

The Assault on Carlson's Switch

Ariel Glitterwing Stargazer

(co-ordinated by Martin Dickson as DM)

Mid-afternoon, W'nsday 2nd Frost, 805

The volunteers assembled for initial discussions and briefing, a chance to go over battle plans and get a feel for the capabilities of the other volunteers.

The basics of the plan were then laid out by Braegon:

"Thank you for answering my call, I have been working with a couple of Mil Sci's to come up with an effective attack plan.

The basic plan is this, you will be divided into fighting units of 4 to 6 as that is the size group most of us are used to operating in. In 2 days time at midday we will be launching an assault on the Carlstons Switch pass through the Ildrisholm Hills. We will be supported by the Eltrandorian Algain Heavy Cavalry, Halph Heavy Cavalry, some Brastor Borderers and a few hand-picked men from other units.

Between now and late tomorrow morning we will be discussing everyones combat capabilities, organising the fighting units, and casting the longer duration magics. Then around midday we ride out in our finery with banners waving and head to Regars Keep. There we spend the night at the guild outpost, strip down to fighting gear, and cast the medium duration enhancement magics. In the morning we fly to the Eltrandorian forward position just this side of the pass.

At mid-day on the 4th we attack the pass with the goal of breaking their lines, destroying as many of their command staff as we can find, and generally causing chaos and death amongst their ranks. At the same time the Eltrandorians will push through and deal to the lesser troops of our opposition. If all goes well we may be able to clear the pass enough to get the trapped troops out.

It is not critical that we break through, there are back-up plans for getting people out. But it is essential that we cause them lots of damage and disrupt as much of their local command and co-ordination as we can.

If all goes to plan I expect to have all of you home by the evening of the 4th."

Plans and discussions continued throughout the afternoon, and those that did not have them were given Lesser and Greater Enchantments.

Between Braegon and the Duke's military advisors the volunteers were organised into groups based on expected roles in the assault. Braegon numbered these teams, however the advisors seemed to think this was insufficiently military and have added more "poetic" names.

Group 1 "Hammer" - Mobile Strike Force (High Level and able to fight and fly in combat):
Sabrina (Mil Sci), Lysander, Mary-Em, Kilroy

Group 2 "Sword" - Front Line Fighters: Mordrin (Mil Sci), Darius Jedburgh, Sir Wojer, Gok, Starflower

Group 3 "Shield" - Combat Support, Healing, Anti-Troop / Blast Magics, and Bodyguards:
Engalton (Mil Sci), Axis, Bleyze, Flamis, Shemin-ah, Valery, Wordsmith, Sooty

Braegon explained their roles:

"Group 1 are expected to remain mobile, breach defences to create landing points, target enemy commanders, strike points of heavy resistance. Group 2 are expected to hold a stable front line between our mages and the enemy and, naturally, to strike down all who come before them. They are expected to be the first to land in breaches created by group 1 and to hold them safe for group 3. Group 3 are expected to heal and support group 2, and unleash magical death and destruction on the enemy. Group 3 will be covered by a high rank Base Chance enhance."

3rd Frost

Just before noon, the group assembled and rode out of the guild gates. Led to the outskirts of Seagate by trumpeters and a detachment of the Duke's personal guard in full dress uniform, were some of the great heroes of the guild:

Axis Dragonmage: a tall male human, wearing the tabard and bearing the standard that mark him as the Herald of Xanadu, the Dragon-father.

Bleyze: a tall male elf, with scarlet hair and dressed in bright red. A well known fire mage with a reputation for danger (often to himself).

Braegon: a large and heavyset human male with red hair and beard, wearing gold dragon scalemail, and with several gems orbiting around his head. Seemed rather quieter than usual.

Darius Jedburgh: a male human wearing red dragon skin armour.

Engalton: a familiar looking handsome male human of around six feet in height and solid build in his late forties. Always smells of lavender.

Flamis: a human female dressed in a red and gold over-skirt and blouse, revealing a silver chain mail bikini top, a long black cloak thrown about her shoulders. She wears bronze arm-bracers depicting comedy and tragedy, and leather boots, and carries a distinctive black staff with fiery markings, her "Rod of Fires".

GoK a male elf, wearing fine leather armour, a fine cloak, a highly etched Silver hand 1/2, and riding a black mustang.

Kilroy: a paragon of manly beauty, riding a giant raven named Karreyhun.

Lysander: a female elf with great white feathered wings; charismatic and beautiful. Carrying a hand and a half sword.

Mary-M: a female halfling with angelic wings, wearing gilded cuirbolli armour of unusual design with a breastplate, armoured kilt, greaves, vambraces, and helm with Queztal green feathered plume. Twin shortswords are belted at her waist.

Mordrin: a female dwarf wearing well worn heavy plate, showing many years of hard use and "panel beating". She bears a hand and a half sword and kite shield, showing similar use.

Sabrina : a female elf, winged helmet sitting upon long blonde hair, clad in blood red dragon skin, girded with many weapons. She sat astride a huge jet black pegasus named Ajax, who shimmers in his chainmail, and shows off his 30 ft wingspan.

Sir Wojer: a male elf clad in white silks, a yellow scarf, flowing blue cloak, with long blond hair

streaming over his left shoulder. On an old palfrey emblazoned with a red hand on a white field; a big two handed sword in a scabbard over his shoulder.

Shemin-ah: a weather-worn human female plains barbarian.

Sooty: a short male elf, with heavy burn scars over most of his face, dressed in gold embroidered black desert robes, carrying a six foot long ornately carved quarterstaff, with a dragon's head at one end and a griffon at the other.

Starflower: a female elf, dressed in a shimmering silver cloak over translucent cloudy grey laen plate armour, with twin tulwars belted at her waist.

Valery: a female human dressed in leather armour and carrying a silver glaive.

WordSmith: a male dwarf, clad in well buffed hard leather armour and sturdy boots, with a gold cloak worn proudly. He is carrying a battle axe and shield, and accompanied by a floating chest, and a crystalline weasel.

Banners were unfurled and as the procession wended its way out of Seagate people gathered at the sides of the road to watch, cheer, and sometimes just gaped in awe. The braver amongst them shouted out "Go the Guild!" "Bring back the Light!" "Destruction to the Dark Circle!"...

The crowds thinned out as the party got further from Seagate and the ride, or flight (for those that insisted) to Regars Keep was pleasant on this clear winter's day. The guild outpost near the Keep is simple and spartan even compared to guild lodgings. Those that wore parade finery changed into their standard adventuring kit and settled in for the night. The group were joined by Borgoff, (a handsome and very tall (6'10") male human, apparently around 20 years old, wearing Blue Dragonskin Armour, with a Red Kite Shield and a Hand and a 1/2 sword) and Phaeton, (a 5'3" human in white robes and rainbow cloak). Both men had been already stationed there. Borgoff was assigned to Sword while Phaeton was in Shield.

