Spirits of the House

by Altariel

Summary

The old year ends, Boromir has not returned, and Denethor contemplates mortality. A seasonal AU set in Minas Tirith.
Someone was knocking at the door.

He pulled back from the lure of the visions set before him, raising his eyes to look instead at the world around him. A chilly morning was creeping in through a crack between the shutters; its pale light faltered for a moment against the glare of the globe, which blazed one last time and then fell dark. Then the tapping started up again. It was rhythmical, like the beat of a drum, and it was becoming more insistent. A voice spoke.

“My lord? My Lord Denethor?”

He licked lips that had turned ash-dry, found his tongue amidst the cinders.

“What is it?” he said, staccato.

“You asked me to fetch you, sire, when your son came. He awaits you now, my lord.”

He drew in a breath of cold air, sighed it out, and – with reluctance – covered the stone with a cloth stiffened from use. He felt the sharp pang of loss as its clarity abandoned him, dreaded and then felt once again the tapping and the knocking of doubt.

“Very good,” he said. “Inform him I shall be with him shortly.”

“My lord.”

He listened to the footsteps departing down the stairs, and then rose from his seat. With a quick movement, he cast the shutters open, and the faint early light took its chance and slipped into the room. He looked out upon a city at the very end of the year. The sky surprised him with its blue, but it was even colder than he had expected. He shifted further back into his gown, reached out and snuffed between his fingers the single candle set upon the great black desk, and then went to the door.

Someone was knocking...

His eyes blurred and, for a moment, he thought that he could see something in the carvings on the door... the knots and the whorls of the wood whirled, and then resolved themselves into a bird, soaring... He shook his head, and rubbed his eyes, and his vision cleared. He had not slept enough, he told himself; and berated himself for such foolishness, before a day as long as today would be. He unhooked the chain with a clatter, drew back the bolt, and made his way down around the turns of the narrow stone stairway.

Reaching the lower levels, he went with quick steps down corridors, passing staff and servants as they hurried along, heeding little as yet to the bustle of the day’s business. When he reached his chamber, he stood for a moment in the doorway, looking in. There, waiting before the hearth, warming his hands over the fire, was his son. Denethor half-closed his eyes and, with his vision hazy, he could broaden the man’s shoulders slightly, add just a little height...

Denethor opened his eyes, and went in. Faramir turned at the sound of the footsteps, saw his father, and bowed in greeting.

“My lord,” he said, and stepped away from the fire, clasping his hands behind his back.

“Lord Faramir,” his father replied. “When did you reach the City?”

The First Stave
“Late last night, sir.”

“And your journey?” Denethor took a step towards him, regarded him closely. It was not an arduous ride from the coast, although it was a long one. Still, he was young enough.

“We went well – thank you, sir.”

Denethor gestured across the room towards the table that had been set for breakfast. They stood by their chairs and faced West, and Denethor watched, as he had often done, as something undefined, something unreachable, crossed his son’s face.

“Sit,” the steward said after a moment, waving his hand at the chair, and his son obeyed. They passed dishes and plates between them with a precision borne of years of practice. The younger man ate well; the elder much less. They spoke for a while of Faramir’s recent journeys, of the bargains he had driven with the lords of the southern fiefdoms, of policy, of strategy. And then they were silent.

“Tell me,” said Denethor, into the quiet, “how does the family fare in Dol Amroth?”

Faramir swallowed his mouthful of bread. “Elphir’s boy is walking now,” he said, “and is very like his father.” He smiled. “They are all well, very well. Thriving.”

“And the Prince himself, how is he?”

A beat of hesitation, perhaps?

“Our uncle,” Faramir replied, “is the same as ever he is. And Lothíriel,” he continued, without pause, “had the whole household upside-down in preparation for mettarë. You know how they celebrate it at the coast.”

“Indeed I do. I am surprised that they did not ask you to stay.”

Faramir picked up his cup. “They did.”

“But Ithilien proved too much of a lure?”

Over the rim of his cup, Faramir gave him a careful look. Both his sons, at times, bore that expression, Denethor thought, but Faramir more often.

