At the Rising of the Moon

by lindahoyland

Notes

These characters all belong to the estate of J.R.R. Tolkien. This story was written for pleasure and not for financial gain.
Deck the halls with boughs of holly

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Deck the halls with boughs of holly,
Fa la la la la la, la la la la.
Tis the season to be jolly,
Fa la la la la la, la la la la.
Don we now our gay apparel,
Fa la la, la la la, la la la.
Troll the ancient Yuletide carol,
Fa la la la la la, la la la la.

A/N

This story was inspired by a comment that Raksha the Demon made in a recent review of "A Web of Treason" on another site and is intended as a surprise seasonal gift to my readers.

I know nothing of how either "Yule" or "Mettarë" was celebrated, especially in Rohan, and hope readers will excuse me relying purely on my own imagination. I have endeavoured to include accurate details of actual Viking and Celtic traditions.

Dedicated to Raksha.

At the Rising of the Moon

"It looks magnificent!" Aragorn exclaimed. The Queen nodded her agreement, as did Faramir and Éowyn.

During the Hobbits' stay in Minas Tirith, they had expressed dismay that Gondor did not celebrate its Midwinter Festival, 'Mettarë, in the same manner as their festival, 'Yule', which was also held at the time of the Winter Solstice. Éowyn had also voiced near identical sentiments for Yule was also enthusiastically celebrated in Rohan.

Although Éowyn was very happy in Gondor, she missed her own people's cheerful Yuletide celebrations. The feasting, singing and dancing in the Golden Hall had been something she greatly enjoyed and had looked forward to each year. She found the Mettarë bonfires rather drab and lifeless by comparison.

Always eager to do everything he could to make his wife happy, Faramir had asked Aragorn if they could celebrate this winter's Solstice in the Rohirric manner. The King had not taken much persuasion to agree to hold a traditional Yule feast, followed by a ball in the Merethrond. He insisted only on it being a fairly informal affair, rather than a state banquet, of which the King considered there were already far to many of.

Having spent most of his life in the North, Aragorn privately agreed that the Mettarë bonfires lacked the colour and cheer of the northern celebrations of the Winter hoped that in years to come, he would find a way to combine the various traditions from both parts of his kingdom.

Invitations had been sent out; not only to the lords and ladies of Gondor, but also to the merchants,
"This is beautiful!" Arwen enthused, admiring the arrangements of holly, pine, laurel, yew and juniper decorating the vast room. Sprays of evergreens were hung around the hall, while elaborate displays of foliage adorned each table, the greenery crowned by glowing candles and festooned with scarlet ribbons. It was almost possible to imagine that the vast stone hall had been magically transformed into a forest.

"It is so pretty!" Elbeth exclaimed; running excitedly around, to make sure she did not miss anything and reaching up to touch the colourful ribbons that adorned the garlands.

The adults smiled at the excited little girl. Elbeth was Faramir's niece, the result of a brief liaison his late brother Boromir had enjoyed with a kitchen maid. After the death of her deranged mother, Faramir had taken her into his household, to raise alongside his own daughter, Elestelle.

The fire blazed brightly in the hearth and filled the room with the aromatic scents of pine cones and juniper berries, which had been added to the logs, the latter at Aragorn's insistence. Their scent was said to prevent colds and fevers, which thrived in crowded places during the winter.

"Is it to your liking?" the Queen asked Éowyn, "I hope this compares favourably with your Yuletide decorations at the Meduseld."

"It is very pretty, but.." Éowyn looked searchingly around the room obviously seeking something. She walked over to the table displays and studied them frowning. Looking up at the wall decorations her frown deepened into an expression of dismay. "Where is the mistletoe?" she asked.

"I do not think we have any," Aragorn said apologetically.

"Why do we need mistletoe?" Faramir asked, "We already have a magnificent display of evergreens. The holly and juniper have far more attractive berries."

"Men!" Éowyn exclaimed. "You have no sense of romance whatsoever!"

"I do!" Faramir protested indignantly, "Why, I wrote a poem for you only last week!"

"Yet, you question the need for mistletoe!" Éowyn retorted. "And you are even worse! "she accused Aragorn, "I know that you spent years in Rohan, so you don't even have the excuse of claiming not to know why it is essential!"

"We will send the servants out for some," Arwen said soothingly, going in search of the housekeeper.

"What is mistletoe for?" Elbeth demanded, puzzled at the adults behaviour.

"It is primarily used for healing and has so many uses that it is known as 'allheal.'" Aragorn began, "The berries can be used to aid the heart and it is also valuable in the treatment of rheumatism and..."

"She does not need a lecture on treating diseases, Aragorn!" Éowyn said sharply. "The people of Rohan associate it with love and peace, Elbeth. If enemies met by chance in a forest under the mistletoe, they would lay down their weapons. We hang it up at Yuletide and kiss the people we love under it," she explained, "Most especially our spouses."

"What a charming custom!" Arwen exclaimed enthusiastically.
"That sounds silly. I'm glad I'm not married!" Elbeth asserted, with the supreme confidence of an eight year old. "It sounds more sensible to use it make sick people feel better!"

"In the North you kiss everyone you love, not only the one you are in love with," Aragorn added with a twinkle in his eye, "So if we find some and your aunt and uncle allow you to stay up tonight, you can expect lots of kisses!"

Elbeth wrinkled her nose in disgust. "You, Uncle Faramir and Aunt Éowyn may kiss me if you wish to, but nobody else!" she scowled. Then a sudden realisation dawned and she beamed delightedly. "Can I really come to the feast?" she asked, "Aunt Éowyn, Uncle Faramir, please let me come!" She looked at her Aunt with a pleading expression, which rivalled that of a hungry puppy.

Éowyn looked set to refuse, but on meeting her husband's and Aragorn's eyes, she said "You may stay for a little while, so long as you are a good girl. I shall have to leave early to feed Elestelle, so you can remain until then."

"Thank you, Aunt Éowyn, thank you Uncle Faramir! Thank you, Strider!" Elbeth exclaimed reaching up to kiss them in turn.

The King and the Lady of Rohan exchanged amused glances.

Just then, Arwen returned, accompanied by the flustered looking housekeeper.

"I'm sorry, my lord," the woman said, addressing the King "We did plan to include mistletoe in the displays. We thought the white berries would look pretty, but there was none to be found anywhere. We even asked the healers, but they had used all their supplies to make medicines and salves. With there being so much to do, preparing for the banquet, we decided that holly and juniper berries would suffice."

"Did you look everywhere?" Éowyn enquired. "There must be some in a city the size of Minas Tirith!"

"One of the grooms told me that he saw some in an apple orchard on the other side of the Pelenor, but when he asked for some, an old woman appeared and said she would only give to the King himself, if he came and cut it with a golden dagger at moonrise!" the housekeeper replied, "Begging your pardon, my lord, but that's her exact words, or so I was told. Naturally no heed was paid to such an impudent woman's request!"

"Was it old Gudrun?" Faramir enquired. "That sounds like the sort of remark she is famed for making."

