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Based on the world and characters of J.R.R. Tolkien
Illustration an excerpt from Everquest by Verant Software

Not even the moonlight could reach into the depths of that valley and reveal the horrors that lay beneath the twisted bracken. Mithrandir had journeyed many days and nights with little rest to reach the southern vales of Greenwood. He now understood all too clearly why King Thranduil had renamed the great forest Mirkwood. To the watchful eyes of the beasts that dwelled within this unhallowed ground Mithrandir appeared to be no more than a man, careworn and burdened with the weight of many years. Passing his hand into a ragged gray pouch he produced a brilliant stone and placed it firmly into the top of his gnarled staff. The very illumination seemed to make the surrounding vines recoil in pain. Mithrandir could hear numerous creatures and other unmentionable beings scatter into the surrounding brush seeking refuge from the cleansing aura of the mighty Istari.

It was not long before the dark hill soon loomed its ugly head through the choking mists. Mithrandir did not hesitate in the presence of it, nor did he charge recklessly forward, his steady gait seemed to keep in harmonious rhythm with the soft chanting he began to utter. From the ground six small flames began to form. At first they were quite faint, and then grew like the stalks of a plant into tall pillars of fire that just barely reached over the top of Mithrandir's pointed blue hat. Each took on the color of blue, red, or green and moved into position around Mithrandir. As the Istari drew closer to the hill he began to notice its lack of vegetation. The many holes that bore into the loose dirt made it appear as more of a giant mound. Upon approaching one of the lower burrows Mithrandir peered upward and estimated that a horse could clearly pass through the gap with little contact from the jagged walls.

Lowering his staff to the mouth of the hole Mithrandir saw numerous black spheres reflecting the light of his glowing stone. A foul reek poured out into the chill night air and recognizing its scent the wizard quickly strafed backwards. Before he could move a safe distance away a dark chitinous form sprang at him and then burst into a torrent of flames. The shrill squeal it released as a dying breath pierced the night and echoed down into the roots of the hill. Eight sinuous legs curled over the body as it was relentlessly consumed by the wizard's flame. With a quick incantation the six columns of flame began to rotate around Mithrandir at a rapid pace. The sound was hard to describe, but if one were to pound hundreds of hammers across a padded surface, it might come close to the noise that resonated within the great hill. Within moments the mound grew black from the hundreds of spiders that came to answer the dying scream of their fallen comrade. If it had not been for their great numbers, the spiders would have surely retreated from the powerful wizard. They greatly feared his power but the shadow within the hill spurred them on to attack and to defend its domain. "Flame of Anor hear my call!" Mithrandir raised his arms and the very air around him seemed to boil with a great intensity. The scorching barrier did not halt the ongoing waylay of the spiders. Their bodies, nearly as large as sheep, piled high becoming a morbid and noxious bonfire. Realizing the futility of this confrontation the spiders surrounded Mithrandir and bore their fangs while raising

their legs, a sign of tremendous insult among this monstrous breed. It would be uncharacteristic of Mithrandir to let down his guard but his attention was drawn away while one of the beasts closed in for the kill. Carefully scaling up the bodies of his fallen brothers the spider took an advantageous point above Mithrandir and leaped down upon him! He was pinned to the ground under the great weight of the ferocious arachnid but managed to keep the jagged fangs away from his throat using his staff. Black viscous venom dripped from the spider's rancid maw, pooling onto Mithrandir's faded gray robe.

"Back to the darkness with you!" He shouted and his wooden staff became white with a blistering heat. The spider was thrust high into the air and exploded into thousands of burning embers that rained down upon Mirkwood. Rising to his feet Mithrandir could see the horde of spiders scattering into the nearby woods, away from the clearing and the wielder of the sacred flame.

With the exception of the pops and cracks of the numerous bonfires, the night returned to silence. The six columns of fire dulled into small orbs of light and returned to the earth from which they were summoned. Mithrandir wasted no time and resumed his course to the very roots of the hill. The passage was coated with the foul waste of numerous spiders that seemed to reflect the light of the wizard's stone and added to the darkness that resided beneath the soiled earth. It was only but a few furlongs into the hill that Mithrandir began to sense a growing concentration in shadows that his staff could not illuminate.

"Could it be a stronghold for one of the Ulairi?" The wizard thought.

The tunnel grew wider and soon opened into a large chamber in which all the burrows lead. In the center a spinning cyclone of shadow and flame hovered above the ground. Whispers in the tongue of Mordor echoed throughout the chamber and in Mithrandir's mind.

"You shall not reside here any longer servant of the dark lord!" The Istari thrust his illuminated staff into the growing tempest of darkness. The hill shook and a great bellow of agony. Swirling into a cylinder of pure blackness the mysterious form burst into thousands of flapping wings. Mithrandir covered his face as the scattering bats escaped through the numerous tunnels, all collecting into a great black mass that drifted in the wind towards the east.

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The leaves of fall had already begun to drift to the ground, landing at the feet of the Eldar and the Istari who had gathered within the sacred wood. Standing before the newly formed council King Thranduil lowered his head solemnly and addressed the current status of the crises in Mirkwood.

