

The Forge of Xen'drik

By Kay Kenyon

Illustration by Steve Prescott

Ravon Kell slammed his shovel into the stony ground, cursing the hard jungle soil. They had already buried fifty slaves, and there was no end in sight.

The sun threw lashing rays on his back, cooking him in his rags, but the worst heat came from the ground itself, where the grinding magics of the genesis forge blistered the land, killing the jungle for a swath of a thousand feet around their prison.

Nearby an orc guard wrinkled his snout at the stench of bodies. "Bury 'em three in a hole," he ordered the halfling Finner.

"That's against—" Finner started to protest, but fell silent as the orc loomed over him.

Ravon dug his hole deeper. Yesterday's slave uprising had been doomed from the start. An army officer in the Last War, he'd weighed the odds and had stayed out of the fray. It wasn't even a contest, here in this lost jungle of Xen'drik where no one knew there was a forge or slaves—both illegal under the Treaty of Thronehold.

Maybe the poor bastards knew the odds and just wanted to die. As the old marching song went, there were nine hundred and ninety ways to die. An orc's blade thrust being merely one.

He looked up at the massive factory: an arms mill the size of a fortress; soon to produce an endless supply of lances, shields, cudgels, maces, swords, crossbows, spears—not to mention magic-infused spike wire, lightning spheres, and thunder shock implements.

A genesis forge, by the Devourer, though one had not been seen in the world since the fall of Cyre, as they were forbidden by the Treaty of Thronehold. But those laws didn't apply in Xen'drik, a wild continent far from Khorvaire. Besides, a cloak of invisibility hid the forge. From the jungle, the misshapen fortress looked like nothing more than a vine-covered crag, not a hulking factory ten stories high, with massive iron walls studded with bulging armories and effluent towers disgorging steam and rank smoke.

At the top of the forge bulged the dome of the artificers' keep. There, mages with their diagrams, spells, and sigils directed the magical workings of the forge. They drew enormous power from stockpiles of dragonshards and from the latent magic of the very ground on which the forge rested—an ancient giant burial site, it was said.



Ravon spat. His task—the task of every other slave, guard, and artificer—was to bring the forge to working order, and by so doing, bring the world to war. As a captain in Karrnath's army, war had been his job, but he would never fight again. In the Last War Count Vedrim ir'Omik had throw him in the dungeons, stripping him of his commission and very nearly his life. It was one thing to take his punishment like a man, and quite another to take it when innocent of the charges—charges trumped up by the count's favorite vixen, at that. Earlier in the war a few of Ravon's victories had come to the count's attention, but by the Nine Hells, he wished that Vedrim had never visited the battlefield with his entourage. The attractive lady had taken a fancy to the celebrated captain, he'd declined to bed her, the count had been led to believe otherwise, and now Ravon wished that for all he'd suffered in the dungeon, he'd at least had the pleasure of what he'd been accused of.

High up the outer wall, a flat ring protruded like a horizontal embedded plate. Two rings, actually, one within the other. They turned very slowly, in opposite directions, grinding the dragon shards—the raw material of the forge's magic.

On the outer ring, pacing slowly to keep the slaves in view, the forge master Stonefist glared down at them. Even among gnolls, he was especially ugly. Strutting up there on the outer ring, his presence filled the slaves with further dread, a fact that even the slow-witted gnoll well understood.

Finner pulled out a gourd from inside his shirt, offering Ravon a drink of hoarded water.

Ravon waved it away. "Drink it yourself."

"You first, Captain." Finner bent over with another of his coughing spells, but managed not to spill.

Ravon wiped the sweat streaming into his eyes. "I'm not your captain anymore." He glared at Finner. "And I don't need a steward. Get to digging or that orc will put *you* in a hole."

The halfling still held out the gourd. "You'll always be a captain of Karrnath. Don't make no difference, prisons or digging graves."

Ravon took the gourd, else there would be no shutting Finner up. Tossing off a gulp of water, he nodded at the halfling, getting a worshipful look in return. To his surprise, it shamed him. There was nothing left to look at that way. He'd left that man in the count's dungeons. They had beaten and tortured that man out of him, and then had made him do the same to others.

So, Finner, he thought, how do you like the real Ravon Kell?

* * *

Ravon entered the forge through the iron jaws of the front door. The inner maze of ramps and halls growled with a low throbbing, less heard than felt through the soles of the feet. The goblin who'd fetched Ravon prodded him with a spear. Ravon batted it away from the small of his back, heedless of the goblin's snarl. No one was going to cut him down before Stonefist said. Ravon's time had not yet come, and the goblin knew it.

He tramped up the stairs leaving the guard to return to grave duty. Ravon had more freedom than most of the other workers. Stonefist had conceived the plan to save him for a showy death. Why waste the great captain of Karrnath on starvation or overwork? Maybe Stonefist's sadistic plan was ready to go, if the gnoll wanted to see him.

Second level, the rat pen. Gnomes and dwarves and halflings ran in their caged circles, turning the

great forge rings that wove the spell to cloak the forge from prying eyes. Every kingdom in Khorvaire would rise up to destroy the forge, if discovered. That wasn't going to happen, though Ravon in his off-guard moments hoped for it. Hope made servitude less bearable, a lesson he'd learned well in Vedrim's dungeon.

A female dwarf grown thin from the endless walk spat through her cage and landed a gobbet at Ravon's feet. "Think you're high and mighty, don't you? Foul slime!"

Ravon made a half salute. "Good day to you as well, Bisreth."

