

The Price of Experience

Original Story by Andrew Johnson

“Nomad, you have the most experience in dealing with the Nurzgaal, and the Alberstein Swamp lies in your team’s domain. Thus, you will be in command of destroying the new Spawnlord that our watchers have located.” This command was met by a murmur of approval from the other field experts. Nomad was known amongst the researchers and teams in Agrabus as having the most experience with dealing with the Nurzgaal, and they were all glad that the job was falling to someone else.

Dammit. Why me of all people? Nomad was a shorter man, wearing an overcoat of mottled greens and greys overtop a tightly fit jerkin and breeches. His boots were caked in dry mud, and he smelled perpetually of rot and decay. He stood up, letting his cap shade his eyes as he spoke back to the Ops Commander. “With all due respect sir, I am currently lacking in team members. While I do have experience dealing with the Nurzgaal in that region, I can’t very well tackle the appearance of a new Spawnlord by myself.”

“Duly noted Nomad. You have already been assigned a new team from the surviving members of Subjugation Teams W-SW and N-NE. They both had unfortunate accidents containing the recent outbreaks from the lab, and the surviving members only make up enough for one team. They have been rerouted to your base in Mirefell and are awaiting your orders there.”

“You’re joking right? You want me to take down a Spawnlord and their brood with the dregs of failed teams? If you want to hand me a death sentence, then just come out and say so!” Nomad’s indignant cry caused an uneasy ripple in the people surrounding him. It was an unspoken rule to not raise one’s voice within the Ops Center, as multiple outbreaks of the more temperamental experiments had been caused by uproarious commotion.

The Ops Commander eyed the rest of the room, which had gone dead silent in the wake of Nomad’s outburst. “To the rest of you, dismissed. New orders will be relayed to Field Experts as they become relevant. Nomad, get your ass to the Recon Center now. We have some additional info that you might find helpful in your mission.”

Seething, Nomad watched on in excruciating silence as the other Field Experts filed past him out of the room. As he passed, Wander, head of Subjugation Team W-SE, rested his hand on Nomad’s shoulder. “Good luck out there. Make sure you come back again, yeah?” After the last of the Field Experts had left, leaving just Nomad and the Ops Commander in the room, the Commander’s shoulders sagged just a bit.

“Close the door, will you?” As Nomad pulled the door shut, the Commander sat wearily down in a chair, regarding Nomad with his blind eyes. “I’m sorry this job fell to you. I

really am. But you are the one who managed to singlehandedly destroy the Hive and two other Spawnlords. We need you to do this before the Nurzgaal get out of hand again.”

“It wasn’t singlehanded. You and everyone here knows that. If it weren’t for Tess, Rober, and Angelica, I would have died too, and the Hive would still be active. But now you want to send me back out into the field, and with dregs whose teams have already failed? Even if we take out the Spawnlord, there’s going to be more blood on my hands, and I can’t keep doing this.”

The Commander stared at Nomad, his gaze softening just a touch. “Damn, you really did know their names. How’d you manage that? Policy has always been, Operatives have no names and Field Experts have codes.”

“Yeah, because that makes it easier for us to forget them when they die. I know, and I’m not a fan. That’s why I made it a point to learn theirs. You put me in charge of Team S-SE, and I took responsibility for their lives, and the lives of everyone in that region. I’d be dishonoring them to not even know their names.”

The Commander shrugged. “Well, that’s on you. But as for your new team and the situation, it’s a bit more nuanced than I said in the briefing. Your new team members are named Helena and Victor. They both come from circumstances similar to yours, which is why I’m assigning them to you. Victor’s team, N-NE was tasked with investigating an outbreak of some sort of new disease taking root near Calmaren, and to contain it if possible. The source turned out to be a rotting Wyvern guarding some sort of crystal. Long story short, the Wyvern is now dead, but the crystal was stolen by a dragon devil. The rest of Victor’s team were sucked into a portal to the Hells along with the crystal and devil. Helena is a rare breed, a human able to use an ancient sword style belonging to the Sylph. Her team was investigating the wizard of Valesh Thyra, but got caught in the middle of an ongoing conflict between some of the underground factions there.” The Commander paused to take a sip of his water, before setting it down and resuming. “They are both survivors, like yourself, and have also proved themselves quite adept at thinking on their feet and surviving ludicrous situations. I think you’ll find them a hard pair to kill, even with your track record.”

