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Opening extract from

Charlie's Monsters

Written by

Dean Lorey

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Chapter One

Monster in the Model 3

On most days, Charlie Benjamin was pretty sure he was the loneliest kid on planet Earth. He went to school by himself in his home on a quiet street inside a gated community. Although the houses all looked nearly alike on the outside, there were several different models a buyer could choose from.

The Benjamins lived in a model 3.

"The model 3 is the superior model," Charlie's father frequently told him. He was an exact man with the exacting name of Barrington. "The 1's are obviously prototypes – less said about the 1's, the better. The 2's, however, are what happens when you rework something too quickly. You often take *two* steps backwards to take one step forwards. Which brings us to the 3's – the simple, solid, *dependable* 3's."

The model 3 was Charlie Benjamin's prison.

At thirteen, he was short for his age, with unruly sandy-coloured hair, dark brown eyes and a spray of freckles across his nose and cheeks. His elbows and knees were remarkably unscabbed and he had virtually no bruises, thanks to his well-meaning mother's insistence that he stay inside the house.

"It's an uncertain world," she often told him. "I can protect you in here, but once you step outside..." This was always followed by a grave shake of the head, as if the horrors of life outside of the model 3 were too painful to contemplate.

"I know you keep saying that," Charlie said to her one Saturday morning after a particularly grave shake of the head. "But that doesn't make it *true*. I'm tired of being stuck here all the time. I want to go to normal school."

"*Normal* school?" his mother replied. "Honey, we have everything a normal school has right here. Books and computers, papers and pencils, tests and marks..."

"But no students," Charlie interrupted. "I mean, other than me."

"That's true," his mother agreed pleasantly. She was such a pleasant woman, in fact, that she'd never even blamed her own mother for naming her Olga. "And *thank goodness*, because no students means no teasing, no

bullying, no making fun of you just because you're a little bit different."

Even though Charlie was the first to admit that he was *more* than a little bit different, protecting him from the abuse of other kids by locking him away in the house seemed a little to him like removing a splinter by chopping off his hand – it got the job done, but at what cost?

The price is just too high, he thought as he heard the postman shove the morning post through a chute in the front door. With a sigh, he walked over to retrieve the usual assortment of bills and catalogues – always for his parents, never for him. And that was when, to his astonishment, he spotted a small blue envelope addressed to "Charlie Benjamin".

"That's me," he gasped.

Almost in a daze, Charlie opened the envelope, to reveal an invitation to a party – and not just any party. It was a *sleepover* party at the home of some kids who lived just down the street. Charlie didn't know them personally, of course – he didn't know any kids his own age – but clearly someone there had taken pity on the small, strange boy who lived in the model 3.

Charlie read the invitation twice to make sure it really said what he thought it said; then he read it once more for

good measure. Once he was satisfied that he wasn't dreaming the whole thing, he showed it to his parents.

"Absolutely not," his father said after glancing at the invitation.

"But *why*?" Charlie immediately shot back. "I've been good. I've done all my schoolwork – in fact, I just finished the chapter on geography."

"Honey, what your father means," his mother said, "is that we certainly wish you *could* go, but what if you have one of your 'nightmares'?"

One of his nightmares.

Even though it had been years since Charlie had had a catastrophic nightmare in public, the thought of it happening again made him absolutely weak with dread. And yet – here was an actual, *real* opportunity to make a friend.

He couldn't pass it up.

So he begged his parents. He pleaded. He offered to do the dishes for a year and mow the lawn and learn French. He argued that it had been so long since his last unspeakable nightmare that he had surely outgrown them. Finally, he told his parents that going to the sleepover party was the only present he wanted for Christmas and his birthday *combined.*

For the next two years.

Three if that's what it took.

After much arguing behind closed doors, his parents finally relented. Which is how, later that night, Charlie found himself skipping up the steps of a stranger's house with an overnight bag slung over his shoulder.

"You know how to get hold of us if utter disaster occurs?" Charlie's mother asked nervously, following behind him.

"Yes, mum, I know how to use a *phone*."

