

# BLACK PUDDING

## INTERLUDE – Champions of Light

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Galen was seething with frustration as he was surrounded by the royal court's chosen few, tasked with serving as his personal guards in this desolate outpost in the remote countryside. And while he acknowledged their efforts, he was also irked by his kingdom's constant vigilance over his safety. He was no fragile blossom to be coddled and kept under lock and key like some delicate artifact. Of course, the Kingdom of Slaethia had stationed their prized air fleet here, guarded by their best mages. The fleet was touted as one of the kingdom's greatest accomplishments, second only to Galen, the Champion of Solum. He was a champion, a symbol of power and might, and a shining light to all who beheld him. He was meant to soar like a mythical beast, to vanquish evil and bring justice and peace to the realm.

He paced the deck of the Skyborne Sovereign, frustration mounting as his phantasmic dragonfly-like wings fluttered in frustration. Galen was among the few fairies that inhabited the Kingdom of Slaethia. Still, they were revered, and him being a champion only added to their prestige. Fairies came in all shapes and sizes, from tiny as a thimble to as large as a gnome. Galen was unusually large for his kind. He stood tall like a dwarf, with a lean, toned physique and a captivating elegance that left even the elves envious. The dwarves and quite a few humans found his delicate features too ethereal. But, as a champion, even the dwarves overlooked his lack of a beard.

A tempest of wind and restorative magic swirled around Galen as it coursed through his veins, an ordinary occurrence for his kind. To encounter a fairy without the gifts of wind and healing magic was as unlikely as finding a dryad without a tree. Or a gnome without magic! In fact, the outpost was largely populated by gnomes, who comprised the bulk of the kingdom's most powerful spellcasters. The idea of a gnome being deemed unworthy of the elite ranks and forced to serve among the common soldiers was nearly unheard of, much like the notion of a dwarf spellcaster serving as an elite mage. Such a thing was simply unprecedented and defied all norms and expectations.

Galen was a fairy, but beyond that, he was the Champion of Solum, the God of Light, and held an advantage as an Ascendant, or Leveler, as the gods of light referred to it. The gods had altered the ancient system to empower their champions, granting them the strength to overpower the forces of darkness and triumph over evil. This alteration resulted in a virtually endless supply of mana, a boon that Solum referred to as an exploit. This gave Galen the ability to unleash devastating magic with ease, without tiring, though with the limitation of a time limit that prevented him from spamming his most potent spells.

Galen approached the taffrail, gripping the handrail as he surveyed the fleet. Three hundred airships were moored here, filled with ten thousand soldiers, knights, mages, and the kingdom's most elite forces. A smaller detachment had taken control of the village of Elsternwick, capturing the notorious vampire, Aurelia. Galen had been disappointed to learn that a mere few thousand

soldiers had laid siege to the vampires and evil creatures that lurked within the Grotto of the Betrayed dungeon ruins. It was not their victory that disappointed him but that they did it without the fleet's presence and, most of all, without him.

Nevertheless, the fleet was here now. Galen was eager to launch a military campaign to the west, eradicating the final remnants of evil in the realm. The prospect of fulfilling the next decree from his gods and moving on to conquer the other realms in the sky filled him with fierce excitement. For he had never explored the other moons of Völuspá.

“Champion Gale,” the elven captain of the Skyborne Sovereign called out to him.

“Proceed, Captain,” Galen responded.

“Champion, the Swift Sentinel is approaching, seeking permission to land. Champions Einarr, Orlaith, and High Priest Nelzar are aboard.”

“Grant—.” Galen's voice cut off as a brilliant shaft of light erupted into the sky, as if a cathedral-sized mana crystal had detonated in the direction of Elsternwick. In the distant east, towards Slaethia, the champion spotted another identical pillar of light.



Craycroft was livid! The crystal that enabled his nightly teleportation to his tower had been shattered, causing a mana explosion. A detonation of a Way Stone was no minor blast. Mercifully, Craycroft had been whisked through the ethereal during the cataclysm, appearing on the other side only after the explosion had reached its peak. He had been dragged along with his bed, clad only in a flimsy bed sheet, appearing in the midst of the army. The embarrassment was unbearable, and the seasoned wizard was determined to ensure that the vile creature Aurelia would face the consequences of her actions. He would take great joy in pounding those consequences into her himself.