"Yes, that's the old crone's name, quite crazy if you ask me, my lord!"

"Do not worry about it, Doreth," Arwen told her, "You are excused to return to your duties."

"Thank you, my lady." The housekeeper curtsied and hurried away.

Éowyn turned to Faramir; "That woman appears both from her name, and regard for the old traditions, to be one of my people," she remarked.

"I believe that she came from Rohan to settle here some thirty years ago or more," Faramir told her. "My father's Master of the Horses met her, when he went to Rohan to collect some colts promised to Gondor. They fell in love and were married soon afterwards. She has a reputation as something of an eccentric, and is quite well known as result. But what is to do with tradition that
she refuses to let any save Aragorn cut the mistletoe?"

"It is believed by my people that certain rituals must be observed." Éowyn explained, "Otherwise, it is believed that the fertility of the land will suffer during the coming year. Obviously Gudrun believes the old stories and fears for her apple crop!"

"I will humour her by fetching the mistletoe myself!" Aragorn decided impulsively. "I would enjoy a gallop over the fields. I have been indoors far too long."

"You should take Faramir with you," Éowyn suggested, "He has been under my feet all morning and Arwen and I need to choose our dresses for tonight and find something for Elbeth to wear."

Elbeth pulled a face at the very thought.

"You can only come to the ball if you are properly dressed," Éowyn warned, "Of course, if you would rather go to bed early after a plain supper. I will not make you attend."

"Very well," the child conceded, "Just as long as it doesn't have frills on it!"

"Be sure not to return until you have some mistletoe!" Éowyn warned, turning her attention back to the men.

"And do not be late for the ball!" Arwen added.

"Your wish is my command, my love!" Aragorn replied, kissing her tenderly before making good his escape with his Steward.

"Do you think I was wise, sending them out together?" Éowyn said doubtfully, as soon as the men had left the room. "They always seem to get into some sort of trouble!"

"Whatever could happen to them, just collecting some mistletoe?" Arwen reassured her. "You worry too much. Now we need more candles along the side of the hall and on the tables. I will tell Doreth we wish to see the Merethrond ablaze with light!"

"I will fetch Eldarion and show him all the decorations before the guests arrive. I think he will be fascinated by so many lights and all the coloured ribbons," said Arwen. "I am growing to like this celebration of yours!"

"We need to send the servants out to find a suitable Yule log," said Eowyn, "Then we had better get ready. Come on, Elbeth, stop playing with those ribbons!"

"What is a Yule log?" asked Elbeth, as her aunt led her from the hall.

Éowyn sighed. It was going to be a very long afternoon.
Here we come awassailing

Love and joy come to you,

And to you your wassail too;

And God bless you and send you

a Happy New Year

And God send you a Happy New Year.

Dedicated to Raksha.

Pausing only to unearth an ornate golden dagger that had been a coronation gift from Gimli, Aragorn and Faramir made their way to the stables and asked for their favourite horses, Roheryn and Iavas to be saddled.

Accompanied by their guards, King and Steward rode through the levels of the City. Despite it being an hour of the day, when most people were at their labours; many recognised them, despite their unassuming garb, and came out to greet them.

Aragorn and Faramir returned each greeting with a smile or a wave. Although they sought no acclaim, it gladdened their hearts to see the obvious affection the people held them in.

When they passed the market, a stallholder approached the Steward and held out the bag he was clutching to him. The guards made to drive him away; however, Faramir beckoned him forward.

"I would like to present you with these chestnuts, my lord," the man said, bowing deeply. "A right good crop there's been this year and I'd be honoured if your lordship would have some."

Faramir smiled and accepted the gift, albeit with a slight feeling of embarrassment that they had been presented to him, rather than to the King.

"Your family have been here far longer than I have, so it is only natural they seek you out to honour!" Aragorn reassured him once they were out of earshot.

"But whatever shall I do with them?" Faramir groaned, stuffing them into his saddlebag. "Éowyn tells me our cook only likes to prepare produce she has chosen herself."
"I am sure you will find some good use to put them to," Aragorn assured him.

The horses, wearily of the slow pace, strained their heads, pulling skittishly at the reins by the time they had descended to the final level.

"You may leave us," Aragorn told the guards, dismissing them once they had passed through the City Gates. "Our horses need exercise and we would like to allow them their heads now."

"My lord?" the captain asked, looking doubtful.

"We have exercised Roheryn and Iavas alone many times before. We are both skilled horsemen and these horses need a good gallop. Your mounts could never keep up with them. You may take the rest of the day off!"

"Very well, my lords. I wish you a pleasant ride." Shaking his head, at what he deemed to be the highly eccentric behaviour of his superiors, the captain ordered his men back to their barracks.

Given their heads, the horses set off across the Pelenor at a gallop, each trying to outpace the other. They were perfectly matched and were almost neck and neck when they finally slowed to a trot.

"I won!" Faramir announced jubilantly, with an almost boyish enthusiasm.

"By less than a head!" Aragorn retorted good-humouredly. It always pleased him when Faramir shed some of his natural solemn reserve and allowed himself to enjoy life. They halted for a moment to let the horses recover. Their snorting breath blew in clouds in the frosty air.

It was a perfect winter afternoon for a ride; bright and crisp, the frost making the air tingle with an icy freshness. The red sun shone through the bare branches of the trees, while mist hung low along the distant riverbanks.

The King and the Steward rode on in companionable silence, greatly enjoying each other's company and the chance to leaves the confines of the City for a brief time. The feel of the wind in their hair and the cold air against their cheeks was sheer bliss for two men accustomed to an outdoor life, but now constrained by rank to spend most of their time indoors. They felt oddly grateful to the obstinate Gudrun for giving them a rare chance to spend a companionable afternoon out riding, rather than engrossed in cares of state.

All too soon, Faramir announced to his companion, that they had reached Gudrun's dwelling, a dilapidated farmhouse, surrounded by outhouses obviously containing animals, from the sounds they could hear. Chickens squawked and foraged around the farmyard. An orchard of ancient apple trees surrounded the house and even in the fading afternoon light, they could see the bright green of an abundant crop of mistletoe.

As they dismounted, Faramir reached into his saddlebag and took out the chestnuts, intending to rid himself of them by offering them as a gift to the old lady.

Aragorn knocked on the door of the farmhouse. There was no answer. He was about to knock again, when a wizened crone emerged from one of the outbuildings carrying an empty bucket.

"Pigs!" she snorted, without bothering to ask for an introduction to her visitors. "However much you feed them, they still want more! The chickens are almost as bad!"

"My good lady," Aragorn began, "I believe one of the King's men came here earlier today and requested some mistletoe. I take it that you are Dame Gudrun?"
"I am indeed," the crone replied, in a strong voice that contradicted her wizened appearance. "The cheeky young fellow thought he could take it just because some king in the Citadel wants it!"

"He was prepared to pay you a fair price, Dame Gudrun."

"Well my mistletoe's not for selling, not unless the King himself turns up on my doorstep!"

