

## THE ELF HOUSE by David Drake

*This is a short story in the Isles universe for a Bill Fawcett project, which last I was told will be titled Masters of Fantasy. It's for Baen Books and was originally described to me a fantasy companion to The Warmasters, but things have a way of transmuting in the publishing world.*

*The story was an interesting exercise. I've written a million words in the Isles series, but this a) had to be understandable to people who hadn't read any of the novels; and b) had to be complete in 5-6K words. I wrote it in 5,700 (on my tombstone you can carve HE WAS A PROFESSIONAL).*

*I think it's a pretty good story, though not as flashy as some of the things I've done. The title's The Elf House, and Cashel's the viewpoint character. As for when it comes out--well, the book's still waiting for Dave Weber's story. Those of you who know Dave's writing commitments can join me in a chuckle at that.*

Cashel didn't need to carry his quarterstaff in the corridors of the Vicar's palace--what'd been the Count of Haft's place till Prince Garric arrived the week before--but he was more comfortable holding the smooth, familiar hickory than he'd be otherwise. He didn't dislike big buildings, but he disliked being in them; and this palace had a nasty feel all its own.

Besides, the staff had been a friend in places where Cashel had no other friends. He wouldn't feel right about leaving it alone in the huge suite assigned to him while he went off to dinner with Garric in the roof garden. If the servants, officials, and the amazing number of other people crowding the palace stared at him, well, a man as big as Cashel or-Kenset was used to being stared at whether he carried a quarterstaff or not.

For a wonder there wasn't anybody around at the moment. Cashel sauntered down the hall looking at the cherub mural painted just above shoulder level. In the dim light through the transoms of the rooms to either side, there was something new to catch every time he passed.

Cashel started to grin at the little fellow with his wings spread as he struggled to lead a goat who didn't want to go. The sound of a girl crying jerked his head around.

He'd been holding the quarterstaff straight up and down in one hand. Now, without him thinking about it his left hand slipped into position a span below the right and he slanted the staff before him. "Ma'am?" he said, ready to deal with whatever was making a woman cry.

The girl wore servant's clothing, a cap and a simple gray tunic set off by a sash of bleached wool. She knelt a little way down a corridor which joined the main one from the right. Cashel didn't remember there being anything but a blank wall there, but he guessed he'd always missed it because he'd been intent on the mural opposite.

She gave another vain push at the inward-opening door in front of her, then looked up at Cashel with eyes glittering with tears. "Oh, sir!" she said. "I dropped the key and it slipped under the door. The steward will beat me if I don't get it back!"

"I don't guess he will," Cashel said. The notion that somebody'd beat a little slip of a girl surprised him into speaking in a growl. He didn't know her, but he didn't think

men ought to hit any girls. He was *real* sure no man was going to try that twice in front of Cashel or-Kenset.

He cleared his throat and went on in a normal voice, "But anyhow, let's see if I can't get your key."

The door stood a finger's breadth ajar. Cashel pressed with the fingertips of his right hand without budging it further. It was stuck, that was all; rusty hinges, he figured, since the panel didn't bind to the lintel or transom. Through the crack at the edge he could see a glint of gold in what was otherwise darkness; the key was there, all right. It must've bounced wrong off the stone floor.

Cashel leaned his quarterstaff against the wall beside him and placed his hands one above the other on the latch side of the panel. The girl looked up at him intently. She seemed older, all of a sudden, and there was no sign of her frightened despair of a moment ago. He made sure his feet were set, then put his weight against the wood.

More people lived in the palace than did in all Barca's Hamlet where Cashel'd grown up. Even though there wasn't any traffic in the main corridor, sounds constantly echoed through the hallways and made the floor quiver. All that stopped; Cashel pressed against the panel in dead silence. Maybe it was the effort, because the door still didn't want to give--

And then it did, though with creaking unwillingness. It opened another finger's breadth, twice that....

