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opening extract from

Demon Headmaster Strikes Again

written by

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published by

Oxford University Press

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A Really Weird Village . . .

Simon saw them come. The removal van lumbered down the road, followed by a red car, and both of them stopped at the end house. The children got out of the car and stood talking while their parents unlocked the house. Two boys and a girl.

The older boy was about Simon's age, and he looked disgusted. His voice floated up the road.

'This village is weird! There's no one about.'

The other boy groaned. 'Stop *moaning*, Lloyd! We've got to get used to it, however weird it is. Haven't we, Di?'

The girl nodded. 'Harvey's right. Dad's taken the new job, and so this is our home now. However weird it is.'

'Not much of a home.' Lloyd scowled. 'With the rest of SPLAT a hundred miles away.'

Judging by his expression, SPLAT was something really important, but Simon didn't get a chance to guess what, because the children's father called from the front door.

'Let's get on with the unpacking, then!'

Simon watched them run into the house. They

might be new, but they'd got one thing right straight away.

It *was* a weird village.

'It's creepy!' Lloyd said. 'There's no one around.'

They'd been unpacking for two days, and it was almost the first break they'd had. Harvey was flopped out on the floor, but Lloyd was by the sitting-room window, gazing moodily out across the village green.

Dinah looked at her brothers and thought how different the two of them were. They were both upset about moving, but Harvey was trying to make the best of it. Not like Lloyd. He'd been grumpy and irritable ever since they left their old house.

'It's only a village,' Harvey said soothingly. 'You can't expect a lot of people.'

'You'd get more people on an iceberg in the Arctic,' growled Lloyd. He glared at the post office and the shabby little shop. 'It's *dead*.'

'Well, it's where we live,' Dinah said briskly. She picked up her purse. 'Why don't we go and explore a bit? Mum's nipping out to look at the shops. Let's go too. Maybe we can buy some postcards of the village.'

Harvey jumped up, but Lloyd didn't move.

'Oh, wow!' he said sarcastically. 'What a treat!'

Dinah felt like shaking him. 'You'll never settle in if you don't try to like it.'

'I don't want to settle in. I'm going to stay here and write to the others.'

Harvey stared. 'What for?'

'Because we're still SPLAT!' Lloyd said fiercely. 'The Society for the Protection of our Lives Against Them. Remember? I care about keeping in touch, even if you don't.'

'But they're coming to stay,' Harvey said. 'They'll be here in a couple of days.'

'Exactly!' Lloyd sat down at the table and took out his pen. 'And they need to know what to expect.'

Dinah sighed. Maybe writing to SPLAT would cheer him up, but it didn't seem very likely. As she and Harvey left the room, she caught sight of the beginning of the letter.

Dear Ian, Mandy and Ingrid,
This place is a million times worse than I expected . . .

Harvey obviously felt like that about the shops. He stared through the window of the little supermarket and pulled a face. 'Looks really exciting. I don't think.'

Mrs Hunter shrugged. 'You haven't got to come in. Go with Dinah and take a look at the post office.'

Harvey peered through the post office window and three old ladies in woolly hats peered back at him. He shuddered.

'I know,' Dinah said quickly. 'Go down to that bus stop and see when the buses go into town.'

Harvey brightened. 'Now that *is* a good idea. Checking the escape route.'

He ran off, and Mrs Hunter smiled at Dinah. 'Well done. I don't know how I managed before you came to live with us.'

Dinah grinned back and pushed open the post office door. As she walked in, the three old ladies stopped talking and stared. Dinah smiled politely and went up to the counter.

'Hello. Have you got any postcards of the village?'

The postmistress shook her head. 'There's no call for them,' she said frostily. 'We don't get many visitors.'

There was something unpleasant about the way she said *visitors*. Dinah laughed quickly.

'Oh, I'm not a visitor. We've come to live here. My dad's got a job at the Biogenetic Research Centre. Doing public relations.'

'At the BRC?' All at once, the woman's whole

face altered. It was like magic. Her eyes lit up and she gave Dinah a warm, friendly smile. 'The BRC is a wonderful thing to have in the village. It's a really good neighbour.'

