

Rise of the Blazing Fist

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The drip of a leaking pipe could be heard throughout the room, weaving together with the snores of a passed out goblin to conduct a depressing symphony. Damp and unwelcoming, even by the neighborhood's standards, Krug's pub was as empty as always. Short of a few patrons slouched on the bar, the only sign of life came from the back office, where a teenager was pacing furiously.

"I can't believe this mutated sewage drinker has got the nerves to order us around like that. As if we were workin' for him!"

"Humm, we *are* working for him. You might not like it, but it doesn't change the fact that it's true," said his best friend, exasperated.

"And a drop off job too! As if we were street cubs needin' pocket change. He's just fucking with us. He's trying to humiliate us, openly."

"You're not listening to me at all anymore, are you? Nope. He's gone. Gods dammit." Cross sighed, Kuzon had passed the point of reason.

"We ain't doin' it," Kuzon carried on, lost in his rant. "We just ain't doin' it. If he wants his shit delivered, he just gotta ask a street cub like the rest of us. I'm not interested."

"You know what happens if we refuse, right? We're out of work. He owns the streets, the gangs and the guards. He puts a ban on the Blazing Fists, no one hires us. No one hires us, we go broke and we starve. You got a solution for that? Because you're not exactly employable. This is kind of your only option."

Finally acknowledging the presence of his second in command, Kuzon locked eyes with him. His anger had dissolved, replaced by determination and excitement.


"Oh no," said Cross, as several painful memories replayed in his mind. "I know this look. Every time you get that little flame in your eyes, I end up getting stabbed."

"We gonna kill him. Him and all them knuckleheads kissing his ass. We gonna kill the Rat King." Cross let out a deep sigh. "I knew it. Every time. Every. Single. Time."

Three weeks after his announcement, Kuzon still had no idea how he was going to kill the Rat King. The crew was on board, none of them took much convincing. Mily, always in favor of violence, was so excited at the idea that she had become unmanageable. She had started three bar fights in the last week alone and nearly triggered a war with another gang in the process.

Furball, whose loyalty belonged to the Blazing Fists' members first and foremost, was far more concerned about the 'why' than the 'what'. As long as he felt it was for the benefit of the gang, he would rally the troops. Cross still objected, as usual. Kuzon's best friend had always been the voice of caution and reason. But when the time came, Cross would come through for them. He always did.

The only thing Kuzon lacked for his plan to work was, in fact, an actual plan. Even he knew taking on the Rat King head on would lead to their deaths, at best. The King had too many people in his pockets and Kuzon had very few. But with no shortage of resentment against the King in the slums, maybe turning the gangs against him could work, thought Kuzon.



The Bloodragers were the obvious first choice. Unfortunately, he had cracked far too many of their skulls to consider making peace with them, and they hated the Fists even more than they resented the King. The Shadow Creeps would probably rally, they hated the king more than anyone, but they weren't much of an ally, and they wouldn't dare get in his way either, essentially making them irrelevant. He could probably use them as cannon fodder, but that wasn't his style, and it certainly wasn't the Fists' way of doing things.

Then, there was the issue of the City Guard. He couldn't afford to buy them, and attempting to take them out would be even more foolish than their plan to take down the King himself. No, trying to rally people to his side was not the solution. But, maybe he could make sure the King had fewer friends? Kuzon didn't need more people on his side, he just needed no one in his way. If the slums feared the Fists more than they feared the King, they wouldn't dare oppose him. A plan started formulating, or at least something resembling one.

Sitting in the back office of Krug's Pub, the officers of the Blazing Fists were waiting for Kuzon to show up, late to the meeting he had himself called. Finally, arriving more than half an hour late, the gang leader barged in through the door, unfazed by his tardiness.

"You're late charred-brain!" Mily said, as she straightened herself on the couch she had been laying on.

"Don't care! I have a plan to take down the Rat King!" Kuzon waited a few seconds, letting the suspense build up. "We're gonna charge in head first!"

"YES!" Mily jumped up, her annoyance vanishing in favor of psychotic anticipation.

"AH! The most foreseeable plot twist!" Cross was sitting backwards on an old wooden chair, mindlessly playing with a dagger. "Kuze! That's not even an option. The Bloodragers alone are going to skin us alive before we can make it to King's Street."

