Magic, Lost and Found

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Summary

The Colonel thinks he’s lost the magic...

Notes

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"There could be complications."

Harrison Blackwood watched the members of the elite Special Forces Omega Squad file off their troop truck. He frowned. The soldier's weapons dangled loosely in their hands, and their shoulders sagged as low as their despondent expressions. Silently the scientist counted until Lieutenant Colonel Paul Ironhorse stepped down. The colonel was always first on the truck and last off. The astrophysicist felt his chest tighten. Three Omegans were missing.

"Colonel?" Blackwood said quietly, stepping in next to the officer as he marched toward the coach house where his troops were quartered.

When Ironhorse made no reply, Blackwood reached out and gently grabbed his arm. "Paul, are you okay?"

Ironhorse stopped, his head snapping around and his eyes widening as if noticing his friend for the first time.
"Harr—?"

"What happened?" Blackwood cut him off.

Ironhorse's troubled gaze followed the remaining soldiers as they filed tiredly into the coach house. A slight tremor shook the colonel's body. "We lost three," he said quietly. "I have to go talk to the men."

Blackwood shook his head, allowing his hand to climb up the soldier's jacket sleeve, his fingers encircling the arc of Ironhorse's shoulder. "That can wait a little while," he said, adding hastily when the colonel's eyes narrowed. "Until you're cleaned up." He directed Paul toward the Cottage, surprised that there was no resistance. "How did it happen?"

"Malfunction. One of the choppers… The aliens were on the run. We had time. It should've been easy. We lost three and two Delta Force crew members."

They stopped at the side door of the government safe house. Ironhorse's anger exploding. "It was a fuckin' mechanical failure!"

He turned imploring eyes on the scientist, but Blackwood didn't know what to say. "I'm sorry," he ventured, unable to offer any other consolation. Reaching out, he opened the door, guiding the soldier inside.

"It's a waste, a goddamned waste. They were good men."

"I know."

Harrison's own frustration caused him to grind his jaws together. He'd let Ironhorse talk him into staying behind since he was still recovering from a pair of cracked ribs – compliments of a alien-blended human's crushing hug. If Ironhorse hadn't arrived when he had…

Blackwood pushed the image away. It was over. He was alive and relatively undamaged. But he shouldn't have let Paul talk him into staying. If he'd been along, maybe…

They paused at the door to the colonel's office. "I'd— I just need some time alone, Doctor."

Blackwood nodded, and with a final squeeze of Paul's shoulder, left him alone, taking refuge in his own office. After a pause, he heard Paul stalk down the hall toward his bedroom. Silently he prayed that the soldier found the peace he needed.

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Harrison stopped just outside the colonel's office but didn't knock on the closed door. If Ironhorse wanted a little time to work through his grief the least he could do was give it to the man.

He turned, but couldn't force himself to walk away.

The situation wasn't new, Blackwood argued silently. He turned back to the door.

Ironhorse had lost men under his command before. There had been other Omegans killed since the unit had joined them.
Granted, it was ironic, *tragic* that a mechanical failure had aided the aliens in this case, still, wasn't two days enough?

Blackwood sighed softly. Who was he feeling sorry for, Paul or himself?

The unit had held services for their three fellows that morning. Their bodies had been sent home for burial, but the Squad needed to honor their fallen comrades in their own way. Blackwood, Suzanne, and Norton had joined the soldiers, watching as a solemn presentation was made to three neatly folded flags. Taps followed.

When it was over, Ironhorse excused himself and disappeared into his office, refusing to come out for lunch. It was now nearly time for dinner and Blackwood was determined that the man was going to eat.

He stared at the closed door, then knocked softly, calling, "Paul?"

"Not now, Harrison," was the muffled reply.

"Not good enough, Colonel," Blackwood said, reaching out to turn the knob. Stepping into the unlit room, he found the colonel seated at his desk, staring at the bare polished surface. To one side, three envelopes sat waiting to be mailed. "Paul?"

Ironhorse looked up. "Doctor, please, I—"

"I know you think you'd rather be alone right now," Blackwood acknowledged. "But I think you're lying to yourself."

Ironhorse's eyes closed, his head shaking slightly. "It's not the deaths, Harrison. God knows I see enough of that."