“I had thought to stay in the city this year,” Faramir said, turning away slightly to stare out of the long windows set in the eastern wall. “Given... given Boromir’s absence—”

“No.”

“He will be missed tonight—”

“No,” the steward said again. “I see no need for you. The ceremony will be quiet and quickly over. I would not keep you from whatever diversions Ithilien offers.”

Faramir turned back to his breakfast. He set down his cup, picked up a piece of bread, and buttered it, slowly. His father watched each of his movements, watched the flush rise up from the younger man’s throat and briefly colour the pale skin of his face. It passed, soon enough.

“What news may I take back with me?” Faramir said.

“News?”
“If I could, I would take back news of your purposes for the company. There is need for more supplies—”

Denethor stopped him with a sharp laugh. “Petitioning the Steward as he eats his breakfast? At the very least, I must remark upon your daring, Faramir.”

“When last I was there, matters were becoming acute—”

“It is the same throughout the realm, or will be soon enough.”

“Ithilien is the front line, sir.”

“No, my Lord Faramir – Ithilien is beyond the front line. Which is the river now – as I thought you of all men might remember.”

“Which makes the Ithilien company all that more vital!” Faramir urged softly. “If the Enemy advances on the river – which He surely must, in time – the Rangers must be prepared to harry Him—”

“You seem most ready to doubt my wisdom in this—”

“I do not doubt your wisdom, sir – but would, if I may, offer you my counsel—”

Denethor turned his head away and looked out at the morning. “On this matter, Faramir, you have long since become wearisome.”

“Why will you not even listen to me?”

Faramir’s voice seemed to echo in the high, cold ceiling of the room. Slowly, Denethor turned his gaze back upon him. Faramir raised a hand to his forehead, reddening in anger and frustration. Denethor watched impassively. But the shield that the third had always been became, all of a sudden, more painful in its absence.

Faramir set his hands on the table before him. “My lord,” he said, his voice much quieter, “let me keep men there. Not a full company. But some. The Rangers would delay any advance—”

“What use is there in such a delay? The Enemy will cross the river, that much is certain. And we shall need all able-bodied men for the defence of the City.”

Faramir folded his arms, and lowered his head. When he spoke again, his voice had fallen to no more than a whisper.

“And if Minas Tirith falls, sir? What then?”

At last it had been said – and he had not been first to say it.

“If you would only leave some men beyond the river,” Faramir was saying, “then, if all else fails, some would yet remain to fight on—”

“You have so little faith in the strength of the White City?”

For a moment, watching his son’s face blanch, he believed Faramir might strike back. And then the younger man stilled himself, and even smiled, if faintly.

“That is beside the point, is it not? Since I have naught else in which to put my faith.” He pushed his chair back and set his hands upon his knees, and then looked up directly at the steward. “I
have a long journey to make, and would prefer to begin it sooner rather than later. May I have your leave, father?”

Denethor held his eye for a little longer, and then lifted his hand in dismissal. Faramir rose and, when he reached the doorway, Denethor called after him. “Be back by noon of yestar. I would have you in attendance for those ceremonies at least.”

Faramir halted, and then turned. “Your servant, sir,” he said, and bowed, and left.

The day resumed its customary pace, and in the evening he spoke the words and lit the candles with the same resolve in his voice he had achieved for more than thirty years now. And then, his duty done, he withdrew upstairs, to his own private ritual. The year declined, and the visions rose before him, and he counted the numbers of the shades that were set against him until, exhausted, he fell – into sleep.
The Second Stave

Someone was knocking at the door...

He jerked awake, and raised his head from the desktop where it had fallen after the struggle. He stretched his fingers out to the side, but the globe felt cold, and it had gone empty and dark. Beyond the shutters, he heard the distant tolling of the midnight bell. He had been dreaming, he realized; had thought he heard knocking. It must have been the bell.

He sat up straight in his seat. Before him, on the table, the candle was burning low, and the papers gathered had been scattered as he slept. He reached out to straighten them, casting a dispassionate eye over the uppermost sheet... Almost as an act of will, he set them down again. He knew he would read them better in the morning, and he had no great wish to waste his own time.

