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Opening extract from

The Spin

Written by

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1
Compost

Stormy felt as if he were being cooked – steamed like a pudding, baked like an apple pie. The kitchen was *so* hot he could barely breathe. He yawned. Scooped up the eggshells and onionskins into the bucket of scraps, yawned again.

Uh-oh. Otto the cook had spotted him.

'You! Stormy! Wakey-wakey!' A sieve sailed through the air towards his head. Stormy ducked. 'No yawning in here!' Otto yelled. 'Take that bucket to the compost heap! And be quick about it! No snoozing in my kitchen! Zero yawning! D'you hear me?'

'Yes, sir. No, sir.'

Stormy picked up the heavy bucket and got a whack on his ear. A *size five* whack.

Otto was tall, and as wide as the black stove, and when he hit you with a size five spoon it felt as if your head was splitting open, like a conker bursting out of its shell.

'Ouch! Yes, sir.'

He ran to the door as Otto reached for the number six spoons.

Stormy perked up in the fresh, cool air. He staggered across the yard, down the path and past the crooked bean-poles and rows of shrivelled sprouts, the bucket bumping against his thin legs.

If I were taller and stronger I'd give Otto what for! I'd show him. If I didn't have *to do what he told me to do, I wouldn't do it!*

The steaming compost heap at the very end of the path was hidden behind bushes. Beyond it, the garden sloped away in rocky terraces and giant boulders down the side of the mountain.

Stormy tossed the contents of the bucket onto the pile, set it down and stood a moment.

In the evening gloom, every edge and outline was beginning to fade.

The twilight sky was a beautiful purple, with tiny brilliant stars just beginning to appear like holes in the dark. Two spitfyres were wheeling around the Academy castle on the summit of Dragon Mountain. They were looping, tilting and swooping like birds, as if they were searching for something on the mountainside. It was unusual for winged horses to be out so late. He wondered what they were doing. Lucky things, those sky-riders. They weren't orphans like him; they had rich parents who paid for them to go to the Academy. He looked up at the spitfyres adoringly. If only he could get close to one, touch one – it was what he most wanted in the whole world.

A sudden chink of metal against metal made him spin round.

'Who's there?'

A man leapt out of the shadows, grabbed him and without a warning, locked his hands together round his neck and began to squeeze.

'Silence!' said his terrible voice. 'Don't move. Not a word!' His grip on Stormy's throat was like a metal claw, cutting off air, pushing him to the ground.

Stormy stopped breathing.

The man was strong, but no taller than Stormy. His long grey hair hung in rat-tails around his grizzled face. Inside his beard his few teeth were broken into yellow spikes. He was shivering and wet.

'I won't say a word!' Stormy managed to say, terrified. 'I'm not moving, only you're just about throttling me – sir!'

The awful hold on his throat lessened but did not go away. A dank, damp, marshy smell, a smell of wet undergrowth, cloggy soil and worms, crept into Stormy's nostrils.

'Name?' The man's voice was a croak, as if it hadn't been used for years or had been strained by shouting.

'Stormy. Sir.'

'God help us! What sort of name is Stormy?'

'The one the orphanage gave me, sir. Found on a stormy night, thunder and lightn—'

'You a norphan?' the man interrupted, looking around in a distracted manner as if he expected someone to appear.

'I am.'

'Listen then, norphan, and you'll not be hurt. I've a gang

back there in the bushes and if I give the sign they'll leap out and rip you limb from limb and chuck the pieces over the cliff for the vultures. They would, soon as butter a slice of bread.' Stormy nodded to show he understood. 'But I won't give the sign if you –' he looked about nervously and gave Stormy a shake, 'you bring me food. And a file for the chain. A coat if you can find one.'

'Food and a file and a coat if I can find one,' Stormy repeated. His heart was beating madly. The man held him so tight his toes barely touched the ground.

'A big file, mind, for this here big leg chain.' He rattled it softly. 'Strong. Come back at midnight. If you're not here by the time the clock strikes the last of the twelve, we'll be in that place there two ticks later.' He nodded towards the kitchen. 'I know where you sleep; know your very bunk. We'll come to you and slice your throat. Got it?'

