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The Magazine of Prophetic Fiction



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ON THE COVER: *Painting by Rudolph Belarski depicts a scene from BEYOND THE VORTEX, by Frank Belknap Long.*

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Read our Companion Science Fiction Magazine—**STARTLING STORIES**



Kurt Langer saw Magda reaching for him as fast as the gravity of Mongrovia would permit

# MONGROVIAN CARAVAN

By RICHARD TOOKER

*On a Far-Off Planet, Kurt Langer Strives Against Fearful Odds for a Cargo of Precious Lunite—and a Woman's Love!*

**T**HE lusty bass voice of oxygen-suited Gimp Halley reached Kurt Langer's ears through the tiny radio receiver inside the glass-eyed globe of his helmet.

"All clear ahead! Give 'em the light."

Langer looked dubiously down the long, jagged incline of alien black rocks, between steep, knife-edged ridges.

"Okay," he answered without conviction. "Here we go! Look out for trouble where that gulch cuts in about halfway down. Those stick-men will be dying of thirst for

Terran blood after that last pasting we gave 'em."

One armored hand flicked the lever-control of the black light unit suspended under the oxygen tank from Kurt Langer's belt. The invisible rays shone back at the photo-electric "eye" of the leading tank-like carrier behind him. Instantly, the ten caterpillar-treaded vehicles moved forward and down the rocky slope. The carrier's sensitive tracks adjusted themselves automatically to inequalities of surface. Those of the ten, not receiving

enough of the rays from Langer's back-belt unit, were led by relayed beam from the one just ahead of them in the train. They followed the black light beam like so many well trained pack-horses.

All ten of the carriers were loaded to capacity with the precious, heavier-than-mercury lunite, gleaned from rare and guarded deposits on the huge second planet of the Alpha Centauri system. Mongrovia, they'd named the world, after Norden Mongrove, the great explorer of the 21st century.

Electro-magnetic telescoping had vastly revised earthman's lens-measured estimates of space distances while arthile, the powerful and controllable rocket-explosive had given him meteor wings. The two had made possible the flight to the nearest star system in little more than a year. Two years of a space-man's life for a round trip, if he survived.

Langer looked back, turning slowly, burdened not only by his oxygen suit, but by the ponderous gravity of the planet. A conscientious boss of his pogies, as the space-men called the latest in pack-trains, he saw an almost human individuality in the compact, little "tanks" that to the casual observer would look precisely alike.

A young veteran of stellar venture like Kurt Langer, found each pogie bore scars and dents that were sentimental mementoes. Moreover, a pogie had internal peculiarities that gave it personality. Variations in the delicate, but heavily armored, mechanisms accounted for this. They were robot machines, with more than canine intelligence.

**L**ANGER muttered as the lead carrier negotiated the end of a black boulder, streaked with gleaming crystal. He grinned as the lead pogie toppled perilously, then with a human-like lurch, caused by the shifting of the gyroscopic balancers, regained equilibrium.

One hand poised to cut the black light switch if necessary to avoid an accident, Langer watched his robot packers negotiate the offending boulder, one by one. Next to the last were over, rolling on sturdily, before a mishap threatened.

"It would have to be you, Lordamighty," Langer murmured as the pogie hesitated, hummed loudly, jerked, and then with an odd variation in the self-adjusting units, sidled around the boulder like a huge turtle, instead of climbing over.

Gimp Halley's sudden warning brought Langer to a halt again. He switched off the

pogie-control, the train stopping simultaneously tipped up at apparently perilous angles. Some of them, their gyroscope stabilizers prevented their falling.

"I don't like it, skipper." Halley's radioed voice vibrated with concern. As navigator for Kurt Langer's freighter rocketeer Minute, Gimp Halley took his duties super-seriously. Scouting for the savage stick-men near the lunite deposits was out of his line. But Gimp Halley never complained of duty.