'Oh. That's nice.' Dinah blinked, startled by the sudden change.

She was even more startled when she turned round and found the three old ladies muttering behind her.

' . . . wonderful thing, the BRC . . . '

' . . . in the village . . . '

' . . . really good neighbour . . . '

It was all Dinah could do not to shudder. Maybe Lloyd was right when he said the village was creepy.

She bought some stamps and a map of the nearest town, and then went outside to meet Harvey. He was smiling as he came back from the bus stop.

'I've just met the doctor. Doctor Gill. She was really nice. Especially when I told her where Dad was working. She thinks the BRC's a wonderful thing.'

Mrs Hunter was coming out of the supermarket and she smiled when she heard what Harvey said. 'I was rather worried that people might be unfriendly. I thought they might not like the BRC, because it does genetic engineering. But it's

obviously very popular. Someone's just been telling me what a good neighbour it is.'

A wonderful thing . . . A really good neighbour . . . It was the same words, all the time. Dinah thought how peculiar it was, but she didn't say anything, because her mother and Harvey were looking so happy. What was the point of upsetting them?

All the same, she was frowning as they walked back across the village green.

They were almost home, when Harvey pointed down the road. 'Isn't that Lloyd? By the postbox. Who's that with him?'

Lloyd was talking to a boy about his own age, and they were both smiling. Dinah grinned.

'Looks as though he's made a friend.'

'Hurrah!' Mrs Hunter said, under her breath.

But she spoke too soon. Lloyd said something—and suddenly the other boy's expression changed. He stopped smiling and backed away quickly, disappearing round the corner.

Lloyd shoved his letter into the postbox and came marching down the road. He looked furious.

'I hate this place! And I hate the BRC! I wish they'd never offered Dad a job!'

'It's not their fault,' said Dinah.

'Oh, *isn't* it?' Lloyd said darkly. 'Didn't you see what just happened?'

'We saw you talking to a boy,' Mrs Hunter said.

'That's right!' said Lloyd. 'His name's Simon, and he was really friendly. Until I mentioned where Dad was working. And then—pow!—he couldn't get away fast enough. People in this village must hate the place.'

'But they don't,' Harvey said. 'They love it. Don't they, Mum?'

Mrs Hunter nodded. 'They seem to.'

'Simon didn't love it!' Lloyd said fiercely. 'If you'd seen his face—'

'He's only one person,' said Harvey. 'We've talked to lots of people. And they all said—'

'Stop it, you two!' Mrs Hunter pushed the front gate open. 'Let's wait for the expert, shall we? Dad's supposed to know exactly what people think of the BRC. It's his job.'

'It's the easiest job I ever had!' Mr Hunter leaned back in the armchair and sipped his tea, smiling at Mrs Hunter. 'I don't need to worry about the village. No one's bothered about the research. They all think the BRC is wonderful. A really good neighbour.'

Dinah felt the back of her neck prickle. She looked round at her mother and Harvey, but they hadn't noticed anything odd. Harvey was thinking about something quite different.

'So what *is* this research?'

'It's to do with DNA,' Mr Hunter said. 'Genes and all that stuff.'

Harvey looked blank. 'What kind of DNA?'

'Any old kind, I think. I saw them taking in a tank full of lizards today, for example. They must be going to do some work with those.'

'What kind of work?' Lloyd said suspiciously.

'Search me.' Mr Hunter reached into his briefcase and pulled out a thick book. 'Why don't you read about it?'

Lloyd leaned over his shoulder and read the title. '*DNA and Evolution. By Professor C. Rowe of the University of Wessex*. No thanks!' He backed away. 'Give it to Di.'

Mr Hunter laughed and held it out. 'Would you like it, Dinah?'

'Really?' Dinah's eyes lit up. 'But don't you need it?'

'Certainly not! I can't plough through all that.' Her father looked horrified.

Dinah took the book. 'Don't you need to understand the research? If you're managing the BRC's public relations?'

Mr Hunter grinned. 'I'm learning the easy way. They're sending me on a course.'

'That's nice,' Mrs Hunter said. She glanced round from the box she was unpacking. 'When does it start?'

'Well, actually . . . ' Mr Hunter looked suddenly sheepish. 'I have to leave the day after tomorrow.'