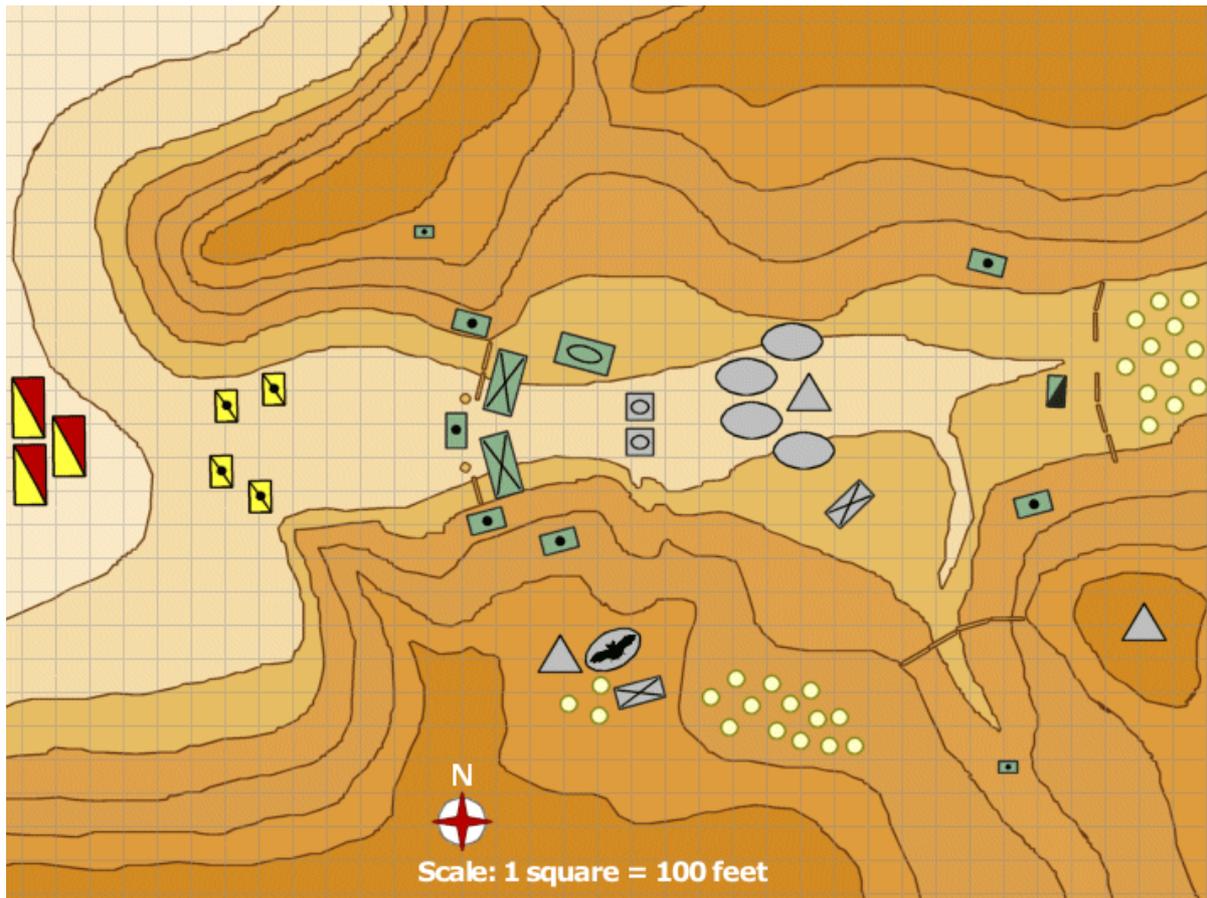
There was further information that Braegon passed on to the military commanders but, because of the threat of Dark Circle spies, it had to be kept secret.

It is odd that certain other Guild Members who were rumoured to be involved appear to be missing, these being Dramus, Faith, Roke, and Seredipity.

4th Frost

Some slept peacefully and awoke early in the morning to find themselves magically armoured, protected, and enhanced. Others were more aware of or had been an active part of the night's activities. Braegon left early on other business.

Many of the group appeared much as they did the day before, although there were rather more weapons in view. Others exchanged their civilian wear for very obvious combat gear: Sir Wojer wore Kinlu style Plate mail, and sported a white sashi-mono battle banner bearing a red hand. Flamis on the other hand has dropped her red and gold over-skirt and blouse, to reveal the rest of her silver chain mail bikini, and Starflower has traded her plate armour for a chain shirt. Mary-M carried a pole (which looks a bit light for a quarterstaff) and a tightly wrapped suspicious package.



Just over two hours after sunrise the last of the medium term magics were cast and using their various means of flight (and with extras provided by some of the Duke's mages) the group set off east for the 97 mile flight to Carlson's Switch.

Nearing noon the group approached the pass. Below them, the Eltrandorians have manoeuvred into support positions as arranged. Laid out before them in the mouth of the pass are the assembled forces of the Dark Circle defenders. The Eltrandorians saw the guild assault force fly over and began their advance as the military scientists guided the groups towards their initial targets.

Frysdag 4th Frost 805, midday.

As I watched from on high, Group 2 approached from the south-west and gets spotted first (per plan), and the bat cloud moved to intercept. The bats spread out a fair bit -- meaning that at this point "lotsa bats" is about what Group 2 could see.

Getting closer, the Group could see that the bat cloud consisted of what appeared to be live bats, undead bats, and some large, but not giant, bats (wingspan of 2 yards sort of thing). These headed straight for Group 2 apparently intent on their standard tactic of envelop and pull down.

In the meantime Group 1 popped up over the north-west hill and swooped down past the

Key	
Eltrandor Heavy Cavalry (200)	
Eltrandor Hobilars (50)	
Guild	
Dark Circle	
Hobgoblin/Orc Infantry (200)	
Goblin Archers (100)	
Goblin Patrol (6-10)	
Orges (100)	
Goblin Wolf Riders (50)	
Skeleton / Zombie Infantry (100)	
Undead Shambling Mob (200)	
Undead Mammoths (5)	
Undead Vampire Bats (?)	
Dark Circle Command	
Earth Elemental Fortifications	
Tents	

northern gobbos (ignoring the irrelevant patrol of 6 gobbos + 1 zombie). These gobbos made a good TK target being on slightly steeper terrain than the more southern gobbos, meaning they were more clumped. A TK grenado was dropped and gobbos were blown in every direction, some raining down to do damage to the hobgoblins below. The first visible earth elemental fell to one of the four namers in Group 1.

On the ground, the Eltrandorian Hobliars began firing at the gobbos in the centre of the pass mouth.

Seeing that Group 1 blew up the gobbos and banished the elemental, the DC commander figured that this group was the real threat and took to the air, heading north, followed by his lackeys.

Continuing across the Pass mouth the second elemental was banished by Group 1 and then more damage was inflicted, this time on the southern gobbo archers, where Starflower's "Mind Scream" had a suitable panic inducing effect, along with some high powered Light to force redeployment.

Group 1 then regained altitude, having had to get lower for some of the anti-gobbo effects, and with the bat cloud gone westwards, get a good look at the commander and staff.

The command unit headed for Group 1, presumably with the intent of finishing them off before turning back against Group 2, making the assumption that the bats haven't already dealt with that "diversion". This unit consisted of a score of dark figures on star wings, a half dozen figures mounted on giant bats, one ornate figure mounted on a big, black, flying horse with fiery hooves, and a dragon looking kinda reddish - but looking as though most of its colour has been drained away.

