

# PLANET STORIES



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# ASTEROID JUSTICE

By V. E. THIESSEN

**What was Sam Knox up to now—drifting helplessly in a tiny eggshell across black oceans of space with two weeks' grub? Was this the way the great man-hunter deftly snagged his prey?**

SAM KNOX TOUCHED A BUTTON in the control room of the *Wanderer*, and the draperies slid back from her transparent nose. He stood a moment, a sturdy compact figure, gazing into the dark.

"Look at them!" he said bitterly. "They hang there like stars."

Before the *Wanderer* he could see the mining fleet at the edge of the Asteroid Belt, their identification lights twinkling out from the enshrouding ebon mantle of space.

They might as well be stars, for all the progress he had made with them. He had been here a week, spreading his nets for asteroid fragments like the rest of them, and never a sign of his presence had they shown. They hung there, cold and aloof—almost suspicious, he would have thought, had they any reason to be suspicious.

Not that they were unfriendly by nature, these men who spread their nets to trap the errant meteors; but they were a clanish tribe, known to one another from season to season, more snobbish than any social ruling class. They were close-knit, bound together by bonds of danger and hazard, and the dream of sudden wealth.

Perhaps it is only a matter of time, he thought. Perhaps time will make me one of them. He must win their friendship soon, if he were to find Pell.

And that was his job, to find Pell. His was not the hunt for wealth in the heart of some fragment of asteroid. Yet the excitement of the search had long been a part of his life. What Sam Knox hunted he found. Sam Knox hunted men.

He had two bosses. The most lenient of these was the Department of Terran Justice. His other boss lay deep inside himself, demanding much—expecting everything.

Through the left lower quadrant of the transparent nose he saw one of the nets

flare into quick acceleration. It was too far away to be his own, and he watched it, each corner of the net a flaming ribbon of rocket fire in the velvet black of space.

A moment later he knew whose net it was, for the mining ship *Fleetblast* slid by him in pursuit, controlling the rocket-powered net from the remote controls in her maw. The *Fleetblast* sped on, unable to equal the instant acceleration that the touch of the meteor sent into the rockets of the net.

But she was soon catching up. With her remote controls she was slowing the rockets of the net, as she increased her own speed. In a few minutes both ship and netted meteor would be hanging motionless alongside, the meteor caught and halted just as a small boy catches a swift ball in his cap.

Sam grimaced. What would it contain when they melted it open with the heat rod? Probably nothing. Possibly mineral ore, to be refined into metal for new heat rod tips, for from this the miner fishers of the Asteroid Belt eked out their precarious existence.

But perhaps — PERHAPS — there was wealth and fortune. Here might be the dream come true. Here by the luck of space, might lie one of the rare jewels of the asteroids, spawned in some once-fiery sun, and flung into space in the heart of a fragment. For this the eternal hope of man yearned, and men spent their lives fishing and mining here. For this they risked the swift and horrible infections of life in the Asteroid Belt.

THE VISAPHONE sprang into life. Sam recognized the voice as that of a woman. . . . "*Fleetblast calling Aeries . . .*"

The *Fleetblast* lay some fifty miles ahead, a speck of light, where the chase of her net had led her. Just to her right,



*Sam Knox whirled . . . seized Ned's gun arm . . .*

closer, lay the only near ship, the *Aeries*.

*"Aeries speaking—go ahead . . ."*

Before the *Aeries* her net sputtered four ribbons of flame. In a surge of power the *Aeries* was off, acceleration full, straining like a hound after a rabbit. There would be no more conversation from the *Aeries*, Sam knew, until the catch was landed.

The woman was unaware of this development, unaware that the *Aeries'* flaming jets were bearing her far away.

*" . . . father is hurt . . . an open wound and we have no more penicillin X . . ."*

No penicillin X! No ship took to ether for the "Belt" without a supply of that important penicillin derivative.

Sam touched the controls. This was the break, this was the luck of Sam Knox. The jets responded with a trail of flame. He pulled alongside the *Fleetblast* in a few minutes.