"Can you really see any?" Langer transmitted. His belt dial was on zero for all close communications by radio. His lean, sharply-chiseled face, nested in the huge helmet, looked a trifle pinched and effeminate, although Langer wasn't in the least.

On the contrary, Kurt Langer was wiry, quick of physique, brain balanced and actually surpassed the ox-like hugeness of his navigator.

"You're too darn big and slow for a space-man, Gimp," Langer had told his man once with a disarming frankness, "but you're honest and loyal. I can depend on you. That's worth a lot out where the unexpected always happens!"

"I think you're right about that gulch," Gimp Halley acknowledged now. "Wait till I see for sure."

He moved on with the slow, draggy pace that was about all an earth-man could manage against the terrific load of Mongrovia gravity, compounded by oxygen paraphernalia, not to mention the extra-armored suits required to protect them from the stick-men's puncturing darts.

All around them, as Kurt waited intently, the uneroded hills of Mongrovia rose up forbiddingly, under an atmosphere so thin that humans could not survive in it. Above, a reddish sky weltered down, presided over by the two majestic orbs of the Alpha Centauri binary. At vast distances the stars would seem as one. Three daylight moons were visible, actually sister planets of Mongrovia.

Kurt Langer felt a stinging reaction to the scene as he fingered the small, camera-like machine-gun which hung about his neck on a slender, metal cord. A nostalgia, too, for far-away Terra that was akin to the dread space sickness. He was lonely for a certain pair of blue eyes.

For the first time in days, weeks, months of strain he felt weak and futile against the endless obstacles of the infinite. He had to recall stoically the motive for his being here to stiffen his will, fight off the nausea and numbness of rationed oxygen.

"You can't really see those sticks against that black and crystal rock," Halley radioed back, anxiously. "Sometimes I see a hundred and then I think I'm seeing things."

"You'll be seeing things all right whichever way it is," Langer answered, waiting methodically.

They had killed a hundred or more of the "sticks" in two brushes with them since loading the last pogie at a lunite deposit. But the Mongrovians propagated like ants and were just as tenacious and persistent in the battle for survival. The more they killed, the more gathered to attack from far and near.

These tall, spectral creatures resembled giant walking-stick insects. Dull, lead-colored bodies blended well with backgrounds. Small, pointed heads, bearing huge eye clusters on either side, made them look like men, though their posture standing was but half erect. Earth scientists had studied them with scant results beyond empirical observations. They learned what, but not why.

The "sticks" were man-like in their use of a slightly mechanical weapon, the throwing or sling-stick. They aided one another gregariously and apparently had means of communicating with each other.

They lived in the myriad crevices of the planet on a microscopic amount of water, and fed apparently almost solely on the deposits of lunite, which they defended from the inroads of the Terrans with the blind fury of maddened hornets.

**I**T WAS apparent that the sticks were not affected by the gravity of their native planet as earthmen were. They were many times as strong and active for their weight on Mongrovia as a Terran. One of many forms of life revealed by stellar discovery, they defied final analysis by human five-sensed intelligence.

Gimp Halley's machine-gun now began chattering its faintly audible death song. Langer fired a burst at a faintly discernible movement above him in the rocks. The thin atmosphere carried only a little of the ripping explosive sound waves. Rocks blew into dust-like fragments, as two stick-men vanished.

"Hold it," Langer directed. "We haven't any rolls to waste. Wait till you can get 'em in a row, Gimp."

Faintly audible from the gored and tumbled ridges above them, indicating that the gulch wasn't the only danger zone, their mechanical "ears" detected the excited, code-like

clickings or stridulations by which the stick-men of Mongrovia were believed to communicate.

"Ek, ek . . . ek, ek, ek . . ."

A moment more, the earthmen waited, listening, when Halley called suddenly, "Look-out, here they come!"

A chorus of piercing shrieks, incredibly high-pitched, and the dark rocks seemed flowing down upon them in a squirming mass that sprouted skeletal arms, legs and bulbed heads. A hail of glittering missiles rained down on them, some sticking a moment in the woven metal of the oxygen-suit armor.

