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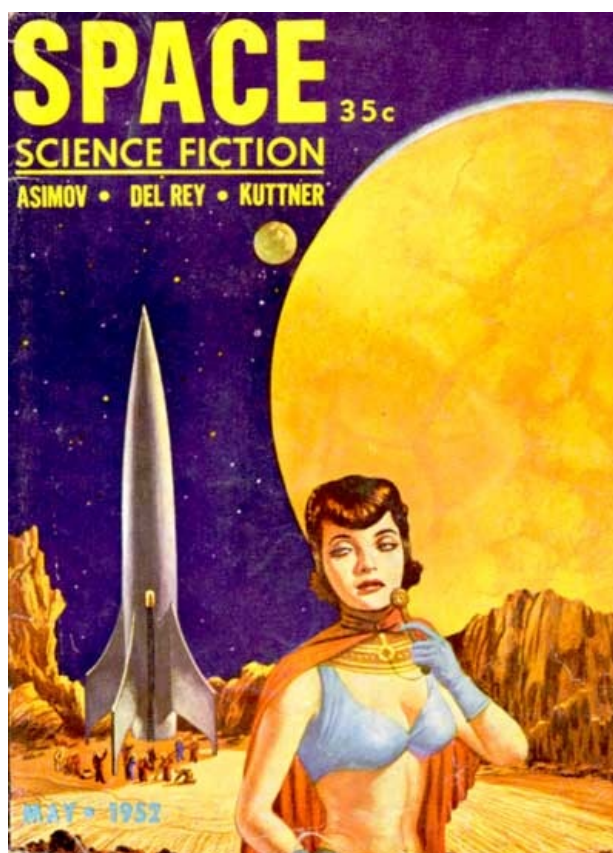
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TO EACH HIS STAR

by BRYCE WALTON

"Nothing around those other suns but ashes and dried blood," old Dunbar told the space-wrecked, desperate men. "Only one way to go, where we can float down through the clouds to Paradise. That's straight ahead to the sun with the red rim around it."

But Dunbar's eyes were old and uncertain. How could they believe in his choice when every star in this forsaken section of space was surrounded by a beckoning red rim?

There was just blackness, frosty glimmering terrible blackness, going out and out forever in all directions. Russell didn't think they could remain sane in all this blackness much longer. Bitterly he thought of how they would die—not knowing within maybe thousands of light years where they were, or where they were going.



After the wreck, the four of them had floated a while, floated and drifted together, four men in bulbous pressure suits like small individual rockets, held together by an awful pressing need for each other and by the "gravity-rope" beam.

Dunbar, the oldest of the four, an old space-buster with a face wrinkled like a dried prune, burned by cosmic rays and the suns of worlds so far away they were scarcely credible, had taken command. Suddenly, Old Dunbar had known where they were. Suddenly, Dunbar knew where they were going.

They could talk to one another through the etheric transmitters inside their helmets. They could live ... if this was living ... a long time, if only a man's brain would hold up, Russell thought. The suits were complete units. 700 pounds each, all enclosing shelters, with atmosphere pressure, temperature control, mobility in space, and electric power. Each suit had its own power-plant, reprocessing continuously the precious air breathed by the occupants, putting it back into circulation again after enriching it. Packed with food concentrates. Each suit a rocket, each human being part of a rocket, and the special "life-gun" that went with each suit each blast of which sent a man a few hundred thousand miles further on toward wherever he was going.

Four men, thought Russell, held together by an invisible string of gravity, plunging through a lost pocket of hell's dark where there had never been any sound or life, with old Dunbar the first in line, taking the lead because he was older and knew where he was and where he was going. Maybe Johnson, second in line, and Alvar who was third, knew too, but were afraid to admit it.

But Russell knew it and he'd admitted it from the first—that old Dunbar was as crazy as a Jovian juke-bird.

A lot of time had rushed past into darkness. Russell had no idea now how long the four of them had been plunging toward the red-rimmed sun that never seemed to get any nearer. When the ultra-drive had gone crazy the four of them had blanked out and nobody could say now how long an interim that had been. Nobody knew what happened to a man who suffered a space-time warping like that. When they had regained consciousness, the ship was pretty banged up, and the meteor-repeller shields cracked. A meteor ripped the ship down the center like an old breakfast cannister.