Stormy gulped. 'Got it.'

The squat man pushed him away roughly, then he turned and limped away, holding his chain from the ankle cuffs so that it didn't clank.

Stormy stood frozen for a few minutes, waiting for other figures to rise up out of the dark. No one appeared. What a terrible man! Escaped from the Academy dungeons, no doubt – a convict, a *murderer*, probably, and he knew where Stormy slept . . . His very bunk!

Stormy crept ever so quickly back to the kitchen.

2
Otto

Otto's few strands of long grey hair were drawn over a scabby, turnip-shaped skull. His eyes were like two burnt potatoes and his nose was a knobbly ancient parsnip.

The only time Otto had left the kitchen was when his sister ran away to the circus. He went to bring her back, but before he could coax her home, she died in an accident. It was after he returned that he started throwing pans and counting the strawberries in a bowl, daring anyone to steal one.

Stormy was one of Otto's kitchen skivvies, the lowest of the low. They washed, cut, peeled, cored and mashed. They prepared plain food for the orphanage and fancy casseroles, puddings and tarts for the Academy.

The convicts in the dungeons got what was left.

Brittel ran the spitfyre kitchen, a much smaller place than Otto's kitchen, hidden away down a narrow corridor. Brittel was as thin as a stick and as mean as a snake. He prepared all the spitfyre food. He used strange ingredients

– rare herbs, minced bark, molluscs, special flowers and copious amounts of grass which he combined in mysterious, secret ways.

The food was sent up through the core of Dragon Mountain in lifts. The Winder, always the strongest boy in the orphanage, had the job of wheeling it up.

Stormy hoped to make it from skivvy to under-cook in Brittel's kitchen by the time he was thirteen or fourteen. He could never expect to get closer to a real spitfyre than that.

Stormy opened the kitchen door nervously, hoping no one would notice how long he'd been at the compost heap, or that he was shaking. His friend Tex gave him a wink.

'Where have you been, you little worm?' Otto yelled. He was a simmering pan with the lid off. 'It's taken you an hour to empty a bucket. Is our compost five miles away?'

'I –'

Otto picked up a size six wooden spoon and ran at Stormy, waving it. 'I'll show you, you cheeky little slice of sausage! How many ounces of flour in a three-egg cake? What ingredients in a chocolate sauce? Wasting my time, lingering and loitering! Time is food, Stormy! Lobster pancakes! How d'you make puff pastry? Crème caramel? Food comes first!'

The other skivvies sniggered. Stormy didn't mind – he'd laugh too if it were someone else being chased round the kitchen.

Sponge, Otto's old dog, staggered up on his stiff legs and pretended to nip at Stormy's ankles. He and Stormy were friends; Sponge would never really bite anyone.

Otto battered Stormy's back and shoulders with the wooden spoon, whooping every time he made a good, loud sound. 'Splat! Whack! Crack!' he cried. 'Batter! Smash!'

Otto was large and slow and Stormy was small and quick. After the first few blows, which didn't really hurt, Stormy escaped under the kitchen table. Sponge joined him, grinning.

'Sorry, Mr Otto . . . sorry, sir . . . sorry, Mr Otto, sir –'

'Moron!' Otto yelled at Tex, seeing him about to sweep bits of bread into the bucket. 'Keep those! Crumbs is food. No waste here! Don't forget the little birdies!'

'No, sir.'

Stormy was forgotten. He stayed under the table. His encounter at the compost heap had chilled him to the marrow, and despite the warmth he was shivering. Otto could be scary, but it was the wild man outside he was most scared of. There had been anger and misery in the bones and hard flesh of those hands around his throat.

The old dog sank down and snored, and Stormy crawled out, picked up a knife and began chopping.

Otto was standing by the window that looked over the mountain track, slurping a mug of mint tea. He watched that stretch of path a lot, as if he were expecting someone.

