

★ PLANET ★

★ ★ ★ STORIES ★ ★

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STAR OF PANADUR

BY ALBERT de PINA AND HENRY HASSE

On the barren wastes of Europa, two marooned men fought, battling over an animal whose life one had saved. There was no fear in the animal's eyes—only the gleam of a weird unearthly knowledge that foretold the way the fight would end.



Illustration by Lubbers

HUGH! Hugh! There's life here . . . look . . . look at this! Found it in a cavern!" The shrill voice was exultant and gleeful.

5—Planet Stories—Mar.

Hugh Betancourt quickly rose from the fire he tended, and turned startled eyes on the furry bundle Jim Brannigan grasped firmly by the scruff of its neck. At first,

nothing was visible but the liquid sheen of the thing's silvery fur; but as Jim roughly thrust it out, Hugh gave an involuntary gasp of surprise. The creature's small, triangular face was nothing less than beautiful! Its eyes were soft and large and luminous, like beryls, set wide apart. Above its broad forehead a short mane of silver fur, beginning in a widow's peak, fell back cloud-soft and shimmering. It was about three feet tall, slim, furred to the throat-line; a strange biped with slender arms and six-fingered hands.

"Damn it, Jim, go easy! You've all but strangled it! Here give it to me." Hugh extended his arms.

"Don't let it get away from you, it's faster than a jack-rabbit," Jim cautioned, extending the ham-sized hand in which he held the creature. "Luckily, I surprised it in a sort of cave-like gully, where it couldn't escape. It means food, Hugh! Lots of food if we can find more of these animals!"

For a moment, the incipient madness of many days on this hellish satellite engulfed Hugh in a wave of nausea. He remembered the gravity-screen tearing from its pivots, and the spaceship caught in the tremendous pull of Jupiter; the last desperate try at the controls, and then the tiny dark bulk of Europa curving up to meet them headlong. There had been cheerless days of biting cold when the tiny satellite faced the distant pallid sun. There had been nights that were like a canto out of Dante, as they were bathed in Jupiter's red cold-glow. More recently, and for more reason, Hugh remembered the dwindling food supply which had now quite vanished.

"Yes, food," Hugh echoed Jim's words in a hoarse whisper. He grasped the soft warm body in his hands with gentle firmness. The creature did not try to escape, it lay limp and inert with its eyes closed. "But—but food doesn't quite solve our problem. Unless we can find some oxide crystal to alloy in the portable smelter, we're sunk. Jim, that jagged hole in the prow isn't going to repair itself!"

Jim's ordinarily red face grew redder with anger, until there was no distinguishing between the color of his hair and that of his face. "All right," he snarled, "so we need the oxide! For days we've been

searching all over this cold hell for some, and where are we? I still maintain our immediate problem is food!"

"Yes, yes, food," Hugh murmured. Why, he wondered vaguely, was he so reluctant to talk about it while he held this limp warm creature in his arms? He looked down at it again, and was startled to find himself staring into its extraordinary eyes. Limpid, brilliant, full of a semi-human intelligence now, they were scarcely a foot from Hugh's own eyes—and for a single instant Hugh had the crazy idea that they were filled with a strange fixity of purpose, almost as if it were trying to convey something to him there in the appalling silence of Europa.

A SUDDEN cold came over Hugh that was not the cold of Europa. It took quite an effort for him to tear his own eyes away, then he laughed and whispered inquiringly of himself, "Am I going crazy? Maybe this place is beginning to get me at last. For a moment I thought. . . ."

He shrugged uneasily.

"What are you mumbling?" Jim demanded irritably, his huge form bulking against the bizarre jagged landscape. "I'd have slit that thing's throat and skinned it already? Here, give it—"

"Wait, you fool!" Hugh's ordinarily thoughtful, hazel eyes were bright now and hard, as he drew back from Jim's grasping hand. "We're the first to find life on Europa, the only ones to see what inhabits it; and all you can think of is your damned stomach. You can't be starved, you ate this morning!"

"Yes, and that was the last of it," Jim snarled. His face was ugly now and purposeful. "Well, I'm hungry again, and now that I've found these European kangaroos I aim to be fed and kept warm. Notice how fine that pelt is?"

Hugh had noticed, indeed. He had noticed even more, the peculiar sheen and aliveness of it, as if it were surcharged with a definite energy. As he held the creature close, a warm feeling of well-being slowly diffused through him. And something, *something* like a faint echo in his brain was like a shadowy background to his thoughts. Yes, he knew; here was food and here was warm fur against the

eternal cold of the satellite. But their space suits protected them in a measure against the cold, and if necessary they could subsist a few more days without eating. Perhaps by then they would find some of the rare crystal oxide, enough to repair their ship and leave. Perhaps. . . .

