



THE UNIQUE MAGIC OF MIDDLE-EARTH.®

PERSPECTIVES ON THE NATURE AND HAZARDS OF
MAGIC IN 

*“Still round the corner there may wait
A new road or secret gate...”*
—J.R.R. Tolkien

Just as a myriad of Fantasy Role Playing games exist, an equally diverse set of reasons can be found as to why people wish to play certain systems over others. When it comes to Middle-earth Role Playing, one of the attractions is undoubtedly the idea of “entering” Tolkien’s world and taking part in the fascinating history of Endor. Not only is Middle-earth complete with a vivid background and detailed settings, it has an atmosphere all its own in fantasy literature. Perhaps nothing illustrates this concept more clearly than the unique nature of magic in Middle-earth. For those GMs who wish not only to recreate the geography, history and people of Middle-earth, but also this unusual outlook on magic, the following guidelines may provide some useful concepts from which to start. This information should be used in place of the rules given in the *Middle-earth Role Playing* Second Edition guidelines on pages 70-73 and 264. Remember, however, that these ideas are designed to serve as guidelines and not detailed rules. GMs are left to determine how these principles should be applied to their campaign.

To aid in illustrating the basic premise behind this article, that magic in Middle-earth is unique among FRP worlds, we begin with a passage that presents many of the ideas discussed here.



But though [the Fellowship] had brought wood and kindlings by the advice of Boromir, it passed the skill of Elf or even Dwarf to strike a flame that would hold amid the swirling wind or catch in the wet fuel. At last reluctantly Gandalf himself took a hand. Picking up a faggot he held it aloft for a moment, and then with a word of command, naur an edraith ammen!, he thrust the end of his staff into the midst of it. At once a great spout of green and blue flame sprang out, and the wood flared and sputtered.

'If there are any to see, then I at least am revealed to them,' he said. 'I have written Gandalf is here in signs that all can read from Rivendell to the Mouths of Anduin.' (LotR I, p. 380)

Magic in Middle-earth, as clearly shown here, is a scarce and mysterious thing. Use of this power, even for such simple acts as lighting a fire is never a trivial matter. If someone as masterful as an Istar hesitates to use his power, then lesser spellcasters should certainly feel this great need for restraint. One clear reason to withhold the overt use of magic, as the passage shows, is that other spell users are likely to discover the caster's presence. But another perhaps more subtle reason for restraint is that excessive use of power is not in keeping with the grand designs of Ilúvatar. Gandalf, in accordance with the desires of Eru, rarely chose to wield his full strength against his foes, and preferred to inspire others to rise up against evil. He and the other Istari were not sent to Middle-earth to overcome Sauron by force, so their use of magic was highly limited. This theme of constraining the use of power and allowing events to take a more natural course prevails throughout the history of Middle-earth, and is never more true than with magical abilities. Though spellcasting PCs will not have the impending responsibility of an Istar, they will risk turning down a path of evil if their power is used too often to further their own ends. The Dark Lord, Saruman and the Mouth of Sauron are all individuals who succumbed to these selfish desires, and each came to rely on their magical power to dominate others and serve themselves. But other spellcasters, such as Gandalf, Galadriel and Elrond, were wise in their use of magic and principally put forth their power in more subtle ways most often for the benefit of others. Of course at times, such as during the battle with the Balrog of Moria, Gandalf was forced to use his full power. But these mighty displays of wizardry were always reserved for moments of great need and were seldom sought out.

Furthermore, magic in Middle-earth is at the same time both dynamic and simple. Endor's magic is dynamic because most influential spellcasters are not

merely learned people who have acquired magical skills. They are beings of a supernatural or immortal nature. Gandalf and Saruman are not wise, old men well practiced in the arts of wizardry. They are Maiar from the immortal land of Aman, sent to Middle-earth by Manwë, Lord of the Valar. Similarly, Elrond and Galadriel are great leaders of the Noldor, who have lived thousands of years accumulating their unmatched skills and vast knowledge. But perhaps the clearest example of all is Sauron himself, who is not simply an evil sorcerer who has used his powers to gain dominion over others. He is the legacy of the incarnation of Evil itself. The presence of these individuals and others creates a core of magic practitioners with power far beyond the reach of mortal men.