* * *

Stormy worked all evening, anxiously watching the time slip away. Ten thirty. Eleven o'clock. Eleven thirty . . . How was he ever going to get out to the convict with the food and the file by midnight?

At last the kitchen was tidied and cleaned, the food prepared, ready for breakfast. Team by team the staff left; the skivvies were the last. Stormy glanced at the clock. Oh, if only they would all hurry up! He let the other boys go out ahead of him, then went back to pick up an imaginary speck from the clean floor before following them, making sure he was the last to leave the kitchen. But he didn't climb the stairs up to his dormitory as they had done. He slipped quickly into the darkness at the bottom of the stone stairs, where Otto kept his coats and wellingtons. He pushed his way through the heavy mackintoshes and tweeds and slippery leather until he felt the cold stone wall. He was well hidden. He stayed very still, waiting. The smell of Otto was all around him.

The clock struck quarter to midnight. Sweat broke out all over his body. *Come on, Otto!* At last the cook shuffled out, Sponge padding beside him. He slept in a damp stone-flagged room beside the kitchen, dreaming of piecrusts, brandied cherries, apple crumble and cake.

He was yawning and scratching at his greasy head. His footsteps came closer and closer. Then stopped.

'What's the matter, Sponge?'

They were right there, right beside the coats!

Sponge was sniffing loudly. Stormy closed his eyes and prayed his shaking limbs wouldn't give him away. *Go away, Sponge! Go away!*

'Come on, you daft old dog. It's only a mouse. Bed!' And at last his bedroom door shut.

3
Stealing

Stormy waited a few minutes, then crept out from his hiding place, dragging with him a vast green tweed garment he had never seen Otto wear so would never miss. He put it on to save carrying it, and headed for the kitchen, the coat hem trailing on the floor.

He tiptoed in, feeling like a burglar; feeling like a thief.

Black beetles scattered, scurrying back into the cracks and crevasses behind the stove. The only sound was the crackling fire and the scratching of mice and lizards in the skirting board.

The great coat was suffocating in the hot kitchen but still he was shaking; even his lips were quivering. He almost couldn't do a single thing.

He went to the big stone larder. Otto knew every item of food on every shelf. If one thing was moved, he'd go crazy! Once he'd prepared a dish, he had it recorded in his brain forever. No skivvy had ever managed to steal

so much as one mulberry from here without Otto knowing about it – nor lived to tell the tale.

But Stormy had no choice.

He shut his eyes. *If I can't see what I'm doing, I'm not responsible*, he told himself. He pushed back the enormous coat sleeves and let his fingers close around whatever food they happened to touch. Stormy's mouth watered when he opened his eyes and saw a muffin in his hand, baked golden with the red fruit oozing out of the top. There were four other muffins – it would be missed, but what could he do?

He lifted the cheese cover but the cheese beneath was cut into triangles and beautifully arranged in a swirl. The muffin, might, just might have fallen on the floor and got eaten, but not the cheese. He put three crumbs of muffin on the shelf and three on the stone slabs. There, it had fallen and Sponge had eaten it, or the mice. He put the muffin in the coat pocket. What else? There was a long loaf, and since the end was jagged he hoped Otto would not miss another inch or two. Then an apple, but as he reached for the apple, he set three others rolling off along the wide stone ledge. He froze. No one came. He left the fallen apples. A bat had got in or some rats, giant beetles or . . . There was the end of a fat sausage, just two inches of it; he added it to the rest in his pocket.

Now the file; where would he get a file? The man wanted something to cut through the chain that hobbled

his legs together; it would need to be a huge file. Otto kept tools for mending the stove and the turning spit beneath the stone sink. Stormy pulled the cupboard door open and rummaged around quietly. There was a heavy chisel and hammer, and he considered taking them before he spotted a massive pair of pincer things that Otto had used to cut the bars on the pantry window when his friend Purbeck had got his big head stuck through them. Otto had made Purbeck wait for two whole days before freeing him. It had been snowing at the time too.

The back door was locked, but the key was in the lock and Stormy turned it slowly. The clock in the tower began to chime the hour. Midnight!

He ran.