Away to the south-west, Mary-M discarded the wrappings around the suspicious bundle she'd been carrying, and brandished forth (attached to a halfling scaled banner pole) the Holy Standard of Saint Jeremiah. The noonday sun flashed on its golden surface, and for most of Group 2, the oppressive feeling of the area lifted somewhat. Lysander, Phaeton, and Mary-M, in particular, felt their spirits lifted, but we heard later that Sooty felt queasy afterwards.

The bat cloud as a whole hesitated, but by then Group 2 were in range and magical fiery destruction (as well as Sunrays, and not a few arrows) swamped the cloud. In less than 30 seconds most of the bats were incinerated, crisped, desiccated, shot, or otherwise dealt with. A small number of normal bats fled southwards, and showed no signs of stopping anytime soon. The few bigger bats who made it through the firestorm, and still keen to attack, were dealt with at closer range, fortunately, since everyone had fire armour, the fire mages did not have to worry about collateral team-mate damage, and being larger, the bats made fine targets for swords and other melee weapons too.

While Group 2 dealt with the bats, the command unit closed with Group 1, who did not have the massed magical firepower, but even so some energy bolts, ice magics, and other attack spells struck the enemy, and were met by Whitefires and Blackfires, which seemed to have no effect, except Shemin-ah, and no-one succumbed to fear.

The dragon initially swooped in, looking to close with Kilroy, but pulled back at the last second before making contact. Some of the cloaked figures swooped in with swords drawn against

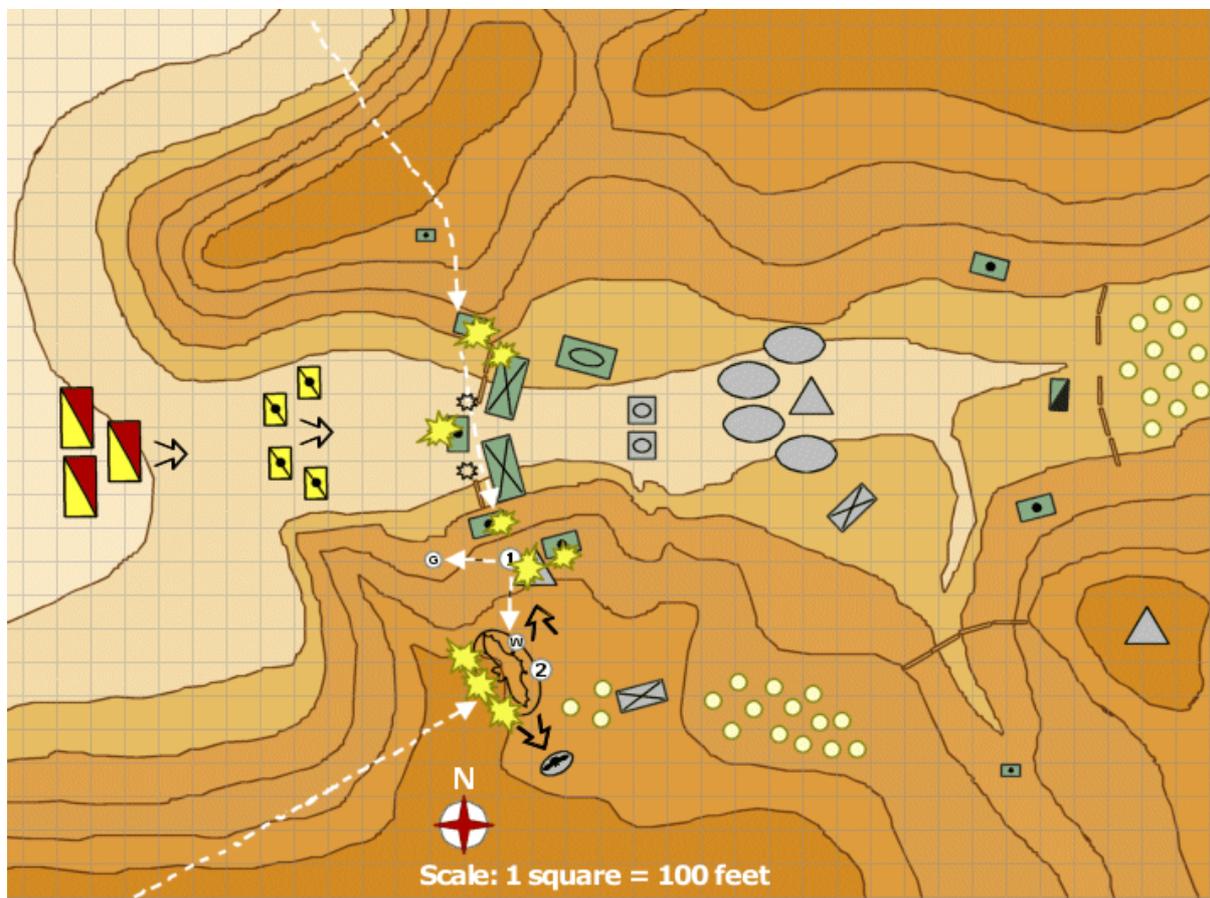
Borghoff, Engalton, Wordsmith, Shemin-ah, and Jedburgh, and there were hideous shrieks as several of the undead turned to ash, while others recoiled.

The dragon shrieked, a terrible sound that started in the sub-sonic and rose up beyond hearing. Several of the group looked momentarily hesitant, even Engalton was seen to blanch, and Wordsmith could not help but head away for relative safety. The dragon breathed out great gouts of fire, smoke and black ash that engulfed Group 1, blinding, choking and burning away Fire Armour.

The Namers got off Dispel magics on some wings and, with their wings gone, some of the cloaked figures fell, but others remained floating, becoming easy targets for Starflower, Kilroy and his giant raven Karreyhun, and for Gok's holy sword and other melee attacks. Some did damage before they disintegrated or at least drain as they went.

The ornate figure on the Nightmare dived into close combat with Kilroy and his raven. The combat was inconclusive with the Skeletal Lord inflicting moderate injuries on both Kilroy and Karreyhun (and additional draining effects), while in turn taking a number of substantial blows. He seemed immune to the effects of the anti-undead potion, and the undead-dusting effects of Kilroy's mace, although Kilroy noted the glowing trceries on his bracelets and that his cloak appeared to be shedding rat skins. Finally he pulled back and filled the air around him with ash and smoke, largely concealing himself before moving towards the edge of the combat, giving Kilroy time to recover.

To add to the confusion, the goblin archer unit that was almost directly below the fight fired arrows into the fray. Most missed wildly, but a few lucky shots inflicted light injuries on



Karreyhun and Starflower, more serious damage to Axis, and one particularly well aimed arrow saw Jedburgh's lower left leg transfixing. Starflower in turn strafed them with her "Mind Scream" sending many running in confusion and making them rather less interested in taking part.

With half of the cloaked figures down, the combat turned into a confused dog-fight with webbed adventurers struggling to break out of the Webs, or having them dispelled, while trading attacks spells, and trying to close with the cloaked figures (now identified as a mix of Wights and Wraiths) who kept their distance and threw Webs, as well as more White and Blackfire, and the Skeletal Knights on the Giant bats, who appeared to be doing little. Though a half dozen phantasms also appeared and disappeared as they were counterspelled, and mental attacks are also being resisted -- save for Gok, whose wings began to carry his unconscious form westwards. The dragon continued to twist away from close combat and filled the air with blasts of fire, burning off more and more Fire Armour but so far inflicting no injuries.