He stood up from his chair, sighing and stretching. He felt a draught of cold air pass across the room, and regretted the need for secrecy that prevented him from ordering a fire lit here— And then he heard the knocking. Someone was knocking at the door.

He frowned. He had left orders that he was not to be disturbed. Only the direst need would draw his servants into disobedience... At once, he thought of his son.

“Who is there?” he said, a little fearfully now.

There was no reply.

His sons, he recalled, when they were young, had played a game in the Tower along these lines – once only, and never on their father. He doubted there was anyone else in the realm bold enough, but his sons were both beyond such games now, and both well beyond the bounds of the City. He took in a sharp breath, displeased.

And then the knocking started up again. Swiftly, angrily, he crossed the room, dealt with the chain and the bolt, and threw the door open to look in disbelief at the old man who was standing there.

“You’re dead,” he said, there seeming – in the circumstances – to be nothing else appropriate to say.

Adrahil bowed his head. “So I am,” he replied. “And indeed it is the Gift of Men!” And then he smiled, and it seemed to Denethor that a change took place in him, and he was no longer simply old. His silver hair thickened and darkened, the lines on his face smoothed away, his back straightened and he stood tall and princely once again. All in all, the steward thought, he looked quite hale – for a man dead nigh on twenty years. And beneath the change, something remained – the sum of the wisdom of a life that had been both long and well lived.

Adrahil reached out and offered him his hand.

“Will you come with me?” His voice had the vigour of youth and the power of age.

“Where?” whispered Denethor. Was this to be the end, at last? he thought, and found he did not regret it.

Adrahil only smiled. His hand remained outstretched.

Denethor took it, and felt that it was warm. And then the world around him melted.
It seemed to him that they were soaring, like seabirds, across the land, heading westwards. Gondor lay in darkness beneath, with only a flickering light here and there from a hearth or a camp fire. High above, the stars shivered in the winter sky. He felt the cold upon his face, and then he saw a great darkness rise up before him, in the West, and he knew what it was – the Sea, vast and terrible.

They came to rest standing on the stone steps leading up to a grand hall. Carved on each of the great doors before them, face to face, were two swans, each with a single eye staring out. And then, suddenly, the doors were thrown open. A bright light flared up and shone out from inside, and Denethor was forced to shield his eyes from the blaze.

“Look up,” his guide said quietly, from beside him. “There is naught to fear. Not in this place.”

Denethor lowered his hand. Lamplight and music and laughter were spilling out like waves upon them.

“I always liked to keep mettarë well,” the Prince of Dol Amroth said, joyfully. “Come inside!” And he held out his arm in welcome.

Slowly, reluctantly, fearing what he might find, Denethor passed through the doors into the hall.

All of Dol Amroth, it seemed, was gathered here – and many too from Minas Tirith. He saw faces of men and women he knew were long gone, and murmured their names to himself, a chant for the dead. There, he saw, and ached, was his father; a big man in many ways, and in spirit not least. He was speaking to the prince, and laughing, and then he bent his white head to listen to one of his captains... But that man’s face was turned away and, from where he stood, Denethor could not see for certain who it was.

Then, standing at his father’s left side, he saw himself. Younger – but, still, not a young man – dressed in black edged with silver, staring out across the room. And he knew straight away what he was looking at, for he would never forget that first sight... He bowed his head.

He felt warm fingers alight upon his hand. “There is nothing to fear,” the spirit reminded him. “Look up.”

He raised his head, and turned it, and there she was – wearing a dark blue gown with white jewels in her long black hair, her head thrown back in laughter. Her vibrant colours stung his eyes.

Finduilas... The sound of her name seemed to fill the air, and he did not know if he had merely thought it, or if it had been wrenched from him.

And then she turned, and caught sight of the man in silver and black walking towards her, and her face began to glow. He spoke to her – and although Denethor could not hear the words, he remembered them well enough – and he offered her his hand, and she took it, and they went out into the centre of the hall and danced, while those gathered around watched with eyes as sharp and bright as birds’.