It was a long chance, almost an impossibility, and Hugh knew it; but now, also, he knew what he must do.

He did it. With a distasteful glance at his now openly-belligerent partner, he stepped forward. Then with unexpected suddenness he lurched as if he'd lost his footing on the rough terrain. He stumbled sideways. He twisted and fell deliberately to the ground. He opened his arms wide.

It was rather clumsily done, Hugh realized that instantly.

FOR an infinitesimal moment, the furry creature sprawled too, immobile, where Hugh's momentum had flung it. It gazed with an uncanny intensity into the Earthman's eyes. Then in a single, graceful leap of incredible speed, it was gone into the growing red haze, as night came on and Jupiter's macabre glow shattered the surrounding crags.

"You fool, you utter damned fool!" Jim Brannigan screamed, livid with rage. "You did that deliberately!" Then his huge body was launching at Hugh, the great heavy fists lashing out with the force of pistons. Hugh, lighter but more lithe, had only time to roll to one side and regain his feet. Then he was ducking the barrage of blows, evading the murderous rushes, allowing Jim to tire out of his frantic rage. Only once did Hugh strike a blow, a terrific lashing left into the other's solar plexus that doubled the red giant into helpless nausea.

"That's all we need now," Hugh said with a measure of calm, "to maim or cripple each other. We'll never get back that way. Come out of it, man! What we've got to do is get that oxide!"

"What we've got to get is food! You let the only food go that we had!" Jim Brannigan began to weep, in great racking sobs.

Merely nerves, temporary hysterical reaction, Hugh decided. Jim wasn't really hungry yet; he was only an-

icipating the event. When he got over this, he would sulk. When he got over that, he would start scheming, with that unpredictable mind of his. Knowing the man, Hugh decided to watch him carefully from now on.

He took Jim's arm and they walked over to the crippled spacer, lying like a great silver bug with its nose smashed, in the stark hollow of this ravine. They entered. Hugh walked forward and examined the thin sheet of beryllium that patched the ship's wounded hull for the night. He went astern and turned on the generators at quarter speed, to provide a miserly warmth. On his way back to the inner cabin he stopped and peered out of a port-hole at a now familiar scene: Europa's dark mad terrain becoming swiftly suffused with Jupiter's red.

He entered the cabin, glanced at Jim and saw that he was now in the sulking stage. The hunger problem pressed insistently upon Hugh's own mind. That little furry creature! In spite of hunger, he was still glad he had let it escape; but damn it, he wished he knew why! Hugh thrust the problem from him and glanced again at Jim. Soon Jim's mind, bordering upon necessity, would begin scheming.

Hugh knew the man. . . .

Despite an utter weariness, Hugh didn't sleep through the rest of that short night. His mind, alert and hunger-clear, wrestled with the problem of survival in this mad world of snow and silence. In the opposite beryllium-mesh bunk, Jim snored fitfully, as though rehearsing in his sleep some violence in his mind.

Hugh arose slowly, and donned with caution the stiff, heavy space-suit as protection against the cold. Adjusting the helmet and oxygen tank, he opened the airlock and ventured out into the Dantesque magnificence of Europa's night. The red opaline haze had the quality of a waking nightmare. The great snow crystals were drifting lazily again, appearing now like livid blotches of ruby. Jupiter loomed like a great gloating nemesis across the entire ragged horizon.

Hugh didn't know where he was going. No pre-determined plan guided his footsteps. There was only a great urgency to leave the spacer and go somewhere and seek. . . . Hugh stopped, brushed the

brittle red snow from his face-plate and wished he could wipe the sweat from his brow. Go where, and seek what? Seek oxide crystals of course, he told himself; but there was something else now, something strange and powerful that gripped a part of his mind and urged him on like the fear of madness.

He stumbled on for hours it seemed, until he was in the fearsome cavern country. Here the stark, heaven-rearing cliffs were honeycombed with tortuous caves and gullies and immense grottoes. He entered a low gallery-like cave that wound in and downward into the mass of a gigantic cliff.

Now an unshakable inner dread plucked at his mind and gripped his throat as he tried to check his precipitate descent, but couldn't. He no longer seemed possessed of any volition of his own. He shrugged fatalistically; then he felt a thrill of excitement, as he noticed a faint luminescence of the surrounding walls. This light increased as he descended deeper and deeper through widening passages. Then at last, at the end of a turn a burst of radiance met his eyes.

He was in a grotto of titanic proportions. The substance of its walls and distant ceiling gave it the gentle radiance of a sunless day. But it was a glaucous radiance, ineffably green as the light beneath the waters of a shallow sea.

"Holy, roaring comets!" Hugh swore aloud as he stood there quite still, staring. "By all the Red-Tails on Venus, it's oxide—all of it!" His voice echoed inside his helmet and beat against his eardrums.

