

G3

Adam Buckley Wright II. Like many men who were named after their father, Adam went by his middle name, or “Buck” in his case. Not that he had anything against his father. His father was a wonderful man who was always there for his family. Things were just too confusing with two “Adams” in the house.

Buck’s father was also a brilliant physicist. He invented the proton drive that made interstellar travel possible. Buck was no slouch when it came to brilliance himself. He had earned two engineering PhDs – Electrical and Mechanical – and now his father’s proton drive was going to propel him to the first interstellar human settlement.

Buck was not the only one creating this colony, of course. Thousands of people within the Space Agency had spent decades working on the project. They sent unmanned reconnaissance spacecraft to hundreds of planets which fell within the so-called “habitable” parameters. Surprisingly, these had found only one suitable candidate. It was a relatively young planet with moderate temperatures, an oxygen/nitrogen atmosphere, and abundant water. It had lush vegetation and a wide variety of animal life, only a few of which could pose a threat to humans. There was no indication of intelligent life, on this planet or on any of the others they’d surveyed. The planet was officially known by a complex set of astral coordinates that identified the galaxy, the star, and how many planets away from the star it was, but it was generally referred to as “G3” because those were the last two characters in these coordinates.

Once G3 was selected as the target, detailed planning and preparations began. Specialized robots were designed and sent to G3 to construct the colony structures, using materials available on G3 whenever possible. One of the drawbacks to the proton drive was that it was only capable of accelerating a small mass to the hyperoptic speeds that were needed for interstellar travel. It was also hideously expensive. Robots had to be made as lightweight as possible, and only components that absolutely could not be made on G3 were flown there. It had taken ten years to construct the colony as a result, and the Space Agency had suspended all manned flights and curtailed many unmanned operations to pay for it.

Buck was one of nine colonists who would travel to G3. The most important colonist, in Buck’s eyes, was his wife Evelyn. They had met in grad school, while Buck was working on his second PhD. Evelyn was working on her medical degree. Their studies and her subsequent internship gave them very little time to socialize, but it didn’t take them long to realize they were made for each other. They were married the week after Evelyn finished her internship. She earned a reputation as a talented surgeon while Buck rose through the ranks in the Space Agency. She joined the Agency when the opportunity to participate in this mission arose, and she earned a postgraduate degree in Biology while becoming the foremost expert on the flora and fauna of G3.

Other colonists who would make the journey were Li Yeung, a civil engineer; Robert Stillman, a geologist; Isaac Patel, an agricultural engineer; Nancy and William O’Brien, computer software specialists; Kofi Akpan, a metallurgist; and Colette Bélanger, a chemist. They had all been chosen for their outstanding skills in critical fields, and they trained together for three years before the mission. In

addition to his technical knowledge, Buck proved to have the best hands-on skills of the group. (In anything that did not involve surgery, that is.) The others jokingly called him the “maintenance man” because he could fix anything that broke in the colony structure, but they realized this would be a critical talent.

Buck and Evelyn were the first to leave the isolation facility and report to the launch pad on the departure day. Evelyn was there because she had won the drawing to be the first traveler, and Buck because he wasn’t about to let anyone launch her without his overseeing it. The physics of the proton drive limited manned flights to one passenger per spacecraft, and the launches were scheduled to depart at one-hour intervals to give the launch facility time to set up for each launch.

Evelyn was understandably excited and a little nervous as they walked through the tunnel to the launch facility.

“Just think,” Buck said. “You’ll be the first human being to set foot on a planet outside our system.” He let this sink in and then added “Don’t worry about saying anything historic. There won’t be anyone there to hear you.”

They held hands as they emerged from the airlock onto the launch pad. A small, cylindrical capsule lay on the launch rail in front of them. The top two-thirds of the cylinder were hinged open, exposing a contoured cushion for the traveler to lie upon. Ken couldn’t help thinking it looked a bit like a coffin. He glanced at Evelyn, and it was obvious she had the same impression. “At least the cushion isn’t light purple,” he said.

Buck was glad to see Ken Davidson was the launch superintendent. Ken was one of the veterans at the Space Agency. He had worked with Buck’s father on some of the first proton launches, and there had never been a problem that Ken couldn’t handle. Ken had just emerged from his own isolation period, not as long as the colonist isolation but long enough to ensure he wouldn’t infect them before launch. No one else was allowed on the launch pad.

Ken had his ever-present smile on his face when he greeted them. “Are you ready?” he asked Evelyn?

Her first attempt at a reply was inaudible, so she cleared her throat and repeated “Yes.” Her voice sounded uncertain, only a little above a whisper, but Ken graciously ignored the doubt in her voice.

“Your chariot awaits!” he said, pointing to the capsule with a grand sweeping gesture.

Evelyn hugged Buck, and then carefully stepped into the capsule and lay down. Ken bent over and fastened three restraining straps across her body. “These are just to keep you in place during zero-G,” he said. “It’s a very smooth ride, and you’ll be sound asleep.”

Ken stepped away from the capsule and Buck leaned over. “I’ll see you on G3, Eve. Look for me about an hour after you arrive.” He kissed her, and then straightened up.

“Ready for a nap?” Ken asked. Evelyn nodded and Ken flipped a switch. Buck watched her body relax, her lips forming the slight, peaceful smile she always wore when she was sound asleep.

“Stand clear,” Ken warned. Buck stepped back and the lid of the capsule hissed closed, the sealing bolts making a slight whine as they burrowed into their sockets.

“Why don’t you come up here with me,” Ken suggested. He was standing on an elevated platform, about six feet above the launch rail. “You’ll get a better view.”

Buck climbed the steps onto the platform. A series of green lights stretched across the panel in front of Ken.

