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opening extract from

Brigands M.C.

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Only a full-patch member of the Brigands is entitled to wear the club's colours: an embroidered logo depicting a caped highwayman brandishing a sawn-off shotgun.

Excerpt from *Riding with Kurt and the Brigands* by Jane Oxford

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Out of eleven British chapters, the South Devon Brigands ranked second only to London in power and seniority. Their clubhouse was a creaky affair, converted out of a pair of barns on fifteen acres close to the wealthy enclave of Salcombe. On a clear day the video cameras mounted around its corrugated metal fence could peer over the barbed wire at millionaires' yachts moored in the marina below.

Dante Scott was eight years old, son of Scotty, the vice-president of South Devon Brigands. Dante was a tough kid who'd swing at anyone who took the mickey out of his tangled red hair. He liked hanging out with his dad at the Brigands clubhouse, which was usually on Wednesday and Friday nights when his mum drove to Plymouth for evening classes.

Bikers played pool, drank, smoked dope, swore and didn't want kids under their feet. Nobody ever cleaned the compound outside and Dante's mum told him never to play out because of broken glass and jagged metal, but he'd never been hurt and his dad didn't mind if it kept him occupied.

Dante would get behind the wheel of a wrecked Ford and pretend to drive, or make a ramp with bits of rotting wood and send empty beer kegs crashing down the hill.

Mostly there were other kids around. The ground was too sloped for football, so they'd play hide-and-seek or tag, which was most enjoyable in the dark with torches. Best of all was when Teeth came and coached kids in the boxing ring.

None of the Brigands were exactly teddy bears, but Teeth looked scary even by their standards. Huge and muscular, he wore sharp spurs on the back of his boots and greasy jeans held up with a length of bike chain that could be ripped out and used to beat the shit out of anyone who messed with him.

Biker names were usually ironic. Little George was the size of a house, Fats as thin as a rake and Teeth had nothing but squishy gums and a couple of brown molars at the back. He'd never say how he lost them. Dante asked one time and Teeth just said, *you should have seen the state of the other guy.*

Teeth was a nightclub bouncer with a sideline in drug dealing, but he wanted to be a pro wrestler. Sometimes he'd get a few weeks' work at a holiday camp in the summer and he'd wrestled on TV a couple of times, though he wasn't one of the big stars who got in the wrestling magazines stacked up in Dante's bedroom.

Teeth would take Dante and any other boys who were interested into the big room at the back of the main barn which contained an ancient boxing ring with frayed ropes and a warped floor. He'd taught Dante how to box properly, how to do Karate kicks and headlocks and all kinds of other stuff that he wasn't supposed to tell his mum because his dad said she'd go spare.

Every Brigand in the world has to attend a Wednesday-night clubhouse meeting known as church. Church night was Dante's favourite. Wives and girlfriends of the chapter's sixteen full-patch members would make food and get drunk at the bar while the men had their meeting in a little outbuilding known as the chapel. There were always other kids around.

Joe was always there. He was the son of the Führer, the chapter president. Dante and Joe were in Year Four at the same school and they were good mates. On this particular Wednesday the pair had stuffed themselves with chicken wings, cocktail sausages, oven chips and cola before each getting a hard smack and a threat of worse to come after dumping an older girl called Isobel into a puddle by the line of motorbikes out front.

After some loud belching to stop Joe's geeky eleven-year-old brother Martin from concentrating on his book, the pair ended up wrestling each other and chasing around the outside of the boxing ring. When they got breathless they'd run back to the bar and fuel up on cup cakes and Fanta.

This got repetitive after a while, so Dante and Joe were pleased when church ended and Teeth came out of the meeting room. Most of the Brigands joined the women and club associates at the bar, but Teeth sauntered past the pool table and blinking fruit machine to stick his head between the elasticised ropes of the boxing ring and give the two eight-year-olds high fives.

'How's my little champions?' Teeth asked, as he cracked a big gummy grin. His lips curled into his mouth

and he couldn't sound Ss and Ts properly, but nobody was ever going to take the piss.

The two eight-year-olds were covered with grime and dust off the floor of the ring. They had bright red faces and glistening brows.

'You gonna show us a new move?' Joe asked, panting as he sat down with his legs swinging over the side of the ring.