Yes, it was beryllium oxide gleaming at his feet, crystalline and powdery just as men had found it for the first time a century before in the desert wastes of Arizona. The entire floor of the grotto was covered with it as far as his widening eyes could see. He bent in a frenzy of joy and scooped up whole handfuls. He half-babbled over it like a delirious King Midas. He let it trickle fondly through his fingers in a little glittering flood. Saved! Now they could repair the ship and return! Return to Earth and tell of this!

Not until several minutes later did Hugh begin to wonder how he had come here. With a rush of apprehension, he remembered a cold and tenacious something that had seized a part of his mind. But now it

was gone and he felt strangely limp and tired.

He leaped to his feet. Staring around, he wondered if he could retrace his steps back to the space-ship. And in that precise moment he felt his mind seized again with a sort of frantic suddenness. There was no mistaking that very clear warning of, "*Danger! Danger!*"

But he could not have acted in time. Even as he spun around he was unaware of the shadow that lengthened behind him, until it loomed very near and a part of it lashed out. Not until the last split second, did Hugh glimpse wild and red-streaked eyes in vivid contrast to the grim and purposeful face behind a helmet plate. Then the part of the shadow that was Jim Brannigan's arm, holding something massive like a rock, completed the swift arc and struck.

A sun exploded within Hugh's head. Livid flames engulfed him, consumed him, he tried to cry out but couldn't; then the sun fragments cruelly withdrew, leaving him helpless in a cold blackness through which he fell like a plummet to ultimate extinction.

JIM BRANNIGAN stood there tensely for a moment, looking at the man he had struck down. But only for a moment. His lips quirked into a tight smile, and his exulting keen eyes took in the cave's glittering expanse.

"A fortune in oxide crystals," he murmured, "an inexhaustible mine! And he thought he could cheat me out of it, keep it from me! Good thing I followed him. Serves him right if I've killed him."

He didn't seem too worried about it, and he didn't look at Hugh's body again as he started gathering in the rare crystals.

"Europa's uncharted, I can claim-deed this whole region! And probably there's another fortune in furs," he added as he suddenly remembered the creature he had captured. Already, in his greedy mind's eye, he saw himself a tycoon, the oxide king, with a corner on furs finer than anything ever seen on Earth, Venus or Mars.

This he saw. But what he didn't see were the myriad pairs of burning beryl eyes peering at him from concealed openings in the opaline walls. He was not aware of the increasing energy potential

being generated by a growing legion of furred bodies in surrounding caverns, as more and more Panadurs pressed forward to peer out at him. Around Jim Brannigan now the frigid atmosphere began to rise. At first it was pleasantly cool, then warm, and warmer, until it became suffocating.

Still the silvery-furred Panadurs, in utter silence, generated heat as their mental forces grew and deliberately united into a single, increasing potential. Their fur stood erect, an angry violet-silver now, crackling a little with the intensity of the effort. As a single unit, they waited, each furry Panadur now touching the other in a living, livid chain of cumulative power.

Jim Brannigan ceased his gloating and awoke at last to an indefinable danger. Swiftly he arose and whirled toward the entrance, peering back over his shoulder at the danger he could feel, that he knew was there, but could not see.

But already it was too late. Now that increasing energy potential, grown and united into a single purposeful weapon, was being aimed. Jim Brannigan hadn't taken three steps toward the entrance when suddenly, silently, intangible as thought, but infinitely more devastating, it was released! As the devastating bolt struck him, Brannigan collapsed into a crumpled heap, shattered, silent . . . inert.

FOR hours that lengthened into days, Hugh Betancourt lay unconscious. His blanched features were lifeless and cold, there in the same cavern where Brannigan's treacherous blow had toppled him into oblivion.

Then, as a hint of color returned to his cheeks, and a slow strength began to course through his limbs, he regained moments of lucidness; but they were brief and he always lapsed back into delirium.

With the wavering unreality of a mirage, vague memories of those strange furred creatures, encircling him, surged into his mind; they seemed to have pressed close to him, holding hands. Strange! They were joined by a line of their fellow Panadurs to a similar circle surrounding a huddled figure a short distance away. But that was crazy! And Hugh's mind would slide back into the darkness again.

Once, he thought one of the Panadurs

came and placed its exquisite face against his chest, and held it there a long time, as if it were testing the Earthman's metabolism. This seemed so very real! Hugh was aware of an almost crackling silence and the cave ceiling's unchanging luminescence.

Still a third time, he imagined that a silver-gray Panadur, almost stately in his measured movements, came over to him with a gleaming jewel in his hand. It was an inch in diameter and the same color as the creature's eyes, a pale luscious green. Majestically, despite his diminutive size, he placed the stone over Hugh's heart. Instantly the gem flamed with the effulgence of a glowing star. The Panadur seemed satisfied.

