“What! a furrier, a man that calls rabbits conies, when he doesn’t turn their skins into squirrels?” asked Bilbo.

“Good gracious heavens, no, no, NO, NO!” said Gandalf. “Don’t be a fool Mr. Baggins if you can help it; and in the name of all wonder don’t mention the word furrier again as long as you are within a hundred miles of his house, nor rug, cape, tippet, muff, nor any other such unfortunate word! He is a skin-changer. He changes his skin: sometimes he is a huge black bear, sometimes he is a great strong black-haired man with huge arms and a great beard. I cannot tell you much more, though that ought to be enough. Some say that he is a bear descended from the great and ancient bears of the mountains that lived there before the giants came. Others say that he is a man descended from the first men who lived before Smaug or the other dragons came into this part of the world, and before the goblins came into the hills out of the North. I cannot say, though I fancy the last is the true tale. He is not the sort of person to ask questions of.

“At any rate he is under no enchantment but his own. He lives in an oak-wood and has a great wooden house; and as a man he keeps cattle and horses which are nearly as marvellous as himself. They work for him and talk to him. He does not eat them; neither does he hunt or eat wild animals. He keeps hives and hives of great fierce bees, and lives most on cream and honey. As a bear he ranges far and wide. I once saw him sitting all alone on
the top of the Carrock at night watching the moon sinking towards the Misty Mountains, and I heard him growl in the tongue of bears: ‘The day will come when they will perish and I shall go back!’ That is why I believe he once came from the mountains himself.”

Bilbo and the dwarves had now plenty to think about, and they asked no more questions. They still had a long way to walk before them. Up slope and down dale they plodded. It grew very hot. Sometimes they rested under the trees, and then Bilbo felt so hungry that he would have eaten acorns, if any had been ripe enough yet to have fallen to the ground.

It was the middle of the afternoon before they noticed that great patches of flowers had begun to spring up, all the same kinds growing together as if they had been planted. Especially there was clover, waving patches of cockscomb clover, and purple clover, and wide stretches of short white sweet honey-smelling clover. There was a buzzing and a whirring and a droning in the air. Bees were busy everywhere. And such bees! Bilbo had never seen anything like them.

“If one was to sting me,” he thought, “I should swell up as big again as I am!”

They were bigger than hornets. The drones were bigger than your thumb, a good deal, and the bands of yellow on their deep black bodies shone like fiery gold.
“We are getting near,” said Gandalf. “We are on the edge of his bee-pastures.”

After a while they came to a belt of tall and very ancient oaks, and beyond these to a high thorn-hedge through which you could neither see nor scramble.

“You had better wait here,” said the wizard to the dwarves; “and when I call or whistle begin to come after me—you will see the way I go—but only in pairs, mind, about five minutes between each pair of you. Bombur is fattest and will do for two, he had better come alone and last. Come on Mr. Baggins! There is a gate somewhere round this way.” And with that he went off along the hedge taking the frightened hobbit with him.

They soon came to a wooden gate, high and broad, beyond which they could see gardens and a cluster of low wooden buildings, some thatched and made of unshaped logs: barns, stables, sheds, and a long low wooden house. Inside on the southward side of the great hedge were rows and rows of hives with bell-shaped tops made of straw. The noise of the giant bees flying to and fro and crawling in and out filled all the air.

The wizard and the hobbit pushed open the heavy creaking gate and went down a wide track towards the house. Some horses, very sleek and well-groomed, trotted up across the grass and looked at them intently with very intelligent faces; then off they galloped to the buildings.
“They have gone to tell him of the arrival of strangers,” said Gandalf.

Soon they reached a courtyard, three walls of which were formed by the wooden house and its two long wings. In the middle there was lying a great oak-trunk with many lopped branches beside it. Standing near was a huge man with a thick black beard and hair, and great bare arms and legs with knotted muscles. He was clothed in a tunic of wool down to his knees, and was leaning on a large axe. The horses were standing by him with their noses at his shoulder.

“Ugh! here they are!” he said to the horses. “They don’t look dangerous. You can be off!” He laughed a great rolling laugh, put down his axe and came forward.

“Who are you and what do you want?” he asked gruffly, standing in front of them and towering tall above Gandalf. As for Bilbo he could easily have trotted through his legs without ducking his head to miss the fringe of the man’s brown tunic.

“I am Gandalf,” said the wizard.

“Never heard of him,” growled the man. “And what’s this little fellow?” he said, stooping down to frown at the hobbit with his bushy black eyebrows.

“That is Mr. Baggins, a hobbit of good family and unimpeachable reputation,” said Gandalf. Bilbo bowed. He had no hat to take off, and was painfully conscious of his many missing buttons. “I am a wizard,” continued Gandalf. “I have heard of you, if you have not heard of me; but perhaps you have heard of
my good cousin Radagast who lives near the Southern borders of Mirkwood?"

“Yes; not a bad fellow as wizards go, I believe. I used to see him now and again,” said Beorn. “Well, now I know who you are, or who you say you are. What do you want?”

“To tell you the truth, we have lost our luggage and nearly lost our way, and are rather in need of help, or at least of advice. I may say we have had rather a bad time with goblins in the mountains.”

“Goblins?” said the big man less gruffly. “O ho, so you’ve been having trouble with them have you? What did you go near them for?”

“We did not mean to. They surprised us at night in a pass which we had to cross; we were coming out of the Lands over West into these countries—it is a long tale.”

“Then you had better come inside and tell me some of it, if it won’t take all day,” said the man leading the way through a dark door that opened out of the courtyard into the house.

Following him they found themselves in a wide hall with a fire-place in the middle. Though it was summer there was a wood-fire burning and the smoke was rising to the blackened rafter in search of the way out through an opening in the roof. They passed through this dim hall, lit only by the fire and the hole above it, and came through another smaller door into a sort of veranda propped on wooden posts made of single tree-trunks. It faced south and was still warm and filled