Langer did not wince or try to dodge. He and Halley shuttered their deadly "cameras" in twin arcs that left a perfect circle of annihilation. Little heaps of fragments formed about them, bits of the stick-men that had escaped "dusting."

"That'll hold 'em a bit," Langer said with satisfaction. "It will take an hour for another bunch like that to come in."

The eerie ek, ek, ek of the sticks that still survived in the rock crannies higher up reached their ears faintly. "A lot of business we've got murdering them for taking their grub," Gimp Halley muttered.

Kurt Langer grinned as he heard the faint transmission on Halley's zero adjustment.

"Don't worry, Gimp, we're the ducks this time, and they've already had some pot shots at us. Get busy and look for punctures."

The steel-hard darts thrown with surprising force by the stick-men, by means of rods about four feet long, were a natural phenomenon of the surface formations on Mongrovia. The darts appeared in fields like volcanic spicules. Most of them did not even adhere to the armor-textured oxygen suits. But others, sharper, harder-thrown, penetrated the leak-proof inner lining of the suits.

Still all would be well if the dart did not chance to have a hollow point, as some did.

The hollow point prevented the leakproof lining from healing the hole completely, and precious oxygen began to leak out under pressure of the tanks.

What was still worse, in case of a puncture, it was very difficult to locate it without removing the oxygen-suit. This could not be done in Mongrovia atmosphere. Time was of the essence, too, of a gauntlet-running for a cargo of lunite. No one could waste valuable oxygen while looking for dart tips that were like needles in haystacks.

"I wonder if those devils know that their darts are the worst enemy we have on Mon-

grovia," Gimp Halley grumbled.

"It sometimes looks as if they did," Kurt Langer replied. "But if they're so smart, why don't they pick all hollow-point darts, or all darts whose points will break off so we can't find 'em?"

"I guess they're just good by accident," Halley rumbled. "Like me, when I am good at anything."

A slight dizziness caused by the oxygen variation of his tank mixture set wings to Kurt Langer's fancy. Magda Bashen, nurse-medico, would be waiting when, and if, he returned from this trip.

Langer doubted if he'd have started the pilgrimage to the space-man's Mecca at his tender age of twenty-six if it hadn't been for Magda and smoke getting in his eyes. He could see her now even more clearly, it seemed, than on that last day almost a year ago.

"I could never marry a space-man who hadn't tried for a cargo of lunite from Mongrovia," she had said, hotly.

"You wouldn't marry one who tried and failed," Langer had replied. "They don't come back if they fail. It's one in ten or so by the last figures, isn't it? Who's out now?"

"One in ten come back, Kurt, but it's worth it, and if you want to know who's out now you can look at the register the same as I. A cargo of lunite will save a thousand lives on earth. It's the greatest curative discovered anywhere, any time."

"I know, Magda," Langer had continued. "I've always planned to make my try naturally, but I'm young yet. They usually do it at about thirty-five, and the Minute's a small ship for that fight."

"You want me first," she taunted. "After that I can be a widow any time."

Slow to rile, Kurt Langer burned a long time when lit. He had leaped up furiously, "That's enough, girl! I'm leaving for Mongrovia tomorrow at noon, if my crew will stick for that trip. If they don't, well, I'll get another crew."

"And I'm going with you," Magda announced serenely.

"Don't make me laugh," he had slammed out angrily.

**K**URT LANGER, had burned all the way to the hangar of his rocketeer the Minute. This was the ship he had saved so long to buy for his very own to go adventuring off the better known skyways of the void. Magda would probably

marry Lon Wilks if he didn't come back.

She had liked Lon a lot before she met him. Not that Magda Bashen couldn't have any man she wanted. Brains and buxomness were combined in Magda. She was considered one of the best nurse-medicos of the day, at a time when women were leading men a shade as all-around doctors. But she had a penchant for space-men, especially space-men who brought back the precious lunite from Mongrovia.

