The Company of the Ring

by Flapdragon

Summary

A fill for the Hobbit Kink-Meme

Prompt: AU Thorin witnesses Bilbo using the ring and supports his use of it. At least before an accident causes it to fall in the fire and bring ancient writing across the band. After discovering what the ring really is the party decides to halt their current mission to destroy the ring before it regains it's true power. Bilbo thinks he'll be useless without it but Thorin believe otherwise. Because of this everything changes not just the fate of the ring but their friendship morphs into something else.

Notes

This is the first five parts of the fill compiled together for posting with some slight edits

This is going to be me pouring book and movie canon together and stirring it around. A lot. Also, while most of the history here is canon the fact that the Necromancer is Sauron was actually discovered about a hundred years before the quest and Sauron was driven out the year of. Saruman not believing that shit is going down/covering for Sauron at that point
in time is a movie thing (although he did actually do that) but I’m running with it because reasons.
A Change In Direction

He was not supposed to be the only one on watch. Bombur was supposed to be there with him but the dwarf had drifted off and Bilbo himself was yawning. Despite the recent events Gandalf had been pushing them hard to get somewhere (or rather, to somebody) and the entire company was exhausted, especially as nearly all of their supplies had been lost somewhere between the mountains, the goblins and the wargs so they were marching on little food.

Bilbo stood at the edge of the camp, looking outwards. The light of the little low fire that was still burning cast shadows and he had one hand on his sword hilt. His other hand was turning the ring over and over and running a thumb over its smooth contours. He hadn't had time to really look at it since he'd had the luck to pick it up. Now at least he stood a chance if he should be asked to burgle something, an invisible thief would be impossible to spot if he was as quiet as a hobbit.

- Thorin could not sleep. He hadn't said anything of it but the pain from being thrown around by Azog's warg was considerable - even to a dwarf. The pace Gandalf insisted on was not helping. It made it impossible to get comfortable on the ground and, since he was awake, the snores of his companions and the hobbit's constant yawning were irritating. Giving up entirely on sleep he got to his feet as quietly as possible, intending on relieving their hobbit of his watch - somebody should benefit from his sleeplessness.

To his surprise the hobbit didn't turn around as he approached, too busy staring down at something in his hands. He coughed as he got closer and the hobbit jumped a foot in the air and disappeared from sight. Thorin stared.

"Oh," came a voice from nowhere, "it's only you." And a second later Bilbo reappeared. "What was that?" Thorin asked.

"I...erm...you see," Bilbo stuttered, wishing he could just put the ring on again and disappear. Thorin simply continued looking at him. And the whole story of his adventure in the caves came tumbling out. Finding the ring, Gollum, the riddle game (which caused Thorin to raise his eyebrows), finding out what the ring did, catching up to them, the whole thing.

"Well that certainly explains how you managed to escape the goblins," Thorin said, once he was finished. "May I have a look at the ring."

With a strange reluctance Bilbo handed the ring over, it looked delicate and small in Thorin's larger hands. Momentarily the thought of how the ring had managed to fit on Gollum's spidery fingers when it was clearly made for a hobbit hand crossed his mind, but then Thorin began speaking.

"This was forged long ago," Thorin said, "but it is not of dwarf make. Still, many rings of some little power were made in that time, this seems to be no more than one of them if it does only what you say. Keep it, and may it get you out of more trouble." He handed the ring back to Bilbo. "It may be wise to speak of it to the wizard, if he does not already know of it."

"I'll do that," a ring of invisibility was all well and good but he hadn't considered that it might be anything more. Magic was magic, wasn't it?

"Go and get some sleep," Thorin said, "I'll take your watch." Bilbo was not going to argue with that and darted over to his makeshift bedroll and was asleep within minutes.

As the night moved on Thorin considered the hobbit and his ring of invisibility. He’d heard of the great rings, the seven rings given to the dwarves – like the ring Thror had worn which had thereafter passed to Thrain but had been lost with his father - but never had he heard that they conferred invisibility upon the bearer.
Bilbo meant to speak to Gandalf about the ring early the next day but the wizard had gone ahead before he woke up. There had been instructions left with Thorin as to which direction to continue in and that the wizard would return before sundown.

The dwarves took a somewhat more leisurely pace without Gandalf there, conscious that they were all tired and hungry and, in some cases, injured. There had been neither sight nor sound of Azog’s orcs and the eagles had taken them at least a day’s journey ahead, but they still had to keep up the pace since the orcs could travel quickly by night even if they had to hide during the day. Still, the walking made Bilbo worry less. He hoped he could speak to Gandalf privately about the ring, he'd wanted to keep it from the rest of the company – it would be nice to be thought of as a competent burglar, even if it was only because of the ring. It was comforting...if that was the right word, to have Thorin approve of him...of his use of the ring. After the various comments about his competency as a burglar he wasn’t sure if the dwarves would see the ring as cheating.

Gandalf, as it turned out, returned before sunset with news both good and ill.
“I have found you lodgings for tonight at least and maybe a little longer,” Gandalf said, “you can rest in safety and resupply before you reach Mirkwood.”
“Surely you mean ‘we’, Mr. Gandalf,” Dori said.
“No, I do not,” Gandalf said, “I meant to get you over the mountains and that I have done, in a fashion. I am much further east than I ever meant to come with you, for I have some other pressing business to attend to. I may look in on you before this adventure is over, but this was never my adventure to have. I will go with you a little further, to the lodgings I mentioned, but then I must leave.”

Bilbo wasn’t the only one who protested at that, but the hobbit was the most vocal. After all, he was the one who seemed to get into the most trouble when Gandalf wasn’t around. The trolls, the stone giants, the goblins and Gollum had all happened when Gandalf wasn’t there. The only one who was silent was Thorin, and Bilbo looked at him curiously while the other dwarves tried to promise Gandalf a share in the gold when they reclaimed it. Surely Thorin would know best of all of them that there was no way they could defeat a dragon without a wizard. Instead Thorin simply looked more solemn and held up a hand for silence, grumbling the dwarves stopped their protestations.
“Thank you Thorin,” Gandalf said. “Now, we must head onwards to reach the lodgings before sundown.”

They had to ford a river, which was fine for Gandalf and all well and good for the dwarves – since the shallower ford only came up to the chests of the dwarves, maybe a little higher at some of the lower points – but Bilbo was neck deep in the water for the most part and had to keep one hand in his pocket at all times for fear of losing the ring. Fili and Kili had all but plunged into the water, prompting some muttering from the older dwarves who seemed as reluctant as Bilbo to go into the water. Gandalf had proceeded next, since the water came to his waist and did not seem to bother him. Slowly the dwarves had shuffled their way across the water and Bilbo, who (despite an adventurous childhood) could not swim, had to follow. Fortunately Bofur, who was in front of Bilbo, did not mind the hobbit clinging on to the back of his coat and Thorin, who Bilbo found out was behind him, caught him when he slipped and half drowned himself and shoved him back upright. Bilbo was half expecting a comment about that but by the time everybody was safely across, they had all quite forgotten about the incident.

Although all anybody wanted to do was lay down and dry off, Gandalf insisted that they keep going. There, at least, Bilbo had some advantage since he was not wearing boots and his feet dried much quicker than the dwarves boots so he did not have to squeal the whole way until Gandalf held up a hand and they stopped. They’d begun passing huge patches of flowers earlier in the day,
patches which reminded Bilbo of his own little garden – although on a much grander scale, since the different types of clovers all looked like they had been planted. Bees buzzed through the air, bees bigger than hornets. It was only when they’d come to an nigh-impenetrable belt of oak trees and a high thorny hedge beyond them that Gandalf had stopped them.

“Now I shall introduce you to your host, but since there are so many of you and he is unaccustomed to guests you had better come two at a time at five minute intervals,” said Gandalf, then he turned to Bilbo. “Come along Bilbo, there’s a gate around here somewhere.”

There was a gate, a huge wooden affair, but beyond that Bilbo almost thought he was back in the Shire’s farmlands. He had to trot to keep up with Gandalf as they approached a huge wooden house. Outside it a man was standing, he looked to be about the normal height for Big People until they got closer and Bilbo discovered that he was much bigger. He towered above Gandalf and Bilbo only came up to his knees.

“Who are you,” demanded the man, “and what do you want.”

“I am Gandalf,” said the wizard.

“And who’s this,” the man said, bending down to peer at Bilbo.

“This is Bilbo Baggins, a hobbit of the Shire.” The man seemed to mull that over and Gandalf continued, “and I am a wizard. You know my cousin Radagast, who lives in Mirkwood, it was he who told me of you, Beorn.”

“Radagast you say,” Beorn said, “not a bad fellow, as wizards go, passed by here a few days ago.”

“Indeed,” said Gandalf.

“What is it you want?” said Beorn, gruffly.

“Your aid, and some shelter. We, that is to say the company I am travelling with, lost our ponies and nearly lost our lives after a rather bad time with goblins and orcs in the mountains.”

“Goblins and orcs?” Beorn said, in the least threatening tone he had used, “what ever were you doing near them?”

“For the goblins, we did not mean to cross their path, but for the orcs – well that’s a longer tale.” Gandalf said.

“Then by all means, come inside and tell it,” Beorn said.

Eventually Gandalf had told the whole tale, though much of the early part of it was punctuated by the comings of the dwarves (and for some parts thereafter, especially those for which Gandalf had not been present, there were some interjections by the dwarves) until all fifteen members of the company and Beorn were sitting around the table while Gandalf finished the tale with their fortunately timed rescue by the eagles. The sun was dimming and shadows were falling.

“Well that was a fine tale,” Beorn said, “the finest I’ve heard in a long while. You may be making all of it up, but it certainly deserves supper.”

He stood up from the table and clapped his hands, Bilbo was not the only one to goggle openly as Beorn’s ponies and dogs and sheep made quick work of setting out torches and bringing plates and cutlery to the table. Though the meal contained no meat the dwarves and hobbit fell on it with great gusto. It was Beorn’s turn to tell them tales of the forest which barred their way east – Mirkwood that had once been Greenwood the great.

By the time their meal was finished true night had fallen and the animals, at Beorn’s call, came in to remove the plates and light the fire pit that was in the centre of the house – which was much bigger than it had first appeared. Beorn excused himself outside and the company found that beds had been laid out for them, only straw mattresses and blankets but better than the hard ground with only their clothes to keep them warm. Though they all were replete and somewhat dozy from the meal, they sat around the fire and Balin told some of the dwarvish legends.

Bilbo had contrived to sit next to Gandalf, hoping to strike up a conversation and mention the ring (especially now he knew that Gandalf would be leaving them) but with Balin’s storytelling, he
could not. It was not until the story was over and the dwarves began talking amongst themselves or heading off to bed that Bilbo managed it.

“Gandalf,” he said.

“Yes Bilbo,” the wizard said.

“I wanted to talk to you about...well about how I escaped from the goblin cave,” Bilbo said, once again removing the ring from his pocket and turning it over and over between his fingers.

“Indeed,” said Gandalf.

Once again Bilbo told the tale of how he’d fallen and found a ring and then subsequently found out what it could do and escaped.

“I mean, Thorin said it probably wasn’t much, but I thought I ought to check.” Bilbo finished.

“Well that’s quite an adventure,” said Gandalf, “will you show me the ring you spoke of.”

Bilbo attempted to flip the ring into the air and catch it to show Gandalf, in his mind it looked rather impressive, except that he fumbled the catch and the ring went into the fire.

“Bother.” Bilbo said vehemently, looking around for a poker or tongs to get at it.