Aragorn drew himself up to his full height, towering over the diminutive lady. "I have come with a golden knife as you requested, Dame Gudrun. I, King Elessar, bearer of the Sword- that- was-Broken, have come to request that you sell me some of your mistletoe!" He placed his hand on his sword hilt, as he spoke.

Unimpressed, Gudrun snorted. "Humph! Well, I suppose you must be the King as no other is as tall as you and I recognise Denethor's youngest. Well, King you might be, but you're not having my mistletoe until the moon rises over the orchard and you show yourself to be worthy. I'm not forgetting the rituals to honour Lord Bema, which I have observed since I was a lass, especially since he granted me such a husband as I was blessed with!"

"Madam, have you forgotten that you are addressing King Elessar Telcontar, the Renewer, the heir of Elendil, the wielder of the Sword Reforged, the victorious in battle against the armies of Mordor and the High King of the Reunited Kingdoms?" Faramir said sternly. "He is entitled to order you to surrender your mistletoe for a fair price!"

"And you, Faramir Denethorsson, are addressing a proud daughter of the Mark!" Gudrun retorted. "He has only been King for these past four years. My traditions go back more than five hundred years to Eorl himself!"

"King Elessar can trace his ancestry back for thousands of years to Elendil, the ancient Kings of Númenor, Luthien the Fair and beyond." Faramir replied proudly.

"Never heard of them!" Gudrun replied, "And he can't say that he's lived here for thirty years as I have!"

"Madam, I warn you..." Faramir began, only to be silenced by Aragorn placing a placating hand on his arm.

"Peace, mellon nin, the moon will rise within the next hour or so. We can wait." the King said calmly, secretly rather amused at the situation. Used as he was to fawning courtiers, he found Gudrun rather refreshing.

"Would you like some chestnuts, madam?" Faramir enquired, realising he must concur in the King's plan to humour her.

"No I wouldn't!" she snorted, "Fit only for feeding the pigs, they are!" However, the gesture must have mellowed her somewhat, as she beckoned towards the door and invited them inside.

Aragorn and Faramir had expected the interior to be as uninviting as the exterior and were pleasantly surprised to find themselves in a pleasant, albeit sparsely furnished room. A cheerful fire blazed in the hearth by which stood a rocking chair, occupied by a plump and peacefully slumbering ginger tabby cat.

"Elbeth would like it here!" Faramir whispered in Aragorn's ear.

The old woman went to the cupboard, the only other piece of furniture in the room, and took out three goblets and a bottle.
"Now you're here, you might as well have a sip of my home made wine to warm you," she said, handing them each a goblet. "Waes hael!" she declaimed, taking a generous swig from her own.

"Waes hael!" Aragorn replied, sipping his drink cautiously. It tasted of cloves and cinnamon but was not unpleasant. He gestured to Faramir that he should drink.

"Waes hael!" Faramir intoned courteously, balancing his drink in one hand and the unwanted bag of chestnuts in the other.

"Well, I can't stand here all day chattering like you fine gentlemen from the Citadel do!" Gudrun said briskly, draining the rest of her goblet in one swallow. "There's the cow to be milked and chickens to be fed and locked up for the night. You can make yourselves useful by putting more wood on the fire if it burns low, but don't go disturbing the cat!" With that parting instruction, she turned and went out through the door.

As soon as she was safely out of earshot, Aragorn burst out laughing. "That old woman could rival Ioreth for sheer impudence!" he chortled.

"I thought she was most insulting to you!" Faramir said primly. "My father would never have tolerated such insolence. You are a more tolerant man by far!"

"She is a typical example of her people," Aragorn explained, "I encountered many of her kind when I served King Thengel in my youth. They are hard as nails, fiercely independent and have little respect for authority. Yet, such people are honest, courageous, hard working and have warm hearts. It would not surprise me to learn that Ioreth had some Rohirric ancestry as she reminds me so much of those women of Rohan. We had better make ourselves comfortable as she will not hurry to return on account of our presence, I deem!"

"There is not even a chair to sit upon!" Faramir grumbled.

"The hearthrug will suffice!" Aragorn said good humouredly, sitting himself down on the pelt in front of the fire and stretching out his long legs to get comfortable. Seeing Faramir's hesitation, he added, "Do not fret about the fleas. We can always bathe when we return.

"It just seems so wrong that you should be treated like this!" Faramir complained, as he settled himself beside the King. There was only just enough room for them both sitting closely huddled together, side-by-side.

"We have known far worse," Aragorn soothed. "You should make yourself comfortable and relax. Just think, if we were not here, we would either be poring over documents or under our wives' feet as they prepare for the banquet. I actually feel quite at home here. I spent many a Yule in a place similar to this in the North with Halbarad and his family. We would roast chestnuts on the fire and sing while we waited for them to cook." His eyes suddenly lit up. "Chestnuts! Just the thing! We can roast those that you were given! There is a pan here at the side of the hearth we can use."

"Roast them?" Faramir sounded puzzled. "Chestnuts should be boiled! I cannot see why you are so enthusiastic about such an insipid tasting food!"

TBC

A/N

A very grateful thank you to all my readers for your kind comments. I have replied to everyone who is logged in. I fear I have no influence with other writers, but I promise I have no intention of refusing unsigned reviews myself.
Readers are invited to relax over this story, as my heroes deserve a break from having dreadful pain inflicted upon them (apart from being harangued by old ladies that is)!
"Insipid? You have not tasted them as they should be cooked, obviously!" Aragorn grinned. "Roasted chestnuts are a dish fit for a king or a steward for that matter!" He had already divested himself of his gloves. Taking out his knife, he started to prepare the chestnuts, by cutting a small cross in the side each one.

Faramir copied his example and soon the chestnuts were roasting merrily on the fire. The cat; awakened by the sound, sat eyeing them balefully with glittering green eyes.

"At last I can warm my hands!" Faramir said, holding them out towards the fire.

"You will get chilblains doing that!" Aragorn cautioned, "Come let me warm them for you!" He reached out and took Faramir's hands between his own. "Your hands are like ice!" he exclaimed, rubbing them vigorously. "Why did you not say so before?"

"I am accustomed to having cold hands," Faramir replied. "I can only think I was born that way. When I was on campaign in the army, I spent every winter covered in chilblains. Now, your hands are exceptionally warm!" He sighed contentedly at the King's touch, finding as always, that there was something immensely soothing in Aragorn's very presence. It seemed not only his hands but every part of his body was infused with comforting warmth. A wonderful feeling of peace enveloped the room, sensed even by the cat, which curled up and went back to sleep again.

"I think the chestnuts will be ready now," Aragorn said after a few minutes had elapsed, finally releasing his Steward's now comfortably warm hands. He removed the pan from the fire and blew on them to cool them. He then offered Faramir one to sample.

"Mmm, this tastes delicious!" Faramir sounded surprised, as he savoured the sweet floury taste.

"I told you they would be!" Aragorn replied a trifle smugly, dividing the chestnuts between himself and his Steward. "Eat up! There are plenty more."