'Kickboxing drills,' Teeth said seriously.

Both boys groaned.

'That's *so* boring,' Dante complained. 'Show us something cool, like that secret move you told us about where you hit the guy in the back of the head and his eyeballs shoot out of their sockets.'

'You're too young,' Teeth said cheerfully. 'Fancy moves do not a good fighter make.'

As Teeth spoke, he pulled off his boots and hung his leather Brigands jacket on the ring's corner post.

'Tell you what,' he said, as he jumped into the ring, with holey socks and a giant foam sparring pad over his right hand. 'Show me some decent kicks and punches. Then I *might* just show you a good way to dislocate someone's shoulder. Dante, you're up first.'

Over the next quarter hour Teeth worked up a sweat as the two boys chased him around the ring punching and kicking his sparring mitt. A couple of older girls also came in, and while Dante and Joe leaned against the ropes watching, Teeth showed the girls a devious thumb lock that could be used on any boy whose hands wandered into places they shouldn't.

'I don't know why you bother, Sandra,' Dante chirped. 'You're so ugly no boy's gonna come near you anyway.'

Sandra was thirteen, with her hair scraped back tight and a mouth like a foghorn. 'I dare you to come down out of that ring and say that,' she yelled. 'I'll rip your bloody little head off.'

'My cousin reckons you've already slept with half the boys in Year Ten,' Joe added.

'Oh does she indeed?' Sandra said, placing her hands on her hips. 'Like she can talk after everything she got up to with—'

Teeth interrupted. 'Now, now, children! Play nicely. If you're gonna start shrieking and whining I'm off to the bar to get drunk.'

Dante blew Sandra a cheeky kiss as Joe turned back into the ring and picked up the sparring mitt.

'You wanna put on your gloves and spar some more?' Joe asked.

'Too knackered,' Dante puffed, as he glanced at the clock on the wall behind the ring. 'Let's get a drink.'

As the boys jumped out of the ring, their dads – the Führer and Scotty – came into the room. The two men had been holed up in the club office for more than an hour after church finished.

Scotty was a big man, thirty-four years old, square jaw, rugged looking and with the same tangled red hair as his son. The Führer was twenty years older. Short and squat, with a titchy Hitler moustache and his arms fully inked with tattoos. His bald head and fat belly meant that

Dante could never look at him without being reminded of a bowling pin.

'Is Martin in here?' the Führer barked, so angry that all the tendons in his neck stuck out. Then he turned to Teeth. 'Has my boy Martin spoken to you?'

Teeth shook his head. Dante thought it was weird because Martin was the last kid on earth who'd jump into a boxing ring.

'I told him to speak to you,' the Führer said, before steaming off to the other room.

Joe grinned at Dante and whispered cheerfully, 'My geeky brother's about to get his butt kicked.'

Before Joe could explain, the Führer was back, dragging eleven-year-old Martin by his white school shirt.

'What did I tell you, brat?' the Führer shouted. Sandra and the other teenage girl backed off as Martin got bundled against the wall.

'Talk to Teeth,' Martin replied sheepishly. 'I forgot.'

'And what did you do?' the Führer yelled, as he ripped the book out of his son's hand. 'Harry Potter!' he snorted. 'You spend the night reading some book about dragons and tomorrow you'll go back to school and get your arse kicked again. What's the matter with you?'

'Screw you,' Martin shouted defiantly. 'Fighting never solved anything.'

There was a sharp crack as the Führer slapped his son's face. He turned towards Teeth and Scotty and began an explanation.

'Yesterday I caught this little bag of bones in the kitchen, crying to his *mommy*. Saying that some kid's

picking on him at school. Can you imagine that? My son, the school punchbag. So I brought him down here tonight and told him to get Teeth to show him some moves. So what does he do?'

Joe seemed to enjoy watching his big brother getting whacked and couldn't resist stirring it. 'He can't help it, Dad,' Joe blurted. 'He's a natural born geekburger.'

Teeth spoke more sympathetically. 'It's not hard you know, Martin? Four or five sessions will teach you enough to stick up for yourself. I'll be happy to meet you up here a few afternoons after school and help you out.'

'I *don't* want to learn to fight,' Martin said angrily. 'I'll deal with this my way.'

