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Opening extract from

The Spider's Lair

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Stitch Head made his way through the ruined, blackened corridors of Castle Grotteskew. A bitter wind whistled through the windows and snow fell through holes in the ceiling. Stitch Head wrapped his tiny, mismatched arms round him to keep warm.

"*Stitch Head...*"

All at once, a dozen hideous, unnatural creatures emerged from the shadows, each more impossibly freakish than the last. Before long, Stitch Head found himself surrounded by a terrifying assortment of monstrosities. A slithering serpent with a human head ... a giant eyeball with tentacle feet ... a part-dog, part-cat, part-bat ... a steam-powered skull ... *it was the stuff of nightmares.*

"Stitch Head!" cried the skull, puffing across Stitch Head's path. "A thousand thanks for that extra dose of *Lunacy Lotion*. I feel a

hundred per cent less demented!"

"No problem, Godfrey," said Stitch Head.

"Stitch Head! That *Blood Succor* tonic completely cured my vampirism!" said the dog-cat-bat. "I owe you one!"

"You're welcome, Bertram," replied Stitch Head.

"Your *Savagery Salve* worked a treat, Stitch Head," hissed the man-serpent. "I haven't savaged anyone in ages!"

"Glad I could help, Quentin," Stitch Head said.

So it was, through corridor after corridor, that Stitch Head found himself confronted by grateful creations.

"Thank you *so* much for the eyedrops – I can finally see where I'm squirming!"

"Thanks for finding my phantom limb – I knew I'd left it around here somewhere…"

"Great work unblocking my toilet!"

Indeed, despite the creations' near-impossible monstrousness and stomach-wrenching ugliness, each one was more pleasant than the last. Stitch Head simply nodded humbly and carried on through the castle.

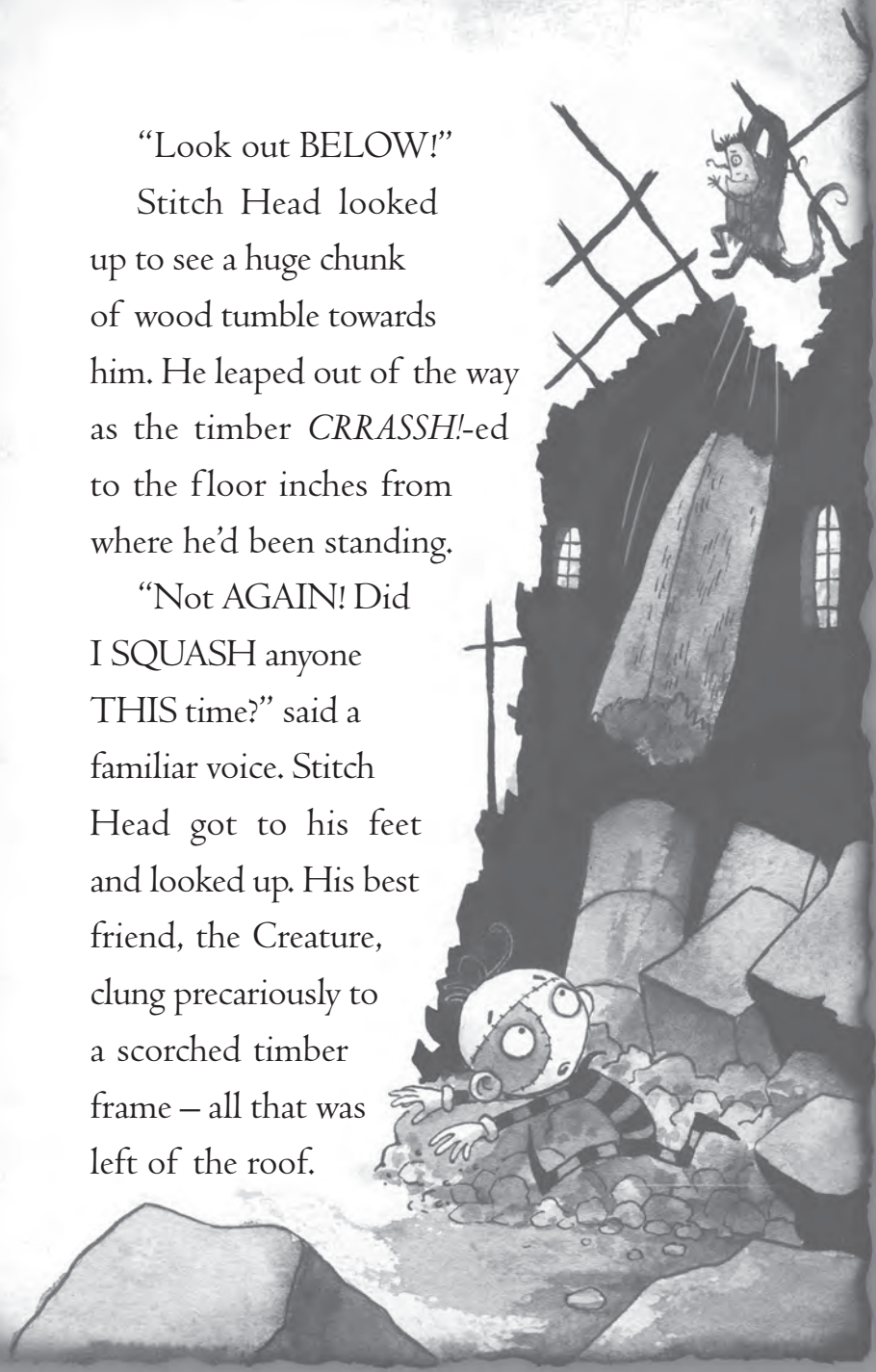
At last he arrived at the charred remains of a thick door, all but hanging from its hinges. He pushed it open and stepped into the fire-blackened shadow of a once great hall. Inside, a dozen or so creations were busily carrying out repairs. In one corner, a massive, many-tentacled octo-monster patched up holes in the wall. In another, a colossal lizard-beast chewed up and swallowed mounds of rubble in its great jaws.

