

I

The northern lights burned like livid, blood-red wounds in the sky, casting their florid glow upon the ruins of haunted Lublask. Ian, Thor, and Elrohir were putting the last of the Juklanders defending an artillery battery to the sword when a sudden clarion blast, the call of countless horns, echoed from the city's docks. The Juklander horde was on the march.

The heroes raced back to the Ganzoi army as the Juklander army poured through the gate at the docks— a wild, frenzied horde of mail-clad berserkers, their wolf-fur capes billowing as they charged with the fury of the damned. Their war cries were raw, guttural roars, echoing with incoherent rage as they surged forward to clash with the Ganzoi. "Fall back! Back to the University!" Elrohir's voice rang out like thunder as his sinuous draconic form coiled above the army, his massive wings beating the air. Sir Yon, the grim-faced and resolute general of the Ganzoi army, raised his arm high to signal the retreat. He led the desperate withdrawal toward the crumbling ruins of the Lublask Royal College.

The Juklander Reavers spurred their steeds into a frenzy, froth flying from the beasts' mouths as they charged ahead of the ranks to harry the retreating Ganzoi. Eyes wide with hate and madness, the Reavers rode in close, their javelins flying to pierce the backs of the tightly packed Ganzoi. But the Ganzoi musketeers wheeled about, their guns roared with fury, and the Reavers were driven back. Black smoke billowed from the volleys, cloaking the retreat like a shroud. Dozens of dead Reavers, their horses, and scores of Ganzoi trailed from the retreating army like the thread of an unraveling garment. Dread creatures made of viscera and shaped like warped dragonflies feasted upon the corpses.

The Ganzoi reached the University, a shattered relic of marble, stone, and ancient timber. Only a few buildings, half-collapsed and crumbling, still clung to their foundations. The weary warriors, their bodies aching with exhaustion, summoned the last of their strength to dig in. But they knew their respite was fleeting—the Juklanders would be upon them in moments.

The Juklanders came on like a storm, their weapons clanging against their shields, their roars filling the air with a primal fury. Their lips twisted into savage snarls, eyes blazing with bloodlust. Behind the Juklander army, the undead lurked in the shadows, shuffling forward with the slow, relentless hunger of the damned, eager for the banquet of flesh that awaited. Above the ruins, skeins of Red Mist hung dark and silent, like dread thunderheads that promised grisly death. Ganzoi sergeants-at-arms muttered words of encouragement to their men, but hope was fading quickly amongst their ranks.

The University was encircled by a crenelated stone wall. It was of meager height, built to ward off riffraff rather than an army. Yet it stood mostly intact, with a firestep running along its length. The Ganzoi, battle-worn and weary, took their places against the wall, crouching low behind the stone battlements, blowing softly on their musket matches to keep them alight.

Those without ranged weapons filled the gaps in the crumbling walls, prepared to keep the Juklanders from breaching their makeshift fortress. In the north the dismounted knights took pride of place in the front rank of these defenders. They were led by Sir Yon, the army's stalwart general, his gaze unyielding as steel.

The southern end of the University was held by the Blazing Bulwark, a fierce band of warriors under the command of Ian, Thor, and Elrohir. The heroes had stationed their musketeers in the few tall buildings that still loomed over the walls, with Ian and the druid Belogost commanding the sharpshooters from their elevated posts. The mercenaries of the Company of the Stag, led by the dragon Elrohir, stood resolute in the breach of the wall, ready to meet the oncoming storm. The army's lone squadron of mounted knights, resplendent upon Vistlan Warhorses and led by the paladin Thor, ranged beyond the wall.

The heroes held their secret weapon in reserve, waiting for the perfect moment. Ian, with a practiced hand, reached up to the scarf he wore—a portable hole in disguise—and drew forth a folded piece of paper. Kneeling, he placed it upon the ground and carefully unfolded it. As the last crease was

smoothed, the paper surged with arcane power, expanding and transforming into a mighty airship, as large as a Juklander longship. A squad of handgunners and a cadre of wood elf longbowmen boarded the vessel. With a surge of wind and a groan of timbers, the airship took to the skies, ready to rain death upon the foe.