Group 2 having destroyed the bat swarm, and with the smoke now largely cleared, got a good look at what is going on with Group 1 and headed to their assistance.

Frysdag 4th Frost 805, a couple of minutes later...

Group 1, (less Gok and Wordsmith), engaged in aerial dogfight:

Borghoff, attempting to give the Skeleton Lord no time to recover, readied his hand-and-a-half and kite shield and charged into him. Engalton followed Borghoff while throwing healing magics at drained and injured team-mates. The Skeleton Lord gained height and his Nightmare blew out more smoke and ash. Borghoff and the Skeleton Lord traded a flurry of blows in passing; the Lord's cloak shed more rats and a moment later, Borghoff's wings disappeared, and he plummeted; his feather fall also gone.

Engalton shouted to the Group to ensure they had low ranked spells upon them; something weaker than their flying.

Kilroy took stock of his injuries as he quaffed a healing potion and realised that many of his protection magics were missing, seemingly removed during his melee with the Lord on the Nightmare. He beat his chest, crying "Kilroy!!!" and charged after the nearest bat-mounted Knight.

Starflower in drake form dived again at the archers below, her Mind Scream driving the goblins to panic and flee. All discipline gone the unit broke and ran.

Jedburgh, still bleeding from his leg wound dispelled a Phantasm attacking Shemin-ah, while she worked to freeze another Wight with Ray of Cold. Axis managed to slow a couple of the Wraiths though all of the undead appeared quite resistant to magic.

Falling, Borghoff triggered an Instill Flight on his armour and headed back into combat with the Lord, looking for an opportunity to close, while Engalton placed extra spells upon him.

Off to the west Gok recovered his senses and turned back to rejoin the aerial melee.

Group 2, a short way south:

The smoke from their firestorm dissipated behind them as Group 2 wheeled north and headed

for the fight.

Sabrina formulated a plan of battle, and, sensing the desperation which the undead would likely feel in the presence of the Standard, ordered Sir Wojer and Mordrin to stay close to Mary-M as she took the artifact into the thick of the fight with Valery following close behind.

Mordrin and Sabrina rallied Wordsmith as he flew towards them, and he joined them as they plunged into the fray. All of Group 2, now including Wordsmith, head for their beleaguered colleagues.

As they charged, Sabrina's voice rang out, crystal clear for hundreds of feet, even across the noise of battle: "Foul dragon, your doom approaches! Sabrina the Valkyrie is upon you! Come now and feel the full force of my wrath!"

The Big Furball

Sabrina couched her lance and she and Ajax leapt ahead of the group to charge straight at the dragon. Dragonfire washed over the pair, and then her dragonbone lance slammed through the dragon's chest. The lance was torn from her hand and she switched to her war axe while Ajax struck at the dragon with his mighty shod hooves. As the dragon shrieked in pain and rage, several of the newcomers to the dogfight paused momentarily, but all fought down their panic and remained steadfast.

Several of the undead were in turn unnerved by Lysander's arrival and the one Wraith who halted in mid-cast before her was quickly dispatched. As the Holy Standard drew near, those already in the fight saw the Wights and Wraiths lose some of their substance, and the bats of the Skeleton Knights began to keen.

With the arrival of Bleyze, Flamis, Sooty and Phaeton, purifying flames and fiery sunlight joined icy blasts in falling amongst the undead. More Wights and Wraiths were struck down as they desperately attempted to avoid the fires.

Seeing the combat going against them the Skeleton knights were spurred to attack directly while the Namers were kept busy dispelling phantasms as their victims got slammed around and signalled the apparitions' positions. Phantasms, that the Namers had identified as originating from the bats.

Mages not immediately involved in combat, put low ranked spells on themselves and their comrades in a partially successful attempt to foil the Knights' ability to remove magic.

Several Knights converged on Mary-M and the Standard, in an attempt to take out its bearer and remove its holy effects. Sir Wojer moved to intercept the first, and dealt it several vicious blows. In return, the Knight's dark blade sliced through Sir Wojer's left shoulder, and became jammed. Sir Wojer decapitated it, and it dissolved to ash, taking its blade with it. With his left shoulder mangled and bleeding Sir Wojer struck at the bat, who fastened its teeth into his leg, but was a moment later turned to dust as he struck it again.

The second Knight, attacking Mordrin, shrieked and turned to ash, but its bat fastened its teeth into Mordrin's neck, who, with her wings dissipated by the Knight's blow, was feather falling. Valery raced to the rescue, and her silver glaive reduced the bat to ash. Trying to staunch the

neck wound Mordrin gently drifted down to where the goblins had fled their position.

A third Knight went for Lysander, opening a wicked gash along her left arm. Lysander slammed her hand-and-a-half down through its right shoulder in an attack that reduced it to ash. A further flurry of attacks saw its bat spiralling earthwards. Tingling with energy after destroying the Knight, Lysander charged and cut down another Wraith, and engaged a Wight.

Kilroy, still in combat with his Knight, and with most of his protections dissipated, had his right leg slashed to the bone which bled badly, followed by a slashing wound to his scalp. Kilroy in turn smashed his mace through the Knight's antique helmet and then through its skull, while Karreyhun bit off the head of its bat.

Another bat mounted Knight engaged Axis and his cloud of larks. They traded blows, the Knight opening a gash on Axis's left thigh, and the bat biting. With the battle getting personal Axis, to the considerable surprise of the Skeleton Knight, changed into a silver dragon and scoured him with Flames of Anor, along with viscous clawing and biting. The bat turned to dust and the Skeleton Knight plunged to the ground below, hotly followed by Axis, who bit down on its head and got a mouthful of ashes for his efforts.

The final Knight also charged towards Mary-M and the Standard, and was intercepted by Wordsmith and the badly injured Sir Wojer. On the first pass the Knight's bat managed to grasp Wordsmith, interfering with his wings, and fastened vampiric teeth into his left knee. The now heavily encumbered bat manoeuvred slowly and made an easier target for Sir Wojer who dealt the Knight a savage blow.

Meanwhile, below the fight, a couple of Wights who had fallen earlier when their wings were dispelled (and unharmed by falling) attempted Falling Stars against Mary-M and the Standard. Targeted as they were against moving targets, one falling star missed completely, but the second star managed to squarely strike the last Knight, along with Sir Wojer and Wordsmith. Sir Wojer did not bear the full brunt of the attack but was sent reeling away in need of medical assistance while the already injured Knight and bat dissipated in a cloud of noxious vapours, releasing the badly injured Wordsmith.

Borghoff, having flown back into combat with the Skeleton Lord, traded blows with him. The Lord turned and circled his Nightmare, still billowing forth clouds of obscuring smoke and ash, to face Borghoff, avoiding his attempts to close. As Borghoff passed, the Lord attacked and circled back. On the fourth pass Borghoff's sword evaded the Lord's defences and slammed down on his left shoulder, the sound of bones breaking quite audible. On the next pass however, one of the Nightmare's hooves smashed into Borghoff's chest and he felt a rib break. The Lord's cloak continued to shed rat skins, and was now in mere tatters as they continued to battle while Engalton healed Borghoff of damage and renewed low ranked spells.

