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Opening extract from

# Monstrous Maud: Scary Show

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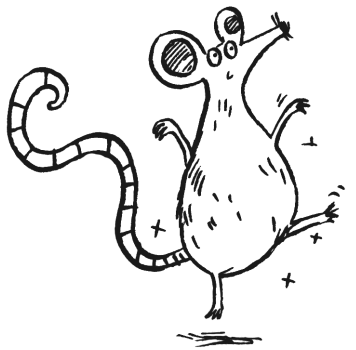
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# Scary Show



A. B. Saddlewick

BUSTER





# Chapter One

Maud had never seen the monsters of Rotwood so excited. A large crowd bustled around the entrance of the school, and other pupils were running over to join them. As Maud approached, she heard gasps, roars and growls. What was going on? Had one of the gargoyles fallen from the roof and hurt itself?

Maud pushed her way through. Danny the demon's wings were beating rapidly, and she had to leap aside to avoid them. At last she reached the front.

Pinned to the school noticeboard, just above

the poster for the lunchtime Spell Club, was a scrap of parchment with large, spidery writing:

SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENT

ROTWOOD'S GOT TALENT

Will you make the crowd SCREAM with delight?
Can you cast a SPELL over an audience?
Do you have the HEX FACTOR?

SHOW US ALL YOUR MOST MONSTROUS SKILLS IN THIS YEAR'S END-OF-TERM TALENT SHOW!

Please note: the talent show is compulsory.
No exceptions.

Maud spotted her friends Wilf and Paprika on the other side of the crowd and pushed her way over to them. Wilf's wolf-tail was wagging, and Paprika was grinning so widely she could see his vampire fangs.

"I'm going to show off my agility skills," said Wilf.

"I'm doing some synchronised flying with the other vampires," said Paprika.

"I'm going to try my gymnastics routine again," said a voice next to them. It had to belong to Invisible Isabel.

"What are you going to do, Maud?" asked Paprika.

Maud felt her cheeks flushing. What could she possibly do to entertain an audience of monsters? Everyone else would be showing off their monster powers, but she didn't have any. She was just a human.

"I'm going to … er …"

"Yeah, what exactly can you do?" said a voice from behind.

Maud turned around and saw Poisonous

Penelope peering at her. The witch's hands were planted on her hips, and there was a smirk on her pale green face.

Maud wished she'd never pretended to be a monster called a 'Tutu'. Penelope was always questioning her about it. But she wouldn't have been allowed to stay at a monster school if she'd admitted she was human.

"Well … er …" said Maud.

The school bell tolled just in time. Maud breathed a sigh of relief, as the pupils began to file up the stone steps. She'd been spared humiliation for now, but the end of term was just a week away. She needed to come up with something fast.

Maud plodded across the gloomy entrance hall. All around her, she could hear monsters discussing the contest. A group of ogres from the year above were planning a weightlifting display. A bunch of hairy trolls from the year below were forming a heavy-metal band.



Maud's pet rat Quentin poked his head out of her pocket, his snout quivering.

"How can I possibly impress this lot?" she asked him. "Should we revive our magic act?"

Quentin squeaked with fear and ducked back into Maud's pocket. At the talent contest in her old school, Maud had tried to saw Quentin in half. Unfortunately, he'd had an attack of stage fright and run away, so she'd had to use her packed lunch for the trick instead. Even the teachers hadn't bothered to applaud.

Maud walked down the long corridor at the back of the hall to the Rotwood science lab for her first lesson. She took a stool between Paprika and Oscar, who was detaching his head.

"I'm going to do my ventriloquist act," said Oscar. He placed his head in his lap. "Good evening, boys and girls!" it said.

"I don't think that counts," said Paprika. "You're supposed to throw your voice, not your whole head."

Professor Gool walked in. He had dark shadows under his eyes and grey skin, but that was how he normally looked. He took a key out of his lab-coat pocket.

"Settle down, monsters," he shouted, the white tufts of hair on either side of his head wiggling up and down. "I know you're excited about the contest, but you're here to learn, not to show off."