But, even with all these substantial individuals present, magic in Middle-earth remains a simple, albeit powerful force. Many spells or other enchantments quite common in other FRP worlds are rare and often far more effective in Middle-earth. Take for instance the One Ring's power of invisibility. Leaving aside the Ring's other enchantments, the power of making the wearer invisible was considered to be extraordinary. This ability allowed Bilbo to accomplish great deeds that would otherwise have been impossible. Another example of this idea is the power of flight. Even Gandalf, imprisoned in the high reaches of Orthanc, needed the assistance of a Great Eagle to fly from his jail. If the power of magical flight is denied to Gandalf, then it must be a rare power indeed. One last instance helps illustrate this theme of simple yet powerful magic. This example concerns the magic of scrying, or using some device to view far distant places. Somewhat common in many FRP systems, scrying magic is another power both rare and substantial in Middle-earth. The Palantiri are among Gondor's greatest possessions, and Sauron's acquisition of one of these orbs had a monumental affect on his ability to gather information and exert his will across Middle-earth. These examples combined with the potency of Endor's greatest spellcasters illustrate the often basic yet powerful nature of magic in Middle-earth.

SPELL USE IN MIDDLE-EARTH

In keeping with this unique magical nature, PCs who are pure spellcasters should be considered rare and unusual individuals. Of course, they need not be Maiar or even Lords of the Noldor, because, as the existence of the Mouth of Sauron demonstrates, even mortal men can become skilled in the use of magic. But these individuals will in most instances have an usual background that has allowed them the opportunity to learn magic skills that are unavailable to most people. The Mouth of Sauron, for example, was a





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Black Númenórean who fell under the influence of the Dark Lord early in his life, and learned secrets of magic known only to a few. Other examples of this idea are individuals who live in communities that are particularly attuned to some aspect of Middle-earth. For instance, the Woodmen of Mirkwood, who have lived for many generations in close connection with the forest, might have members of their society that can make use of magic spells related to this terrain, such as the spell lists “Nature’s Movement”, “Nature’s Lore”, or “Plant Mastery”. The general idea is that some clear reason should exist that allows the individual the chance to learn these rare skills.

But when a mortal embarks on a spell-using career, many dangers are present that create great hazards for him. Again, the Mouth of Sauron was a clear example of this idea. Though he was a mortal Man who far exceeded the abilities of his peers, he gave in to his desires for greater power and knowledge and in the end became a servant of Darkness. To avoid the fate of the Mouth, a PC spellcaster must restrain his use of magic, and endeavor to assist others more than himself, lest the temptations of personal power overcome him.

In order to simulate these temptations, a GM should often quietly remind players who control spellcasters of the possibilities of their character’s power and how acquisition of powerful items and greater knowledge could raise their status far above that of their companions. If a PC shows that he is withholding the use of spells, subtly point out how much easier some tasks might be by using his magic. Always make spellcasters aware of the potential power and influence that is theirs for the taking. This last idea can be accomplished by expounding the prowess of famous spellcasters such as Saruman and Gandalf. The GM can remind the PC that he is not so different from the Istari that he could not become nearly as influential. The goal of these suggestions is to create an atmosphere where the temptations to exert greater magical force are not only determined by the role playing skills of the players, but are actual temptations felt by the players themselves.

The GM should understand that excessive use of magic is not in itself evil or corrupting. But when a PC spellcaster overexerts his own influence in Middle-earth through magic, he will create the possibility of alienating himself from more reserved spellcasters, as well as open the opportunity for evil powers to attempt to draw the PC into their fold. These persuasive techniques will be similar to Saruman’s two attempts to bring Gandalf over to his way of thinking. In truth, the basis for evil in magic use, as in most aspects of Middle-earth, is that it increases the likelihood that the user will act with selfish motives. As the

histories of Morgoth and Sauron vividly illustrate, behaving in a self-centered manner is the source of all evil in Arda.