He could spare a hundred thousand units of the drug, he figured. He got it from the storeroom. He was quite close to the other ship, so decided against using the ship's lifeboat, a tiny space-dory, and simply donned his space-suit. He then yelled into the visaphone, "Fleetblast—open your port . . . I'm bringing the drug." He saw the lock open on the *Fleetblast* and opened his own, propelling himself into space and across the void. A few guiding blasts of his hand rocket and he was inside the lock of the other ship.

A woman helped him out of the space-suit. "Come quickly," she urged. Sam had time to note that she was young and had red hair as he followed her to the living quarters.

An old man lay there on a bed. His trouser had been cut away from his right leg, revealing a crushed and bleeding condition below the knee. Already the leg was beginning to show the faint greyness that indicated the start of the quick infection.

The miner's name, Sam found as he treated the leg, was Timas Rorke. There was a faint trace of Irish blood in him, responsible perhaps for the red hair of his daughter. He lay back in the bed, complaining at the foolishness that had put him there.

"That damned meteor! I was in too big a hurry to load it, and it slipped and

crushed my leg." Timas looked as his daughter. "What do you say, Nancy, shall we call it a season and run back to Terra?"

"There are a few more weeks of good fishing. I can make out."

Sam looked at her, this slip of a girl who was undertaking a man's work. For all her courage she was still a woman, slim and lissome. She was not too tall, rounded sweetly, and well-formed. Under Sam's gaze she lifted her eyes to his, eyes as brown as new-plowed soil.

He had been long away from women, and the sight of her set a wildness coursing in his blood. Strong as she was he could crush her in his arms. He had strength to take care of both of them.

She might have let him too, in other circumstances. Her eyes had already noted the compact sturdiness of his body, noted and approved. But he was Sam Knox, and in his hunt for men a hundred women had tried to deceive him, so that he set his mind against this weakness, and looked away across the room.

**F**OOL! He was a fool to have not seen it sooner. The photograph of a white-haired man stared from a lucite frame. It was Pell.

The report was true. Here was Pell, inventor of the heat rod, hiding where the metal was mined. If he were here, he must be found, and returned to Terra to finish the sentence he had escaped three years before.

He might not have to finish that prison sentence. Only one thing was certain now. In the investigation of the illegal operations of Terran Metals Corporation, the truth had been concealed by the fact that a way had been found to deceive the mind-probe.

When that shattering fact was discovered, that the basis of justice was not dependable, action was swift. The mind-probe was analyzed, and the defect removed. But the truth of the facts in the Terran Metals Trial was now uncertain. Guilty or not, the Department of Terran Justice wanted Pell.

Sam took a step toward the picture. The girl's voice shocked him from these thoughts. "I don't know how to thank you, Mister—?" She paused expectantly.

"Knox, Sam Knox."

She held out her hand. "We are so glad to know you."

"You are the first one to want to know me. I've been here a week, and everyone seems to think I have a plague."

Timas Rorke spoke from the bed. "You must forgive us. We are a hard people to get acquainted with, especially now."

"Why especially now?"

The visaphone buzzed. It was the *Aeries*, now alongside. Nancy went to operate the lock.

A young man came from the lock with her. He was dark and saturnine. His glance viewed Sam with open suspicion.

Nancy said, "Sam Knox, Ned Hawkins."

Sam held out his hand. The dark young man made no move to accept it.

Nancy said sharply, "Ned! Mr. Knox may have saved father's life. He brought the penicillin X while you were chasing meteors."

Ned Hawkins said with surly ill grace, "Sorry. We're obliged to you, Mr. Knox."

Sam turned to the old man on the bed. "You were about to tell me why everyone is so suspicious."

Timas Rorke sat up in bed. His eyes blazed. "Thieves!" he said gustily. "This season there have been thieves. Old Joe on the *Miner II* lost an asteroid jewel worth ten thousand credits. Somebody beat him, slipped him chloroform, and made off with it. Been several cases like it."

Ned's dark suspicious eyes were on them. Sam crossed and picked up Pell's picture. "Relative of yours?" he asked casually.

