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opening extract from

# The Demon Headmaster Takes Over

written by

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published by

**Oxford University Press**

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# 1

## *Switched on Again*

'It's the army!'

'What?' Dinah Hunter blinked and rubbed her eyes. Her younger brother, Harvey, was standing in the doorway. 'Are you mad?' she said. 'It's the middle of the night.'

'But the army's here!' Harvey ran across the room. He was holding a pair of binoculars, and he pushed them at her. 'They're opening up the Research Centre!'

'*What?*' Dinah sat up. 'Don't be silly, Harvey.'

'I'm not being silly. You can see them clearing the doorways. And look at the lights!'

'The lights? You mean they've turned the electricity on?' Dinah grabbed the binoculars and jumped out of bed.

The Research Centre was on the other side of the village, but she could see it over the roofs of the houses. For months it had been closed and sealed up, a dark, silent building gradually disappearing under layers of creeper.

Now the windows were blazing with light. Through the binoculars, Dinah could see vehicles pulled up all round the building. There were

shadowy figures too, hacking at the creeper with machetes. One of the figures walked through a spotlight beam and she saw his army uniform.

'What are they up to?' she muttered.

'They're trying to get in,' Harvey whispered. 'Maybe they know—'

He was speaking softly, but not softly enough. Suddenly, their mother shouted up the stairs.

'Harvey? Dinah? Are you *talking*?'

'Sorry, Mum,' Dinah called. 'We're just—'

'I don't care what you're doing.' Mrs Hunter sounded tired. 'Go to sleep. The removal men are coming at half-past eight tomorrow and they'll expect us to be up.'

'That's right.' Their father joined in. 'Whatever you're discussing, it can wait until tomorrow.'

Dinah shrugged and handed the binoculars back to Harvey. 'He's right,' she whispered. 'We can't do anything tonight. Go back to sleep.'

Harvey hesitated for a second, frowning at the Research Centre. Then he padded back to his room. Dinah sighed and climbed back into bed, snuggling under her duvet. In a few moments, she was asleep.

But it wasn't a peaceful sleep . . .

She dreamt she was inside the Research Centre

again, standing in front of a huge computer. Lights flashed on the control panels and words flicked on and off the screen, but she hardly noticed them. Her eyes were fixed on the black hole that gaped below the screen like a great, greedy mouth.

Something moved inside the hole. Something long and pale, that scrabbled at the sides, hunting for a place to grip.

A hand.

Its fingers closed round the rim of the hole, clamping tight, and another hand began struggling out of the darkness.

On the screen above, there were bright red letters flashing on the screen.

EVOLUTION ACCELERATOR ACTIVATED
DNA REPRODUCED

The hands tightened, pulling on the edges of the hole, and slowly a head emerged. A man's head, with a stern, pale face and strange, sea-green eyes . . .

'No!' Dinah shouted. 'No!'

The thin lips opened soundlessly, mouthing words that hung in the air. *You are feeling very sleepy* . . .

'No!'

Dinah woke with a jolt. Slowly she sat up and looked across the room.

Now that it was light, she could see the Research Centre even more clearly. The soldiers must have been working all night. Yesterday, its walls had been green with creeper. Now they were half bare.

Sliding out of bed, Dinah went to take a closer look. There was still creeper growing over the top of the building, and snaking out from inside, but the soldiers had cleared a huge amount. There was a big stack of broken stems in the car park.

As she watched, one of the men picked up a flame-thrower and aimed it at the stack. A jet of fire shot out and the huge green heap shrivelled into a little pile of smoking ash.

One flame. That was all it took.

The scientists at the Research Centre had used all their skill and knowledge to produce that creeper. They had studied the structure of DNA. They'd learnt how to manipulate it. They'd designed a machine that could reproduce the new DNA. *And the army's going to wipe it all out in a single day*, Dinah thought.

She couldn't just stand by and see it all vanish.

Picking up her jeans, she felt in the pockets and found her little notebook. She leafed through the pages, until she came to the name and address she wanted.

*Professor Claudia Rowe*
*Biological Sciences Department*
*University of Wessex.*

Underneath was the telephone number. She hadn't thought she would ever need that, but maybe she did now. The soldiers were destroying the creeper very fast.

'They're doing *what*?' Professor Rowe shrieked down the phone.

Dinah had to shout too. The removal men had arrived, and it was very noisy. 'They've already cut quite a lot.' She stepped out of the way as two men came past with her bed. 'They're burning it.'