The more practical reason for restraint in magic use concerns the idea of other spellcasters sensing a PC’s power. Whenever magic of any kind is used in Middle-earth, emanations of that power are sent out across the land, something akin to ripples in a lake. Any individual who is particularly attuned to magical energy, such as a powerful spellcaster, has a chance of sensing such a disturbance in the magical fabric of the world. In order to determine the outcome of any use of spells or spell-like powers the Magical Emanations Table and Spellcasting Detection Table can be used.

The Magical Emanations Table is used to determine the radius of magical emanations given off by any particular spell or spell-like power. As can be seen on the table, this area increases as the spell level goes up. Whenever a PC casts a spell or uses an enchanted item with similar powers, the GM should determine if any individuals are present within the area that could potentially detect this magic use. The GM can make use of the map of northwestern Middle-earth found on p. 265 of the Middle-earth Role Playing Second Edition guidelines, which shows the locations of many of these individuals. If the leader of a particular community does not himself have great magical abilities, that does not mean that several people who serve that leader do not. An example of this idea is King Thranduil of Mirkwood. Though he is a Warrior with only limited spellcasting abilities, it can be assumed that some followers of the King will have exceptional magical prowess. These people will certainly inform their leader of any magic disturbance. Note that many of these determinations can be made prior to most playing sessions in order to avoid slowing the game.

After the area of effect and the detecting individuals are determined, the GM can refer to the Spellcasting Detection Table to determine the outcome of the spell use. A percentile roll is made each time a spell or spell-like power is used, and these rolls are modified by the factors given at the bottom of the table. The explanations for the various parts of the table are as follows:

Level of Sensing Individual: The numbers along the top of this section indicate the column to be used for the percentile roll, based on the level of the person detecting the spell or spell-like power.

Modifiers to the Sensing Roll: This section is used to determine the modifications to the percentile roll. Note that with the Spell Level and the Caster’s Level the chance of discovery increases as these levels go up. In addition, the Area Type is divided into two categories: population and degree of magical activ-

ity. The greater the population, the larger the risk, because these areas are watched more closely. The inverse is true of the magical activity in an area. If a large amount of magic is used in an area, such as in an Elven community, then the chances of discovery are lessened due to the masking this other magic provides. In an area of particularly low magical activity, such as barren wilderness or the Shire, the risks become greater, because any magic used is very noticeable.

Result of Spellcasting: the first sentence explains what has been sensed (i.e. that a spell has been cast, the general direction from which the power emanated, the approximate distance to the spellcasting, etc.). Note that the exact spell that was cast is not sensed, only the level of the spell.

The second sentence, far less definitive than the first, gives the general reaction of the individual who senses the spell. This information is presented in the most basic form possible and should always be modified by the GM to fit the exact circumstances. For example, the race or species of the servants sent out should fit the situation, and the reaction given should never create a situation that would be disadvantageous to the detector. If the result is incompatible with the general attitudes of the detecting individual it should be altered or ignored.

The third sentence gives a modification for the next spell cast in the same general area. Note that if a great deal of time has elapsed (a few days) this modification can be ignored.

MAGIC ITEMS IN MIDDLE-EARTH

Closely related to the ideas above are the magic items of Middle-earth. Like the spellcasters themselves, the enchanted items of Endor are somewhat rare and often very potent. Adventuring groups should not in most instances possess a great many magic items without causing significant (and often dangerous) attention to be drawn to themselves. The reason for this attention is twofold. First, as with spellcasting, the use of magic items that duplicate spell affects will have a chance of drawing attention to the user as if he or she cast that spell. Secondly, magic items such as enchanted weaponry or armor will tend to stand out in most settings. After all a warrior striding into Bree or even a place like Minas Tirith wearing shining mithral mail and a gleaming magic sword will hardly blend in with the commoners. Spies of the Dark Lord or other evil powers will be sure to take notice.

