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Opening extract from

Monstrous Maud: School Scare

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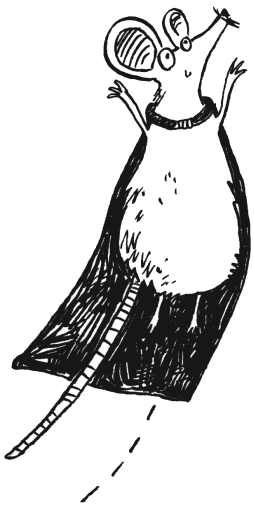
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Chapter One

Maud Montague's pet rat had escaped again. "No, Quentin!" she hissed.

Her rat was scuttling along the top of the back seat of the school bus, heading straight for Warren, the werewolf from the year above. Warren had his head back, snoozing, with his tongue lolling from one side of his mouth.

"Quentin, come back right now!" called out Maud, as loudly as she dared.

Quentin turned back to her, brushing the wolf's stubby black nose with his tail as he did so.

"RaCHOO!" Warren woke up with a noise that was part sneeze, part roar.

Quentin squeaked and launched himself off Warren's shoulder and into Maud's pocket.

"Grrroar! What did you wake me up for?" Warren asked Billy Bones, the skeleton who was sitting next to him.

"It wasn't me," said Billy.

"Well, why are you grinning then?" asked Warren.

"I can't stop," said Billy. "Skeletons always grin."

Warren snarled. "How convenient."

The brakes screeched, throwing everyone out of their seats, and the bus skidded to a halt at the side of the road. The driver honked the horn in three long blasts. Maud picked herself off the floor, checked Quentin was okay, and peered through the dirty windows. A limousine with the number plate W1CK3D zoomed past. Who on earth could be in such a hurry?

"Has anyone seen my left arm?" said Zombie Zak.

"It's here," said the driver, fishing under the pedals.

The bus spluttered back into life and jolted away again.

"I wonder who that was," Maud muttered.

When they reached the school, Maud was shocked to see the big black car parked in front. Surely none of her teachers could afford a vehicle like that?

One of the back doors opened, revealing an interior of spotless cream leather. A girl wearing buckled shoes and a ragged black dress emerged. Maud couldn't believe it. It was her classmate Poisonous Penelope!

Penelope was a witch with a pointed hat and purple hair who usually took the bus with everyone else. What was she doing in such a fancy car?

"See you later," said Penelope to the driver.

Maud couldn't see his face under the brim of his hat, but his hand emerged from the window to wave goodbye, and Maud noticed a large gold ring on his index finger.

Penelope slammed the door and the car turned around and tore off down the driveway, throwing tiny chips of gravel into the air. A group of younger pupils scattered, getting out of the way just in time.

Maud ran up to Penelope as she climbed the school's stone steps.

"That's a fancy car, isn't it?" asked Maud. "You didn't cast a spell on the lottery numbers, did you?"

"It's my uncle Peregrine's car," said Penelope, sneering at Maud. "Well, *one* of his cars."

"How many does he have?" asked Maud.

"Enough to fill the humongous driveway of his ginormous house," said Penelope. "I'm staying with him while my parents are on holiday in Salem. So I won't have to go on that

smelly bus again for a couple of weeks."

"It's only smelly when Zombie Zak forgets his after-grave spray," said Maud. "I don't know why you're being so snooty."

"Because Uncle Peregrine owns hundreds of hotels and has pots of cash," said Penelope as she strode through the school's arched doorway. "But I wouldn't expect a scruffbag like you to understand."

Maud hung back in the entrance hall as a crowd of admirers gathered around the witch. Penelope was hard work at the best of times. This was going to make her totally impossible.



"Gather round, my little monsters," said Professor Gool.

The science teacher smoothed down the twin tufts of white hair on his head, but they sprang right back up again. He fished a notebook out

of his lab coat and beckoned the pupils around the desk at the front of the classroom.

"You too, Montague," he said.

Maud was peering out of the narrow window to see if she could spot her vampire best friend, Paprika. He often flew to school in bat form, but he was late today. Maud was surprised. He'd been really looking forward to this lesson on bringing the dead back to life.

Maud walked over to the front desk and stood next to Wilf. He was a werewolf, Warren's younger brother, and her second best friend. Professor Gool whipped a sheet away to reveal a pair of metal clips wired to a generator.

"Wow! Monstrous!" said Wilf.

"Me first," said Frank Stein, a hulking pupil with green skin and metal bolts sticking out of his neck. "It's just like the one we have at home."

"I'm afraid not," said Professor Gool. "I really can't demonstrate this on pupils anymore. Health and safety regulations."

All the students groaned.

"It's not my decision," said the teacher. "If it was up to me, you could run electricity through yourselves until your little eyeballs sizzled and popped out. It certainly did me no harm when I was your age."