'What's your way?' the Führer roared. 'Cry to mommy? Pay off the bully with a bag of sweeties?'

'I'm a pacifist,' Martin said, as he scowled at his dad. 'I'm not like you, Dad. I don't want to pick up an iron bar and break a guy's back, like with that dude you put in a wheelchair.'

The Führer wrenched Martin forward before thumping him against the wall again. '*You'll* be in a wheelchair if you don't get up in that ring. And the next time I see you reading I'll shove the damned book up your arse.'

Martin got hitched off the ground and thrust violently between the ropes around the ring. He moaned as his hip slammed down on the planks. People had heard the ruckus and were filtering through from the bar to see why the Führer was yelling.

'One step out of that ring and I'll break your skinny neck,' the Führer warned.

Martin clutched his painful hip as he staggered towards the far side of the ring, but he wasn't trying to escape. He'd eyed Teeth's Brigands M.C. jacket hooked over the corner post and when he got there he picked it up by the collar and spat on the patch.

Dante's jaw dropped. A biker's patch is a sacred object. It wasn't unknown for people to get a beating for accidentally brushing up against a patch in a crowded bar. If any adult had spat on Teeth's patch in a Brigands clubhouse, they'd be unlikely to make it out alive.

'That's what I think of your stupid ass motorcycle club,' Martin shouted defiantly, as he spat again and then gave his dad the finger.

'You little *bastard*,' the Führer snarled, as he grabbed the top rope and started clambering up into the ring.

'Oh you big brave man,' Martin shouted back. 'Let all your cronies cheer while you beat up your eleven-year-old son.'

Joe didn't like his brother much, but he didn't want to watch him die either. 'Martin, shut your *stupid* mouth,' he begged. 'Dad's gonna kill you!'

'Screw you as well,' Martin yelled back. 'You just copy everything Dad does.'

More people were coming into the back room from the bar. Outrage flashed through the gathering as everyone found out that Martin had spat on Teeth's patch.

The Führer had a vile temper, and Teeth didn't want his president doing something to Martin he'd regret

later. So he grabbed him around the waist and pulled him down off the ropes. Teeth was twice the size of the Führer, but he struggled to keep hold. Scotty and another biker waded in to help.

'He's a kid acting out, boss,' Scotty said. 'Calm down. I know you don't really want to hurt him.'

'That's not my son,' the Führer screamed, as he pointed at Martin. 'When I get my hands on you I'm gonna smash every bone in your body.'

Teeth wasn't happy that some kid had spat on his patch. He reckoned Martin deserved a slap, but he didn't want to see him get stomped by a grown man.

'It's my patch to defend,' Teeth said, as the Führer finally settled down enough for the three bikers to let him go. 'But I'm not fighting a little kid and neither are you.'

'He *can't* get away with that,' the Führer answered. 'He's old enough to know what the patch means to us.'

'Someone his own size,' Teeth said, before looking down at Dante. 'Hey Dante, you wanna defend the club's honour?'

Dante had sloped off to the corner of the room with Joe and was startled to find everyone looking his way. 'Eh?' he gawped.

Teeth ducked down beside Dante and spoke in a whisper. 'Martin's a head taller than you, but he's skin and bones. You can take him easy. Will you get up there and fight for the honour of my Brigands patch?'

Dante didn't know how to answer. Teeth was one of his favourite grown-ups and he'd normally do anything

Teeth asked, but it wasn't exactly normal for an adult to ask you to jump into a ring and beat up another kid.

Dante's dad, Scotty, crouched down opposite Teeth.

'We've got to do something to satisfy the Führer,' Scotty explained in a whisper. 'You know what his temper's like. If we let him deal with Martin, the boy's gonna end up in hospital with his skull caved in.'

Dante looked warily at Teeth. 'So you want me to go easy on him?'

Teeth shook his head. 'The little prick spat on my patch. He deserves *some* pain. I just don't want the Führer killing him.'

Dante looked left and right at the two men he admired most in the world. 'OK, I'll fight him.'

Ever since his outburst, Martin had hung back at the far side of the ring looking increasingly scared. He'd seen his dad dragged off the ropes, but had no idea what was coming next until Teeth dinged the bell at ringside. By this time there were nearly forty people in the room.