This idea does not mean that a party of adventurers should be prevented from obtaining magical items, but that the use and display of these treasures must be done with great care and restraint, just as the use of

spellcasting must be controlled. It is suggested that the GM usually let the PCs discover these potential hazards for themselves.

Perhaps the best example of this idea can be seen with Aragorn early in *The Lord of the Rings*. Though this Chieftain of the Rangers of the North is one of Middle-earth's most formidable individuals, possessing several items of power as well as substantial spellcasting abilities, he presents himself as a rough looking vagabond, and rarely openly displays his full power. Though the average PC can never hope to attain the status of Aragorn, the same discreet lifestyle can often prolong the career of any adventurer, as well as make that character a more believable part of Middle-earth.

GMs should be aware that the possession of extremely potent forms of magic, such as a Lesser Ring of Power or a particularly famous enchanted sword, can potentially upset the balance of play by either giving the PCs too much power and influence, making the game less challenging, or by creating a situation that the evil powers of the world can not possibly ignore. In the latter case the PCs would be hunted down much as Frodo and his companions were in their journey from the Shire to Rivendell. Of course, the nine Nazgûl would probably not be sent out after the party, but other nearly as ominous foes could be allotted this task. In keeping with this idea, it is suggested that few if any truly powerful items be obtainable by PCs. After all, when powerful items changed hands in *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*, such as when Bilbo found the One Ring or when Galadriel gave the Elessar to Aragorn, the history of Middle-earth itself was affected. Only if a GM is prepared to cope with these hazards should such items be obtainable by PCs.

MAGIC AND THE RACES OF MIDDLE-EARTH

Magic in Middle-earth is viewed by the more common inhabitants as a wondrous and inexplicable thing that is more akin to the Undying Lands than Endor. Or, as in the case of evil sorcery, the Free Peoples see magic as a dark and mysterious power, best avoided at all costs. In both instances magic is never viewed as a common part of every day life. In most communities those visitors who are known to use magic will at best be viewed with suspicion.

This general description applies to Endor as a whole, but further explanation of how each race of Middle-earth fits into this scheme can also be useful. The following information can help a GM determine the reactions of a given society to spellcasters and other magic, and in deciding the likelihood of finding users of magic in a given community. All of the races





are followed by a brief description, except Elves, who have a special relationship to the magic of Middle-earth and require more detailed information.

Men. Men distrust magic and its practitioners more so than most races of Middle-earth. This idea is in part due to the fact that magic is more foreign to humans than any other race (except Hobbits), and that Morgoth in the First Age and Sauron in the Second Age have shown Men that sorcery is a tool of Darkness. Very few spellcasters will be found among these people, though all types of magic users can potentially exist. Because the races of Men vary to a great degree, some exceptions to this idea are present, such as the Dúnedain and the Black Númenóreans. These races, being descendants of Númenor, are more knowledgeable about magic and therefore fear it less than most Men. Several other examples can be found as well, but in most of these communities some connection to magic will be present, such as living in close proximity to Elves.

Hobbits. Of all the races of Middle-earth, Hobbits avoid magic and spellcasters the most. This attitude exists to a large degree for the same reasons that Men dislike the use of magic. But with Hobbits this feeling is even stronger, because their quiet and peaceful lifestyle does not mix well with Wizards and Mages, and Hobbits avoid circumstances that could lead to adventurous activity. For these reasons, no Hobbit spellcasters of any type will be found in Middle-earth.

