

CLASSICS TO GO

# AMAZING

STORIES  
VOLUME 61



ALAN EDWARD NOURSE

# **Amazing Stories**

**Volume 61**

**Alan Edward Nourse**

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# Gold in the Sky

## YOU WILL MEET—

**Greg Hunter.** Test pilot—happy only when his life hung in the balance.

**Tom Hunter.** A pioneer—his frontier was hidden in test tubes.

**Johnny Coombs.** A prospector—he returned from the asteroids too soon.

**Merrill Tawney.** An industrialist—he sought plunder even beyond the stars.

**Major Briarton.** A government man—his creed was law and order.





**They fought with whatever was handy, not bothering to figure the odds.**

# 1. Trouble Times Two

The sun was glowing dull red as it slipped down behind the curving horizon of Mars, but Gregory Hunter was not able to see it.

There was no viewscreen in the ship's cabin; it was too tiny for that. Greg twisted around in the cockpit that had been built just big enough to hold him, and shifted his long legs against the brace-webbing, trying to get them comfortable.

He knew he was afraid ... but nobody else knew that, not even the captain waiting at the control board on the satellite, and in spite of the fear Greg Hunter would not have traded places at this moment with anyone else in the universe.

He had worked too hard and waited too long for this moment.

He heard the count-down monitor clicking in his ears, and his hands clenched into fists. How far from Mars would he be ten minutes from now? He didn't know. Farther than any man had ever traveled before in the space of ten minutes, he knew, and faster. How far and how fast would depend on him alone.

"All set, Greg?" It was the captain's voice in the earphones.

"All set, Captain."

"You understand the program?"

Greg nodded. "Twenty-four hours out, twenty-four hours back, ninety degrees to the ecliptic, and all the acceleration I can stand both ways."



Greg grinned to himself. He thought of the months of conditioning he had gone through to prepare for this run ... the hours in the centrifuge to build up his tolerance to acceleration, the careful diet, the rigorous hours of physical conditioning. It was only one experiment, one tiny step in the work that could someday give men the stars, but to Gregory Hunter at this moment it was everything.

"Good luck, then." The captain cut off, and the blastoff buzzer sounded.

He was off. His heart hammered in his throat, and his eyes ached fiercely, but he paid no attention. His finger crept to the air-speed indicator, then to the cut-off switch. When the pressure became too great, when he began to black out, he would press it.

But not yet. It was speed they wanted; they had to know how much acceleration a man could take for how long and still survive, and now it was up to him to show them.

Fleetingly, he thought of Tom ... poor old stick-in-the-mud Tom, working away in his grubby little Mars-bound laboratory, watching bacteria grow. Tom could never have qualified for a job like this. Tom couldn't even go into free-fall for ten minutes without getting sick all over the place. Greg felt a surge of pity for his brother, and then a twinge of malicious anticipation. Wait until Tom heard the reports on *this* run! It was all right to spend your time poking around with bottles and test tubes if you couldn't do anything else, but it took something special to pilot an XP ship for Project Star-Jump. And after this run was over, even Tom would have to admit it....

There was a lurch, and quite suddenly the enormous pressure was gone.



Something was wrong. He hadn't pushed the cut-off button, yet the ship's engines were suddenly silent. He jabbed at the power switch. Nothing happened. Then the side-jets sputted, and he was slammed sideways into the cot.

He snapped on the radio speaker. "Control ... can you hear me? Something's gone wrong out here...."

"Nothing's wrong," the captain's voice said in his earphones. "Just sit tight. I'm bringing you back in. There's a call here from Sun Lake City. They want you down there in a hurry. We'll have to scratch you on this run."

"*Who* wants me down there?"

"The U.N. Council office. Signed by Major Briarton himself and I can't argue with the Major. We're bringing you in."

Greg Hunter sank back, disappointment so thick he could taste it in his mouth. Sun Lake City! That meant two days at least, one down, one back, maybe more if connections weren't right. It meant that the captain would send Morton or one of the others out in his place. It meant....