Reluctantly, Craycroft donned a robe, not of his own choosing but one taken from a fallen soldier amidst the ruin of the encampment. The destruction was staggering, and yet, the survival of so many knights was a testament to their mastery of barrier magic – the very same skill that had brought prosperity to the Kingdom of Slaethia in the wake of its resurrection. A harsh lesson taught to them by the very monsters that had wreaked so much havoc upon them this night.

With a heavy sigh, Craycroft approached Paladin Vanya Anlyth, whose husband, General Ezad Anlyth. Ezad had not only fallen to Aurelia but had been turned into an undead. Craycroft cast his gaze upon the lifeless form of the General, now motionless, a clear sign he had been freed from the spell that bound him to a state of undeath. Regrettably, they could not afford to gather the dead, they needed to regroup and rejoin the main forces in the southern countryside, and the airships moored there. A small detachment would stay behind to watch over their fallen, for they couldn't afford to add their bodies to the ranks of the necromancers' horde. The Paladin had taken command, a decision that was fine by Craycroft, who, although he could easily seize control, preferred to avoid the headache of doing so.

Their enemies had slunk away into the shadows, but Craycroft and the knights around him made no move to give chase. The destination of these fiends was all too clear. And the knowledge that they possessed the dungeon core made it imperative to muster their full military might before they constructed a barrier. But if they failed, the old wizard only hoped they could dismantle their barrier before their foes could open a portal. The consequences of such an event could be disastrous. Portals could lead to any realm, even those beyond their own sky above, and the mere thought of their enemies gaining a foothold in one of those places sent shivers down Craycroft's croaked spine.

And so, they set out on their march, fully aware that it would be a grueling journey that would last several days. But the knights clung to the hope that the fleet would spot them. The telltale pillars of light from the explosions clearly indicated that they required aid. Tragically, the devastating blasts that had reduced Elsternwick and the encampment to rubble had also damaged their communication crystals. They were left in the dark and isolated from the main body of their army. But as the dawn approached from the west, a glimmer of hope appeared to the southeast, the first of the airships, the Swift Sentinel, if Craycroft's memory served him correctly.



An elite knight approached a gnome of great renown, adorned in a lavish white and gold robe and embellished in exquisite jewelry encrusted with precious enchanted gems. The gnome wore a magnificent headdress upon his head, befitting his status. "High Priest Nelzar," the elite proclaimed, "we have sighted our forces from Elsternwick. It seems they are marching in the direction of the outpost."

The High Priest acknowledged the knight with a nod as the airship's captain bellowed orders to the crew to prepare for a rapid descent.

Consistent with the design of most of Slaethia's airships, these vessels were crafted to be both air and sea capable. Maintaining their stability in the air and water, they possessed a spiky fish fin-shaped keel, which made them incapable of landing on solid land. Their design, however, the vessels utilized air-whaleboats for dis and reembarking. In addition, Slaethia's airships are equipped with two columns of Airlight Pods, allowing for swift and massive deployments of troops to launch attacks against their enemies below. To increase their speed, these airships were fitted with a set of ethereal sails and standard leviathan leather sails. However, these ethereal sails were only intended for high-speed travel outside the bounds of the sky. Using them within the atmosphere of any moon would result in the catastrophic destruction of the ship in a fiery explosion caused by the friction of moving at such speeds. Fortunately, the atmosphere of Völuspá extends beyond the known moons, and its magic-rich environment facilitates airship cross-traversing through the realms.

The Swift Sentinel gracefully descended toward the surviving remnants of the forces below. The extent of their losses from the initial siege and the earlier cataclysm was unknown to High Priest Nelzar. Still, it was clear that events had not transpired as planned. According to what his deities had revealed, the dark gods now had a new champion. And possibly two demi-goddesses on their side. This promised to be a far cry from the straightforward battle Nelzar had prepared for.