Others doing cage duty took up the catcalls. "Lackey." "Traitor." They thought he was in close with Stonefist; even *liked* the forge master. The very thought gagged him. It was true that Stonefist gave him the run of the place, within reason. Ravon provided entertainment for Stonefist—and banter the forge master had come to relish.

The thought festered that he was also a model slave, dependably doing what he was told. Once, he would have called such a man a craven coward. Well. Perhaps one day Stonefist would push him too far, and he'd show himself a man, after all.

Snapping whips in the air, the goblin guards silenced the rat pen outburst, ignoring Ravon as he passed through.

Arriving at the third level, Ravon found Stonefist waiting for him. The gnoll was seated next to a wall of the forge proper. The ten-story heart of the edifice sweated out a putrescent goo in spots. This was the *bowel room*, slave talk for the place where the forge shat out its weapons. Or would, come the word from on-high. Some high lord or other, but such things mattered little in the end. What mattered to Ravon

was a decent death. He'd put more than his share of thought into choosing a good one.

Seeing Ravon approach, Stonefist kicked at the cringing slave filing his toenails. "Enough!" he roared. She fled the room. At Stonefist's side stood an elf, the ever-watchful, the ever-grim Nastra, a bulging ring of colorful keys at her belt.

Noting Stonefist's daggerlike toe nails, Ravon said appreciatively, "Nice job. Except for the stink. Need to wash those feet sometime, boss." Over the weeks he and Stonefist had fallen into an exchange of insults. The gnoll was doubtless stirred by verbal abuse from a man he could torture to death at a whim.

Stonefist grinned. "Maybe you lick feet?" He turned his foot to one side, then the other. "Lick clean?"

Ravon gave an elaborate sigh. "A slave's work is never done."

"No slaves!" Stonefist blared. "Slaves against the law."

"Well, if not slaves, how about *happy workers*?"

Stonefist roared a laugh. "Happy workers!" He socked his fist against the forge wall, leaving a dent. "Happy workers!" Even Nastra smirked. "Big boss will like happy workers," the gnoll said, his good mood growing.

"You never said who the big boss is, Stonefist."

"Hah! Big boss is . . ." His grin fell away. "But Stonefist don't tell."

A flicker of interest flamed high in Ravon. It would be good to know one's real enemy. But it was a soldier's instinct, and he was no longer a soldier.

"I save you from shovels, Captain," the gnoll said. "Not die of too much work. Stonefist save captain for *commmbaaat*," he said, as his eyes grew rapturous.

Nastra made a distorted smile.

"Maybe I won't do your combat," Ravon said lightly. He'd been wondering what he *would* do when Stonefist ordered him to fight. It might not be a bad way to die: Ravon against a few orcs and goblins. But then again, it would mean contributing to Stonefist's sadistic pleasures.

The forge master frowned. "Then captain die. I cut your heart out."

No heart in there, Ravon thought, but have at it, you sack of pus.

The pleasantries concluded, Stonefist heaved himself from his chair. Ravon was a big man, but the forge master stood a foot taller.

"Stonefist show you a thing, yah?" Waving Ravon to follow, he lumbered toward one of the forge portals.

"Foul bitch," Ravon muttered to Nastra as she walked by his side. Skinnier even than most elves, she still possessed a fluidity that might be called grace, if she hadn't been a sadistic freak of a gnoll's minion.

"I pissed on your bed this morning," Nastra crooned. "Think of me tonight as you dream." As she walked, her hundred keys clinked like bells.

"I *do* think of you. You perform all my delights, lady elf. Think of *that*."

She hissed in response. Oh, how the vile creature would love to carve him up a little with the handy knife on her belt. It was one of Ravon's few remaining pleasures to provoke her. Even Stonefist liked to see her taken down a notch.

They came to the egress gate in the forge wall, the place where the weaponry would soon exit. To Ravon's surprise, the process had begun.

A great, burnished sword blade, edges honed and glittering, protruded from a portal. The blade was emerging from the door so slowly that Ravon could

barely tell it was moving. A tendril of smoke slipped out as well, as though the forge was passing intestinal gas at the effort. But it was still in testing mode. Ravon tried and failed to imagine the hellish environs of a fully enlivened genesis forge.

Stonefist eyed Ravon. "You fight my goblins with sword, yah? Kill and kill, to see if sharp?"

Stonefist had long promised Ravon a good fight with the forge's first product. A little celebration, as it were. With this weapon, by the look of the sword's ensorcelled iron, Ravon might last a few minutes even if out-numbered. But he said: "I'd rather fight *you*, Stonefist. Someone easy." He shrugged. "If it were up to me."

Stonefist's expression darkened. He bent over Ravon, pointing a meaty finger at his chest, his breath fit to knock Ravon flat. "You kill goblins. You kill what I say you kill." His voice boomed. "You kill lady elf. You kill halfling Finner. Whoever Stonefist say!"

Lightly bringing the gnoll's attention back to the sword, Ravon asked, "When will it be ready?"

"Soon," the gnoll muttered. Then, regaining his mood, he said, "How you like sword?"

"Good so far," Ravon said.

Stonefist nodded over and over, muttering half to himself, "Took much dragonshards. Two years of dragonshards to make. Big pile. Now out come good-so-far sword! Ha!" Stonefist threw wide his massive arms. "Soon come big important visitor. He watch forge get born!"

That was news. The high lord coming. Ravon flicked a glance at Nastra, whose long and almost handsome face showed no sign of surprise, only a patient, cold longing to watch a captain of Karrnath fight to the death. Well, she hadn't overseen the killing of any slaves for a couple of days.