Hawkins slammed the flat of his hand against a bulkhead. "That does it! What kind of miner are you that you don't know the Master Miners?" He whirled to the old man and the girl. "Tell him nothing more."

Sam said simply, "This is my first season. How am I to know anything with everyone so suspicious? If you need more medicine let me know." He picked up his space-suit and went into the lock.

Nancy came quickly into the lock after him. She said in a low voice, "Thanks for everything. You must forgive Ned. He is jealous."

Sam held the helmet to his space-suit in his hands. "If I had a claim on you,"

he said swiftly, "I should be jealous, too. Not man nor devil should take you from me." He put the helmet on and turned to the lock.

Once back in the *Wanderer*, he considered what he had learned. Pell was here, so much had been established, and he had at last a foothold of acquaintance among these people. That should help.

AND indeed it did. It was through Timas Rorke, he suspected, that four old men now stood on the floor of the *Wanderer*.

He hadn't, however, quite planned on falling in love. It was difficult for him to believe that so strong a bond could be forged in the week he had known the Rorkes. The increasing jealousy of Hawkins was testimony to the growing tenderness between Sam and Nancy Rorke.

The elder of the four men stepped a little forward. "Mr. Knox, we are here because a friend of yours has requested that you be admitted to the Miners."

He was right then; the week's cultivation of Timas and his daughter was bringing results. "Tell me about the Miners," he asked.

"We are far from Terra here. Years ago we found the necessity for establishing some sort of society for our own pleasure and protection. We have our own government, our own laws. Each year a number of the older miners are chosen Master Miners. This year there are seven. We formulate all laws, and sit in judgment on those who break them."

Master Miners! Pell was one of these. Sam kept the planes of his face wooden. "What must I do to become one of this society of yours?"

"You must submit to questioning to prove you are worthy. You must swear loyalty to all our other brother miners. You must agree to be guided by our laws, as supreme here, as long as you are in the Asteroid Belt."

"Very well, I agree."

They took a small space-dory to the largest ship in the mining fleet, the governing ship, *White Lark*. Sam wondered if he were being wise. If they had the latest mind-probe, all the truth would come out in the examination. His connection with Terran Justice would be discovered, and

perhaps all chance lost of taking Pell. It was unlikely that they had the new probe, he decided, and if they had the old model he could fool them.

They had no mind probe at all. They simply asked him questions, the seven of them, trained to evaluate character swiftly in their rough life, they watched him as he answered their questions. They sat around him in a semi-circle, and in the center, in charge, was the man he hunted. He had found Pell!

The questioning began. When they touched the dangerous fringes of knowledge with their probing questions he held his face even more wooden than usual, careful too to let no emotion show in the timbre of his voice.

And at last it was over. Pell rose and looked at the cricle of Master Miners. "I am satisfied," he announced. "Are there any objections to the entrance of Mr. Knox as a Miner of our Order?"

There were none. Pell said, "You will take the oath of fealty tomorrow, here. There will be many who want to meet you." He walked with Sam to the lock, to the small space-dory in which they had come.

Sam thought, I can take him now. I can slip a dis-gun into his ribs, and take him now. The reaction of the other miners was unpredictable, but with speed and skill he could make it. And once aboard the *Wanderer* no mining ship could approach his super-drive.

His hand slid down his pocket to the cold plastic butt of his dis-gun.

There was a rattle as another dory struck the ship. A space-suited form slid into the lock. He took his hand off the dis-gun. The figure stripped off its helmet, and a mass of flame-colored hair cascaded down around the shoulders. It was Nancy Rorke.

"Am I too late? I just heard you were up for membership in the Miners."

Pell put his hand on her shoulder. "He's passed the tests. We administer the oath tomorrow."

Sam took his hand from his pocket. There would be danger. He would not make his play with a woman here.

Nancy's brown eyes were on his, filled with warmth and gladness. "I'm so happy. I just couldn't believe it when Ned told

me he had put you up for membership."

Ned Hawkins had proposed him for membership! Sam pondered that all the way back to the *Wanderer*.