For a few minutes there was silence broken only by contented munching and the sound of the cat purring in its sleep. This is not so bad a way to spend Yule, mellon nin," Aragorn said at last breaking the silence, "Roasting chestnuts with loved ones, is in the North, considered the ideal way to celebrate the feast."

Faramir's heart was filled with warmth, which came not only from the fire. He had spent his entire
childhood vainly yearning to hear such words from his father. His new lord gave him all the love that his father had denied him and had become both as brother and father to him. Impulsively, he hugged the King, easily able to show him all the affection that Denethor would have repulsed.

Aragorn unhesitatingly returned the gesture. He loved the younger man as dearly as a son and had never forgotten that he owed his throne and the beloved wife he could only wed once he attained it, to Faramir's acceptance of his claim. Not only had his Steward smoothed his path to the throne, but also his guidance and detailed knowledge of Gondor's laws and history had proved invaluable. Faramir was also the most loyal and devoted of friends who had saved his life on more than one occasion. Faramir, Arwen, and his young son; these three were dearest to him and to lose any one of them would break his heart.

Their heads touched, causing their thoughts to mingle, reaffirming what by now was a familiar, but always a deeply moving spiritual experience for them. For what could be more precious than to actually experience the depths of love and loyalty within each other's hearts?

Faramir nuzzled his head against the King's shoulder in an affectionate gesture before throwing another handful of chestnuts into the pan.

"Apparently I have convinced you of the merits of roasted chestnuts!" Aragorn grinned.

"I defer, as always, to the wisdom of my King!" Faramir replied with mock solemnity.

They finished their second helping and the cat, once satisfied that no more popping sounds were about to issue from the hearth, settled itself on Aragorn's lap where he stroked it absent mindedly.

"I wonder if the moon has risen yet?" Faramir fretted, "Éowyn will be furious if we are late for the Ball"

"Even after the moon rises, I still have to satisfy Dame Gudrun that we are worthy of her precious mistletoe," Aragorn said dryly.

"Whatever will she have us do?" Faramir asked.

"Well maybe, we will have to climb the apple trees, then run naked round the orchard three times before standing on our heads!" Aragorn said solemnly.

"No!" Faramir exclaimed in horror, "We should leave now!"

"Peace, mellon nin!" Aragorn chuckled, "I was only jesting! I will just need to convince her that I am whom I say. You take what I say too seriously at times!"

Faramir nodded. He still found Aragorn's teasing and sense of playfulness hard to get used to. He had never expected a king to have a sense of humour. He found himself smiling at the absurd scenario Aragorn's imagination had conjured up, realising Éowyn would have told him if such strange rituals were indeed the custom of Rohan.

They lapsed into companionable silence and were becoming drowsy, lulled by the fire's warmth, when Gudrun's entrance startled them back to full wakefulness.

"The hour has come! The moon has risen over the orchard so you may cut the sacred plant and then be on your way if you are worthy!" Gudrun announced, then stared astonished at the sight of the cat on Aragorn's lap "Have you bewitched my cat?" she demanded indignantly, "He comes to none save me!"

"A cat may look at a King and even deign to choose his lap if it so chooses!" Faramir told her,
rising to his feet as he spoke. Aragorn did likewise, dislodging the cat, which gave an indignant meow. It retreated to the chair where it sat washing itself, eyeing them disdainfully.

"You could take lessons from that cat on how to look regal and aloof!" Faramir teased as the two men followed Gudrun to the orchard.

"It would still manage to look superior even if I were to practise for a hundred years!" Aragorn replied grinning.

The orchard looked like an enchanted world, now that the moon had risen. A sharp frost had coated the gnarled branches, which shimmered in the moonlight. Mist lingered under the trees and an owl could be heard hooting in the distance.

"Behold the sacred grove!" Gudrun intoned.

Faramir repressed an initial urge to giggle, as the straggly trees they were standing beside, hardly merited such an impressive description. He forced himself to concentrate on holding a lantern Gudrun had provided.

Aragorn fumbled at his belt for the ceremonial dagger. Gudrun eased the shawl she was wearing from her head and intoned "Bema, Lord of Forests, we thank you!"

Aragorn pushed back his hood, as gesture of respect for her beliefs and nudged his Steward to do likewise. He approached the tree where the mistletoe grew most profusely and raised the blade to cut it.

"Wait!" Gudrun said sternly, "You have not sung the incantation. Only he, who knows the ancient words of wisdom, may cut the sacred plant.

Faramir groaned inwardly. It seemed that their quest was doomed to failure and Eowyn was going to be furious. He held the lantern to illuminate the King, who was looking slightly embarrassed and shuffling his feet. Then to the Steward's surprise, he began to sing.

"Bema, Lord of Forests, bringer of fruits,
Tamer of horses, help of the hunter, lord of the land!
This night, we invoke thee, ask for thine aid!
Bring us thy blessings, cherish thy children,
Bestow us thy bounty, grant us thy gift!"

His voice rich, deep and sonorous echoed through the frosty night, awesome in its beauty. There was something ethereal and ancient in the haunting melody of the song. Its sheer beauty brought tears to Faramir's eyes.

Roheryn, hearing his master's voice, neighed joyously, a call that was swiftly echoed by Iavas.

Just then, the moon reappeared, illuminating Aragorn in its silver rays. Tall and kingly he stood, his dark hair framing his noble features, the light reflected off the gleaming blade shining in his eyes.

The bells from the City rang out to mark the Solstice at that moment, as was the custom at Mettare.

Gudrun gasped and fell to her knees, as did Faramir. There were moments like this, in which his
friend was transformed, and appeared as the Kings of Old out of legend. Faramir had seen it happen several times now but it never failed to fill him with awe. This was Aragorn, his close friend who was as a father to him, his healer and mentor. Yet, he could become as remote and incalculable, as one far above all other living men. Faramir was reminded that this was the greatest who now lived, a figure out of legend, who had commanded even the Army of the Dead to his will and brought Faramir back from the very brink of death.

"Aragorn Arathornsson, you are indeed worthy of my mistletoe!" Gudrun exclaimed.

"Faramir!" Roused from his reverie by the King's voice, Faramir rose to his feet and took the freshly cut sprigs that Aragorn handed to him while he cut several more.

"Thank you, Dame Gudrun, Aragorn said courteously, as they left the orchard, the precious mistletoe carefully wrapped in a cloth. He handed her some coins.

"No, my Lord King!" she protested, "It is yours by right!"

"Take it!" Aragorn insisted, "I insist so that I may ask you in future to supply the Court with mistletoe to celebrate the festival! Éowyn Éomundsdaughter of the House of Éorl would have it thus!"

"You should have told me to begin with that your wife wanted my mistletoe!" Gudrun scolded Faramir.

"Would you have surrendered it more easily then, Dame Gudrun?" Faramir asked.

"No, but I would have liked to know!" she retorted.

"So may we then rely on you to supply the Court next Yuletide?" Aragorn pressed.

"Only if you cut the mistletoe with your own hand!" she cautioned, this time accepting the money.

"Gladly, my lady," Aragorn agreed, always eager for an excuse to leave the sometimes suffocating walls of Minas Tirith behind for a while.