"You'd better demonstrate on a dead frog then," said Penelope. "I've got a couple in my lunch box for spells."

"I can't even do that anymore," said Professor Gool. "Animal rights."

Penelope rolled her eyes.

"I'm going to have to demonstrate on this," he said, dragging a suit of armour out from under the desk. "It doesn't have any feelings." He held up the electrode clips. "Now, who can tell me where these go?"

Frank Stein pointed to the bolts on either side of his neck.

"That's right," said Professor Gool.

He attached the electrodes to either side of

the helmet and turned the generator up a notch. It started to rattle up and down.

"Now," said Professor Gool. "Watch what happens as I increase the power."

He turned the dial, and the generator gave out a high-pitched whistle. The armour shook violently.

On the other side of the classroom, Maud noticed that Penelope was wiggling her fingers and muttering under her breath.

"Sir, Penelope's casting a spell," said Maud.

"Shush," said the teacher. "I'm trying to concentrate."

Professor Gool was focusing on the dial and didn't see the electrodes unhook themselves from the helmet and float down magically towards Wilf's hairy paws.

"Now we increase the power further," said the teacher, cranking up the dial.

"Owwwwwwwww! Hooooooooooooowl!" Wilf sprang into the air, and his fur stood on

end as the clips touched his paws.

Professor Gool stared at the lifeless suit of armour. "Oh dear, that didn't work. I'll try a bit more."

"Wait, Sir!" said Maud.

Professor Gool yanked the dial up again. Wilf yelped as if his tail was trapped in a car door. Smoke billowed out of his ears, and the classroom started to smell faintly like a barbecue.

"SIR!" shouted Maud.

Finally, the teacher noticed the frizzling werewolf and shut the power off.

Penelope burst into a loud cackle, while everyone else crowded around Wilf anxiously.

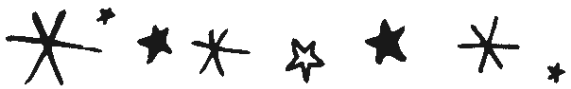
"I'm fine," said Wilf, though his hair was still standing on end, making him look like a giant, fluffy teddy.

"Let's try again," said Professor Gool. "And this time, cut out the silly pranks."

Maud frowned at Penelope, then checked the

window again. There was no sign of Paprika, but she did notice a blue car pulling up in the driveway. Very strange. The only vehicles Maud had ever seen in the car park were the spluttering school bus and the battered old cars the teachers drove. This looked like a perfectly normal car.

A young woman stepped out of the car and pressed a button on her key ring that made the car beep. She was wearing a neat grey suit with flat black shoes, and her brown hair was parted at the side. Unless she had a pair of wings or an extra head tucked somewhere, she looked a lot like an ordinary human. But what would a human be doing at a school for monsters?



Professor Gool had just finished hooking up the electrodes again when the school's headmistress floated in through the door. The Head was a

ghost with large round glasses and her hair tied back in a bun. She was also Maud's great-aunt Ethel – although the other pupils didn't know that.

The Head usually had a calm, stern expression, but today her eyes were wide, her hands were trembling, and she was floating even further off the ground than usual.

"Clear everything away," the Head shouted. She pointed at the suit of armour. "Cover that thing up."

"What in Hades is the matter?" asked Professor Gool.

"There's an inspector here," she said. "A human inspector. If she works out what kind of school this is, we'll be shut down."

Professor Gool gasped and threw the sheet back over the suit of armour.

The Head pointed at Maud. "Montague! Go downstairs and introduce yourself to the Inspector as Head Girl!"

"I didn't know I was Head Girl," said Maud.

"Well, you are now," said the Head. "If anyone around here can pass for normal, it's you."

"Yes," muttered Penelope. "I wonder why that is?"

Maud blushed. She was the only human pupil at Rotwood, and only a few trusted people knew her secret. But Penelope had recently visited her house and was getting suspicious.

"As for the rest of you," shouted the Head, "put on your disguises, quickly! And don't do anything freaky when the Inspector's here. That means no casting spells, no roaring, and absolutely no removing of limbs."

"Miss!" said Billy Bones, sticking his hand up. "I forgot my disguise today. I didn't know I needed it."

"How many times must I tell you not to leave home without it?" said the Head. She glared at Billy's bare white frame and shook her head. "You'd better hide in the cupboard."

Billy got up and skulked towards the cupboard.

"Miss, I've forgotten mine as well," said Invisible Isabel from the back of the class.

"Well, never mind," said the Head. "Somehow I don't think it will be a problem."

"That's so unfair," said Billy Bones.

"Into the cupboard!" screamed the Head, hovering ever higher in the air. Several pupils flinched with fright. Maud had never seen the Head so panicked before. Billy hurried to obey.

"Right," said the Head, floating back down. "Now, you're all pretending to be humans, remember? We can get through this."

Maud wasn't so sure.