'But it's unique!' Professor Rowe sounded horrified. 'There's nothing like it, anywhere else in the world. *You* know that, Dinah.'

Dinah knew all right. She knew more than Professor Rowe. She'd been in the lab where the creeper was made—and seen the Evolution Accelerator that had made it. 'But what can I do?' she said.

Professor Rowe was thinking out loud. 'We must get hold of some samples, before it's too late. You'll have to go down there and talk to them, Dinah.'

'Me?'

'There's no one else. I'll set out straight away, but it'll take me at least an hour. You've got to stall them until I get there. Plead. Threaten them with a scandal. Do whatever it takes—but don't let them destroy that creeper!'

'But—'

*But we're moving*, Dinah was going to say. Professor Rowe didn't give her a chance.

'Once they destroy that creeper, we've lost it for ever!' she said fiercely. 'They're destroying *knowledge*, and knowledge is precious. Go and fight for it, Dinah! I'll be there as soon as I can.'

She rang off, and Dinah put down the phone and took a deep breath. She'd have to go. She hated the sight of the creeper, but Professor Rowe was right. Knowledge was precious.

She called down the hall. 'I'm just going out for a bit.'

'Are you mad?' Lloyd, her other brother, stuck his head out of the kitchen. 'You can't go out now.'

'I've got to,' Dinah said stubbornly. 'I'm going to the Research Centre.'

'To see the army?' Eagerly, Harvey came rattling down the stairs. 'I'll come too!'

Mrs Hunter ran out of her bedroom with an armful of bedding. 'Dinah, you can't—'

'It's important,' Dinah said quietly.

'To go and look at a lot of soldiers?' Lloyd looked scornful. 'You're like a couple of two year olds.'

But Mrs Hunter was watching Dinah's face. 'Really important?' she said.

Dinah nodded.

'All right. You can go. But don't be long.'

'Thanks, Mum.' Dinah snatched up her coat and headed out of the house. Lloyd turned away in disgust, but Harvey was right behind her.

The road outside the Research Centre was crowded with villagers. Three soldiers were stationed at the gate, to keep people away from the building. Dinah looked at them and then wriggled through the crowd to Mrs Pritchett from the Post Office. She always knew what was going on.

'What's up, Mrs Pritchett?'

'They're destroying that creeper,' Mrs Pritchett said. 'About time, too. It'll be all over the village next.'

'It's slowed down,' Harvey said. 'It used to grow much faster than that.'

Mrs Pritchett sniffed. 'That's only the season. If they leave it till next spring, it'll be twice as bad. Got to get rid of it now.'

'There's lots inside the building,' Dinah said.

She could see it pressing against the windows. 'Are they going to burn that too?'

Mrs Pritchett shrugged. 'Suppose so. But no one's gone in yet. Except one little fellow in a brown anorak.'

'Perhaps he's in charge,' muttered Harvey.

'Him?' Mrs Pritchett looked scornful. 'No, *that's* the commanding officer. The tall man, by the gate.'

That was the man they needed to speak to, then! Dinah grabbed Harvey's arm.

'Come on.'

Harvey went pale. 'But we can't—'

'Yes we can!' Dinah started pulling him towards the tall soldier. 'You can't burn that creeper!' she shouted. 'You're destroying knowledge!'

Back at the Hunters' house, Mrs Hunter was getting impatient.

'Aren't Dinah and Harvey back yet?'

Lloyd was watching the removal men shut the lorry. He turned round and shrugged. 'Not unless they're hiding.'

Mrs Hunter frowned. 'How can they be so thoughtless!'

Mr Hunter put a hand on her shoulder. 'No problem,' he said. 'Lloyd can go and fetch them

back. He's not doing anything useful. Off you go, Lloyd!'

Typical! Why was it always him who had to sort things out? Lloyd sighed and set off, grumbling under his breath.

He was halfway through the village when a white sports car came screeching past. It stopped abruptly and the driver jumped out and called back to him.

'How do I get to the Biogenetic Research Centre?' She was a fairly young woman, in jeans, and she looked fierce and anxious.

'Turn left at the top.' Lloyd pointed. 'You can't miss it—'

Before he could finish, she had jumped back into the car and driven off.

What was the big hurry? Why was everyone obsessed with the Research Centre? The place had been shut down for months and nothing was going to happen there.

By the time he reached the Centre himself, the woman was talking to the soldiers. She was waving her hands about and shouting.