"The Bloodragers aren't gonna do jack. They'll be too busy being dead."

"Oh really? Is that so? Care to tell me how that's going to happen?" Cross dropped his dagger on the floor, finally catching up. "Oh please don't tell me..."

"Cause we'll kill them! Right?! Right?!" exclaimed Mily, cutting off the young man. "I love this plan!"

"Kuze, tell me you have a better plan than that. Something that doesn't involve us getting killed, preferably." Cross was desperate, hoping for a glimpse of a good idea to be hidden amidst the madness.

"Nope! Mily is right. We get rid of the ragers, no one'll get in our way after that. The genius of the plan lies in its simplicity, really."

"Nooo, its stupidity lies in its insanity!" said Cross. "You know, if you're interested in collective suicide, we can just as well do it here, it'll save us all some time."

Furball, who up until that point had been listening silently, took his feet off the large office desk and stowed away his tobacco pipe.

"If you want us to remove the Bloodragers from the equation, I can sell it to the men. More than one of these kids out there is eager to settle some issues with the green skins. What I'm worried about is the city guards. They're not gonna peacefully sit down and let us work, and between the Bloodragers and the Fists, we all know whose side they're going to take."

"So, that's the one part of the plan I'm still figuring out," admitted Kuzon. "I'm not sure what to do about them. We would need someone to distract them." He looked at the officers of the Blazing Fist one by one, hoping for a suggestion.

“Don’t look at me! Even I’m not that crazy,” Mily said defensively.

“Figuring shit out is your job, kid, not mine,” Furball stated calmly.

Kuzon looked at Cross. He was usually the one who came up with smart and convoluted plans to conquer the impossible.

The young man picked up his dagger from the floor. “Ugh, I can’t believe I’m even entertaining this! But, we could ask the Furies. If someone is mad enough to scrape with the rusties, and feared enough to avoid retribution, it would be them.”

Kuzon gave him a confused look. “You trip and fall on a treasure lately? We can’t afford the Furies.”

“Furball is Nemves’s cousin. And everyone knows Nemves has no love for the Rat King. They’ve been known to take a free gig once in a while.”

Cross gave Furball a quick glance, trying to gauge the rat’s reaction. His family affiliation was not common knowledge amongst the Blazing Fists, and the rogue was well aware that in these parts of town this kind of revelation could get you permanently silenced.

The old ratfolk took a moment to process the revelation before a smirk tugged at his lips.

“And they say the hot-head is the dangerous one,” he said lightly. “Yes, I am indeed Nemves’s cousin, but so are nearly a hundred ratfolk living in these sewers. Family ties only get you so far with my people. I can probably get you a sit down with Gruum, the rest is going to be up to you.”

Radiating with pride, Kuzon turned his gaze towards his best friend, “See. I told you I had a plan.”

In the dead of night, a hooded figure moved swiftly through the shadows, nearly invisible. For the last four hours, the rogue had circled the Bloodrager territory twice, confirming the position and identity of each of their guards. After a full moon cycle of reconnaissance, he knew the name, face, tattoos and personal habits of each Bloodrager. Yet, they knew nothing of his existence, let alone his nightly strolls in their alleyways. Satisfied with his round, the young man left his unsuspecting subjects behind and headed home.

Opening the door of his tiny apartment without a sound, Cross put away his cloak and his belt, determined not to wake Mily up. She was laying on the bed, the only piece of furniture in the room, fast asleep. Even after all this time, Cross couldn’t get used to seeing this woman, normally so hectic and lively, this quiet and peaceful. He silently unlaced his boots and slipped in the bed next to her.

“Didn’t get yourself in trouble out there?”

“Really?! Again?! Can you explain to me how I can move undetected around trained scouts who can see in the dark, yet I can’t slip into bed without waking you up?”


“I told you, I can feel you. I don’t understand how those idiots out there don’t notice you, really. I can feel your energy from across the room.” Mily teased.

“Oh, bite me,” Cross grumbled. “Not everyone can be as exceptional as you.”

“You got that one right,” chuckled Mily, as she extended her neck, kissing him on the cheek. “So, when do you think we can get moving? Soon? Please say soon. I can’t take it anymore.”