As the Juklander river wolves surged forward, their eyes blazing with savage intent, Ian the bard cupped his hands to his mouth and let loose a bellow that echoed like a thunderclap across the battlefield. "Attack! Come to the University!" His voice, infused with arcane power, ripped through the air, cutting through the din of battle and reaching the ears of the Vistlan army maneuvering outside the city walls.

Frost King Pazov heard the call and wasted no time. With a grim nod, he dispatched his swiftest runners to carry his command to his scattered forces. The order was clear—converge at the northern gate!

II

The Juklander ragers sprinted toward the University with a ferocity born of madness, the mounted reavers and wild-eyed berserkers quickly outstripping the slower, regular troops. The battle began in a maelstrom of chaos; the Ganzoi fire was effective but wild, cutting down the Juklanders in ones and twos, but the rest pressed on, relentless, hurling their spears at the defenders with savage determination.

A squadron of reavers, cunning and swift, rode close to the southern wall, their spears ready. As Ian's company of musketeers fired in the opposite direction, the reavers struck. The deadly missiles flew true, and before the musketeers could duck behind the crenelated walls, many were struck down, their lifeblood staining the stones.

But the reavers had little time to savor their victory. Thor, his eyes blazing with righteous fury, led his squadron of knights in a thundering charge. Their lances splintered as they struck the reavers with the force of a hurricane. Without hesitation, the knights drew their swords and fell upon the survivors, the clash of steel ringing out as they completed the slaughter.

The north side of the University was similarly pressed. Ganzoi crossbows and muskets spat death at the onrushing Juklanders, yet still the berserk horde pressed forward. Their howls filled the air, wild as wolves, as they crashed into the dismounted knights under Sir Yon's command. The general's iron thews bunched and corded as he swung his greatsword with lethal precision, each stroke cleaving through two slaving Juklanders at a time. But for every foe he felled, more surged forward, their berserk fury unrelenting. The Ganzoi held their ground, building a wall of corpses bricked with Juklander flesh and mortared in Juklander blood.

Outside, the Vistlan army formed ranks before the northern gate and began their approach. The walls were made of solid ice, forty feet tall, and a freezing wind came off them to chill the attackers. The gatehouse was made of frozen, iron-banded stone, the gate itself solid lead with friezes of bears and warriors stamped into it. At first it appeared the gate was deserted, but a sudden hail of arrows flew from the gatehouse and pelted the Vistlans. Dozens of unarmored Vistlan militia fell, their scythes clattering to the ground. The Vistlan archers spread out into open order and advanced across the field, spraying arrows toward the windows of the gatehouse to keep the defenders' heads down. The Vistlan infantry gritted their teeth and carried on toward the gate, their most armored troops escorting a tree trunk battering ram.

III

At the southern end of the University, the airship loomed like a vengeful specter over the Juklanders, its archers and musketeers unleashing death from above. Arrows and musket balls rained down on the advancing horde, each shot finding its mark in the seething mass below. On the wall, handgunners, their faces smudged black with powder, frantically tap-loaded their muskets, sacrificing precision for speed as they fired round after round into the fray.

Belogost, with hands raised to the heavens, summoned a storm cloud that darkened the skies above the Juklanders. Thunder boomed, and lightning speared down, striking with deadly precision. At the same moment, Ian's voice rang out in a chant, and the air itself seemed to shatter—a peal of noise erupted, bursting windows and tearing Juklander flesh as if by unseen hands. The very ground trembled as Thor and his retinue of knights thundered into a unit of berserkers, their lances and swords cutting a bloody path to clear the wall. Still the Juklanders came on.

At the northern end, the wall was shrouded in a veil of black smoke, the air thick with the acrid stench of gunpowder. The staccato cracks of muskets and the twangs of crossbows punctuated the gloom, each shot fired blindly into the smoke. But the Juklander reinforcements were not the wild berserkers who had been swept aside by the knights. These were the River Wolves, disciplined and deadly.

They came silently, their round shields locked together in an unbreakable phalanx, creating a mobile fortress that seemed impervious to the Ganzoi's fire. No wild swings of axes, no frenzied battle cries—only the cold, calculated press of men driven by iron will. With the force of hundreds of Juklanders they pushed, forcing aside the corpses piled in the gap, inexorably forcing the Ganzoi back. They were inside the University.