'I'm a biologist, Major Pearce! That creeper is unique. It's already given me crucial ideas for the work I'm doing! If you destroy it, you'll be setting scientific development back for years!'

Dinah was there too. Lloyd couldn't hear what

she said, but her cheeks were pink and she was nodding fiercely. Harvey was just behind her, looking embarrassed.

Major Pearce was obviously trying to be polite. 'I appreciate your concern, but there's important equipment in that building. It must be rescued before the creeper destroys it.'

'What sort of equipment?' the woman said scornfully.

The major avoided her eyes. 'I'm not at liberty to say.'

Lloyd decided it was time he took Harvey and Dinah away. He went marching up to them. 'Come on, you two. We're leaving. Now!'

'Not yet!' Dinah said impatiently. 'Professor Rowe needs me.'

'Professor who?' Lloyd looked round. He was imagining an old man with a mop of white hair.

It was the young woman from the sports car who answered. She stopped shouting at Major Pearce and held out her hand.

'*I'm* Professor Rowe. Call me Claudia.'

'I . . . er . . . hello.' Lloyd let his hand be shaken. 'I'm Lloyd. Dinah's brother.'

'Come to get her?' Claudia said briskly. 'Well, she won't be long. We just need some samples of this creeper. Come on, Dinah!'

Catching hold of Dinah's hand, she side-stepped

neatly round the soldiers and began striding towards the Research Centre.

Harvey looked frantically at Lloyd. 'They'll get shot!'

Major Pearce's hand was already sliding inside his jacket, but it wasn't a gun he pulled out. It was a mobile phone. He tapped in a number, very quickly, and began to talk in a low, urgent voice.

'Mr Smith? Major Pearce here. Sorry to trouble you, sir, but we may have a problem.'

Lloyd couldn't make out the answer, but it sounded irritable. Whoever Mr Smith was, he didn't like being disturbed. His voice went on and on and Major Pearce rolled his eyes up to the sky.

'Intelligence!' he muttered, under his breath.

But his voice was polite when he spoke into the phone.

'Yes, sir, I realize you're doing something important in there. Yes, sir. And confidential. But a professor's turned up. She says we can't torch the creeper because it's unique. And she's on her way into the building.'

There was another burst of irritable words.

Major Pearce sighed. 'Yes, I could have stopped her. But she would have caused a lot of trouble. It's Professor Rowe, sir. From Wessex University. Claudia Rowe.'

There was a silence, and then something that

sounded like an order. Major Pearce switched off the phone hastily. Without even glancing at Lloyd and Harvey, he set off after Dinah and Claudia, almost running across the forecourt.

'He's going to arrest them!' Harvey hissed.

But he was wrong. Major Pearce caught up with Claudia and Dinah, said something to them, and led the way towards the doorway the soldiers had cleared. Lloyd watched the three of them disappear inside the building. *Oh great*, he thought crossly. *How am I going to get Dinah now?*

Harvey was watching too. 'Do you think they'll be all right?'

'Of course they'll be all right,' Lloyd snapped. 'Why shouldn't they be?'

'Well, there's . . . there's the Evolution Accelerator,' Harvey mumbled, staring down at his feet. 'You know it can copy people, from their DNA. You don't suppose—?'

Lloyd knew what he was thinking. 'Oh, stop worrying! He's gone. He's never coming back. You all saw him disappear into that hole. The Evolution Accelerator swallowed him up.'

'But what if—?'

'He's *gone*, Harvey.'

2

# *Who Stole Mr Smith?*

Dinah shivered as she walked into the Research Centre again. It felt like going back into a dragon's mouth.

But everything had changed. Last time, the place had been bustling with people, all working hard. Now it was empty, and the corridors were full of creeper.

Claudia was staring round in amazement. 'It's like the Sleeping Beauty's palace in here.'

'Maybe that's what's happened to Mr Smith,' Major Pearce said crossly. 'Perhaps he's turned into the Sleeping Beauty.' He punched at the buttons of his mobile phone again. 'Why isn't he answering?'

'He's not far away,' Dinah said. 'Listen.'

Very faintly, from the far end of the long corridor, they heard another mobile phone ringing.

'What's the point of phoning if he's that close?' Claudia said. 'We can go and see him.'

She began to walk down the corridor, stepping over tangles of creeper and brushing aside the strands that hung down from the ceiling. Major Pearce followed her, but he didn't stop dialling.