Pride of Place

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Summary

Newly returned from fighting the Easterlings, Denethor is taken aback to find a stranger at his father’s table. This story is co-authored with Raksha the Demon.

The characters are the property of the Tolkien Estate. No profit has been, nor will be made from this story.

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Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall. - Proverbs 16.18 – The Bible.

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“Welcome home, my son!”

Denethor frowned slightly as his father seized him in a bear hug that nearly crushed his own ribs. It was a rather vulgar display. Surely the Steward of Gondor’s greeting to his heir should be more
dignified. But his father insisted on treating Denethor like a child. Denethor saw his father's arm reach up to try to pat him on the head, a gesture that Denethor detested. Usually he would have nobly tolerated it, but this night his fatigue and hunger sharpened his impatience. He swerved away with as much aplomb as he could manage.

“I hear you have performed great deeds of arms against the Easterlings,” Ecthelion smiled. “You must dine with me tonight. I have a new captain I should like you to meet. Thengel commended him to me most highly.”

“As you wish, sire.” Denethor struggled to hide his irritation at being expected to dine with some Rohirric clodhopper. Worthy allies, the sons of Eorl, but incapable of conversation that did not centre on the merits of their horses. Thengel was an exception. He had taken on the manner and speech of Gondor during the many years he had spent in exile, and had a Gondorian wife of high blood, the fair Morwen. Most of Thengel's messengers and envoys were barely able to speak Westron, and daunted by the usage of more than one fork. And now his father had given a Captaincy to one of them?"

Denethor would be kind to the man. There had never been enough time for him to master the Eorling tongue, but he could sing *The Slaying of Scatha*, one of Thengel's favorite songs in that language - all ten verses with chorus! His father liked the song too, despite understanding it less than did Denethor; and had been known to bang on the table with his hand to match the steadily quickening rhythm of the refrain. Denethor smiled The Rohir captain, doubtless lonely for the grassy plains and Golden Hall of his own country, would surely be cheered by the song. And, Denethor realized, the Steward would be pleased.

With luck, Denethor considered on the way back to his own chambers, the Rohir captain would be awed by the splendour of the Steward's Residence, and not speak much at all. The Rohirrim were at least courteous folk; and mighty warriors.

Denethor’s mood improved as he prepared for dinner. His manservant praised him on Gondor’s latest victory while he helped Denethor don a shirt of finest linen and a richly embroidered velvet tunic. Ah, but it was good to be home! Much as Denethor appreciated the respect of his soldiers in the field, he had missed the greater comforts and deference that was afforded his high station here at home.

With a few moments to spare before the meal, Denethor moved to the window, for the view it afforded was one of his favourites. His chambers overlooked the Court of the Fountain, where the most sacred symbol of Gondor, the White Tree stood. Denethor’s heart swelled with pride. He was heir to Gondor with all her history and splendour. The White Tree might be withered, but the spirit of Númenor was not!

Denethor had been told since childhood that the blood of Westernesse ran truer in him than in the sons of other families. Even his own kindred marvelled at his ability to see deep into the hearts of Men. Surely the renewal of the strength of Númenor within him portended a great destiny? Denethor drew himself up, aware of the power that was his and the greater power that he would hold one day. Prince in all but name, but never King, he would use his prowess to protect Gondor.

Denethor slowly made his way to his father’s private dining chamber. Ecthelion was alone. It seemed that punctuality was not one of the Rohirric Captain’s virtues.

Denethor was just about to take his seat when a very tall stranger entered, clad in the black and silver of the Guard. The Steward stood up; and, as often happened when he stood up hastily, an old wound in the right knee caused him to stumble. Denethor moved towards him; but the stranger was both quicker and closer; and reached Ecthelion first. All Denethor could do was watch while the
unknown Captain held out his arm for Denethor's father to grasp.

Ecthelion thanked the man, then lightly clasped the stranger's supporting arm until they reached the high-backed chairs. Denethor kept his mouth shut; scarcely able to credit all he had seen. The stranger had not even bowed! The manoeuvre of Ecthelion's taking the Captain's arm was easily done; the Captain's demeanour completely relaxed, the Steward's attitude trusting. This had happened before; perhaps more than once. Denethor knew then that this night was not the first occasion that the outlander had dined with Denethor's father.

"Are you well, lord?" asked the stranger, in slightly accented Sindarin. Denethor bristled, remembering how his father had brushed off his own advice to use a cane. The Steward seemed to be pleased by the man's attention.

"In good fettle, Thorongil," Ecthelion replied. "Come to table, Denethor; don't dawdle."

"Yes, Father," Denethor said clearly and in a slightly louder tone than was usual for him. A subtle reminder was needed here. Just who was the outlander and who was Ecthelion's only son and thus heir to the rule of Gondor?

Ecthelion turned west; his hand still on the stranger's arm. Denethor and the man called Thorongil turned west at the same moment. The moment of silence seemed very long. Then, the ritual having been observed, Denethor sat down in his usual chair at his father's right hand; glad that it was still vacant. His father's new friend waited until Denethor was seated and then took a seat farther down the table. Denethor shot him a quick look. The man had a soldierly bearing, and was certainly no Rohir, with those Dúnedain grey eyes and dark hair. And what was that odd silver star that the fellow wore so close to his Captain's sigil?

"Denethor, meet Captain Thorongil," said Ecthelion. "Is it not amazing to see the two of you together? You are as alike as close kindred!"

"I am honoured to meet you, Lord," said the Captain. "Your fame precedes you throughout Gondor and other lands. And your father has told me much of your great deeds," Thorongil continued.

The accent seemed more Northern than Eorling, Denethor noted. And the name of Thorongil's father had not been given, as was customary in an introduction. If the man had been abandoned by a scoundrel sire, was he now trying to attach himself to Denethor's father? Ecthelion was usually a good judge of character, but he had a kind heart and a weakness for strays.

Thorongil inclined his head graciously before raising it to meet Denethor's questing gaze. Most men stood back, or dropped their eyes when Denethor turned even half the power of that gaze upon them. But this man gave no ground. He gave no challenge either; though Denethor thought, without knowing exactly why, that the stranger actually could have had he cared to do so. What secrets lay behind those seemingly guileless grey eyes? The Northern eagle would bear watching.

"I have been glad of Thorongil's company while you were away, my son," said Ecthelion. "He knows much of lore and legend."

Dinner was served. First, at his father's bidding, Denethor recounted the details of the campaign against the Easterling incursions. The conversation then turned to the great battles of old. Denethor spoke of the Last Alliance, a subject that Denethor knew well from constant study. Discussion of the Siege of Barad-dûr and its end had always enthralled him. How could it not? The story evoked the rise of the Númenoreans in Middle-earth and Gondor's glory of old, a shining hour when the strength of Elves failed and Isildur defeated Sauron with one daring sword-stroke.
“You tell the tale well, my son,” said Ecthelion. “You should hear Thorongil tell the story; though. He speaks of the deeds of Elves and even Dwarves as well as the valour of our own people. Why, it is almost as if he had heard the tale from one who fought there!”

Thorongil coloured slightly and lowered his eyes.

_Dwarves fighting beside the armies of Men?_ Denethor repressed the urge to take the Northerner to task for obviously embellishing what was written. He was the heir to the Stewardship and a lore-master of note; and he would not lower himself to correct some vagabond sell-sword, however self-assured the fellow was.

Denethor favoured Captain Thorongil with a lordly smile. One day, he would rule when this nobody was long forgotten.

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