Suddenly he thought of what else it meant, and a chill ran up his back.

There was only one reason Major Briarton would call him in like this. Something had happened to Dad.

Greg leaned back in the cot, suddenly tense, as a thousand frightful possibilities flooded his mind. It could only mean that Dad was in some kind of trouble.

And if anything had happened to Dad....

The sun was sinking rapidly toward the horizon when the city finally came into sight in the distance, but try as he

would, Tom Hunter could not urge more than thirty-five miles an hour from the huge lurching vehicle he was driving.

On an open paved highway the big pillow-wheeled Sloppy Joe would do sixty in a breeze, but this desert route was far from a paved road. Inside the pressurized passenger cab, Tom gripped the shock-bars with one arm and the other leg, and jammed the accelerator to the floor. The engine coughed, but thirty-five was all it would do.

Through the windshield Tom could see the endless rolling dunes of the Martian desert stretching to the horizon on every side. They called Mars the Red Planet, but it was not red when you were close to it. There were multitudes of colors here ... yellow, orange, brown, gray, occasional patches of gray-green ... all shifting and changing in the fading sunlight. Off to the right were the worn-down peaks of the Mesabi II, one of the long, low mountain ranges of almost pure iron ore that helped give the planet its dull red appearance from outer space. And behind him, near the horizon, the tiny sun glowed orange out of a blue-black sky.

Tom fought the wheel as the Sloppy Joe jounced across a dry creek bed, and swore softly to himself. Why hadn't he kept his head and waited for the mail ship that had been due at the Lab to give him a lift back? He'd have been in Sun Lake City an hour ago ... but the urgency of the message had driven caution from his mind.

A summons from the Mars Coordinator of the U.N. Interplanetary Council was the same as an order ... but there was more to Tom's haste than that. There was only one reason that Major Briarton would be calling him in to Sun Lake City, and that reason meant trouble.

Something was wrong. Something had happened to Dad.

Now Tom peered up at the dark sky, squinting into the sun. Somewhere out there between Mars and Jupiter was a no-man's-land of danger, a great circling ring of space dirt and debris, the Asteroid belt. And somewhere out there, Dad was working.

Tom thought for a moment of the pitiful little mining rig that Roger Hunter had taken out to the Belt ... the tiny orbit-ship to be used for headquarters and storage of the ore; the even tinier scout ship, Pete Racely's old *Scavenger* that he had sold to Roger Hunter for back taxes and repairs when he went broke in the Belt looking for his Big Strike. It wasn't much of a mining rig for anybody to use, and the dangers of a small mining operation in the Asteroid Belt were frightening. It took skill to bring a little scout-ship in for a landing on an asteroid rock hardly bigger than the ship itself; it took even more skill to rig the controlled-Murexide charges to blast the rock into tiny fragments, and then run out the shiny magnetic net to catch the explosion debris and bring it in to the hold of the orbit-ship....

Tom Hunter scowled, trying to shake off the feeling of uneasiness that was nibbling at his mind. Asteroid mining was dangerous ... but Dad was no novice. Nobody on Mars knew how to handle a mining rig better than Roger Hunter did. He knew what he was doing out there, there was no real danger for him or was there....

Roger Hunter, a good man, a gentle and peaceful man, had finally seen all he could stomach of Jupiter Equilateral and its company mining policies six months before. He had told them so in plain, simple language when he turned in his resignation. They didn't try to stop him ... a man was still free to quit a job on Mars if he wanted to, even a job with Jupiter Equilateral. But it was an open secret that the big mining outfit had not liked Roger Hunter's way of resigning, taking half a dozen of their first-rate mining engineers with

him. There had been veiled threats, rumors of attempts to close the markets to Roger Hunter's ore, in open violation of U.N. Council policies on Mars....

Tom fought the wheel as the big tractor lumbered up another rise, and the huge plastic bubble of Sun Lake City came into view far down the valley below.