THE CEREMONY that joined Sam Knox and the Order of Miners was a simple one. There were many of the Miners in the *White Lark*, to witness the oath of fealty, and many more watching on their visaphones. The coldness was gone; he was one of them, and he felt the strong warmth of their friendship. Nancy's eyes smiled at him all through the ceremony.

There was one curious thing. Ned Hawkins was not present at the beginning of the ceremony.

The voice of Pell pronounced, "You are now one of us." Men gathered around Sam, shaking his hand and clapping him on the back.

"Stop the ceremony!" It was a beautifully timed entrance, an actor's entrance. Hawkins stood just inside the room, still in his space-suit, holding the helmet in his hand. He came forward now, his magnetic boots clanking on the steel floor of the *White Lark*.

Pell frowned at him. "If you have objections, you are too late. After all, you were the one who proposed his membership. Miner Knox is one of us now."

"Then he is subject to our law. He is no miner—he is a thief."

Pell said somberly, "That is a serious accusation."

"Old Joe died today as a result of the chloroforming and beating. Before he died he tuned in the ceremony on the visaphone. He identified this man as the one who beat and chloroformed him. He died soon after. His heart couldn't stand the excitement."

Pell looked at Sam. "What have you to say?"

"Would you believe a wild tale like that? Hearsay testimony from a dead man? It's simply an invention."

"Invention?" It was one of the Master Miners. "Why, Hawkins proposed you for your membership."

Ned Hawkins said raspingly, "If it is all hearsay, I suppose you won't object to a search of your ship. The Asteroid jewel that was stolen is probably there."

The pattern was too clear to Sam. It

was of course a frame, a perfect frame, if the jewel had been planted aboard the *Wanderer*. They would find other interesting things, too. The super-drive of the ship would be as useful to a thief as to a Terran Justice man.

They found the jewel carelessly hidden in the *Wanderer's* upholstery.

Sam said, "If you will put us both under the mind-probe, you will learn the truth."

Pell frowned at him. "I know from my own experience that the mind-probe is worthless. I was convicted once by a mind-probe trial. No, we will have a simple trial; we will try you after the fashion of older times. Verbal testimony, evidence, and a jury of Master Miners. We will try you at once. Justice is swift here in the Belt."

**SAM KNOX** sat hopelessly in a tiny space-dory. Through the view port he could see the twinkling lights of the Asteroid fleet vanishing in the distance. And in his mind he could still hear the voice of Pell, pronouncing sentence like the tolling of some bell of doom.

"Miner Sam Knox, you will be banished forever from the Asteroid belt. If you return, it is the duty of every Miner to ray you on sight. And, if any befriend you, they may share your fate. Your ship and all your possessions are forfeit. You will be placed in a small space-dory with food and fuel for two weeks. If in that time you can come to some larger ship or outpost of civilization, you are to be congratulated. If not, may God have mercy on your soul."

He had lost the *Wanderer*—he had only this tiny dory and two weeks' food. That was bad enough, the chance of wandering forever in space without food or fuel, but worse than that was the thought that he had failed. He had found Pell, and failed to bring him back. He sat for a moment, face in hands, tasting the bitter failure. There was, too, an aching sense of loss when he thought of Nancy Rorke.

There was a tarpaulin over his stocks of supplies. He might as well take inventory. He rose and went to the rear of the tiny craft. He pulled back the tarpaulin. Curled among the supplies was a woman, her hair a russet halo of glory. She stood discovered, shyly looking at him. It was Nancy Rorke.

Sam wanted her. Lord, how he wanted her. He crossed and seized her in the solid strength of his arms, crushing his lips and body against hers. "You fool!" he breathed. "You wonderful, glorious little fool!"

She said simply, "I knew you would need me. I found which dory they were to use and stowed away."

Now there was food and water for only a week. All but fuel was now divisible by two. They were far from the usual space-lanes, and the chance of passing craft was microscopically small. Somehow, Sam knew, they must win through. Somehow he must wring defeat from failure.