The girl stuck her arm in, calling something that Cashel could barely hear through the roar of blood in his ears. "I can't quite...", she said, so he kept pushing and the door gave some more, enough that she squeezed her torso into the room beyond.

Cashel shoved harder yet. He could feel the wood fighting him like the staff of a bent bow, ready to snap back if he let up the pressure.

"I've got it!" the girl said, only her legs from the knees down out in the hallway where Cashel could see them. "I've--"

And then she shrieked "Milord, I'm falling!" shrilly. Her legs slid out of sight, following the rest of her. She was wearing sandals with straps of green-dyed cut-work.

Cashel didn't understand what was happening, but as the girl slipped inward he slammed his shoulder hard against the panel instead of just shoving with his hands. He hadn't done that before because he didn't want to smash the door, but now he didn't care.

The door didn't break, neither the thick fir panel nor the squealing hinges that fought him all the way, and he swung it open at right angles. The room within was small and dingy. There was no furniture, and part of the rotten wainscoting had fallen onto the floor.

The girl had the key in one hand and reached toward Cashel with the other. She looked like she was sliding backwards, but she was already farther away than the far wall of the room.

Cashel grabbed the staff with his left hand and stretched it out to the girl. She couldn't reach it and screamed again. Her voice was growing fainter; he could see her body shrink as the distance increased.

"Duzi!" Cashel bellowed. He strode into the room, holding the quarterstaff out in both hands. The girl grabbed it, but Cashel's feet slipped like he was standing on an icy hillside.

The door slammed behind him. The only light was a dim, yellow-brown glow that silhouetted the girl's body and he and she plunged down an unseen slope.

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Cashel felt himself spinning as he dropped, but his body wasn't touching anything. The girl held the other end of his staff; he couldn't see her expression, but she didn't bawl in fear or make any sound at all that he noticed.

They skidded onto a gritty hillside and stopped. Cashel looked over his shoulder. All there was there was gray sky and a rising slope. There wasn't any sign of the room where they'd come from. He looked all around and didn't see anything he liked better.

The bare hills ranged in color from yellow-white to the red of rusty iron. For the most part the rock had weathered into gravel, but there were outcrops where the stone must've been harder. The general landscape wasn't pretty, but the outcrops were worse. Whenever Cashel looked hard at one, he started to see a large, angry face.

He got up, brushing crumbled rock from the back of his tunic. He hadn't come down hard, for all that they'd seemed to be rushing headlong through emptiness. He glanced at the girl, already on her feet. She smiled and said, "My name is Mona, Lord Cashel. Do you know where we are?"

"Just Cashel, please, mistress," he said with a grimace. "I'm not lord anything."

He cleared his throat, looking around again. The landscape wasn't any more appealing on a careful survey than it'd been when he first landed in it. "And I don't know anything about this place, except I wish we were someplace else."

"It's where the house elf lives," Mona said. She was looking at the landscape also, turning her head slowly. "Used to live, I mean. There can't be anything alive here except the dwelling itself."

She held her arms across her bosom; her expression was coldly disapproving. From Mona's features she was younger than Cashel's nineteen years, but her eyes were a lot older than that.

Cashel followed the line of her gaze up a series of streaked, ragged slopes. On top of a butte was what at first he'd taken for white stone weathered into a spire. When he squinted and let it sink in angle by angle, he realized he was seeing a man-made tower with battlements on top. A slant of windows curved around the shaft the way they'd do to light a circular staircase.

"You mean that castle?" Cashel said, nodding toward the structure instead of pointing. "That there's people living there?"

"There's no people here and no elves either," the girl said as she stared toward the tower. "Only us. And I don't mean the building, Cashel. This whole world was the dwelling for the house elf."

Cashel cleared his throat. He took out the pad of raw wool he carried in his belt wallet and wiped the smooth hickory surface of his quarterstaff as he thought.

"Mona," he said while keeping his eyes fixed on his task. "The only house elves I've heard of are the little fellows who live under the hearth and, well, make things go right. The Luck of the House, some people call them."