How long ago that had been, Russell didn't know. All Russell knew was that they were millions of light years from any place he had ever heard about, where the galactic space lanterns had absolutely no recognizable pattern. But Dunbar knew. And Russell was looking at Dunbar's suit up ahead, watching it more and more intently, thinking about how Dunbar looked inside that suit—and hating Dunbar more and more for claiming he knew when he didn't, for his drooling optimism—because he was taking them on into deeper darkness and calling their destination Paradise.

Russell wanted to laugh, but the last time he'd given way to this impulse, the results inside his helmet had been too unpleasant to repeat.

Sometimes Russell thought of other things besides his growing hatred of the old man. Sometimes

he thought about the ship, lost back there in the void, and he wondered if wrecked space ships were ever found. Compared with the universe in which one of them drifted, a wrecked ship was a lot smaller than a grain of sand on a nice warm beach back on Earth, or one of those specks of silver dust that floated like strange seeds down the night winds of Venus.

And a human was smaller still, thought Russell when he was not hating Dunbar. Out here, a human being is the smallest thing of all. He thought then of what Dunbar would say to such a thought, how Dunbar would laugh that high piping squawking laugh of his and say that the human being was bigger than the Universe itself.

Dunbar had a big answer for every little thing.

When the four of them had escaped from that prison colony on a sizzling hot asteroid rock in the Ronlwhyn system, that wasn't enough for Dunbar. Hell no—Dunbar had to start talking about a place they could go where they'd never be apprehended, in a system no one else had ever heard of, where they could live like gods on a green soft world like the Earth had been a long time back.

And Dunbar had spouted endlessly about a world of treasure they would find, if they would just follow old Dunbar. That's what all four of them had been trying to find all their lives in the big cold grabbag of eternity—a rich star, a rich far fertile star where no one else had ever been, loaded with treasure that had no name, that no one had ever heard of before. And was, because of that, the richest treasure of all.

We all look alike out here in these big rocket pressure suits, Russell thought. No one for God only knew how many of millions of light years away could see or care. Still—we might have a chance to live, even now, Russell thought—if it weren't for old crazy Dunbar.

They might have a chance if Alvar and Johnson weren't so damn lacking in self-confidence as to put all their trust in that crazed old rum-dum. Russell had known now for some time that they were going in the wrong direction. No reason for knowing. Just a hunch. And Russell was sure his hunch was right.

Russell said. "Look—look to your left and to your right and behind us. Four suns. You guys see those other three suns all around you, don't you?"

"Sure," someone said.

"Well, if you'll notice," Russell said, "the one on the left also now has a red rim around it. Can't you guys see that?"

"Yeah, I see it," Alvar said.

"So now," Johnson said, "there's two suns with red rims around them."

"We're about in the middle of those four suns aren't we, Dunbar?" Russell said.

"That's right, boys!" yelled old Dunbar in that sickeningly optimistic voice. Like a hysterical old woman's. "Just about in the sweet dark old middle."

"You're still sure it's the sun up ahead ... that's the only one with life on it, Dunbar ... the only one we can live on?" Russell asked.

"That's right! That's right," Dunbar yelled. "That's the only one—and it's a paradise. Not just a place to live, boys—but a place you'll have trouble believing in because it's like a dream!"

"And none of these other three suns have worlds we could live on, Dunbar?" Russell asked. Keep the old duck talking like this and maybe Alvar and Johnson would see that he was cracked.

"Yeah," said Alvar. "You still say that, Dunbar?"

"No life, boys, nothing," Dunbar laughed. "Nothing on these other worlds but ashes ... just ashes and iron and dried blood, dried a million years or more."

"When in hell were you ever here?" Johnson said. "You say you were here before. You never said when, or why or anything!"

"It was a long time back boys. Don't remember too well, but it was when we had an old ship called the DOG STAR that I was here. A pirate ship and I was second in command, and we came through this sector. That was—hell, it musta' been fifty years ago. I been too many places nobody's ever bothered to name or chart, to remember where it is, but I been here. I remember those four suns all spotted to form a perfect circle from this point, with us squarely in the middle. We explored all these suns and the worlds that go round 'em. Trust me, boys, and we'll reach the right one. And that one's just like Paradise."

