a little smile. She wasn't afraid of the girl. She wasn't afraid of anything just now. She turned back to face the front, lost in her own thoughts once more.

Babs drew back one mighty arm and hurled a punch across the aisle. Unfortunately her fellow bully had just then started up the aisle to join in, and Babs' powerful fist hit him instead, just at waist level. He collapsed onto the floor and lay groaning.

A loud voice called from the front. 'You two! Come here! Now! Detention for both of you, and you're travelling up here where I can keep an eye on you!'

The got up and walked to the front, throwing sour glances behind them.

'Good heavens!' cried the teacher when they sat down by him. 'You're revolting!'

The rest of the bus laughed. Someone shouted from the back, 'That's right, sir, they are!'

'What have you been doing?'

'Fell in a ditch, sir,' the boy muttered.

'Smells like it, too. But what's that on your heads?'

'Oh, that. We was out looking for – for someone. Then these owls, they all flew overhead. And they –'

'I see. You've got owl poo all over you. Could you open the window beside you? I know it's cold, and you're wet, but we can't have you stinking out the whole bus, can we?'

And there's more excitement, danger and magic in the rest of the book!