He cleared his throat again. "Not that I've ever seen one. Or known anybody who did."

"How could anybody live under a hearth?" Mona asked, with a pretty smile that took the sting out of words that could've been pretty cutting if said the wrong way. "But

they *could* live between the cracks of the real world, in a place that grew for them. A place like this was."

She looked around, no longer smiling. "When the elf died," she said, "the dwelling should've fallen apart like a web when the spider dies. This dwelling took a life of its own instead. A sort of life."

The sky was getting darker. It was solidly overcast, as heavy and oppressive as a block of gray stone. Cashel could feel a storm in the air. Duzi, the little god of shepherds, knew how many times he'd been caught by the weather while he was minding sheep; but he didn't have sheep to worry about this time, so he could go somewhere else.

"Ah, Mona?" he said. "I think we'd best get under cover while we can. Unless you've got a better idea, let's head for the castle up there."

"Yes," she said. "We'll do that. Though the storm will catch us anyway."

They had about a half mile to go. The route was uphill on average, but Cashel could see there were several ridges and gullies between them and the castle. Experience had taught him that the terrain was always worse than it seemed at a distance, but he didn't foresee anything they couldn't cross even if he had to carry the girl part of the way.

He looked at Mona again. She wasn't the frail little girl that she'd seemed when he first saw her in the palace corridor. She stepped with determination across the rough terrain, avoiding head-sized chunks of rock but seemingly unperturbed by the coarse gravel. Maybe the soles of her sandals were sturdier than they seemed. Cashel himself was wearing thick boots. He didn't like the feel of footgear, especially in warm weather, but the stone floors of the palace and cobblestone streets of the city beyond were too much for the calluses he'd developed going barefoot on the mud and meadows where he grew up.

Lightning flashed somewhere above the clouds, giving them texture if not shape for an instant. Cashel held his staff crosswise, ready to brace himself with an iron butt-cap if the gravel slid or a rock turned under his foot. You couldn't trust your footing here....

"I'm surprised there's nothing growing here," Cashel said. The girl was a couple steps in front of him, choosing each step and keeping in perfect balance. "This isn't good soil--" his boot toe gouged into the slope "--but with rain, there ought to be something."

"Nothing can live here," Mona said bitterly. She reached down and brushed at the loose grit. "Look."

The underlying rock was mostly dark brown and cream, with streaks of maroon and other colors. Cashel frowned as he let his eyes grapple with the pattern.

"It's a tree trunk," he said at last. "It's a stone statue of a tree trunk."

"It *was* a tree trunk," the girl said. "The house has turned it to stone to reabsorb it. Lesser vegetation is--"

She swept her left hand in a short arc, palm down.

"--already gone. Stone and dust. The house has only a half-life; it hates the real thing."

She smiled wryly at Cashel. "Forgive me if I get carried away," she said. "There's nothing evil about what's happening here, any more than there is with cancer or a wolf

tree. But it's a perversion and can't be allowed."

Cashel nodded. "We'd best be getting on," he said, nodding toward the tower ahead of them. The hill was particularly steep right here; he could only see the crowning battlements from where he stood. "Though you were right about us not beating the storm."

They resumed, climbing steeply now. The girl dabbed a hand down frequently while Cashel used the butt of his staff to steady him where he didn't trust the grip of his feet.

He knew what a wolf tree was. If a forest grew wild, there'd always be a few trees, oaks more often than not, that through a combination of luck in soil and the weather spread over ground that could've supported a dozen ordinary trees. Their limbs shaded out lesser growth, and their trunks grew gnarled and rotted at the heart, useless for anything but firewood.

Forests didn't grow wild, of course: wood was too valuable a resource for that. If a tree started taking more than its share, the woodlot's owner hired a husky young man like Cashel to cut it down.

A steep-sided gully barred their way, not broad but deeper than twice Cashel's height. He figured he could get over it, but the girl'd have to climb down and then--

Mona jumped over the gully from a standing start, looking like nothing so much as a squirrel hopping the gap between trees. She glanced over her shoulder. "I'll wait for you here, Master Cashel," she said with a trace of laughter in her tone.