Sabrina and the dragon went for it hard. The dragon delivered a bruising blow to Sabrina's back with its tail, and opened a ragged wound down Ajax's left flank; his left front leg lamed. Sabrina hacked great gashes in the dragon, deep wounds which spurted black blood that has a corrosive and necrotic effect, burning without fire, and caused both Sabrina and Ajax considerable pain.

Gok arrived back at the outskirts of the fight just as, in the midst of the melee, and in the presence of so many unholy beings, the Standard of Saint Jeremiah began to glow, shining and

sparkling, a glorious radiance, and then there was only light; a moment of brilliance and calm, gone as quickly as it appeared.

Most of the group were momentarily blinded, those unlucky enough to have been looking towards the banner could see only the fading afterimage of the sun. Only Mary-M, Lysander, Engalton and Phaeton could see clearly for those first moments after the flash.

The party appeared unharmed by the Banner's blast, save for Sooty who had terrific sunburn over almost all of his body and was in excruciating pain until he managed to focus long enough to soothe the pain.

Against the undead however, the Standard had a dramatic effect. Where the remaining Wraiths were, only dissipating oily smoke remained in the air. The few remaining Wights appeared to be on fire, and were quickly cleaned up by the melee fighters. At this point, all of the Knights and their bats had been dispatched. The great dragon appeared to be scorched and blackened, and Borghoff, still engaged with the apparently unharmed Skeleton Lord noted a ring of jet crumble and fall from his hand.

With the dragon badly burnt and blackened, and with far fewer targets for their spells, the fire mages, Phaeton, and Shemin-ah concentrated their magical attacks against it. Twisting in a vain attempt to evade the spells the dragon offered Sabrina a momentary opening and she slammed her Vodagh war axe through the side of its neck. A moment later, the great body became a vast falling ash cloud, and a dragonbone spear, which she recovered with a quick dive.

As Borghoff traded yet another blow with the now obviously weakening Skeleton Lord, a heavy necklace with a large glowing ruby suddenly appeared upon his breast. Spurring his nightmare, the Lord's tombstone voice reached the ears of Borghoff and Engalton: "Another time, mortals!". The Lord and his mount turned translucent, transparent, and then disappeared, leaving only a dissipating cloud of fumes.

Taking stock

At this point, all of the command units were destroyed or otherwise gone. Many of the party were suffering injuries, ranging from minor scrapes and bruises to deep bleeding wounds. Mordrin was still wafting gently towards the ground.

Away to the east and south-east, above the other two command units, wings were in the air...

The party then landed and regrouped about where the Command Unit had been initially.

Engalton placed healing area counters upon the ground, various draughts and restoratives are drunk, and the Healers busy themselves with stabilising the wounded, halting bleeding, quickly cleaning wounds and applying bandages, while the (now) unwounded stood guard.

Jedburgh had the arrow removed from his leg, Wordsmith's knee was tightly bound, as were Axis and Kilroy's legs. Mordrin's neck was cleaned and dressed, Lysander tended the nasty gash in her arm, Mary-M tended to Sir Wojer's shoulder, and Sabrina saw to Ajax. Flamis used Cleansing Flame to heal Sooty's sunburn.

Ignoring the injury to his ribs, Borghoff, accompanied by Gok and Bleyze, approached the

tattered tents that, such as they were, appeared to be the commander's encampment -- undead seemingly having little use for housing or possessions. Walls of fire and light prevented any of the lesser undead from approaching the camp, and being still close to the Standard, the draining effects of lesser undead in the DC seemed to be negated. Bleyze also noticed that the undead's numbers appeared to have been somewhat depleted despite them having not been engaged.

Borghoff and Gok checked out the camp while Bleyze provided cover. The one large tent proved to be the commander's pavillion. Upon seeing the adventurers enter, two small (goblin sized) dark robed figures attempted to open an ornate wooden box. Borghoff and Gok quickly dispatched the two, who turned to oily smoke and dissipated. The chest proved to have an Ignite Flammables trap attached, the magic of which was easily Expelled. The disarmed box contained a number of maps and several documents that appeared to be in cipher, all of which were taken for later examination.

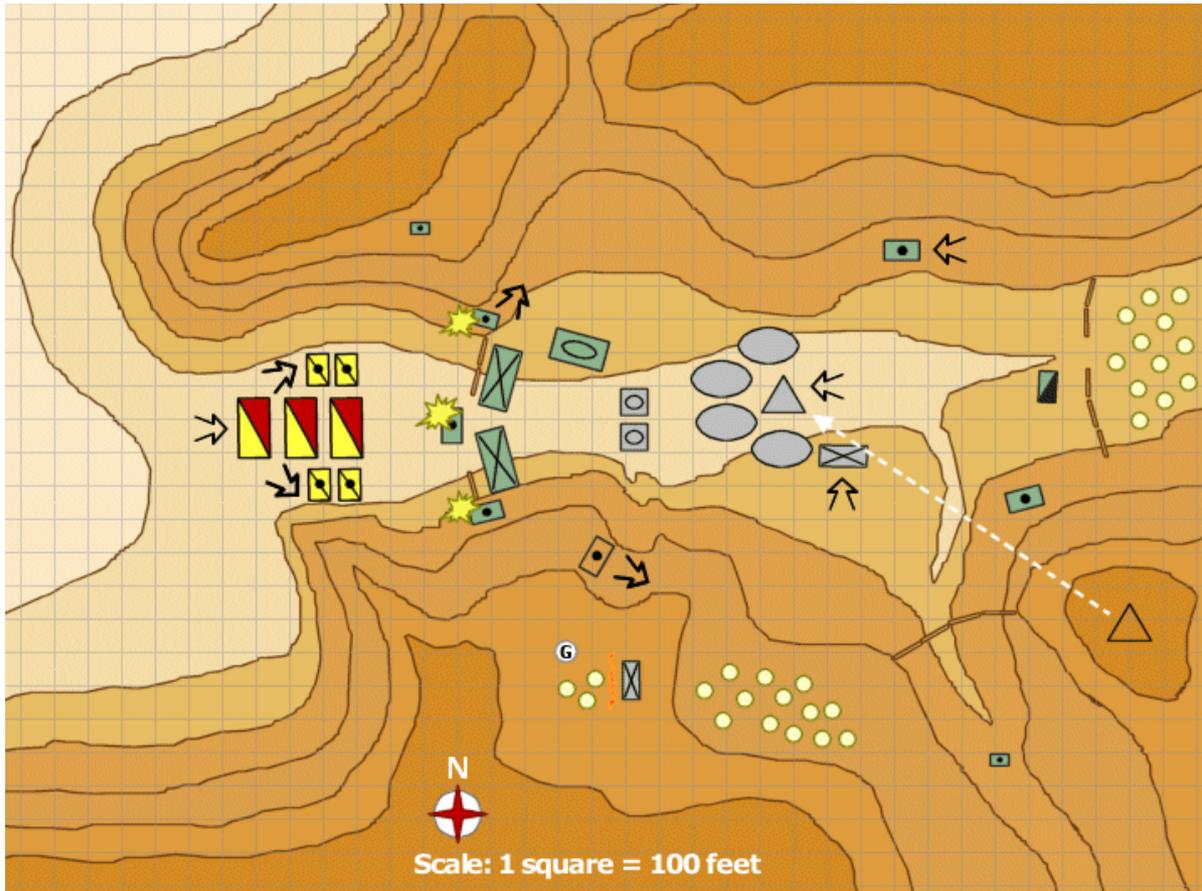
The other two tents proved to be more corrals with roofs. Each contained about a dozen unhealthy looking humans. All appeared docile as a result of undead WP drainings, and suffered from malnutrition and bite marks.