Outside the city, the Vistlan infantry surged forward with a deafening roar, their voices a wild with triumph as they sprinted the last few yards toward the towering gate. Arrows whistled overhead, a relentless hail designed to keep the Juklander defenders huddled behind cover. When the Vistlans reached the lead gate, they brought their improvised battering ram to bear, the wooden beam groaning as it struck against metal.

But just as victory seemed within their grasp, a harsh, jarring snap echoed from above, wrenching their attention skyward. From the murder holes high above, the Juklander defenders unleashed a torrent of icy stone blocks, massive icicles the size of dragon's teeth, and cauldrons of boiling oil, hissing and seething as they rained down upon the attackers.

The Vistlans reeled under the savage assault, their armor and skin steaming with boiling oil, their screams echoing across the battlefield. They withstood the onslaught as best they could, but the relentless barrage took its toll. Death and fear spread through their ranks, eroding their resolve. In the end, despite their valiant efforts, the Vistlans were forced to retreat. They left their battered ram at the foot of the gate, the leaden doors barely marred by their desperate assault.

IV

Ian bellowed his command to the soldiers on the southern wall, urging them to concentrate their fire. The relentless barrage from the Blazing Bulwark's musketeers and bowmen rained death upon the Juklanders, their ranks thinning under the unyielding onslaught. Several bands of raiders, their spirits broken, began to fall back, their retreat a desperate scramble. Yet the bulk of the Juklanders pressed forward, their savage resolve unshaken.

Thor, commanding his mounted knights with a fierce, unyielding will, stood as a bulwark against those who sought to flank the southern edge of the University. The battle was fierce and bloody,

each clash of steel marked by heavy losses on both sides. The ground ran red with the blood of the fallen, and the knights, though valorous, paid a steep price for their stubborn defense.

From the shadow-haunted ruins encircling the University, a low, guttural growl echoed across the battlefield, sending a chill through the hearts of the living. The undead emerged from the darkness. The creatures were huge, twelve foot tall stumbling mounds in the approximate shapes of men but made of fused tendon, flesh, and organs. They fell upon the trailing groups of Juklanders, ripping them apart and adding their meat to their amorphous bodies. Meanwhile, a floating miasma of Red Mist approached the University from the south, mindlessly following Thor and his knights. A second skein of Red Mist silently crested the University's walls and found Belogost and his unit of musketeers. The screams of the victims echoed through the ruins. They appeared to be boiled alive, their skin, bones, and mortal flesh reduced to naught but a burbling reddish-brown puddle.

The River Wolves, having breached the northern wall of the University, spread out into disciplined ranks and began their killing work. The Juklanders poured through the breach like a relentless tide, swelling the numbers of the invaders. Sir Yon, a tempest of steel, wielded his greatsword with a blur of deadly precision. His blade parried the River Wolves' axes with a metallic clang, then riposted with ruthless efficiency, leaving his foes strewn in bloody ruin. His armor was dented in countless places, his pauldrons hanging by straps, his gorget rent. Yet he fought on with the fury of a cornered lion, even as the Juklander numbers weighed heavily upon his army. Ganzoi state troops fell beneath the cruel axes of the River Wolves. Mercenary swordsmen wavered under the relentless assault.

A horde of ghouls, grisly and relentless, clawed their way up the northern walls and fell upon a company of mercenary quarrelers. They were torn to shreds before another company, fleeing the melee in disarray, was rallied by their captain and turned and fell upon the undead threat. Meanwhile, the River Wolves facing Sir Yon and the dismounted knights overlapped them. The knights' armor held proof against the wolves' axes and the battle descended into a claustrophobic press. Yet the Juklanders were clever and merciless. The River Wolves in the second rank flicked their axes low between the fighters, using the beards of the blades to hook the knights' heels and trip them. Prone, the knights' vulnerable points at groin and armpit were easy prey to Juklander daggers. Scores died on their backs.

With his army faltering against the implacable Juklander defense, Frost King Pazov dismounted and strode with grim purpose toward the gate. He muttered incantations beneath his breath, and the air around him grew icy, the moisture freezing and falling in sharp, crystalline plinks against the ground. Suddenly the gate groaned as the moisture within its metal froze. Spalling metal sheared from the door in places, yet it stubbornly held.