"Paradise is it," Russell whispered hoarsely.

"Paradise and there we'll be like gods, like Mercuries with wings flying on nights of sweet song. These other suns, don't let them bother you. They're Jezebels of stars. All painted up in the darkness and pretty and waiting and calling and lying! They make you think of nice green worlds all running waters and dews and forests thick as fleas on a wet dog. But it ain't there, boys. I

know this place. I been here, long time back."

Russell said tightly. "It'll take us a long time won't it? If it's got air we can breath, and water we can drink and shade we can rest in—that'll be paradise enough for us. But it'll take a long time won't it? And what if it isn't there—what if after all the time we spend hoping and getting there—there won't be nothing but ashes and cracked clay?"

"I know we're going right," Dunbar said cheerfully. "I can tell. Like I said—you can tell it because of the red rim around it."

"But the sun on our left, you can see—it's got a red rim too now," Russell said.

"Yeah, that's right," said Alvar. "Sometimes I see a red rim around the one we're going for, sometimes a red rim around that one on the left. Now, sometimes I'm not sure either of them's got a red rim. You said that one had a red rim, Dunbar, and I wanted to believe it. So now maybe we're all seeing a red rim that was never there."

Old Dunbar laughed. The sound brought blood hotly to Russell's face. "We're heading to the right one, boys. Don't doubt me ... I been here. We explored all these sun systems. And I remember it all. The second planet from that red-rimmed sun. You come down through a soft atmosphere, floating like in a dream. You see the green lakes coming up through the clouds and the women dancing and the music playing. I remember seeing a ship there that brought those women there, a long long time before ever I got there. A land like heaven and women like angels singing and dancing and laughing with red lips and arms white as milk, and soft silky hair floating in the winds."

Russell was very sick of the old man's voice. He was at least glad he didn't have to look at the old man now. His bald head, his skinny bobbing neck, his simpering watery blue eyes. But he still had to suffer that immutable babbling, that idiotic cheerfulness ... and knowing all the time the old man was crazy, that he was leading them wrong.

I'd break away, go it alone to the right sun, Russell thought—but I'd never make it alone. A little while out here alone and I'd be nuttier than old Dunbar will ever be, even if he keeps on getting nuttier all the time.

Somewhere, sometime then ... Russell got the idea that the only way was to get rid of Dunbar.

"You mean to tell us there are people living by that red-rimmed sun," Russell said.

"Lost people ... lost ... who knows how long," Dunbar said, as the four of them hurtled along. "You never know where you'll find people on a world somewhere nobody's ever named or knows about. Places where a lost ship's landed and never got up again, or wrecked itself so far off the lanes they'll never be found except by accident for millions of years. That's what this world is, boys. Must have been a ship load of beautiful people, maybe actresses and people like that being hauled to some outpost to entertain. They're like angels now, living in a land all free from care. Every place you see green forests and fields and blue lakes, and at nights there's three moons that come around the sky in a thousand different colors. And it never gets cold ... it's always spring, always spring, boys, and the music plays all night, every night of a long long year...."

Russell suddenly shouted. "Keep quiet, Dunbar. Shut up will you?"

Johnson said. "Dunbar—how long'll it take us?"

"Six months to a year, I'd say," Dunbar yelled happily. "That is—of our hereditary time."

"What?" croaked Alvar.

Johnson didn't say anything at all.

Russell screamed at Dunbar, then quieted down. He whispered. "Six months to a year—out here—cooped up in these damn suits. You're crazy as hell, Dunbar. Crazy ... crazy! Nobody could stand it. We'll all be crazier than you are—"

"We'll make it, boys. Trust ole' Dunbar. What's a year when we know we're getting to Paradise at the end of it? What's a year out here ... it's paradise ain't it, compared with that prison hole we were rotting in? We can make it. We have the food concentrates, and all the rest. All we need's the will, boys, and we got that. The whole damn Universe isn't big enough to kill the will of a human being, boys. I been over a whole lot of it, and I know. In the old days—"

"The hell with the old days," screamed Russell.