Old Art Delos, his engineer, had been secretly longing for his chance at Mongrovia before he was retired. Gimp Halley's wish had ever been one with his skipper's. They had trimmed off for projection at noon the next day, having fueled for two years to be spent in the void. Magda had come just before they left with that silly idea of going with him.

"I've always intended to go, Kurt," she said. "I've been promised the two year absence by the hospital faculty for a long time and now I've earned it."

"No," he'd turned her down rather cavalierly, "you can't buy yourself off like that. Anyway, you're needed here as much as a cargo of lunite. If I don't come back, good luck, Mrs. Wilks!"

That had cooked her. She had hurled something like, "I'll go anyway and you'll be sorry!" at him, and stalked off with her chin in the air like the queen she would always be in his heart.

"Guess I've got a puncture I can't find," Gimp's radioed report brought Kurt back to the present with a jolt. "I'm using oxy a sight too fast for my peace of mind."

Kurt Langer lumbered up and studied Halley's gauge. They didn't have time to look very long for punctures. "You've got enough oxy to last if you ride a pogie the rest of the way back to the Minute," Langer said. "As soon as you begin to feel faint I'll unload one for you."

"The same as letting a couple of hundred people die back home," Halley replied, ruefully. "That lunite is worth more than my carcass any day."

"Not if we lost all of it," Langer announced flatly. "Anyhow, I'd unload the whole darn train right here before I'd leave you to die."

Halley's huge, bulbous form seemed to stiffen at its living core as he tramped off heavily ahead of the pogie train. "Come on," he growled, "I'm okay."

The wormlike line of pogies surged forward obediently as Kurt Langer flicked the

black, light-switch guide on again. The armor of the pogies was too thick to be penetrated by darts. A rear guard was unnecessary with the helmet rear view mirrors to see that no adequate number of stick-men tipped one over.

What accounted for most of the disasters on Mongrovia, provided a ship survived the meteor belts and other perils of the twelve-month projection, were the cursed darts of the stick-men. With their long, sectional arms, these creatures could manipulate a throwing stick like a sling, loosing the missile at the instant of greatest initial velocity.

This was done by means of a cunningly fashioned trip that defied clear analysis by Terran science. After the darts were fended off or spent, if the camera guns failed to stop all the stick-men, those same throwing sticks became murderous spears to gouge holes in the oxygen suits and end another expedition in tragedy.

It was usually finis when the stick-men attacked in sufficient numbers to break through the explosive bullet defense. Ammunition drums ran out, and oxygen tanks could not fill themselves. Always one must be limited in supplies on such expeditions. Every move on Mongrovia was an effort for a Terran. It took more oxygen to get around. It took more of everything, especially courage.

Space-men who started on the "pilgrimage" to Mongrovia expected to die. It was a sort of space-man's Valhalla. Those who went there were consecrated to the cause of relief for human suffering, which had grown more serious a problem as Earthmen grew older in evolution, developed neuroses unsuspected in the earlier epochs.

Mongrovia lunite had become a tradition, and the space-man who died before his attempt to bring back a cargo of lunite was like a Christian dying unbaptized.

"Delos calling, Delos calling. . ."

It was the quarter hour signal for the routine broadcast from the Minute for report and check-up. The Minute lay, after her perilous landing, about five miles away. It might as well have been fifty in that gravity and over such riven terrain.

"Okay, Art," Kurt Langer dialed the Minute. "Gimp seems to have a puncture, but he's still up. If he goes down, I'll unload a pogie for him and he'll have enough to keep him alive without exertion until we get back to you."

"Everything jake here," Delos transmitted. "Lot of sticks around, but I can handle 'em with the batteries."

"I wish we had your armor," Kurt said and dialed back to zero. He could now be contacted only by a code signal from the Minute.

