

# *When Compassion Calls*

*an Avarthrel tale by*  
*Urpo Lankinen*

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*Forren Field, 29.VI.630 AR*

Quirierle Foggymorn looked at the horrifying monster in front of her with a calculating eye, her hand engulfed in dim blue glow of magical fire.

Even when the wizards around her were undoubtedly just as fearless as Quirierle was, she alone dared to approach the dying beast this close - she felt she could defeat the beast in a hand-to-hand combat if the need arose, but the other wizards were not known for their fighting prowess. Quirierle was a skinny, physically fit woman who, unlike most in her company, actually felt comfortable in the military uniform of a Battlemage, and was not in slightest longing for more traditional wizard's robes.

"I... I can't", Quirierle said.

Quiet words, barely loud enough to be heard by people just near her.

Quirierle stopped and looked at the giant chaos beast who was lying on the ground, surrounded by Varmhjelm's finest Battlemages and a company of finest soldiers of the King's army. The creature was bloodied, beaten, charred; it seemed it had sustained massive damage after the wizards had located its weak spot...

As she studied the beast, Quirierle barely noticed that there was a flash of lightning, and loud rumble of thunder several eye blinks after. Then came rain that was harder than what could be normally expected in Varmhjelm - usually, the rain was more of a gradual affair. Yet, the magic flame burning in her hand was quite unaffected by the downpour. The big raindrops came, and she was surprised by how the drops hurt her unprotected head. With a fast flick of her wrist, she let the flame die out, then squeezed the hand in a fist so tight her fingerless leather gloves creaked; then, she sighed deep and frowned as her mind was sweetly blanketed by a not-so-sweet feeling of unspecified anger. A bit dazed, she pulled the hood of her deep blue officer's cloak over her head to shield her from the heavy drops. What was wrong here? What was she doing wrong? No—she was doing everything right, but the others...

"We've got to do something, Quir!" shouted one of the other Battlemages. Battlemage-Lieutenant Arvid Blelenchar, possibly?...

How *dared* he be like that! She barely knew him, and he was being friendly and was using nicknames, not really going by the book... well, actually, *everyone* was doing that - most mages just couldn't stay formal in the heat of the battle when the facts dictated that they should occupy their heads with something far more important than protocol and military discipline - but thinking of the justification was besides the point. She just needed something, *anything* else to think. This minor annoyance brought her back to the ground.

"I *said* I can't kill it!" Quirierle shouted a bit louder over the din of battle nearby - The other half of the company not yet managed to close the portal, it seemed. Her determination could be heard clearly in her voice, with that usual little hint of threat; people around her understood that if she could not kill the chaos beast, no one else should try their luck with that thing either.

"Why? What's going on?" Blelenchar said. Now I seem to have completely lost them, Quirierle thought, and for a good reason. Battlefield is not the place for original thinking. She scratched her short brown hair, trying to figure out something to say. She needed...

"Please! Can you please let me examine this creature?" Quirierle said, then ducked almost instinctively. A slow but loud booming sound - not a normal explosion, but one that almost seemed like it was stretched out to occupy a far longer period of time than usual - reverberated all around, making pebbles under their feet tremble, and a bright flash of lightning-blue light from behind them told that Battlemage-Colonel Barhavian had just de-linked the interplanetary magic portal; the display of light was probably far more impressive and deadly in the surface of planet Xyrlentaigen.

She looked at the barely human-shaped torso of the great beast, a creature out of the realm of worst fears. The creature lay before her, rumbling surprisingly quietly when it breathed laboriously. It had a dark red skin; it was bulky, with a long segmented tail - badly burned in the concerted attack by the wizards. It had feet with beastly talons, and hands with crab-like claws. Its back had several burn marks, but the chest was undoubtedly in worse condition - the wizards had concentrated their attacks there, when they were not even sure if the creature *had* any vital organs there. If it wasn't a weak spot, they clearly had hoped it was...

But the creature's head - with a pair of dæmonic horns, recessed eyes that were glowing red, and dragon-like snout - was what had caused Quirierle to pause. The creature had shown no remorse and no mercy while they fought, but now, she was almost certain this look in the beast's eyes was...

"What is this, Captain Foggymorn?"

Quirierle turned to face Colonel Barhavian; the other Battlemages seemed to shy away from the grumpy, weather-beaten old man. Most people had sense to give way for old, distinguished wizards; somehow, even other wizards shied away from Barhavian.

"My apologies, sir", Quirierle said. "Sir, I am aware this is not perhaps the best time to ask this, but with your permission, I would like to capture this magical creature as a research specimen."

"That beast has been terribly dangerous, Captain", Barhavién said without skipping a beat. "I would rather see the creature be dispatched as soon as possible. But..." Barhavién paused, carefully examining the creature. "Perhaps you would like to explain yourself? Hmm - it looks like a fairly typical Xyrlentai creature to me..."

"I just can't kill this creature", she said. "It's... too cute." Barhavién frowned. Quirierle was absolutely sure he was going to order her to destroy the creature right away, so she had to say something fast. "And I have personally been looking for a specimen of chaos beasts from other worlds. I have no reason for picking this particular individual beast, sir, but I believe this is a good opportunity for acquiring one."

"Captain, I believe Anchorfall Academy has, in stasis, several specimens from the incident half a century ago..."

"But, sir! Those are all either dead specimens, or in danger of dissipation if they are removed from stasis - or both. Either way, we have never captured beasts of this size from *any* world. We actually even have tangle-webs big enough in the supply wagon, and we did not need it in the battle - it should be ready for use... Um..."

As Quirierle had been speaking, Barhavién had been examining the beast from all around. Now, he slowly came back to the front, and looked Quirierle in the eyes. Not a muscle twitched in her face; all she could offer was a good, honest look. Finally, the old wizard spoke. "Sergeant Cardrich."