They were three days out when they saw a ship. It seemed somehow familiar, and it circled them three times before it had decelerated enough to pull alongside the slower dory. The lock opened and Sam propelled the tiny dory inside. Nancy said in amazement. "It is Pell's ship. Do you suppose they know the truth?"

Sam knew it was not that when Pell opened the door of the dory. His voice was curt. "I have extra food and fuel. The ship *Sol Shine* is passing between Mars and the outer planets. You should be able to contact here at these co-ordinates at the time noted." He handed Sam a sheet of astrographic calculations.

Nancy caught at his arm. "Why bring us this?" she asked. "Is it because of me?"

Pell smiled at her. "No, my dear. It was not because of you—or perhaps it was. Perhaps a woman's heart is surer judge than a jury of Miners."

He raised keen eyes to Sam. "Once they found me guilty," he said. "I was not. I cannot rid myself of the belief that perhaps others, too, might not be guilty."

"The others do not know you came?"

"No, else my life would be forfeit."

Sam Knox said wonderingly. "You risked that, for the sake of possible justice?"

Pell inclined his head.

"Why go back? Come to Terra with me."

"I cannot."

"Listen, man." Sam was urgent. "I came from the Department of Terran Justice to find you. The Terran Metals case is re-opened. The new mind-probe is just. Come back and we will find the truth."

A strange look spread over Pell's face. "Terra! The glorious rose-gardens of Terra." He shook himself. "I dare not, but as I have given you life you must promise me this. You must not tell where I am to be found."

Sam Knox said bitterly. "I promise nothing. I came to the Belt to find you." He sidled forward. If he could reach Pell—

A dis-gun rose in Pell's hand. "Be it so. Then I must move on." He closed the door of the dory on them and threw the release that thrust them from the lock of his ship. He left them sitting—watching his ship's lights recede in the darkness.

Nancy put her hand on Sam's arm. Pell's ship was now a speck of light, vanishing in the black. "Never mind Pell. We will go to Terra together."

Sam said, "I had almost convinced him. He wants to go to Terra. You heard him. If I could talk to him again..."

Nancy tugged at his arm. "Sam! What are you thinking of?"

He touched the controls of the space-dory, and it swung in a long curve, doubling back.

"No! Sam, No! They will kill you if you go back. Forget Pell and come with me to the *Sol Shine*."

Sam Knox's jaw was a ledge of granite. "I came for Pell."

The tiny dory leaped forward, nose pointed for the Asteroid Belt.

**S**AM slid in under no power, using the inertia of the ship, lights off, alongside the *Fleetblast*. He said, "Let's hope your father is alone."

Timas Rorke was alone. He was hard to convince, but his daughter could work wonders with him. "Very well," he grumbled. "I'll see if I can get Pell over here." He shrugged into a space-suit, and slipped his own dory out of the lock. He blasted away to find Pell.

"Look, Sam," Nancy called. "It's the *Aeries*."

The *Aeries* slid by the *Fleetblast*, moving her nets to some other sector of space. The visaphone sounded, "*Aeries calling Fleetblast... Aeries calling Fleetblast...*"

Sam gripped Nancy's arm. "We must not answer. Perhaps he will go on."

For a moment the *Aeries* paused, then

it flared an orange trail of acceleration as it headed onward.

And the *Fleetblast's* dory scraped alongside. From the lock stepped Pell and Timas Rorke.

Sam Knox stood, wide-legged, facing Pell, a compact and resolute form. "I came to take you back to Terra."

Their eyes met and searched each other. Pell sighed. "Almost I am willing to trust you. You, too, are a man who will risk life for a principle."

"If you are innocent, I promise you you will be cleared. There is no flaw in the mind-probe now. You know we cannot use the probe at random, but, if you bring charges against those who framed you, we can use the probe to get the truth."

Pell straightened. He seemed to grow taller. "I'll do it."

"You'll do what?" From the opening lock Ned Hawkins came, a dis-gun low in his hand. Behind him were four older men. Sam saw Pell's face grow pale. They were four of the Master Miners, four of those who dispensed justice in the Asteroid Belt.

One of them said gravely, "In the name of all Miners, I arrest you, Pell, for aiding a convicted thief. Have you anything to say before we take you way?"