Nomad found himself nodding as the Commander spoke. *They do both seem like invaluable assets. But even still...* “What did you mean by ‘more nuanced’? The details of my new team I would have gotten anyways, so what haven’t you told me that you couldn’t say during the meeting?”

The Commander took a long pause before answering, seeming to consider his words very carefully. “From what our scouts report, the new Spawnlord seems to be some sort of hybrid, between a human corpse and the Nurzgaal infection. From what we’ve gathered, the corpse seems to be that of one of your old team members, Tess.”

Nomad's eyes went wide, and everything seemed to come to a stop, as he staggered back, his breath coming in shallow gasps. "Tess..." he whispered. "What do you mean, that Tess's corpse has become the body of the new Spawnlord?"

"That's exactly what I mean. And that's why I thought you should be the one to take care of this. You considered her a sister; I know. I think it only right that she be destroyed by the one who cared for her."

"You're damn cold Commander. But, thanks. This does mean a lot to me." Nomad straightened his back and squared his shoulders, taking a deep breath before addressing the Commander more formally. "Sir, before I head out to rendezvous with my team, have the scouts reported anything about the abilities of this new Spawnlord? I will need every detail if I am to take down this threat as soon as possible."

The Commander stood up again, also squaring his shoulders, a slight smile gracing his stony features. "Recon Center has already put together a full report concerning what they learned. Stop by on your way out and pick up the file. Best of luck to you and your new team, Recon. We look forward to your return." With that, the Commander and Nomad both turned away from each other and head out their respective doors. After picking up the file from the Recon Center, Nomad quickly mounted his horse and set out for the town of Mirefell, on the eastern shores of Lake Caldberg.

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"Helena and Victor. I have heard of both of your situations from Ops Command, and I am sure you both know who I am. As such, I am going to skip over greetings and launch straight into this briefing." Standing at the head of his command table at his small base in Mirefell, Nomad took stock of his two new team members. Helena was a young woman with chestnut brown hair, wearing blue robes tied at the waist. Her arms were covered in leather straps, and she had a large tome attached at the hip. From her back hung a longsword, its gem-studded pommel carved with Sylph runes. Her face, while still young and fair, belied the hardness of years of experience, giving the impression that she was much older and wiser than she appeared. On the other side of the table stood Victor. He was a Lizardfolk from the Woodspring Isles, which surprised Nomad as he had thought all of the Lizardfolk to be extinct after the Tides of Madness had overtaken the Isles. His scales were a deep grey in color, with hints of blue shining through at spots, though a great many of them had fallen out, revealing the flesh beneath. The veins under the visible flesh pulsed black with the aftereffects of the virulent plague he had been working to contain with his previous team, and although it would no longer spread, the residual damage to his body was quite obvious. From his neck hung a brass candlestick, the holy symbol of Eshelas, Lord of Light. Over his tunic on his back was also a sword, this one a two-handed executioner sword with a handle crafted from bone.

These two have definitely seen their fair share of turmoil, and I don't really want to know right now either. But they are definitely strong. With his appraisal of his new team members in mind, Nomad returned to the briefing. "As you may know, the Nurzgaal are a species of hive-minded creature born from experiments in the labs back in Agrabus. They escaped and made their way south, setting up roots in the Alberstein Swamp. The Spawnlords are independent leaders that control the minds of their troops, and are similarly linked back to the Hive. While the Hive acts as the central brain for the species, the Spawnlords are capable of independent thought and initiating their own actions, so long as they are not in direct violation of the Hive's directive of expanding their species. The basic Nurzgaal troops tend to look like humans that lack skin, with the muscles and bones clearly visible. Their black blood is highly acidic and can burn through metal at a rapid rate. As such, their main method of attack is by launching this blood through organic weaponry that closely resembles crossbows. Their bodies produce this blood at a rapid rate, which allows it to be fired from these organic weapons, however if the tubes that connect the weapons to their backs are severed, then their blood loss will become unregulated, and their bodies attempts to create enough blood to match the loss will overwhelm the bodies, causing them to shut down and perish. Any questions so far?"

Victor stepped forward, his gravelly voice spilling out through sharpened teeth. "So that's the deal with the normal soldiers. Seems the best solution is to sneak up and attack from behind, sever the tubes before we get spotted and their range overwhelms us. What about the Spawnlords?" Nomad nodded, affirming Victor's idea about how to deal with the soldiers.