"Do you want me to quickly review any of the fus I've taught you – kung or otherwise?" his father offered.

"I'm not gonna need to fight anyone with kung fu, dad. Nothing's gonna happen, trust me."

"We never should have permitted this," his mother moaned. "And a *sleepover* no less! What were we *thinking*?"

"Nothing will go wrong," Charlie said, looking longingly at the other boys inside the house. They were clearly already having a blast. "I won't have any nightmares tonight – *trust me*."

"Of *course* we do, son," Mr Benjamin replied as he handed Charlie a mobile phone. "We know nothing will go wrong, but just in case it *does*, I put our home number on speed dial so you can call quickly if something absolutely catastrophic occurs."

"Thanks, Dad," Charlie said resignedly, taking the phone from him.

"And if you look in your backpack," his mother added, "you'll find earplugs in a little bag. You can use them if the other children tease you and call you horrible names."

"OK, Mum," Charlie said, wishing desperately that they would leave – but they just stood there.

"Well!" Mr Benjamin said finally. "I guess we had better go. We love you, son, and we trust you and we feel certain in our hearts and in our souls that nothing cataclysmic or disastrous will happen this evening."

"It won't," Charlie said. "Everything will be fine. I *promise*."

And everything *was* fine... for a while. Charlie played computer games, ate pizza and watched PG-13 horror movies. Incredibly, he even found himself on the verge of making a friend – a tall blond kid everyone called "FT", which, Charlie learned, was short for "FTW", which was short for "For the Win", because of his terrific video-game prowess.

It was the most fun Charlie had ever had in his entire life.

Then it was time to go to sleep.

Accounts differed as to what exactly *happened* during

what newspaper headlines would soon call "Terror at the Sleepover Apocalypse", but certain facts were not in dispute. At some point, around three in the morning, tremendous screaming and crashing came from the bedroom where the kids were sleeping. When the adults in the house finally managed to fling open the door, they found all of the children suspended from the ceiling, wrapped tightly in cocoons of extraordinarily tough webbing. The only child not encased and suspended from the ceiling was Charlie, who stared at the shattered bedroom window in shock.

"My God, what *happened*?" gasped the father when he saw his children dangling like Christmas tree ornaments.

"A giant spider," Charlie said, and pointed to the broken window. "It left through there. It's not my fault."

No one blamed Charlie, exactly. After all, how could a thirteen-year old kid have done such an extraordinary thing to so many other children? And yet even the local newspaper reporter wondered why Charlie was the only one left unharmed by the "giant spider" – a fact that Charlie himself had puzzled over. Even though no one actually accused him of anything, after the kids were cut down and revived, none of them would speak to him or even look at him – not even FT. Charlie had gone to sleep that night thinking he'd finally made a friend but he'd

woken up to find himself the object of fear and panic.

It wasn't the first time.

In fact, from almost the moment he was born, sleep and Charlie Benjamin were an explosive combination. The very first public disaster had happened during naptime at Welcoming Arms kindergarten.

Charlie was three years old.

Even though he couldn't quite recall the specifics of the nightmare he'd had while he and the rest of the children slept on mats inside the darkened classroom, he could vividly remember the inhuman howling and shrieking that had snapped him out of it. As the kindergarten teachers raced in to see what could possibly be making such astonishing noise, little Charlie woke, to find the classroom around him utterly destroyed.

The colourful nursery-rhyme wallpaper hung from the wall in ribbons, as if slashed by talons. The fish tank lay shattered against an overturned bookshelf as the fish inside frantically flipped and gasped for air. A spray of glass from the back window glittered brilliantly across an easel, which lay splintered on the floor.

"What happened?" the teacher asked, her face ashen.

"I'm sorry," little Charlie replied, shaking. "I didn't mean to do it."

"*You* did all this?" the teacher asked incredulously.

Charlie nodded. "Sometimes bad things happen when I have nightmares."

The pattern was always the same.