**Y**OUNG Kurt Langer considered again how his luck had been neither good nor bad in landing on Mongrovia near a lunite deposit big enough to fill his cargo hold to capacity. He just hadn't been too far from several small deposits quickly located by specially constructed detectors. Most of the one-in-tenners who survived the expedition had made a lucky landing very near a deposit. They told their grandchildren about it. Others on the other hand, searched for a despairing length of time, with oxygen dwindling. The space-man who returned alive and luniteless might better have tied a rocket around his neck and shot himself sunward.

The brand of Cain would be upon him. Cruising Mongrovia in a rocketeer, looking for lunite from above, was out of the question. Barely enough fuel could be carried to fight out of that gravity after one landing on it.

Ek, ek, ek! The sticks were at it again, their numbers thickening as they rallied for another attack from the rock crevices above. Gimp Halley had stumbled and swayed. He could barely raise his feet.

"Better take the count," Kurt radioed.

A gurgle responded from Halley's helmet as he went down to his knees, tried to rise, then collapsed on his face. Mongrovia gravity got a man quick when his oxygen content thinned a bit. Kurt Langer stopped the pogies and walked up to Halley. The gauge showed barely enough for survival-pressure without exertion. Through the helmet window, his face glowed up, ruddy, round, beaded with sweat, eyes agonized, mouth open, panting.

Langer checked the oxygen suit briefly. No break visible. Only stretched on the repair rack on board the Minute could they hope to find the tiny hollow point, or points, that prevented the leakproof lining from closing.

Kurt Langer flashed his black light beam and brought up the pogies. Ten pogie loads of lunite would beat a twenty year record, and he wanted all there was in this. But even nine loads would rank him with the three top men.

A few twirls of a combination lock in the round top, and the leading carrier opened like a huge beetle spreading its wings. In-

side, a pale greenish mass, thick as cold honey, filled a handled container. Langer heaved the weighty load out and dumped it at the side of the trail. An excited ek,ek,ek sounded from the rocks above at this jettisoning of priceless provender for the stick-men.

Gimp Halley was able to help himself into the hollow back of the pogie, before collapsing with a muffled crash. His machine gun perched on his chest, he could help if he could keep awake.

Langer gave the pogies the light and shuffled on doggedly.

Like a file of monster snails they reached the end of the canyon-like formation. Here a massive wall of red-black rock confronted them. Langer gritted his teeth as he saw that they must almost parallel the way they had come for a long distance. The terrain of Mongrovia certainly furnished a stern ally for the stick-men!

They toiled up along a shelf-like escarpment. Weird pinnacles of rock and solid ore veins towered over them like the colonnades of some ancient temple. Swarming along always, the stick-men voiced their code-like plaint as they massed for another attack. Kurt hoped he could blast them off without Gimp's help. If they ever closed in with those spear-headed dart hurlers—

The ruins of a dozen pogies from some over-ambitious venture loomed before them. Though the planet was strewn with such remains, it was mere chance that one blundered onto the wrecks, so vast this far off world was. Langer swallowed a thickness in his throat as he glanced at the mangled remnants of three oxy suits. The pogies had been battered almost to scrap metal. The sticks could not solve the combinations to the locked cargos of lunite, but they could exert a terrific violence and persistence.

A great bluish disc edged over the crimson face of one of Alpha Centauri's suns. The twin of the binary was setting in a murky haze. The reddish cast prevailing, deepened. Across the sky, wavering streamers of corona found their astral way. When the one sun was down, the other eclipsed. Then the brief and semi-Mongrovia night would be upon them. It couldn't make much difference.

Kurt Langer fought a dizzy spell grimly. Earth and Magda had never seemed farther away. Only the quarter hour call of Art Delos assured him of one fragile link still existing between him and life and love and home. He radioed that Gimp was riding pogie-back, and cautioned his engineer

against attempting any wild breaks for a rescue. Delos' job was to keep the Minute clear of sticks.