While party members revitalised and healed up, Axis took the opportunity to have a quick scry down into the valley and up to the SE hilltop.

Looking into the valley, the winged figures continued to circle near the command unit's original position. They seemed to number some dozen or so robed figures, which, based on the previous fight, were most likely Wights and/or Wraiths. Trying to get a better view of the command unit failed; the crystal would, for some reason not focus closer, but Axis could just make out that still on the ground are a half dozen bat-riders. Looking instead at the hundreds of shambling troops they appeared to be unarmed and unarmoured, were dressed in torn and filthy clothing, something like zombies, but rather less decayed. They stood quietly and shuffled slowly. Some of the clothing was recognisable as being that of troops formerly fighting against the Dark Circle, others appeared to have been Brastor peasants and townsfolk.

Turning to the SE hilltop, scrying revealed a dozen more robed figures in the air and a few figures still on the ground. The grounded figures were difficult to scry clearly, the vision blurring around them, the worst being one who appeared to be carrying something. What Axis could make out showed tall and gaunt figures in baroque armour, much like "spectral warriors". The area on the hilltop showed the signs of a ritual -- symbols and odd glyphs mark the ground -- but it appeared that the ritual had been abandoned and, as Axis watched, the figures on the ground triggered or cast





shadow wings, joining the figures in the air then the entire group quickly headed for the valley command post.

Healed and recharged as best as could be achieved in a short time the party planned their next move...

Just before the intrepid adventurers began their run down into the valley and its hordes of undead the following was relayed to me of events unfolding off to the north, where an agitated Ogre chieftain was berating his two shamans. (dialogue translated liberally from the Ogrish).

Chief Grundark Skullcrusher: Where are those new Earth Elementals, you scabby useless sons of goblins?!

Shaman Grog: They're gone! I've called two now and they've both bogged off an' vanished.

Shaman Borag: Yeah, me too Chief.

Chief Grundark: [untranslatable], well, are the collapsing areas in front of those spineless hobgoblins ready?

Shaman Borag: Yeah, they've been ready for hours. *slurrp* Hey, where'd Grog go?

sucking sound as Shaman Borag also vanishes into the ground

The party healed, recharged, and planned as much as possible in a short time. Some quick reorganization of groups was done: Axis, still in dragon form, and Starflower as a drake went to accompany the flyers of Hammer, while Mary-M and the Standard joined Sword, where Sir Wojer and Mordrin could continue their invaluable bodyguarding.

Protections and spells were renewed, and Shemin-ah threw up some walls of ice to provide

temporary shelter for the corralled captives until they could be evacuated upon the group's return. Ready to renew the attack, the group summoned up their resolve and lifted off from the hill-top prepared to charge the single, combined command unit in the valley.

Airborne once more the Guild party headed north-east, planning to hook around then strafe the command unit with all of their available offensive magics before creating a landing zone slightly to the east of the command unit's position. The flight in took a quarter of a minute as mages went over spell preparations and everyone readied again for battle. Beneath them, on the ground, Flamis's fire elemental, Freda, kept pace, blazing a fiery trail down from the hill top.

Flying over the shambling hordes they all saw what Axis had reported, hundreds of dead but only slightly decayed figures, unarmed and unarmoured, and dressed in the torn and filthy clothing of peasants, townsfolk and soldiers. They looked up with hungry expressions as the squadron flew over. The Fire Elemental raced into the nearest group and began to immolate them on its way through.

Approaching the command unit, there were clearly a dozen dark robed figures on a mix of Star and Shadow wings circling, who were joined in the air by four Skeletal Knights on giant bats. A similar number of robed figures were on the ground, accompanied by a couple of Vampires and the three tall figures in the ornate armour. One of the Vampires was mounted on a dark horse and bore a red banner attached to a lance; a banner the colour of blood and bearing dark glyphs, the other, on foot, carried an enormous two handed sword with a pitted blade and unpleasant greenish tinge.

As the Holy Standard neared, the unit the Wights and Wraiths lost some of their substance, and then the Fire mages, Phaeton and Axis engulfed the command unit in flame and cleansing light -- destroying three wraiths and a wight. Kilroy unleashed an enormous Solar Flare that vapourised another wraith and wight and Starflower's mind scream rendered a wraith senseless. Firebolts and coldrays also stabbed at the unit, while blackfire, whitefire, and necrosis flashed back at the party.

Swinging around just to the east of the command unit and into the open, Engalton and other namers prepared landing sites for Sword and Shield with counterspells and healing areas dropped on the ground. Shield landed while Sword and Hammer wheeled back into the commanders. Hammer slammed into the undead in the air and Sword landed on their pre-prepared site to engage targets on the ground.

In the air, several of the undead lost their composure in the face of Lysander's fear effect, one Knight shied away and engaged Axis, while a wight and wraith both fled the battle. Lysander engaged another Knight, smashing through his helmet and jaw as his bat fastened teeth into her right thigh. Another blow rendered the Knight to dust. The bat meanwhile opened a serious wound in Lysander's leg from which arterial blood flowed. In reply, Lysander smashed the bat's head with her sword and it dropped groundwards as she began to staunch the serious bleeding.

Axis clawed and bit, while breathing the Flames of Armor at the Knight who attacked him while the Knight hacked at Axis. Another mind scream from Starflower rendered the Knight's bat insensible and falling, and Axis fastened claws in the falling Knight, tearing its chest open before it turned to dust and ash.

Two Knights charged at Kilroy and Karreyhun. Killroy bellowed his war cry and smashed his mace into one Knight's chest, crushing it, while Karreyhun clawed and bit at its bat, tearing off a wing. The other Knight landed a deadly slashing blow to Karreyhun's throat, causing the great raven and its rider to plunge to the ground. A moment later, Sabrina's couched lance caught the Knight from behind, smashing through its armour to emerge from its chest. The Knight disintegrated as a blow from Ajax's hoof broke its bat's wing.

On the ground, the Namers were again kept busy countering phantasms created by the bats, though these do not last long as the conclusive air battle reduced their numbers, and Spectral Warriors from the apparently necromantic Liches. Necrosis and Streams of Corruption flew towards Sword from the Liches, but the counterspelled area and the healing effects kept the fighters standing.

The insubstantial wraiths hung back and cast blackfire across Sword without much effect, save that Sir Wojer berserkly charged amongst them slashing wildly with his two-handed sword. The unfortunate wraith, who feared him, was turned to dust, and another wraith hewed apart. Despite a slashing blow from a wight that reopened his shoulder wound, Sir Wojer continued to slash his way through the undead. A couple of the Wights targeted falling stars on Sword. Jedburgh managed to move out from under one, but the other landed directly on Mary-M who, though saved from its full effect by her counterspell, looked decidedly the worse for wear.