"It has become increasingly difficult for my people to hold the darkness at bay. While Dol Guldur lays many a furlong away to the south the concentration of unnatural beasts waivers not to the northern reaches of the forest. I implore the White Council to seek a means in which to banish the Necromancer from his stronghold for good and cleanse the Mirkwood of all his perversions."

An Istari draped in white flowing robes arose from his seat and gestured for King Thranduil to take a place at the seats amongst the Eldar.

"The servants of the dark lord, Sauron still endure. It has become my belief that a remaining Ulairi, one of the nine, resides within Dol Guldur. While the location of this fortress holds no strategic purpose..."

Mithrandir doubted the wisdom of Curunir, for while he had years of study and much knowledge of Sauron and his rings of power he did not bare witness to the shadow that hibernated within the core of Dol Guldur.

"... and now this Nazgul has wrought and reshaped the hill into a tower, as a means to gather the dwindling number of orcs and wolves that remain scattered across Middle-earth." Curunir's eyes widened as Mithrandir stood up, an obvious expression of disagreement on his face.

"My own expedition into Dol Guldur has lead me to believe, Saruman, that a being of much more sinister intent and origin resides within that tower."

"Had you researched the tomes and writings as well as I had, Gandalf, you might have realized that one of the Ulairi held more power than the other eight. It is quite possible that the Necromancer is the Witch King of Angmar, the very same one you failed to drive away from Mirkwood that last time you aimlessly wandered your way there." The sarcastic tone of Curunir brought an underlying tension among the Eldar.

"And I suppose then that your research has revealed a way in which we can expel the Necromancer?" Mithrandir sat down and waited for Curunir to support his claims and how he would propose to resolve the problem. Galadriel looked back from her seat next to Cirdan and Elrond and peered at Mithrandir.

"Why do you allow him to seize power over this council without little resistance Mithrandir? You are his greater, many times over." Galadriel's voice seemed as soft as a whisper within his mind, yet it resonated loudly enough to produce an infinite echo.

"It concerns me little that Saruman controls the workings of an assembly while the rest of the world moves forward. I only wish he did not hesitate so to eliminate the growing threat in the southern Mirkwood. My heart tells me that urgency is at hand, lest we reface an enemy from the past."

"The Eldar share these same concerns as well. I would not heed Curunir's advice Mithrandir. I have little trust for him; his mind is closed and fortified. Ideas and ill thoughts are concealed within that not even I can see."

"Time will tell what havoc his mind has wrought while our backs are turned elsewhere."

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The White Council had grown increasingly frustrated with Curunir. He urged them to wait and observe but the situation had become to grave. With the consent of Elrond and Thranduil, Mithrandir once more journeyed to Dol Guldur.

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Twisting black thorns and bracken consumed the path. Mithrandir found it very disconcerting that his glowing stone did not have the potent effect it once had on the dark vegetation. While the vines gave way to the Istari they soon crept back when his illumination had passed. For a moment the wizard thought that he had entered the lands of Mordor rather than the southern reaches of Mirkwood. A dark citadel towered above him, stabbing the sky with its menacing spires.

"In just eight-hundred years... why Saruman? Why did you let this continue?"

Mithrandir shuddered as he approached the gate. Two hooked chains began to draw the massive doors open. He was expected this time. A rolling fog poured around Mithrandir and he stepped inside. His light could do nothing to pierce the darkness that twisted the space around him. Suddenly Mithrandir lost all sense of direction and was flung upwards, as if the sky had become ground and the ground had become sky. The wizard frantically reached out for anything to slow his ascent but there was nothing. With a great jolt he was forced against a hard surface. The reality inside the tower was shifted once more and the grey wizard found himself at the bottom of large pit. His breathing became heavy as he scanned the chamber. Numerous chains and spikes and other instruments of torture were scattered haphazardly on the ground. Then he heard a deep breathing that was not his own. Mithrandir could not place the direction and turned frantically to find it.

An icy grip had taken hold of his wrist and the Istari summoned a great strength to pull away from the unknown assailant. His staff was pointed forwards illuminating a pale face and long white beard.

"A dwarf?" Mithrandir was certainly shocked to see one of Aule's children dwelling in a place like this. Trembling the venerable dwarf reached into a satchel and produced a scroll and a key.

"Find....Thori-n. Find....Thorin." The dwarf pushed the scroll and key towards Mithrandir, desperately trying to relinquish these items to the wizard. Placing the items in a tattered gray pouch Mithrandir knelt down and put his hand on the dwarf's shoulder. "How ever did you get in here?" The dwarf continued to shake, his eyes glazed and locked in a permanent gaze of horror. "Come with me, I think I know of a way to escape." Looking back Mithrandir could see a chain extending upwards into the darkness.

"The eye... the eye!" The dwarf began to shriek and he fell to the ground shaking violently.

"An eye? What eye? Speak up man!"

"No! I know nothing of the other three nor the One! Leave me be! Leave me be! Trouble me no more with the heirs of your enemy! I know naught, I swear! Its coming... go... go now! Go before its too late!"