"Now quiet down, Russ," Dunbar said in a kind of dreadful crooning whisper. "You calm down now. You younger fellows—you don't look at things the way we used to. Thing is, we got to go straight. People trapped like this liable to start meandering. Liable to start losing the old will-power."

He chuckled.

"Yeah," said Alvar. "Someone says maybe we ought to go left, and someone says to go right, and someone else says to go in another direction. And then someone says maybe they'd better go back the old way. An' pretty soon something breaks, or the food runs out, and you're a million million miles from someplace you don't care about any more because you're dead. All frozen up in space ... preserved like a piece of meat in a cold storage locker. And then maybe in a million years or so some lousy insect man from Jupiter comes along and finds you and takes you away to a museum...."

"Shut up!" Johnson yelled.

Dunbar laughed. "Boys, boys, don't get panicky. Keep your heads. Just stick to old Dunbar and he'll see you through. I'm always lucky. Only one way to go ... an' that's straight ahead to the sun with the red-rim around it ... and then we tune in the gravity repellors, and coast down, floating and singing down through the clouds to paradise."

After that they traveled on for what seemed months to Russell, but it couldn't have been over a day or two of the kind of time-sense he had inherited from Earth.

Then he saw how the other two stars also were beginning to develop red rims. He yelled this fact out to the others. And Alvar said. "Russ's right. That sun to the right, and the one behind us ... now they ALL have red rims around them. Dunbar—" A pause and no awareness of motion.

Dunbar laughed. "Sure, they all maybe have a touch of red, but it isn't the same, boys. I can tell the difference. Trust me—"

Russell half choked on his words. "You old goat! With those old eyes of yours, you couldn't see your way into a fire!"

"Don't get panicky now. Keep your heads. In another year, we'll be there—"

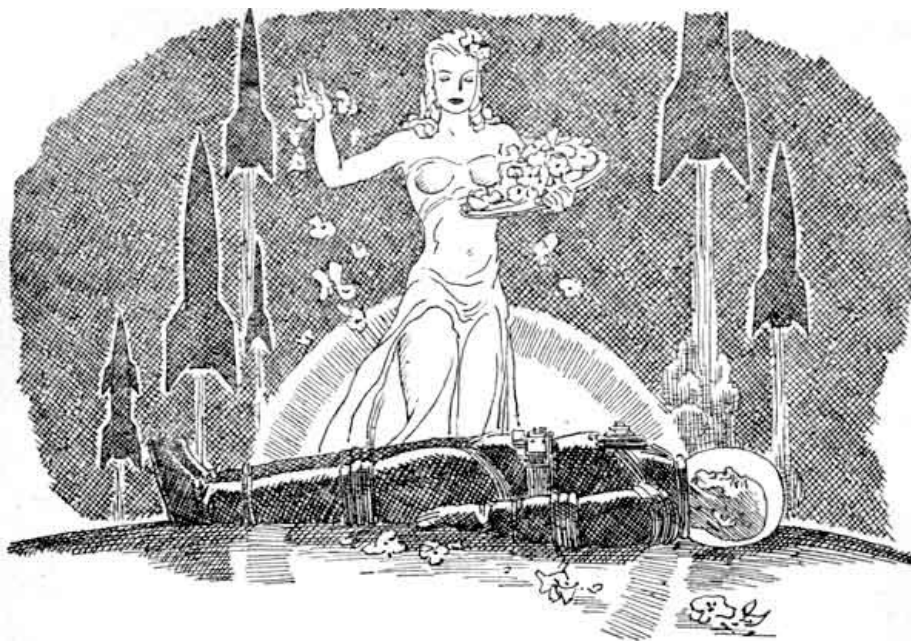
"God, you gotta' be sure," Alvar said. "I don't mind dyin' out here. But after a year of this, and then to get to a world that was only ashes, and not able to go any further—"

"I always come through, boys. I'm lucky. Angel women will take us to their houses on the edges of cool lakes, little houses that sit there in the sun like fancy jewels. And we'll walk under colored fountains, pretty colored fountains just splashing and splashing like pretty rain on our hungry hides. That's worth waiting for."