"Then what?" the scientist asked, slipping into the chair across the desk from the distraught soldier. Reaching out, he rested his hands on top of Ironhorse's desk, the tips of his fingers nearly touching the soldier's where they were splayed against the cold wood surface.

The black eyes rose, his gaze meeting the astrophysicist's blue. A shock of black hair fell across Paul's forehead.

"Sometimes… I just get… lost… in memories." He snorted softly to himself.

"What did this remind you of?" Harrison asked encouragingly. Maybe he could get Ironhorse to talk to him for once.

Ironhorse looked away, his eyes fixing on a photograph taken during Vietnam. He was one of ten men. Derriman stood beside the then lieutenant Ironhorse.

"Talk to me, Paul, please?"

The soldier took a deep breath and held it for a moment. He let it out with a stream of words. "My first command in-country was a squad of newbes. Derriman was the only one who'd been around long enough to know what the hell was going on. I was as green as those kids and just as scared. I knew I was going to screw up and get some, or all of them killed…"

"Our first few missions were hairy… man." Ironhorse smiled sadly and shook his head, the memories flashing through his mind. "But we didn't lose anyone. It was stupid, so damned stupid, but after a while we started thinking we were… charmed… that we *couldn't* die."
"And?" Harrison prompted when the soldier showed no signs of picking up the story.

Ironhorse's gaze returned to his hands, pressing hard against the surface of his desk. "We went in to pull out a unit pinned down in the bush. They'd been in the jungle for three days trying to reach a LZ. HQ sent in a green pilot, and he got shot down for his trouble. We knew we'd be going in hot, but we were invincible…

"We had three choppers with us. It was tight, real tight, but the pilots wedged the birds in and we kept Charlie back while they got their unit loaded. Derriman and I put down covering fire while our unit headed for the last chopper. Charlie got a bead on us, started shelling. Derriman and I hauled ass to one of the dust-offs with the guys we'd picked up.

"The pilots must've had a direct line to God that day, because those choppers were doin' the impossible." He shook his head again, the wayward lock of hair sticking to his sweat-damp forehead.

"But damned if we didn't get out." He laughed softly. "We were still charmed. The flight back was quiet…" he said, almost carefully, like he was testing his ability to continue. "We ran into fog." Ironhorse stopped, then took a deep breath and pushed on. "The pilot tried climbing out, but the ceiling was too high. Everyone was getting nervous."

Paul reached up, wiping his hand across his face. Blackwood noticed that it shook slightly.

"We dropped down to get under the fog, and one of the choppers hit the side of a hill."

Blackwood felt his own eyes close. "Who?"

"My boys. They died with the pilot, co-pilot, and gunner," Ironhorse said softly, unshed tears standing in his eyes. "They gave me a new squad; Derriman stayed on, but I lost the magic."

"I'm sorry," Blackwood whispered.

Ironhorse sucked in a breath, and pulled his hands away, folding his arms across his chest, walling himself away from the scientist. "A fact of war, Doctor. Just like this accident."

"But—?" Blackwood prompted, hearing an unspoken.

Ironhorse remained silent.

"Paul, I didn't think you'd give into superstition that easily," he chided gently, hoping to force the colonel out of his new defense.

The dark eyes locked on the astrophysicist's. "Call it whatever you want, Doctor. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to mail these." With that, Ironhorse stood, scooped up the three envelopes, and stalked out of the room.

Blackwood dropped back against the chair and sighed. He'd blown it. That had been the wrong thing to say, and it was too late to take it back, but what should he have said? He couldn't read the soldier. Was he depressed? Sad? Angry? What?

With a sigh, Blackwood forced himself up and returned to his office. He'd wait and see how dinner went.
"Down! Get down!" Ironhorse yelled at Blackwood.

The scientist, running as fast as he could just in front of the colonel, threw himself behind the cover of two large garbage bins nearly filling the narrow alley. The building they had been trying to clear of aliens exploded.

Ironhorse felt the blast lift him off the ground, hurl him along for several yards, then introduce him to the pavement. He curled instinctively, grunting as he impacted and rolled. When the tumble stopped, Paul lay frozen, waiting for the air to return to his lungs and the impossibly loud roar in his ears to stop.