Ravon wondered who the big visitor would be. Wondered if he would live to see it. Hoped he wouldn't. "You'll need a bath, then, Stonefist." Ravon said. "With company coming."

Stonefist grinned, showing an impressive rack of teeth. "By Dolurh, Stonefist miss you when you dead!" That brought on a fit of barking laughter. Even Nastra joined in, as ugly a mewling sound as Ravon had ever heard.

He heard Stonefist's guffaws all the way up to the fourth level, the slave barracks. Just before he turned into his quarters—by the grace of the Sovereign Host, a private cell—he heard keys jangling and turned to see Nastra slinking around the corner and down the crabbed and steep north stairs. Had she followed him, spying? He wondered where the creature was going. Nowhere to go, surely. This lovely forge was the end of the line.

* * *

Deep in the night, ear-splitting yowls erupted down the fortress corridor. Instantly awake, Ravon sprang from his pallet. From cell block eleven, he heard the rasping shouts of goblins and slaves chanting "Finner, Finner!"

Cursing, Ravon stalked down to the slave barracks in time to see a dozen goblins surrounding a bloodied Finner. One of them yanked a fistful of hair from Finner's head and, grinning, raised it aloft like a captured flag. The slaves stomped and hollered as Finner fell to his knees in a coughing fit.

In the tumult, no one saw Ravon stride in until he grabbed a goblin by his leather belt, holding him a foot off the floor, kicking and growling. He swung the creature around, slamming him into another goblin and clearing a wide swath.

His fit passed. Finner stared at the palm of his hand and a few bloody teeth he'd coughed up. By the Devourer, here was a fine mess. Ravon had promised Finner's lieutenant that he'd keep an eye on the young halfling. Finner had served tirelessly as the officer's steward despite a set of bad lungs that would have kept lesser men from service. Ravon owed it to the lieutenant, he supposed. The man had died in his arms on the battlefield.

Still holding the goblin by the belt, Ravon growled, "Anybody want this sack of shit?"

The goblins fell silent, their grins fading to resentful scowls.

"No?" Ravon flung the creature aside and walked over to Finner. The formerly cheering slaves now looked properly ashamed. To watch a fellow slave savagely beaten . . . Ravon shook his head, glaring at them. The urge rose to slay two or three goblins before the others fell upon him. But then, that would be too much like the old Ravon and it was so much easier not to be him.

He helped Finner back to his private quarters—a rat hole with a slit for a window—and dumped him in a pile of straw.

Finner gazed up at him, but this time without the puppy look. The beating bashed the puppy out of him, no doubt. Still, there was that *gratitude* in his eyes.

"By the Dark Six, get some sleep," Ravon muttered. Then, to escape Finner's groveling, he stalked into the cell warrens, the walls secreting the usual bubbling pustules like a body with the plague. Eventually he found some solitude on a balcony used for dumping refuse. He sat until a glimmer of dawn seeped into the jungle and the blasted ground near the forge. Fumaroles in the cracked land coughed up sulfurous wisps. On the far side of the clearing, an

early morning detail was hammering away on something. A reviewing stand. Getting on time for the end of the world. But if the genesis forge was ready to deliver itself of millions of arms, and if it took two years of accumulated magical dragonshards to create half a sword, where were the stockpiles, the hoards of powerful shards and objects of enchantment? He'd dared to ask a forge artificer once, in a rare hallway encounter. The elite mage had wrinkled his nose at Ravon's odor and murmured, "Endless stocks, below. Endless."

He meant the giant graveyard. But somehow Ravon doubted there was enough enchantment below for all that would soon be rolling out of the genesis forge.

A noise startled him. Nastra stood at the door.

He turned back to gaze out over jungle. "So did your goblins report me?"

"Yes."

He shrugged. "Well, they started it."

There was nothing much to say to that, nor did she respond, but rather watched at Ravon's side as the jungle brightened from black to sewage green.

Below them, Stonefist had come out onto the turning rims and with his henchmen flung a helpless gnome off the ring to his death four stories below. Then another. The guards' laughter came trickling up.

"Stonefist's at it early," Ravon muttered.

Nastra remained silent for a moment, before saying, "How bad was Vedrim's dungeon?"

"Not pleasant. No hot and cold running water. Lousy food."

"I'll bet the count has especially creative tortures."

That was true, but he wasn't going to give Nastra any pointers. "It's an art with him."

Another gnome went sailing off the ring to his death. Nastra murmured, "It can make a monster of you."

He turned to her. "What can?"

She stared at him with cold, flat eyes. "Torture."

Was she accusing *him* of monstrosity? He stifled a guffaw. "What's *your* excuse, lady elf?"

"Each to his own, Captain." She nodded at Stonefist and his entourage, below. "You could save a few gnomes, though, if you had a mind to."

Ravon stood up, his peace shattered. "I'm not kicking them off the rings. That would be Stonefist, or are you blind as well as dumb?"

"Stonefist knows you're up here. He's throwing the workers off to goad you. Everybody has a breaking point. Our forge master wonders what yours is. Even the slaves are laying wagers." Walking off, she said, "I've got a few coins in the game myself."

When Ravon got back to his cell, Finner had washed out his second set of rags, and hung them up to dry by the window slit. Ravon noted that the cell was newly swept as well. It almost looked decent.

Noting Ravon's scowl, Finner said, "It's what a steward does." Then he turned to pound the dust out of Ravon's mattress.

"Nine Hells." Ravon was now thoroughly stuck with Finner, all four feet of him, including his racking cough and broken ribs.