The defenders, recognizing the formidable Frost King, dared the Vistlan archers' onslaught to loose their arrows upon him. A shimmering sphere of ice enveloped Pazov, deflecting the arrows with a clatter as they fell harmlessly to the earth. Unperturbed, Pazov advanced through the storm of steel, his steps measured and unyielding.

Still muttering arcane words, he thrust his arm forward and a frozen orb erupted from his palm, slamming into the lead gate with a shattering force. The gate, already weakened by the biting cold of his ongoing freezing spell, groaned and cracked beneath the assault. A second and third ball of frost struck, ringing out with a cold, metallic clang, further weakening the gate. With the fourth attack the lead door, brittle and weakened from the relentless freeze, shattered with a resounding crash.

The Vistlans roared in triumph, charging past Pazov and into the city, braving the dangerous gauntlet beneath the gatehouse's murder holes. They surged up the stairs, intent on slaying the defenders, but Pazov's commanding voice checked them. "Ignore them. To the University!"

It was then that Pazov, lost in his spellwork and the relentless task of maintaining his frost

shield, looked down with a start. Three arrows had evaded his ethereal defenses and found their mark. Red flowers of blood bloomed from where the shafts sprouted from his chest.

V

A bestial roar tore through the University as Elrohir soared into the air. Torrents of fire erupted from his gaping maw, scorching away the Red Mist that had been liquefying Belogost's musketeers. With a sweep of his wings he turned, belching flames upon a throng of Juklanders and reducing them to ash and ruin.

Below, Ian murmured an incantation, weaving a spell of impenetrable magic to seal the gap in the wall closest to the Juklanders. The enemy, thwarted, had no choice but to advance through the blistering gunfire of the Blazing Bulwark to reach the second gap.

Ian commanded his troops to cast the dead over the wall, clearing the way for his next grim maneuver. From the depths of his portable hole, he drew forth a dread weapon—the Orb, a foul relic of the Juklanders and their dark masters, seized by Elrohir when the heroes annihilated the Juklander leadership. The crystal pulsed with dark sorcery, swirling with malignant energy, and the newly slain began to rise. The dead fell upon the nearest living creatures—the Juklanders. They ripped the barbarians apart in a frenzy.

But some of the dead reacted to the Orb by dissolving into a swarm of tiny, floating undead creatures; a Red Mist. The skein floated over and engulfed Ian's musketeers, liquefying dozens of them before being burned away by Elrohir. Ian stowed the Orb again, and between the relentless attacks of the Blazing Bulwark and the undead, the Juklanders assaulting the southern end of the University were slain to a man.

Although they had triumphed over the Juklanders, the Blazing Bulwark still faced the relentless menace of the undead. The airship had floated low during the course of the battle, low enough for the huge amorphous piles of flesh to climb aboard. The struggle to eradicate these horrors was fierce, and though the abominations were finally destroyed, most of the Wood Elves perished in the fray. Meanwhile, Thor and his handful of mounted riders carved through a throng of ghouls with brutal efficiency. With the Wall of Force sealing the breach in the wall, the Blazing Bulwark were free to silence the remaining undead at their leisure.

“Musketeers! Focus on the gap!” roared Sir Yon, his voice cutting through the din as he and his beleaguered knights fought to hold back the River Wolves. The handgunners reorganized their positions and poured fire into the close ranked Juklanders funneling into the opening in the wall. The narrow gap in the wall became a slaughterhouse, with the tightly packed ranks of Juklanders falling like wheat before the scythe. Those who remained inside the walls were encircled and and were slowly ground down by the relentless blades of the Ganzoi. Sir Yon offered quarter to the last defiant few, but they met his mercy with a roar of defiance. Sir Yon obliged and they were destroyed.

The Order of the Leopard were the first Vistlans to reach the University, their approach heralded by the strange keening noise caused by the wind fluttering the feathers of the tall wings fastened to their back armor. They galloped into the University's courtyard, bringing news of Frost King Pazov's wounds.

Epilogue

Of the 922 Ganzoi that entered Lublask with Elrohir, Ian, and Thor, 325 died in battle or of their wounds in the days afterward. 80 were injured but lived to fight again. The 517 that survived unwounded no doubt suffered the mental scars that must have been inflicted in that day of hell.