Before either occurred, two Omegans dropped down next to him, one on each side. They grabbed handfuls of his uniform, hefting and carrying him to safety just before a second explosion, larger than the first, tore through the morning air.

Ironhorse felt the rain of debris even after the two soldiers dropped, covering his body with their own. He forced his eyes open, but all he could see was a growing back cloud climbing up to fill the sky above them.

"Sir, can you hear me?" one of the soldiers asked.

Turning his head slightly, Ironhorse recognized Goodson, the squad's medic. He nodded.

"Blackwood?"

"They're getting him. Just lay still until I can see if anything's broken." The medic's inspection was swift and thorough. "No breaks; your luck's holding, Colonel."

Reaching out, Goodson inspected the abrasion along Ironhorse's cheek and temple. "How's your head?"

"Okay," Ironhorse said, conducting his own mental inventory. "A little rattled by the explosion."

"I'm not surprised," Goodson replied, adding, "That roll saved you a concussion, Colonel. Neat trick."

"Goodson!"

"Behind the van!" the medic called back.

Ironhorse pushed himself up to his elbows. Stavrakos sounded worried.

Stavrakos and Derriman rounded the back of the van, carrying Blackwood between them.

"Harrison?" Ironhorse called as the pair laid the man down, Goodson shifting over to begin an examination.

"We called for an ambulance," Derriman told Ironhorse, then headed off at a trot, yelling, "Alverez, get the perimeter secured! Stein, cleanup!"

Ironhorse managed to sit up, his fingertips probing his hairline and the bleeding scrape. The medic handed him a gauze pad, then returned to Blackwood.

Pressing the pad to his head, Ironhorse watched the medic, waiting for him to complete his
evaluation of Blackwood. Stavrakos stayed nearby, providing security.

After a few minutes, the medic turned to the colonel. "Looks like the explosion caught him between the wall and the garbage bin. He's banged up pretty good, but I didn't find anything broken. He might have a mild concussion though."

The soft wail of a distant but approaching ambulance filtered in over the sounds of the soldiers and the still burning building.

"Sergeant," Ironhorse said to Stavrakos, drawing the man's attention away from the other Omegans he was watching.

"Yes, sir?"

"Call Norton, let him know what happened. Tell them we'll be back as soon as we can. I think they'll keep Blackwood overnight."

"Yes, sir," Stavrakos replied, guessing that the doctors would want to keep Ironhorse as well.

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Suzanne slipped quietly into the Fort Streeter hospital room. Her gaze was drawn to Harrison first. He was sleeping, a thin strip of white encircling his head. One cheek was black and blue, like he'd been a fight. She looked to Ironhorse. He was awake, a red scrape showing along one temple and cheek.

"How are you feeling?" she asked quietly, walking over to the soldier's bedside.

The colonel shifted, edging further up in the bed. "I'm fine."

She gave the abrasion a closer examination. "Looks painful."

"A little," he admitted.

"Harrison?"

"Mild concussion, and he re-bruised the ribs," Ironhorse said tightly. "They wanted him to stay overnight in case there were complications."

"And you decided this would be an easier way to stay with him?" Suzanne surmised coyly.

The colonel shrugged. "Something like that."

"The aliens?"

"We cleared them all out, but they'd rigged the building to blow."

She shook her head. "They're getting bolder."

"That's what I've been thinking, too."

"Me, three," Harrison said. "But what does it mean?"
Suzanne stepped over to the scientist's bedside, then leaned down and gave him a tender hug. "Sorry if we woke you."

Harrison glanced at the wall clock. "No problem, my hour was up anyway."

Suzanne laughed softly. "They're going to just love you around here," she muttered, pulling back.

"So, what does it mean if they're getting bolder?" Blackwood asked.

"I have no idea," Suzanne responded. "And you don't need to worry about it until you're back home either."

"Tell Norton we'll be back tomorrow," Harrison instructed.

"I'll tell him you might be back tomorrow. Neither of you better come home if they want you to stay here," she threatened.

"Yes, ma'am," Harrison teased, giving Suzanne a sloppy salute.

She shook her head. "You're both impossible."

"Hey," Paul said, holding up his hands, "you didn't hear any complaints from me."

Suzanne's head cocked to the side. "You're right." Her eyes narrowed. "What gives?"