Finner turned to leave. "I'll fetch your breakfast."

"No!" At the halfling's wide-eyed look, Ravon muttered, "Tell them it's my gruel, but bring it up here and eat it yourself." Finner started to protest. "That's an order. A steward does what he's bloody well told."

Finner grinned with what teeth he had left.

* * *

One night a storm lashed down on the forge. Lightning erupted as though Eberon itself were on fire. It ought to have cooled the forge down, but it only succeeded in turning the warrens into insufferable chambers of steam. Unable to sleep, Ravon left Finner to his exhausted slumbers and walked out to lean against a corridor wall. The thunder was loud enough to wake the dead giants underground. Between belching cracks he heard a familiar jangling sound and looked down the corridor to see Nastra heading down the north stairwell—again. He followed.

Ravon was not a small man, but he had long experience with silent tracking, all the easier when walking on stone stairs and iron halls. He followed Nastra down the stairs, open at the top, but increasingly narrow as they continued down. It was a reckless thing, to follow her. She carried a small dagger at her belt, and he'd seen her use it. A blade at the throat . . . the hundred and twelfth way to die, and not as bad as some. Still, Ravon had a hankering to die with a weapon in his hand. Call him sentimental. So Stonefist's promise of a fight with a bunch of his henchmen was always in the back of his mind.

Nevertheless Ravon followed Nastra to see what villainy she was up to. If she broke the rules, he could use it against her when she tormented Finner.

The elf slipped around another turn of the stairs, the descent growing hotter. By now they had surely passed ground level. Ravon hadn't thought there was anything past ground level, but down they climbed. Then, from around a landing, he heard a scraping noise.

Peering around the corner, he saw that Nastra had opened a door and, releasing the key back to her collection, she disappeared through it. The door clanged shut behind her.

He was not surprised when he couldn't open it. What surprised him was that when he touched the door it burned his fingers.

* * *

It was the way of the hellish forge that the most interesting things happened at night. Executions, rapes, orc berserker outbreaks—but this night's entertainment was of a different sort.

A guard came for him, and Ravon tramped down to the bowel room at Stonefist's order.

When he saw the purpose of the summons, his heart quickened. Stonefist and Nastra were leaning over the forge maw, as though crooning over a newborn baby.

The sword was complete. Its hilt was heavy with cladding, but nicely wrought. The blade, perfect; the length, a good four feet.

Stonefist lifted it from the receiving tray, holding it up and turning the blade to and fro. "Commmbaaat," the gnoll rumbled. "Yah." He turned his gaze on Ravon. "You hold." He held the sword out, then withdrew it with a sly smile. "But not yet."

"My time has come, then," Ravon said, feeling a rush of relief like a window thrown open and fresh air wafting in.

The gnoll smiled. "When Stonefist say. Maybe tonight. Maybe tomorrow. Stonefist choose."

"But soon."

Stonefist squinted at Ravon, handing the massive sword to Nastra. "But Captain's death must be . . . special. Very sat-is-fying. Nothing . . ." Words failed him.

"Vulgar?" Ravon supplied.

"No vulgar!" the gnoll boomed gleefully, though Ravon doubted he knew what the word meant.

"Nothing . . . quick," Stonefist finished.

Nastra locked the blade away in an armory drawer. Ravon realized that she was thinner than ever, wasting away in fact. Maybe she was sick. The night was just filled with happy thoughts.

Now that the main event of the evening, the first weapon from the genesis forge, was done, Stonefist looked for other diversions.

"Lady elf," he said slyly, "forge need more cage-walk. You get halfling Finner." He grinned at Ravon, actually drooling. "Night shift."

Ravon frowned. "He's already done his shift, boss."

"Missed work today." Stonefist put a finger to his forehead. "Stonefist remember. Missing shift."

"Two shifts in the same day will kill him." Ravon shrugged. "A waste of a worker when the very important visitor is coming."

Stonefist paused, processing this idea. Then: "Lady elf: you wake halfling."

Ravon kept his expression neutral. "Means nothing to me. You're the boss."

"Stonefist boss. *Vuulgaaar* boss, yah?"

"Yeah," Ravon said, giving an insolent salute.

Stonefist liked a few military flourishes. But he still sent Nastra up to the barracks.

Soon dismissed, Ravon rushed up the stairs to catch the elf. He found her at the door to his cell. "Nastra," he murmured.

She turned, her face a mask of indifference.

"What's he doing to you? You look worse every day."

Her eyes caught a glint from the everbright lantern high on the wall. "What's it to you?"

Ravon shrugged. "Just wondering why you want to be a lackey for our lovely forge master."

"Maybe I like the work."

That had occurred to Ravon, but he wanted to keep her talking. "Leave Finner alone, Nastra. Show a little mercy. Some day you'll need a favor."

She smiled, showing surprisingly clean teeth, not that it was a pleasant sight. "I thought you didn't care about Finner."

"I don't. But I made a promise in battle to Finner's dying lieutenant. I said I'd watch over his steward. Damned if I know why."

Her dark eyes held his. "It was a promise."

"Yes."

For a moment he thought she might be softening, actually affected by Finner's story. But no, the old sarcasm was at the ready. "Cry me a bucketful," she snapped.

She turned on her heel and stalked away. But, to Ravon's surprise, she let Finner sleep in peace that night.

* * *

The next night Ravon lay in wait for Nastra.

He hid in a recess by the north stairs and, true to habit, the elf skulked by and disappeared down. Nastra was hiding something, he was sure of it.

What he couldn't figure out was why he gave a damn.