Cashel grunted. He checked the ground, then backed two steps and came on again in a rush. He butted his quarterstaff firmly at the edge of the gully and used the great strength of his shoulders to loft him over. He landed beside her, flexing his knees to take his weight.

"You're graceful despite your size," the girl said as she resumed her way toward the tower.

"Who are you, Mistress Mona?" Cashel asked. "*What* are you?"

"I'm a servant," she said. "We're all servants of one kind or another, aren't we? You used to serve sheep, for example."

"I didn't serve sheep," Cashel said, shocked at the thought. "I--"

He broke off. A shepherd did a lot of things, but when you boiled them all down they amounted to making sure his sheep were safe and comfortable. Put like that it sure enough sounded like being a servant.

"Well, maybe that's so," he admitted, saying the words instead of just holding his tongue and pretending he hadn't been wrong to begin with.

The rain hit, violent slashes from straight ahead. Each gust drove at Cashel's face like he was standing in the sluice of the mill back home in Barca's Hamlet. He didn't see how Mona could stand against it but she did, lowering her head and striding on.

The lightning was nearly constant, dancing in the clouds as the air shuddered with thunder. Run-off gouged fresh rivulets which gushed down the slopes as streams of thin mud.

The gully they'd crossed must be a raging freshet now. It'd be a bad time to lose your footing and slide into a torrent.

The storm stopped as abruptly as it'd begun. It paused, at any rate; the rain no

longer fell, but the sky stayed the same dark mat. Mona had a little peaked cap as part of her livery. It'd blown away, and her simple tunic stuck to her torso, sopping wet and three shades darker than its original light gray. Cashel figured he looked like a drowned rat himself.

He grinned and slicked the water off his staff between his thumbs and forefingers, sliding first his right hand to the ferrule and then cleaning the other half with his left. A drowned ox, maybe. On his worst day, nobody was going to confuse Cashel or-Kenset with a rat.

They'd reached the base of the great outcrop on which the tower stood. The cliff was pretty steep, but there was a path slanting up to the left. It looked badly worn... well, no. It looked more like the rock had been melted somehow. Anyway, they'd be able to get up it even if the rain started again.

"Wait!" the girl said, staring intently at the cliff to the side of the pathway. Her index finger traced a bump in the rock. It was about the size of a ripe cantaloupe and had a pearly luster instead of the dull, chalky surface holding it.

Now that Mona'd pointed out the first one, Cashel saw that there were more balls, as many as he could count on the fingers of one hand, in the rock beside it. They looked as much like frog's eggs as anything Cashel could think of; though much bigger, of course.

"The seeds of new dwellings," the girl said softly. She took her hand away from the stone. "Each seed should grow into a home for a young elf who'd make the people of a house in the waking world a little happier. This place is absorbing them too."

She turned her head toward Cashel. "I was wrong, I think," she said. Her voice didn't sound angry, but it rang as hard as a sword edge. "What's happening here *is* evil."

"Let's go on," said Cashel, but Mona had started up the path before he got the words out.

The wind rose again before they'd climbed halfway. It whirled around the outcrop, buffeting Cashel head-on no matter which direction he was facing as he walked along the curving path. Rain began to fall, a few drops at a time but big ones that stung like hard-thrown pebbles.

Mona's tunic was sleeveless and only knee-length. Even so Cashel was afraid that it'd give the storm's violence enough purchase to snatch her from the path and throw her onto the broken landscape below. Her balance remained perfect and her steps stayed steady despite the gusts.

The top of the outcrop was as flat as a table. The tower stood in the center with no more margin than Cashel could span by stretching his arms out to either side. He wondered if the spire itself was artificial, a pedestal built at the same time the tower was; though if what Mona said was true, this whole world had been made--or grown, which he supposed was the same thing.