The murmur in the room died down, and Oscar stuck his head back on.

"Today we'll be examining dangerous spiders," said Professor Gool.

He unlocked the cupboard under his desk and heaved out a large plastic tank. Reaching inside, he lifted up a black spider with four red eyes, too many legs and a flicking tail.

"This is the highly monstrous scorpion spider," said Professor Gool. "One sting contains enough venom to kill a human in less than a second."



The spider scuttled up Professor Gool's arm, and the class cooed.

"Cute!" said Invisible Isabel.

"I'm going to pass him around, so be very careful," said Professor Gool. "He's a fragile little creature. I don't want him coming back with only thirteen legs."

He handed the spider over to the monsters at the front table, who crowded round to pet it.

This was just the sort of lesson Maud usually loved, but all she could think about was the contest.

Paprika nudged her. "What's up?"

"It's the show," whispered Maud. "I don't know what I'm going to do. I'm not a monster, remember?" Paprika was the one monster in all of Rotwood who knew Maud's secret. Unless you counted Mr Von Bat, Paprika's dad and Maud's class teacher.

Professor Gool pointed at Maud. "Montague!" he shouted. His cheeks were

red, and the tufts of hair on his head were sticking up. "Name the three most terrifying spiders in order of monstrosity."

"Yes, Sir," said Maud. "Number three is the poison-spitting yellow huntsman. Number two is the red-horned nostril-burrower. And number one is the Australian toilet-seat-lurker."

Professor Gool looked a little disappointed, the tufts of hair sinking down again. "Correct, but it still doesn't give you the right to jabber away willy-nilly."



After the lesson, Maud followed the other pupils out into the playground, among the wonky, weather-beaten gravestones.

A skeleton pupil called Billy Bones ran up to her. "We're playing Monsterball, Maud. Wanna join us?"

"No, thanks," said Maud.



She sat down on a patch of overgrown grass, leaned against a mossy headstone and watched as Billy and Oscar picked teams. Paprika and Zombie Zak were last to be chosen. Billy scratched his bare skull for a moment and pointed at Paprika.

"Monstrous!" shouted Paprika. "I wasn't last!"

"Ug!" shouted Zak, shuffling over to Oscar's team.

Oscar whipped his head off his shoulders and threw it up in the air to begin the game. It grinned as it spun round and round in the air. Maud wished she could rip her head off and fling it around like that. But if you tore a human head off, it wasn't so easy to put it back again.

She stared gloomily at the crumbling graves. At her old school, Primrose Towers, she'd felt like the odd one out because she hated pink dresses and fluffy bunnies. Now she was the odd one out because she had no special powers. Maybe she'd never fit in anywhere.

Something thudded in front of her.

"Hi Maud," it said.

Maud peered into the long grass. Oscar's head spat out a clump of grass and smiled muddily.

Billy Bones was rushing over, Oscar's body following, feeling the way with its hands and stumbling into gravestones.

"It's over here!" shouted Maud. She grabbed Oscar's hair and lifted his head up.

There was a sudden rustle from the trees at the edge of the graveyard. Maud heard a voice.

"This can't be the way," it said. "You're looking at the map wrong. As usual."

"We're on the right trail, dear," replied another voice. "It's just a little overgrown."

An elderly man and woman stumbled out into the yard.

Humans! What were they doing in Rotwood Forest?

The elderly couple were wearing waterproof jackets, hiking boots and rucksacks with pans, torches and can-openers hanging from metal frames. The man was holding a map.

The old man smiled at Maud and was just about to speak when he saw Oscar's head. His mouth stayed open, and he dropped the map.

"Hey!" shouted Oscar's head. "This is private property!"

The couple looked at each other, screamed, then turned and ran into the forest, their pots and pans clanking.

Oscar's head shook in Maud's hand, as he sniggered.

A few graves along, Billy Bones was doubled up with laughter. "Humans, eh?"

"I know," said Maud, forcing a smile. "Stupid, stupid humans."