In the last six months he'd learned not to care, even relishing the prospect of his own death. But then Finner had become his steward, and in Finner's eyes Ravon had seen the reflection of the man he used to be. Nine Hells. One foot in the grave and now he had hope again . . . not a hope to live—no, never that—but hope to have absolution for all that he'd done.

By the Devourer's Teeth, he wished he'd never met Finner.

But now he was curious. Where did the sovereign bitch go on all these back stair excursions? A lover? His stomach turned at *that* thought.

He watched from a recess in the wall as Nastra stood before the hot door fumbling for her keys. She selected a blood red one and, using it, went through.

Ravon plunged forward, catching the door an inch from closing. He worked the latch so that the elf would hear the mechanism click into place. Then he followed her down.

For down it was, a shaft of a stairwell now steeper than before—and hotter with every step. Here the walls streamed with foul excreta, slick and stinking. It brought to mind the question of *why* the whole forge, not just here, sweated a vile slime. It had always seemed natural to the misery of the place, but now Ravon thought it was something more, perhaps something far worse. The hammering heat itself was a mystery. But the forge was built on top of a graveyard of giants and places of such ancient magic had a natural affinity for the dark places of Khyber, bringing its hellish heat close.

And down, still—with Nastra rounding the corners of the landings, and Ravon one turn behind, just catching a glimpse of her cloak as it disappeared. No lover down here. *Nothing* down here. His curiosity mounted.

Abruptly, the descent ended. Nastra was off across a murky cavern, roiling in noxious fumes. Ghostly rock formations jutted up from the floor while stalactites hung down from above, dripping goo . . . the very pus that infected the forge itself. Ravon followed the elf, the ground thrumming beneath his feet as though the heart of a giant lay just below.

A scream tore through the cavern, stopping Ravon in midstride. The howl trailed off. He couldn't see Nastra, lost in the murk.

Voices. One horrid and low, the other a murmur. Nastra was with someone. That low, guttural voice sent a shudder over him. All senses on keen alert, he moved with practiced stealth toward the source of the voices, using rock formations as cover. That voice. Not human, not in any way normal. The list of possible creatures was short and exceedingly nasty; maybe best to slink away now before he risked discovery. Lying flat on the ground behind a massive rock, he crept forward to look.

A creature stood on a rock outcropping. A skeletal, flesh-wasted monster, some seven feet tall.

By *all the Six*, a death hag. Why had he pulled forward? The hag could probably hear his very breath if she wasn't so focused on Nastra. He was frozen now, lying flat, but exposed.

The death hag jumped down to where Nastra knelt, screaming, "My master does not wait! The baron of Cannith signifies nothing to such as us. My master does not wait for human lords!"

Then the hag slowly craned her neck, looking around. Ravon stopped breathing.

"Yes, exalted," Nastra piped up, bringing the hag's attention back. "Just a day, however. What is a day to your great master? It is nothing!"

The death hag screamed in frustration, raising her hands and wringing them. "A day, a day? You shall understand how long is a day, when my sisters cut a slit in you and slowly draw out your entrails!" The creature swiped her claws through Nastra's hair, snapping the elf's head back and forth. "We shall bring up the fires to feed the engine. Open the pipe! Let the sweet lakes of Fernia flow!"

Ravon heard the word *Fernia*, and his mind opened to a new and most unwelcome surmise.

The hag was still screaming, "Aye, Fernia longs to flow!"

Nastra quailed but answered, "Yes, Fernia shall flow, great one. The glorious day!"

Ravon's heart cooled at the growing realization. By all that was unholy, the forge needn't worry about running out of dragonshards. It was going to have Fernia. It would be fueled by one of the planes of the Elemental Chaos: Fernia, the Sea of Fire.

Because, he now realized, the genesis forge was sitting atop a *manifest zone*, where the worlds intermixed. But not even a death hag could create a pipe to extrude the Elemental Chaos . . .

Nastra looked up at the hag. "A glorious day it will be, but not yet, exalted one. Tomorrow. Stonefist begs the demon lord's indulgence for one more day—"

Her agitation growing, the death hag rolled her eyes fully around in their sockets.

Nastra went on, "—so that *his* master, the great Cannith personage, may arrive, may witness the event."

The death hag emitted a horrid ululation. She bashed her right hand down on her own lower leg, shattering it. Somehow, the witch remained upright. Then she plucked aside her rags and touched her femur, healing it over with gristle. Calmer now after her outburst, the death hag grinned and yanked Nastra to her feet.

"*One day only*, sweetling. The demon lord shall wait *one day*. Then the fire comes up. The forge is born!"

"Yes, exalted lady. Tomorrow. You have my word."

The hag rasped, "What is your word to *me*?"

"Nothing," Nastra said. Then she met the hag's maddened gaze. "But it's all you've got."

The witch cocked her skull-like head, as though considering whether to eat the elf on the spot or save her for another time.

By the Sovereign Gods, Ravon had space in his mind to think, Nastra just talked back to a death hag.

"Leave me," the hag spat, "return tomorrow and tell us Cannith has arrived. Then the gates of fire open!" With a ferocious leap she launched herself away, disappearing into the boiling smoke.

The creature was gone. Even so, Ravon waited a few beats before standing up to face Nastra. He swayed for a moment, temporarily weakened by having been in the death hag's proximity.

Spying him, Nastra's look revealed her dismay. The forge's secrets, or most of them, were now exposed. Her eyes flicked toward the vanished death hag. Then she waved him toward the end of the cavern where the stairs gave on to the audience chamber.