The darkness surrounding them pulsed as mass of shadow began to take shape in the lower corner of the dungeon. Soon it swirled into an orb that spanned ten feet wide and hovered off the ground.

"Find Thorin! Give him the map! Don't let my death be in vain!" The dwarf stood up and recollected himself. From the ground he picked up a rusty battle axe and shambled

towards the growing darkness. Mithrandir was about to grab the dwarf and pull him up the chain if he had to but then it opened. A rising black sheath curled upwards revealing a swirling mass of fire. In the center a dark slit opened into an infinite void. The chamber echoed with thousands of screams and Mithrandir recoiled in sheer terror. Raising his axe the dwarf rushed forward and tried to pierce the great blazing cornea in a futile attempt to stun the malicious spirit. It had become all too clear to Mithrandir what this was and he made his way to the chain. The eye glared at the hapless dwarf and a semicircle of smoke enveloped him. The wizard quickly chanted an incantation above the screaming and his hands began to glow with an eerie cobalt blue. Gripping the chain he pulled himself upward with an unknown strength born of panic and fear. Mithrandir could feel the icy glare of the eye upon him and he raced up as quickly as he could bare. The eye now filled the chamber and started to rise upward. The wizard's heart grew heavy with despair until he saw a shaft of moonlight making its way in through the gate. It appears as if the tower could rotate space inside of it twisting the confines of up and down. Mithrandir swung on the chain to reach the gate but the eye was closing in fast. A choking smoke overtook the Istari but he withdrew his breath as best as he could. With a last agonizing effort Mithrandir leaped from the chain and landed at the base of the massive black gate. He inhaled the cool night air and sprinted forward. The dark slit peered through the gate entrance and soon the tower glowed a fiery red. The path was hidden from the twisting mass of thorns and vines trying to prevent the wizard's escape. "Fire of Anor show me the way!" A blazing path of fire sped across the ground and scorched the twisting bracken. The whole clearing had become ablaze in an unnatural fire as Mithrandir made his way through the dark trunks of Mirkwood.

The scouts had found Mithrandir just outside of Rivendell. After giving him a horse he made his way to Elrond. Dabbing a poultice onto his cuts Elrond sat back and placed the fine silken cloth into a bowl of green tinted water. Mithrandir sighed. "True, alas, is our guess, This is not one of the Ulairi, as many have long supposed. It is Sauron himself who has taken shape again and now grows apace; and he is gathering again all the Rings to his hand; and he seeks ever for news of the One, and of the Heirs of Isildur, if they live still on earth." "In the hour that Isildur took the Ring and would not surrender it, this doom was wrought, that Sauron should return." "Yet the One was lost, and while it still lies hid, we can master the Enemy, if we gather our strength and tarry not too long."

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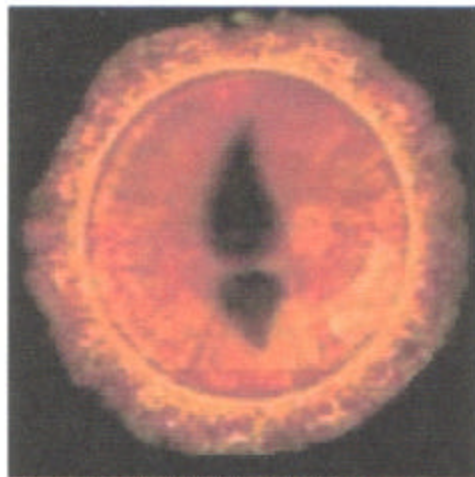
"Let my tale be proof of his coming. If this council does not take swift recourse against Sauron then he will surely regain his power within Dol Guldur! In just eight hundred years it has been reformed into a mighty citadel. To wait any longer may be the folly of us all." Mithrandir was met with approving eyes amongst the Eldar and the rest of the Istari. Curunir stood behind a silver podium and glared at Mithrandir with impudence and loathing. "You propose to strike a viper that is without fangs Gandalf? How do propose to attack a being that is without form or matter? To do so would be like waging war on your own

shadow. The Enemy lacks the power to threaten Middle-earth. For I believe not that the One will ever be found again *in* Middle-earth. Into the Anduin it fell, and long ago, I deem, it was rolled into the Sea. There it shall lie until the end, when all this world is broken and the deeps are removed.”

The members of the Council withdrew to their dwellings across the land to meet once more at an urgent or appointed time. Elrond felt an uneasiness in his heart and he turned to Mithrandir, “Nonetheless I forebode that the One will yet be found, and then war will arise again, and in that war this Age will be ended. Indeed in a second darkness it will end, unless some strange chance deliver us that my eyes cannot see.”

“Many are the strange chances of the world,” said Mithrandir, “and help oft shall come from the hands of the weak when the Wise falter.” The wizard reached into his robe and found the scroll that had rested there unremembered for days. Breaking the seal he studied it closely and saw that it was a detailed map of the land surrounding the Lonely Mountain. “Here of old was Thrain, King under the Mountain.”

Mithrandir looked up at Elrond, his eyes bright with realization and wonder. “Strange chances indeed.....”



IT IS ONLY THE BEGINNING.....