An Extract from The Demon Headmaster by Gillian Cross, read by Lindsey Russell

Dinah walked on round the playground, waiting for the bell to ring or the whistle to go.

But there was no bell. No whistle. Nothing. Instead, quite abruptly, all sounds in the playground stopped and the children turned round to stare at the school.

There on the steps stood a row of six children, three boys and three girls. They were all tall and heavily built and they were marked out from the others by a large white P sewn on to their blazer pockets. Without smiling, the tallest girl took a pace forwards.

‘Form – lines!’ she yelled into the silence.
‘Yes, Rose,’ all the children said, in perfect unison.

As quietly and steadily as marching soldiers, they walked together, forming neat straight lines which ran the length of the playground. Each child stood exactly a foot behind the one in front. Each line was exactly three feet from the one next to it. Not quite sure what to do, Dinah stood by herself, a blotch of blue among the green.

The tallest boy on the steps walked forward.
‘Lead-in!’ he bellowed.”
‘Yes, Jeff’ chorused the children.

Still in total silence, they began to march forward, row by row, up the steps and through the door into the school, their eyes fixed straight ahead and their feet moving in step. There was no giggling or whispering or pushing. The whole thing was utterly orderly, the only sound being the steady tramping of feet.

Dinah continued to stand still, watching, until the playground was almost clear. As the last line marched off, she tacked herself on to the end of it and walked towards the school

When she got to the top of the steps, Rose stuck out an arm, barring her way.
‘Name?’ she said briskly.
‘Dinah Glass,’ Dinah said. ‘I’m new, and—’
‘Just answer the questions,’ Jeff interrupted her.
‘What’s that you’re wearing?’
‘It’s my old school uniform. I—’
‘Just answer the question,’ he said again. There was no friendliness in his voice and as he spoke he looked not at Dinah but over her shoulder. ‘It is not satisfactory. All pupils here shall wear correct green uniform. Kindly see to it.’ He looked so haughty and spoke so stiffly that Dinah was irritated.

‘I don’t know why you’re being so bossy,’ she said coldly. ‘Anyone’d think you were one of the teachers, instead of a measly kid like anyone else.’

‘All pupils shall obey the prefects,’ chanted Rose, in the same stiff voice. ‘The prefects are the voice of the Headmaster.’

Dinah felt puzzled, but she was determined not to show it. She thrust her chin up and looked straight at them. ‘Well, I think you should take me to see the Headmaster. I’ve got a letter for him.’

The prefects looked doubtfully at each other. Then Jeff vanished inside the school, while the others stood barring Dinah’s way. It had grown colder and the icy wind was turning her fingers blue. She lifted them to blow on them.

‘Hands by your sides,’ Rose rapped out instantly. “Good deportment is the sign of an orderly mind.’

Stubbornly, Dinah went on blowing. At once, Rose said, ‘Sarah! Simon!’ Dinah’s hands were instantly seized by two of the other prefects, who forced them down to her sides and stood holding them like that until Jeff reappeared.

‘The Headmaster will see you,’ he said. ‘Follow me.’

Thoroughly bewildered now, Dinah walked into the school after him and along a straight corridor. At her old school, all the walls had been covered with pictures and drawings done by the pupils, but these walls were completely blank, except for a framed notice hung halfway along. Dinah swiveled her head to read it as she passed.

_The man who can keep order can rule the world._

Frowning slightly, she went on following Jeff until he came to a stop in front of a door which had the single word HEADMASTER painted on it.

He knocked.

‘Come in.’

Jeff pushed the door open and waved Dinah inside, pulling it shut behind her.

As she stepped through, Dinah glanced quickly around the room. It was the tidiest office she had ever seen. There were no papers, no files, no pictures on the walls.
Just a large, empty-topped desk, a filing cabinet and a bookcase with a neat row of books.

She took it all in in one second and then forgot it as her eyes fell on the man standing by the window. He was tall and thin, dressed in an immaculate black suit. From his shoulders, a long, black teacher’s gown hung in heavy folds, like wings, giving him the appearance of a huge crow. Only his head was startlingly white. Fair hair, almost as colourless as snow, lay round a face with paper-white skin and pallid lips. His eyes were hidden behind dark glasses, like two black holes in the middle of all the whiteness.

She cleared her throat. ‘Hello. I’m Dinah Glass and I-’

He raised a long, ivory-coloured hand. ‘Please do not speak until you are asked. Idle chatter is an inefficient waste of energy’.

Unnervingly, he went on staring at her for a moment or two without saying anything else. Dinah wished she could see the eyes behind the dark lenses. With his eyes hidden, his expression was unreadable.

Finally, he waved a hand towards an upright chair, pulled round to face the desk. ‘Sit down.’