A dim yellow glow flickered in the dark by the compost heap. Stormy headed towards it, his heart booming, and his mouth dry. With his eyes set on the light, he saw nothing, only heard a hideous *wheeze* as the terrible man leapt out and flung him to the ground. The man was on top of him in an instant, settling on his chest like a heavy toad, and smelling like one too.

'Alone?' The convict's voice rasped close in his ear. 'Anyone see you?'

'No, sir.'

'Tell anyone?'

'I swear I didn't, sir.'

'Food?'

'Yes, here, if you'd just let me . . .'

The man rolled off him and, reaching for a shrouded lantern, opened it so a sliver of light shone out. Stormy managed to get his hands into the deep pockets of the big coat and squash the stolen food into the convict's hands. 'Sorry, it's a bit broken and –'

He didn't notice a folded square of paper escape from his coat pocket to the ground.

The little man grabbed the muffin with shaking hands and rammed it into his mouth. His teeth were chattering so badly that much of it flew out again and had to be scooped up several times before it was eaten and swallowed once and for all.

Stormy had a moment in which to nervously study the convict. His eyes were black and very round, like polished stones. And his ears, half hidden by the straggly hair, were pointed.

A *grubbin*! That accounted for the smell of old leaves and wet earth.

'What you starin' at?' the grubbin said, and food sprayed out of his mouth as he spoke. '*What?*'

'Nothing, sir, nothing.'

'Is it the ears? Is that it?' He chewed away furiously, swallowing in great hungry gulps; saliva dribbling down his chin. 'Ears? Been paying all my life for them ears. Locked up for years and years, little norphan, for a pair of ears. A pair of pointed ears! Locked up there.' He indicated the dungeons, the tiny black-barred windows set into the castle walls below the Academy.

'Get the file?' he added, gripping Stormy's arm tight. 'Did you?'

'There wasn't one,' Stormy said, quickly, pulling out the pincers. 'I got these. I hope they'll do. Otto's going to go crazy when he finds out!'

'Fierce is he, this Otto?'

Stormy nodded. 'Can be.'

'Well, I'm grateful to you, and sorry. There. Can't say fairer than that. I've done nothin' wrong and shouldn't be locked up, and that's a fact. I needs my freedom. What about you?' The grubbin stuffed the last of the sausage into his mouth and nodded at him. 'Know what it's like to need something? Need it bad?'

'I do. Yes. I *need* to be a sky-rider,' Stormy blurted.

'Ah ha. Good, good,' and the grubbin held out a dirty hand for the tools. 'Got a dream, lad, hold it. Now give me them.' He weighed the heavy pincers in his palm. 'Good. Done well.'

'Can I go now?' Stormy whispered.

'Yes. Thank you. You can go. Away to your bed before my men come back. 'Ere, give me the coat.'

Quickly Stormy stripped off the coat and the grubbin put it on. It was huge on him too, drooping off his shoulders and long on the ground, but he hugged it round himself gratefully.

'You done me proud, young man. Thank you. Thank you for your help and I hopes you get your dream. Brave lad. Here – don't forget this.' He scooped up the fallen

paper and thrust it into Stormy's hand. 'Might be important.'

He shut off the light and limped away into the darkness, hardly clinking at all, and was eaten up by the shadows.

4
Guards

Stormy could not sleep. His night was tormented by fearful dreams where Otto roasted him slowly on the spit above the fire or fed him live to Sponge, in bite-size pieces.

He kept waking, thinking he heard the door to the dormitory open, thinking Otto was coming to get him, imagining he heard the low growl of Sponge as he padded up to the bed, his wet nose sniffing loudly, scenting stolen food.

He was amazed when he woke at six o'clock to find he was still all in one piece, safe in his narrow bunk and not dead. Images of the escaped prisoner came swiftly into his mind along with the paper he'd handed him, which, after briefly glancing at the night before, he'd pushed under his pillow.