Carefully stowing the mistletoe in their saddlebags, they set off homewards, casting a final backward glance at the moonlit orchard, now deserted. It shimmered as if made of precious mithril under the silver orb of the full moon.

The Star of Eärendil shone brightly overhead as they rode back across the Pelenor.

"You should make a wish," Aragorn told Faramir, "In the North, it is believed that if you wish upon the jewel of the sky at Yuletide, your wish will come true!"

"I already have everything I could ever wish for," Faramir replied, "I have your friendship and you have taught what it feels like to know a father's love, the greatest of the many gifts you have so freely given me. I have a beautiful wife and daughter and Gondor is prosperous and at peace. What is there to wish for save that it may continue thus!"

"That is my wish too!" Aragorn replied, "With you at my side together with Arwen and Eldarion, I have everything!"

Lights were starting to appear in the fields as more bonfires were lit to celebrate the Winter Solstice.
"I think maybe we should have made a wish after all," Aragorn said ruefully.

"What for?" asked the Steward.

"To return in time for the banquet lest our wives show us the full force of their wrath!" the King said, urging his horse to a gallop.

Faramir did likewise and they rode as if the Black Riders themselves were in pursuit.

TBC

A/N

A very grateful thank you to all my readers for your much appreciated kind comments. I have replied to everyone who is logged in.

I would like to wish all my readers good health and happiness for the New Year. I am touched that many of you were reading my stories at this time last year and are still following them.
See the blazing Yule before us,
Fa la la la la la, la la la la.
Strike the harp and join the chorus.
Fa la la la la la, la la la la.
Follow me in merry measure,
Fa la la, la la la, la la la.
While I tell of Yuletide treasure,
Fa la la la la la, la la la la.

For Raksha.

"Wherever can they be?" Éowyn fretted, pacing anxiously across the floor of Arwen's room, where the Queen and the Princess of Ithilien were together with their children, awaiting the return of their husbands.

"Maybe one of their horses went lame?" Arwen said placidly. She was sitting on the rocking chair by the fire, feeding Eldarion.

"I should never have sent them out together!" Éowyn fretted, as she paced the room. "I should have known better! The mistletoe was not so important, that they should risk coming to harm collecting it!"

"Nothing ill will have befallen them. They are grown men and seasoned warriors, more than capable of taking care of themselves," Arwen replied.

"They might well be, but they are our husbands and innocents abroad, outside of a battlefield!" Éowyn said grimly "Only they could go for a ride in the forest and be drugged by a crazy old woman. Then, there was the time that they went swimming and a goat ate their clothes. When you were giving birth and our backs were turned on them, Faramir managed to get into a fight with my brother. Then, while we were in Ithilien together, Aragorn was kidnapped! And there was the time they went camping and…" She sighed deeply. "The moment we they are out of our sight, they get into trouble! They are as drawn to disaster as ducks are to water! How can you be so calm?"

"Because I would know if anything were seriously wrong," Arwen said firmly. "I expect the babies would sense it too!"

"Well, I may not be blessed with mystical abilities, seeing as I am neither Elf nor Númenorean, but my common sense tells me that it does not take five hours to fetch some mistletoe from scarce
three miles away! They could have walked there and back long ago in that time!"

"I am certain we have no need to worry," Arwen assured her friend. "Please stop pacing. You and Aragorn between you will most surely wear out the carpet! He paces like that too when he is restless."

"Ada, da, da," gurgled Eldarion contentedly, as his mother wiped his milky face and rose from the rocking chair to settle him into his cradle.

"Yes, you shall see ada soon, my big boy," Arwen cooed, "Who saw the pretty decorations with Auntie Éowyn and Elestelle this afternoon?"

Éowyn stopped pacing for a moment and smiled at the memory of her baby daughter and Eldarion, reaching for the ribbons with chubby fingers, their baby faces alight with pleasure.

"I wish Faramir had been there to see Elestelle grabbing the ribbons," Éowyn lamented, resuming her agitated pacing across the room.

"I had better get changed," said Arwen, "If they are late, we will have to greet the guests. Stop pacing, please, Éowyn, you are making Eldarion's cradle vibrate!"

Éowyn sighed, but this time obeyed. She took her daughter from her cradle and settled with her in the rocking chair that Arwen had recently vacated. She was just unfastening her gown in preparation for feeding her, when a tap came on the door.

"May we come in?" Aragorn's voice called.

"Come in, we were expecting you!" called Arwen.

The door opened and a bedraggled looking King and Steward entered, clutching armfuls of mistletoe.

"Wherever have you been?" scolded Éowyn, "The banquet will begin soon!"

"Dame Gudrun kept to her word and made us wait until moonrise," Aragorn explained.

Éowyn snorted, "You are the King and the Steward, you should not be commanded by some bossy woman! And why ever have you brought all that in here?"

"It is the mistletoe you said you wanted!" Faramir protested.

"Not in here, in the Merethrond, you foolish men! The servants are there waiting for it." scolded Éowyn.

Faramir looking rather crestfallen make to leave again.

"It is lovely mistletoe, thank you for bringing it to show us!" Arwen said soothingly, "It is good to have you back." She smiled at Faramir and kissed her husband, reaching to enfold him in a loving embrace.

"You had better not touch me," Aragorn said rather sheepishly, "I think I might have fleas!"

"Little wonder, as you are covered in cat hair!" Éowyn observed, "And you are both covered in leaves and twigs! I told you to fetch some mistletoe not a fur or a forest!"

"We had better go and have a bath," said Faramir.
"Fleas or not you most certainly need one, before you are either coming to the feast or sharing my bed tonight!" Éowyn said sternly.

"Never mind, nothing is wrong that hot water will not cure!" Arwen said briskly, "I have already told the servants to heat some water. Off with you both now, or you will be late, but be sure to give Doreth the mistletoe first and tell her to send someone to brush the carpet in here!"

"I shall ask her to save it after the festivities," said Aragorn, "I am sure the Houses of Healing could put it to good use!"

"Have you no sense of romance?" Éowyn groaned as the men made their escape, dropping leaves and berries behind them in their wake.

"Women!" King and Steward muttered under their breath simultaneously, "Whatever will it take to please them!"

"Éowyn did not even offer me a kiss after we brought all that mistletoe!" Faramir lamented glumly.

"And Arwen is always fretting about her carpet!" Aragorn added, as they walked morosely down the corridor.

They were so engrossed in their own thoughts that they almost bumped into Elbeth, who was being shepherded in the direction of Arwen's rooms by her nurse.

"Hello!" the little girl said brightly, "You look nice with leaves in your hair, Uncle Strider! Is that how you are going to go to the party? Can I have leaves in my hair too?"

"You will have to ask your Aunt Éowyn," Faramir said wearily, "We saw a nice cat, this afternoon, Elbeth, you would have liked it."

Elbeth pouted. "Why do grown ups have all the fun?" she asked, "Aunt Éowyn made me try dresses on all afternoon. Why can't we go to parties wearing our ordinary clothes?"

"I only wish we could," Aragorn replied. "Maybe next year, you could come and see the cat with us," he added to placate her.