Thorin, who had been sitting close enough to hear the tale over again, appeared at Bilbo’s shoulder and quickly reached into the fire to pick it out. Bilbo gasped but Thorin’s hand was unburnt as he dropped the ring onto the flat top of his other gauntlet to let it cool.

Dwarf, hobbit and wizard watched as, slowly, a fiery script began to make itself known around the band of the ring.

“That is not any language I know,” Thorin said.

“Nor is it one you should,” Gandalf said, looking grim, “though the letters are Elvish the language is that of Mordor. I will not utter it’s true form here but in the Common Tongue it says ‘One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them, One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them’, two lines of a verse of Elven-lore.

Three Rings for Elven-kings under the sky,
Seven for the Dwarf-lords in their halls of stone,
Nine for Mortal Men doomed to die,
One for the Dark Lord on his dark throne
In the Land of Mordor where the Shadows lie
One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them
One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them
In the Land of Mordor where the Shadows lie.

This is the One Ring that was thought lost.”

Bilbo noticed that the dwarves who had gone to bed had all been roused and the whole company sat around the fire, staring at the ring which lay – quite harmless – on Thorin’s arm guard. Thorin sat down, but allowed the ring to remain sitting on his arm guard since neither Bilbo nor Gandalf made a move to take it.

“What’s that mean?” Ori asked.

“Long before Erebor was founded, when Durin’s folk lived peacefully in Moria, the Elvish settlement of Eregion was right outside the walls of Moria. Elves and Dwarves traded peacefully,” there was much scoffing at that, but Gandalf simply spoke over it, “and the Elvish smiths there were famed. It was then that Sauron the deceiver, disguised in a fair form and calling himself Annatar, the Lord of Gifts, came to Eregion. There he laboured with Celebrimbor, the grandson of Fëanor and the other craftsmen of Eregion, who began to create Rings of Power. Sixteen of these unknowingly had Sauron’s influence. Nine of these rings were given to great mortal kings and seven to worthy dwarf lords. Sauron’s purpose in doing so was to control these ring bearers. Swiftly the nine kings of men fell under Sauron’s power but the dwarf lords endured and would
not fall,” that prompted cheering, which only quieted under the combined glares of Thorin and Gandalf, “but unknown to Sauron, Celebrimbor forged three rings that were hidden from his influence. These were given to the elves. Sauron did not give up and instead he forged one ring to rule all the others, a ring into which he poured much of his own spirit. Enough that, even when he was slain by Isildur, he lived on because Isildur took the ring. Long has it passed out of sight and many thought it lost and Sauron truly dead.”

“And then our hobbit finds it on the floor of a goblin cave,” Thorin finished.
“It would appear so. This ring has much greater power than simple invisibility. My dear Bilbo, your fumble may yet save thousands of lives.”
“How do you mean?” Bilbo said.
“I may have been able to read the words on the ring once they were visible, but I would not have known how to make them so – nor, I think, would any other of the wizards or the elf lords who walk this earth today. If you had not slipped and the ring had not fallen into the fire I would have supposed the same as Thorin and Sauron’s power would have been allowed to grow. This is the final piece. The blade that Radagast brought from Dol Guldur was not of this world, Dol Guldur has long been a fortress of Sauron though it is but a ruin now. If Sauron is still alive then his servants, the Ringwraiths – the spirits of the nine kings of men enslaved to Sauron – are not destroyed, as was thought, but simply in hiding with their master. The unusual activity of trolls, orcs and wargs crossing the Bruinen is testament to Sauron’s growing power and something must be done about it. There is a difficult choice for this company. To continue onwards to Erebor and Smaug or to abandon that quest in favour of another. To take this ring to the only place in Middle Earth where it may be destroyed.”
“And where is that?” Thorin asked.
“Mount Doom in Mordor,” said Gandalf. He looked around at the dwarves, who were all in various states of shock, and at Bilbo who was just about clinging to consciousness. “But it is late, or else early, and this is not a decision to be made lightly. Go to bed. Bilbo, take the ring back from Thorin.”
“But why can’t you take it?” Bilbo said.
“I already bear one ring. Bearing two is not permitted and I fear that if I should take the ring then it might wake. In Gollum’s company and in yours it is asleep, so long as it remains that way you may touch it with ease – though I would not have you use it save in the last depths of despair. Even Thorin taking it is a risk, for his father and grandfather both bore one of the seven.”

Bilbo flexed his fingers and quickly snatched up the ring from where it lay on Thorin’s arm, dropping it in his pocket as quickly as possible. It didn’t seem any different than it had before he knew what it was, it was no heavier, but it felt different somehow. He wasn’t sure if it was because he knew now that it was evil rather than just a useful tool or if it had woken up.

The three of them proceeded to bed. Beorn’s animals had managed to lay out a mattress that was indisputably for Gandalf close to the fire, indisputable because it was nearly twice the size of the other pallets, but the other dwarves had graciously left the two normal mattresses closest to the fire open for Thorin and Bilbo.

Despite the exertions of the day and the terror and excitement of the night Bilbo was having trouble getting to sleep, knowing that he had an evil dark lord’s soul in his pocket.

Eventually Bilbo fell into an uneasy and not at all restful sleep, only to be awoken by Beorn coming in. Feeling not at all himself, and wishing he could leave the ring under his mattress or else in some other place so he didn’t have to carry it, Bilbo got up – maybe some breakfast would make him feel a little better.

Gandalf was already awake and sitting at the table. Bilbo hopped, for it was a goodly hop to get on the bench and his feet tangled awkwardly, on to the bench next to the wizard. He thought
about asking if this was real, if it wasn’t just some horrible dream he’d had because he’d drowned or something, the ring he’d picked up on a whim couldn’t be one forged by some evil so great and so dark he couldn’t really comprehend it. That Gandalf wasn’t about to ask, or strongly suggest, that Thorin and the company abandon trying get their home back because of something he’d done. They’d barely accepted him as it was, they’d hate him if his finding this ring meant they lost their home. He should have just left the damned thing lying on the ground in that cave.

Beorn seemed in a good mood, his animals at his heels bringing breakfast as the dwarves - one by one - came to the breakfast table. Their expressions were all grim, and Bilbo couldn’t meet their eyes.

“That story you told, Gandalf,” Beorn said, “I liked it much last night but I like it still better this morning, for now I know it to be true.”

It transpired, and Bilbo became very glad of Beorn’s good humour for the large man spoke at length, that Beorn had changed shape into a bear (which Gandalf assured the dwarves he had mentioned to them but they all swore he had not) and headed back across the river and up towards the mountain when he had run straight into Azog and the rest of his orc pack. He had not managed to capture nor kill Azog but as a great, tireless bear, he had chased down one warg rider to question and run the others off. That rider had confirmed much of the story but Beorn had had to grab a goblin sentry to confirm the rest of it. He was mightily proud of the orc and goblin heads which now adorned his gate and the warg skin nailed to a tree. It was only after he had finished telling the tale that he seemed to notice the solemn mood which hung over the rest of the company.

“I thought this news would be greeted with celebration. Your enemy is driven far behind you, though wargs move swifter than ponies, I am resolved to give you food and mounts for your quest onwards and hereafter I shall think better of any dwarf I see knowing what you have done,” Beorn said, looking around at all of them. “What is it that so troubles you all?”

There were some shared glances between the dwarves but then Gandalf spoke, outlining quite generally what it was that Bilbo had found and what it meant. Beorn’s expression likewise turned grim.

“And what do you propose to do about this?” Beorn said.

“That we have not decided,” Thorin said.

“You must do so forthwith,” said Beorn, “for I do not want that thing within my lands any longer than it has to be.” With that, he left the hall.

“Now it comes to it,” Gandalf said, “we must decide what to do.”

“We, Gandalf?” Dwalin said, “I thought you were leaving us.”

“And indeed I was, but with this…new development, no matter what course you decide I shall go with the ring at least until we have passed through Mirkwood. For if it is truly Sauron within the fortress at Dol Guldur, I do not know how far his reach has spread and if his mind would seek it out.” Gandalf said.

“Very well,” said Thorin, “we know what you would counsel us, wizard. To delay our return to Erebor and go instead to Mordor to destroy this ring. What do the rest of the company say?”

“Could we not go first to Erebor and, once that is reclaimed, go forth from there to Mordor with a greater strength?” Balin suggested.

“Erebor has been inhabited by a dragon for one hundred and seventy one years,” Gandalf said, “returning it to rights and building it back to its former glory will not be a swift undertaking. One that is perhaps better suited to times of peace.”

“If Sauron is growing as powerful as you say,” Dori said, “what is to stop him from using Smaug?”

“That is precisely the reason I would have us set out now. Curtail Sauron’s power before he has the chance to do just that. The reappearance of the One Ring will convince those who had thought, or wished, Sauron destroyed that he not yet dead. I believe they can hold his power back until the Ring can be destroyed. Besides, Sauron would have to have much more power than he
does now to convince a dragon to leave such a hoard.” That was not well received. Bifur said something in Khuzdul which made the dwarves nod. “Because if Sauron returns to his full power while you sit in your mountain, he will not leave you be.” Gandalf boomed. “He may attack the strongholds of Men and Elves first, but eventually his eye will turn to the Iron Hills, to Erebor and to the Blue Mountains as the last of the free folk. If you wait and Sauron is returned to his strength then Durin’s Bane will not be an idle legend.”

Bilbo was liking this less and less. He did not much like being in the middle of an argument, quite literally in this case, especially over something he had caused. He couldn’t even put on his ring and leave because it was evil. Instead he tried to make himself as small and unnoticeable as possible and hope everybody ignored him. Which they mostly seemed happy to do, as the discussion became louder. He didn’t even know what outcome he wanted it to be, unless somebody was going to offer to take the ring off of him before they journeyed to Mordor (wherever that was). Gandalf wouldn’t take it off him and none of the other dwarves seemed like they were about to offer to take the ring - then again, was it really their problem, he’d been the one to pick it up.

The argument continued long after breakfast was finished and cleaned away. He couldn’t blame them for not wanting to come, he didn’t particularly want to go. It was the right thing to do, destroy evil, but that didn’t mean he wanted to march into Mordor and drop the ring in Mount Doom. He noticed that it mostly seemed to be the older dwarves, the ones with more connections to Erebor, who were speaking - Fili and Kili in particular seemed to be keeping quiet. Gandalf did seem to be swaying some of them as the argument quieted but Thorin and Balin seemed to be standing firm that the quest to Erebor was paramount and they could always go to Mordor later. “Then let the company vote on it.” Thorin said with an air of finality, looking around. Gandalf agreed that that was fair.

The votes were cast and Bilbo was a little surprised when he was included. He had to remind himself more than once that destroying the ring was the right thing to do, bigger evil and all that, and how strange had his life become when going to fight a dragon became the easy choice. Maybe he regretted his decision a little more when they reached the seventh vote for going to Mordor because Bilbo got a good look at Thorin’s face and how it crumpled just a little bit before the dwarf king could control it. Thorin had been waiting a hundred and something years to get his home back and he, Bilbo, had accidentally broken that dream. In the end, despite the loyalty they owed to Thorin, there were only three hold-outs and nine were in favour of going. “That is settled then,” Thorin said, voice not shaking an iota, “we go to Mordor.”