Now he pulled it out. It was a faded handbill, much creased and fingered. He unfolded it quietly and read:

Cosmo's Circus
Wonderful Wild Winged Horses

THE GREATEST SPITFYRE SHOW ON EARTH!
COME AND SEE OUR DAREDEVIL
DEATH-DEFYING ACTS!
SEE THE MOST SPECTACULAR SPITFYRES
IN THE WORLD!

Cosmo's Circus presents the Great Renaldo!

The Great Renaldo was a young man, as round and sleek as a well-fed seal. He had a large black moustache with twirled-up ends and was wearing a sort of string vest through which his muscles bulged.

RENALDO
THE STAR OF THE SHOW!
TERRIFIC Tricks and Dazzling FEATS of Bravery!
Spitfyres tamed to submission!
Renaldo is fearless!
Don't miss the Great Renaldo!

Stormy stared at the confident spitfyre master with wonder and awe. To be in a spitfyre circus looked even better than being a sky-rider in the Academy.

Behind Renaldo were some of the tiny folk with very round faces and spindly legs known as *littles*. They wore tights and elaborate hats. They cartwheeled round the

ring or rode on miniature ponies with star-studded harnesses.

Tex was stirring in the bunk below and quickly Stormy folded the handbill up again and slipped it inside a book.

'What happened to you last night?' Tex asked him, poking his head round from the lower bunk. 'Did Otto keep you?'

'Tummy trouble,' Stormy said. 'Stuck in the bathroom.'

Tex laughed. 'What did you eat?'

'I didn't eat anything! I wouldn't dare.' Stormy got up and started to dress. 'Otto has eyes in the back of his spotty old head.'

Tex laughed again. 'I know,' he said. 'All that glorious nosh going up to the Academy and I bet they don't appreciate it! Once when I was carrying a tray to the Winder I just let my face sort of fall into the plate and I ate a whole stuffed tomato!'

They both giggled.

'It's torture, putting the food in the lift, closing the door, seeing it disappear,' Tex said dreamily. 'Don't know how the Winder manages. If I –'

'Hey, Tex, you don't hate grubbins, do you?'

'What, molemen? No. Why?'

'Just wondered.'

'Brittel does, but he's a narrow-minded idiot,' Tex said with great certainty. 'And hates most things.'

'That's true,' Stormy said. 'He's always making nasty comments about them . . . I'm sure they're not all bad. He probably just wishes he could dig up gold and stuff, like they can.'

‘I suppose they’re a bit grubby,’ Tex said. ‘Don’t know that I’d want to live underground; it’d make you smell. Too dark. And I wouldn’t have their gold teeth, even if I were rich.’

Stormy tried to remember if the grubbin last night had had gold teeth. He’d had a lot of gaps, so maybe he had once. ‘Brittel says grubbins shouldn’t be allowed to live alongside humans. Says they steal and lie. He once told me his –’

Suddenly the bell started ringing, an urgent, sharp, harsh sound that shook the walls and rattled the windows in their frames.

Stormy froze. ‘An alarm?’ he whispered.

‘Yeah, it’s an alarm all right,’ said another boy, joining them.

‘I should think so!’ Tex agreed, looking excited. ‘Great.’

The boys rushed to the windows and peered out – all except for Stormy. He was too terrified to move.

‘Something’s up!’ another boy said. ‘I’ve just seen Mrs Cathcart running!’

The boys giggled. ‘That’s not running, it’s rolling!’

‘Last time I heard that bell, some twit up in the castle got burnt to a crisp by a flying horse,’ Purbeck said.

‘They think they’re fireproof, those posh Academy boys,’ Tex said.

‘Wonder what’s up this time?’ another boy asked.

‘I expect we’ll find out soon,’ Tex said.

Stormy straightened his bed covers quickly. His fingers were trembling . . . Had his thieving been discovered *already*?

* * *

Before breakfast the boys were lined up to listen to Mrs Cathcart, the housekeeper. She was so plump that her hands barely met around her squidgy middle. Having a squinty eye meant no one ever knew where, or at whom she was looking, so all the skivvies watched her intently, though their minds were on the pots of porridge slowly growing cold on the long tables behind them. Mrs Cathcart gave them the same old talk.