"Well, you're the King, so why don't you make a law that everyone must wear ordinary clothes to come to parties in?"

"I would, but the Queen would not like it," Aragorn explained. "Now you had better go and get ready. Uncle Faramir and I need to have a bath."

"Aunt Éowyn made me have one too," Elbeth said sympathetically, "It was before I had to try the dresses on."

"Did you find a pretty one?" Faramir enquired.

Elbeth made a face. "No, they were horrible with frills all over them! I said, I'd rather stay in my room and have bread and jam for supper than wear them. Aunt Arwen said; she would see what she could find. I expect she will find something even worse with bows on!"

Aragorn repressed a smile, suddenly remembering a conversation with his wife a few weeks ago. "Maybe your Aunt Arwen will surprise you," he said enigmatically, "I do not think Elves are very partial to bows and frills any more than you are!"
"Come Lady Elbeth, you need to change into your party frock!" The nurse bowed and led her charge away. Elbeth's expression was more melancholy that that of a criminal on the way to execution.

An hour later, the King and Queen, accompanied by the Prince and Princess of Ithilien, and the Lady Elbeth were preparing to greet their guests.

The beautifully decorated Merethrond was sparkling with the light from hundreds of extra candles in honour of the occasion, looking almost as magnificent as its occupants.

The Queen looked stunning in a simple gown of crimson velvet trimmed with silver. On her head, she wore a coronet of mithril set with diamonds. Her long black hair hung loose and was braided with hundreds of tiny diamonds, which glittered like frost with the sun shining upon it.

Eowyn had chosen a gown of forest green velvet embroidered in gold to match her hair. She wore a gold circlet on her head, adorned with emeralds. Aragorn and Faramir were dressed in near identical outfits comprising a black velvet tunic and breeches, embroidered in silver and gold, Aragorn’s elaborate coronet of mithril, contrasting with Faramir’s plainer circlet.

Elbeth, standing between her Aunt and the Queen, no longer looked miserable. Instead, she was happily preening herself and feeling very grand in her new gown, a surprise present from the Queen, and of a similar cut and design to the one she was wearing as well as being equally devoid of frills and bows. The crimson velvet set off the little girl's colouring to perfection and the full skirt twirled delightfully when she moved and caused the silver embroidery to shimmer and glitter in the candlelight.

Aragorn formally welcomed the guests and explained this was a traditional Yuletide celebration, such as was celebrated in the northern part of his kingdom. First the he Yule log would be brought in, then there would be half an hour of dancing followed by the banquet, after which more dancing would round off the evening. He had decided to have some dances before they ate to give Arwen and Eowyn a chance to take part before they needed to return to their children.

Damrod and Aedred, had been given the honour of bringing in the Yule Log, a massive branch of oak, which was carefully dusted with flour and laid before the blazing fire. Asking Elbeth, if she would assist them, Aragorn and Arwen moved forward to perform the traditional duties for the master and mistress of the house.

A servant brought a tray, on which were three basins, containing salt, oil and mulled wine.

Aragorn asked Elbeth to hand him the salt, which he solemnly sprinkled on the log and intoned "May the land be cleansed of evil!"

Arwen then took the oil and poured it, saying as she did so, "May the land be at peace!"

Finally, Aragorn took the bowl of wine from Elbeth and said, "May the land be fruitful!"

Damrod and Aedred carefully placed the log on the fire.

The harpist took up his instrument and played quietly while Aragorn intoned;

"Let this Yule log burn so bright; 
To chase away the power of night! 
Before the embers die away
May the sun return to stay

May the Valar bless this day!

They stood for a moment in silence until the flames leapt up and enveloped the log. The assembled guests clapped, while the children present, cheered aloud.

The musicians then struck up a merry tune and Aragorn approached his Queen, "May I have the first dance, vanimelda?" he asked?

"Gladly, my beloved!" she replied.

He took her hand and soon they were gracefully dancing, their steps in perfect harmony. Faramir and Éowyn soon joined them, and then two by two, the other guests took their places, until the Great Hall was filled with dancing couples, swirling across the floor like colourful blossoms in the breeze.

TBC

A/N A big thank you to all my readers for your much appreciated comments have replied to everyone who is logged in. There will be a final chapter of this story and then "A Web of Treason" will resume.

For those of you who have not read my other stories, Elbeth is Boromir's daughter by a kitchen maid, Hanna, who was introduced in "Shadow and Thought" While Aedred is one of the senior healers, who was born in Rohan. He was first introduced in "Burden of Guilt."
Sitting under the mistletoe
(Pale-green, fairy mistletoe),
One last candle burning low,
All the sleepy dancers gone,
Just one candle burning on,
Shadows lurking everywhere:
Some one came, and kissed me there. - Walter de la Mere

Dedicated to Raksha, who inspired this story.

In a corner, Elbeth sat wondering why did grown ups have to spoil parties with silly things like dancing.

Éowyn caught sight of the child's expression and whispered in Faramir's ear. "That child's expression could turn the milk sour! She reminds me very much of how I was at her age. I hated watching dancing!"

"No one would know, as you excel at it, my love!" Faramir said gallantly.

Éowyn smiled at him. "The mistletoe looks very nice," she commented, "You did well to obtain it!"

"It was Aragorn's doing," Faramir conceded though he basked in her praise. "I think it is causing considerable speculation about what it is for!"

Éowyn glanced towards the archway, from which the mistletoe was prominently hanging and glimpsed Lord Húrin of the Keys and his Lady, together with Prince Amrothos of Dol Amroth and his wife who were pointing at it and regarding it with considerable curiosity.

"We only use mistletoe as a remedy here. They will not know the traditions of the North," Faramir explained.

"I hope they don't think it a foolish idea!" Éowyn fretted.

The musicians lay down their instruments as the dance ended, heralding a brief pause to enable couples to change dancing partners or simply get their breath back.

Aragorn and Arwen walked over to where Elbeth was sitting and Arwen joined her. The King solemnly approached the small girl. He bowed politely and asked; "My Lady Elbeth, will you do
me the great honour of granting me this dance?"

Elbeth hesitated, unsure of how to respond until Arwen moved closer and whispered something in her ear.

Giggling, the child accepted Aragorn's outstretched hand. "Yes, my Lord Strider, you may!" she replied, preening herself, as she was led out on to the dance floor by the King.

The musicians struck up a merry tune and soon the dancers were swirling across the floor again. Although Elbeth had only been having dancing lessons for a few months, she had proved naturally gifted and Aragorn matched his steps in consideration to her youth and inexperience. Her young face was flushed with excitement and pure happiness as her full skirt twirled around her, the embroidery sparking in the candlelight.

"That should silence the gossips who would shun her for being born out of wedlock and will make Elbeth's night for she adores Aragorn!" Faramir whispered in Éowyn's ear as they whirled past on the dance floor.

"I'm so glad she has a happy home with us now!" Éowyn replied, snuggling closer in her husband's arms.