Bilbo was glad it was over, if only because it meant he could finally get down from the table, except Gandalf stopped him. “If you’re to take the ring safely to Mordor, it ought to be somewhere more secure than your pocket,” the wizard said, Bilbo winced a little - he didn’t want to anchor this thing to him any more permanently - but he accepted the finely made chain that Gandalf gave him. It was finer quality than anything he’d seen in the Shire so he guessed it was dwarven made. He wondered which of the company had given up one more thing to the quest. Resignedly he took the ring from his pocket to thread it through the chain, handling it as little as possible with only his fingertips, and closed the clasp of the chain around his neck. It felt more like the click of fetters closing around wrists than it ought and the ring was heavier than it had been in his pocket.

The entire party was very quiet and spread out within the hall. Thorin had gone somewhere by himself but even the rest of the dwarves were only sitting in small groups, at least until Beorn returned. The giant man spoke quietly to Gandalf alone, to Bilbo’s utter relief, and then left again. Lunch was an awkward affair, eaten where they were sitting and with very little of the relief or merriment that had been present at the previous meals.
With nothing else to do and not really daring to speak to the dwarves, Bilbo turned his attention to his mending. He didn’t have any buttons to fix his ruined waistcoat but all his clothing was in need of mending by this point and he spent a boring enough afternoon trying not to think about what was ahead and stabbing his fingers with the too-big needle and thread that one of Beorn’s dogs had brought him when he’d asked.

Supper was taken at the table so they all had to be sociable and sit at the table.
“Tomorrow you shall leave,” Beorn boomed, “with provisions enough to last you a good long while and ponies.”
There was a general thanking of Beorn, though it was rather lacklustre. Gandalf had not spoken of what road they were to be taking to Mordor and Bilbo wasn’t entirely sure where Mordor was, Thorin’s map had only shown the Lonely Mountain, nothing further south than that.

The next morning dawned early and bright. Beorn roused them as soon as he came into the house and as soon as they’d rubbed the sleep out of their eyes they could see fifteen packs sitting neatly in a row, thirteen of roughly equal size but one was smaller and another larger. They were allowed one final, quick, breakfast before Beorn led them outside where fourteen ponies and a horse stood waiting. They were sturdier than their previous ponies, and regarded them with eyes that were more intelligent as well. There was a general ruckus amongst most of the company, deciding who would get which pony after Thorin had chosen his and settling their packs on them.
“What about the orcs following us?” Bilbo asked Gandalf, quietly.
Beorn obviously heard what he said and, to Bilbo’s mortification, replied in his great, loud voice, “No orc would dare to cross the Great River for a hundred miles north of my house, nor come anywhere near it. Orcs are not overfond of water and there are few fords south of here until the woods of Lothlorien. The ponies will stay with you as long for as long as you can ride them but when you reach Lorien, you must allow them to leave.”

The company agreed and soon they were off. Heading southwards instead of towards Mirkwood, but the tree line was not so very far off. Occasionally Bilbo would catch Thorin looking wistfully westwards as the far-off shadow of the mountain passed out of sight.

As soon as they were a ways away from Beorn’s lands, Thorin turned to Gandalf.
“Lorien, Gandalf. More elves?”
“Yes, Lorien,” the wizard said, “Sauron needs to be found out and fought, but if I am to continue on the quest with you then others must do it. The Lady Galadriel can call a council where we can present the ring and make others aware of his presence. She can also provide the company with boats,” that caused some grumbling within the company and even Bilbo was nervous - he’d never been boating, “which will take us closer to our destination with greater speed.”

They kicked their ponies to go a little faster when far-off warg howls could be heard.
“How far’s Lorien?” Fili asked.
“From here, it is some 200 miles, but these are Beorn’s ponies. It should only take us a week or so to get there.”
“At least we’ve woods to take cover in, if needs be,” Gloin said.
Gandalf made a noise that could have been either approval or disapproval and kicked his horse towards the front of the string of ponies.

Despite having never ridden before going on this adventure Bilbo couldn’t help but be glad that they had ponies once again, even after the two days of rest at Beorn’s house he was still aching from his fall within the mountain and the battle shortly afterwards. This pony wasn’t quite Myrtle, but he...she...it didn’t seem to be trying to take advantage of its novice rider. He was fairly sure they were making good timing, although he couldn’t be certain and he wasn’t entirely sure what ‘making good time’ was when on a pony, but still. Hopefully this time they wouldn’t have to worry about the ponies being eaten by trolls or chased away by wargs while they slept. No, if they
were going to be chased by wargs, Bilbo rather hoped that they were *on* the ponies when that happened. Azog was all the more worrying now, if they got captured and the ring was discovered how long would it take an orc to work out what the ring did or for Sauron to find it and the world to end (or whatever it was that was so bad that would happen if Sauron got power again), not that it would be of much consequence to him since he would likely be dead.

At least being on the road again had one positive effect. Even if they weren’t heading quite in the direction they had planned the company did have to start talking to one another again and the general mood raised a little, apart from Thorin. Bilbo had been trying to avoid contact with the company’s leader, no longer because he was afraid the dwarf leader would disapprove of him but because he wondered if Thorin didn’t blame him for taking them so far away from his home. Durin’s Day was drawing closer and once that passed they’d have to wait a whole year before there was a chance of getting into the mountain again. It was little comfort that he was mostly avoiding the rest of the company as much as he could as well.

“Don’t fret master hobbit,” Bofur said, drawing up next to Bilbo, “he’ll come around.”
The company head down towards Lorien, but there are some rather unexpected diversions on the way.

The first three days of their travels southwards had been quite uneventful, sleeping in the lee of the tree line and with everybody on a more careful watch. More than one of those watching at night had spotted, or thought they had spotted, an overlarge bear following them.

“That is Beorn,” Gandalf had said matter-of-factly, when he was asked about it, “he means us no harm but he will make sure we keep our promise regarding the ponies. Though it is unusual for him to venture so far south.”

Having a giant, who could also turn into a bear, following them was a boon and a curse. Gandalf had explained that Beorn would not suffer animals to be killed, even for food, which meant no meat (even if any animals would come near the trail of a giant bear) but they had an ally within shouting distance if it became necessary. The foodstuffs Beorn had given them were not in any way lacking, the nuts, flour, dried fruit, honey and twice-baked cakes were all very tasty and they would last the company for weeks with some care, simply that the dwarves rather enjoyed meat.

The dusting of low scrub which covered the mostly flat stretch from the river to the trees didn’t make for very good cover but it was far more comfortable outdoor bedding than they’d found since they had hit the mountains. The ponies were turned out to graze at night and it was that much easier to keep an eye on them, though with their exposed position no fires had been lit. Fortunately it was still the last days of Afterlithe (if Bilbo had got his days right, it might have been early Wedmath already) so it was no hardship to sleep outside, even with few enough blankets.

It was much harder to ignore one another when the entire company was travelling together. Balin and Dwalin, the other two hold outs for going to Erebor first, had both spoken to Bilbo in passing without any sort of recrimination for being the cause of this whole thing. He had yet to speak to Thorin, but that might have been his own cowardice since the dwarf king had spoken to the rest of the company. The cause of the whole thing was still sitting, quite harmlessly, strung around Bilbo’s neck and it hadn’t gotten heavier or exhibited any signs of waking up that he could discern - which he was grateful for, he didn’t think he could fight the soul of some powerful dark lord.

Nevertheless, as they travelled south, the howls of wargs got closer and closer. On a normal day the river was out of their sights, but Bilbo could only hope that the wargs were still on the other side of it. It was the third night of travelling, just as they were all settling down to sleep - apart from Oin and Gloin who were on watch - when the warg howls could be heard especially close. They all sat up and the moon, which was large in the sky, could be seen in the distance glittering off the river and illuminating a host of dark figures on the other bank. One larger than the others, though it was impossible to tell for certain.

“Azog,” Thorin hissed and the company hurriedly began gathering their belongings, unsure of how well - or even if - they could be seen by the orcs, mounted up and headed off in a line at a canter keeping as close to the tree line as was possible.
Eventually they had to slow down for the sake of the ponies who had kept up the pace for longer
than normal ponies could be expected to but who did, eventually, tire and need to be walked.
Hoping they’d put enough distance between themselves and Azog the entire company dismounted
and took their packs off of the ponies - they might need a burst of speed out of them if they
weren’t far enough ahead.
“I thought Beorn said he’d driven them off,” Bilbo said, heart racing.
“And I don’t doubt that he did,” Gandalf said, “but they would have fled into the mountains
where Beorn could not or would not follow so they could regroup. Wargs can travel farther and
faster than almost any horse even if they had reason to be wary of Beorn.”
“They can’t cross the river, can they?” Ori asked.
“The further south we get, the less chance there is they will try and cross the Anduin,” Gandalf
said,
“That’s not really an answer, Gandalf,” said Nori.
“There are no fords southwards which orcs or wargs might cross” said Gandalf, “for they are too
swift and too deep but there is an old ford which we passed some two days ago which they may
chance, if they dare to get so close to Beorn’s house. Our best hope is to press on southwards as
fast as we may and hope that they are discovered.”
“And if they don’t cross the river,” Dwalin said, “if they wait for us to cross over to them?”
“Though we cannot see it we should shortly come to the Gladden Fields, where the Gladden
River joins the Anduin. The Gladden comes down from the mountains and is no small stream. If
they wish to go around it they will have to go deep up into the mountains and come back down.”

When they stopped walking altogether, as the sun crept over the trees and the not-so-distant
mountains - which Bilbo had been informed were the mountains of Mirkwood - for a few
moments making the forest not look quite so imposing, Thorin decided - and Gandalf quite agreed
- that all of their belongings which were not vitally important could be left behind. If they were to
be chased then they needed the ponies to be as light on their feet as possible. That held them up a
while but when they departed it was with packs that were lighter than they had been.

A faster pace than the walking they had been doing was generally agreed and the ponies set to a
bouncing trot which Bilbo found damnably uncomfortable but which ate up the ground in front of
them. Gandalf called a halt at midday and they stopped to sleep, eat and rest the ponies. The rest
was short lived and sooner than Bilbo would have liked they had to mount up again and ride
onwards, still clinging closer to the trees. When the sun started heading towards the Misty
Mountains, casting huge jagged shadows as it passed behind them, the company did not stop to
make camp, instead they pushed onwards.

Their everpresent bear shadow did not seem to be following them any longer and Bilbo could
only hope that it was because Beorn was dealing with Azog. At night, when he wasn’t worrying
more about being eaten by wargs, the woods to their left looked a lot more imposing and he
suddenly remembered that he’d heard Radagast mention something about before the wargs had
attacked the first time - giant spiders. He wasn’t afraid of spiders usually, they were just another
part of nature and useful for catching flies, but the thought of giant ones was less than comforting.
He found himself looking deeper into the trees, worrying about spotting one but eventually he
became too tired to care unless they were under attack from them.

They didn’t stop at all through the night, although they dismounted several times to walk to the
ponies. By the time the sun rose again Bilbo was half asleep on his pony and listing ever so
slightly to one side - Bofur, who was riding next to him, would shove him back upright if he ever
went a bit to far sideways. He wasn’t the only one, Dori and Nori were doing a better job of
keeping Ori balanced but the young scribe was just as tired as the hobbit and the rest of the
company appeared to be conducting a yawning competition.

“We can’t keep pushing ‘em like this,” Dwalin said, riding next to Thorin, “half of ‘em wouldn’t
wake up if we were attacked and the little burglar is about to fall off his pony.”
Thorin agreed and drew the company to a halt. Sluggishly they made camp and were mostly too tired and stiff to even bother eating before the bedding rolls were broken out and everybody save Gandalf - who didn’t seem at all tired - went to sleep. Gandalf looked over the fourteen sleeping figures, this quest was far off the mark he’d intended already and it would only get further so. Certainly he’d intended to give the son of one of his favourite pupils an adventure, surely nobody could have a mother like Belladonna Took and grow up so wholly unadventurous, but this was a little further than he’d intended it to go. Still, what had been started could not stop.