'Ladies and gentlemen,' Teeth shouted. 'Following the desecration of my beloved Brigands patch by the skinny young chap now cowering on the far side of the ring, I'm pleased to say that cool heads have prevailed. The honour of defending the Brigands Motorcycle Club will be taken up by someone his own size. Namely, young Dante Scott!'

Most of the crowd was drunk and cheered noisily as Teeth lifted Dante into the ring and his dad led a chant in his name. The ring felt huge and its height gave a strange sense of isolation.

'Kill the geek, Dante,' Sandra shouted. 'Smash his brains out!'

'Put your fists up, Martin,' Joe shouted. 'Stop being a pussy.'

Everyone was yelling something, except poor Martin who stood on the far side of the ring with his arms at his side. Dante's brain ran at full pelt. Two things occurred to him. First, he wasn't wearing gloves, gumshield, or any other safety equipment and nobody had laid out any rules. Second, he thought about school and how his teacher made kids shake hands and sit together for the whole of the following lesson if they got in a fight.

Dante felt like he lived in two different worlds. The world of his mum and his teachers, where you weren't supposed to swear or fight and always had to be nice to everyone. Then there was the Brigands' world, where men sold drugs, stabbed snitches, got drunk, stole cars and found it perfectly acceptable to stick you in a boxing ring and tell you to beat the crap out of another kid who'd spat on a jacket.

'Stop stalling, Dante,' the Führer shouted. 'Wipe the floor with the skinny prick!'

Dante stepped away from the ropes and saw Martin backing into the opposite corner of the ring. Getting cornered is the worst thing a boxer can do, but Martin had never boxed in his life and held his arms crossed meekly in front his face.

Dante closed fast and threw a punch. He was surprised by how swiftly Martin dodged and he thought – almost hoped – that the fight would be more even than

everyone assumed. He followed up with a Karate kick and his trainer sank deep into Martin's undefended stomach.

The crowd shouted wildly as Martin stumbled sideways. With everyone cheering him on, Dante got a taste of bloodlust as the older boy hit the ropes and bounced back towards him. He pounded Martin's face and stomach before an especially satisfying blow hit the squishy part of Martin's nose.

Blood spurted up Dante's arm and across the front of his T-shirt as Martin's legs gave out. The crowd was going insane and Dante felt wonderful and terrible at the same time. At the front of the crowd, Sandra was jumping up and down and screeching, 'Kill him, kill him. Scramble his brains!'

The amount of blood was shocking, but all the cheering made Dante feel like he was king of the world. Martin was sobbing and clearly had no intention of getting up, despite a few unsympathetic souls telling him to be a man and find his feet.

Teeth symbolically held his Brigands jacket aloft and rang the bell at ringside.

'Honour restored,' he shouted, before looking at the Führer. 'Are you happy with that, boss?'

The room went quiet as the Führer considered his reply. 'My boy got what he deserved,' he nodded. 'I'll settle for that.'

Teeth looked relieved as he stepped into the ring. 'Could someone get me some ice for Martin's nose, please?'

As Dante ducked between the ropes to leave the ring he found the Führer standing right in front of him.

'Sweet-faced little bulldog,' the Führer beamed, as he gave Dante a quick hug and slipped a ten-pound note into his palm. 'You gonna wear a Brigands patch one day?'

'Sure,' Dante said, as the other Brigands gathered around, saying stuff like *you saved the club's honour* and taking it in turns to shake his hand.

Two metres behind, Teeth had Martin sitting up. The boy's nose dripped blood on to the wooden boards. As Teeth held a handkerchief over a split lip, Martin kept saying thank you because he knew he'd have come off far worse if his father had done the beating.

Joe chased his friend as Dante walked away from the ring, looking at the clotting blood spattered up his arm as he crossed into the deserted bar.

'You were *lethal*,' Joe said enthusiastically. 'When my brother's nose burst! Oh man, I wish I'd been allowed to do that!'

Dante kept walking silently, until he was out in the night air facing a line of bikes.

'You OK?' Joe asked uncertainly. 'He didn't even hit you, did he? *And* you got a tenner off my dad.'

'Just shut *up* a minute,' Dante said, as he tried getting his head straight. He felt really confused and if Joe hadn't been standing there, he probably would have started crying.