“Very well then, we must just tighten our belts and trudge on—or we shall be made into supper, and that will be much worse than having none ourselves.”

As they went on Bilbo looked from side to side for something to eat; but the blackberries were still only in flower, and of course there were no nuts, not even hawthornberries. He nibbled a bit of sorrel, and he drank from a small mountain-stream that crossed the path, and he ate three wild strawberries that he found on its bank, but it was not much good.

They still went on and on. The rough path disappeared. The bushes, and the long grasses between the boulders, the patches of rabbit-cropped turf, the thyme and the sage and the marjoram, and the yellow rockroses all vanished, and they found themselves at the top of a wide steep slope of fallen stones, the remains of a landslide. When they began to go down this, rubbish and small pebbles rolled away from their feet; soon larger bits of split stone went clattering down and started other pieces below them slithering and rolling; then lumps of rock were disturbed and bounded off, crashing down with a dust and a noise. Before long the whole slope above them and below them seemed on the move, and they were sliding away, huddled all together, in a fearful confusion of slipping, rattling, cracking slabs and stones.

It was the trees at the bottom that saved them. They slid into the edge of a climbing wood of pines that here stood right up
the mountain slope from the deeper darker forests of the valleys below. Some caught hold of the trunks and swung themselves into lower branches, some (like the little hobbit) got behind a tree to shelter from the onslaught of the rocks. Soon the danger was over, the slide had stopped, and the last faint crashes could be heard as the largest of the disturbed stones went bounding and spinning among the bracken and the pine-roots far below.

“Well! that has got us on a bit,” said Gandalf; “and even goblins tracking us will have a job to come down here quietly.”

“I daresay,” grumbled Bombur; “but they won’t find it difficult to send stones bouncing down on our heads.” The dwarves (and Bilbo) were feeling far from happy, and were rubbing their bruised and damaged legs and feet.

“Nonsense! We are going to turn aside here out of the path of the slide. We must be quick! Look at the light!”

The sun had long gone behind the mountains. Already the shadows were deepening about them, though far away through the trees and over the black tops of those growing lower down they could still see the evening lights on the plains beyond. They limped along now as fast as they were able down the gentle slopes of a pine forest in a slanting path leading steadily southwards. At times they were pushing through a sea of bracken with tall fronds rising right above the hobbit’s head; at times they were march-
ing along quiet as quiet over a floor of pine-needles; and all the while the forest-gloom got heavier and the forest-silence deeper. There was no wind that evening to bring even a sea-sighing into the branches of the trees.

“Must we go any further?” asked Bilbo, when it was so dark that he could only just see Thorin’s beard wagging beside him, and so quiet that he could hear the dwarves’ breathing like a loud noise. “My toes are all bruised and bent, and my legs ache, and my stomach is wagging like an empty sack.”

“A bit further,” said Gandalf.

After what seemed ages further they came suddenly to an opening where no trees grew. The moon was up and was shining into the clearing. Somehow it struck all of them as not at all a nice place, although there was nothing wrong to see.

All of a sudden they heard a howl away down hill, a long shuddering howl. It was answered by another away to the right and a good deal nearer to them; then by another not far away to the left. It was wolves howling at the moon, wolves gathering together!

There were no wolves living near Mr. Baggins’ hole at home, but he knew that noise. He had had it described to him often enough in tales. One of his elder cousins (on the Took side), who had been a great traveller, used to imitate it to frighten him. To hear it out in the forest under the moon was
too much for Bilbo. Even magic rings are not much use against wolves—especially against the evil packs that lived under the shadow of the goblin-infested mountains, over the Edge of the Wild on the borders of the unknown. Wolves of that sort smell keener than goblins, and do not need to see you to catch you!

“What shall we do, what shall we do!” he cried. “Escaping goblins to be caught by wolves!” he said, and it became a proverb, though we now say “out of the frying-pan into the fire” in the same sort of uncomfortable situations.

“Up the trees quick!” cried Gandalf; and they ran to the trees at the edge of the glade, hunting for those that had branches fairly low, or were slender enough to swarm up. They found them as quick as ever they could, you can guess; and up they went as high as ever they could trust the branches. You would have laughed (from a safe distance), if you had seen the dwarves sitting up in the trees with their beards dangling down, like old gentlemen gone cracked and playing at being boys. Fili and Kili were at the top of a tall larch like an enormous Christmas tree. Dori, Nori, Ori, Oin, and Gloin were more comfortable in a huge pine with regular branches sticking out at intervals like the spokes of a wheel. Bifur, Bofur, Bombur, and Thorin were in another. Dwalin and Balin had swarmed up a tall slender fir with few branches and were trying to find a place to sit in the greenery of the topmost boughs. Gandalf, who was a good deal taller than the oth-
ers, had found a tree into which they could not climb, a large pine standing at the very edge of the glade. He was quite hidden in its boughs, but you could see his eyes gleaming in the moon as he peeped out.

And Bilbo? He could not get into any tree, and was scuttling about from trunk to trunk, like a rabbit that has lost its hole and has a dog after it.

“You’ve left the burglar behind again!” said Nori to Dori looking down.

“I can’t be always carrying burglars on my back,” said Dori, “down tunnels and up trees! What do you think I am? A porter?”

“He’ll be eaten if we don’t do something,” said Thorin, for there were howls all round them now, getting nearer and nearer. “Dori!” he called, for Dori was lowest down in the easiest tree, “be quick, and give Mr. Baggins a hand up!”

Dori was really a decent fellow in spite of his grumbling. Poor Bilbo could not reach his hand even when he climbed down to the bottom branch and hung his arm down as far as ever he could. So Dori actually climbed out of the tree and let Bilbo scramble up and stand on his back.

Just at that moment the wolves trotted howling into the clearing. All of a sudden there were hundreds of eyes looking at them. Still Dori did not let Bilbo down. He waited till he had clambered off his shoulders into the branches, and then he jumped for the branches himself. Only just in time! A wolf snapped at his cloak as he swung up, and