They were all roused in the mid-afternoon, Gandalf having allowed them to sleep as much as possible, and after a short meal that was neither lunch nor dinner nor breakfast but became all three combined they mounted up onto the very well refreshed ponies and trotted onwards.

Once again the dying sun appeared to be eaten by the great jagged teeth of the mountain and the ponies became unusually skittish, sticking together in one group rather than strung out in a line no matter what their riders were attempting to urge them to do. The bridles the ponies were wearing had no bits and the dwarves attempts to get the ponies to move into a line simply by using their legs was not working so there were an awful lot of banged shins and accidental elbowing. Quite what was making the ponies skittish they didn’t know until the last rays of the sun had been replaced with the dark of the night, still lit up by the waning moon, and the first bone chilling howl of a warg could be heard.

Far too close behind them, no longer off to the side.

The ponies bolted. Dwarf, hobbit and wizard alike clinging for dear life on to the reins of their ponies. Kili, whose pony was at the back of the herd, risked a look behind them and sure enough, the dark shapes of wargs had broken from the tree-line a few miles behind them and were racing towards them.

“Wargs,” he called, though the rush of wind and the thunder of hooves on the ground threatened to steal his words away.

Bilbo gripped the reins even harder, until he could feel his nails bite into his palms, and squeezed his eyes shut - the pony was just as afraid of the wargs as he was, it would take him in any direction that was opposite to one a warg was coming from, all he had to do was stay on it and not be sick.

The forest in front of them curved outwards and they’d intended on following the tree line around, but instead the ponies careened into the forest, no matter the amount of pulling on the right rein they did. The tight herd they’d maintained broke up as the ponies had to dodge nimbly around trees. The forest was dark, low branches smacked the heads and shoulders of the riders and Bilbo could have sworn he felt something sticky. Then he wasn’t moving forward any more and he had to open his eyes. In front of him were the ruins of a castle, the woods had fallen away behind him. Instead his pony was turning in frantic circles and, at the cries from its fellows in the distance, it reared up and Bilbo rolled head over furry heels over his pack and onto the ground.

When he got to his feet the pony had already disappeared with his pack into the forest, back northwards. The ring around his neck felt heavy and he began to feel quite strange as, without his particular will, his feet began taking stumbling steps towards the ruined castle, eerie and blue in the moonlight with dark shadows which flickered unnaturally. There was a ringing in his ears, a piercing whine that caused him to clap his hands over his ears but it didn’t stop. Another faltering step towards the single bridge into the ruin. Tremendous pressure inside his head. Another step forwards.

A shrill neigh from behind him broke whatever it was that had ahold of him and he turned around to find Thorin on his pony, though the poor creature was prancing in anxiety with its eyes rolling white in its head.
“Come on,” Thorin said and Bilbo ran, knees nearly buckling under him, to the pony. One strong arm hauled him upwards and he found himself wedged between Thorin’s pack and Thorin as the pony was turned away from the ruin and began to move quickly between the trees, this time in the right direction. Bilbo found himself shaking, even as he clung on to Thorin and his face ended up mashed into the fur of the dwarf’s coat, even as the ring grew lighter until it seemed no more of a burden than it had been when he’d first picked it up.

There were wargs right behind them, Thorin only had one hand on the reins and the other had unsheathed Orcrist. The pony seemed to be the one directing them between the trees and Bilbo thought he saw, when he sat a little more upright, a warg with an orc rider crash into a tree as the pony dodged around it. Bilbo could feel the sweat pouring off the animal as it exerted itself and they broke free of the treeline. Too soon, too close, the wargs broke from the trees behind them and the pony seemed to somehow step it up a gear as if it hadn’t been running for most of the night.

He couldn’t see around Thorin to see if the rest of the company had made it away safely in front of them. He did not dare to try and draw his sword, which had miraculously stayed in its sheath when he fell, to try and defend them, he’d only end up hurting the pony. The chase slowed a little, all of the animals had been running all night and the wargs likely for longer, and Bilbo thanked Beorn again for giving them mounts such as this one.

It was only when the sound of squealing orcs and yelping wargs could be heard behind him that he looked up, he could see the corpses of some of the wargs and the orcs even as they passed into the distance. Another volley of arrows flew overhead and most of their pursuers began falling back. Bilbo lent sideways enough to see around Thorin and in front of them, though a ways off by the river, stood a phalanx of elvish archers, huge bows drawn back with arrows on their strings ready to loose a third volley of arrows to discourage the more intrepid orcs. Still the pony kept on its charge until it came to the banks of the river where it stopped, sides heaving dramatically and sweat streaming down its body. Thorin allowed Bilbo to slither down off of the pony before he dismounted and removed the pack from it. Its legs were shaking worse than Bilbo’s as the elves carefully led it on to the barge.

“Thank you,” Bilbo said quietly to Thorin, when he found his voice, “for coming back for me, I mean.”

“It wouldn’t do to leave our hobbit in Mirkwood,” Thorin said, “why were you heading for the ruin, if I may ask.”

“I don’t know,” Bilbo said, shaken, “I don’t think I was entirely myself, and not in a good way.”

“You think it was the…” Thorin cut himself off, looking up at the four elves who were skilfully paddling them around a sharp corner and out of the fast flowing river into a tributary and two of the archers who had stepped on to the barge with them.

“I don’t know,” Bilbo said, “but I don’t much like to think about what would have happened if you hadn’t arrived when you did.”

“I think we both owe our thanks to this brave girl here,” Thorin said, patting the pony who had decided sailing wasn’t for her and was laying down on the barge.

“She will be well looked after,” one of the archers said, “before she is returned to Beorn.”

Eventually they came to a halt at some sort of quay, though it appeared to simply have grown out of the bank, and Bilbo and Thorin were ushered off the boats. There, in a clearing not far from the dock, were the rest of the company save Gandalf. As soon as Thorin and Bilbo came into sight they were rushed by the rest of the dwarves demanding to know if they were well and what on earth had happened. Bofur even began patting Bilbo down to check for injuries until Bilbo assured him that apart from some bruises he was as well as he’d ever been – though that was not strictly true. Thorin described, if quite briefly, their little adventure but would not speak of where he had found Bilbo, since there were still elves around.

“And what happened to all of you?” Bilbo asked, when he could get a word in edgewise.
Fili and Kili took turns telling, or rather interrupted each other’s telling of, the story. The wargs had left them behind, presumably to search out Thorin, and they’d gained a very reasonable head-start, reaching the banks of the Anduin just as the elvish archers were departing their boats. None of them knew how the elves had known they were coming, but the general consensus was that Gandalf was the one who had done it.

“Ahh Thorin, and Bilbo,” came the wizard’s familiar voice as he re-joined the group, “I am glad to see that you made it here in one piece.”

“We have things which we need to speak to you of, Gandalf,” Thorin said. “I shall be happy to listen,” Gandalf said, “but first you are to meet the Lady of Lorien herself. Follow me.”

Dutifully the company trotted after him and there was a collective groan at the sight of the huge, illuminated, spiral staircase leading up to a glowing bower.

Chapter End Notes

Well this was interesting to write. I didn't expect half of it to happen. Then again, when you put your fingers to the keyboard you never know where the story will take you.

Azog, the rascal, decided he wanted to turn up, the ring decided it wanted some attention other than Bilbo angsting over it and if you can guess who the archers at the end are I will give you a virtual cookie.

If there are any horse errors then I apologize, but they are Beorn's ponies which means they are special which means I can handwave things. Anyway, I hope you enjoyed the chapter.

Next up: Phase II of Operation Lonely Mountain.
The climb up the stairs, which seemed to have grown out of the trunk of the tree they wrapped around, was tiring but Bilbo could not help but look around in awe. Silver-white lanterns hung like ice in the trees surrounding them and on the roof which covered the stairs. Faintly he could hear singing, though he did not understand the words in the slightest they lightened his heart. There were little platforms in the trees surrounding them and he could pick out the shadowy figures of elves, Gandalf informed him that they were called *talans* (or *telain*, to give them their proper plural) and many of the elves in the golden wood lived on them. Bilbo shivered, his hobbit hole was much nicer and there was no chance he would roll out of bed and fall off his home - although he supposed elves were much different to hobbits.

Soon enough the stairs turned inward, to a part of the tree from which many branches spread. They followed a series of small *telain* around to a second, smaller set of stairs which led up into the arbour that they had seen from the ground. It was adorned with more lanterns, making it shine like a white flame even amongst the light of the other trees. Yet the lady who waited on the steps somehow glowed a little brighter than her surroundings. She was fair, fairer even than any of the elves Bilbo or the rest of the company had seen in Rivendell and, though there were no signs of age on her face, there was a graveness in her eyes.

“Welcome Thorin son of Thrain,” she said, “and a welcome to all your companions. Long has it been since any of the line of Durin came to the golden wood,” Bilbo could swear he heard her voice whispering in his ear but ignored it, “and welcome also to you, Bilbo Baggins, ringbearer. Gandalf has told me a little of your adventures and your quest but you are weary, go now and rest and we shall talk more of it when you are refreshed.”

The dwarves made perfunctory bows and were all relieved when they were led down the stairs by another elf. Between two of the great tree roots, which dwarfed even Gandalf, an awning had been strung though it was still summer and the night sky was all but cloudless. The ground that the dwarves threw their bedrolls down on was soft and there was a pile of extra blankets, which Bilbo in particular was glad of. They did not speak much while they set up camp and all slept better than they had for two days at least.

When they woke the sun was high and the wood around them was dappled golden. There had been little time to eat the past two days and no time for hot food so they got through much of what was left of the food Beorn had given them in one sitting. The elves had left them more food, which was happily added into the various dishes and for the first time in a while Bilbo actually felt full when he finished. His trousers were getting a little loose around the waist with various meals that had been missed since he’d left Hobbiton. He had never bothered to explain to the dwarves that hobbits, especially respectable Baggins’, ate seven meals a day and would usually snack in between - though how they thought he’d been able to feed them on such short notice when he lived by himself he didn’t know. The jump to three, or what was more often one or two, meals a
day shared between fourteen or fifteen people (thirteen of which were dwarves who seemed to have a similar appetite to hobbits) had been hard.

Gandalf had not stayed with them and so was not there when they woke. It was mid-afternoon before the wizard descended the stairs.

“Where have you been?” Thorin asked, looking up from where he was sharpening his axe.

“I have been in council with Lady Galadriel and Lord Celeborn, relaying the story of our journey up until our rather hasty appearance on their eastern borders,” said Gandalf. “And they would both like to meet you, Bilbo.”

“I…erm…that is,” Bilbo said, fiddling with his cutlery and looking nervously at Gandalf. He wasn’t entirely sure how to speak to somebody like Lady Galadriel. Certainly when they’d stayed in Rivendell he’d spoken to some of the elves there and found them much like other folk, some merry and others sombre, but there was something older and more profound about Lady Galadriel. There had been a similar air around Lord Elrond but he hadn’t interacted with the Lord of Rivendell at all so that had been all well and good.

“No harm will come to you, if that is what you are worried about,” said Gandalf, “but they would know your side of the story and may wish to see the ring for themselves.”

There was some grumbling about that, which mostly centred on whether the elves would want to take the ring off of Bilbo and then their entire journey, now significantly out of their way to Erebor, would be in vain. Bilbo was looking around nervously around between the dwarves and Gandalf when Thorin spoke over them. “The burglar will not be going alone. I will go with him.”