"One more thing," Delos reported last. "I've scoped a rocketeer that looks about an hour away. She's heading in for a landing the way it looks."

"Another pilgrim, maybe," Kurt chuckled. "I hope they don't hit it any hotter than we did. Give them a flare unless you think they're hijackers. We don't want to furnish any lunite glory for some of the yellow slickers in the business."

**A**NOTHER attack of stick-men from three sides, kept Langer busy. Halley did not revive enough to help. Two of the sticks reached Langer with their deadly throwing stick points. He mashed one's head with a blow of his fist and knocked the other off its feet with a sweeping upward kick of his heavy boot. He sank down resting after the struggle, before he beamed the pogies again and plodded on, praying that he had developed no punctures.

The Minute's signal buzzed at his ear.

"Ship overhead looks doubtful, skipper. They don't answer my signals."

Kurt adjusted the scope attachment on the inside of his helmet panel, swept the sky briefly. Faintly, he discerned the deceleration fan of a rocketeer. From where he stood it looked like a tiny comet of pale blue.

"Don't call them, Art," he directed, sharply. "We can't involve them, even if they're friends. They're on their own here on Mongrovia, same as we are!"

The connection blurred off. A grim set of figures kept pounding through Kurt's head—one in ten—ten to one. Ten chances in a hundred he would win.

"You asked for it, Magda," his lips formed. "I suppose you're sorry now even if I'm not! You were right. A space-man should try it young. It takes youth to lick Mongrovia. Most of 'em wait too long!"

His head cleared with a chilling shock of surprise.

"Kurt, is that you and Gimp down there about three miles from a rocketeer?" the radio ear was rendering. "I'm scoping you from about ten miles and coming down fast. We shed a braking tube in the meteor belt. It nearly stripped us."

Great rockets! Was he getting delirious or something?

Magda Bashen radioing from ten miles up!

He turned up the oxygen content a bit to sharpen his senses and looked up through his scope eyes. Against the red sky a braking flare with a piece out of it stood out like a wing of blue flame.

"Magda!" Kurt Langer whirled his belt-dial frantically for transmission connection.

"Magda—Kurt calling."

"I hear you, Kurt," the girl's voice answered.

"If that's you in the flesh, don't try to ride your ship to a landing down here with a missing tube. You'll never make it! It's rougher than a Martian glacier down here. And you can't bail out in this air without a resister. Got one?"

"No!" Her voice seemed harsh. "Only three resisters left for the four of us. Outside work to save the rest of our tubes lost us one resister, exhausted the extra. Never mind me, I asked for this, you know. I'll not let any one give me their resister and sacrifice himself, you know that, too."

"Say, whose ship are you on, for cripes sake!"

"Lon Wilks' Jinx. Oh, I told you I was going and why. You don't know 21st century women, not nurse-medicos anyway."

Icy fire stole through Langer's veins. He hadn't really thought her so serious. Naturally, Wilks would take this chance to beat his time with Magda. Now they'd crack up, and Magda would be caught in the wreck, unless Wilks could persuade her to use the third resister.

He'd order the crew to bail out, but Magda was super-cargo and not under orders. If Wilks used the third resister, leaving girl and ship to their fate, then he wasn't the space-man that Kurt Langer had known him to be!

Kurt Langer looked around, trying to make a swift estimate of just how bad the landing might be with a missing braker. Even the stick-men became interested in the new landing. He took this chance to report what was up to Art Delos, and beamed the pogies forward again. His attention was now divided between picking a barely passable route to the Minute and observing Lon Wilks' battle with Mongrovia gravity.

Langer could almost hear the Jinx's skipper imploring Magda to use the third resister. She'd be telling Wilks she could take it. He'd come right back, "I can go down with you then. It's my ship. Besides, I'm tough on these emergency bumps. I know how to kedge flutter. I may set her down easy enough so we can walk away from it."

The Jinx was blasting down into a roughly circular hollow just below the shelf rock that Langer followed with the pogie train. Not so much jagged stuff down there, but still rough enough. Magda's voice crackled in his helmet ear.