When the dance ended, Aragorn again addressed the gathering, "Before we go into supper, I would like to explain the significance of the mistletoe hanging here," he said, "In the north it is the custom for people to kiss their loved ones under it, as a sign of friendship and goodwill for the year ahead, a charming custom, which I have decided to observe here tonight at Lady Éowyn's suggestion."

He moved to stand under the largest bunch of Gudrun's mistletoe, now festooned with scarlet ribbons and hanging over the doorway. Arwen joined him and he kissed her tenderly, followed by Faramir and a somewhat reluctant Elbeth, who appeared to regard the whole procedure in a similar light to taking some nasty tasting medicine, though she was not adverse to kisses in less public places.

Faramir followed the King's example with Éowyn and with Elbeth, then somewhat to his surprise; his very sedate Uncle Imrahil approached and kissed him on the brow.

"Your mother would be so proud of you today, nephew!" the Prince Of Dol Amroth said, "To see you at the King's side, happily married and honoured by all, is what she would have dreamed of!"

Rather hesitantly, the rest of the guests moved forward and followed the example of their King and Steward by kissing their loved ones under the mistletoe.

A Herald then announced that supper was served, broth made with venison followed by traditional Yuletide dishes of roast goose and plum pudding with sugarplums for the guests to nibble. It was washed down by the special Yule drink of ale mixed with apples and sugar.

Elbeth, seated between the King and Faramir behaved beautifully, even leaving without complaint, when Éowyn said it was her bedtime and retired with Arwen.

Aragorn and Faramir followed their ladies with their eyes, wishing that they could follow them and seek their beds. However, they were obliged to linger for another hour of dancing, enjoying watching Aedred take to the floor with a surprisingly nimble Ioreth, and Lord Húrin and his Lady making light of their advanced years. They politely pleaded fatigue to ward off the attentions of the many young ladies who wanted the honour of having danced either with the King or his Steward.
The Feast drew to a close at last with a cup of mulled wine passed round in traditional Rohirric fashion. All were now eager to get home while the bonfires were still burning to provide some light and warmth on the way.

Aragorn and Faramir courteously bade their guests goodnight, struggling to repress their yawns.

"I will bid you good night now, mellon nin" said Faramir, once they were alone "I think everyone enjoyed celebrating according to Eowyn's traditions!"

"Tonight brought back many happy memories for me," said Aragorn. "Before we retire to bed, though, there is one last custom we must observe!"

"So Éowyn told me!" Faramir replied, glad that he was prepared. They made their way back to their apartments, Faramir pausing for a moment to retrieve a parcel from his study.

When they reached Aragorn's study, the King led his Steward inside. A fire burned in the grate and candles burned cheerfully in anticipation of their coming. Reaching behind his desk, Aragorn handed Faramir a carefully wrapped parcel.

"Happy Yule!" he said, "I wanted you to have this gift but it is only thanks to Arwen that I am able to get it for you!"

Faramir carefully unwrapped the parcel to reveal a grey cloak of an identical design to the one that his King usually wore. He held it up in the candlelight and to his amazement, the fabric seemed to change colour. He gasped in awe when he realised what it was. "An Elven cloak for me?" he exclaimed in amazement. "I thought Elves only clothed their own people in such raiment?"

"They do, usually," Aragorn agreed, "However, Arwen was given some material by her grandmother before she sailed. She knows how much you like my Elven cloak, and seeing you helped Frodo and Sam, we felt that practically makes you one of the fellowship and that you deserve an Elven cloak!"

"Thank you so much!" Faramir impulsively threw his arms around the King and they exchanged a warm embrace. He then pulled apart to hand him a carefully wrapped gift of his own. "I hope you will like this," he said, "Éowyn explained about the custom of exchanging gifts at Yule, so we chose this for you."

Aragorn unwrapped a beautiful silver flask engraved on one side with the Royal Arms and on the other the Arms of the Stewards. The seven stars around the White Tree were represented by diamonds.

"Éowyn said you needed something to carry the miruvor in, that you always seem to have to use when we get into trouble!" Faramir said somewhat ruefully.

"That is beautiful!" Aragorn exclaimed, hugging his Steward. "I shall carry this with me wherever I go. Now, we had better go to bed, our wives will be waiting for us." He blew out the candles and they made their way towards their rooms, still clutching their gifts under their arms.

When they reached the corridor that branched off to their separate apartments, they paused by the window to say goodnight.

"I shall sleep well, tonight, I think," said Aragorn, "I have enjoyed myself today We had quite an adventure did we not?"

"We did indeed!" Faramir agreed. "One thing puzzles me though; however, did you know what Gudrun wanted you to sing?"
"You are forgetting that I spent years in Rohan under the guise of Thorongil," Aragorn smiled, "King Thengel was as fanatical about the old traditions as Gudrun is, and would sing that invocation to Bema every year. He had a voice like a corncrake but it proved useful to know the chant today! What puzzles me is; why ever do women set such store by mistletoe? I am always kissing Arwen and showing affection to my loved ones!"

"It is strange indeed," Faramir agreed, "I am always kissing Éowyn too and others whom I love! Who needs mistletoe?"

"It is a very useful plant for healing but I see little point in hanging it up!" Aragorn agreed," I have lived over ninety years and I still do not understand women!" Goodnight, ion nin." He bent to bestow a goodnight kiss on Faramir's brow, as was their custom.

"Goodnight, adar nin, Happy Yule!" Faramir replied returning the kiss. A warm glow suffused him that Aragorn should refer to him thus.

For a moment, they stood looking out of the window. The moon shone brightly overhead and the bonfires could be seen still blazing brightly over the Pelenor. Tomorrow, the days would start to lengthen once more. The darkness of winter was already giving way to hopes of spring. Gondor was at peace and the future was full of promise. It was indeed a happy Yuletide.

TBC

A/N A very grateful thank you to all my readers and a warm welcome to the new ones. I hope you will try more of my stories in future if you enjoyed this one. I have replied to everyone who was logged in.I would love to know which parts you most enjoyed.

With special thanks to Raksha for inspiring the story and her helpful suggestions and to Laerien and Julia for their support.

I based the Yule traditions on a mixture of real traditions and my own imagination. If any one would like more information, please e mail me privately (Not PM as I cannot send links via it)

A Corncrake is a British bird with a harsh and unpleasant cry.

"Web of Treason " will continue next week all being well. I decided to take a break, both for a light hearted tale for Christmas and also because many of my readers were obviously busy with the holiday season.

I hope you enjoyed reading this as much as I enjoyed writing it. It was good to depict Aragorn and Faramir as the good friends, I feel they ought to be!
The King is in the altogether

The characters are the property of the Tolkien profit will be made from this story.

The King is in the altogether, he's altogether, he's altogether as naked as the day that he was born!"
- from
Hans Christian Andersen, "The King's New Clothes",
with Danny Kaye

A Streak of Moonlight

The King and the Steward shuffled their feet awkwardly, trying to decide what they should have agreed to procure some mistletoe for the Yule celebrations, from the eccentric Dame Gudrun, they had expected a pleasant ride could certainly have never anticipated this in their worse nightmares.