“I think we’re ready. I’ll ask Kuze to gather everyone tomorrow to go over the details. Bloodrager payroll is in five days, they’ll all gather at the pub. We’ll strike then.”

Five days. As he said it, it finally sunk in. In five days, they were going on a frontal assault against the Bloodragers. It was going to be a hard battle and he truly couldn’t tell which way it would go. As



he processed the reality of it all, he felt his shoulders tense, his heart pick up its pace and his palms flood with sweat.

Next to him, Mily was processing the very same thing, albeit with the opposite reaction. Shivering with excitement at the thought of the fight to come, she straddled him; her crimson eyes shone in the dark, and a murderous grin lit up her face.

As she leaned down for a kiss, Cross whispered affectionately, “You’re insane.”

Walking through the finest parts of town, Kuzon felt uneasy. It was his first time out of the slums since he and Cross were street cubs running errands for the gangs and even back then, he felt out of place. The fact that the neighborhood seemed equally uncomfortable with their presence did nothing to alleviate the feeling. Passersby were circling wide to avoid them, children were pointing fingers, and, while his understanding of the magical arts was limited, he could feel more than one divination spell on them.

Alongside him, Furball appeared to share none of his displeasure. The veteran had long since stopped being impressed by the ostentatious and, if you asked him, pretentious displays of wealth in the upper city. As they turned around a corner, Kuzon's eyes fell on Nemves, one of the officers of the legendary Tiny Furies. The rat was sitting on the front steps of a large mansion, waiting for them. Suddenly reminded of the meeting to come, Kuzon's discomfort vanished, replaced by something new to him and far worse: anxiety.

As the giant ratfolk stood up to welcome them, Kuzon finally took in Nemves' impressive size. Furball was large for one of his kind and Kuzon, rather short for a human, still towered over him by a good nine inches. Nemves, however, met the ifrit at eye level and was easily twice the shoulder width, making him one of the largest ratfolk in living memory.

Enveloping Furball in a sincere embrace, the Fury smiled ear to ear.


“Sven, cousin! It's a pleasure to see you. Look at you! You're aging like fine milk!”

Sven? Why did he ... Wait. That's his name! It hadn't occurred to Kuzon that he did not know Furball's real name, nor had he ever met anyone who did. As if he could read his thoughts, Furball delivered a look that left no doubt in Kuzon's mind that, if he wanted to keep breathing, the name better be forgotten.

“I see you haven't lost your charming sense of humor,” replied Furball, shifting his gaze back to Nemves. “It's good to see you too, you oversized rat. Thanks for doing this, truly. I'll owe you one.”

“Ha, don't thank me,” exclaimed the Fury with a generous laugh, as he welcomed them inside the mansion. “You haven't met Gruum yet.”

As the trio entered the mansion, the young leader couldn't contain an expression of surprise. He had seen many guild houses in his life, even entering the quarters of the Rat King on a few occasions, but the Fury's house, the Ticking Shelf, was nothing like anything he had seen before. It contained everything customary for a lavish mansion, from the fancy sofas to the paintings on the walls and the swinging golden chandelier, yet it had the smell and atmosphere of a busy tavern. A dozen undeniably drunk and merry folks lazed around a large living room, playing cards and darts. True to their name, not a single one of them was taller than five feet. Their cheerful demeanor and short stature did not fool Kuzon for a second, though; every one of them was a hardened killer and a force to be reckoned with.



In a corner of the room, he found what he was looking for: a muscular goblin flaunting a tall red mohawk. The officious leader of the Furies was lazily lounging in an armchair, smoking a cigar, and drinking what Kuzon could only guess to be hard liquor. The goblin locked eyes with Kuzon and, with a large grin, pointed towards an empty chair in front of him. As he sat down, Kuzon suddenly felt very small, despite being a foot taller than most present in the room. Furball sat comfortably in the chair next to him, blending perfectly into the surreal picture.

“Kuzon of the Blazing Fist,” said Gruum in an inquisitive voice. “Heard some about you and your crew. Proper hot head you are, apparently.”

“You’ve heard of the Blazing Fists?” The ifrit was genuinely shocked. “I don’t know what to say. I’m honored.”

“Most of the Furies are from the slums. Word gets around. Heard a whole lot ‘bout that Mily of yours too. Hell, heard she might even be crazy enough to make the boss forget she’s on the wrong side of five feet. She ever ends up walking on stubs, do me a favor and send her our way, will ya?”