"Uh, excuse me," said Stitch Head, as a wheel-footed wolf-woman rolled past him at speed. "Have you seen the—?"

"Look out BELOW!"

Stitch Head looked up to see a huge chunk of wood tumble towards him. He leaped out of the way as the timber *CRRASSH!*-ed to the floor inches from where he'd been standing.

"Not AGAIN! Did I SQUASH anyone THIS time?" said a familiar voice. Stitch Head got to his feet and looked up. His best friend, the Creature, clung precariously to a scorched timber frame – all that was left of the roof.



"STITCH Head!" hollered the Creature, clambering down from the ceiling. The Creature was one of Professor Erasmus's most impressive creations – a huge, hulking monstrosity with a breathtakingly terrifying combination of unpleasant elements, including a tail and a spare arm.

"So what do you THINK?" it asked. "Pretty IMPRESSIVE work, eh? The EAST WING will be back to its GRIM, DEPRESSING self in NO time…"

"You're doing a great job, Creature," replied Stitch Head. "Near-death experiences aside…"

"I KNOW! I think I've found my CALLING – I LOVE being a BUILDING FOREMAN! The pressure, the responsibility, the YELLING…"

The Creature began striding around the room, shouting things like, "YOU there!

More FLICKER in the lamp! More CREAK in that DOOR!"

"Actually, I don't think you *have* to yell…" began Stitch Head.

"It's GREAT! I'm TELLING you, Stitch Head, you should BURN down the castle more OFTEN…"

"It was an *accident*," sighed Stitch Head, blushing a slightly darker shade of ash-grey than normal. "Actually, it'd be nice if everyone stopped going on about—"

"No one holds it AGAINST you – it's not EVERY day you get POSSESSED by an evil GHOST and try to DESTROY everything," boomed the Creature. "Anyway, the CREATIONS are all DELIGHTED to FINALLY have something to DO around here! Between that and all the HELP you're DISHING out, you COULDN'T be more

POPULAR! It's like you're KING of THE CASTLE!"

"I don't know about that…" said Stitch Head, blushing again. It still felt strange to be out of the shadows. He had spent most of his almost-life locked away in a small room in the castle. Part of him missed that peace and quiet.

"At THIS rate," continued the Creature, leaning down to Stitch Head and whispering in his ear, "you MIGHT even get a CELEBRITY VIP INVITE to the castle Christmas PARTY!"

"Wait, aren't *you* organizing the castle Christmas party?" asked Stitch Head.

"YEP! It's going to be GREAT! Haven't had MY invitation yet, though … fingers CROSSED!"

"Do *I* get an invite?" said a voice.

Stitch Head and the Creature turned to see Arabella leaning against one of the many statues of Professor Erasmus that littered the castle. Arabella Guff was a girl from Grubbers Nubbin. She was fierce, fearless and the only human Stitch Head had ever met (except for Professor Erasmus) who wasn't terrified of the castle and its inhabitants.



"ARABELLA!" the Creature cried. "We haven't seen you in AGES! Where have you BEEN? We've MISSED you!"

"Been busy, ain't I?" replied Arabella. She ruffled her already untidy hair and rubbed one of her boots on the back of her leg.

Her pet monkey-bat, Pox (half-monkey, half-bat, entirely savage) fluttered excitedly down on to her shoulder and started gnawing at her ear. "So, what's new, Stitch Head?" Arabella continued. "Burned down any castles lately?"

"It was an accident…" sighed Stitch Head. "Anyway," he continued, keen to change the subject, "how's your nan, Arabella? Is – is she any better?"

"That's the thing…" said Arabella. She tugged at her black dress, and then kicked the professor's statue. "Nan went and *died* on me."