The entrance was partway around the tower from where the path reached the top. Mona started for it with Cashel right behind. Now that they were close, Cashel saw that the windows in the tower were blocked up--filled with stone rather than just shuttered. What he'd seen were the outlines where the sashes used to be.

The rain resumed in torrents, now mixed with hail the size of quails' eggs. Cashel threw his left arm up to shield his eyes. He'd have bruises when this was over, that was for sure. Balls of ice shattered against the stone, cracking like a fire of pine boughs.

Sharp bits bounced from the ground, pricking Cashel's ankles and lower legs.

The tower's doorway was recessed. Mona bent toward it, doing something with the panel. Cashel hunched behind her, trying to shelter her from the hailstones that slipped past the overhang.

The rattling hail drowned the thunder, but its deeper notes still vibrated through Cashel's boots. Lightning was a constant rippling presence overhead. The tower's walls were alabaster; Cashel ran his fingertips over them, trying to find joints between the courses. If there were any, they were too fine for his touch or eyesight, either one, to identify them.

"Mona, maybe I can break it down," Cashel said, speaking louder with each word of the short sentence. The hail made more noise than he appreciated until he tried to talk over it.

A crust flaked off the wall when Cashel rubbed it. Though the tower stood in open air, the stone was rotting like a statue buried in the acid soil of a forest.

"I've got it!" said the girl, and as she spoke the tower opened; she stepped inside.

Cashel was close on her heels, bumping the door as he entered. It was made of the same white stone as the rest of the building, pivoting on pins carved from one block with the panel. As soon as Cashel was past, it banged shut with a ringing sound more like a xylophone than that of stone on stone.

The storm's noise ended abruptly when the door closed. They were in an anteroom.

"There's light!" Cashel said in surprise, and there was: a soft, shadowless glow from the stone itself. The room was unfurnished, but on the walls were carved patterns as rich and fanciful as the engravings on a nobleman's gold dinner service.

Only a few patches remained to show what the original decoration had looked like, though. The scaly rot disfiguring the tower's exterior had claimed most of the inner surfaces too.

Mona stepped through the inner doorway. Cashel followed, keeping his elbows close to his sides. The passage was so narrow that if he'd tried to swagger through arms-akimbo, he'd have bumped the jambs.

A slender woman stood in the center of the hall, her right hand out in greeting. "Oh!" Cashel said, straightening in surprise. The tower was so silent that he'd convinced himself it was empty.

"Her name was Giglia," Mona said, walking toward the other woman. "She was the luck of the palace ever since the Count of Haft built it. There was never a house elf who could match what Giglia did with glass. She made the palace windows gleam like a thousand rainbows every sunrise."

Cashel touched his tongue to his lower lip. His staff was slantways before him, not so much a threat as a barrier between him and the silent Giglia. "Why doesn't she move?" he asked.

"Because she's dead, Cashel," Mona said. "She grew old and died; as things should do. Without death there can be no renewal."

She reached toward the dead woman; their faces were as like as those of twins. When her fingers touched the other's cheek, Giglia disintegrated into dust motes. Her right arm fell to the floor intact, then erupted as a geyser of fine dust swirling in the air.

There was a dry, sweetish smell. Cashel threw his arm over his nose to breathe through the waterlogged sleeve of his tunic, though he didn't suppose it mattered. "Mona?" he said. "How can we get out of here? Back to the palace, I mean? Or somewhere!"

Instead of answering, the girl walked toward the door on the other side of the central room. Her feet stirred Giglia's remains into umber whorls. Grimacing, Cashel followed.

The room beyond was darker than the others. Against the far wall was a throne inexpertly hacked out of stone; on it sat a statue as brutal and primitive as the throne itself. It was male, but it had tusks and a crude ape's face. In its right hand was a stone club the length of Cashel's arm.

"Is this a chapel?" Cashel said. "Is that the god they worship here?"

The tower shuddered. Cashel heard the sharp *crack/crack/crack* of stone breaking. The statue trembled side to side on its throne.