Both vampires and three wights engaged Sword. The Vampire with the sword struck at Borghoff, while the Vampire with the lance charged at Mary-M and the Standard. Mordrin intercepted the mounted vampire, smashing her hand and a half across its mounts front legs. The undead mount turned to dust tumbling the vampire to the ground but the vampire stood, still holding the lance/banner and drew a wicked, jagged sword. Borghoff and the other vampire traded blows, each looking for openings in the others defence, while Gok vapourised a wight with his holy sword, before going to the aid of the limping Jedburgh. The final wight attacked Mary-M with a jarring blow that cracked her right wing. Dropping her short-sword, Mary-M brought the Standard down hard on the wight who shrieked and vanished in a brief burst of white light.

With people on the ground, the demeanour of the ghoulish mobs changed. Hundreds of ghouls swung their hungry gaze towards Sword and Shield and then began running towards them. No shambling mob or orderly charge this, but a headlong rush; rapid and eerily silent. As they neared Sword the ghouls halted or flowed around the group, the presence of the Standard preventing their close approach, and concentrated their attention on Shield.

Away to the west, at the mouth of the Pass, the Eltrandorians heavy cavalry has begun to gain speed, moving from a walk, to a canter, to a gallop. The remaining goblin archers in the enemy's centre scrambled aside and the hobgoblins steadied their lines. The cavalry lowered lances and selected their targets. The hobgoblins in the centre appeared smug and sly, as though they expected any moment, a calamity to befall the cavalry. On the knights charged and the hobgoblins began to lose their composure as the ground steadfastly refused to swallow the horsemen. The Eltrandorians struck the goblinoids lines with a sound that could be heard by the Guild over the noise of their own battles; a great resounding boom that echoed through the mouth of the pass.

The Shield group erected walls of fire and light, attempted Forbiddings against "ghouls", and began blanketing the incoming undead with enhanced dragonflames, hellfire, Sunrays, and

freezing cold. Flamis's fire elemental joined the group, seizing and incinerating the undead. Burning ghouls charged out of the fire, charring as they leapt into close quarters, clawing and biting, heedless of their terrible injuries. Shield's "bodyguard" fighters attempted to keep the ghouls away from the casting mages with varying degrees of success, Valery's silver glaive managed to keep an area open around her and Phaeton, but filthy fingernails and teeth opened wounds on Bleyze and Sooty, as ghouls dragged them down, greedily stuffing torn flesh into their ravenous maws. Trusting to their Fire Armour, Flamis and her elemental created a firestorm over the two mages, broiling the undead.

Suddenly, siege munitions came catapulting out of the west, fired from the backs of undead mammoths and passing over the hordes of undead; targeted beyond the valley command unit on the area where Shield was making its stand. Dozens of grapefruit sized globes fell among Shield and the ghouls, shattering to splash alchemical fire indiscriminately. Enchanted skulls also landed in the melee, skulls that exploded as they struck the ground, sending razor sharp bone shrapnel lancing through living and undead alike.

One shard punctured an artery in Flamis's right arm releasing a spray of blood, while another tore through Shemin-ah's left ankle embedding itself in the joint. A third impaled Phaeton's left elbow, while a glancing blow opened a shallow but bloody scalp wound on Wordsmith. Fire drenched ghouls attempted to pile on top of fighters and mages alike; continuing to attack even with limbs hewed off, dragging themselves up blades that impaled them until they suddenly disappeared into ash from the undead protections.

Slightly ahead of the confused melee, the Standard of Saint Jeremiah began to glow, shining and sparkling with an eye burning radiance. Ready this time, Mary-M was able to call a warning and then there was only light; a moment of nothing but the utmost brilliance, which is then gone, leaving the noon-day sun seeming dimmed.

Warned as they were, blindness was at worst momentary, and almost immediately the effects could be seen. The ghouls were devastated, many of those nearby reduced to no more than drifting dust and ash, others charred and blackened. Many still remained however, too distant to have been affected, but raced towards the party. The unfortunate Sooty was once again badly burned, though not, he thinks, quite as badly as the first time.

Another hail of fire globes fell onto Shield, and then the siege artillery stopped and did not fire again. Those on the ground felt a slight shudder underfoot, while those in the air saw, glancing westwards that, where the mammoths were, there were gaping pits, and within the pits, black armoured warriors destroying the beasts.

Amongst the command unit though, the effect of the Standard were far less. In the moment of the Standard's flash the light seemed to bend around the commanders; a hemisphere of darkness that appeared centred on one of the Liches and protected most of the other undead. Observing the centre of the effect, Sabrina steadied her lance and charged into a Liche, impaling it though the chest, while Kilroy picked himself up off the ground and yelling "Kilroy!" charged another of the ornate trio. Axis and Starflower bore down upon the third.

Still engaged with a vampire Borgoff hammered his sword into its abdomen. The vampire brought its greatsword smashing down across Borghoff's chest, and previously broken ribs, staggering him. Jedburgh and Gok having destroyed their wight attacked the vampire turning its

attention from the incapacitated Borghoff. Gok's holy sword caught the vampire on the side of its neck, above its gorget, and the creature dissolved into misty vapours. The vampire with the lance pointed its sword at Mordrin and, speaking an unholy word, released a chain of lighting bolts from its banner at both her and Mary-M. The bolts struck the two, damaging and stunning. Mordrin reeled back, clutching her sword, and the vampire stalked towards Mary-M who was dazedly clinging to the Standard.

With her lance jammed in the Liche, Sabrina switched to her axe, and the creature disappeared under a flurry of axe blows and a storm of hooves. Kilroy's mace jarred his target's shoulder, while its black scepter in turn shattered Kilroy's left collarbone. Kilroy began to back away defensively. The Liche that Axis and Starflower attacked, carried a black chalice filled with smoking red liquid. Axis breathed flames over him, while Starflower clawed at him. Her attack smashed the bones in his left arm and the black chalice fell to the ground and overturned, smoking blood spilling out onto the earth.

A moment later, the remaining vampire was on fire, the noon sun's rays igniting his flesh as the unholy artifact's power was dissipated and the Standard of Saint Jeremiah suppressed the Dark Circle effects fully for the first time.

For the third time today, the Standard of Saint Jeremiah began to glow, shine and sparkle before light blanketed everything in a moment of calm. Mary-M felt the Standard become quiescent, its power temporarily drained.

As people's vision cleared, they could see that the party stood in an area devastated and cleared of unlife. To the west, the mammoths have been destroyed, black armoured dwarves have emerged from their pits and fired upon the ogres, and the hobgoblins, who have found themselves caught between charging cavalry and pits to their rear, broke and fled.

The battle appeared to be over.