Dwarves. As with the races of Men and Hobbits, magic is in most ways foreign to Dwarves. The only class of pure spellcaster found among this race are Animists. The one important exception is in the creation of enchanted items. Because Dwarves were made from the very stone foundations of Endor, they have a close affinity to the many magical ores and minerals found within the earth. The Dwarves were created by Aulë, the Smith of the Valar, and gained from their maker an unquenchable lust for creating great works with their hands. These two attributes give Dwarves not only superior ability at forging and metallurgy, but also the knowledge of how to better enhance the natural enchantments of the materials used. Therefore, mithril mail made by a Dwarf, for example, will exceed the quality of similar armor made by a Man. This difference of quality is due to both the Dwarf's physical skills and his natural knowledge of how to bring out the enchantment of the ore. Note that this ability does not necessarily involve actual spellcasting.

Orcs and Trolls. Members of these two races, including Uruk-hai, Olog-hai, Pertereg and Half-orcs, are not typically inclined toward learning the arts of spellcasting or magic item creation. Most individuals do not possess the mental capacity for

TABLE OF MAGICAL EMANATIONS

Level of Spell	Radius of Emanations
1st-2nd	N/A
3rd-4th	1/2 mile
5th-6th	2 miles
7th-8th	5 miles
9th-10th	10 miles
11th-12th	25 miles
13th-15th	50 miles
20th	100 miles
25th	125 miles
30th	150 miles
50th	200 miles

magic-using professions in the first place. Unlike the races described previously, Orcs and Trolls have been dominated by powerful spellcasters for much of their history. They have become somewhat accustomed to the use of magic, even though most Orcs and Trolls cannot themselves make great use of it. Though Mages are extremely rare, Animists can occasionally be found among these races.

ELVEN MAGIC

By far the most unique aspect of magic in Middle-earth is the power which is exhibited by the Elves. Though by the Third Age Elven culture in Endor is dramatically waning, the Elves' natural abilities and great skills are still unrivaled by any other people. Much of this power, though viewed as magic by the other races, comes naturally to all Elves, both Eldar and Avari, and is due to the position the Quendi hold as the Firstborn of Ilúvatar.

All the races of Elves have a close affinity to the elements and natural forces of Arda, but at the same time they exhibit a mysterious immunity to these powers. One natural force by which the Quendi are little effected is time. Unlike any other race of Endor, Elves are immortal and rarely show signs of aging, only tiring of Middle-earth after many long centuries. Other forces which seem to affect Elves less than others are heat and cold, for they can endure these extremes far easier than the other races of Middle-earth. Similarly, darkness hinders the Quendi little. They can see on a moonlit night as a man sees on a sunny day and their sight during daylight hours is far superior to that of a man.

Perhaps the strangest resistance to natural forces shown by the Elves is their perceived levity. Though a true understanding of this characteristic is known only to the Quendi, Men see this trait as enabling the Elves to walk on air. This ability is clearly shown when Elves travel silently through a forest without leaving any trace of their passing. Another illustration

of this power is shown by Legolas when he demonstrated his ability to walk across the snow on Caradhras without plunging through the surface. All of these traits and powers are used by the Elves in the same way a man might use his ability to speak, and they seem no more magical to Elves than talking is to a human. But these abilities are regarded by the other races of Endor as strange and inexplicable elements of Elven Magic.

Other aspects of the Elves' magical nature are not found in all Quendi and are instead related to the Eldar's close ties to Aman. These powers had two sources. The first was being in the presence of the Two Trees, and the second was living among the Valar themselves. The Noldor who returned to Middle-earth were said to have had the light of the Two Trees shining from their faces, and this affected the Deep Elves in no small way. They tended to be wiser and far more knowledgeable than the Moriguendi. The Noldor had learned great skills from Aulë and the other Valar during their time in Aman.

The power gained by the Noldor is chiefly exhibited in their ability to fashion items of unsurpassable quality as well as great works of power.

But these enhanced characteristics of Elven nature are not restricted to the Noldor. To a lesser degree these same traits were also gained by the Sindar. Though the Elves of Doriath and their descendants never saw the light of the Two Trees nor lived among the Valar, they did dwell in the presence of Melian (a Maia) and Thingol, both of whom, like the Noldor, had the light of Valinor shining from their eyes. The presence of these two individuals gave the Sindar a wisdom and inner light very similar to the Noldor, even though less pronounced.