When at last Hugh Betancourt regained full consciousness, and was able to sit up and stare around him, he realized that he had not been a prey to delusions. Although he still felt weak, his mind was crystal clear. Here was the circle of Panadurs still enclosing him. *But the circle had grown*, as if a great many more creatures had joined the uncanny circle in an ecstasy to be in close proximity to the tall earthman. Their furry, vibrating bodies pressed close to him, and their strange, fragile hands touched his wrists and throat and face, as they seemed to caress him with infinite gentleness.

Waves of sheer energy seemed to envelop him and penetrate to the deepest recesses of his being, as if by some strange alchemy, these alien creatures of stark Europa were transmitting to him the elemental life force itself.

But strangely enough, that other circle of Panadurs enclosing that huddled figure over there, in the semi-gloom, was contracting as it grew smaller and smaller, day by day. Hugh ceased to wonder about all this as he lay back to gather his strength. He fell into a peaceful sleep.

THIS time when he awoke, it was a profound sense of well-being far beyond anything he'd ever known. It permeated his body the exhilarating glow of a rare Venusian wine.

One thing, however, still eluded him. He sat up and felt his head where the blow had fallen. He remembered only the excruciating pain in the microscopic in-

stant before the rushing darkness came. There was nothing there now. Not even a scar.

"A rock from the ceiling must have fallen," he thought. "My luck to be standing right under it."

"It was not a rock!"

The thought came into his mind clear and unmistakable. Then Hugh found himself staring into the beryl-green eyes of the stately keeper of the jewel. Like a flash, the scene he had not witnessed, of Jim Brannigan stalking him from the space-ship, the murderous blow and the vision of himself lying in a pool of blood on the glittering expanse of oxide crystals, was etched into his mind by the telepathic power of the Panadur.

"We know you would have spared us," came the uncanny stream of thought. "Your companion captured me when I, as the chosen leader, went to investigate your arrival. But you deliberately let me go when it meant your own life. But he, whose fur was like the angry spot of the greater world, would have destroyed us. We read his thoughts."

"Telepathy, by Mercury's molten heart!" Hugh exclaimed in awe, dimly sensing the prodigious mental power of the being. "And we were going to eat one of them!" He stared around the cave, remembering Jim Brannigan, and it was apparent that Hugh still didn't realize all that had occurred. "I suppose that murdering, mercenary scum's left long ago with the ship, and here I'm stranded! If I ever get my hands on him—"

"That you will never do."

Hugh was aware of the Panadur again, and he saw the shadowy copy of a smile fit over its features.

"We gave you of our energy," the shimmering silver being transmitted. "And we gave you of another life that you might have yours again. It was but justice!"

"What? What other life?" And then Hugh tottered where he stood, swayed sickeningly, as the entire meaning burst upon him. He remembered the scenes in his delirium, when two circles, one of which enclosed him and another that enclosed a huddled figure, had been formed

by Panadurs, while a living chain of the brooding creatures joined the two circles together. He shuddered as he remembered that his own circle seemed to expand as the other inexorably contracted!

"There was no choice!" The limp thought-message from the Panadur impinged upon Hugh's mind. "We know the secret of the release of electronic energy by the disassociation of electronic and neutronic balance in the atomic scale. We reverse the vibration of matter and through magnetic means draw a steady stream of energy—pure energy from matter in whatever state. In your case, we simply transmitted the energy content of the red-furred one to you."

HUGH hardly dared to glance in the direction where the huddled figure had been, but with an effort of will he steeled himself against the growing nausea and resolutely walked over to the thing.

He felt his sanity reeling.

He was brought back to sanity by the Panadur, who, all along, had communicated with him. Its fragile, six-fingered hand was extended, palm-upwards and lying on it was a gleaming jewel.

"Take it and go!" The message came with majestic power, yet there was a world of kindness in it. "Go back to your ship. You will find its damage repaired. We have done that for you. With the star of Panadur you will be guided back as my thought centers upon it. On the day when you return to our world, gaze upon the star and you will be helped to find again and gather the crystals you seek. *But none from your planet must ever see us again, or even hear of us!"*

"I promise!" Hugh exclaimed fervently, remembering Jim Brannigan's intent and that there were many men like Brannigan.

Slowly Hugh left the cave, clutching the dazzling gem through which he could feel a directed flow of thought. He was still a little dazed at this miracle. He wanted to laugh and to cry. But the flooding realization that his ship, repaired and ready, awaited him; that he was free to leave this craggy hell of crimson shadows and arctic nights, left only a vast, singing quiet in his soul, too deep for tears.