"We're going to try that hole below you, Kurt. Lon won't bail out. The crew will be ordered out with resisters any minute. They're good guys, Kurt. Rusty Welch and Big Anders. They don't want to leave us but it's orders. Be good to them. Well, happy landings, Kurt. Sorry for it all. Just want you to know I never intended that you should go alone without me, young as you are. It was easy for us to follow you only six hours behind."

**W**HAT if she and Wilks were only hurt? How could he ever get them to the Minute alive in this gravity, with the stick-men harrying them? He stopped the pogies and looked up to see the Jinx's safety port open and two bloated oxygen suits drop out, both firing resister pistols to brake their falls on giant Monrovia. They didn't bother to open chutes in such tenuous air.

"That's Welch and Anders," Langer muttered and promptly forgot about them as he watched the emergency landing with increasing admiration for the artful kedge flutter off setting the blown tube at the critical altitude. The Jinx was blooming with steely blue, shot with orange fire. Coming down over every ounce of resistance remaining in her tubes. She could have made it anywhere except on Mongrovia.

Nothing any one could do, absolutely nothing! Teeth locked, Kurt saw rocks and rocketeer come together. The muffled concussion reached him largely through ground vibration. Landing guards stove in, the port rocket barrels were twisted in their massive bases, otherwise, not too bad.

Langer cursed the gravity. He dared not leave the pogies too long with Gimp Halley in an oxygen sleep. He started out hesitantly, stopped at a radio call near by. Blessed luck! The two-man crew of the Jinx had made a safe landing.

"Hey, one of you fellows, watch my pogies and navigator, while I get to that wreck. We've got to get them out of there if they're alive. The hot tubes may blow her tanks any minute."

One of the Jinx men saluted and stayed while the other hobbled after Kurt Langer.

The port door of the Jinx banged open, hammered from within to force through a



jammed casing. Langer couldn't tell at first who tumbled out heavily. Not until he glimpsed light brown hair in the helmet panel as he struggled nearer. It was Magda.

"Get him out, Kurt," she was radioing faintly an instant later. "Get him out before the ship blows up!"

Wilks was huddled under the shock-spring jackets in his oxygen suit. He did not answer radio. Yet his lips moved, eyes opened a little.

Langer knew he could never drag Wilks up the tipped deck to the port door that was alone in the clear. He seized a loading winch above, slung it out of the idle-slot, pressed the automat button. It worked! The winch hummed around into position. He hooked Wilks' belt ring to the adjustable cable in its roller eye, then the power did the rest.

As he rolled the Jinx skipper out the port door, he said, "I hate to handle you like that, Lon, but it's rough or nothing on Mongrovia."

Outside, the hot tubes were smudging. Langer wavered. They needed any extra oxygen and could use the pogies that might be intact in the cargo hold.

"Get away from that ship!" Magda was shrieking, while the man from the Jinx dragged his skipper away in the direction of the pogie train on the shelf above.

Langer backed away groggily. A jolting blast from the wreck knocked him on his way back generously. He came to slowly, Magda bending over him.

"If those tanks hadn't been nearly drained, we wouldn't be here," she heard her saying.

"We needed that oxygen," Kurt Langer mumbled.

"If there was any!" Magda snapped, then hastened pleadingly, "We've got to get Lon up to the train."

"And unload another carrier of lunite," Kurt added, bidding farewell to his hopes for fourth place in cargo records. He wondered if Magda had changed her mind after the long voyage with Lon Wilks. Well, Wilks had the stuff all right. Without him Magda would be only a good looking dead girl, utterly useless.

He dismissed it from his mind as he called the man at the pogie train. "Bring down Dugo, I mean pogie Number Two, so we can load your skipper."