“How we missed her when she left us for your city,” Adrahil said. Denethor turned to look at him. The face of the prince was still young, but filled with the sadness that comes from loss, from change, from the passing of time and all things.

“You were not alone in missing her,” he answered, bitterly, for he had often thought that many had set their sorrow at her death ahead of his. And he knew that none had grieved for Finduilas as much as he.
Adrahil looked at him from ageless eyes. “No,” he said, “I was not.” He raised his hand. “Watch,” he whispered, and then dropped his hand again, quickly.

It was as if they were ripped out of the place, and this second severance from her was even crueler. It went dark. Denethor stumbled, fell forwards, and felt Adrahil steady him with a strong grip. He drew his hand over his eyes and, when he looked up once more, he found that they were standing in a little sitting room. It seemed to be evening – the curtains were drawn and the candles lit. Outside, the wind was lifting the leaves, and he heard the sound of the rain against the window. At the far end of the room, a little boy was sitting cross-legged before the fire, looking down at a book that was resting upon his knees. The door creaked, and the boy looked up and frowned.

“Where have you been?” he said. His tone was petulant. “I’ve been looking for you all day. I couldn’t find you!”

Denethor turned his head to see who was there. It was another boy, older, maybe as much as ten years old – he came in, pushing the door shut quietly. He was dressed very formally, in black; and Denethor could see that his face was tired and sad. He made a move as if to go to him, but the spirit stopped him. “Wait,” he said. “Watch.”

The older boy went across the room. When he reached the fireside, it seemed as if his strength suddenly left him. He slid down, to sit opposite his brother on the rug.

“I couldn’t find you,” the younger one said again, reproachfully. “I thought you’d gone away. I thought you’d left me.”

The older boy did not answer. He reached out for the poker, and began to dig at the fire.

“Father says we’re not to do that,” the little boy pointed out. “In case we hurt ourselves.”

The other poked at the fire even harder. His brother watched the movements anxiously, his head darting to and fro like a bird’s.

“I thought you’d left me,” he said again, subdued now. “I thought you weren’t coming back.”

“Don’t be stupid.” The other boy’s voice came out thick and harsh. “Where would I have gone?”

“I don’t know... With mother, maybe.” He hesitated, and then started again. “If you’ve come back, does that mean she’s coming back too?”

The older boy’s head shot up. His eyes were very bright, and very angry. “She isn’t coming back. She’s dead. There was a big stone box, and we put her inside, and then we put a lid on it. She’s gone.” He turned back to the fire, and stabbed at it with the iron, viciously.

After a moment or two, he looked up again. The younger boy was bent over his book once more. Now, however, he was tearing at one of the pages, slowly, and methodically.

“Don’t do that!” his brother cried. “Father will be furious with you!” He grabbed out to stop him, but the poker, falling from his grasp, fell sideways, and caught the little boy on his hand. Denethor jerked forward, but Adrahil reached out and stopped him. The little boy cried out in pain, and flinched back, and his pale skin went a bright and ugly red. He looked up accusingly at his older brother, who stared back at him, watching in horror as the smaller one’s eyes filled up and his face began to shudder.

“Don’t cry!” he begged him, in a hoarse whisper. “You’ll bring him in here!” He grabbed his
brother’s hand and started to rub at it. “Look, it’s hardly hurt at all! I’m sorry! Just... don’t cry! Not today!”

The smaller boy swallowed once, twice, and pressed the heel of his unhurt hand hard against his face. He closed his eyes, screwing them tight shut for a moment or two, and then he opened them wide again, and stared at his brother.

“Look,” the older one said, lamely, holding up the hand to show where the skin was now no more than pink. “I’ve made it better.” He let go, and picked up the book. He examined the shredded page closely, frowned, and then very carefully folded the paper and tore off the damaged part. Then he threw it, and the other bits, into the fire – and looked up again at his brother.

“Forgiven?”

The little boy stared at him for a moment, and then nodded, a little.

“How do you want to sleep in my bed tonight?”

He nodded again, more vigorously.