Russell did it before he hardly realized he was killing the old man. It was something he had had to do for a long time and that made it easy. There was a flash of burning oxygen from inside the suit of Dunbar. If he'd aimed right, Russell knew the fire-bullet should have pierced Dunbar's back. Now the fire was gone, extinguished automatically by units inside the suit. The suit was still inflated, self-sealing. Nothing appeared to have changed. The four of them hurtling on together, but inside that first suit up there on the front of the gravity rope, Dunbar was dead.

He was dead and his mouth was shut for good.

Dunbar's last faint cry from inside his suit still rang in Russell's ears, and he knew Alvar and Johnson had heard it too. Alvar and Johnson both called Dunbar's name a few times. There was no answer.



"Russ—you shouldn't have done that," Johnson whispered. "You shouldn't have done that to the old man!"

"No," Alvar said, so low he could barely be heard. "You shouldn't have done it."

"I did it for the three of us," Russell said. "It was either him or us. Lies ... lies that was all he had left in his crazy head. Paradise ... don't tell me you guys don't see the red rims around all four

suns, all four suns all around us. Don't tell me you guys didn't know he was batty, that you really believed all that stuff he was spouting all the time!"

"Maybe he was lying, maybe not," Johnson said. "Now he's dead anyway."

"Maybe he was wrong, crazy, full of lies," Alvar said. "But now he's dead."

"How could he see any difference in those four stars?" Russell said, louder.

"He thought he was right," Alvar said. "He wanted to take us to paradise. He was happy, nothing could stop the old man—but he's dead now."

He sighed.

"He was taking us wrong ... wrong!" Russell screamed. "Angels—music all night—houses like jewels—and women like angels—"

"*Shhhh*," said Alvar. It was quiet. How could it be so quiet, Russell thought? And up ahead the old man's pressure suit with a corpse inside went on ahead, leading the other three at the front of the gravity-rope.

"Maybe he was wrong," Alvar said. "But now do we know which way is right?"

Sometime later, Johnson said, "We got to decide now. Let's forget the old man. Let's forget him and all that's gone and let's start now and decide what to do."

And Alvar said, "Guess he was crazy all right, and I guess we trusted him because we didn't have the strength to make up our own minds. Why does a crazy man's laugh sound so good when you're desperate and don't know what to do?"

"I always had a feeling we were going wrong," Johnson said. "Anyway, it's forgotten, Russ. It's swallowed up in the darkness all around. It's never been."

Russell said, "I've had a hunch all along that maybe the old man was here before, and that he was right about there being a star here with a world we can live on. But I've known we was heading wrong. I've had a hunch all along that the right star was the one to the left."

"I don't know," Johnson sighed. "I been feeling partial toward that one on the right. What about you, Alvar?"

"I always thought we were going straight in the opposite direction from what we should, I guess. I always wanted to turn around and go back. It won't make over maybe a month's difference. And what does a month matter anyway out here—hell there never was any time out here until we came along. We make our own time here, and a month don't matter to me."

Sweat ran down Russell's face. His voice trembled. "No—that's wrong. You're both wrong." He could see himself going it alone. Going crazy because he was alone. He'd have broken away, gone his own direction, long ago but for that fear.

"How can we tell which of us is right?" Alvar said. "It's like everything was changing all the time out here. Sometimes I'd swear none of those suns had red rims, and at other times—like the old man said, they're all pretty and lying and saying nothing, just changing all the time. Jezebel stars, the old man said."

"I know I'm right," Russell pleaded. "My hunches always been right. My hunch got us out of that prison didn't it? Listen—I tell you it's that star to the left—"

"The one to the right," said Johnson.

"We been going away from the right one all the time," said Alvar.

"We got to stay together," said Russell. "Nobody could spend a year out here ... alone...."

"Ah ... in another month or so we'd be lousy company anyway," Alvar said. "Maybe a guy could get to the point where he'd sleep most of the time ... just wake up enough times to give himself another boost with the old life-gun."

"We got to face it," Johnson said finally. "We three don't go on together any more."