'You'd be scrabbling around in the filth of the village if it wasn't for the kitchen,' she said. 'You'd be dirty and hungry and lonely. The kitchen has saved you, and in exchange we ask only for hard work. Dedication. And loyalty.' She smoothed her blonde hair, tucking a short strand behind her ear.

Stormy gulped loudly.

'I've gathered you together to explain about the alarm you heard. There's been a break out. A convict has escaped from the dungeons!'

Stormy nearly toppled over.

A shiver rippled through the boys like wind through a field of nervous grass.

'He is a ruthless, violent creature. A *grubbin*! Not that I'm prejudiced or anything, but even if you only believe *some* of what you hear about them, you can't sleep easy in your bed . . . If we see him, we must not approach him. He's dangerous. He is a lifer, never *ever* to be set free, a

desperate creature. Report anything suspicious to me or Mr Otto, immediately!'

Stormy clenched his sweaty hands tightly together and looked straight ahead.

As Mrs Cathcart's stare went round the hall, it seemed to Stormy that one of her blue eyes lingered on him, watching him with special interest. He tried to make his eyes go glassy and vacant, like Purbeck's usually were. Oh, lordy! She *couldn't* know what he'd done! She couldn't!

Suddenly the door was flung open so violently that it crashed against the wall. The boys jumped. Mrs Cathcart squealed.

Otto! The long strands of his hair, usually neatly combed over his skull, hung down on one side of his big face. Sweat gleamed on his cheeks like olive oil. His cheeks were ripe tomatoes.

'Thief!' he cried. 'Robber!'

Stormy felt his stomach flip over and start to slide away towards his knees. His hand twitched with an automatic desire to own up. His feet even stepped forward involuntarily. *It was me! It was me!* But he said nothing.

'A robber in the kitchens?' Mrs Cathcart's arched eyebrows went even higher. 'Impossible! Are you suggesting one of my boys might have . . . Never.'

Otto stamped over to where she stood.

'My larder!' he cried. 'Someone has stolen food! Crumbs on the floor! Touched my muffins!'

Some of the boys giggled but were soon silenced by a look from Mrs Cathcart. 'Precisely what is missing, Mr Otto?' she asked.

'A raspberry muffin; an apple with a patch of orange-red on it, salami, one and a half inches of bread and – and my finest tweed coat!'

Mrs Cathcart tapped a plump finger against her chin thoughtfully.

'It sounds as if that escaped prisoner has paid *us* a visit. I'll ask the guards to investigate. Boys, you are dismissed! Watch out for anything unusual and report it immediately. Off you go to your porridge!'

Stormy's heart was thumping, arms trembling, knees knocking, but he could still walk. Slowly he made his way over to his table, and sat down next to Tex.

'You could eat anything from the kitchen now and Otto'd just think it had been the old grubbin thief!' Tex said, spooning up his porridge quickly. 'We should try.'

Stormy nodded weakly. He was safe for the moment – that was all he could think about.

'Funny you asking about grubbins this morning, isn't it?' Tex said, grabbing some bread. 'What wouldn't you do for a bit of butter, Stormy? And jam, eh?'

Stormy hardly heard him. He was remembering the two spitfyres skimming down the mountain in the twilight last night. Now he knew what they had been looking for.

* * *

Towards evening a mist came down and even the air in the kitchen became clammy. Stormy peered outside – swirling grey obliterated everything.

It seemed that everyone was waiting for something to happen, and at last it did. The kitchen door opened and a tall guard came in. His grey leather suit was beaded with moisture from the mist. The skivvies quietly laid down their knives and egg-beaters and inched towards him, hungry to hear news.

'Mind your dirty guard's feet on my clean floor!' Otto snapped.

The guard grinned. 'Same jolly Mr Otto we know and love,' he said. 'Thought you'd like to know that we've caught the culprit, Mr Otto. The food thief.' With a wink at the boys the guard helped himself to an iced chocolate bun from a heaped dish on the table.

'Oi, don't touch that!' Otto cried. 'Put that back immediately!'