He would go to sleep at home in his soft, warm bed and everything would *seem* to be fine – at least for a while. But sometime during the night, terrible snorts and growls would rip through the house. By the time his parents burst into his bedroom to see what was wrong, the place would be ruined – mattress stuffing tossed everywhere, carpet torn, glass shattered. And even though they never actually caught him in the process of destroying a room while in the grip of a bad dream, they figured he *must* be doing it – it was the only explanation that made any sense. In fact, Charlie dreaded going to sleep because he was terrified about what he might find when he *woke up*.

The incident at naptime (later dubbed the "Naptime Catastrophe") quickly became legend, and it wasn't long before the other kids starting chanting "Nightmare Charlie" at him whenever he walked by. Soon, his parents were summoned before the kindergarten administrator, who carefully explained that Welcoming Arms would no longer be welcoming Charlie.

"The other children are *afraid* of him, you see," the administrator said with terrible seriousness. "In fact, they refuse to take their naps when he's in the room. This is

absolutely unacceptable. Naptime is the cornerstone of the kindergarten experience. It is the glue that holds the remainder of the curriculum together. Without naptime, chaos is inevitable and ruin is sure to follow!"

"I can sense your passion," Charlie's father agreed in his calmest voice. "But if you think that Charlie is the *cause* of their distress—"

"He's not," Charlie's mother snapped as she gently rubbed her son's back with her warm, strong hands. "The other children have been teasing and tormenting *him* – not the other way around. My heavens, do you know what they call him? 'Nightmare Charlie'!"

"Quite right," Barrington continued. "But my point is that perhaps Charlie could be moved to a different area of the classroom while the rest of the children are sleeping."

The administrator was horrified. "We cannot go down that slippery slope. If I make one exception for one boy, pretty soon I'll be making two exceptions for two boys, and, before you know it, it's all exceptions and no 'ceptions' if you get my drift." He shook his head sadly. "No, Welcoming Arms and 'Nightmare Charlie' – I mean, *Charlie* – must now go their separate ways."

Even though Welcoming Arms was the very first kindergarten to kick Charlie out, it certainly wasn't the last – Balance Point, Happy Child, Li'l Learners and

Perfect PlayPals followed soon after. But that's where Charlie's horrible streak of getting kicked out of kindergarten finally came to an end, because by then, he was old enough to get kicked out of primary school.

Charlie was six years old.

"I know you claim there's nothing wrong with him," the principal of Paul Revere Elementary purred to Charlie's parents, slurring through adult braces. They were a rat's nest of decaying food – an archaeological dig that contained everything he had eaten in the previous week. "But our school psychologist believes he suffers from a variety of serious problems. *Very* serious. In fact, he has diagnosed Charlie with—let me see..." Mr Krup began reading from a file. "Yes, here it is. OCADMMD."

"That's an awful lot of letters for such a little boy," Mr Benjamin said, protectively putting his arm around Charlie's narrow shoulders.

"And he's earned every one of them, believe me! It stands for Obsessive-Compulsive Attention Deficit Mental Meltdown Disorder." Mr Krup set the file down and glared at Charlie, unearthing an ancient piece of sweet corn that lay trapped against a molar. "Now, being a public school, we are required by law to give him an education. However, we think it is in 'Nightmare Charlie's' – I mean, *Charlie's* – best interests to be removed

from the general population and sequestered in a trailer off school grounds, where he can only associate with other children that have been diagnosed with as many letters as he has. Sign here, please."

The principal slid a form over to Charlie's parents.

Charlie's mother slid it back.

"No," she said.

"Pardon me?"

"You and the other children may not like Charlie, Mr Krup. You may not *understand* him. But he is a wonder. And if you can't see that, then you don't deserve him. He will leave with us today and never return." Olga stood and smiled triumphantly. "Until I can find a school that sticks, I will teach him myself."

And that's just what she did.

For the next seven years, Charlie went to school in the protective bubble of the model 3 – until that bubble burst on the night of the Sleepover Apocalypse.

Why am I such a freak? Charlie thought as he sat on his couch and stared out of the large front window of their home, hoping to catch a glimpse of the neighbourhood kids as they got out of school. Even if he couldn't play with them, he figured he could at least *watch* them. It had been five days since the Sleepover Apocalypse, and he was still reeling.