The wizard sighed and muttered something which contained the words ‘stubborn’ and ‘dwarves’ but did nothing else when both of them joined him.

Bilbo spent the walk up the stairs fussing with his clothes. His jacket had a number of tiny singe marks, some rather disturbing dark stains (including dirt embedded in the back of it from where he’d landed when he fell off his pony) and he was sure he hadn’t managed to get all the troll mucus out of it; his waistcoat was in scarcely better condition though he was still lacking buttons. Why hadn’t he thought to pack some spare clothes when he’d run out madly to join this quest? It was no matter anyway, between the goblins, Gollum, the orcs and losing his entire pack if he’d bought any they’d be spread out from Rivendell to the banks of the Anduin. It was one more little comfort of home that he missed, being able to get a fresh shirt, waistcoat and trousers out of one of his wardrobes whenever he pleased.

They came once again to the talan with the bower on it. This time Gandalf led them up into the bower where Galadriel sat behind a table next to a second elf, his was silver haired but like Galadriel was clad wholly in white. Bilbo assumed he was the Lord Celeborn that Gandalf had mentioned. The two stood up to greet them and Galadriel gave a little smile when she saw Thorin standing close behind Bilbo. They were offered seats next to Celeborn, with Gandalf sitting next to Galadriel.

“Gandalf has told us that you have discovered the one ring,” Celeborn said to Bilbo.

“I think so,” Bilbo said, “or so I’ve been told.”

“May we see the ring?” said Celeborn. Bilbo looked to Gandalf, who nodded, and then to Thorin who didn’t look best pleased but who seemed to agree. From around his neck Bilbo pulled the chain with the ring on it. Rather than touch the ring, he pulled the chain over his head and dropped the ring and chain together on to the table. Both elves looked at it and then looked back at Bilbo who fought not to squirm.

“This is the one ring,” Galadriel said, “though it sleeps yet Sauron’s spirit rests inside.” Bilbo looked at her, surprised, even Gandalf hadn’t known that it was evil until he’d seen the writing around its band.

Once again Bilbo had to tell his story from falling down the goblin caves to escaping out of the mountain. In his previous tellings of the tale, to Thorin and to Gandalf, he had somewhat glossed over the creature he called Gollum’s role in it. Now he elaborated on it, the riddle contest,
Gollum’s pursuit of him and his decision not to kill Gollum when he could have. He didn’t look at Thorin after that admission, knowing that the dwarf king would likely not approve of his mercy towards a creature that had tried to kill him so recently before. Or indeed to any creature that lived in a mountain filled with goblins. For some reason this seemed to be of particular interest to Gandalf.

They actually seemed quite relieved when Bilbo finished speaking as his narrative returned to the one of the whole group. Bilbo himself was quite relieved, hoping that his part was mostly over, until Thorin leaned closer to him and rumbled in his ear.

“You did not speak of what happened at the ruin.” The dwarf’s beard tickled his neck and made him shiver a little, though it was pleasant.

“Ah, yes,” Bilbo said, prompting Gandalf and the two elves to look at Bilbo once more. Bilbo launched into what had happened when his pony had bolted in the wrong direction, the ruin and what had happened to him and to the ring. That took the relieved looks off of the faces of the three listeners who had not known the story beforehand.

“Radagast was right,” Gandalf said, “there is a Necromancer in Dol Guldur and it is no human meddling with magic they do not understand who has unearthed artifacts of old. It is the spirit of Sauron.”

“Yet Saruman, in all his wisdom, would not see that,” Celeborn said, “long has he held forth that Sauron was destroyed and the ring lost with Isildur.”

“We must call another council,” Galadriel said, “to decide what must be done.” Bilbo tensed a little, he wouldn’t mind giving up the ring but he had rather resigned himself to going to Mordor. Thorin all but growled at that and Galadriel fixed him with a serene look. “Peace, son of Thrain, we would not take the ring from Bilbo or stop your quest to destroy it. Of the members of the council there are none who could bear the ring without corruption as you have, Bilbo Baggins, nor could he have asked for better companions. What the council must decide is how to deal with the threat in Dol Guldur.”

That seemed to placate Thorin, who relaxed a little in his chair.

They talked for a little longer before Bilbo put the ring on once more and he and Thorin left the bower and headed down, Gandalf stayed with Galadriel and Celeborn.

“I wonder how long we’ll be staying here,” Bilbo wondered, as they walked down the stairs.

“We have to stay until they let us go,” Thorin growled, “there are no other ways out unless we’re willing to go north again or cross the Anduin.”

“Ah,” Bilbo said. He hadn’t quite realised how stuck they were, even if the elves did seem quite pleasant. The dwarves did not seem to like the open water any more than he did and all the elvish archers would make that impossible.

The rest of the dwarves were waiting for them when they reappeared.

“What’s going on?” Dwalin asked.

“The ring is what Gandalf said it was, they’re calling a council to decide what to do about Sauron.” Thorin said, grimly.

“So we’re staying here,” said Balin.

“Apparently so,” Thorin said. There was some grumbling about that but they were safe enough and there was food being provided to them.

They spent the next eight days in Lorien, though most of the dwarves became far more amenable to staying there when the elves brought them meat. They did not see much of Gandalf at all during that time since he was often in council with Galadriel and Celeborn. Elrond was the first to arrive, flanked by two other dark haired elves and one with golden hair. Waiting with Galadriel and Celeborn to greet the newcomers was she who had been seen by few mortals, Arwen daughter of Elrond who had long been staying with her mother’s parents in Lorien. Bilbo, who had been
tentatively exploring Lorien, happened to witness the reunion of Arwen Undomiel with her father and brothers.

Next, though they came from different directions, came Cirdan the Shipwright on horseback and Radagast on his sledge pulled by rabbits. The wizard came to greet the dwarves, already attracting animals from the trees around them, and ended up eating with them, though they hid the meat at a quiet suggestion from Gandalf and had to put up with throngs of animals joining them for dinner.

Last to arrive was Saruman, who did not look best pleased at the situation since he had not long been back at Isenguard after travelling from Rivendell but who had come nevertheless.

It was then that Gandalf came to the dwarves again, most of whom had been quite oblivious to the recent arrivals but had been quite content to rest in what appeared to be a safe place, even if it was overrun with elves.

“You are wanted to speak to the council again Bilbo,” he said, Thorin opened his mouth, “and you may come as well, Thorin.” Thorin snorted at that, he would have gone whether he was given leave to or no, but stayed close to Bilbo anyway.

The rest of the dwarves followed them to the bottom of the stairs leading up to the bower where the council would be held. As Thorin, Bilbo and Gandalf headed up the stairs Kili nudged his brother - there were three dark haired elves looking somewhat wistfully up the stairs as well. One of the elves spotted them looking and the trio came over.

“Mae govannen,” one of them said then, noticing the looks of confusion and distrust on the dwarves’ faces, continued in Westron, “well met. None of us have met dwarves before. I am Elladan,” he gestured to the other male elf, his likeness in every way, “my brother Elrohir and our sister Arwen.”

Truth be told many of the dwarves were rather struck by Arwen who, though she had no beard and was slender and tall rather than robust like a dwarf woman, was so fair as to transcend their difference of species. While they might not have been particularly friendly towards the elves they introduced themselves politely enough.

“And you too have companions in council with our grandmother?” Elrohir asked, once they had finished.

“Aye,” said Balin, who had silently been nominated as the most tactful to speak to these elves, “our leader and our burglar are both up there.”

“Your burglar?” Arwen said curiously.

“Yes,” Balin said, “our burglar, lady.”

“He’s a hobbit,” Kili jumped in.

“About this high,” Fili continued, indicating a point in the air which - to be truthful - was a good two or three inches below the top of where Bilbo’s head would be.

“And he found…” Kili started, but was cut off when Nori, from behind him, jabbed him with a dagger.

“So it was he who found the item that had our father and Glorfindel leaving Rivendell in such a hurry,” Elrohir said.

“We barely caught them.” Elladan said.

“We got chased here by orcs,” Ori said.

That made both elves very friendly, though Arwen made her excuses and left shortly thereafter, and the discussion turned mostly to the best ways of killing orcs, wargs and goblins - the twins seemed both slightly horrified over the number of goblins in the mountain and viciously happy at the number they had slain in their escape. They, it turned out, had left to see if there had been more orcs coming down from the north during most of the time the dwarves had been staying at Rivendell.

One thing, it turned out, which could temporarily end the feud between elves and dwarves was the
Bilbo wasn’t sure if it was incidental or if Gandalf had orchestrated it so they arrived last. All the other members of the council were sitting around the table and looked up when Gandalf, Thorin and Bilbo came in. Bilbo, looking around, recognised Radagast, Elrond, Galadriel and Celeborn but there was also another human in white robes with a staff, a golden haired elf and a silver haired elf who had a beard.

“This is why you had us called here, Gandalf,” the other human said.

“Peace, Saruman,” Gandalf said, “Galadriel told you of what has been found, did she not.”

“I hardly believe a halfling could have resisted Sauron’s influence for so long,” Saruman spat. Bilbo squared his shoulders and met the man’s dismissive look with a steady gaze. He’d charged an orc pack not knowing how to use a sword and stopped three trolls from eating him and the company, he wasn’t letting this man scare him.

“The spirit of Sauron sleeps still,” Galadriel said, “but it truly resides in the ring.”

“Then let the halfling bring the ring forth and we shall decide what is to be done with it,” said Saruman. Bilbo looked to Gandalf, who nodded, before he tugged the chain over his head and placed it on the table in front of him. They took their seats.

“You were not called here to discuss what we are to do with the ring,” Galadriel said, “but what we are to do about Sauron, since we now know that he lives.”

“Oh,” Saruman said, “and what is to be done about the ring.”

“We are taking it to Mordor to destroy it,” Thorin said, from beside Bilbo.

“Are you indeed?” Saruman said. Bilbo got the feeling that he would have continued onwards but an aura of something seemed to grow around Galadriel and she gave Saruman a cool look, which caused the man to sit down quite sharply.

“To business then,” Celeborn said, “Sauron is likely hiding in Dol Guldur with the remnants of his servants. From the blade that Radagast,” Saruman did little to hide his snort and Radagast stiffened, “brought from Dol Guldur we believe that the Witch King at least still lives.”

“Are we to mount an attack on Dol Guldur then,” the golden haired elf said. Of all the elves around the table he was the only one not garbed in robes, though he bore no weapon it was plain to see that he was a warrior.

“That is certainly being considered, Glorfindel,” Celeborn said, “it may become necessary to do so.”

“If Sauron’s power grows he may wish to move to Mordor,” the silver haired elf with the beard said.

“Indeed Cirdan,” said Celeborn, “and the quest to destroy the ring would no longer be heading away from danger but into it.”

“This quest,” Saruman said, “how do we know it will be successful?”

“We do not,” Elrond said, “but what other course of action is there? If it not destroyed then Sauron will rise to power again.”

“And you know this for certain?” Saruman said, “has your gift of foresight told you this.”

“A gift of foresight is not needed to predict that Sauron would rise once more,” Glorfindel said, “evil always strives to be triumphant.”

“We do not know how much Sauron’s power has grown,” Elrond said, “haste and secrecy is needed.”