'Delicious!' the guard said, taking a bite. 'Light and delicious! Mind, I prefer white chocolate myself.'

'Whatthedevil!' Otto yelled, and probably would have leapt on him if a second guard hadn't come in just then, carrying Otto's old green coat.

'Look what I've got!' he said, flinging the coat down and helping himself to a bun.

'My coat!' Otto cried. 'Oi! My buns!'

'Stingy, aren't you, Otto, even when we've done you a favour. We caught the villain and he was so desperate he was wearing *that*.' The second guard pointed to the coat.

'He's outside now; trembling and shivering like a little puppy. Says he wants to say he's sorry.'

'We aren't sorry,' the other guard said, picking a ripe pear out of the fruit bowl and polishing it on his sleeve. 'We never apologise for nothing.'

Otto gave him a cold stare before following them. The kitchen staff bunched behind him, straining to see.

The light spilled from the kitchen doorway on to a miserable sight. The grubbin hung like a limp rag between two pan-faced guards. His cheeks were smeared and blackened with grime and his trousers dirty and torn. He had lost not only a boot but also his leg irons.

'He says he'd like to apologise to you, Otto, in person,' the first guard said. He prodded the grubbin with his truncheon. 'Can't think why. We don't bother, little moleman – why'd you want to?'

'Don't listen to him!' Brittel snapped, stepping to the front of the onlookers and pointing a thin, stained finger at him. 'He's only doing it to get off more lightly. Dirty beggar! Nasty, wormy *grubbin*!'

The grubbin winced; his knees folded beneath him like paper and his head drooped heavily. His eyes were half closed and his chin shook as he spoke.

'Sorry, sir,' he muttered wheezily. 'Sorry for taking your coat and your food.' He forced open his eyes a little and peered at the kitchen staff intently, as if trying to pick out one particular face amongst the watching boys. His eyes met with Stormy's, and there was a flash of recognition on both sides. The grubbin quickly closed his eyes and

looked away. 'I had *no* help, sirs, *none*. It was all my own doing.'

'Of course he didn't have help, he didn't need it!' Brittel said. 'Stealing is in their blood!' He folded his arms across his narrow chest. 'It's natural for them, born to it.'

'We'll take him off now, then!' The guards hauled the convict up on his trembling legs. 'He's done his apology. Enough. Back to the dungeons with you.' And they dragged him away.

'What's the matter with you, Stormy?' Brittel said as they went back inside. 'Your face is a picture! You don't care what happens to a dirty old grubbin, do you?'

Stormy shook his head and added quietly, 'But he might be innocent. We don't know for sure.'

'Course we know!' Brittel said. 'Those little diggers are all bad. My father lost all his money because of them; cost him his life too, it did.'

'How's that, then?' Tex asked, playing for time, avoiding his kitchen duties.

'How's that? My father bought a mine off them; good deep one, supposed to be fresh, supposed to be full, only to find the grubbins had already cleared it out of precious stones and gold. Everything gone. Wasn't theirs to dig. They're thieves.'

'That's enough, Brittel!' Otto snapped, slamming the door to the yard. 'Back to work. All of you!' The boys scurried to their places.

'All very well,' Brittel muttered, 'but it was the ruin of my old man. Ruin.'

'I don't like mysteries,' Otto went on, ignoring him. 'Don't like wondering if my skivvies are honest or not. Glad to know the truth.'

Stormy had raced back to his place at the end of the table and picked up his knife again. *Honest?* The knife sliced his finger. 'Ouch!'

'Stormy?' Otto called out.

'Nothing, sir!'

Stormy sucked his bleeding finger and dived under the table as if he had dropped something.

He wasn't honest, but he was safe. He was safe! The grubbin had saved him! Hallelujah!

'But how did the robbing thieving villain get in?' Otto added, shaking his head. 'I don't know.'

Brittel pointed at Stormy.

'Ask that little grubbin-lover. He might know.'

Stormy kept silent. Avoiding Brittel's stare, he stood up and started chopping again. Now no one would ever know what he'd done.