and also because of the burning of the chief wolf’s nose and the death from the wizard’s fire of many of his chief servants. So much they told him when he forced them, but he guessed there was more wickedness than this afoot, and that a great raid of the whole goblin army with their wolf-allies into the lands shadowed by the mountains might soon be made to find the dwarves, or to take vengeance on the men and creatures that lived there, and who they thought must be sheltering them.

“It was a good story, that of yours,” said Beorn, “but I like it still better now I am sure it is true. You must forgive my not taking your word. If you lived near the edge of Mirkwood, you would take the word of no one that you did not know as well as your brother or better. As it is, I can only say that I have hurried home as fast as I could to see that you were safe, and to offer you any help that I can. I shall think more kindly of dwarves after this. Killed the Great Goblin, killed the Great Goblin!” he chuckled fiercely to himself.

“What did you do with the goblin and the Warg?” asked Bilbo suddenly.

“Come and see!” said Beorn, and they followed round the house. A goblin’s head was stuck outside the gate and a warg-skin was nailed to a tree just beyond. Beorn was a fierce enemy. But now he was their friend, and Gandalf thought it wise to tell him their whole story and the reason of their journey, so that they could get the most help he could offer.
This is what he promised to do for them. He would provide ponies for each of them, and a horse for Gandalf, for their journey to the forest, and he would lade them with food to last them for weeks with care, and packed so as to be as easy as possible to carry—nuts, flour, sealed jars of dried fruits, and red earthenware pots of honey, and twice-baked cakes that would keep good a long time, and on a little of which they could march far. The making of these was one of his secrets; but honey was in them, as in most of his foods, and they were good to eat, though they made one thirsty. Water, he said, they would not need to carry this side of the forest, for there were streams and springs along the road. “But your way through Mirkwood is dark, dangerous and difficult,” he said. “Water is not easy to find there, nor food. The time is not yet come for nuts (though it may be past and gone indeed before you get to the other side), and nuts are about all that grows there fit for food; in there the wild things are dark, queer, and savage. I will provide you with skins for carrying water, and I will give you some bows and arrows. But I doubt very much whether anything you find in Mirkwood will be wholesome to eat or to drink. There is one stream there, I know, black and strong which crosses the path. That you should neither drink of, nor bathe in; for I have heard that it carries enchantment and a great drowsiness and forgetfulness. And in the dim shadows of that place I don’t think you will shoot anything, wholesome or un-
wholesome, without straying from the path. That you MUST NOT do, for any reason.

“That is all the advice I can give you. Beyond the edge of the forest I cannot help you much; you must depend on your luck and your courage and the food I send with you. At the gate of the forest I must ask you to send back my horse and my ponies. But I wish you all speed, and my house is open to you, if ever you come back this way again.”

They thanked him, of course, with many bows and sweepings of their hoods and with many an “at your service, O master of the wide wooden halls!” But their spirits sank at his grave words, and they all felt that the adventure was far more dangerous than they had thought, while all the time, even if they passed all the perils of the road, the dragon was waiting at the end.

All that morning they were busy with preparations. Soon after midday they ate with Beorn for the last time, and after the meal they mounted the steeds he was lending them, and bidding him many farewells they rode off through his gate at a good pace.

As soon as they left his high hedges at the east of his fenced lands they turned north and then bore to the north-west. By his advice they were no longer making for the main forest-road to the south of his land. Had they followed the pass, their path would have led them down a stream from the mountains that joined the great river miles
south of the Carrock. At that point there was a deep ford which they might have passed, if they had still had their ponies, and beyond that a track led to the skirts of the wood and to the entrance of the old forest road. But Beorn had warned them that that way was now often used by the goblins, while the forest-road itself, he had heard, was overgrown and disused at the eastern end and led to impassable marshes where the paths had long been lost. Its eastern opening had also always been far to the south of the Lonely Mountain, and would have left them still with a long and difficult northward march when they got to the other side. North of the Carrock the edge of Mirkwood drew closer to the borders of the Great River, and though here the Mountains too drew down nearer, Beorn advised them to take this way; for at a place a few days’ ride due north of the Carrock was the gate of a little-known pathway through Mirkwood that led almost straight towards the Lonely Mountain.

“The goblins,” Beorn had said, “will not dare to cross the Great River for a hundred miles north of the Carrock nor to come near my house—it is well protected at night!—but I should ride fast; for if they make their raid soon they will cross the river to the south and scour all the edge of the forest so as to cut you off, and Wargs run swifter than ponies. Still you are safer going north, even though you seem to be going back nearer to their strongholds; for that is what they will least
expect, and they will have the longer ride to catch you. Be off now as quick as you may!”