"Sir!" the young Battlemage-Sergeant under Quirierle's command snapped to attention.

"Arrange this magical beast to be restrained. Captain and I will put it in stasis. Afterwards, we need to transport it temporarily to The Fellenhill Brotherhood Tower and onward to Anchorfall; have someone contact Fellenhill and ask them to come here. That will be all."

"Sir, yes sir!" Cardrich saluted and went away to look for the his squad's mages.

Barhavién turned to Quirierle and sighed heavily. Then, he smiled. "Cute, eh, Captain? Do not get me wrong, I can trust on your judgement, and I agree that this creature would be a valuable specimen - if we only can get it to stasis fast enough..." the old archmage prodded the beast with his staff, inciting a loud groan of discomfort from the creature. "But I can't help but to notice that you may have some sort of a personal motive for this. Would you care to elaborate?"

"Well, sir..."

"I'm just asking this as a friend." Barhavién smiled. "As a curious fellow magician - not as a soldier, not as a Battlemage."

Quirierle smiled a bit, then looked a bit gloomily at the creature. "Thank you, sir. Well... What I wanted to say was this: We have killed its creator. The rest of the army trapped here is soon dead. This thing... could be the last thing the creator made. Their mightiest creature. These were Xyrlentai; last we heard of them, they did not even have concept of belongings, or records, or even culture of any kind. Each creature just lived in the moment - eat, sleep, move, kill.

They knew no form of written word, let alone magical recording - and they just make up things as they go along.”

“That is right”, Barhavién said.

“But look at this unique creature!” Quirierle said. “If we kill it now, we shall depart this field with just memories. Memories... that could be wrong or right. And that is all that is going to be ever understood of this creature.”

“I see. You want to study this creature in detail.”

“Better than that. I want to store it forever in the Academy. It is an unique magical creature, last of its kind, and as such it needs special, observant, nurturing care.”

The old wizard looked at the creature, then turned to Quirierle and smiled, not saying a word.

Quirierle sighed. “I feel horrible right now.”

Barhavién blinked - and Quirierle thought that she was surprising people far too often today. “And why is that?” the old wizard asked.

“That I had to actually *rationalise* sparing a life. Are we becoming monsters, sir?”

“We're soldiers, Captain. A moment ago, I acted as a commander of this unit, and - quite coldly - demanded information that we needed in order to survive.” Barhavién smiled. “I can assure you my human side said ‘yes, spare the monster's life, if there is no threat to anyone!’.”

“It is an unique creature, sir - yet it was, ultimately, just one out of many magical creatures, and I know I couldn't just say we need to save it for no particular reason. If I had not said anything, we would have crushed it. I looked the beast in the eyes, and saw sorrow and submission. It has given up. We can't kill it now.” Quirierle sighed and hung her head. She took a few good breaths, looked at the soldiers and lesser Battle-mages scurrying around the beast, then finally looked the old wizard in the eyes. “Sir, that is my personal reason: I saved a horrifying beast because *I am a human!*”

The old wizard smiled. “As a fellow human being, I appreciate your concern for life, and as your superior officer, I commend you for your consideration of long-range plans... even if this particular captured beast is of little strategic use. I am sure the people at the Academy will just *love* this big fellow.”

Sergeant Cardrich returned. “Sir! The beast is restrained from all sides inside of a large capture net, sir!”

“Thank you, Sergeant. Tell your men to clear the surrounding area, then contact Fellenhill.”

“Yes, sir!”

“Well, Captain, looks like the day is coming to a nice and satisfying end”, Barhavién said. “Will you perform the ritual?”

Quirierle smiled. “I will, if you can assist me, sir.”

“I can do that. And the creature is all yours to study as soon as we return to Anchorfall, if that is what you want.”

“Yes, that reminds me... Sir, I'm requesting an evaluation of service.”

“An evaluation? I think you have been doing wonderful job re-

cently.”

“A formal evaluation, sir.”

“A formal evaluation, Captain? Surely you are not...”

As the soldiers dispersed, Quirierle began mixing some of the magical ingredients for the stasis ritual. As she looked up the proper words of power from her grimoire, she said, “Sir, I have seen too many worrying things lately. I finally understand what I need: I need a break from destroying things on a whim. I could keep doing this forever, sir, but yet, somehow, I feel I am exhausted.” She closed her eyes and shook her head. “I request that I can remain in Anchorfall; Captain Daggerner has been idle in the Anchorfall for several months and he knows everyone from my company well. All I really need is a formal evaluation for my release petition.”

Barhavién smiled compassionately as he listened and drew patterns in the muddy ground with his staff. “You have done far more than most people in five years. I am sure a little bit of relaxation is in order... but please, promise to come back, Captain. We need people like you.” He smiled, then said quietly, “Soldiers who are humans.”

Quirierle smiled. “I will consider that, sir.”

“The gates of Castle Loudhorn are always open for great heroes, Captain”, Barhavién said, referring to the honoured headquarters of the Battlemage corps. “But tell me, what do you intend to do once you retire?”

Quirierle closed her eyes. “Some research in the Academy, I suppose... but my biggest dream is to reopen the old alchemy shop.” She smiled. “I think I do alchemy better than combat magic any day.”

Barhavién nodded. “I think this change will bring many good things to you. Now... shall we perform this ritual?”

Quirierle looked at the creature that lay restrained under the net, breathing hard, but seemingly less in pain than before. In its face, she could easily see a rather clear expression - one that was hard to fake and was easy to interpret, even when the creature was now under skies alien to it, and in all likelihood destined to remain so until the end of its days. In its state of stupor, the creature smiled thankfully.

Quirierle smiled back. “We will bring you to light, my new friend. It is the least I can do after the horrors you saw today.”

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