

opening extract from

The Demon Headmaster and the Prime Minister's Brain

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The Octopus Game

'Dinah!'

Dinah didn't hear. She was settled in the crook of the big, old pear tree, thinking about the website she was designing.

'*Dinah!*'

She was concentrating so hard that she did not hear the voices calling her from the other end of the garden.

But Lloyd was not the sort of person to put up with being ignored. He came stamping through the garden, with all the others following him, and stood beside the tree.

'DINAH!'

She looked down and blinked at him.

'Oh. Sorry. I was thinking.'

'Huh!' snorted Lloyd.

Harvey, Dinah's other adopted brother, raced up and interrupted, just as Lloyd was about to say something really rude.

'Di, aren't you ready? Look, everyone else is here. We want to get going.'

Dinah peered between the branches. Sure enough, there were the other three members of

SPLAT. Two tall figures—Ian and Mandy—hauling along a smaller, chubbier one that struggled crossly.

'Ingrid doesn't look very happy,' Dinah said.

'Ingrid *isn't* very happy!' shouted Ingrid, scowling fiercely. 'Ingrid's sick to death of the horrible Computer Club. We went *yesterday*. Why do we have to go again today?'

'We voted to spend this week at the Computer Club.' Lloyd gave her a stern look that was meant to shut her up. 'What's the point of having a secret society if we don't all stick together?'

But it was not so easy to shut Ingrid up. 'What's the point of having a secret society at all, if we don't do anything special? We were going to have a great time this summer. A SPLAT picnic and a SPLAT camp in the woods and a SPLAT visit to the Science Museum and—oh, lots of things. But we've landed up trotting back to school, like everyone else. To the *Computer Club*.' She pulled a fierce, ugly face.

'It's only for another four days, Ing,' Mandy said gently. 'And if you'd only try to enjoy it, you'd see it's fun.'

'It's *boring*,' Ingrid said firmly. 'And anyway, who wants to go back to school in the holidays?'

'We voted,' Lloyd said again. He folded his arms and glared at Ingrid. 'Now stop moaning and behave properly.'

Up in her tree, Dinah started to get irritated. She didn't want to listen to their squabbling. She wanted to get on with her website.

'Look, Ing.' She waved the paper she was writing on. '*I* haven't forgotten about the rest of the holiday. I'm going to put it all on the SPLAT website I'm making. Why don't you go ahead with the others and make sure we've got a computer? Then when I get there I can show you what I'm doing.'

Ingrid scowled. 'It's still just computer stuff, isn't it?' But she did not manage to sound quite as angry as before, and a moment later, she was letting Mandy lead her out of the side gate and away towards the school.

At the foot of the tree, Ian bowed low, in his usual teasing way. 'Well done, O Genius,' he drawled. 'How brilliant you are at handling people.'

'What do you mean *she's* good at handling people?' Lloyd looked furious. '*I* was the one who told Ingrid to behave.'

Ian grinned at him. 'Of course, of course, Great Leader. How stupid of me to forget. I grovel in the dust.'

'Be more sensible if we started going to the Computer Club,' chipped in Harvey. 'If we're not there soon, I'll have to wait *ages* for a game of Diamond Dragon.'

He pushed them both and the three boys began to walk up the garden. Dinah watched them for a moment. Bossy Lloyd and tall, comical Ian. Having one of their friendly quarrels, while Harvey ran along behind trying to stop them. All quite normal and ordinary. She settled herself on her branch again and gave a private grin. Things were so pleasant and peaceful. Oh, it was going to be a good summer, with no excitements and lots of time to work. Now, where had she got to?

An hour later, she walked up the road towards the school gates, with the design for the website tucked in her pocket. Her pale, thin face was as stiff as usual and she looked almost bored, because her feelings never showed on the outside, but inside her head she was singing.

Lovely, fantastic Computer Club! It meant that she could spend all day working out programs and trying new things, without the others nagging her for being dull and not joining in. And there were four more days of it left!

She was so busy planning what she would do on the other days, that she did not look where she was going. She ran up the school steps and nearly fell over two small, gloomy figures sitting at the top.

'Careful!' snapped Ingrid.

'Thought we were big enough to *see*,' muttered Harvey.

Dinah looked down at them in amazement. 'Whatever is the matter with you two? What are you doing out here?'

'Sulking!' Ingrid said. 'Because of the horrible Computer Club.'

Oh dear, thought Dinah. She sat down on the steps beside them, wishing she was Mandy, who was good at this sort of thing. 'You did promise to come, you know. And *you* liked it, anyway, Harvey. What's changed since yesterday?'