“And you think leaving the one ring in the hands of a witless halfling and a company of dwarves is wise? Dwarves fall easily to lusting over gold,” Thorin tensed and Bilbo was sure that, council or no, Thorin would attack the man. Though it would do little if the dwarf king really decided to, Bilbo caught Thorin’s sleeve and the dwarf subsided a little - though his hand strayed to the handle of Orcrist as Saruman continued, “why should these be any different, one of them will take the ring from the halfling and your precious quest will fail. I take no part in this foolishness.” With that he pushed back his chair and swept out of the hall.
“Whatever Saruman’s thoughts on the matter,” Gandalf said, tiredly, “I believe that leaving the ring with Bilbo is the right course of action.”
“None of my kin would dare to harm our burglar,” Thorin said. Bilbo found that the kernel of worry that Saruman’s words had inexplicably planted within him died quickly under the warmth that spread throughout him.
“That I do not doubt,” Galadriel said.

The remaining council spoke at length of what might be done to hamper Sauron’s power, Radagast was called upon to recount again his encounter with the spiders in Mirkwood and, despite Thorin’s grumbling, Galadriel and Celeborn agreed that they would reach out to Thranduil in order to hem Sauron in on both sides. Any aid that could be given to the company would be given, or at least all the aid they would take from elves.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the slight delay but between being ill, packing for a move and starting work again I really wasn’t up to writing. The early parts of this were a nightmare to write. Galadriel flatly refused to speak for a while and Celeborn didn’t even show up until eleven hundred words in.

On the other hand Saruman was ridiculously easy to write, even if he was being a dickface.

And wheeee cameos. I love them so much. Glorfindel and the twins are definitely going to get more love later.

Next up: Phase III of Operation Lonely Mountain.
Chapter Summary

The company continues to reside Lorien but there is a rift growing between two of its members.

Chapter Notes

Parts of this chapter borrow heavily from The Mirror of Galadriel.

There are some disturbing (but fictional) images in this chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Exactly what sort of aid the dwarves would accept quickly became a bone of contention. The boats they were borrowing were a particular niggle, since the dwarves were not happy about going on the water, let alone in boats made by the elves and some of the elves, for their own part, were not best pleased with their boats being used by dwarves. With Gandalf still in council with Galadriel, Celeborn and their various guests it was Bilbo who was quickly nominated as the go between for the two groups, since he was deemed to be the most polite, though Thorin was his constant shadow. He quickly got used to reading Thorin’s expressions and conveying them in the politest manner possible to the elves, who seemed quite taken with Bilbo - which did not make things easier.

It took maybe two days after their appearance before the council to sort out what was going with them (never let it be said that hobbits were anything less than supremely comfortable when it came to the business of food), though it contained more lembas bread and less meat than the dwarves would like. Bilbo politely turned away gifts or replacements for things that the dwarves wouldn’t have accepted, somewhat surprised that beings who the dwarves obviously disdained would be quite so generous. The only thing he accepted for himself, though that was cause for disapproval from the dwarves, was a set of new clothes made in the same style as his old ones but obviously elvish. They were lighter and seemed to be stronger than his hobbit clothes, though since he’d been able to wash and mend that set they weren’t half as bad as they had been, and having a second set of clothes - since he didn’t wear half so many layers as the dwarves - was a good enough idea.

With that sorted Bilbo joined the rest of the dwarves in relaxing, since there would be little time for it once they left. Though he had no pipe, nor any pipe weed (and no chance of getting any since the elves did not seem to smoke and he hadn’t seen much of Gandalf), it wasn’t that bad a time. The only trouble with relaxing all day was that by nightfall he couldn’t find it in himself to sleep and stirred restlessly at the edge of the camp, the sounds of the forest mixing with the snoring of the dwarves. He was contemplating going for a walk, to see a little more of Lorien, when he saw the Lady Galadriel walking beneath the trees, garbed in white. She turned her fair face to regard him and beckoned to him.

Leaving his bedroll behind him, he followed her, both of them walking silently. He quickly
became aware that Thorin was following him as they headed down the southern slopes of the hill of Caras Galadhon and passed through a high green hedge into an enclosed garden open to the sky. Still Galadriel continued onwards down a long flight of steps into a deep green hollow with a glittering stream running through it.

At the bottom of the hollow a shallow silver basin rested on a pedestal which looked like a branching tree, a matching ewer standing beside it. Without a word Galadriel filled the basin until the water almost spilt over the edge and breathed on it, the ripples calmed and the water was clear and flat. It was then that she turned and looked at the hobbit who had followed her and the dwarf who had followed him.

“Here is the Mirror of Galadriel,” she said, “you can look in it if you will.”

“What will I see?” Bilbo said.

“I cannot tell,” said Galadriel, “for the Mirror shows things that were, and things that are, and things that yet may be. Would you look in it?”

Thorin pressed in close behind him and Bilbo realised that the dwarf had removed his armoured tunic. Still, he couldn’t deny that he was curious to see what the mirror might show him.

“I will look,” Bilbo said, stepping forward and climbing the pedestal so he could look into the dark water - water that did not even reflect the stars that burned bright in the heavens.

The darkness fell away and he saw the Shire in high summer, all green and good with lights in the party tree and the whole of the Shire gathered for some great celebration, until instead it was burning and black with orcs crawling all over it and great metal buildings being erected where hobbit holes had stood. That image faded and now he saw a great white city jutting out of a cliff, thousands of men in silver armour desperately fighting orcs in front of it and above the whole battlefield a red-gold dragon flew with a stomach coated in gold and gems, upon its breast a gem that could only be the Arkenstone, blazing streams of fire down upon the men and glorying in their death. The bodies of the company, of Gandalf, lying like broken dolls with their lifeblood spilt upon the dead earth and above them a familiar pale orc stood, his blood-smeared face twisted in a smile of satisfaction as he held out Thorin’s decapitated head towards Bilbo. The Mirror went dark, but before Bilbo could step back a shape began to grow, a figure that was darker even than the darkness of the Mirror. He wanted to lean forward, the ring about his neck grew heavier under his shirt, wanted to give in but he knew with a strange certainty that if he did then the images in the mirror would come to pass. Instead he jerked away from the basin, stumbling backwards and he would have fallen, if Thorin had not moed closer to catch him and set him upright on the ground.

“What did you see?” Thorin asked, urgent but surprisingly gentle.

“I…I think I saw what will happen if we…if I fail,” Bilbo said, turning to look at Thorin just to make absolutely sure the dwarf’s head was still attached to his body. In the corner of his vision he could see Galadriel, tall and pale and looking approving.

“Will you look in the mirror also, Thorin son of Thrain?” Thorin looked at the basin with distrust, and then at Galadriel with only a little less. Bilbo thought he was sizing up the options before him.

“I shall,” Bilbo nearly laughed, he should have known that Thorin would be unable to back down from anything, let alone from something elvish. He watched as the dwarf leant over the basin, silver-streaked hair falling forward so he couldn’t see any of Thorin’s face. He wanted to lean forward, the ring about his neck grew heavier underneath his shirt, wanted to give in but he knew with a strange certainty that if he did then the images in the mirror would come to pass. Instead he jerked away from the basin, stumbling backwards and he would have fallen, if Thorin had not moed closer to catch him and set him upright on the ground.

Then Thorin reeled back from the Mirror as if he had been unexpectedly struck, anger and worry and sadness and fear showing clearly in his face before he got ahold of himself. His chest was heaving, his beard damp with sweat.

“Thorin?” Bilbo said, trying to get a proper look at the wild blue eyes. Without so much as a word
the dwarf turned on his heel and stalked back the way they’d came. The hobbit turned back to Galadriel, “what did he see?” he demanded.

“I do not know what it was he saw,” said Galadriel, “but I know of the thing you saw last.”

“The dark shape?” Bilbo said, looking behind him to see if he could see Thorin. He should have followed the dwarf king but he wanted to know what the shadow had been.

“The dark lord,” Galadriel said, “his presence grows on my mind also and I perceive him even as he hides in shadow and ruin.”

“That was Sauron!” Bilbo said, though it came out a little closer to a squeak than he would have liked.

“Yes,” said Galadriel, “as his strength grows he begins to try and see me and my thoughts, but the door remains closed to him.” Bilbo began to perceive that on her hand was a ring which glowed like the stars, though why he had not seen it before he did not understand. “This is Nenya, the Ring of Adamant, and one of the Three. By its power Lorien is made safe from all evil in the land.”

“Gandalf has one, doesn’t he?” Bilbo said, remembering what Gandalf had said about bearing one ring already, even though none of them had been able to see Gandalf wearing any rings.

“Yes, he bears Narya,” said Galadriel.

“I should go back and see what happened to Thorin,” Bilbo said, quite suddenly feeling like he had been here too long, Galadriel smiled.

“Go to your king,” she said, “for something ails him, though I know not what.”

Bilbo made her a little bow and headed back the way they had come, shaking his head at her description of Thorin as ‘his king’. Really, could elves not tell the difference between dwarves and hobbits? Most Big Folk likely couldn’t, but really.

When he made it back to their little camp Thorin was already asleep in his bedroll, Bilbo didn’t particularly want to wake him if he really was asleep so moved silently to his own.

The next morning he woke a little later than the others thanks to the moonlit excursion, to find Thorin already gone and the others sitting around and still eating a lazy breakfast.

“Where’s Thorin,” he asked, forcing himself to be casual as he dished himself out a bowl of breakfast.

“He wasn’t here when I woke,” Dori said, “and I think I was the first up.”

“He’s armed at least,” said Dwalin, and Bilbo noticed that though Thorin’s coat was with his bedroll his mail tunic and Orcrist were not.

“I’m going to see if they’ve got an archery range,” Kili announced, picking up his bow and quiver. Fili followed his brother, though he didn’t have a bow.

“I think they’ve got a library somewhere,” Ori said, looking bright eyed, “I’m going to find it.”

Dori, clucking, followed his littlest brother out of the campsite.

It was Nori who approached Bilbo and sat down next to the hobbit. “About the boat journey,” he said, “I’ve a bit of skill with boats, if that’s any help.”

“You would,” Dwalin grumbled, shooting Nori a dark look.

Bilbo ignored Dwalin’s comment, though he wondered what it meant. “That’s a great help, Nori. Actually, now that we’ve got the supplies sorted out, I ought to plan out who’s going where in the boats and I might need your help with that.”

That got a grumble from the remaining dwarves but Nori seemed surprisingly willing to help.

By the time the sun was dipping below the horizon Bilbo hadn’t seen Thorin once. He’d sorted out an equitable division of people between the boats, including space for extra supplies but he’d spent most of the day worrying about Thorin. Those who had wandered off at some point during the day, which had ended up being most of them, had all returned apart from Thorin.

“He’s fine,” Dwalin said, passing Bilbo a chunk of bread. That was somewhat reassuring but Dwalin didn’t know about their trip or about the Mirror. He wasn’t sure if he should mention it or keep it to himself, he didn’t know how Thorin would react to him telling the rest of their company
about the trip and really, how much would it have affected the reason that Thorin had chosen to
disappear. Privately Bilbo promised himself that he’d stay awake until Thorin came back and
confront him about it. That plan didn’t work out very well, he’d gone to his bedroll the same as
the others but before the moon was high in the sky he’d fallen asleep.

That day set a sort of pattern for the week that followed it. Gandalf and the rest of the council
continued to meet, the dwarves struggled to keep themselves occupied (Bilbo was surprised they
hadn’t managed to sharpen away their weapons) and Thorin was evidently avoiding Bilbo. It only
took the hobbit a day or so to work out that Thorin was avoiding him specifically, since the king
seemed happy enough to associate with the rest of the company but hadn’t even bothered to
explain why he hadn’t spoken a word to Bilbo. It took maybe another day after that for Bilbo to
completely pass through being worried and into being irritated. If Thorin was going to ignore him
for something he hadn’t even done (or possibly might never do, if it was something that Thorin
had seen in the Mirror) without the courtesy of explaining why then Bilbo was going to ignore
him right back.