“Oh you don’t know the half of it,” Furball said with a chuckle. “That young woman makes most of your undersized maniacs look like upstanding citizens.”

The goblin let out a sincere laugh before turning to Kuzon. “So! I’m told you need the Furies’ help and that you can’t afford us. This promises to be interesting! Wanna tell me more?”

“I’m going after the Rat King. That sewage drinker has been making us miserable for long enough. It’s time for a change. But he’s got everyone in his pocket. If we move against him as it is, the only fighting going on will be to decide who gets to skin us alive.”

“If you want help to fight the Rat King, le’me save you some time son, it ain’t gonna happen. Furies don’t get involved in the slum’s power struggles. Below our paygrade and none of our business.”

“Oh no, I wouldn’t dare,” replied Kuzon. “That rat bastard is mine anyway. But to get to him, I need to take out the Bloodragers first. Send a message and make sure no one stands in our way. And to do it, we need the city guards to be busy somewhere else. The Furies have a reputation for causing chaos and I know you’re not afraid of the guards either. We were hoping you could get into a bit of a scrape with them while we get our work done.”

The barbarian burst out laughing. “You want us to shove our heads up the Rusties’ asses, for free, while you take out another gang? Either your brain charred up good, or you got balls the size of an ogre’s. But I have to say, I do like your style, boy.”

Gruum turned towards Furball. “What do you think about all this? Think the kid’s worth it? He got as much brawn as he’s got stones, or is all for show?”

“Mily would make the Furies look like upstanding citizens. Kuzon would make them look like educated archmage. He’s thicker than a dragon’s hide and more stubborn than a goblin matron. Yet, for some reason, I’ve been working with the boy for almost six years now. That probably says more about me than it does about him really, but I guess you can read something into it.”

Gruum’s demeanor suddenly changed. His smile vanished, replaced by a cold expression. His eyes morphed from lazily amused to frighteningly focused, revealing a sharpness of mind and a wisdom only born from painful experience. He leaned forward, his voice deeper and softer than before.

“Tell me Kuzon,” something about the way Gruum said his name sent a shiver down Kuzon’s spine. “When you crack the Rat King’s skull open with your hands, as I am sure you will, who takes his place? You see yourself sitting on the throne? Or are you just going to watch them all tear each other apart to decide who becomes king of the irrelevant?”

A long silence followed. Maintaining eye contact, Gruum was clearly waiting for an answer—an answer Kuzon felt incapable of giving. The goblin had gazed straight into his soul and asked a very simple question: “*Who the fuck are you, kid?*”

Unsure what the expected answer was, Kuzon rolled with the truth. “Never thought about it that way, really. Rat King been a pain for too long. Gettin’ tired of it, so I’m doin’ something about it. That’s about as far as I thought it through really.”

“Interesting,” Gruum whispered. He leaned back into his chair, regaining his smile.

“Well! I certainly won’t deny the shorties a scrap with the rusties. We’ll help you out. Have Furball and Nemves handle the logistics and let us know when you’re ready to move. Boss gonna have my head for this one but, oh well, Ol’ grump’s never happy anyway.”

Standing in the street outside the Ticking Shelf, Kuzon felt relieved, if a little overwhelmed, by the events. Ideas, words, and loose threads crowded his thoughts. The Furies’ involvement, the fall of the Rat King, the future of the Blazing Fists, and, in his mind, the words of Gruum echoed softly: “*You see yourself sitting on the throne?*”

Furball bluntly interrupted his thoughts. “Have a drink with me before we head back, will you?”

The two men sat by a tree on the river bank just outside the upper city, the perfect place to share a bottle of wine on a sunny afternoon. The old rat had been quieter than usual since leaving the Ticking Shelf and even Kuzon, not the most perceptive of folks, could tell something was bothering him. But he knew Furball well enough not to try and press him; the words would come in due time.

“You did good out there, kid. It seems you have a knack for these things. Goblin could have laughed you out of that mansion ... or not let you out at all. Yet, you keep defying the odds.”

Kuzon took it in silently. This was not a two-way conversation. “But that question Gruum asked you, I’ve been wondering the same for some time now. And I had an inkling the answer would be something like you told him.”


