

Aftermath

A short story about how Buck may have been feeling after the dreadful trial.

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It was the eve of the terrible trial which had almost seen an innocent man condemned to death. The ordeal may have been over and Buck vindicated, but he still felt like a condemned man. Instead of death though, his own guilt now threatened to become his life sentence. Of course he had no recollection of the events that had been exposed by the OEI as he had been placed under deep hypnosis when they occurred. That fact though, did nothing to appease his troubled mind.

After the trial, he had been surrounded by well-wishers from all levels from the Admiral downwards, but his initial relief had soon ebbed away in the solitude of his quarters. In the hours following the trial well meaning colleagues had suggested a celebration. He turned this down. He had even turned down Wilma's offer of 'company', unsure of her intentions after the kiss. Only a few days ago, he might have considered taking their relationship further but now there was no way he could contemplate getting involved with anyone. She had looked hurt but respected his wishes and bade him goodnight.

Sleep would not come to him however. Instead his imagination worked overtime and he was haunted by visions of his family being taken away and interrogated by the US air force. The chances of the real reason behind his subterfuge having been revealed were slim. It was very likely, he knew, that to cover their own tracks, his mom, dad, his brother and even his girlfriend Jennifer could have been hauled away and subjected to endless questions or tortured. He rose from the bed and paced up and down the room. Would they have believed he was capable of treason?

Images formed in his mind. His family heartbroken at his disappearance. Sweet, gentle Jennifer, grieving for her lost lover. He would have been, at first, hailed a brave man and a hero he thought ironically. Then, just as they were coming to terms with their loss, their memories of him would have been so cruelly tainted. Had his loved ones gone to their deaths believing that he had betrayed them all?

For the next few days Buck stayed in his quarters, leaving only to grab food. He had asked Wilma to relieve him of duties for a while. She reluctantly agreed although she thought his mind would have been better occupied on the bridge. They were however, a way off any unexplored worlds and the crew could manage without him for a while. She missed his presence, his laughter and his strange quaint twentieth century phrases. She missed him. He might have well have been on the other side of the quadrant even though he was on the same ship.

Hawk too, had noticed his friend's absence. Although he usually spent a lot of time in his own quarters than on the bridge like the rest of the crew. Buck used to visit him sometimes and share his stories of old Earth and his early experiences of life in the future. He and Buck had been two of a kind, both men displaced in their surroundings. Buck, five hundred years out of time and Hawk living and working beside a race of people of whom he had only ever known as his mortal enemy. Their friendship had been forged from gratitude and respect after tragedy had struck on Throm. Then it had grown stronger as they travelled together on the Searcher and shared expeditions to unknown worlds.

Admiral Asimov approached the bridge and addressed Wilma, deliberately keeping his voice low.

"Colonel Deering could I have a word?" She knew without being told that this was about Buck. She sighed and followed the admiral into his office.

"I understand that you have relieved Captain Rogers of his duties for the moment?"

Wilma stood facing him with her arms behind her back and her hands clasped together. She shifted her weight from one foot to the other, feeling a little awkward.

"Yes admiral, I didn't think it was a good idea, but he was adamant that he wanted some downtime. I – think he just needs to gather his thoughts and gain a little perspective after the trial."

"I see," the admiral frowned. "The accusation of treason seems to have hit him harder than I anticipated. Have you seen him today?"

"Only briefly sir, and I didn't really speak to him. I wish I knew what to say to him, he seems a little – depressed."

"Well you're one of his close friends Colonel, I think you should maybe go and see him, let him know that we are

concerned about him.”

Wilma nodded. “I’ll drop by and see him later.” *If he’ll let me in*, she thought.

“Thank you Colonel, as you were.”

She nodded. “Admiral.”

When Wilma had finished her duties for the day, she went back to her cabin, showered and changed. Clad in a burgundy jumpsuit which brought out the red tones in her chestnut hair, she headed for Buck’s quarters. She couldn’t help feeling a little apprehensive as she pressed the button on the small wall panel that would announce that he had a visitor

“Buck it’s Wilma.”