“I don’t know what you’ve done laddie,” Balin said, as they waited for Bombur to cook supper
with Thorin once again nowhere to be seen, “I’ve never seen him ignore anybody.”
“Hey,” Bilbo protested, “I haven’t done anything, he just started ignoring me.”
“That’s true,” Nori said. Bilbo had rather come to like the slightly disreputable dwarf, even if he
was positive he didn’t want to know the origins of some of the things Nori had procured for their
trip after he’d mentioned them, “he was perfectly normal the night before all this happened.
Maybe even a little overprotective.” That got some chuckles, which Bilbo staunchly ignored.

“Do you suppose the elf lady could have witched him,” Gloin said, looking around at the trees
suspiciously.

“Why would she do that?” Ori said, curious.
“I don’t know,” Gloin said, “divide us mebbe,” Then went back to his food, grumbling something
about youngsters who wouldn’t know an elf witch if she spelled them.
“Maybe you should ask him what’s going on Dwalin,” Bofur said to the big warrior, “we can’t
have our leader ignoring our burglar.”
Dwalin didn’t give much of an answer and the conversation turned to exactly when they would be
leaving. Bilbo never found out if Dwalin had talked to Thorin because the situation didn’t really
change at all in the next four days they were in Lorien. In fact the only thing which did really
happen during those four days was that various dwarves finally began to give Bilbo some lessons
in using his sword in a manner that was more likely to kill his enemies and less likely to injure his
friends.

Between that situation and the fact that Gandalf had been in council for most of their time in
Lorien and so had barely seen the company, it was highly unusual for the rest of the company to
wake up and find both Thorin still within the campsite and a familiar grey robed figure sitting by
the remains of their cooking fire. Bilbo wasn’t sure if he was still dozy from sleeping or if the sun
was particularly bright that morning but he began to see a flickering flame hovering over one of
Gandalf’s hands, he rubbed his eyes but the flame was still there. It took a little while, and some
breakfast, for him to conclude that it was Gandalf’s own ring, the one Galadriel had spoken of.

“Mr. Gandalf,” Dori said happily.
“About time you came back,” said Dwalin.
“Yes, I apologise for my absence,” Gandalf said, “but if you’ll spare a little breakfast I come with
news.” Bombur had begun to set about breakfast while Bofur and Bifur prodded the fire back into
life.

“Are we moving on,” Kili said impatiently, Bilbo had never been more glad that Lorien
apparently had a very good archery range and a number of elves for Fili and Kili to compete
against otherwise he had no idea what the two brothers would have gotten up to - though he was
certain it would have involved more meddling around the camp.

“We will be leaving tomorrow morning,” Gandalf said, “the boats are moored ready and loaded
with the supplies you have been given.” Bilbo had known that already, since he’d been the one to
organise how many boats there were to be and then later where most of the extra supplies were to
go. Hearing that the dwarves became quite merry, most of them having grown quite bored in
Lorien. It was in this merriment that Bilbo spotted Thorin leaving.
“Where’s Thorin?” Gandalf said, once he noticed the dwarf king was not there.
“Oh he’s ignoring our burglar,” Fili said carelessly, “and that means the rest of us as well.”
“Bilbo?” Gandalf turned to the hobbit, as if seeking some kind of sanity.
“I’ve just as little idea as you Gandalf,” Bilbo said, though that was not strictly true, “though it’s
getting quite vexing.”
“Indeed,” said the wizard.

Their final day in Lorien was mostly spent eating what was left that was too perishable to be taken
on the trip, something which Bilbo heartily approved of - even if the elvish lembas wasn’t actually
all that bad, though he found it less filling than the elves claimed. Gandalf began to elaborate a
little more on the plan past Lorien and the routes proposed. Ori had helpfully been allowed to
bring maps down from Lorien’s library (which he deemed to be rather good, even if it was in a
tree) and Gandalf began to show Balin and Oin, who seemed to be quite interested, one or two of
the routes he planned to take them. The wizard did reveal that this had been one of the subjects the
council had spoken about, exactly which route the company would be taking to get to Mount
Doom, since some favoured climbing the broken Black Gates, others simply trying to climb the
Ephel Duath or possibly even the pass of Minas Ithil.

Thorin did deign to join them for their final dinner in Lorien, though he still didn’t speak to Bilbo,
nobody particularly seemed to care since Nori had procured some elvish wine and, while nobody
overindulged - too conscious of their ordeal on boats coming in the morning - most of them
became pleasantly tipsy. Not quite enough for singing, especially here in the forest of the elves
where elvish voices raised in song sighed on every breath of the wind, but enough that Bofur did
break out his tin whistle and play a merry tune before they all, one by one, succumbed to sleep.

The next morning dawned and the dwarves rolled their bedrolls up, attached them to their packs
and headed down to where the boats were moored. There were many boats there, some brightly
painted in green or yellow, some shining in silver or gold but the majority were elegantly crafted
but painted only grey or white. Six of these grey boats floated, tied close to the dock and of those
three had their extra supplies in. The dwarves all ended up in the boat that Bilbo had carefully
organised for them (even Thorin who Bilbo had not actually told which boat he was supposed to
be in) and, however derogatory they had been in the past about elvish boats (or boats in general)
they had to admire the fact that the elvish boats scarcely lowered into the water as the dwarves
piled into them.

The elves standing on the docks handed them the leaf shaped paddles and warned them that the
boats could be a little wayward, which did not go over well. Nori and Dwalin, in the lead boat
were the first to be cast off from the dock and so forth down the line until they reached Gloin, Oin
and Dori in the last boat. Their paddling was inexpert and, for the most part inefficient at first but it
was easy enough to get the hang of and by the time they rounded a corner there was less splashing
and more forward motion. When they looked up there in front of them was a ship wrought to look
like a bird and on it stood Celeborn and Galadriel, Elrond and Radagast as well as other elves that
only Thorin, Bilbo and Gandalf recognised as Cirdan and Glorfindel. They were silent as the
dwarves passed by, a strange and solemn farewell to what was likely the last peaceful and
sheltered rest they would have until the ring was destroyed.
This was a horrible chapter to write. There were four rewrites for the first three or four paragraphs alone.

I am so happy to have this done.
The Anduin River

Chapter Summary

The Company travel down the river to meet their destiny.

Chapter Notes

I’m elongating the journey here a bit, since the Company are all a bit bad at boating so they’re going to take longer to get places than the Fellowship did (also the scenery is a bit nicer, since they aren’t travelling in February - I hate February).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It turned out that boating, past the initial learning curve, was quite boring. The line of boats was not always straight or close together (or else it was too close together and the front of one boat would bang into the back or the side of the boat in front of it) and Bombur and Ori’s boat in particular seemed to be prone to wandering to the side. The summer sun beat down on them from a cloudless sky and between the sun and the exertion of paddling Bilbo was getting a little too hot even after removing his jacket. He wondered how the dwarves weren’t overheating in their layers of armour and clothing since Bofur and Bifur, who he was sharing a boat with, did not seem to be getting too hot at all.

That wasn’t the only unpleasantness. Even with the mighty Anduin beneath them they still had to paddle, and Bilbo had only just gotten used to the burn of leg muscles that came from riding so now his shoulders and arms burnt from the exertion after only a few hours. Bilbo found himself feeling ill from the rocking of the boat and he wasn’t the only one.

“That’s right sensible,” Gloin called from the end boat. Bilbo turned around to look at the dwarf, who had rarely spoken to him. Gloin was looking a little green around the beard, though Bilbo had to turn back quickly as his paddle banged into Bifur’s and then into the side of the boat. This threw off their rhythm.

“So you can’t swim either?” Bofur said.

“Not a stroke,” he said. “He’d played in the water as a tween but hobbits rarely ventured deeper than waist height in water with little to no current - let alone anything which required actual swimming.

“Then we’ll all drown if these boats sink,” Bofur said cheerfully.

“Elvish boats,” Gandalf said, from the boat ahead, “do not sink. Especially these boats.”

That was the end of that. Though Bilbo was quietly relieved of Gandalf’s surety, he did not like the idea of drowning.

The forests which lined the rivers loomed dark over it, even with the sun overhead. The summer day was long but even though they did not stop paddling until the night actually began to fall, they
did not find a place on either bank where they could put the boats in and sleep on land.
“We’ll sleep on the boats,” Thorin called, to a chorus of groans. One person on each boat would
have to be awake at all times, to make sure that the boats did not wander too far to one side or the
other.

Sleeping on a boat was uncomfortable Bilbo found, since with two other dwarves, two of the
paddles and their supplies there was little room (even for a hobbit) though the rocking did send
him off to sleep quickly enough. It was far too soon when he was being roughly shaken awake by
Bifur, who said something Bilbo could not understand. Bilbo sat up and stretched, took the paddle
from Bifur and carefully moved around the boat.

He wasn’t alone, there were five figures sitting upright in the boats. Gandalf and Balin had tied
their boat to Thorin, Fili and Kili’s so the both of them could sleep. He could see ahead in the
moonlight, that Thorin was sitting awake in the second boat and Nori in the first boat.

If he and Thorin had been talking then they might have had a quiet conversation, the way Dori
and Ori behind him were, instead they sat in rather awkward silence. Nori turned around and gave
Bilbo what the hobbit thought was a sympathetic look, since he could not really start a
conversation with Bilbo around Thorin without offending the king.

The second day passed much the same as the first, though the dwarves started singing something
which Bofur explained was actually a mining song but it helped them to keep their paddles in
time. They had to sleep in the boats again that night.

This continued for three or four more days, until everybody was sore from sleeping in the boats,
tired of paddling and getting irritable with one another thanks to the enforced confinement.

On the fifth day out from Lorien, land was sighted. Even though it was barely midday, everybody
agreed that they should put the boats in and so - with some bumping and clattering of paddles -
they managed to turn the boats towards the western bank and land them. They tied the boats
carefully to thick protruding tree roots and they all sat down with some relief. Oin and Gloin
began to set up a campfire, Fili and Kili volunteered to go hunting in the forest so they could have
some hot food. The rest of them began setting up a camp, and Thorin declared that they’d be
staying here at least one night if not more, which made the company very happy.

That night was the merriest they had had since leaving. Fili and Kili brought back rabbits, though
they didn’t have much meat on them there were enough of them that everybody got cooked meat
with their lembas bread. It wasn’t exactly a feast but it was hot and it was eaten on solid ground.
Only one of them had to be awake at once and their camp was much more spread out than the
boats. Bilbo stretched his aching back, glad not to be curled against the bottom of the boat. He
couldn’t imagine how the others, who were all taller than him (let alone Gandalf), must be feeling.

Though the company would have liked to stay longer, Gandalf pressed them on in the morning. It
was later that day when the forest began to fall away to reveal the lands on each bank. To the east
the land was brown and dead, swathes of ground as far as the eye could see with no living thing
upon it, not even the suggestion of stones or ruined trees to break up the desolation. Bilbo gasped,
he wasn’t the only one, the dwarves were all staring eastwards at the unfriendly and empty lands
but this was the opposite of the Shire, the antithesis of all that was green, good and alive there. He
shook, remembering the vision in Galadriel’s Mirror of the Shire falling and dead but even in the
Mirror he had never seen a land so dead as this, never contemplated that there might be a place so
ravaged that no life grew there..