At the end of the block, the school bus from General MacArthur Middle School groaned to a shuddery halt. Its door accordioned open and students poured out, chomping gum, hauling bulging backpacks, laughing and playfully shoving one another. Charlie quickly spotted FT, who removed a Frisbee from his book bag and whipped it towards one of the other kids.

Charlie waved to him. FT saw him in the window and shot him an icy glare; then he turned back to the other kids, ignoring Charlie completely.

"Do you think they'll ever stop blaming me?" Charlie asked his mother. "About them hanging from the ceiling in cocoons, I mean."

He knew the answer was *no*, but, to his amazement, his mother simply shrugged, barely looking up from the afternoon soap on the TV. She had changed so much in the last day or so that he hardly even recognised her. She seemed to be completely uninterested in him, which wasn't like her at all. Charlie hoped that she was simply coming down with the flu, because he couldn't bear the thought that his recent disaster might have caused her to finally, after believing in him for all these years, just *give up*.

"I want to go to school next year. *Normal* school," Charlie

said to his parents during dinner that night.

"Charlie, we've gone over this and over this," Barrington replied. "Do I have to remind you about the Sleepover Apocalypse?"

"But that wasn't my fault!" Charlie shouted. "Everyone keeps blaming me, but I told you I didn't do anything to those kids – it was a giant spider! I actually *saw* it that time!"

"Charlie, *please*," Mr Benjamin said, massaging his temples. "This conversation's over."

"It is *not* over! I can't have any of my nightmares at school because it's during the day, so why shouldn't I be able to go like everyone else?"

"*Because they'll hurt you!*" Mr Benjamin shot back. Instantly, he looked as though he regretted it. "You may not have one of your nightmares, but it won't matter. They've already labelled you, Charlie. You're *different*... and they'll torture you for it. They always do. Now please, go get ready for bed, son."

"I don't want to. I—"

"*Charlie.*" Barrington's voice was a stone door, slamming shut.

Charlie got up from the table and stormed out.

Mr Benjamin sighed heavily and turned to his silent wife. "The older he gets, the harder it is to keep him here.

I know we do it for his own protection, but, much as it pains me to say it, someday soon we're going to have to let him face the world on his own."

Olga turned away without saying a word.

"Are you all right, dear? You're not coming down with something, are you?"

She shook her head. Mr Benjamin took her hand gently in his.

"I know, I don't want to let him go, either. It's cruel outside the model 3, and a boy like Charlie, a wonderful, *unusual* boy, well..." he shook his head sadly. "He's going to take *such* a beating."

The glow-in-the-dark stars glued on to the ceiling above Charlie's bed had grown faint. The walls of his room were covered in soft foam. There was no glass in there, nothing sharp or heavy that could potentially hurt him if thrown or broken during a particularly destructive nightmare – only rounded corners, thick padding and windows made of safety plastic. To Charlie, it sometimes felt like an insane asylum designed to protect him from himself, from the horrible things that often happened after he fell asleep.

And sleep, as usual, was slow in coming.

He tried to empty his mind of the crazy thoughts that

were zinging around his brain by writing two new entries in the "Wicked Awesome Gadget Journal" he kept beside his bed. The first one (gadget number 47) was an idea for a "Wicked Awesome Laser Watch" that emitted a beam of light powerful enough to temporarily blind bad guys, giving you time to get away. The second one (gadget number 48) was a handheld device that used a complicated computer chip to identify smells for people who had lost their noses in horrible accidents. He called it the "Wicked Awesome Odorometer".

He had no idea how he could actually build any of the objects he dreamed up, but that wasn't really the point – the important thing for now was the *idea*.

A squirrel nibbled at a nut on his windowsill. In fact, he could hear more of them in the attic above, scratching away softly. It was oddly soothing.

Without even realising it, Charlie finally fell asleep.