The rat took a swig of wine and presented the bottle to the young man. He let the silence settle in, methodically packing his pipe and putting it in his mouth before leaning towards Kuzon, who snapped his fingers in a spark to light the old rodent’s tobacco.

“You weren’t there before the Rat King became the Rat King. But I was. Entire lower city was at war, constantly. Shadow Creep used to be a force to be reckoned with, believe it or not. Lost a lot of good friends during those years too. But since Karaska became the Rat King and took the crown, town’s been sleeping quiet. He’s an arrogant pain, for sure, but he runs a tight ship. And a lot of people feel better knowing if he was ever to fall, the Bloodragers would take his place. Now you’re planning on taking both of them out at once. If no one replaces the Rat King, there’s gonna be a power vacuum and it won’t be pretty.”

Kuzon diverted his gaze towards the river, lost in thought, processing what his old friend was saying. While Gruum might have been satisfied with his lacking answer back there, Furball obviously wasn’t.

“Listen kid, you’re gonna have to ask yourself some questions. Are you a king, or you just stirring shit. Who are you doing this for? If you’re just angry and looking to lash out, more power to you. But if you care about your crew, if this isn’t about your ego, you’re gonna have to step up and take the throne. You’re not playing games anymore; this is real life. You’re going to have to make the tough calls and stop at nothing to see the end of it, because every moment of weakness will be blood on your hands.”

Furball took a long drag from his pipe, lost in thought. Blowing out a thick puff of smoke, he shrugged. “Personally, it’s all the same to me. I’m too old to give a shit.”



Leaning over a large table at the tavern, all four officers of the Blazing Fist were studying a map of the lower city while Cross rehashed his plan. Around them, a little more than thirty soldiers were getting ready for battle, sharpening their blades, adjusting shoddy leather armor and psyching themselves up one shot of liquor at a time. With the anticipation of the last few weeks finally reaching its climax, the excitement of the Blazing Fists was palpable. They were ready for blood.

Cross pointed at the location of the Bloodrager scouts he had identified on the map.

“I will be taking out the scouts from here to there. This should give room for Kuzon and the demolition team to reach the Singing Goblin without attracting too much attention. Tonight is payroll. Most of the Ragers are gonna be there. Most are gonna be drunk. Hopefully, the initial blast is gonna take some of them out.”

Identifying three other locations on the map, he added, “Three teams led by Furball are going to be posted there, there, and there to pick up the remainder of the Bloodragers trying to reach central command.”

“This is gonna be messy,” Furball interjected. “Fighting in the street, surrounded by civilians in panic, it’s a bad idea. I’m telling you right now, if it’s between letting some of them green skins slip and risking our boys’ lives, I’m letting them through. And even then, we’ll lose some of them in the battle for certain. It won’t be a perfect job.”

Even though he was talking to Cross, the mastermind behind the operation, Furball was looking directly at Kuzon, who acknowledged his words with a nod.

“All we need is for you to buy some time for the main squad to reach central command and to stop reinforcement before they can organize,” said Cross.


The rat nodded. He had his marching orders, and he was satisfied with them. Cross continued, “Now, Mily.”

All turned towards the young woman. It was obvious she was ready for battle. Her unarmored body was tense, almost vibrating, and her hair was braided into a tight, thick braid descending down her back. Her combat attire exposed numerous scars scattered across her body, many of them suggesting lethal wounds. Yet, all present were drawn to her psychotic crimson eyes, almost glowing from the adrenaline and the bloodlust. Cross felt a shiver run down his spine, struggling to believe this was the same woman who had left his bed that morning.

“Mily, you’ll be coming in from the eastern side and make your way towards central command. You have one simple task.” Cross looked at her, intentionally edging her towards a violent peak, “Kill everything in sight.”

Having heard everything she needed, the murderous woman turned around, shoved two fingers in her mouth, and let out a powerful whistle. The tavern went silent, and all eyes turned towards her. Every member of the Blazing Fists was familiar with this whistle and what it meant. Bloodshed was afoot. As Mily slowly walked out the door, palms resting on the pommel of her blades and a mischievous grin on her face, sixteen Blazing Fists followed suit in silence.

“May the gods have mercy on their souls,” whispered Furball.