"Hurry up!" snapped Gudrun, "I cannot wait here all night, the ritual must be fulfilled before I will surrender my mistletoe to you, Aragorn Arathornsson!"

Aragorn and Faramir were sorely tempted to flee. Then they remembered Éowyn had told them not to return without the mistletoe. They decided that nothing could be worse than having to face her wrath combined with Arwen’ servants had searched far and wide and Dame Gudrun's mistletoe was all that could be found in the environs of Minas Tirith.

"Tell us again, what we must do, good lady," said Aragorn, trying to play for time.

"You must begin by climbing the tallest trees in the orchard," Gudrun replied.

Aragorn and Faramir found climbing the trees was the easy part, though it had been a while since either of them had attempted such a feat, and the old apple trees seemed rather precarious a perch. They had climbed many a tree in their ranger days, but always a sturdy oak or linden.

Gudrun seemed satisfied though and nodded her acceptance. "Now take off your clothes, Aragorn Arathornsson!" she ordered, cackling gleefully. "You must traverse my orchard three times naked!"

"You do not have to do this, Faramir," Aragorn said gently. "You can leave if you wish.

"I shall stay at your side," Faramir said staunchly.

Aragorn squeezed his friend's shoulder in would never have forced his Steward to take part in this strange ritual. Yet, he was touched and grateful that he chose to remain, however great the cost for such a reticent and modest man.

The King prepared to could not have been more miserable had she ordered his head to be
removed. Faramir felt compelled to do likewise to show support for his friend and King.

Slowly and reluctantly, they unfastened their cloaks and folded them neatly on the ground, then pulled their tunics over their heads. Next, they removed their shirts, shivering as the frosty air met their finely muscled bare chests.

They bent to unlace their boots and pull off their socks and then straightened to unfasten their belts. They cast a pleading glance at the old woman but she remained unyielding and their breeches were added to the pile of clothing.

"Surely we can keep our drawers on?" Faramir begged.

"Lord Bema demands that you surrender your all to him!" Gudrun said firmly. Despite her advanced years, she was obviously enjoying the sight of two finely toned, lean, muscular male bodies, softly illuminated by the light of the full moon and was determined that all should be revealed.

"Let us get it over with quickly, mellon nin," said Aragorn trying to sound comforting but not succeeding. He unlaced his drawers and let them fall, trying to cover his nakedness with his hands.

Hesitantly Faramir did likewise, revealing even more finely muscled thighs than his elder.

If they had hoped Gudrun would tactfully avert her eyes, they were to be disappointed, for the crone watched them intently, her aged eyes gleefully roaming over their shivering bodies, appraising every inch of their anatomy.

"Very nice, but I like more flesh on a man," she pronounced, poking Faramir in the ribs. "Now my late husband was a fine figure of a man in all senses of the word!"

Both now naked as the day they were born, King and Steward set off round the orchard as if the Nazgul were in hot pursuit.

Gudrun’s eyes never left the pair. She chuckled in wry amusement while the silvery figures streaked through her apple trees. They ran in long loping strides with an ease and grace that even her cat might have found hard to match.

Panting, they returned to stand before her, still trying to cover themselves with their hands, while at the same time reaching for their discarded clothing.

"You have not stood on your heads yet!" Gudrun admonished them."That is the conclusion of the sacred rite."

"Surely, we can get dressed first?" Faramir protested.

"This last part of the ritual must be completed sky clad," the old woman said firmly.

Blushing scarlet both from exertion and embarrassment, the two friends now were forced to use their hands to lever themselves up. They turned their backs to Gudrun, who was finding it impossible to conceal her mirth.

Neither had ever stood on their heads before and found it a very complicated balancing feat, in which they were not entirely successful. It was very hard to concentrate in a freezing orchard, devoid of a single stitch of clothing, while every move was closely watched by the old woman.

After what felt like an eternity, Gudrun declared herself satisfied.
Aragorn and Faramir had never dressed so swiftly in their lives. Their clothes felt damp and cold from the lying in the frosty air and they shivered both from cold and the knowledge of what Gudrun had so recently witnessed.

"You may now have the mistletoe," Gudrun intoned solemnly.

"There must be an easier way than this, if Éowyn wants any next year," groaned Faramir, as they finally prepared to leave, the precious mistletoe secured in their saddlebags.

"You could have simply sung an incantation but this way was far more enjoyable!" cackled Gudrun leaving the King quite speechless.

"No!" cried Faramir.

Faramir awoke with a start." No!" he cried again.

"Whatever is the matter, my love?" Éowyn asked anxiously. She sat up and fumbled to light the bedside candle. To her alarm, Faramir was pale and shaking. When she put her hand to his forehead, she found he was drenched in a cold sweat. "Are you unwell? Shall I fetch Aragorn?" she asked, full of concern.

Faramir blinked as he became aware of his surroundings. "No, my love, I am well. It was just a bad dream," he said, sitting up and hugging his sweat soaked nightshirt to his body."I must have eaten too much rich food tonight."

"It must have been an evil dream indeed," Éowyn said . "You were thrashing your legs around as if running, and you failed to awaken even when I poked you in the ribs!"

"I had better change," said Faramir, climbing out of bed and making his way to his dressing room.

He returned a few moments later, looking much more composed, having bathed and changed into a fresh nightshirt.

"What was the dream about?" asked Éowyn , who had been checking in his absence, Elestelle had not been disturbed by the commotion.

"It was very foolish," Faramir replied sheepishly.

"I would like to know,"Éowyn persisted.

"While we were waiting in Gudrun's home for the moon to rise, I asked Aragorn what she would want us to do before letting us gather some mistletoe," Faramir explained. "He teased me by saying, we would have to climb trees, run round her orchard naked three times and then stand on our heads. I dreamed we actually did that!"

"Surely, you did not think Arwen and I would allow you to go alone to do such a thing?" Éowyn replied.

"That is exactly what I thought, once I realised Aragorn was jesting," Faramir said, snuggling comfortably against his wife.

"We naturally would have come with you if such a ritual existed. We wouldn't have missed such a spectacle for anything!" Éowyn said with a chuckle.
"You would?" Faramir was profoundly shocked.

"Wild horses would not have prevented us!" Éowyn laughed again, the sound eerily akin to Dame Gudrun's laughter in his dream. "Now go back to sleep, it is the middle of the night!" Thus saying, she blew out the candle.

Wondering if he would ever truly understand women, Faramir closed his eyes.

An hour later, a streak of moonlight shone through a gap in the curtains and illuminated the Steward and his wife, sleeping peacefully in each other's arms. A smile played on Faramir's lips, for his dreams were now of a much more pleasant variety.

The End

_A/N This extra chapter was written as a gift for Raksha as an AU extra scene, which I then expanded to try to fit in with the rest of the story, for of course, Aragorn and Faramir would never agree to such a_. Is based on Aragorn's comment in chapter 3, quoted at the beginning of the chapter. I thought this story complete but the Muse had other ideas! I hope you enjoy this light hearted diversion.

_I hope to post another chapter of "Web of Treason" very soon._

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