'*The day after tomorrow?*' Mrs Hunter put down the pile of plates she was unwrapping. 'But that's Saturday.'

'I know,' Mr Hunter said, apologetically. 'That's what I said when the Director told me. But I couldn't really argue. You know they offered me this job out of the blue. And they're paying me a fortune. I've got to do something to earn it.'

Lloyd looked furious. 'But we've only just got here.'

'You wouldn't be here at all,' Mr Hunter said, 'if they hadn't lent us this house until we sell our old one.'

Mrs Hunter sighed. 'I suppose you're right. They have treated us very well. I just wish they'd let you stay until I get to know a few people.'

'But you do know someone!' Mr Hunter looked a bit more cheerful. 'Guess who I met at work today!'

Mrs Hunter shook her head. 'I can't imagine.'

'Mrs Carter!' Mr Hunter said triumphantly. 'Remember her? The Director phoned her unexpectedly—just the way he did with me—and offered her a job in the personnel department.'

Mrs Hunter looked vague. 'Mrs Carter?'

'You know. Tall woman with a double chin. Got a daughter called Rose.'

Rose Carter!

Dinah nearly jumped out of her skin. She'd never thought she would hear that name again. Her mind began to fill with pictures.

Rose's blank hypnotized face. Her cold eyes. Her mechanical chanting: *The prefects are the voice of the Headmaster. They must be obeyed.* The Demon Headmaster had had their whole school in his power, with everyone hypnotized into obedience—except SPLAT. Rose had been his ideal prefect.

And she was here? In the village?

Dinah glanced at Lloyd and Harvey. She could see that they were stunned too.

'Rose is here?' Mrs Hunter was looking relieved. 'That's nice. I'll ask her round to see the children.'

That was obviously the last straw for Lloyd. A terrible end to a terrible day.

'Come on, Harvey,' he said gruffly. 'I'll give you a game on the computer.'

Dinah wanted to talk about the strange things that were happening, but she could see that Lloyd wasn't in the right mood for that. She would have to wait.

With a sigh, she picked up the book about DNA and evolution, and began to read.

Each living thing has its own, unique DNA, which took millions of years to evolve . . .

She was still reading at bedtime, when Mrs Hunter came in to say goodnight.

'Can't I have a bit longer, Mum? I'll put my own light out.'

'Well . . . all right.' Mrs Hunter smiled. 'After all, you're not going to school at the moment. And it'll be nice for Dad if *one* of us understands what the BRC is up to. Goodnight.'

Dinah mumbled something as her mother went out of the door. She wished she *did* understand what the BRC was up to. Slipping out of bed, she went over to the window and opened it, parting the curtains. With her chin on her hands, she stared across the village at the BRC laboratory.

The whole building was black and shadowy, except for two lights, low down at one end. They glowed through the night like two dull eyes. Could people still be working there, so late?

What were they doing?

Without knowing why, Dinah shuddered. The building looked like a great monster, crouched there in the dark. Like something evil, waiting to pounce.

She was just going to close the curtains, when a noise came drifting towards her, through the

night. From the direction of the BRC building.

Bzzz-ZZZ-zzz-ZZZ.

An insect noise? No, it was too loud. And it was too irregular for a machine. What could it be?

BZZZ-zzz-ZZZ-zzz.

Dinah leaned further out of the window, trying to pinpoint exactly where the noise was coming from, but it dwindled and died away. She didn't hear it again, even though she waited another ten minutes. She climbed back into bed feeling miserable and uneasy. The BRC was definitely peculiar.

Everyone sang its praises—in the same words.

Rose Carter's mother had been offered a job there at exactly the same time as Mr Hunter.

And now there was this mysterious buzzing.

How could she make sense of it all? She felt like racing round the village, asking questions. But would anyone answer? People would just say: *the BRC is a wonderful thing to have in the village . . . a really good neighbour*. She would never find out anything like that.

Unless . . .

The answer came just as she was drifting off to sleep. What about the boy that Lloyd had met? What was his name? Simon. *He* didn't think the BRC was wonderful. Maybe he would tell them what was going on.

If they could get him to talk to them.