ELVEN CREATIONS

Perhaps the most well known form of Elven magic is their creation of enchanted articles, both common things and talismans of great power. The Elves are called the Children of the Earth, and, like the Dwarves, the Quendi have a close affinity to the land. Unlike the Naugrim this affinity encompasses all of Arda, including each element as well as the flora and fauna. Due to their close ties to nature as well as their great knowledge and craftsmanship, the Elves are able to fashion things beyond the skill of Men and Dwarves.

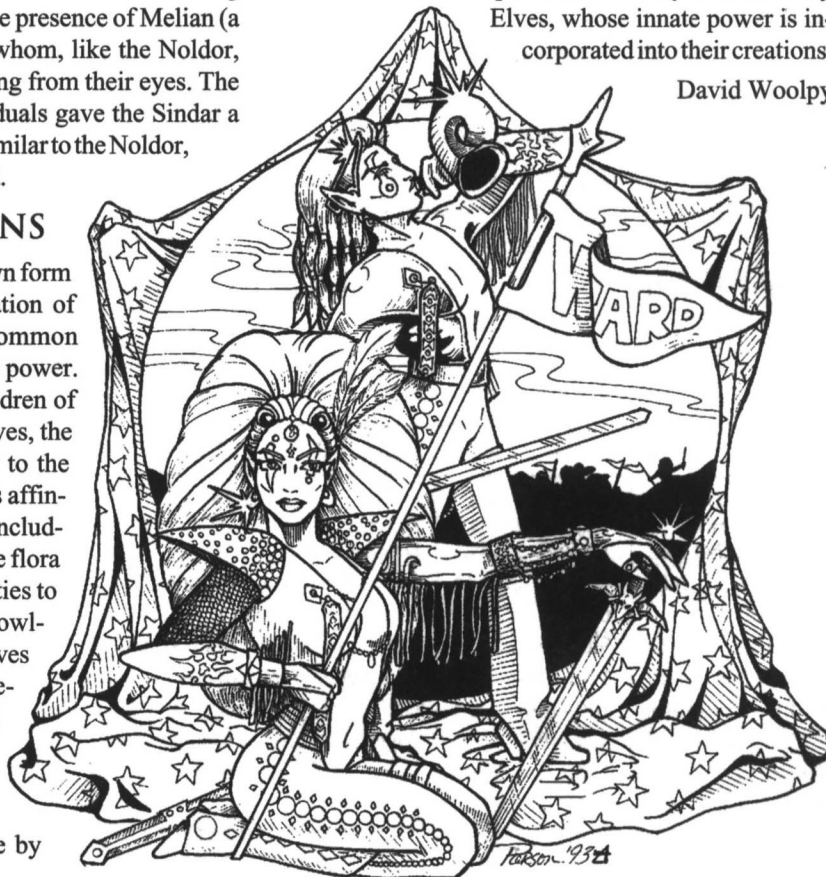
Many powerful creations that required great lore and skillful technique were made by

the Elves throughout their years in Endor. These enchanted items, such as the Rings of Power, the Mirror of Galadriel and the Elessar, were unrivaled in their potency and influence. But magic items such as these were rare even for the Eldar, and required the maker to use unmatched forging skills as well as powerful enchantments.

More mysterious to the other races of Middle-earth, however, are the lesser, almost common goods which the Elves produce. These items are more mystical to the other races because at first they seem to be nothing more than well-made, but otherwise ordinary things. Upon making use of these items, their truly enchanted nature is revealed. One good example of these sorts of Elven goods is the equipment the Fellowship of the Ring received upon leaving Lórien. The Elven cloaks, the rope, and even the Waybread exhibited the Quendi's ability to make ordinary items in a most extraordinary manner. The cloaks concealed the wearers almost as if they were invisible. The Elven rope could untie itself at the wish of the owner, and the lembas had a renewing quality and was able to sustain a traveler for many days with no other source of food. Unlike the powerful talismans these items are not seen as magical to Elves, and no great spell craft is required in their making. The 'magic' of these more common items comes from the

simple fact that they are made by Elves, whose innate power is incorporated into their creations.