The stick-men had recollected their obligations to homeland and honey pot and were beginning to heave a spurt or two of darts. Their grape-bunch heads were popping up

and down in the clefts and pot-hole craters. Langer gave them a blast well scattered, that calmed them down. On the move again, excruciatingly slow, there was one less pogie-load of lunite, one more load of man.

"There's your lunite, Nurse-Medico Bashen," Langer radioed and tested the alarmingly low contents of his oxy tank. The rescue had cost him plenty.

"Eight loads of lovely green lunite, heavier than lead. We'll play Santa Claus yet to the lungers on Terra. That is, if somebody shares their oxy with me," he finished. "I haven't enough left to make the Minute, even with good luck, on pogie-back."

"Kurt," Magda answered after a moment. "I'm short of oxy. We all are off the Jinx. There were no extra drums left when we landed."

"You mean—" But what was the use asking? He could see it all. That fight to save the tubes in space had burned up their oxygen.

**D**USKY purple glow stole about the crawling pogie train. The second sun of the binary had disappeared in total eclipse with the blue planet. Long streamers of crimson corona waved across the sky from the rims of the superimposing sphere. A phantasmic aurora. In a few hours, the eclipse would pass, then day again. . . .

"Langer—Wilks talking—" the zero transmitted voice of the Jinx skipper was weak but distinct.

"Listening, space-man."

"I'm done for—matter of minutes. Take my oxygen—you need it."

Magda Eashen turned in alarm. "No, Lon, I'll let Kurt have my oxygen. I've been the cause of this so let me pay."

"She loves you, Lon Wilks," Langer insisted. "She's changed her mind about me. You can take the pogies in with your crew after I'm gone and claim the lunite as salvage. I'll stop here when my oxy peters out. Nice cemetery with lots of good company!"

"She's in love with both of us," Wilks' husky whisper was barely heard. "Take a look at your man up front in the lead pogie. I think he's dead!"

Knifing fear slashed at Langer's breast as he stopped the pogies, lumbered over to the slumped form of Gimp Halley, cupped by the carrier bed. He glanced at the oxy gauge. The feeder needle was oscillating and indicated breathing. Halley was evidently doing all right.

"He's okay, Wilks," Kurt Langer reported.

As he turned from the lead pogie he saw Magda reaching for him as fast as Mongrovia permitted.

"Kurt," she whispered, "Lon turned off his oxy tank when you went to look at Gimp. I'm afraid he's gone, hurt like he was!"

Magda's sob followed him as Kurt dived slowly to Number Two pogie. Wilks' face had relaxed under the helmet window. His tank had been turned off. The feeder needle indicated no breathing. They had no time for attempts at resuscitation. Lon's lips seemed to shape a faint, "so long—good luck. . . ."

"Lon Wilks, you're a brave man," Langer said, huskily. "You'll not be buried on Mongrovia for all the lunite in creation!" Swiftly he attached the valves that would suck Wilks' oxygen into his own depleted tank. It might be barely enough.

It took two more pogies for Magda and Rusty Welch when their tanks reached the danger point. Six pogie loads of lunite left, and two men on their feet.

"It's also ran on the records now," Langer muttered, "with only six loads left."

"Also ran on the cargo records," Magda murmured sleepily, "but first in my heart now."

The rumble of the Minute's batteries welcomed them back to comparative safety. A massed charge of the sticks was being successfully repulsed by Art Delos. They shot their way through the desperate sticks without a casualty of their own. The freight port open, they ran the pogies up the ramp with their cargoes of life—and death—from Mongrovia.

Revived by adequate oxygen, they blasted off through the purple glow of the half-night on the return to Terra. Magda said from the hollow of Langer's arm, as they lounged in the pilot chairs before the windowed ravishment of an alien sky.

"I did love Lon, Kurt. I learned to on the voyage here, to be with you. He was right—I loved both of you, and I don't see how I could have turned down either. Which means as long as you both lived it would be without me."

"I knew I was lucky," Kurt Langer said solemnly as he thought of Lon Wilks' sacrifice.

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