It started out as a good dream. He was playing Frisbee with a group of kids on the school playground – in fact, they were the same ones from the Sleepover Apocalypse, but they didn't seem frightened of him now. FT threw the Frisbee to Charlie, but an unexpected gust of wind caught it and took it far down the field. Charlie sprinted across the freshly mowed grass with blinding speed. He leaped over a soccer goal and, spinning in midair, managed to

snag the Frisbee in spectacular fashion.

"That's the best catch I've ever seen!" FT said.

"It just comes natural to me, I guess," Charlie replied, trying his best to appear casual.

"Would you like to have a Slurpee with us?" another kid asked, pointing to a Slurpee machine that stood gleaming at the edge of the field. "Nothing tastes better on a hot day than a cold Slurpee with your friends."

"Sounds great," Charlie said, and followed the kids over.

The Slurpee machine glowed with an inner brilliance. FT turned the handle and poured an icy red drink into a Styrofoam cup.

"This one's for me," he said. "Now your turn. Do you want red or blue?"

"Red," Charlie said. "Same as you."

FT placed a fresh cup under the tap and turned the handle. Nothing came out. "That's strange," he said. "Maybe something's stuck in there." He put his finger deep inside and searched for a blockage.

"Find anything?" Charlie asked.

"Not yet," FT said. "Wait a minute... My finger's stuck."

He tried to pull it out, but it wouldn't budge. As he struggled, a cold wind whipped down from the

darkening sky. Thunderheads rolled in.

"Maybe someone should go and get help," Charlie said, turning to the other kids. He was surprised to discover they were gone. In fact, *everyone* was gone now – everyone but Charlie and the trapped boy.

That's weird, Charlie thought.

Suddenly, the tap on the Slurpee machine turned on and the machine hummed back to life. The frozen red drink flowed from the machine, through FT's finger and into his body, filling him like a balloon.

"Do something!" he yelled. "It hurts!"

Charlie tried to turn the handle, but it wouldn't budge. The kid's face began to swell as his colour changed – pink, then red...

"It's so *cold*," FT moaned, shivering. "Help me!"

"I'm trying!" Charlie shouted back, but there didn't seem to be anything he *could* do. The boy's face bloated grotesquely, expanding like a balloon animal, as his skin turned from a deep red to a dark shade of purple, the colour of a rotten plum. The wind that whipped down from the sky was freezing now and Charlie could see his breath on it.

Somehow it had become night-time.

He looked upwards and saw stars... but they looked too perfect. They had five distinct points and were

glowing faintly. Suddenly, Charlie realised that they were the stars on the ceiling of his bedroom. When he looked down, he was shocked to discover that he now was back *in* his bedroom – along with the thing that FT had become.

It looked something like a scorpion – slick purple-black skin stretched tightly over a bloated body full to bursting with juices. Sharp claws clattered at the end of long, unnaturally thin arms. A skeletal tail with a thirty-centimetre-long stinger wavered dangerously above its head and the tongue that flickered, snakelike, in and out of its horned snout gleamed metallic silver.

Charlie tried to shout, to scream out for help, to do *anything*, but his mouth had gone as dry as chalk and the beating of his heart filled his ears like mortar fire. As the creature neared him, Charlie reached over, took the pencil off the nightstand next to his Gadget Journal, and, summoning all his courage, jabbed the pencil into his hand while yelling "Wake up!"

Charlie woke from his nightmare with a shout. Sweat matted his hair to his forehead and his heart pounded in his chest so hard, he felt it might break ribs.

"I'll never go to sleep again," he said as he slid out of bed and carefully felt his way across the dark room towards the thin, comforting line of light underneath the

door that led to the hallway.

His hand touched something.

The creature from his nightmare stood there.

"No," Charlie gasped.

Towering over him, it raised its long, curved stinger, preparing to strike. A thick poisonous-looking fluid oozed from the tip. Charlie's knees went watery and he dropped to the ground.

"Don't," he said.

The monster's tail whistled furiously down towards him with the force of a sledgehammer.