David Woolpy





SPELLCASTING DETECTION TABLE

LEVEL OF SENSING INDIVIDUAL					RESULT OF SPELL CASTING
10-12	13-15	16-18	19-20	20+	
01-35	01-20	01-15	01-10	01-05	Spell goes unnoticed.
36-50	21-30	16-25	11-15	06-10	Spell is sensed, but ignored. +5 on this table for next spell cast in this area.
51-60	31-40	26-35	16-20	11-15	Spell is sensed. The senser becomes wary. +10 on this table for next spell cast in this area.
61-75	41-55	36-45	21-25	16-20	Spell is sensed, but location & distance unknown. Spies sent to locate & report on movements of caster. +10 on this table for next spell cast in this area.
76-85	56-75	46-60	26-35	21-25	Spell & general direction of caster are sensed. Spies sent to find, hinder, & report on movements of caster. +15 on this table for next spell cast in this area.
86-90	76-85	61-75	36-45	26-30	Spell & general direction of caster are sensed. Minor minions sent to find & capture caster. +15 on this table for next spell cast in this area.
91-95	86-90	76-85	46-50	31-40	Spell, direction, & distance are sensed. Minor minions sent to capture caster. +20 on this table for next spell cast in this area.
96-99	91-95	86-90	51-65	41-55	Spell, direction, & distance are sensed. Med. level minions sent to capture or slay caster. +20 on this table for next spell cast in this area.
100	96-99	91-95	66-75	56-70	Spell & exact location of caster are sensed. Med. level minions sent to capture or slay caster. +25 on this table for next spell cast in this area.
—	100	96-99	75-85	71-80	Spell & exact location of caster are sensed. High level minions sent to capture or slay caster. +25 on this table for next spell cast in this area.
—	—	100	86-95	81-90	Spell, exact location, & power of caster are sensed. High level minions sent to capture or slay caster. +30 on this table for next spell cast in this area.
—	—	—	96-99	91-95	Spell, exact location, & power of caster are sensed. Highest ranking minions sent to slay caster. +30 on this table for next spell cast in this area.
100+	100+	100+	100	96-100	Spell, exact location, & power of caster are sensed. Leader & minions go to capture or slay caster. +35 on this table for next spell cast in this area.*
—	—	—	100+	100+	Spell, exact location, & identity of caster are sensed. Leader will stop at nothing to capture or slay caster. +40 on this table for next spell cast in this area.*

*Particularly powerful leaders, such as Sauron or the King of Gondor, will not themselves pursue the caster.

Spell Level	Caster's Level	Area Type	Outlook of Sensing Individual
1st-2nd: No Roll	1st-2nd: NA	Dense Population	Ally: -40
3rd-5th: -10	3rd-5th: -15	(cities, fortresses, & vicinity): +20	Friendly: -20
6th-8th: 0	6th-8th: -10	Average Population	Neutral: 0
9th-10th: +10	9th-10th: -5	(towns, farmlands, small keeps): ... +10	Unfriendly: +10
11th-13th: ... +20	11th-13th: 0	Low Population (wilderness): -10	Enemy: +20
14th-16th: .+30+	14th-16th: +5	High degree of Magic Activity: -10	Enemy knows caster: +30
17th-19th: 40	17th-19th: .. +15	Average Degree of Magic Activity: .. 0	
20th: +50	20th: +25	Low Degree of Magic Activity: +10	
20th+ +70	20th+ +30		



One Game to Rule Them All



...Torn and battered from a near disasterous battle with the great drake, Báin Ironbeard fell to his weary knees before his prize, the most revered of Khazad relics.

Báin breathed the words with tears in his eyes...

“Durin’s armor!”

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