“OK come in,” came the weary reply

Well he was willing to have visitors at least. That was something. The door panel slid open. She entered the cabin which was in semi-darkness. Buck was sitting on the sofa, his expression melancholy. She took the few paces to the sofa and sat down near him. Now that she was here she wasn’t really sure what to say to him. She gazed at him for a few seconds, taking in his dishevelled appearance and wan complexion.

“Buck?” she said softly, “What is it? What’s wrong? The charges were dropped but you- well you seem so depressed. We’re all worried about you.”

Buck sighed heavily, “I know the trial is over Wilma, but every time I close my eyes all I can see is my family and how they must have thought I’d let them all down.”

Wilma shifted position slightly so her body was facing him. “But you don’t know that they even knew anything about it Buck, the video tape could have only just been found when your friend had it.”

“Yes, but I don’t know that they didn’t and that’s just it Wilma, I never will know! Neither will I know if to keep up this charade, my family weren’t held for questioning, tortured, imprisoned. My mom couldn’t survive something like that.”

Wilma placed her hand gently on his arm, “Buck you’re just going to torture yourself if you go on like this. I hate to see you in such turmoil.”

He looked at her briefly then shifted his gaze downwards. “I’ll be OK,” he replied, his voice almost a whisper. He didn’t sound like he was OK though.

Wilma felt tears pricking her eyes. “I- Buck all through the trial I was worried that I was going to lose you and now I feel like I have anyway,” Her voice faltered on the last word.

This seemed to bring him out of his reverie. “I’m sorry,” he said softly, “I guess I never stopped to think about what effect all this had on you.” He reached out and gathered her in his arms. “I don’t know how I would have got through this without you.”

“It’s OK,” she whispered into his shirt, “I guess it’s been difficult for all of us.” Then quickly regaining her composure she pulled away from him. “Anyway um - it would be nice to see you on the bridge again, if you feel up to it.”

“I’ll see how I feel,” he replied.

She leaned over, kissed him lightly on the cheek and left. She did not, however go straight back to her quarters. Instead she took a detour that would lead her to Hawk’s cabin and pressed the door chime.

“I thought it might be Buck,” he said as he opened the door.chime.

“Sorry to disappoint you,” she replied.

“It is no disappointment,” he said with a smile, you are welcome any time Wilma.”

Then his voice adopted a more serious tone. “Have you spoken to Buck today?”

“Yes I've just been to see him now,” she sighed. “Have you?”

“The last time I saw him was yesterday and he made it quite clear that he wished to be left alone, so I shall respect his wishes,” he replied sadly. He sat down and beckoned Wilma to do the same. “How was he?”

She followed his lead and took a seat, “Much the same, he feels guilty about what happened even though it wasn't his fault.”

“But that is silly,” replied Hawk. He paused then, “I have never seen him like this before.”

“I have,” she replied, “Just after...well, Hawk I presume Buck told you about his girlfriend Jennifer from his old time?”

Hawk nodded slowly, “Yes, he told me about her when I first arrived on the ship and I was grieving for Koori.”

“Well, he met a woman here who had been genetically altered to look like her and then she was killed. Afterwards he was pretty much like this for a short while.”

“I see,” said Hawk, “So in a way, he thought he had found his lost love, only to lose her again. That must have been terrible for him.”

Wilma could only nod in reply. She remembered her own mixed feelings when Buck had left New Chicago to follow the Jenny lookalike. She cared so much for Buck she wanted him to be happy, but at the same time had felt sadness that it wasn't with her.

“Perhaps,” said Hawk thoughtfully, “If Buck's destiny lies in this time, then there is someone here for him in this time too.”

If he would only let them into his heart, thought Wilma. Aloud she said, “I'm sure in time Buck will find happiness with someone oneday.”