Adrahil turned to their father. “Did you not speak to them at all?” he asked, curiously. Denethor watched the boys leave the room together, and then answered. “Their uncle stayed for a while after the funeral, you may recall,” he said, as if that explained matters, but the words seemed a little hollow as he said them.

Where was I that day? he thought, and found that the memories were gone, or had never seeped through in the first place.

“You were with me,” Adrahil said, as if in answer, “from early in the morning, until you retired to bed. Did you mean to speak to them?”

“We did speak,” Denethor said at last, with some effort, “a few weeks after the event. I told them about the Gift of Men. They seemed to understand – at least, they did not have any more questions.”

Then the anger rose up in him again, the same cold fury he had lived with ever since she had gone, since she had left him. “Mother, daughter, sister – yes, she was all these things! But for me – for me alone – she was wife!”

“I know,” her father said, more to himself. “But still – they must have missed her.” And then he lifted his hand once more—

And once more the world melted, into darkness.
The Third Stave

The bell tolled the first hour. Denethor was ready, when the hammering came at the door. He drew back the bolts, and looked out.

“So, Grey Wanderer,” he said, with a curl to his lips, “has death caught up with you at last?”

The wizard’s ancient eyes flickered beneath his brows. “Not yet,” he replied.

“And what do you wish to show me?”

“How things are, of course. What else? Will you come with me?”

“Of course,” he said, and took the hand that was offered, in challenge.

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It seemed to him that they were soaring, like eagles, above the land, heading north. The plains of Rohan flew beneath, and then the mountains rose before them, sheer and ruthless. They passed over them, into lands that were dreary and empty. And then he saw, hidden behind a thicket of thorn-bushes, a group of travellers. It was late afternoon and most were sleeping; their faces were turned away and he could not see them. But the man that was sitting on watch he saw, and knew, and the pain of this vision was visceral. It was his son.

Boromir was sitting looking out intently across the bare lands ahead. Between his hands he was twisting a single piece of wood, as if he meant to make a fire. After a moment or two, he drew in a deep sigh. Then a twig snapped. He looked up and round, and then shook his head. Denethor watched in astonishment as a small figure, like a child, stepped out.

“Master Peregrin,” Boromir said, with a twist of his lips. “Not sleeping while you may?”

“It must be time to eat soon,” the Halfling answered, for Halfling it was. His voice had a wistful tone.

Boromir smiled at him. “Soon enough,” he agreed, “but I wouldn’t raise your hopes too high.” He waved the stick at him. “For we have no fire.”

“To think,” said Pippin mournfully, sitting down beside him, “that today is the first day of Yule. At home, we would preparing a feast...” And then he began to list all the food he might expect at such feast.

“Enough!” said Boromir, at length, lifting his hand, and laughing. “Have some pity! You are not the only one eager to eat well!”

Pippin laughed back, good-naturedly. “Do you celebrate Yule too, in your city?” he asked.

“We mark the year’s end, yes. We call the day mettarë.”

“And how do you celebrate it?”

“When it goes dark, we say some words, and light a candle,” Boromir replied, “and then we pass the light around, and light other candles from it.”

“That doesn’t seem much of a celebration!” Pippin looked horrified. “No feasting? No dancing?”
“In some places, yes,” Boromir replied. “Less so, in the Citadel of Minas Tirith.”

“But it’s a fine time of year to make merry! Why don’t you?”

Boromir shifted forwards slightly, and rubbed the stick again between his palms. “My mother died at around this time,” he said, at last, “and we buried her on mettarë. It’s seemed a sad time of year ever since.”

“I’m sorry,” Pippin stammered. “I didn’t mean... Still, you have other family, don’t you? A brother, didn’t you say? Is he like you?” Pippin paused to take a breath. “Your brother, I mean?”

A smile crept across Boromir’s lips. “He’s shorter,” he said.

“And your father? What’s he like?”

Boromir looked past him and frowned, almost as if this was a matter he had never before considered. Denethor listened closely.

“He’s like Faramir,” his heir replied at last. “But older.”

“Will they be together today?” Pippin asked. “Lighting candles?”