However, there was a glimmer of hope for the forces of light. They had three champions and elite knights empowered by their gods, and a single regiment could defeat any seasoned champion. Nelzar had brought along over a dozen regiments of their caliber, providing a formidable force to be reckoned with. That was on top of the over ten thousand standard knights, barbarians, berserkers, elemental benders, and mages of all breeds.

Although High Priest Nelzar had only recently arrived on the scene, he held complete command over the army. The royalty of Slaethia did not dare to question the commands given to him by the gods. Nelzar was the High Priest, the sole voice through which the gods spoke to their followers. He represented all the deities of light across every realm. No other kingdom or realm could claim to have such a powerful voice.

“Bless me shit, I’ve ne’er seen a sorrier bunch in all me days, I tell ya. Them dirty scoundrels really did a number on ’em... I can hardly contain me excitement for a crack at the action!” A dwarf stepped up beside High Priest Nelzar, grumbling about the sorry state of the forces below while grinning.

The gnome gazed upon a dwarf clad in gleaming mithril armor, with intricate engravings adorning every aspect of his plate mail. He wore a helmet showcasing his full, fiery red beard, with a set of grand wings jutting from the crown. The dwarf’s weapon of choice was a formidable war hammer, towering at least five times the height of the High Priest, which rested on the dwarf’s shoulder as if it weighed nothing.

“Champion Einarr, would you kindly send a few of the elites down to retrieve General Anlyth? I find myself in dire need of information.” The High Priest spoke.

“Aye, sure thing!” Einarr spun on his heel before bellowing out. “I need a few of ye fucks to retrieve the General and bring his arse up here!”

Nelzar let out a sigh but refrained from commenting. There was little one could do when dealing with dwarves, after all.

It was then that a human woman stepped onto the airship deck. She approached Nelzar and Einarr. Her figure was draped in a magnificent dress made of adolescent dragon scales, shimmering with an otherworldly glow from the powerful magic imbued within. Though neither Nelzar nor Einarr was particularly drawn to human women, they were both captivated by her beauty. She possessed dark, flawless skin and eyes that pulsed with the essence of her fierce fire magic.

As she neared, the aura of power radiating from her was almost palpable, like the searing heat of a forge, warning all who dared to cross her path. Her eyes blazed with the ferocity of her fire magic, like windows to an inferno. The dragon scale dress clung to her curves like a second skin, highlighting every contour of her form. The residual heat of the dress was a testament to her strength and mastery over her powers. The two onlookers were spellbound, caught in the hypnotic grip of her raw, elemental fire magic.

“C-Champion Orlaith, I entrust you rested well,” the High Priest asked.

“Yes, I did, thank you, High Priest,” Orlaith replied, her voice as sweet as honey but with an underlying hint of the fire within her. Her breath carried the heat of a dragon, a reminder of the raw power she wielded.

The rest of the fleet hovered above as they waited, keeping watch per their standard procedure. The Skyborne Sovereign began its descent, positioning itself alongside the Swift Sentinel.

“Permission to come aboard,” Champion Galen called to the captain of the Swift Sentinel.

The captain responded with a hearty “Aye!” and extended the ramp for the new arrival. But Champion Galen didn’t need it. With a flutter of his shimmering wings, he flew across the gap between the two vessels, his wings glinting in the morning sunlight. His entourage of guards swiftly crossed the ramp to accompany him. The crew of the Swift Sentinel stood at attention as he boarded, and High Priest Nelzar stepped forward to greet him.

“Champion Galen, it’s an honor to have you on board,” High Priest Nelzar said, his voice filled with reverence. “I trust your journey was uneventful?”

“Indeed, it was, High Priest,” Galen replied. His voice had the typical fairy-like whimsical tone, but it carried the weight of power behind it. “I’m eager to join the battle and do my part in eradicating evil from the realms.”

The High Priest nodded with satisfaction. With the formidable combination of the three champions, elites, and a massive army, he was confident that they could overcome any obstacle that may stand in their way. But as the air-whaleboat returned to the Swift Sentinel, it was not the expected General Anlyth who emerged. Rather his wife, the powerful Paladin Anlyth, accompanied by two others that the High Priest knew all too well, Duchess Gimona Grimmail and Magus Craycroft.

“Explain yourself,” the High Priest demanded.