He couldn't help but notice her wistful expression and wondered if he had touched a raw nerve. He had occasionally wondered whether his friends cared for each other more than either of them were willing to admit. He had an inkling after the trial that for Wilma at least, that was certainly the case. He wasn't sure about Buck. He had seemed a little jealous when they had been assigned to accompany Wilma's old flame Aram Duvue to the Oasis, but something was holding him back from being closer to her.

Changing the subject slightly he said, “When I first arrived here I could not see the point in going on. When I was put on trial I didn't care as I thought my life was over anyway. But when I heard of your quest to find your lost races and realised that my people could also be among the stars, it gave me renewed hope. Life goes on and we are but a small part of the universe.”

Wilma sat up suddenly. “That's it!” she exclaimed, “Hawk I have an idea, if you will go along with it, I think I know how to get through to Buck.”

Buck was reclining on the sofa when his door chimes went. Twiki beeped softly in the corner. “Want me to send them away boss.”

“No – it's OK,” he told his little metal companion. “Who is it?”

“Buck it's Wilma and Hawk – we would like to show you something.”

Buck scratched his forehead. Obviously he wasn't going to get any peace tonight. “OK, you might as well come in.”

The door panel slid open and his friends walked in. “Actually Buck, you have to come with us,” Wilma informed him.

“Do I have any choice?” he grumbled.

“None whatsoever,” she replied brightly, “Meet us down on the flight deck in half an hour.”

“The flight deck? Why? Are we going some place?” He looked to Hawk for answers as Wilma obviously wasn't going to be forthcoming with any. “Hawk? What's this about.”

But his friend only answered, “You will see!”

Wilma eased back the throttle and after setting the course, engaged the shuttle on to autopilot. The small space craft cruised along approaching light speed, with it's four occupants; Buck, Wilma Hawk and Twiki. The little drone had insisted that he wasn't being left behind.

Hawk and Wilma exchanged looks. Buck frowned, "Will someone please tell me where the hell we are going?"

"Have a little patience," Wilma admonished him, "We'll be there soon."

"Bidi bidi bidi, you tell him Wilma!"

"Hey you're meant to be on my side," Buck said. He mumbled under his breath.

Suddenly Wilma jumped up and taking back the ship's controls. She slowed down the engines to a slow cruise, and swung the ship round to a forty five degree angle.

"We're here!" she announced.

Buck looked out of the view port to see what the fuss was about. On the horizon was a purplish nebula cluster. The gaseous cloud was host to dozens of twinkling stars.

"What am I supposed to be looking at?" he asked grumpily.

"Over there, to the right of the nebula," Wilma breathed.

On the far right hand side of the gas cloud, was a flat ring of red and orange. In it's centre a sphere of brilliant white light burned brighter than the sun. A green ethereal glow emanated in a cone shape from it's northern and southern axes. It resembled a ghostly butterfly.

"It's beautiful," he murmured, when his eyes finally alighted on the spectacular stellar display.

Wilma crossed the room to stand beside him, "What you are seeing, is a proto star," she whispered. "It's one of the first stages in the life of a new star. Dr Goodfellow was explaining about it as we passed by the other day. Of course it will be thousands, perhaps millions of years before it becomes a star."

"It makes you feel so insignificant, doesn't it," he replied softly.

"Yes," she nodded, "It does, we are here for maybe a few seconds in the life of this star."

In that instant, Buck finally understood. The five hundred years he had lost, the half an millennia he mourned for, were just the blink of an eye in the history of the universe. Whatever events had transpired a few hundred years ago, whatever he had left behind. It would always be important to him but, the ebb and flow of life went on. It was part of the order of the universe. At last he felt able to put the recent events into some perspective.

Hawk had moved to watch the spectacle also. Buck and his friends stayed by the view port in silent awe of the universe unfolding it's secrets. For the first time since the trial Buck felt at peace.

As his companions finally set their course for return to the Searcher, Buck turned to Wilma.

"Colonel I would like my duties to be reinstated as soon as possible."

She smiled, "Glad to have you back with us Captain Rogers."

The End