Boromir gazed out across the empty lands. “Perhaps,” he said. “Perhaps my father will keep him in Minas Tirith. Although, if I know my brother, he would rather be with his men in Ithilien.”

“I would have liked a brother. And instead, I got three sisters. Maybe I’ll meet your brother one day.”

“Maybe,” murmured Boromir. “Although my home is very far from here.”

“There and back again,” said Pippin, cheerfully. “That’s what a journey’s all about. I have that on good authority!”

Boromir began to laugh, and Denethor smiled at the sight. And then he felt the wizard touch his arm.

“Do not take me away from him!” It came out before he could stop it, and he turned to see Mithrandir gazing at him. Is that pity? Denethor wondered, and the thought was bitter.

“I must,” Mithrandir said, gently. “There is something else to see.” He raised his staff, and the world shimmered and shifted...

...and Denethor watched as three cloaked men walked together down some narrow rock steps. There was a sound of water falling close at hand. The steps opened upon a great chamber of rock, and the men passed through it, and into a little recess at the back. The air was cold and damp. The tallest of the men gestured to the others to sit, lit a candle in an alcove in the wall, and then sat down himself.

“How long are you here, captain?” the younger of the three said.

“I must be back in the city by noon tomorrow.”

“Short trip,” the third man observed.

“Duty calls, Mablung,” Faramir murmured, taking off his gloves, and reaching into his pack to draw out a bottle. “My cousin gave me this; he brought it back from some voyage or other.” He
pulled out the stopper, sniffed at the contents, and winced.

“Shall I handle that for you, captain?” the youngest man asked.

“No, Damrod – but you can stop smirking and pass me those cups.”

Damrod grinned and did what he was told. Faramir poured out the liquid and handed out the cups. They all drank. Damrod coughed. Faramir gasped. Mablung eyed his cup with a new respect. “I’m tempted to say we should save this for medicinal purposes,” he said, “but it’s the warmest I’ve been in weeks.” He waved his cup at Faramir, who filled all three of them again.

“Which leads me to ask, captain,” Mablung carried on, quietly, “when can we expect new men?”

Faramir stared down into his cup. “There will be nothing more for Ithilien, neither men nor supplies,” he said, then raised the cup and drank the contents. “The company will not be this side of the river beyond *tuilérë.*”

“None of us?”

“None of us.”

Damrod sighed, slumped forward in the chair, and set his chin upon his hand. Mablung’s eyes glinted in the dim light.

“All our effort,” he said, shaking his head. “All for naught. We should have stayed across the river when the bridge went down.” His tone became resentful. “All that blood spilt. All those young men... and this blasted cold! If the Steward ever cared to leave his comfortable fireside he might feel a little differently about Ithilien—”

“Remember, lieutenant,” Faramir cut through, “of whom you speak.”

There was a chilly pause. Mablung stared down at the ground. Faramir sighed, his breath curling in the air, and then reached out with the bottle again. As he filled Mablung’s cup, their eyes met, and they looked at each other regretfully.

“I’m sorry, captain.”

Faramir nodded, then picked up his own cup and swirled the liquid around. “At least,” he said, “it means an end to hiding in caves in the middle of winter.”

“Will we even see another winter, I wonder?” Mablung muttered under his breath.

“Of course we will,” Damrod said, doggedly. Mablung and Faramir exchanged glances.

“Confidence of youth,” Mablung said.

“Don’t begrudge him either,” Faramir replied. He stood up – the other two following suit – and then raised his cup. “Well,” he sighed, “to the company, gentlemen – however long we have left.”


And so they were all smiling as they downed their drinks, and then Faramir looked sharply at both his lieutenants. Behind him the candle guttered and then flared up again.

“Not a word of this to the men,” he said.
“Of course not, captain.”

“Then... let’s go and light the candles and drink to the Steward’s health.”

And not even Denethor, who had taken the trouble over the years to become more attuned to his son than any other man alive, could catch a note of bitterness in his voice.

“They are good men, your sons,” Mithrandir said, from beside him. “Sons to fill a man with pride.”

“Aye.”