Hawkins jabbed the muzzle of the dis-gun tight in Sam's back.

And that was a mistake. Men of the Terran Police Services had long been trained to defend against a weapon held too close. Sam Knox whirled, striking up and out with his arm, whirling away from the weapon, and striking with his hand. He stepped forward then, seizing Ned's gun arm in a bone-breaking leverage, and the dis-gun dropped to the floor. He shoved Hawkins away and scooped up his weapon.

Now was the time, he thought, to take Pell and run for it. Perhaps they would not find it important enough to follow. They would not know that contact with the *Sol Shine* was possible.

Then Sam groaned. He had forgotten. Too much time had elapsed, and now he was farther away. The slow space-dory, never would be able to reach the coordinates in time to intercept the space-liner.

Somehow he must force the truth. He



lifted the dis-gun. "I'm going to blast you, Ned Hawkins. Before I go I'm going to burn you down. I know you stole the jewel and killed Miner Joe. I know you were jealous and framed me, giving up the jewel as a sacrifice to your jealousy. Tell the truth, Hawkins, and cleanse your soul before you die."

Ned Hawkins pulled back his lips in a dark snarl. "Shoot," he said. "Shoot, you murderer and thief."

A Master Miner said, "We will hunt you down, Knox. We will hunt you to the ends of the galaxy. Even though you kill us all, there will be others to search you out."

"Tie them," Sam Knox directed. Pell obeyed. Sam swung the dis-gun in a compact circle, and the front sight opened the flesh of Ned Hawkins' forearm and let the blood flow.

Sam Knox waved with the gun then at Pell, at the girl and at her father. He said bleakly, "If one of you moves toward the medicine cabinet, as God is in Heaven, I'll ray you down."

He hunkered down on his ankles, a lone figure waiting and watching.

"You devil," Ned's voice struck a high pitch. "*You devil*, give me Penicillin X."

They had not understood till then. The eyes of the bound Master Miners were wide with horror.

Sam gestured with the gun. "Rest easy," he said. "We shall only have to wait an hour at the most."

The red blood that spurted from the arm stopped, and the chronometer ticking in the control room was the only sound in the chamber. Minutes passed, and the arm which had been red with blood was now greying. Swiftly, the infection of space was taking over.

Nancy Rorke said shrilly, "You are not human." She got up and moved for the medicine cabinet. Sam Knox tilted the dis-gun, and the heat ray lanced out and burned a hole in the chair ahead of her. She sat down quickly, with a white face.

Ned Hawkins' eyes were brilliant as a trapped beast. He looked at his greying arm. It was swelling now and becoming painful. His face contorted. He breathed agonizedly.

Pell reached for the medicine cabinet, and Sam burned the knob under his hands.

"You devil!" Ned was breathing hard. Sweat stood on his forehead. "What do you want?"

"The truth,"

"I know nothing."

Sam said, "I am going to burn the penicillin. You people can't keep away from the drug. It's either burn the drug or one of you." He pointed the dis-gun at the medicine cabinet in the corner.

"I'll talk—give me the drug—I'll talk!" Ned began to babble in confession.

Sam said mercilessly, "The proof. Where is proof of what you say?"

"On the *Aeries*. There is a false compartment under the control seat. All the stolen goods except the one asteroid jewel are there."

Sam lowered the gun. "Give him the drug quickly, and you will save him for Miner's justice."

As Sam bent to untie them, one of the Miners said, "If the stolen goods are in the *Aeries*, we owe you an apology."

ON THE *Wanderer* Sam Knox finished the astrogation. The jets were warming, for the first blast of fuel that would send him Terra-bound.

Nancy Rorke stood watching over his shoulder. "And what would you do if I would not go with you?"

Sam smiled at her. "I think I'd carry you away regardless."

"I am afraid you would, but I am more afraid you might not, so I go willingly."

From the doorway Pell said quietly, "The jets are perhaps not so charming, but they are ready, too."

Sam fed fuel to the jets, and the *Wanderer* leaped like a hound, heading for home.