Cashel turned; the outer door had slammed behind them, but maybe he could smash it open again. "Earthquake!" he cried. "We've got to get out!"

"It's not an earthquake," Mona said impassively; she didn't move. "And we can't get out while this remains. The dwelling must have a master to exist, so it's created a master in its own image."

The statue stood up. It looked even bigger standing than it'd seemed while seated; Cashel didn't think he could reach to the top of its head flat-footed. Not that he was likely to need to do that.

It started forward, raising its club. "Mona, get out of the way!" Cashel said in a growl.

He lifted the quarterstaff before him and began backing toward the door to the central room. The light was better there, and there was more space besides. He and his staff covered a lot of territory when the fight started.

Rock groaned against itself. The statue's face shifted as its mouth moved. "I will destroy you...", the stone said in a rumble almost too low for human ears.

Cashel knew where the doorway was behind him. He feinted at the statue's head, then stepped back quickly and surely. He kept his staff vertical to clear the narrow opening. Mona was somewhere nearby, a presence without form because all Cashel's attention was on the statue. He hoped the girl'd stay clear, but he couldn't worry about that right now.

The statue clumped through the doorway after him, barely clearing the jambs. It looked even uglier than it had in the relative shadow of the further room. "You cannot escape me...", it grated in a voice of emotionless menace.

Cashel spun his staff in a short sun-wise arc, crashing his left ferrule into the lumpish fist which gripped the stone club. There was a crack and flash of blue wizardlight; the creature growled like an approaching avalanche.

Cashel wasn't looking for escape. He'd come to fight.

The statue rushed him, swinging the stone club in an overhead blow. Cashel rammed his staff forward like a spear. The blunt butt-cap slammed into the thing's throat with another blue flash.

The creature's head jerked back. The mighty arc of its club touched nothing but air till it smashed in itself on the floor, cratering the alabaster. The grip flew out of the



stone hand.

Cashel backed, gasping in deep breaths. He'd struck swiftly and as hard as he could, and the quivers of wizardlight meant he was using more than the strength of his great muscles. He was uncomfortable about that other business--he was a shepherd, not a wizard--but when he was facing a creature like this he was glad of any help he could get.

The thing held its hands up in front of its face. Its fingers were thin scorings in stone mitts; only the thumbs were separate. Its blunt features were those of a bestial doll a child had molded from clay.

The creature's mouth opened. It screamed like millstones rubbing.

"Watch--" Mona cried, but Cashel didn't need to be told what to do in a fight. The creature leaped toward him like a missile from a huge catapult. Cashel stepped back and sideways, thrusting his quarterstaff low. He slipped the thick hickory pole between the stone ankles; it flexed but held. The creature plunged head-first into the wall with a crash that rocked the tower.

The alabaster fractured in scalloped flakes, leaving a crater at the point of impact. The creature dropped flat on the floor. It braced its stone arms beneath it, starting to rise.

Cashel, holding the staff like a battering ram, struck the back of its head, bouncing it into the wall again. Light as blue as the heart of a sapphire flared at the double *crack!* of iron on stone and stone on stone.

Cashel stepped back, bending slightly and sucking air through his open mouth. The creature's arms moved feebly, like an infant trying to swim. The ferrule Cashel had just struck with glowed orange, cooling to dull red. He switched ends, then brought the staff back with both arms.

The creature got its hands under it and lifted its head lifted slightly. Cashel lunged forward, driving the staff down with the whole weight of his body. The butt hammered the creature at the same point as before. The statue's head exploded in a flash and thunderclap. The massive body began to crumble the way a sand castle dissolves in the surf.

Cashel felt himself wavering. He planted the quarterstaff against the floor and used it to brace him as he let himself kneel. His breath was a rasping thunder, and his blood hammered in his ears.

The only part of the creature still remaining was the outstretched right arm. When it suddenly collapsed to a spill of sand, Cashel caught a brief reminder of the dry, sweet odor in which Giglia had vanished. Then nothing remained but air harsh with the faint brimstone reek of nearby lightning.