Harvey looked round woefully at her, and she remembered how cheerful he had been as he followed the others away an hour ago. What could have changed him?

'*That*,' said Harvey.

Twisting round, he stabbed a finger towards the glass door of the school. Stuck up there was a huge poster. Across the top, it said in large letters:

JUNIOR COMPUTER BRAIN
OF THE YEAR

Underneath was a picture of a man in a white lab coat. He was very tall and very thin, with thick, pebbly glasses. Somehow, the blurred

photograph made him look not quite human. More like an insect. Or a robot. Dinah actually found herself shivering and she gave a stiff little laugh to hide it.

'*He* can't be the Junior Computer Brain of the Year. He's much too old.'

'He's repulsive!' Ingrid pulled an extra-horrible cross-eyed face and stuck out her tongue at the poster. 'He's the Computer Director. The one who's running the competition to find the Junior Computer Brain. Mr Meredith brought the forms in this morning. And the game.'

'And that was it. Whang! Everything *ruined*,' said Harvey miserably. 'Yesterday was great. Like you said. We played all sorts of games and learnt some things as well. But today—well, no one will think about anything except the competition game.'

'They think they're going to win, do they?' Dinah said.

'*No*.' Ingrid looked impatient. 'It's not that. You don't understand. It's not the competition that's taken them over. It's the actual game.'

'But that's silly,' Dinah said. 'A game's just something for fun.'

'That's what we told them,' Harvey said. He sounded really unhappy. 'We told them it was only a game.'

'And what did they say?'

He looked even unhappier. 'They said, "Ssh!"'

'It's made them really *peculiar*.' Ingrid tapped her head and rolled her eyes. 'Remember what they were like when the Demon Headmaster was here?'

Dinah smiled her small smile and tossed her skinny plaits back over her shoulder. 'Oh, come *on*. They can't be that bad.'

Neither Ingrid nor Harvey answered her. They just stood up and hauled at her hands, one on each side, until she followed them into the school and along the corridor towards the Hall.

Dinah let them lead her, but she was still not taking them seriously. Because she could remember what the school had been like when the Demon Headmaster was there. The blank, bare walls. The quiet, hypnotized children moving round like robots. The cruel, bossy prefects. And the feeling of terror everywhere.

That had all changed since Mr Meredith became headmaster. Now it was an untidy, cheerful, noisy school, just like all the others Dinah had been to. How could it have changed back in a single morning?

And yet—it *was* rather quiet today. As they came to the Hall door, Dinah started to feel uneasy. And what she saw when she stepped inside was quite unexpected.

There were no crowds of children charging round everywhere or gathering in little huddles by the computers. There was no laughter or talking. Instead, all the children—about a hundred of them—were sitting crosslegged on the ground, in neat rows in front of one of the computers. They were watching the screen with a steady, blank stare. No one fidgeted. No one whispered. They almost seemed to be holding their breaths.

'You see?' Harvey hissed. 'They've all gone goo-goo eyed over this stupid octopus game. Even the SPLAT people. Look at them!'

Dinah could see that he was right. Lloyd and Mandy were sitting on the floor with the other children and Ian was actually at the computer keyboard. He was the one playing the game.

'They've been like that for ages,' muttered Ingrid, getting crosser and crosser. 'One person playing and the rest just staring. It's *stupid.*' Suddenly she lost her temper altogether. She pulled a face at the rows of motionless backs and yelled, '*You're all SILLY IDIOTS!*'

Ian jumped and looked round. Immediately, there was a loud BLUUURP! from the computer. And a wail from the watching children.

'Ing, you're mean,' Mandy said. 'You distracted him.'

'Oh, sor*ry*,' Ingrid jeered. 'What's the matter?

Was he going to be Junior Computer Brain of the Year?'

'Me?' murmured Ian. 'Of course not. I'm just an ordinary moron having fun. I can tell you, it needs a *genius* to win this game. No one stands a chance except—' Then he caught sight of Dinah. 'Oh, there you are!'

'We've been waiting for you,' Lloyd said. He jumped up and began to organize things as usual, catching at Dinah's arm and trying to pull her forwards. 'You've got to have a go at this game. It's brilliant.'

All the others had turned round now. They were staring at Dinah, nudging each other and whispering. Dinah wriggled uncomfortably. She hated people to fuss over her and she wasn't interested in computer games. She wanted to go and work on her own program.

'Come on!' called Mandy. 'I bet you can do it.'

Dinah looked pink and stubborn. 'I don't think I'll bother, thank you.'

