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Opening extract from

Ivan The Terrible

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In which I meet Ivan and realise I am in for a really hard time

The minute she spotted me, Mrs Blaizely's eyes lit up as if she were planning to eat me. 'Ah, Boris!'

I screeched to a halt in the corridor. 'Yes, Mrs Blaizely?'

'You speak Russian, don't you?'

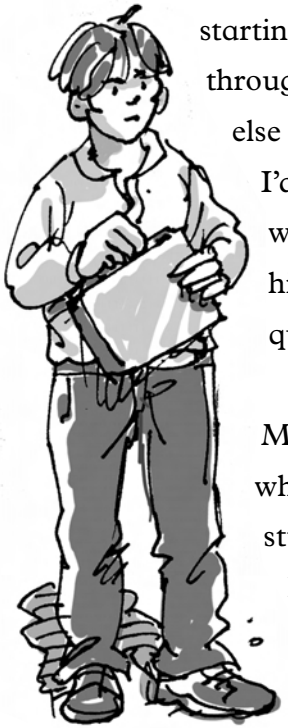
'Yes,' I agreed. (No getting round that one with a mother called Galina Stepanova Rezotsky.)

'Right, then,' she told me. 'I think you're very probably the man for this job. Please come with me.'

I followed her into her office. It says **Mrs Elise Blaizely** on the door, and her name's put in every spelling test we have in our first year in school, till everyone gets

it right.

There, waiting, was a boy my age. I'd seen him earlier at the school gates. His mother had been pointing at the sign that says **Welcome to St Edmund's** and he'd been trying to drag her away. You couldn't blame him. It's horrible starting at a new school halfway through term when everyone else knows everyone already. I'd had to do it myself, so when I saw him tugging at his mother's sleeve, I'd felt quite sorry for him.



Now he stood next to Mrs Blaizely, clutching what looked like a very stylish red leather-bound lunch box.

She pushed him forward gently.

'Boris,' she said. 'Meet Ivan. Ivan, meet Boris.'

'Hi,' I said.

'*Dobya dan*,' said Ivan.

'You see the problem?' Mrs Blaizely said. 'He speaks no English.'

I nodded (though I was thinking there probably wasn't a boy our age on the planet who hadn't seen enough adverts and films to make a stab at saying 'Hi').

'Just for a day or two . . .' said Mrs Blaizely in her coaxing tone.

I gave her one of my suspicious looks. 'Just for a day or two – *what*, exactly?' I asked as politely as I could.

'Chum him around,' said Mrs Blaizely. 'Explain to him all the things the teachers are saying. And then explain to the teachers what he says back.'

'Be his interpreter, you mean?'

She beamed at me. 'Yes. And, if he's

writing, you can translate for him. Just while we get him started. It will give him an idea of the sort of work you're doing in your classes. He'll soon get the hang of it.'

'But what about my own work?'

She didn't laugh. She's too polite. But she did raise an eyebrow because she knows that getting my own work done without being distracted hasn't always been top of my list of real worries.

And, as I say, I do remember exactly how awful it is to have to start off in a new class with twenty-five new people whose names you don't even know, especially if you can't speak a word of the language – not even 'Hi'.

'All right,' I said. 'I'll do it.'

'Good lad,' she praised me. Then, just as she was sending me back to my classroom, she thought of something else. 'Oh, by the way, Boris, please make sure

the two of you are sitting in the front row during Assembly because I'll want to bring Ivan up on the stage to introduce him to everyone.'

'Righty-ho,' I said.

Mrs Blaizely's got a thing about running what she calls 'a civilized school'. She says she wants everyone at St Edmund's to have good manners and a positive attitude. So we began Assembly by singing that wimpy little song about remembering to be grateful for everything round us. (Lulu once wrote a joke version of it about *not* being grateful for empty beer cans, or sick on the pavements, or homework or dog poo. Mrs Shah said it was 'a brilliant spoof' and pinned it on the display board. She kept it up right through till Parents' Evening. Then she lost her nerve and suddenly it vanished.)