Hidden in the shadows of an alley, Kuzon was waiting for Cross's signal, observing the two Bloodrager scouts on the opposite side of the street. One of them seemed familiar, and the ifrit couldn't help but wonder if they had met at some point in the past. The second seemed a bit too young for them to have met; she would have been but a child during his street cub days. She was sat on the ground sharpening a shoddy blade; the sound of the whetstone was oddly timed with her colleague's cigarette ember lighting up in the dark, creating a strange ballet of sound and light.

Kuzon wondered if this accidental synchronicity was the result of countless nights spent on duty together. He wondered how well they knew each other, if they were friends. They probably were, he thought. Life in these parts had a way of creating bonds like no others. He looked over his shoulders at the three Blazing Fists scuttling behind him. These three, he knew for a fact had grown up together. He knew because he was right there alongside them.

His train of thought was interrupted by the whetstone's rhythm missing a beat, bringing his attention back to the two sentinels. They had not moved an inch, but the cigarette's ember was no longer visible in the night, and the whetstone had gone mute. Time stood still for a few seconds until a soft whistle broke the silence. Kuzon turned around and gestured for the group to get moving.

As they navigated the shadowy streets, the group walked past several bodies, all seemingly frozen in position, their throats slit where they stood. Kuzon found himself once again surprised by how effective his friend had become over the years. Following bodies and whistles for nearly twenty minutes, they finally reached the alley behind the Singing Goblin, where Cross was leaning against the back wall of the tavern, visibly proud of his work.

"When did you get so good at this?" Kuzon teased.

"I was always this good, you burnt head punk," replied Cross. "Alright you three, get to work. Let's get this done."

As the group started to work, Cross could feel something was off with Kuzon. The gang leader was suspiciously quiet, and his usual fiery personality was nowhere to be found. The leader of the Blazing Fist had gotten nervous before a fight in the past, just like anyone else, but this was different. His body language was new; he seemed hesitant and tormented. Something was going on in his friend's head—something that was undermining his usually unshakeable confidence. And the idea of something shaking Kuzon terrified the rogue.

"It's all set, boss. Whenever you're ready just spark it. Whole thing will blow up."

Kuzon took a deep breath, exhaled audibly. "Not yet. First we gonna seal the front door."

A long silence floated in the air. No one dared react; it would mean acknowledging what their leader had just said. What seemed like the longest fifteen seconds of their lives passed before Cross broke the silence.

"Kuzon. It's full of civilians in there. Street cubs and ghetto rats, not just Bloodragers. I know you wanna get things done, but this is taking things to a new level."

"Exactly. We're not playing games anymore, this is the real deal. You heard Furball. Filtering through the crowd is gonna be a mess. There's probably thirty Bloodragers in there. Every single Rager gettin' out of this tavern is a danger to our friends. How much are you gonna care about a few innocent street cubs if one of them tusks in there is the one that finally does Mily in? You willin' to take that risk, to make that trade?"

Cross went silent for several seconds. He knew his friend, and when he had made up his mind, there was no changing it. But there was also something else—something new. For the first time in their shared lives, Cross could tell Kuzon had thought this through. He thought about their childhood, most of it spent in an old tavern not unlike the Singing Goblin. He thought about the Bloodragers he

had been spying on for the past few weeks. He thought about Furball, about the Blazing Fists, and about his friends. Finally, a clear image of Mily sprung into his mind.

“I hope you know what you’re doing Kuze, because there is no coming back from this.” Cross turned towards the three Blazing Fists, still silent, processing what was going on. “All right boys, you heard the boss, lock it up.”

The door sealed, Kuzon took a few steps back, coming to a stop in the middle of the street. In a brief moment of hesitation, he looked behind him and made eye contact with Cross, who silently nodded. The ifrit clenched both fists, and a torrent of flames engulfed his body, lighting up the whole street around him. Kuzon took a long, deep breath and unleashed a powerful fireball on the Singing Goblin.

As the tavern burst into flames, a shockwave echoed through the streets. The roaring blaze barely covered the sounds of panic and chaos emerging from inside the building, and even from a distance, the cries of the people inside trying to break open the door joined the fiery symphony conducted by Kuzon. Cross looked at his friend silhouetted in the glow of destruction and mourned the death of an era.



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