"That's it," said Alvar. "There's three suns that look like they might be right seeing as how we all agree the old man was wrong. But we believe there is one we can live by, because we all seem to agree that the old man might have been right about that. If we stick together, the chance is three to one against us. But if each of us makes for one star, one of us has a chance to live. Maybe not in paradise like the old man said, but a place where we can live. And maybe there'll be intelligent life, maybe even a ship, and whoever gets the right star can come and help the other two...."

"No ... God no...." Russell whispered over and over. "None of us can ever make it alone...."

Alvar said, "We each take the star he likes best. I'll go back the other way. Russ, you take the left. And you, Johnson, go to the right."

Johnson started to laugh. Russell was yelling wildly at them, and above his own yelling he could hear Johnson's rising laughter. "Every guy's got a star of his own," Johnson said when he stopped laughing. "And we got ours. A nice red-rimmed sun for each of us to call his very own."

"Okay," Alvar said. "We cut off the gravity rope, and each to his own sun."

Now Russell wasn't saying anything.

"And the old man," Alvar said, "can keep right on going toward what he thought was right. And he'll keep on going. Course he won't be able to give himself another boost with the life-gun, but he'll keep going. Someday he'll get to that red-rimmed star of his. Out here in space, once you're going, you never stop ... and I guess there isn't any other body to pull him off his course. And what will time matter to old Dunbar? Even less than to us, I guess. He's dead and he won't care."

"Ready," Johnson said. "I'll cut off the gravity rope."

"I'm ready," Alvar said. "To go back toward whatever it was I started from."

"Ready, Russ?"

Russell couldn't say anything. He stared at the endless void which now he would share with no one. Not even crazy old Dunbar.

"All right," Johnson said. "Good-bye."

Russell felt the release, felt the sudden inexplicable isolation and aloneness even before Alvar and Johnson used their life-guns and shot out of sight, Johnson toward the left and Alvar back toward that other red-rimmed sun behind them.

And old Dunbar shooting right on ahead. And all three of them dwindling and dwindling and blinking out like little lights.

Fading, he could hear their voices. "Each to his own star," Johnson said. "On a bee line."

"On a bee line," Alvar said.

Russell used his own life-gun and in a little while he didn't hear Alvar or Johnson's voices, nor could he see them. They were thousands of miles away, and going further all the time.

Russell's head fell forward against the front of his helmet, and he closed his eyes. "Maybe," he thought, "I shouldn't have killed the old man. Maybe one sun's as good as another...."

Then he raised his body and looked out into the year of blackness that waited for him, stretching away to the red-rimmed sun. Even if he were right—he was sure now he'd never make it alone.

The body inside the pressure suit drifted into a low-level orbit around the second planet from the sun of its choice, and drifted there a long time. A strato-cruiser detected it by chance because of the strong concentration of radio-activity that came from it.

They took the body down to one of the small, quiet towns on the edge of one of the many blue lakes where the domed houses were like bright joyful jewels. They got the leathery, well-preserved body from the pressure suit.

"An old man," one of them mused. "A very old man. From one of the lost sectors. I wonder how and why he came so very far from his home?"

"Wrecked a ship out there, probably," one of the others said. "But he managed to get this far. It looks as though a small meteor fragment pierced his body. Here. You see?"

"Yes," another of them said. "But what amazes me is that this old man picked this planet out of all the others. The only one in this entire sector that would sustain life."

"Maybe he was just a very lucky old man. Yes ... a man who attains such an age was usually lucky. Or at least that is what they say about the lost sectors."

"Maybe he knew the way here. Maybe he was here before—sometime."

The other shook his head. "I don't think so. They say some humans from that far sector did land here—but that's probably only a myth. And if they did, it was well over a thousand years ago."

Another said. "He has a fine face, this old man. A noble face. Whoever he is ... wherever he came from, he died bravely and he knew the way, though he never reached this haven of the lost alive."

"Nor is it irony that he reached here dead," said the Lake Chieftain. He had been listening and he stepped forward and raised his arm. "He was old. It is obvious that he fought bravely, that he had great courage, and that he knew the way. He will be given a burial suitable to his stature, and he will rest here among the brave."

"Let the women dance and the music play for this old man. Let the trumpets speak, and the rockets fly up. And let flowers be strewn over the path above which the women will carry him to rest."

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