'Oh come *on*, Di.' Everyone was shouting it now. 'You've *got* to have a go. You could win the whole competition.'

Dinah felt like a snail dragged right out of its shell. All the children were staring at her and telling her what to do. And it was no good saying

she didn't want to. They would never leave her alone until she had a go at their stupid game. Slowly she walked through the crowd towards the computer.

'Traitor!' hissed Ingrid.

'Oh, *Di*!' Harvey looked at her sadly and turned away.

'Shut up, you two,' said Lloyd. 'Just because *you* don't like the game, it doesn't mean that no one else can play.' He pulled Dinah closer to the front. 'You'd better watch first, so you know how to do it. Mandy can show you. She's the best one so far.'

Mandy shook her red hair out of her eyes and smiled across at Dinah. 'I'm not really good. I mean—I can't *do* it or anything. You'll be loads better than I am.'

'Oh, get on.' Lloyd pushed her down into the chair in front of the computer. 'Come on. Start.'

Obediently, Mandy pressed the first key and the name of the game flashed on to the screen.

Octopus Dare.

'It's a treasure hunt,' muttered Ian helpfully. 'You have to steer your way through invisible shoals and then dive down and try and get past the—'

'Ssh!' hissed everyone else.

They had already turned back to the screen, staring with glazed dull eyes. Ian shrugged.

'Sorry I spoke. I just thought Dinah might like to know—'

'Shut *up*!' snapped Lloyd. 'Mandy's concentrating.'

She was. She was frowning and biting her lip as she moved a tiny ship around the screen. Shoals and sandbanks kept appearing and disappearing and her ship looped and zig-zagged frantically trying to avoid them. As each one appeared, the watching children held their breath. And when Mandy managed to steer the ship through them, a sigh of relief went round the Hall.

Dinah managed not to look impatient. She was used to having to wait while people struggled with things that were simple and obvious to her. But—couldn't Mandy *see*? There was a definite pattern to the shoals. Once you'd worked that out, you could go straight through and not round the long way. The thing was a 3-D puzzle that had to be worked out, not a test of quick reflexes. But Mandy obviously *couldn't* see. She went on frowning and steering at desperate speed.

Dinah passed the time by looking round at the faces of the others. They were all staring at the screen with the same eager attention, even though the game seemed quite ordinary. Was it the shoals that they found fascinating? Dinah did not think

so. They seemed to be waiting for something else. Something that came later. But why on earth were they so excited about it?

Suddenly the shoals all vanished and a door opened in the side of the ship. Out slid a little yellow submarine.

Mandy sat back and mopped her forehead. 'Phew! I thought I wasn't going to manage it this time. Just let me get my breath.'

'Hurry up,' said Lloyd. 'We want the octopus!'

'Yes! Yes!' everyone else shouted. 'The *octopus*!'

Dinah looked round at them, puzzled by their eager faces. So that was what they'd all been waiting for. That was what the ship had to get past in the next bit of the game. That was what had made them sit so still and watch the screen so anxiously. But—why?

Mandy leaned forward again and clicked on the submarine. At once, the screen was filled with a pattern of long, waving tentacles. They moved and twisted, twining in a complicated pattern of curves and loops, constantly altering and yet always keeping a balance, swelling and shrinking and dancing . . .

Dinah could not look away. As the curves shifted and changed, her eyes followed them. Backwards and forwards. Up and down. Crossing and uncrossing. It was a strange sensation. Watching

them made her feel dreamy and excited, both at once.

Octopus - s - s - s - s! murmured her mind.

It was a second or two before she realized that the submarine was still there, up in the top right-hand corner of the screen. Mandy was trying to steer it past the octopus to reach the sunken treasure. But there was not much time to watch it. In less than a minute, Mandy faltered and the tentacles reached out and engulfed the submarine.

BLUUURP!

Mandy turned round, laughing. 'You see? I'm hopeless. You have a go, Di.'

'Dinah doesn't want a go at your stupid octopus game,' Ingrid said from the back of the crowd.

'She thinks it's boring,' called Harvey.

Dinah stared at the screen. Trying to remember *exactly* what the octopus had been like. Trying to work out how to get past the tentacles. Because she was *sure* it could be done logically, like avoiding the shoals. Only she could not see how, and the problem nagged and teased at her.

'Dinah!' shouted Ingrid. 'Tell them you don't want to do it.'

But her words seemed to come from the other side of a wall of glass. On this side, there was nothing except the octopus. All Dinah could think

of was that she knew she could work out the puzzle. If only she could see the octopus again . . .

Almost in a daze, she sat down in front of the computer.