“It is a pity,” the wizard finished, “that you sent them both away.” And then he vanished.
Something was knocking at the door. Denethor sat unmoving and unseeing, listening to the summons. Past and present – what else remained? He had long desired foresight – would he take it now that it was offered, knowing as he did who the giver of the gift must be?

The bell tolled the second hour. The knocking stopped. And then the door broke its chains and flew open.

A figure stood upon the threshold – pale and tall and thin, and a white hood covered her face. Behind her, all was black. She lifted one marbled hand, beckoning to him and, obedient, he rose and crossed the room. When he stood before her, she offered him her hand. The fingers were thin and white as bone. He hesitated, and she thrust the hand towards him.

He took it, and the cold flesh burned him like a brand. A chill seeped through him. She turned, and led him out.

They walked through the city without taking steps, and the circles seemed to fall away as they made their descent. They passed through the great gates and on eastwards across the fields, heading out for the river. And there, on its banks, they halted.

A cold wind came in from the north, and it seemed to Denethor that it brought with it the distant sound of a horn. The reeds and the river rippled in response, and he saw a dark shape creeping towards him along the waters. The moon came out from behind the clouds and its pale light glanced upon a grey boat, bearing back to Gondor its most beloved son.

Another severance, and his son’s name too was torn from him. “Boromir!” he cried, and he wept, and he made to go towards him. Her hand clenched him, without pity, and he could not move, only watch as the boat went by, and on, and out of sight. He turned to her.

“I saw him!” he whispered. “He lives yet!”

She stood pale and silent for a moment, and then turned once more, and drew him after her. Back to the city they went, heading up and up, until the houses of the dead loomed before them. In the dark hour before dawn, they stood and watched as the procession went past; Denethor stood and watched the burning body of his second son pass before his eyes; stood and watched himself follow with fire and knife. The doors to the house of the stewards fell shut, and the building burst into flame. He turned his head away, in grief, in shame. Below the White City too was burning. All was lost.

“Tell me,” he begged her, “how to stop this. If you ever loved them, tell me how this may be stopped!”

But she only shook her head, and held his hand – and then they were standing in his little room, before the window. They looked out, and it seemed to him that the world span, and he was at the pivot. She pointed south. The river was dark, and there were ships approaching, coming to the City from the Sea. The ships had black sails – and then he thought he saw a gleam of silver upon them. She pointed east. Shapes were wheeling in the sky, shapes with black wings – and then he thought he saw a glimmer of gold upon them. She turned, and pointed back to the palantír. He looked within – and there, in its depths, he saw a pair of hands, and they were burning, burning black and withering, and then they flared with a green fire.

“What does this mean?” he pleaded her to tell him. “What would you have me do?”
But she did not answer, did not speak, only raised her hand, and he knew it was a gesture of farewell.

“Finduilas!” he wept, “My love, my jewel – stay with me!”

_I cannot stay, she seemed to say, but you may choose to join me._

She lifted her hand, drew back her hood, and revealed her face, the face of death. It was bloodless, white as the sepulchre, and her lashes and her lips were black. She raised her eyes, and he saw that there were no pupils; they were milk-white. It was indeed the Curse of Men.

Bile rose in his throat, and he recoiled from her, revolted. Her hand weighed heavy in his, and he dropped it, like a stone. Unnatural light flared up within her, and her figure scorched itself upon his vision. She burned with pale fire for a moment, and then was gone.

Despair engulfed him, that she was lost, that they were all lost, and then Denethor understood the nature of his curse. With a great cry, he drew back his hand, and swept his arm out before him. The _palantír_ flew from the desk and crashed against the hard stone floor, and its shattering and splintering were the last things that he heard.
Bells were pealing; silver cascading to greet the new year. Denethor raised his head from where it had fallen on the desk. Behind him, the shutters had been flung open, and a clear morning was flooding the room – although the candle beside him was burning yet, steadfastly.

Rising from his chair, he saw the shards on the floor to the side of the desk. He went over, and bent down to touch them. A sharp edge nicked his finger and he watched a bright ruby red bead of blood well up. The bells sang on. A great weight seemed to lift from him.