“All primary systems are GO for launch,” Ken said. “Checking backup systems.” He flipped a switch and the lights momentarily went off, coming back green as the backup systems completed their checks. “And we are cleared for launch,” Ken announced. He flipped open a cover and pressed the launch button. The capsule began to glide along the magnetic launch rail, gaining speed as it went. Buck watched it recede in the distance, almost disappearing as it traveled over a mile before the rail gently curved up and ended, launching the capsule into the air. The capsule silently accelerated upward, the eerie blue glow of the proton drive shining from its base. Buck strained to follow it until it completely disappeared against the blue morning sky.

Buck turned his attention to Ken. Ken was already stepping through the checklist for the next launch, activating the machinery that loaded the next capsule onto the launch rail. Buck could hear and feel the generators under the platform winding up, charging the magnetic drive that would propel the capsule down the rail.

“Not like the old days, is it Ken?” Buck asked. Buck barely remembered watching a rocket launch with his father. What he remembered most was how the thunderous noise made his entire body shake, even though they were several miles from the launch pad.

Ken shook his head. “Not at all,” he said. “I launched a few chemical rockets before your dad invented the proton drive. These are a lot better. Not as spectacular as the old ones, though. Nobody comes to watch a launch anymore. Nothing to see.”

“I read somewhere that a few people are losing interest in the space program,” Buck said.

“More than just a few,” Ken answered. “You’ve had your head buried in the briefing books for this mission and probably haven’t kept up with the news. There are a lot of people who say we can’t afford the space program. That we ought spend the money fixing problems here on this planet. I think the problem is that the Agency stopped flying manned missions when they began working on this project. People lost interest. They don’t care about unmanned missions, no matter how much data they send back. They want to see people in space so they can pretend it’s them. If they don’t see people they don’t think they’re getting their money’s worth.”

“We’re about to change that,” Buck said.

“I hope it’s not too late,” Ken answered, still focused on preparing the next launch. “I’d feel a lot better if you guys had a way to come back home.”

“That’s the first thing on our agenda,” Buck said. “Reconnaissance drones have already located the metal deposits we need. We just need to mine it, refine it, and fashion it into a launch rail. Too many unknowns to program the construction robots to do that from here, especially with the comm lag. We need humans on site to analyze the situation and write the code, but we’ll get there.”

“We need bigger spaceships,” Ken said. “Something big enough to carry an entire crew and the supplies they need to go to another planet and come back.”

“Those are coming,” Buck reassured him. “Lots of people are researching proton drives. They’ll find a way to make them bigger.”

Ken frowned. “Your dad worked on it for years, and he couldn’t do it. He was the smartest guy I ever met, and he invented the system.”

Buck stared at the patch of sky where Evelyn had disappeared. “Dad was a genius. But if you look at the history of discoveries you’ll find geniuses usually make one big leap early in their career. They spend the rest of their lives refining that discovery. Dad made a lot of improvements to the proton drive, but he never made the leap that would make the system larger. It will take a young genius to make that leap. There are a lot of young geniuses in the world. One of them will come through.”

Suddenly the door from the command center behind them flew open and the Mission Director burst onto the launch platform. Ken and Buck both stepped back, as the Mission Director was breaking the quarantine by his presence. Buck had never seen him so upset.

“Stop the launches!” he shouted. “How many have you launched? Just the one?”

Ken nodded yes.

“What’s wrong?” Buck asked.

“We’ve lost all contact with G3,” the Director said. “The telemetry data looks like they had a massive earthquake. I don’t want to send anyone else there until we find out what’s happening.” He rushed back through the door.

“Oh my God,” Ken said. He turned and stared at Buck.

“Send me,” Buck said.

“You heard what the Director said. Stop all Launches.”

“It’s not his wife who’s flying to a deserted planet. If they’ve lost contact with G3, she’ll have no way of knowing what’s happening. She won’t know we’re not following her. If the colony structure is still standing, I can get the communications going again and the rest can join us later. If it’s destroyed, she’ll need my help to survive. You’ve got a capsule ready to go. I’ll never get another chance to join her.”

“You won’t be able to come back,” Ken said. “They’re not going to spend billions of dollars and ten years rebuilding the colony. The program was on thin ice to begin with. They’ll make a few speeches about how noble your sacrifice was and then kill the program. You’ll die on G3.”

“I’d rather die with Eve on G3 than live without her back here.”

Ken stared at Buck, his expression twisted with indecision.

“What are they going to do, Ken? Fire you? You’re old enough to retire any time you want.”

Ken’s expression turned resolute. “They won’t fire me,” he grumbled. “They’ll take away my retirement and send me to prison. Get in the capsule.”

Buck opened his eyes and saw Eve bending over him.

“We’ve got to get word to the others!” she said. “The colony’s gone! It’s collapsed.”

“The others aren’t coming,” Buck said as he climbed out of the capsule. “They know already.”

“What???”

“Telemetry data indicated an earthquake just before they lost all contact with the colony.”

Eve stared at Buck in disbelief. “Then . . . I mean . . . if you knew the colony was destroyed, what are you doing here?”

“You think I’d let you explore an exciting new planet all by yourself? You married me for better or worse, and that means we’re gonna share the most exciting adventure of our life. Together.”

Eve’s expression of disbelief dissolved into tears. She wrapped her arms around him and buried her face in his shoulder. “Oh Buck,” she sobbed. “That was the stupidest thing you’ve ever done. You should have stayed behind with the others, but I’m so glad you’re here.”

Buck hugged her tightly to him. They stayed locked in each other's embrace long after she stopped crying. Finally he gently pulled away.

"I don't know what time it is here or when the sun sets, but we probably ought to see if there's anything we can salvage from the colony. With just the one sun, we need to get used to long nights. I'd like to rig up some sort of a shelter before it gets dark."