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Cashel stayed like that for--well, for a time. He figured he could move if he had to, but since he didn't he was just going to rest till he felt like doing something else.

Though he'd kept his eyes open, he didn't have much awareness of his surroundings. There wasn't a lot to see, after all; just the trail of coarse grit that'd been a statue there on the floor in front of him. It looked like what he'd seen on the hills he'd climbed to reach the tower....

"Are you ready to go home, Cashel?" Mona said.

Cashel's world clicked back into hard focus again. He turned his head and smiled

at the girl, feeling a little embarrassed. How long had she been standing there, waiting for him to come to himself?

"I'm all right," he said, wondering how true that was. He stood, lifting himself partly by the strength of his arms on the quarterstaff. He swayed a little, but no worse than you always did when you'd been bent over and got up suddenly.

He grinned wider and said, "I'm fine," meaning it this time. "But how do we get back home, Mona?"

As Cashel spoke, he took a closer look at the walls. His eyes narrowed. "Mona?" he said. "Things don't look right. The stone looks *thin*. It wasn't like that before."

"This world is decaying," the girl said, "and not before time. We have to get you out of here, though. Come."

She stepped through the doorway to the room where the statue had waited; the gold key was out in her hand again. Cashel followed, as he'd been doing ever since he met the girl--except when there was the fighting.

He grinned again. That was all right. Mona was better at leading than Cashel ever wanted to be, and she'd kept out of the way when *he* went to work.

Mona looked back at him. "I'm sorry I had to trick you," she said. "Your help was very important."

Cashel shrugged. "You didn't have to trick me, Mona," he said. "You could just have asked. But that's all right."

The throne had fallen into a pile of sand and pebbles like the thing that'd sat on it. On the wall behind was another door. Mona stuck the key into the door--there hadn't been a keyhole that Cashel could see, but he was sure about what she'd just done--and pulled the panel open.

"Go on through, Cashel," she said, smiling like the sun rising. "Thank you. We all thank you."

Cashel hesitated. "You're coming too, aren't you, Mona?" he said. Light and color without shape swirled in the door opening.

Her smile became pensive. She raised the key in the hand that didn't hold the door open. "I have to free the seeds we found," she said. "Otherwise they'll rot instead of growing as they should."

"But what happens to you?" Cashel said.

"Go on back to your own world, Cashel," Mona said, her voice hard without harshness. "There must be renewal."

Cashel cleared his throat. He didn't have anything to say, though, so he nodded and walked toward the opening. As his leading foot entered the blur of color, Mona said, "Your house will always be a happy one, dear friend."

For a moment Cashel stepped through nothingness so silent that he heard his heart beating; then his bootheel clacked on stone. He was standing in the familiar hallway down which he'd been going to dinner.

"Oh!" cried a servant, dropping the pair of silver ewers he'd been carrying to refill from the well in the courtyard at the end of the passage. They rang on the floor, sounding sweet or hollow by turns as they rolled.

Cashel squatted, holding his staff upright in one hand as he caught the nearer pitcher. It might have a few new dings in it, but he didn't guess the servant would get in real trouble.

"Oh, your lordship, I'm so sorry!" the fellow babbled. He took the ewer from Cashel's hand but he was trembling so bad he looked like he might drop it again. "I didn't see you!"

Cashel glanced at the door he'd come out of... and found there wasn't one, just a blank wall between the entrances to a pair of large suites. He stood up. "Sorry," he said apologetically. "I didn't mean to startle you."

Cashel headed on in the direction he'd been going when he'd first heard the girl--well, first heard Mona--crying. He'd never really liked this palace. It was a dingy place, badly run down before Garric arrived and replaced the Count of Haft with a vicar.

Nothing Cashel could see was different about it now, but the corridor seemed a little cheerier than it used to be. He smiled. He'd have started whistling if he could carry a tune.