There they stood face to face, eyeing each other. "So," Nastra muttered. "You know."

Ravon looked at Nastra's stringy face and stooped shoulders. Her visits with the death hag had eaten away her life force, until all that was left was this pitiful, wasted creature. He spoke in a stunned whisper. "You're going to unleash the Demon Lords."

"Not exactly."

His temper surged, and he pushed her against the stairwell wall. "No? Isn't the hag's master a demon lord?"

With surprising strength, Nastra pushed him away. "Nothing can unleash the Demon Lords. They are banished forever."

Ravon grabbed her arm, this time holding on with a fierce grip. "But they *aren't*. They've already found a way to unleash themselves. They've got you,

Nastra, damn you to the Hells.” He twisted her arm behind her back, and she winced in pain. “I ought to kill you. The world would thank me for it.”

“Go ahead,” the elf whispered. “See if that stops the forge!”

Brutally, he threw her back against the wall and stepped away, unable to execute her as she deserved. Through his contempt, he asked, “Why, Nastra? Why help the bastards?”

She slid down the wall into a crouch. In the gloaming light from the few brightglobes, she looked a bit like a hag herself. “For love.”

He stared at her.

“The high lord of Cannith has my family. He’ll kill them, mother, father, brothers, cousins. Merrix d’Cannith has already slain my sister.” Her voice went very quiet. “Back when I first refused.”

“Nice story. But you’re not that important. Cannith could use any servant base enough, greedy enough, to do his bidding.”

“Dragonmarked,” she whispered.

“What?”

“I’m useful. My aberrant dragonmark. It shields me—just enough—from the powers of Khyber.” She looked blackly up at him. “Even Stonefist can’t survive down here for long. If you’d come much closer, you would understand.”

He watched her carefully for signs of cunning. But oddly, he believed her. She had a gift. A twisted, awful one. And Cannith had tortured her family to be sure she used it.

“I’m sorry,” he heard himself say. And he was, woe-fully sorry, about the hellish forge, the pact with the demons, and even Nastra’s family. But pity was useless. It was anger that he needed. A righteous anger. He gazed into the smoke-laden cavern, imagining

how all of Fernia would be harnessed for a new and bloody war. He felt something small and burning flicker in him, but wearily, he pushed it away.

Leaving Nastra crouched on the stairs, he climbed back to the upper realm. He hardly remembered going up the stairs, passing the hot door and, regaining the fourth level, entering his private cell.

There, on his bed, lay Finner. He was dead. Laid out, his rags smoothed, but not enough to hide the gouts of blood where he’d been struck through with a blade.

Pinned to the halfling’s shirt was a note, almost illegible: *We tested sord blade witout yu. Work good! It was signed with a bloody fist.*

He knelt by Finner’s side and closed the steward’s bulging eyes. After a moment, his body trembling, Ravon rose to his feet. Rage filled him, flooded his mind, released his shackles. Where had he been these many months? Where had the fight gone, and the old Ravon Kell? He shook his head, as though clearing away a dream. The surge of power in his body, in his heart, told him he was ready now, to fight. All he needed was a sword.

A movement at the door. Nastra stood there. Her gaze went to Finner’s body. “He didn’t deserve that,” she said. To his astonishment, she was holding out her ring of keys.

Ravon strode out the door, snagging the keys as he went by. His steps were long but deliberate as he stalked past the cell blocks, his mind afire. He might not be able to fight Cannith or the demons or the hag, but there was one enemy he meant to settle with, and by Dolurrrh, nothing was going to stop him.

When he got to the bowel room no one was there except a couple of goblins, who backed away from him when they saw the expression on his face. Using

the blue key he’d seen Nastra use, he opened the drawer where she’d locked in the sword.

Its weight was solid and lush in his hand. But he had no time to admire the forge’s handiwork. He bellowed out Stonefist’s name. Over the groaning of the forge’s ugly heart, he heard his voice echo. The goblins crouched out of his way as he rushed into the corridor.

“Stonefist,” he bellowed, “you ugly son of a sovereign bitch!”

He roared the gnoll’s name again and again as he stalked down the halls with a warrior’s tread, his footfalls deliberate, balanced, deadly. He knew how to enter battle. He remembered from the old days, which were not so very old, being only six months ago, back when he was Captain Ravon Kell, of his majesty’s army. That Ravon Kell was back.

As he passed the twentieth cell block, a dwarf stood at the entrance. She nodded to him, pointing to the door far down the passage. Ravon understood. The forge master was on the rim. The forge master was out there throwing off slaves.

He flung open the door, letting the first light of day into the gloaming prison.

Stonefist was on the outside rim thirty yards away. Several large orcs kept him company. At the sound of the door opening, Stonefist let go of a human slave, letting him sink into a terrified puddle.

The gnoll turned to face Ravon. “Hah, Captain!” He noted that Ravon was armed. “You like sword, yes?”

“Yes.”

Ravon had not moved from his place near the door.

Stonefist backed up slightly to keep his distance as the rim bore him slowly forward. “You like fight my orcs?”

"When I'm finished with you," Ravon said, "then I'll fight the orcs."

A slow grin crawled across the gnoll's face. Waving the orcs to stand back, he pulled a great curved blade from his belt, rumbling, "Stonefist finish you."

Ravon stepped from the doorway onto the inner rim as it moved in Stonefist's direction. He paced slowly backward, keeping distance from the gnoll as the two rings conspired to bring the combatants together. Between the rings was a furrow that would grind off a misplaced foot.

At the top of the forge a few artificers had emerged from the keep to look on.

