A shadow of things that might be

by Tanaqui

Summary

At dusk on a gloomy evening in Hísimë, Faramir receives a visitation.

Notes

Written for the spook_me challenge. The prompts were: creature – a ghost; movie title – "The Fear Chamber". My thanks to spagan, elena_tiriel and scribblesinink for encouragement and beta reading.

The trumpets for the last hour of the day had just sounded and the light was fading fast. Faramir could have called for a lantern, but the final letter was only a few lines long. He rose and crossed to the southern window, tilting the parchment to catch the dying glimmers of the gloomy Hísimë evening.

As he squinted at the lines, he sensed someone had entered the room behind him – a light-footed messenger lad, or one of the discreet servants bringing a taper, perhaps: he had heard no footfall. Nodding his head in satisfaction at what he read, he asked absently, "What is it?"

No answer. He turned away from the window and glanced up.

And held still. A shape wavered by the door. Familiar, and shocking in its familiarity. Parchment crackled as Faramir's hands clenched into fists.
He had heard the reports, of course. From the captain of the Tower Guard, and the seneschal of the White Tower, and even the steward of his own household. That seasoned guardsmen and sober servants and aged retainers alike had for the past sennight seen a shade pacing the walls and courts and hallways of the Citadel.

He had dismissed the tales as no more than fancies, stirred up like the dust that rose as workmen strove to clear the blackened debris in Rath Dínen and recover what they could of the remains of the departed. The palantír, too, had been found, unblemished it seemed, and set once more in the highest chamber of the White Tower.

Yet his own eyes now made out, as darkness crept on, a mail-clad figure with visage proud and aged. Faramir was not filled with loathing, as when he had seen the phantoms that haunted the slimes and miasmas of the Dead Marshes; nor was his heart moved with pity as when he beheld his brother lapped in clear water. Instead, cold fear enveloped him. They said spirits lingered when some task remained undone. What more would his father have of him?

The figure reached out a hand, not to implore but to beckon. Still imperious; still able to command.

"What...?" Faramir licked dry lips. "What do you want?"

The shade was silent but again gestured for him to approach. Faramir swallowed hard. Too little had he contested that will to refuse its summons now. Too much he regretted that he had not been better able to serve the living man. Letting the paper fall, he stepped towards the door.

Closer to, the figure seemed more insubstantial, not less: wavering like a reflection in Anduin's current. It turned and moved out into the hallway, and Faramir followed, only his own light footsteps echoing faintly against the stone walls as the ghost drifted ahead of him. Soon, it turned aside through an archway and began to climb the stairs that spiralled upwards in one corner of the Tower.

With sudden dread certainty, Faramir knew where they were heading. He halted, reaching out a hand to the cold moulding of the arch to reassure himself of its solidity. The spirit seemed to sense his reluctance, for it turned and once more beckoned.

What would it do if he did not follow? Seize hold of him? Possess him? Return another night, and another, and another, until he mastered his fear and climbed the stairs? For he did not doubt that the phantom could not rest until some final task had been completed.

Swallowing hard, Faramir mounted the stairs, his heart hammering in his chest with more than the exertion of the climb.

At the top of the tower, where the stairs narrowed and went on up to the roof, the shade paused before a door. It had been locked almost all the days of Faramir's life, although since the return of the King, it had not been secured. Still, none entered save at the King's request and with his favour.

The figure gestured towards the door, before scattering into a grey smoke that drifted through panels adorned with a likeness of the White Tree.

Faramir hesitated, and then grasped the cold handle, turned it and stepped through.

The room was even icier than the last time he entered it; more than could be accounted for by the chill breath of an autumn evening once the sun had set.

A stone bench sat to one side under one of the tall unglazed windows that looked north and south and east. In the centre rose a pillar on which sat a dark form shrouded in cloth. The figure – a
lighter patch against the dim walls – again gestured emphatically, this time towards the hidden globe.

Faramir clenched his fists. "I cannot."

The wavering tendrils of which the shade was formed seemed to clench more tightly, giving it more substance, and again it gestured fiercely.

Faramir shook his head. He knew he had the right: the King had shown him the use of the stone of Orthanc, but counselled him against trying his strength against the palantír of Minas Tirith. Elessar had looked into it himself, once, after it had been restored to its resting place, and descended from the high chamber grim and grey. He would speak naught of what had passed, save to warn that it should not be used save in some dreadful need.

The apparition drifted closer to Faramir, and the cold struck at him. "Look!" A faint echo of his father's voice came to him, not a command this time but a plea. Faramir's heart was moved to pity that this unquiet spirit, who once ruled all Gondor with an iron will, should need to beg a favour from the son and Captain whom he could in former times command even unto death.

"Very well," he murmured. The figure bowed and stepped back, letting him approach the stone. Hands trembling, he drew away the cloth and bent a little to look into the dark sphere.

At first the stone was all darkness, but after a moment a light sparked in the depths. It grew until an image filled the globe. With a cry of horror, Faramir reeled back. The stone went dark again, but the after-image stained Faramir's vision: withering in flame, two aged hands that had long held Gondor safe and even at the bitter end still had strength to grasp a weapon.

Faramir squeezed his eyes shut and the image leapt out more clearly against his lids. He opened his eyes again.

"Look!" The ghost had drifted closer, enveloping Faramir with cold like the bitterest winters in the high snows of the White Mountains. When Faramir stood unmoving, it hissed again "Look!" and a grip like bare iron in the ice forced him forwards.

Again the stone sparked, and the image formed. Flames licked lovingly around the wrinkled flesh, yet did not consume it. Faramir had heard the full tale, at last, of his father's madness, and it had grieved him, but he had thought Denethor's suffering ended. Now, new horror piled itself upon him. Did his father's spirit endure this eternal torment? Or did it still demand that son should share father's fate? What act would release them both?

Faramir took a deep breath and tried to master his fear. With his mind, he pushed at the image, as Elessar had shown him with the Orthanc-stone. The flame-lit scene dimmed a little. Heartened, he pushed harder. With a sudden snap that surprised him, the vision changed and rushed outwards. He saw the City wall, and the evening fields of the Pelennor, and the jagged remains of the Rammas, and on; over the river through his own dear land of Ithilien and the mountains into the drear and lifeless plain of Gorgoroth.

He felt the shade at his back follow him in thought, and its hope flare for a moment before dying back as the image steadied on that grim place. Faramir swallowed down the bile that rose in his throat. How often must his father have looked this way, spending strength and heart in secret battle to seek knowledge and advantage?

Yet, even if there was no comfort to be found in the wastes of Mordor, he had felt that flicker of anticipation in his ghostly companion. Remembering his stone-lore, Faramir took a step sideways.
The image shifted to show the flats and mires of the Dead Marshes and the Brown Lands. No help or hope there either. Another step, and he saw great firs swaying in the wind. His father's interest quickened again, but still he felt him questing for something else. Another step: mountains. Another step and a steep valley under starlight where the lights of a fair house twinkled in welcome. Another step: green hills crowned by three tall towers....

And like called to like, as an arrow flies swift to the mark.

The icy grip on his arms lessened and warmed. A voice breathed in his ear: "My time, not yours, my beloved son. Long life and happiness to you and yours!" Faramir felt a pathway open to that other stone, and sensed his father's spirit flee along it – and beyond. On, on, straight and true while the world fell away beneath.

A sense of peace washed over him as the vision faded. He found himself standing again in the highest chamber of the White Tower. No other now stood with him, in flesh or unquiet spirit, and he wept a while in grief and joy.

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