"The Spawnlords are all unique. Due to their ability of independent thought from the Hive, they all have different capabilities and fighting styles. Of the three that I have killed, one had an affinity for breaking the minds of enemies telepathically and had a tendency to graft metal onto its body to better protect itself. The second was able to freely mutate the bodies of other Nurzgaal around it, drastically increasing their size at the cost of making them no longer able to excrete their own blood. These new Nurzgaal rampaged with massive claws and could only be killed by beheading. The third Spawnlord was also mutated, a massive worm-like entity with a penchant for devouring anything living. It cut a massive swath through the Swamp, which has left its old hunting grounds a desolate area that life dares not return to. As for our target, our intelligence from the Scouts states this Spawnlord to be humanoid in shape and has been gathering massive bones from long deceased creatures within the swamp. We believe it to be capable of raising the dead, and our goal is to destroy it before it can cause any damage or begin raising a new Hive."

Helena looked up from her copy of the documents, making steady eye contact with Nomad. "Do we have any idea what the current number of soldiers that the Spawnlord has raised is? As well as where they are located?" Nomad rubbed his chin thoughtfully, pulling at the hairs that had started to grow in again.

“The Spawnlord was first spotted four days past, and didn’t have any soldiers accompanying them at the time. In that time period, it could have easily created up to 40 soldiers if that was its priority. However, one of the scouts kept an eye on them up through yesterday, and it still had not created a single soldier by then, merely focusing on collecting bones. We’ll move out at first light for Breaker’s Cove, where the bones were being stored. With any luck, we’ll be able to set up an ambush and kill it quickly as it returns.”

Victor and Helena both nodded their assent to the plan, gathering themselves and prepping their gear. Once the group was prepared, they headed out of Mirefell, traveling down the Trade Byway along the edge of the lake until they reached the edge of the Alberstein Swamp. Once inside the cavernous depths of the Swamp, the trio was surrounded by massive trees and exposed root systems, with massive canopies of leaves and vines overhead blocking out the vast majority of sunlight, leaving the group feeling claustrophobic and alone within the muggy humidity of the Swamp. Trails did not exist in the Alberstein Swamp, as the water climbed up to the knees of travelers and threatened to suck people down into the muck if they stood around too long. To prevent travelers from getting lost in the swamp, a system of markers had been devised and carved into the trunks of the trees, acting as wayfinding to help people find landmarks and make their way across the treacherous locale.

Breaker’s Cove was a particularly deep part of the Swamp, formed by the root systems of four massive trees twisting together and creating an overhead canopy over a massive patch of mud and slime. Previously, a family of massive carnivorous toads had taken residence in Breaker’s Cove, causing the trail markers to shift into warning it as a dangerous point not to be traveled. A group of money hungry wannabe heroes had eventually gone to the Cove while traveling, killing the toads and leaving the Cove open to new inhabitants.

After about 4 hours of traveling through bog water and avoiding the various species of carnivorous flora and fauna that plagued the less-traveled areas of the Swamp, Nomad, Helena, and Victor arrived at the outskirts of Breaker’s Cove. Within they were stumped to find absolutely no sign of bones or the Spawnlord. However, they did find that the mud and water had been churned and displaced, as if by the movements of some massive creature. The mud had been piled up and dried to form walls against the encroaching water, leaving a massive dry spot in the middle of the area. Above, the root system of the trees that formed an additional canopy had been shattered open, leaving a gaping hole behind, as if something underneath had burst upwards, scattering the millennia’s old roots about as a child would knock over their playthings.

Stumped as to what they had found, the trio was extremely on edge. Obviously, some sort of massive creature had been here, and was powerful enough to upset and destroy an ecosystem older than anything they knew. Kneeling down over the mud, Helena released the tome from her belt, flipping it open to a page and muttering a few words under her breath. Arcane sigils popped and fizzled into existence out of blue light in

front of her, tracing patterns of leaves and complex snowflakes. Helena's eyes glowed an electric blue for a split second, before she closed the book and slowly stood up.

Turning to the rest of the team, Helena gave voice to the thought that had been on all of their minds since their arrival. "Powerful necromantic magic has taken place here, and recently. Whatever the Spawnlord was building with the bones they were collecting, they finished. And they brought it to life and burst out of here." She paused. "So, what now?"

Victor snorted, a fierce exhalation from his powerful nostrils. "Obviously, we track this monstrosity down and destroy it. If it makes its way out of the swamp it will surely destroy nearby villages with this kind of destructive power. We need to stop it before it can do that."