At exactly the same moment, the window beside Charlie exploded inwards as a tall man crashed through. He made a movement with his arm so fast that it looked almost as if time skipped forwards a beat. A blinding flash of blue light snapped in front of Charlie like a lightning bolt. It snaked around the creature's stinger, causing it to arc off course just enough to spike harmlessly into the floorboard, spraying Charlie with splinters of wood.

The stranger landed with a thud, grabbed Charlie by the front of his shirt and yanked him to his feet, away from the monster. To Charlie, he looked just like a cowboy – dusty blue jeans covered the tops of his oiled leather boots, a worn cowboy hat rested on his wide brow and in his right hand he held a lasso that glowed with an electric

blue fire. Charlie suddenly realised that it was actually the *lasso* that was wrapped around the creature's stinger.

"Howdy, kid," the cowboy said with a crooked grin. "Nice to meet you, finally. Looks like I showed up just in time."

Chapter Two

A Class-5 Silvertongue in Full Voice

"Who are you?" Charlie asked, staring in shock at the stranger in his bedroom.

"Name's Rex," the cowboy answered. "I'm sure you got a ton of questions, and I'll get to 'em in just a bit – assuming we live through this, of course. Things are about to get ugly."

"Uglier than *this*?" Charlie replied, gesturing to the monster in his bedroom as it frantically tried to free its stinger from the floorboards.

Rex laughed. "Just you wait. You're gonna get *nostalgic* for this moment once that old Silvertongue starts singing."

"Singing?" Charlie repeated, confused.

Suddenly, that's just what it did. The creature opened its mouth and stuck out its abnormally long silver tongue,

which twisted and vibrated like a tuning fork. No words came out, only notes, but they were sweet as spun silver and amazing in their intricacy.

"Ah, no," Rex moaned, then turned to the window and shouted, "Where's my portal, Tabitha, darlin'?!"

"Working on it!" a female voice answered, and Charlie spun round to see a pretty woman with short red hair scrambling through the shattered window. She wore long trousers, as green as her emerald eyes, and her fingers and neck glittered with an extraordinary amount of jewellery.

"There's my sparkly queen," Rex said. "You're a sight for sore eyes, sweetness."

"*Don't* call me 'sweetness'," she shot back as she strode towards him.

"Sure thing, sugar lips," he replied with a grin.

Clearly aggravated, Tabitha gritted her teeth and extended her right hand. Brilliant purple flames began to dance over her body, charging the air with electricity. Charlie felt the hairs on his arms and legs stand on end. The creature continued singing – faster now, more intense – and Charlie was awestruck by the alien beauty of its voice.

"It's incredible," he murmured.

"Yeah, right up until it crescendos," Rex said. "Then it's gonna get bad, fast."

"What happens then?"

"Oh, our heads'll explode."

"*Our heads will explode?*" Charlie gasped.

"It's actually quite an interesting phenomenon," another voice chimed in. Charlie spun back towards the window to see a short, sweaty man with a neatly trimmed beard trying to climb over the jagged plastic. He wore a dark three-piece woollen suit – far too hot on this warm night. "You see," the man continued, wiping sweat from the tip of his long nose as he grunted with effort, "the precise frequency of the Silvertongue's final note – *stupid window* – causes the air inside a human's sinus cavity to vibrate at such a high speed that it literally shatters the skull. It's a very effective attack strategy."

"Gee, you think?" Rex said.

"Yes, I *do* think, unlike you," the bearded man shot back, still struggling with the window. "And I remind you that you are not to take any action without prior approval from me. You know the rules."

"You still talkin', Pinch? I drifted off for a second."

"I *hate* when you call me that," the man called Pinch moaned.

"And I hate wasting my time arguing with a weasel like you, especially when I got a Class-5 Silvertongue in full voice to worry about."

"It's a Class 4," Pinch said, falling into the room with a thud.

"It's a 5!" Rex snapped. "Count the dang spikes on its tail – or can't you count?"

Charlie looked at the spikes on the creature's tail. "Yup, there's five," he confirmed.

"See, Pinch – even the *kid* knows."