Ravon hoped they would allow the fight to proceed. To fall from an artificer's bolt of power was the eighteenth way to die, and not unmanly, but not the noble end of hand-to-hand combat with an enemy like Stonefist. He stepped over the gap between the rims.

The outer rim was as broad as two gnolls lying end to end, but still there was little room to maneuver.

Ravon found his balance, feeling the sword in his hand like a magical extension of his arm. "The demon lords will teach you to lick their boots, Stonefist. Maybe you're too dumb to know that."

Stonefist grinned wolfishly. "Death hag and demon lord work for Stonefist! They open pipe to the fire. After pipe open"—he spread his arms wide—"it stay open. Nothing can close it, so artificers say. We no need hag or demon, then."

A double cross. Impressive, Ravon had to admit.

The forge master went on. "Stonefist invite hag up to rims and shove her in." Grinning, he pointed to the lethal gap. Then, raising his curved blade, he beckoned with a long arm. "Come to Stonefist."

Ravon didn't meet his opponent's eyes. In the stories, you boldly held the enemy's gaze, but in a fight you watched his chest for the first sign of movement, to gain a split second advantage.

A twinge from Stonefist betrayed a back-handed swipe, and Ravon's sword was there to greet it. He felt the shudder of the blow ring in the bones of his arm. He spun away and then around again, pricking the gnoll's upper arm.

Stonefist didn't feel it, not yet. But it riled him. "How Finner like new sword?" He lunged, missed, lunged again, as Ravon backed up.

Ravon feinted toward the gnoll's left side, then sliced his sword right. Stonefist sprang back. The gnoll was solid on his feet, and strong, but his blade was not as long as Ravon's. The forge master would die. But he was stronger than Ravon, so as much fun as the foreplay might be, it was time to finish it.

Behind Stonefist the orcs watched uneasily. They'd be the next fight, Ravon knew. He wasn't going to walk away from this battle, but he'd take a few of them with him.

Stonefist was swaying, warming up for his next lunge. "I give your eyes to the goblins for a meal!" he brayed.

Ravon shook his head. "But Stonefist, that would be vulgar."

"*Vulgaar!*" Stonefist yelled in joy and rushed forward. Ravon jumped onto the inner rim. Then, the movement of the rim taking him past Stonefist's position, he hopped back on the outer one.

Now behind Stonefist, and before the gnoll could turn, he swung the great sword in an arcing slice at the creature's neck, knocking his head half off. It lay on his shoulder, the stump erupting with thick blood. Absurdly, Stonefist tried to put it back on, managing

to tip it back into place. The forge master staggered around to stare at Ravon.

The gnoll stood as still as a rock outcropping, his gaze lit with understanding.

Ravon kicked a boot forward. "For Finner," he said, connecting hard enough to send Stonefist staggering backward. The gnoll teetered on the edge of the forge for a moment, then plummeted.

A roaring noise. The artificers sending a bolt of searing wind, no doubt. But then the roaring continued, and as Ravon became more aware of his surroundings he saw that every window, door, niche, outcropping, ramp, and hole held a slave or five, and they were all cheering. The orc guards, who had started to approach Ravon, looked up in alarm.

The real battle of the genesis forge began at that moment as dwarves, gnomes, humans, halflings, and all the rest surged onto the rings, tearing the guards apart and throwing the pieces after their master. From above, the artificers sprayed bolts into the throng, burning many, but seeing the sheer number of slaves scrambling up the sides toward them, they retreated.

The traveling rim Ravon was on had come around to the backside of the forge, and Ravon looked for a new way to enter the forge. He had another duty to discharge. Now that he was alive after all.

Inside, chaos, as the cell blocks emptied, their occupants armed with pieces of wood, old iron implements, and broken bottles. Ravon heard the roar of dwarves taking command, directing the melee, even as their meaty arms swung improvised weapons against orcs and goblins. Carnage filled the halls, but Ravon stalked through, heading for the north stairs.

The shrieks and cries of battle receded as he rushed down, fumbling with Nastra's keys, looking

for the red one, finding it. He inserted it into the hot door. Then down again, this time in silence, or in as much quiet as could exist in a manifest zone poised over the lake of fire that was Fernia.

When he arrived in the cavern, he was sweating heavily but still stoked from the combat and the churning madness of Khyber stirred his thoughts. That was good. When facing death, it was best not to be in one's right mind.

He shouted, "Death hag! By the Devourer, by the Dark Six! Death hag!"

Mists swirled around him. He bellowed again. "I bear a message for the lovely hag!"

The room stilled, as though his ears were stuffed with straw. He pivoted, looking in all directions, hating, like any warrior, not to hear his enemy, not to have every sense alert.

From behind, came a singsong voice. "Sweet meat."

He spun. The death hag leaned over him, tall and spectral.

"I bear a message." He let his sword drop to the ground. If she would only listen.

"Speak your last words," she breathed, with a breath like a month-old carcass.

"Listen until the end, hag, for your master will want to know."

"Oh, bold, bold." Her eyes rolled back and came around again. Ravon had to admire the trick.

The witch crooned, "I shall take your blood with especial pleasure. Sip, sip."

By Dolurrrh, she was ugly. But he held her terrifying gaze and said, "I'm a bitter man. You may not find my flesh to your liking."

"I shall eat your tongue first, then decide."

He devoutly hoped she would kill him all at once and not save him for the occasional cannibalistic

treat. He must remember to enrage her to that point. He'd always had a knack for annoying people.