Ironhorse looked wounded. "Nothing."

"I'm not sure I believe it, but I think the nurses can handle you. I've got to go. I promised Debi I'd be back in time to look her homework over before she goes to bed." She walked to the door, turned off the light, then paused, adding, "I'm just glad you're both okay. Do what the doctor and nurses tell you, please?"

"We'll try," Harrison assured.

With that Suzanne shook her head and slipped out.

"I don't think she was reassured," the scientist stated.

The colonel scooted down in his bed. "Can't imagine why."

"What does that mean?" Harrison demanded.

"That you sometimes sound decidedly untrustworthy, Doctor."

Blackwood's eyes widened. "I do?"

Ironhorse turned onto his side. "Yes, you do."

Harrison lay quietly for a moment, then squinted in the semi-darkness at the clock. 8:47 p.m. No wonder he was wide awake. He reached up, turning on the light above his head. Checking his nightstand turned up a box of tissue, a plastic kidney-shaped bowl, and a small Bible.

He sighed. Why hadn't Suzanne brought his journals?

Curly head rolling to the side, he studied the colonel's back. "Paul?" he whispered.
The soldier did not stir.

"Paul?" he asked a little louder. "Are you awake?"

"I am now." Ironhorse rolled over. "What?"

"Uh…" He sought frantically for a topic of conversation. "Think we'll get out of here tomorrow?"

Ironhorse's eyes narrowed. "How the hell should I know?"

"Oh."

The colonel rolled back over.

Harrison watched the soldier's back for a few minutes. "Paul?"

Ironhorse's shoulder rose and fell with a heavy sigh. "Yes, Doctor?"

"Did we get all of them?"

"Of course."

"Any equipment left we can examine?"

"No, it was all lost in the explosion."

"Oh."

Several more minutes passed in silence before Blackwood tried again. "Paul?"

Ironhorse rolled over and sat up in his bed. "Harrison, are you going to keep me up all night?"

Blackwood looked pained. "Am I keeping you up?" he asked, absolutely sure that Paul was counting under his breath. "Of course I don't plan to keep you up all night… just a little while longer, that's all."

"Now that that's settled," the colonel muttered, dropping back against his pillows. He stared up at the ceiling, but the light over Harrison's bed rested in the corner of his peripheral vision. "Can you turn that light off?"

"Oh, sure," Blackwood said, reaching up to snap it off. "That better?"

"Much," Paul replied into the darkness. Now, if he could just enjoy it and indulge in some well-earned sleep…

Silence permeated the room again. Harrison stared at Ironhorse, trying to determine if he was asleep again.

"I'm not asleep," the colonel grumbled, sensing Harrison's attention.

"Ahh," Harrison said. "Guess you can't sleep either?"

"I was doing just fine," Paul breathed.
"What?"

"Harrison, what's bothering you?"

Blackwood paused, trying to find the best way to ask what he wanted. "Uh, you aren't feeling… uh, responsible… about what happened to me, are you?"

"I should have seen the trap sooner," Ironhorse stated matter-of-factly.

"But you don't think this… this had anything to do with, well, magic, do you?"

A soft chuckle rolled through the room. "No, Harrison. I don't." The colonel laughed again. "You took that too literally."

"Oh?"

"Or maybe not literally enough."

"All right, Colonel, you've piqued my curiosity."

"I just meant that Mr. Murphy had finally found me. It's one thing for soldiers to die in battle, Harrison. It's another entirely for them to die needlessly. Our only casualties before now were directly connected to the aliens. Now…"

"Now we know it can happen anywhere, at any time."

"Exactly," Ironhorse said. "Accidental deaths like that undermine morale for a while. Even mine."

"I see," Harrison replied. "And us almost getting blown sky high has restored your moral?"

"But we didn't."

"Speak for yourself!"

"It's a minor concussion, mister."

"There could be complications."

"Not with your thick skull."

"There could complications. Head injuries are very tricky things."

"Now you're an expert on head injuries?"

"No, but I've—"

"Read about it in a book," Ironhorse finished for the scientist. "Harrison, don't you ever go out and live."

"Me? I'll have you know…"

The night nurse, passing by the room gave the door an amused grin. It sounded like her patients were going to be just fine.
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