That is why they were now riding in silence, galloping wherever the ground was grassy and smooth, with the mountains dark on their left, and in the distance the line of the river with its trees drawing ever closer. The sun had only just turned west when they started, and till evening it lay golden on the land about them. It was difficult to think of pursuing goblins behind, and when they had put many miles between them and Beorn's house they began to talk and to sing again and to forget the dark forest-path that lay in front. But in the evening when the dusk came on and the peaks of the mountains glowed against the sunset they made a camp and set a guard, and most of them slept uneasily with dreams in which there came the howl of hunting wolves and the cries of goblins.

Still the next morning dawned bright and fair again. There was an autumn-like mist white upon the ground and the air was chill, but soon the sun rose red in the East and the mists vanished, and while the shadows were still long they were off again. So they rode now for two more days, and all the while they saw nothing save grass and flowers and birds and scattered trees, and occasionally small herds of red deer browsing or sitting at noon in the shade. Sometimes Bilbo saw the horns of the harts sticking up out of the long grass, and at first he thought they were the dead branches of trees. That
third evening they were so eager to press on, for Beorn had said that they should reach the forest-gate early on the fourth-day, that they rode still forward after dusk and into the night beneath the moon. As the light faded Bilbo thought he saw away to the right, or to the left, the shadowy form of a great bear prowling along in the same direction. But if he dared to mention it to Gandalf, the wizard only said: “Hush! Take no notice!”

Next day they started before dawn, though their night had been short. As soon as it was light they could see the forest coming as it were to meet them, or waiting for them like a black and frowning wall before them. The land began to slope up and up, and it seemed to the hobbit that a silence began to draw in upon them. Birds began to sing less. There were no more deer; not even rabbits were to be seen. By the afternoon they had reached the eaves of Mirkwood, and were resting almost beneath the great overhanging boughs of its outer trees. Their trunks were huge and gnarled, their branches twisted, their leaves were dark and long. Ivy grew on them and trailed along the ground.

“Well, here is Mirkwood!” said Gandalf. “The greatest of the forests of the Northern world. I hope you like the look of it. Now you must send back these excellent ponies you have borrowed.”

The dwarves were inclined to grumble at this, but the wizard told them they were fools. “Beorn is not as far off as you seem to
think, and you had better keep your promises anyway, for he is a bad enemy. Mr. Bag-gins’ eyes are sharper than yours, if you have not seen each night after dark a great bear going along with us or sitting far off in the moon watching our camps. Not only to guard you and guide you, but to keep an eye on the ponies too. Beorn may be your friend, but he loves his animals as his children. You do not guess what kindness he has shown you in letting dwarves ride them so far and so fast, nor what would happen to you, if you tried to take them into the forest.”

“What about the horse, then?” said Thorin. “You don’t mention sending that back.”

“I don’t, because I am not sending it.”
“What about your promise then?”
“I will look after that. I am not sending the horse back, I am riding it!”

Then they knew that Gandalf was going to leave them at the very edge of Mirkwood, and they were in despair. But nothing they could say would change his mind.

“Now we had this all out before, when we landed on the Carrock,” he said. “It is no use arguing. I have, as I told you, some pressing business away south; and I am already late through bothering with you people. We may meet again before all is over, and then again of course we may not. That depends on your luck and on your courage and sense; and I am sending Mr. Baggins with you. I have told you before that he has more about him than you guess, and you will find that out before long.
So cheer up Bilbo and don’t look so glum. Cheer up Thorin and Company! This is your expedition after all. Think of the treasure at the end, and forget the forest and the dragon, at any rate until tomorrow morning!”

When tomorrow morning came he still said the same. So now there was nothing left to do but to fill their water-skins at a clear spring they found close to the forest-gate, and unpack the ponies. They distributed the packages as fairly as they could, though Bilbo thought his lot was wearisomely heavy, and did not at all like the idea of trudging for miles and miles with all that on his back.

“Don’t you worry!” said Thorin. “It will get lighter all too soon. Before long I expect we shall all wish our packs heavier, when the food begins to run short.”

Then at last they said good-bye to their ponies and turned their heads for home. Off they trotted gaily, seeming very glad to put their tails towards the shadow of Mirkwood. As they went away Bilbo could have sworn that a thing like a bear left the shadow of the trees and shambled off quickly after them.

Now Gandalf too said farewell. Bilbo sat on the ground feeling very unhappy and wishing he was beside the wizard on his tall horse. He had gone just inside the forest after breakfast (a very poor one), and it had seemed as dark in there in the morning as at night, and very secret: “a sort of watching and waiting feeling,” he said to himself.

“Good-bye!” said Gandalf to Thorin. “And goodbye to you all, good-bye! Straight