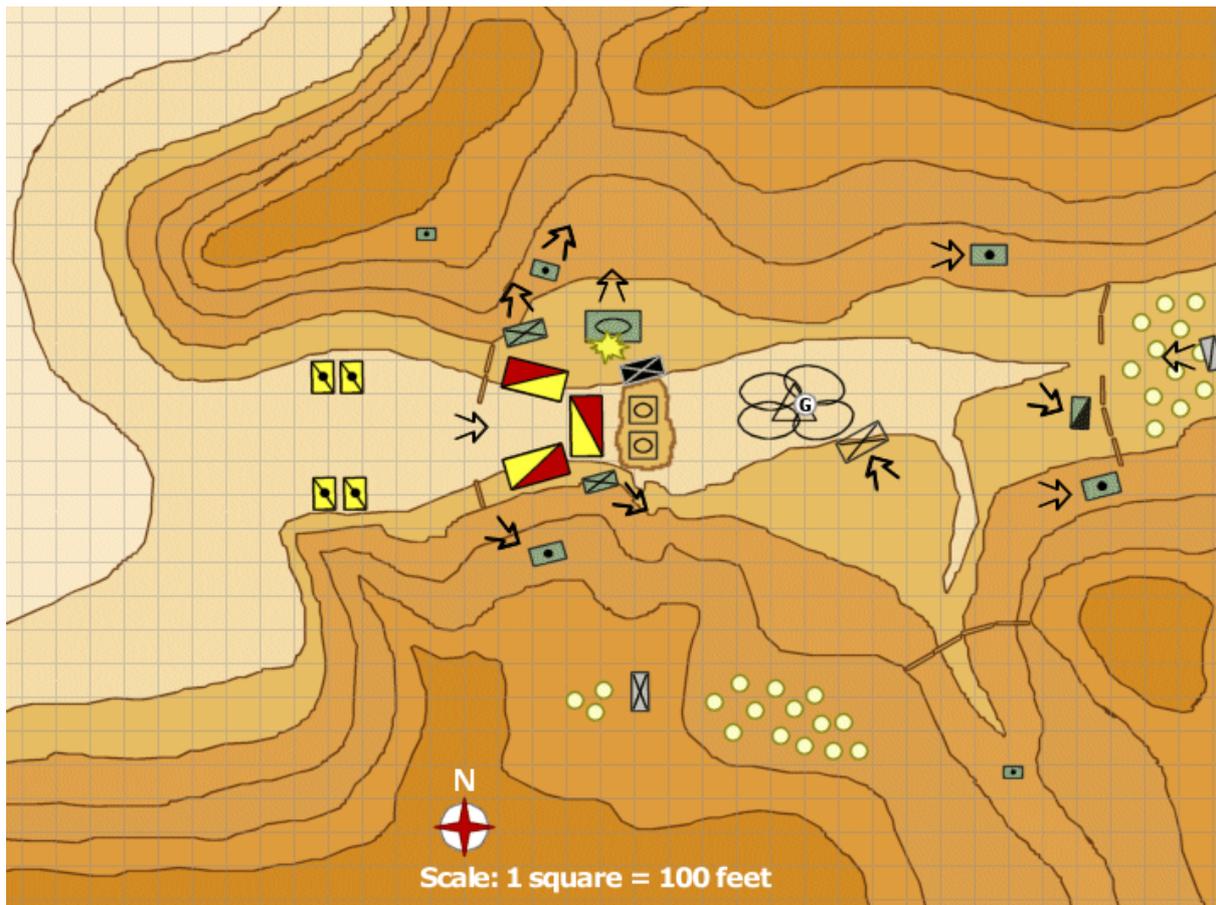
Once again the party rested and healed. Starflower headed west to panic more goblinoids and ogres, most of whom were already fleeing into the hills.

Most of the damage was repaired with potions, healing counters and the like, but very few people did not bear some injuries that would require the attention of the Healers for full recovery.

In the pass mouth, the Eltrandorian cavalry came to a halt before the gaping pits; while the surviving hobgoblins and goblins continued to flee. The ogres retreated, in good order, so far, before the black armoured dwarves who came out of the pits. The dwarves numbered perhaps 200 and seemed to be armed with odd crossbows; sharp cracks and reports could be heard as they shot at the ogres.

As the party recovered, a delegation of dwarves approached, consisting of a commander type and a few bodyguards, along with a banner bearer, carrying an all black standard. They all had strange and twisted bodies: one had goat legs, another a tentacle arm, a third large curving horns, etc. The leader of the group appeared normal to the waist, but his lower body was scorpionoid; six legs and a sting-tipped tail.

They sought out the military leaders and addressed them. (I noticed that their centauroid leader



took a bit of a shine to Mordrin). He introduced himself as Captain Turok of the Black Regiment, and complimented the party on their fighting abilities. He explained that his spies reported DC relief forces approaching this end of the pass (light forces initially, but much heavier ones by nightfall) and wished to know the party's mission from this point and requirements for assistance; if any.

The remaining goblins dispersed into the hills, the hobgoblins threw away weapons and shields and scrambled up steep banks to break contact with the Eltrandorian cavalry, while the ogres had fled in the face of the Black Regiment's strange weapons (and not a few earth elementals) and the Guild stood in a strange wasteland of ash and dust.

Wounds were bound and damage healed, the few nasty looking and evil items lying around were checked, bagged and taken.

After considerable discussion between the Party's military leaders, Captain Turok, and Eltrandorian Officers it is decided to withdraw from the pass in good order, keeping together as a "force in being" to continue the threat to the DC in this area, and force them to commit their reserves and fresh troops here rather than elsewhere in Brastor. This was felt to minimize risk to the troops here, while giving the evacuation plan currently in swing NW of Tobintown the best chance of success.

The Eltrandorians will pull back to their camp, and the Guild are asked to pick up the captives in the ex-DC command area and get them to the Eltrandorian camp, where they can be looked

after (and also looked over to ensure no untoward DC influences). First though, a number of walls would be thrown up to delay the fast moving reinforcements.

Meanwhile the Black Regiment plan to dismantle the DC fortifications in the pass to make it harder for them to hold, as well as planning to lurk around the area for a while in their preferred underground locations. They would also use elementals to fortify the Eltrandorian camp.

This would create a strong sally point for the Alliance forces, and should mean the DC has to put a strong defence force in the pass.

The plan settled, the groups headed off. For the Guild's part walls were created to block the pass, and the few remaining skeletons proved to be no great danger (even with the full DC effects) and are flamed from range. The other camps were quickly surveyed but appeared to be goblin and hobgoblin tents and no more captives were located.

By the time the Guild Forces reached the Eltrandorian camp, the first of their soldiers had arrived back, and the first walls went up, built by strangely dark coloured elementals under the supervision of more black armoured dwarves.

Over the next few hours the elementals and mechanics of the Black Regiment turned the camp into a considerable redoubt with long range attack -- seemed the dwarves managed to scavenge some nasty siege engines from somewhere.

When dusk came, the Eltrandorian commander thanked the Guild for their efforts today, saying that it was a pleasure to operate with such professional troops and that he hoped they might work together in future.

After nightfall, the party headed back to Regar's Keep (by flight or other means), and by late evening all that chose to be, returned to the Guild, or their homes nearby.

It can now be revealed what Braegon had been up to. He, and the other 'missing' Guild members had been involved in building a fourth pass through the Ildrisholm hills, some 15 miles to the south-west of Carlson's Switch. They had contacted the encircled troops and had managed to break through about noon. The Guild assault was designed to keep the Dark Circle's attention elsewhere while the evacuation was in progress.

In conclusion, the overall mission rescued nearly 1000 Brastor troops and over 3000 refugees while destroying 800 goblinoids, 1000+ lesser undead, 60+ greater undead and an undead dragon, thus dealing Rashak's forces a considerable defeat and, hopefully, seriously impacting her plans for an invasion of Carzala.