“Gandalf,” Bilbo said, voice cracking a little “what happened?”

“Sauron,” said Gandalf, Bilbo had never heard so much venom in the old wizard’s voice before.

The west bank was some relief, green grassy slopes behind banks of huge reeds which whipped
back and forth in the slightest of breezes. Behind the reeds, when a breeze blew them out of the
way, it was possible to see hills and even, in the far distance, the dark smudges which could only be mountains. The contrast, looking from left to right, was astonishing.

Bilbo was distracted from the sharp differences when the lead boat gave a shout and quickly started paddling towards the eastern bank. Their little boats had been skirting the edges of the reeds, trying to look for a place to camp for the night to avoid having to sleep on the boats or the eastern bank, amongst all that death. As the the second and third boats followed Dwalin and Nori’s lead, Bilbo saw what had prompted the change in course. Two large black swans and five littler swanlings in various shades of grey had emerged from the reeds and were eyeing the party.

Hobbits occasionally encountered swans, since they sometimes appeared on the Brandywine, but since a decent size swan was often bigger than a decent sized hobbit nobody sensible ever went near them no matter what the speculation about how good swans eggs tasted. Tweenage hobbits, however, (especially Tookish or Brandybuck tweens) had been known to try their hand at gathering swans feathers to give as gifts or to prove their own bravery - which had led to more than one group of tweens being pursued by an angry swan. His mother had actually sported a substantial collection of swan feathers herself.

“Oh,” Bilbo said with a laugh, “they’re just swans. I didn’t expect to see them so far south.”

“They’re bloody big birds,” Bofur said. Bifur said something in Khuzdul which made Bofur laugh. “Don’t suppose they’re good eating.”

“Not re…” Bilbo started to say when there was a shout from behind them, Ori had managed to convince Bombur to paddle a little closer to the swans so he could get a better look and the birds had not reacted well it seemed.

“That bird just hissed,” Bombur said, holding his paddle like a weapon.

“They do that,” Bilbo called, “I wouldn’t get too close Ori, they can be quite vicious.” There had only really been the three of them, his two cousins Flambard and Sigismund Took (who had been cousins to each other themselves), who had been of an age to play together as tweens but Flambard had gotten a broken arm after a mishap with a swan. At that the end boat, the one with Dori in it, surged up alongside Ori’s boat to drag it away from the swans.

Fortunately, that was the last interesting thing which happened to the company that day - though Ori continued to question Bilbo about the swans long after the birds had disappeared back into the reeds - and they all agreed that they would rather sleep in the boats than on the eastern bank since they could find no space in the reeds which took them to a bank.

They were in the boats for three more days before the scenery changed once again as the river grew broader and shallower and more than one of their boats found impassable hidden banks of gravel which slowed their progression to a crawl. Unfortunately the river was still too deep for a dwarf or a hobbit to leave the boats and walk about to find a route which meant they all had time to look around them. The eastern bank was now mostly long beaches made of stones, beyond that the dead land had turned into hills that were still devoid of any kind of life. The western bank had become rolling downs of vibrant green grass, which was far less depressing and almost reminded Bilbo of the Shire. They managed to come close enough to the western bank to put the boats in for another night, though there was little to make a fire out of and no animals to augment the diet which had quickly become boring even if the elvish bread was filling enough.

Unlike the stop in the forest they were exposed so they stayed only long enough to sleep, leaving as soon as the pale rays of the sun made themselves known. It was still slow going, with the occasional outbreak of curses filling the air as one boat got stuck in the gravel and others weren’t quick enough to stop themselves, then the whole line would have to backtrack so the grounded boat could be extricated.

Eventually though, they emerged unscathed but for frayed tempers, and could continue onwards at a better pace. The scenery around them began to quickly change once more as the ground on both
sides rose and became rocky, with both shores covered in brambles and the crumbling cliffs behind adorned with creeping vines and ivy. What started as scrub soon turned into trees on both sides of the river.

“Where are we, Gandalf,” Bilbo asked. They hadn’t dared to get the maps out of the packs while they’d been on the river and there had been little point since they were on a course that could not be lost.

“We’re coming close to Emyn Muil,” Gandalf said, “we will soon find ourselves at the rapids of Sarn Gebir.”

That got everybody’s attention.

“Rapids?” Thorin said indignantly, and he wasn’t the only one. Bilbo was fairly sure he heard Bombur whine.

“They aren’t impassable,” Gandalf said, as if that was some kind of consolation.

“I’ve never been down rapids,” Nori shouted from the front.

“Is this the only way,” Balin said.

“There are said to be old portage routes along both banks,” Gandalf said, “but I do not know how to find them. The rapids are scarcely longer than a mile and from there the river is easy to navigate.”

There was grumbling and some protestations but short of dragging the boats up one of the banks and hoping for the best they had to go down the rapids, but the sun was slowly descending in the sky so they found a small eyot near the western bank which had some cover on it and made camp there for the night.

The day dawned bright and nearly cloudless and it wasn’t long after they set off, after the mild kerfuffle that was Dori insisting that Ori move into the final boat with him, that they began to hear the roar of the rapids. It was longer before they could see the churning spray of water crashing against rocks. Bilbo felt sure he wasn’t the only one who was regretting the decision to go through the rapids as they approached.

“You’d best put your paddle away and hold on,” Bofur said as they paddled closer.

“I’m quite capable of helping,” Bilbo said, a little snippily.

“I don’t doubt that,” Bofur said, “but we’d best not lose you overboard.”

“You’re not getting lost overboard either,” Bilbo said, to Bofur’s chuckle, “nobody is.” He pulled his paddle in though and settled down between two of the seating planks, pressing his palm to where the ring rested on his chest.

Sitting where he was he couldn’t really see past Bifur but he knew when they hit the rapids. The boat lurched violently to one side and Bilbo’s head hit the side of the boat, his cry of pain lost to the bellows of the dwarves and the thunder of the water against the rocks. Bofur and Bifur were frantically paddling on one side, driving them away from rocks which even Bilbo could see. At the last second they changed course enough to send them skimming past that rock and towards another. A wave crashed over the side of the boat, soaking all three of them. The current sent them spinning almost sideways, the two dwarves fighting to keep the nose of the boat pointing downstream, and then dizzyingly back the other way. Bilbo couldn’t see any of the other boats and all he could do was hold on and avoid Bofur when the dwarf fell forward as the boat tipped forward, balancing precariously for a moment before falling into the roiling waters again. More spray doused them and cascaded into the boat as it hit the water and levelled out, still rocking madly from side to side and twisting in the current.

Then, as suddenly as it has started, the rocking ceased. Bilbo breathed out shakily, glad to still be alive.

“Where’s the burglar?” Thorin called. Bilbo hauled himself onto the middle seat, looking around and counting thirteen dwarves and a wizard, before giving them a cheery wave. Thorin looked ahead, apparently unconcerned once he’d found out that Bilbo had not fallen overboard.

True to Gandalf’s word, the river once again became fast flowing with little impediment to the
company, though it narrowed. The cliffs had risen higher while Bilbo had been otherwise occupied, now they soared high and sheer, until the sky was a ribbon of blue above them, and it began to seem like they were headed for a dead end where the two cliffs seemed to converge into one with two huge pillars of stone. As they were swept down the river, so swiftly that paddles were hardly needed, they began to see a gap between the cliffs, a strip of pale sky. The closer they got the more obvious it became that the two pillars of stone were not simply pillars, but were two giant carved figures. Even the dwarves stared admiringly at the feat of engineering for, despite the weathering, the helms and crowns of the two kings were still whole and their great arms, left palms extended to ward off enemies, were still attached.

“The Argonath,” Gandalf said, “these were once great kings of men, Isildur and Anarion. They once marked the northernmost borders of Gondor.”

The wizard had to convince the company that they could not put in by the statues feet to examine the craftsmanship of ancient men but must instead carry on.

“Where are we headed, Gandalf?” Balin said, Bilbo perked up. He’d gotten used to being mostly on a boat but that didn’t mean he wasn’t looking forward to getting solid ground underneath him, even if they were heading to Mordor.

“When we reach Tol Brandir I will explain our route further,” Gandalf said.

“What’s Tol Brandir?” Bofur said.

“You’ll know it when you see it, I don’t doubt,” the wizard said.

It took the rest of the day and the night, but when the light of the sun crept over the horizon their scenery was much changed. The sheer, forboding cliffs had fallen away to steep hills clad in trees on both banks and the river had widened into almost a lake. In the distance, there were three peaks with the bottoms wreathed in mist and a dull roar. Gandalf pushed them forward, and they made good time as the current which had pulled them along so quickly from the rapids at Sarn Gebir continued through the lake. It became clear by the time the sun was high in the sky that towards the southern end of the almost lake the river divided into two around an island, the middle of the three peaks, and the other two were great tall hills.

“The island is Tol Brandir,” Gandalf said, “the two hills are Amon Lhaw, the Hill of Hearing, and Amon Hen, the Hill of Sight. We go right.”

As night fell they reached the start of the right arm and the noise, like thunder rumbling, had steadily been getting louder throughout the day.

“What’s making the noise,” Ori shouted from the boat behind Bilbo.

“The Falls of Rauros,” Gandalf said, “this is where we leave the boats.”

“I should think so,” Bilbo heard Bombur say, “I don’t want to go over a waterfall.” Bilbo quite agreed. They didn’t get out of the boats to make camp, it was still too steep to be able to, but they did manage to stop sailing forwards, carefully setting the boats against a protruding strip of land.

The next morning they carried on, in particularly good spirits because soon they would make camp at the base of Amon Hen and from there they wouldn’t have to sail anymore. Before the middle of the day they found a gently sloping shore and dragged the boats up out of the water. They’d chosen well, there was a small stream tumbling down the side of the hill which fed a lush green lawn and the trees and scrub which covered the entirety of the hill save the peak.

“We’ll rest here for a day or so,” Thorin said, Gandalf didn’t say anything contradictory so the company began to set up camp. Once that was done there was little to do, most of the dwarves produced weapons to take care of but Bilbo was quite happy to simply relax. If he’d had a pipe and some pipeweeds he would have smoked.

He was being shaken awake before he realised that he’d dozed off. The sun was rolling lazily down below the horizon and a small campfire was blazing. Bilbo guessed that hunting had been unsuccessful since there weren’t any additions to the fare, which was a little disappointing but he supposed he had better get used to it - where they were headed he doubted there would be any kind of animals, or at least the kind that anybody would want to eat. What surprised him was the
amount of lembas bread they still had left despite the appetites of thirteen dwarves and a hobbit, who could eat more of the stuff in a meal than simply a bite or two. The elves had clearly expected to feed all of them the whole way to Mordor and back.

Gandalf had pulled Thorin aside and, by the light of his staff, had their map out and was tracing lines on it with a finger which Bilbo presumed to be the way into Mordor. Surely he should have some say in this, shouldn’t he? Then again, he wouldn’t know which ways were best or shortest or least dangerous so he decided not to interrupt. Instead he settled back against his pack, which he was using as a makeshift pillow, and tried to doze off again. He watched the fire burn down and be stoked up again but he was half asleep before Dwalin, who was on guard, slipped off into the night.

The company was woken by a mighty yell

“ORCS!”

Chapter End Notes

For the record, the two swans here were gay and Flambard and Sigismund Took do exist and were about Bilbo’s age.

Did I say Thorin and Bilbo would be making up soon? Yes I did. When is soon? Soon. Ish.

Am I a horrible person for that ending? Probably.

Next Up: Prepare for the fight scene!

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