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The companions wintered in the cottage, and little by little Taran's strength came back. At the first thaw, when the valley sparkled with melting snow and the streams burst from their ice-bound courses, Taran stood silently in the dooryard and looked at the pale green summits, pondering what had long been in his heart.

"We'll soon be ready," said Fflewddur, who had come from seeing to Llyan and the steeds. "The passes should be clear. The Lake of Llunet can't be too far, and with Kaw to help us, we should reach it in no time."

"I've thought carefully on this," Taran replied. "All winter I've tried to decide what I should do, and never have I found an answer. But one thing is clear, and my mind is made up. I will not seek the Mirror."

"What's that you say?" cried Fflewddur. "Do I hear you aright? Give up your search? Now, of all times? After all you've gone through? Taran, my boy, you've regained your health, but not your wits!"

Taran shook his head. "I give it up. My quest has brought only grief to all of you. And for me, it's led me not to honor but to shame. Taran? Taran makes me sick at heart. I longed to be of noble birth, longed for it so much I believed it was true. A proud birthright was all that counted for me. Those who had none—even when I admired them, as I admired Aeddan, as I learned to admire Craddock—I deemed them lesser because of it. Without knowing them, I judged them less than what they were. Now I see them as true men. Noble? They are far nobler than I.

"I am not proud of myself," Taran went on. "I may never be again. If I do find pride, I'll not find it in what I was or what I am, but what I may become. Not in my birth, but in myself."

"All things considered, then," replied the bard, "the best thing would be to pack our gear and start for *Caer Dallben*."

Taran shook his head. "I cannot face *Dallben* or *Coll*. One day, perhaps. Not now. I must make my own way, earn my own keep. Somehow, the robin must scratch for his own worms." He stopped suddenly and looked, wondering, at the bard. "Orddu—those were her words. I heard them only with my ears. Until now, I did not understand with my heart."

"Scratching for worms is unappetizing, to say the best of it," Fflewddur answered. "But it's true, everyone should have a skill. Take myself, for example. King though I am, as a bard you'll find none better—" A harp string snapped, and for a moment it appeared that several others might give way.

"Yes, well, aside from all that," Fflewddur said hastily, "if you don't mean to go home, then I suggest the *Free Commots*. The craftsmen there might welcome a willing apprentice."

Taran thought for some moments, then nodded. "So shall I do. Now will I scorn no man's welcome."

The bard's face fell. "I—I fear I can't go with you, old friend. There's my own realm waiting. True enough, I'm happier wandering as a bard than sitting as a king. But already I've been too long away."

"Then our ways must part again," Taran replied. "Will there ever be an end to saying farewell?"

"But Gurgi does not say farewell to kindly master," cried Gurgi, as Fflewddur went to gather up his gear. "No, no, humble Gurgi toils at his side!"

Taran bowed his head and turned away. "If the day comes when I deserve your faithfulness that will be prize enough for me."

"No, no!" protested Gurgi. "Not prizes! Gurgi only gives what is in his heart to give! He stays and asks nothing more. Once you comforted friendless Gurgi. Now let him comfort sorrowful master!"

Taran felt the creature's hand on his shoulder. "*Dallben* spoke truth, old friend," he murmured. "Staunchness and good sense? All that and more. But your comfort stands me in better stead than all the cleverness in *Prydain*."

Next morning Taran and Fflewddur took leave of one another for the second time. Despite the bard's protest that a *Fflam* could always find his way, Taran insisted on Kaw's going along as a guide. Once this task was done, Taran urged the crow to return to *Caer Dallben* or, if it pleased him better, to fly freely as he chose. "I'll not bind you to my journey," Taran said to Kaw, "for even I don't know where it may end."

"Then how do we fare?" cried Gurgi. "Faithful Gurgi follows, oh, yes! But where does kindly master begin?"

The valley seemed suddenly empty as Taran stood, unanswering, looking at the silent cottage and the small mound of stones marking *Craddock's* resting place. "Times there were," Taran said, almost to himself, "when I believed I was building my own prison with my own hands. Now I wonder if I shall ever labor as well and gain as much."

He turned to the waiting Gurgi. "Where?" He knelt, plucked a handful of dry grass from the turf, and cast it into the air. The freshening wind bore the blades eastward, toward the *Free Commots*.

"There," Taran said. "As the wind blows, so do we follow it."

Since neither Taran nor Gurgi wished to leave the sheep behind, the wayfarers departed from the valley with the small flock bleating after them. Taran intended offering the animals to the first farmstead with good grazing land, yet several days passed and he saw no inhabited place. The two com-