Ravon hastened to say, "Here is the message from Stonefist. The baron of Cannith doesn't need you or your demon lord. Once you open the pipe, it will stay open. Cannith will ignore you. You've been duped."

The hag grabbed his shoulder, her nails strong as meat hooks. "Stonefist would not say so to such as you."

"You'd be right except I was in the process of killing him when he let it slip."

The hag screamed, smashing him down to his knees. "Where is Nastra?"

"I don't keep track of her. Sorry."

The death hag looked over his shoulder, peering into the cauldron of smoke, watchful, perhaps desperate. Turning back to him, she yanked his hair, pulling his head back to expose his neck. "Bitch, bitch, bitch!" she howled.

"Know what you mean." His head was bent so far, he thought his spine would snap. He managed to spit out, "But the elf has her good points."

The witch hunched over him, her face very near, her breath vile. "You do not fear me, manling?"

With all that was left of his voice, Ravon whispered, "Not so much."

And he didn't. He was wholly occupied with trying to figure out what number his death was going to be at the hands of the hag. Was it the three hundred and eighth way to die, or the eight hundred and third? By Dol Dorn's mighty fist, it was *important* to know.

By the time he decided both were wrong and was wildly recalculating, he found himself lying flat on the trembling ground, no one else in sight.

The death hag had gone.

Well. Perhaps his innate charm had won out.

* * *

As Ravon raced up the stairs, he felt the treads shaking beneath his feet. Splinters of stone fell from the ceiling.

The pipe. They were opening up a portal to Fernia after all. They didn't believe him. The hag didn't . . . but the shuddering continued, worsening. He barely got through the hot door as the stair collapsed behind him.

Summoning his last strength, he raced up the remaining flights. Somewhere above him the fight raged on, but even a battle could not penetrate the booming roar of what was coming.

Charging through the halls, he bellowed, "Out, out! It's coming apart. Get outside!"

The forge itself heaved from side to side. And grew hotter with every minute.

Fernia was coming up. Not in a controlled pipe, he decided. It was coming in a flood, an eruption. It would blow the forge sky high. "Out, get out!" he roared, as the slaves started to heed him. He grabbed a dead orc's pike and struck down a pair of goblins coming at him from a side hall. "Out!"

Then in a general stampede, those who yet lived raced from the corridors, cells, and crannies of the forge, heading for the door out. Bodies lay everywhere, orcs draped over dwarves and goblins over halflings, as though in a last embrace. The slaves rushed outward and Ravon followed.

Once in the clearing, he looked back to see goutts of fire erupting from the forge's window slits, and a pillar of purple smoke spiking up into the sky from the artificer's keep.

Even orcs gave up on the fight and stared. Then in a mass surge, they and everyone else turned and raced for the jungle.

Ravon noted a different group standing on one side of the dense forest. A large group of soldiers with their pack beasts also stared at the thundering, shuddering forge.

In their midst stood a lord, by his dress—a regal figure with dark hair and a chain of office around his neck. The expression on his face was one Ravon would never forget.

“Merrix d’Cannith,” a voice spoke, at his side. He couldn’t see anyone. But it was Nastra’s voice. “He came to see the forge open. Not fall to ruin.”

“Hate to see him disappointed,” Ravon murmured. The ground shook violently, as one side of the forge collapsed in a deafening crash.

Nastra went on, “I can extend my cloak around you. Perhaps invisible is best under the circumstances?”

Ravon saw that a large orc was making his way toward him. “If you wouldn’t mind, lady elf.”

“Not that I care about you,” she said. “Never think that.”

The orc began to lope in his direction.

“Of course not. But we might fight our way to the coast. In case of drow. Orcs. Other riffraff. Two swords are better than one.”

“Indeed,” Nastra allowed.

In a swirl, the orc grew fuzzy to Ravon’s eyes. The orc spun around, searching for his vanished prey. After a moment it stalked off.

Ravon felt Nastra bend an arm behind and slowly draw a sword from its sheath. She pressed its hilt into his hand.

The air split with a gargled roar. As they watched in frozen wonder, the top of the forge blew off in a gout of fire and iron. The sound engulfed the world. It was an angry blast from Fernia—but not to enliven the

genesis forge, not in a controlled pipe. An eruption, sent by the minions of a demon lord to wreak death on his betrayers.

Baron d’Cannith beat a hasty retreat into the jungle as pieces of flaming iron, molten rivets, and doors red as ingots fell from the sky.

After the blast, nothing remained but a crater where the genesis forge had been. The jungle burned in places, but the eruption was done.

Ravon and Nastra turned and ran from the burning clearing. He let her lead the way, admiring her speed.

Catching up to her at last, he said, “We’ll find your family. When we get to Khorvaire, we’ll find them.”

A quick glance at him. “Not that you care.”

He shrugged. “Not in the least. But I figure I owe you.”

She smiled. “A promise then.”

“Call it that.”

They plunged deep into the jungle of Xen’drik, watchful for orcs, drow, stray goblins, Cannith’s men, and a score of other enemies. It was a world Ravon Kell remembered well. It was good to be back.

About the Author

Kay Kenyon, nominated for the Philip K. Dick and the John W. Campbell awards, began her writing career (in Duluth, Minnesota) as a copywriter for radio and TV. She kept up her interest in writing through careers in marketing and urban planning, and published her first novel, *The Seeds of Time*, in 1997. She is the author of numerous short stories, including those in *I, Alien*; *Live Without a Net*; and *Stars: Stories Based on the Songs of Janis Ian*. She lives in Wenatchee, Washington, with her husband. You can read a first chapter of her books at www.kaykenyon.com.