"No," replied Nomad. "It won't leave the Swamp yet. As a Spawnlord, its first priority will be to build the foundations of a new hive. The Nurzgaal won't make any push towards our civilization until their numbers are sufficiently built up. But Victor is right. We must track it down and destroy it." *And put Tess to rest.*

"We aren't too far from the old Hive. Let's make camp for a bit, and then head over there. We may pick up a clue as to where the Spawnlord is going to build a new Hive from there." With that, the trio set down their gear and lit a modest fire. They had brought enough rations with them to last a few days in the wilderness, so they chowed down to make sure their energy was up for the coming fight. After they had finished eating, they packed up their gear once again and headed out.

The trip towards the old Hive, while shorter than the trek to Breaker's Cove, was far more treacherous. The water and muck at places climbed up to the chests of the team members, and with reduced movement combatting the increasingly vicious fauna was becoming much more of a challenge. Soon, the team made the decision to avoid combat whenever possible, preferring to try and sneak around the various monsters in their path, albeit at the cost of extending the duration of their travel time.

It was far after nightfall by the time the water level receded, and the group found themselves in a clearing of dried mud, devoid of trees and other flora. Instead, in the middle of the open area lay a massive amalgamation of flesh and sinew, with two massive bones protruding skyward. Helena and Victor were both stunned by the sight. *So, this is the Hive.* But this Hive was very clearly destroyed. One of the skyward bones was split and broken, and the flesh and sinew holding the structure together had been rent and torn apart. Flabby sacs periodically discharged brownish pus that had coagulated into a sludgy mess surrounding the base of the massive structure. Around it, hundreds of corpses lay strewn about, the fleshless humanoid forms of the Nurzgaal broken and scattered across the ground.

As the group took in the sight before them, a massive blast of frigid wind slammed into them, pushing them back and almost sending them flying off their feet and back into the swamp water behind them. The wind pressure continued, and while they managed to regain their footing against the blasting gale, a massive creature alighted in front of them, blocking their way forward to the Hive. Illuminated by their flickering torches and the few pale rays of moonlight that managed to snake their way in through the foliage, the team found themselves face-to-face with a massive Skeletal Lindwurm. But this creature was completely unnatural, even for being a skeleton.

Instead of being just the skeleton of a normal Lindwurm, a massive snake-like entity with two elongated legs, this abomination seemed to be formed into a crude likeness of a Lindwurm using random bones found throughout the Swamp, many of them old and rotten, still dripping water and muck. Additionally, two massive wings of bone had been cruelly grafted onto this form, with the wing membrane formed out of countless vines woven together. From atop this skeletal creature, a single figure rode, standing braced against the wind behind the gaping jaws of the beast.

Although they were twisted beyond normal recognition, Nomad still recognized his friend, ally and teammate Tess, now devoid of flesh and reason, grinning down at Nomad with pitch-black eyes. The team gathered themselves, appalled at what beast they faced, but strong in conviction with their mission.

“We have only one mission. Destroy the Spawnlord and put an end to the Nurzgaal infection. However, I have a second mission for you all. Do not die. Do whatever you must but come out of this ordeal alive.” With Nomad’s words ringing in their hearts, Subjugation Team S-SE charged the massive beast in front of them.

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Six months later, Ops Commander set down at his desk, leaning his head back and pinching the bridge of his nose. *These new recruits are a mess. And the fact that we had to promote so many inexperienced operatives to Field Experts. Is this country finished?*

He had just finished giving the newest set of orders to the Field Experts and was taking a break in his office before he got back to the mountain of paperwork that had been piling up at his desk. As he sat, lost in thought, a knock came at the door. “Urgent report from the S-SE sector! Permission to enter!” The Ops Commander shot upright. *S-SE region? That team has been silent for months! Every time we send someone else down there, we get nothing new. Even the scouts aren’t returning anymore!*

“Come in. What’s going on?” The Ops Commander straightened himself in his chair and turned to face the door. The voice had seemed familiar to him, definitely not one of the staff that normally came knocking though. The door slid open, revealing to the captain a

solitary figure standing in front of a blood-soaked hallway. The familiar mottled overcoat, tattered and drenched in red, adorned the fleshless form of a grinning figure in front of him.

“Field Expert Nomad, returning from the field with Subjugation Team S-SE.”