He stood up, went to the window and looked out from his eyrie. The eastern sky was pale above the shadows of the distant mountains. Beneath, bathed in light, the forests of Ithilien shone, as green and as treasurable as emeralds. He looked closer in, at the Rammas, and marked the gaps in the defence, saw how precariously the homesteads seemed to sit upon the fields of the Pelennor. As he stood and watched, he saw, on the road that led to the city gates, a single horseman riding, coming home. The pealing of the bells rose and crested and fell. It was coming up for noon.

He crossed the room and unbarred the door, leaving it open behind him. He went down with measured steps, considering all that he had seen, uncertain why it was that he did not feel weary after the journeys of the night. He walked on through the lower levels. The chimes of the yeśtarë bells were a little more distant here in the shelter of the Tower, and overlaid with the bustle and the chatter of the servants. As he passed through, he greeted them quietly in turn.

He reached his chamber, and went to wait by the window. The peal of the bells resolved themselves into the midday toll. He looked out across the court towards the fountain, and the gentle splash called to his mind again the grey boat passing down the river. He closed his eyes. Fear and doubt knocked at his heart, but he did not thrust them away. They were better, he believed, than the hard jewel of grief he had clasped there for so long.

The final bell of noon rang out. The door clicked open. Denethor opened his eyes and turned to face his son.

Faramir was a little out of breath. He was twisting at a fastening at the top of his tunic and appeared not to have slept. “My lord—” he said.

“It is gone noon,” Denethor remarked.

“I’m sorry, I—”

“Were you drinking last night?”

Faramir closed his eyes for a moment, collected himself. “It was mettarë—” he pointed out, his voice a little taut.

“It is of no consequence, Faramir. And I daresay you need the practice,” Denethor replied. He barely held back the laugh as his son’s hand froze upon the fastening, his face turning pale.

“I’m sorry?”

“Do stop apologizing, it does become tiresome. And there is no need.”
Faramir stared back at him, almost in dismay. His hand dropped to his side. The fastening, Denethor noticed, was still askew. “Father, are you... are you well?”

“Very well, thank you. Better than you this morning, I should imagine.” This time, he could not prevent the ghost of a smile.

Something passed across his son’s face too, but it was unreadable.

Denethor walked towards him, until they stood quite close, and face to face. He looked the younger man over, and Faramir raised his chin and regarded the steward back steadily.

“You are very like I was at your age,” Denethor remarked, after a moment or two. “But there is much of your mother in you. In your bearing.” He reached out his hand to the top of his son’s tunic and set the link straight. Then he looked into Faramir’s eyes – and saw that they were grey like the sea, and troubled.

“Tell me,” Faramir whispered, with real fear in his voice, “what has happened to you.”

Denethor studied his son’s face, marked the lines and the cares.

_He thinks that I have gone – gone at last, and left him..._

Denethor sighed and, with an effort, stood straight and spoke, slowly. “This is the time,” he said, “when we must summon all our of strength together. I cannot promise you victory. I cannot promise you that nothing more will be lost—” He thought of the boat and halted, and then steeled himself once more. He reached out and clasped his son’s hand in his own.

“I lost sight of hope,” the steward told the man who might one day be his heir, “and then I caught a glimpse of it again.” He smiled once more, and this time Faramir returned the smile – her smile, but living – and it only deepened when his father spoke again.

“Have faith,” he said. “I swear to you, all will be different.”

Chapter End Notes

Written for Aralanthiriel, who wanted a story in which Denethor lived, and has waited many a long month to read it. The idea was entirely Alawa’s, but I really should know better by now. Thank you to Alawa, Isabeau of Greenlea and Sailing to Byzantium for reading and commenting on the drafts.

In 'The Voice of Saruman', the palantír thrown by Gríma down the steps of Orthanc shatters both rail and stair. In _Unfinished Tales_, we are told that palantíri "were indeed unbreakable by any violence then controlled by men". In this AU, they can be broken - literally and symbolically.

With apologies to Boz.

_16th-30th November, 2003_
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