Suddenly, with a squeal like a rusty nail being pried from a plank, the still-singing Silvertongue wrenched its stinger free from the floorboards. The glistening tail slipped out of the lasso and attacked Rex, who leaped backwards as it whistled past his face.

"How about that portal, princess?" Rex shouted.

"It's coming," Tabitha yelled back.

"That's comforting," Rex said, dodging another poisonous tail lash with the grace of a matador. He pulled a short sword (which also glowed with a blue fire) from his belt and used it to parry the sword-like stinger.

The creature's singing had now become a shimmery blur of sound. Charlie could feel his entire head vibrating like a paint mixer. His eyes felt like they were going to pop out of his skull.

"Do something!" Pinch begged. "It's crescendoing!"

"What's going on in there?" someone suddenly shouted from the hallway. "Charlie, are you OK?"

"That's my dad," Charlie said, grimacing. "I'm not supposed to be out of bed."

Just then, the woman's entire body was engulfed in purple fire. There was a blast of hot air and a large portal, like a doorway, opened in the centre of the room. It was circular and big enough to drive a car through. Its edges burned with purple flames, just like the ones that danced across the woman.

Rex smiled. "That's my girl."

The bedroom door flew open and Mr Benjamin rushed in. "Charlie, are you having another one of your nightma—" He stopped cold and stared in shock. "Er, what's this all about?"

The Silvertongue glanced towards him.

That was all the diversion Rex needed. He threw himself at the monster and the force of his weight sent it reeling backwards, interrupting its final, deadly note. The creature stumbled into the portal and dropped out of sight. Charlie ran forwards to see where it went.

What he saw shocked him.

The portal seemed to hover high in the air above a bizarre alien landscape. Far below, a tangled mass of mustard-coloured crystals snaked through one another like barbed wire. The Silvertongue crashed down into them, snapping some crystals and getting sliced by the

razor-sharp sides of others. Soon it was gone from view, lost in the deadly thicket.

"Wow!" Charlie exclaimed, staring in awe.

Rex jumped to his feet and slipped the short sword back into his belt. "And that's how we do *that*," he said with a cocky grin. "Sometimes I amaze even myse—"

Suddenly, with a hideous screech, a giant crimson-coloured bat plummeted out of the red alien sky and flew through the still-open portal. It snatched Rex in its gnarled claws and, with a fury of flapping wings, yanked him backwards through the gateway and into the strange world beyond.

"Rex!" the woman screamed.

Almost instantly, Rex's lasso arrowed back out of the portal, missing Charlie's cheek by centimetres. With a sharp *crack*, it snapped around the bedroom doorknob and pulled tight. Rex held on to the other end, jerking wildly in the air like a kite in a hurricane as the huge bat-like creature struggled to fly off with him.

"Pull!" Rex yelled. "Pull and *don't let go*!"

Tabitha and Charlie grabbed hold of the lasso and played a desperate game of tug-of-war with the bat as Pinch paced fretfully. "I *told* him he needed prior approval for any actions," he moaned. "And now we are in a *situation*."

"Dig in!" Rex shouted as the bat leaped and dove like a sailfish on a fishing line. "And Pinch – *shut up*!"

"Sticks and stones," Pinch said, then turned to Charlie's father. "Mr Benjamin, do you, by chance, have any flour in the house?"

"Flowers?"

"No, sir. Not flowers, as in daisies and petunias, *flour*, as in the sentence 'I need flour to bake my pumpkin pie'."

"Oh," Barrington said. "I think so."

"Get it, please," Pinch replied. "With some urgency, if you don't mind."

"Right away," Barrington said, running out of the room.

The bat-like creature flapped furiously, its wings thundering with a sound like a freight train as it slowly dragged Charlie and Tabitha towards the open portal.

"Help us!" Tabitha shouted to Pinch. "It's pulling us into the Nether!"

Charlie looked down through the portal and saw the razor-sharp crystals far below, waiting to spear them if they fell through.

"Technically speaking," Pinch replied, "I'm only here in a management and advisory capacity."

"*Just help us!*" Charlie, Rex and Tabitha screamed simultaneously.