After we'd finished singing 'In Our Wonderful World', some of the children in the nursery put on a little show about being kind to animals and taking care of your pets. It wasn't up to much, but we all clapped to show our good manners and positive attitude. Then Mrs Blaizely begged us all to make less noise in the corridors and not drop so much litter. (We hear that so often it's practically our morning prayer.)

And then we came to our bit. Mrs Blaizely changed to her really bright and enthusiastic voice. 'I have someone to introduce to you,' she said to everyone. 'His name is Boris and he comes from a huge country called Russia. Russia's so big that some snowy parts in the north are way up in the Arctic Circle while some parts in the south are so dry that they're desert.'

She beckoned to Ivan. 'Don't be shy. Come up here on stage so everyone can see

you and know that they've got to be especially thoughtful and considerate until you've settled in.'

I gave Ivan a little push and he walked up the steps. I thought he'd just blush and stay at the side of the stage, shuffling his feet in an embarrassed fashion like everyone else who's ever been new to the school.

But no. He swept forward right to the middle, almost next to Mrs Blaizely, turned to face us all and did a sort of smart military bow from the waist.

Then he straightened up, threw his arms out wide, and said in the loudest, clearest Russian:

'Greetings to all you lowly shivering worms.'

I was still staring when Mrs Blaizely beckoned. She wanted me up the steps and standing next to Ivan. I didn't have



a choice.

'Now,' she said. 'Boris is going to tell us, in English, exactly what Ivan just said to us in Russian.'

She turned to me. 'Well, go on.'

I tell you frankly, this was my big mistake. If I'd just done it, just gone ahead and told her straight off: 'He said, "Greetings to all you lowly shivering worms",' I could have saved myself a heap of trouble.

But I couldn't do it. Look at it this way. There he was, on his first day in a new school. For all I knew, it could have been his very first week in a new country, his first day in his new house, almost his first words in his brand-new life (apart from arguing with his mother about whether or not to come through the school gates in the first place).

And he'd been called up to stand on

stage with everyone staring. I thought he must have panicked, and said something silly as a sort of joke, not realising that in our civilized school where everyone's supposed to have good manners and a positive attitude, it wasn't going to work, and everyone was going to end up staring at him even more.

Lowly shivering worms?

It's pretty *rude*. I couldn't let him get himself into everyone's bad books so quickly.

So I just told them: 'Ivan said, "Good morning, everyone".'

I thought we'd get away then. I thought Mrs Blaizely would nod at us, and we'd troop off the stage. I'd tick him off (in Russian) and we'd start the day again.

But no such luck, because Ivan hadn't finished. He stepped forward again.

'No doubt you'll all be half-witted

enough to welcome me amongst you,' he said (in Russian). 'Your tiny, dim-bulb brains are simply not capable of seeing that I have secret powers which I intend to use to turn the whole pack of you into my slaves.'

He beamed and gave another of his smart bows. There was a pause. Then Mrs Blaizely glanced at me enquiringly. 'Boris?'

I took a deep breath.

'I am delighted to be here,' I pretended to translate for Ivan. 'I think this school looks very nice. And everyone looks very kind and friendly. I really hope I'll settle in soon and make a whole load of new friends.'

'That's lovely,' said Mrs Blaizely. She turned to Ivan. 'And I'm sure everyone in this hall wants to join me in wishing you well and hoping you feel at home as soon as possible.'

Ivan turned to me. 'What did she say?'



I wasn't going to risk him coming out with another barrage of insults. So I looked Ivan in the eye and told him, 'She said, "Watch your fat tongue, New Boy, or I'll break off your arm and bash you with the soggy end."'

I really hoped he'd look at Mrs Blaizely with a new respect. But he just grinned and walked down the steps from the stage.

Feeling a bit of a wally, I followed him.

End of Assembly. And thank heaven for that.