# Chapter Two

The Head of History, Dr Reaper, peered out from the hood of his thick, black cloak, his withered lips drawn tightly over his sharp teeth.

"The lassst of the troll armiesss fell at the battle of Ossslo," he hissed. "The Vikingsss had banissshed them to the desssolate, icy North, where they ressside today."

The bell rang, and everyone in the classroom started to shuffle about.

Dr Reaper pointed a bony finger at them, as they gathered their things. "You'll want to remember all of that for your tesssts."



Maud packed her pencil case and made her way out. She passed an alcove lit by a dripping candle, and spotted Penelope muttering to Wilf's brother Warren.

"It will be so much fun to watch a proper talent show," said Penelope. "I saw one of those human ones on TV once. There was a magician, a dancing dog and a woman singing show-tunes who was even hairier than you."

"Pathetic," growled Warren.

"I know," said Penelope. She spotted Maud and added, "Humans are so one-dimensional."

Maud cringed and strode past with her head down. *I need a talent,* she thought, *and I think I might know where to find one.* She took the stairs to the library.

When she opened the door, dust swirled around her. High windows threw thin shafts of light on to hundreds of leather-bound books. They'd been stuffed on to the shelves every which way.

Mr Shakespeare, the school librarian, was sitting behind the desk at the far side of the room, dipping a feather into a pot of ink. He was wearing his doublet and hose and a white shirt with a wide collar.

"How dost thou, Maud?" he asked.

"I'm fine, thank you," said Maud. "I'm not interrupting, am I? I don't want to disrupt one of your brilliant plays."

"Plays?" asked Mr Shakespeare. "Alas, no. My agent has told me to concentrate on movies. I'm working on *Hamlet Cop*, *Macbeth v. Predator* and *Romeo and Juliet and Ninjas*."

"They sound … er … interesting," said Maud. She glanced around the shelves, but all she could see were cracked leather spines and crumbling bindings. She wasn't sure Mr Shakespeare used the Dewey decimal system.

"Do you have anything that might help me develop a talent?" asked Maud. "The sort I could impress a crowd with."



Mr Shakespeare leaned forward. A candle on his desk lit up his face eerily. "You seek the concealed arts that confound the ignorant and amaze the very faculties of eyes and ears?" he asked.

"I suppose so," said Maud.

"You'll be wanting the hobbies section, then," he said.

He led her over to a lopsided shelf and moved aside a stack of ancient books with yellow pages. Underneath was a pile of modern paperbacks with titles like *Card Tricks for Beginners*, *Maximise Your Memory*, *Ventriloquism for Dummies*, *Plate-Spinning Basics* and *Juggling – An Amateur's Guide*.

"Monstrous!" said Maud, scooping up the books. "I'll bring them back next week."

"As you like it," said Mr Shakespeare.



Maud left the library feeling better than she had all day. The pile of books was so tall that she couldn't see over the top, and she had to be careful not to squash Quentin. "I'll have a talent in no time," she muttered. "I'll show …" *Thud!*

Maud crashed straight into someone. The books went flying from her hands. Penelope was sprawled on the floor and scowling. Her bag had fallen open, and jars of newt eyes, frog toes and dog tongues were rolling down the corridor.

"I don't know what you're planning for the talent show," said Penelope, getting to her feet again, "but I hope it isn't a balancing act."

"Sorry," said Maud. She knelt and gathered her books.

Penelope glanced at them and narrowed her eyes. "Card tricks? Plate-spinning? Juggling?" she snorted. "Aren't you going to give us a display of your Tutu powers?"

"Of course," said Maud. "I … er … thought I'd warm up with something different. Get some variety into the act."

Penelope grinned. "I can't wait to see what you come up with. It's going to be the highlight of my night."

She muttered and waggled her fingers. The jars rolled back along the floor and flew into her bag, which floated up into her arms.

"Monstrous," said Maud. "Could you do that with my books?"

Penelope smiled. "Of course I *could*," she said. "But I'm not going to." She cackled and sauntered off.