"Oh, very well," Pinch said, and grabbed the lasso. With his added strength, they began to pull Rex back towards the bedroom as Barrington ran in with a bag of flour.

"Got it," he said, panting.

"Excellent," Pinch replied. "Now throw it on the Netherbat."

"The what?"

"The Netherbat!" Rex roared. "The only giant bat around here that's trying to kill me!"

"Oh," Barrington said. Just as Charlie, Pinch and the woman pulled the creature through the open portal and into the bedroom, Mr Benjamin ripped open the bag, unleashing a snowstorm of flour. The Netherbat's wings whipped the powder into a frenzy, and soon everything in the room was coated in a thick cloud of fine white particles. Almost instantly, the Netherbat dropped to the ground and stumbled forwards as if drunk.

"What's happening?" Charlie asked.

"Netherbats, like regular bats, use a form of sonar called echolocation in order to *see*," Pinch replied. "The fine grains of flour clog its transmitters, effectively rendering it blind."

"Thanks, Mr Science," Rex said, elbowing the creature hard in the head. It released him, still coughing and

gasping. With one quick, fluid motion, Rex loosed the lasso from the doorknob and cracked it like a lion tamer, herding the creature back towards the open portal. The Netherbat stumbled blindly through the gateway and tumbled down, spinning crazily, until it was finally speared on one of the needle-like crystal spires far below.

"Close the portal," Rex said.

Tabitha waved her hand and the purple fiery-rimmed gateway slammed closed. There was silence all around them then as the flour settled, blanketing everything and everyone in a peaceful white shroud – in a crazy way, it reminded Charlie of Christmas.

"What in the world is going on here?" Mr Benjamin finally managed. "Who *are* you people?"

"Name's Rex," the cowboy said as he snatched Mr Benjamin's hand and shook it firmly. "Nice to meet you. I'm a Wrangler."

"The proper term is *Banisher,*" Pinch sniffed.

"Proper, but fruity. I'll stick with wrangler. This here's Tabitha." He gestured to the woman. "She's a Portal Jockey."

"We prefer to be called Nethermancers."

"As you can see, she's got a terrific crush on me."

"I do not!"

"Oh, really?" Rex replied with a grin. "How's the

weather over there in Denial City? Hot and bothered?"

"You're unbelievable," Tabitha said, shaking her head.

"I kind of am, aren't I?" Rex replied.

"Just ignore them," Pinch said, turning to Mr Benjamin. "My name is Edward Pinch. I am what we call the *'Facilitator'* of the group, and I am the responsible party."

"Responsible for *what*?" Rex asked.

"For saving your life," Pinch shot back.

"Ah, you didn't save my life. I was about to tell Mr Benjamin here to go and get a bag of flour. You just beat me to it."

"Your arrogance is *astonishing*," Pinch said. "I'm not looking for you to do a back flip in my honour – a simple thank-you will be sufficient."

"All right, then," Rex said. "Thank you, Pinch, for fixing what the princess screwed up."

"What *I* screwed up?" Tabitha shot back.

"That's right," Rex replied, turning to her. "You opened that portal all the way into the 5th ring, didn't you?"

"Of course," she said, "because we were banishing a class 5 Silvertongue. Class 5's are supposed to be returned to the 5th ring of the Nether – that's where they live."

"Yeah, and you know what *else* lives on the 5th ring?

Other class 5's, like that Netherbat that wanted to snack on my head."

"Tabitha was entirely correct in doing what she did," Pinch said, coming quickly to her defence. "The *Nightmare Division's Guide to the Nether* is quite clear on the matter – rules are, after all, *rules*!"

"Well, you know how much I love rules, Pinch," Rex replied. "Without 'em, I'd have nothing to break."

"I've had enough of this," Mr Benjamin said. "Can any of you give me one good reason why I shouldn't call the police?"

"I'll give you one," Tabitha replied, turning to him. "Your son, Charlie, is as strong with the Gift as I've ever seen. But if he doesn't learn to control it... *he'll kill you all.*"