He thought of Greg. Had Greg been summoned too? He closed his lips tightly as a wave of anger passed through his mind. If anything had happened, no matter what, he thought, Greg would be there. Taking over and running things, as usual. He thought of the last time he had seen his brother, and then deliberately blocked out the engulfing bitterness.

That had been more than a year ago. Maybe Greg had changed since then.

But somehow, Tom didn't think so.

The Sloppy Joe was on the valley floor now, and ahead the bubble covering the city was drawing closer. The sun was almost gone; lights were appearing inside the plastic shielding. Born and raised on Mars, Tom had seen the teeming cities of Earth only once in his life ... but to him none of the splendors of the Earth cities could match the simple, quiet beauty of this Martian outpost settlement. There had been a time when people had said that Sun Lake City could never be built, that it could never survive if it were, but with each successive year it grew larger and stronger, the headquarters city for the planet that had become the new frontier of Earth.

The radiophone buzzed, and the airlock guard hailed him when he returned the signal. Tom gave his routine ID. He guided the tractor into the lock, waited until pressure and atmosphere rose to normal, and then leaped out of the cab.

Five minutes later he was walking across the lobby of the Interplanetary Council building, stepping into the down elevator. Three flights below he stepped out into the office corridor of the U.N. Interplanetary Council on Mars.

If there was trouble, this was where he would find it.

He paused for a minute before the gray plastic door marked MAJOR FRANK BRIARTON in raised stainless steel letters. Then he pushed open the door and walked into the ante-room.

It was empty. Suddenly he felt a touch on his shoulder. Behind him, a familiar voice said, "Hello, Twin."

At first glance they looked like carbon copies of each other, although they were no more identical than identical twins ever are. Greg stood a good two inches taller than Tom. His shoulders were broad, and there was a small gray scar over one eye that stood out in contrast to the healthy tanned color of his face. Tom was of slighter build, and wirier, his skin much more pale.

But they had the same dark hair, the same gray eyes, the same square, stubborn line to the jaw. They looked at each other for a moment without speaking. Then Greg grinned and clapped his brother on the shoulder.

"So you got here, finally," he said. "I was beginning to think I'd have to go out on the desert and find you."

"Oh, I got here, all right," Tom said. "I see you did too."

"Yes," Greg said heavily. "Can't argue with the major, you know."

"But what does he want?"

"How should I know? All he said was to get down here fast. And now he isn't even here himself."

"Is Dad on Mars?" Tom asked.

Greg looked at him. "I don't know."

"We could check the register."

"I already checked it. He has not logged in, but that doesn't mean anything."

"I suppose not," Tom said glumly.

They were silent for a moment. Then Greg said, "Look, what are you worried about? Nothing could have happened to Dad. He's been mining the Belt for years."

"I know. I just wish he were here, that's all. If he's in some kind of trouble...."

"What kind of trouble? You're looking for spooks."

"Spooks like Jupiter Equilateral, maybe," Tom said. "They could make plenty of trouble for Dad."

"With the U.N. in the driver's seat here? They wouldn't dare. Why do you think the major rides them so hard with all the claim-filing regulations? He'd give his right arm for a chance to break that outfit into pieces."

"I still wish somebody had gone out to the Belt with Dad," Tom said.

Just then the door opened. The newcomer was a tall, gray-haired man with U.N. Council stripes on his lapel, and major's rockets on his shoulders. "Sorry I'm late, boys," Major Briarton said. "I'd hoped to be here when you arrived. I'm sorry to pull you in here like this, but I'm afraid I had no choice. When did you boys hear from your father last?"

They looked at each other. "I saw him six weeks ago," Tom said. "Just before he left to go out to the Belt again."

"Nothing since then?"

"Not a word."

The major chewed his lip. "Greg?"

"I had a note at Christmas, I think. But what...."

"What did he say in the note?"

"He said Merry Christmas and Happy New Year. Dad isn't much of a letter writer."

"Nothing at all about what he was doing?"

Greg shook his head. "Look, Major, if there's some sort of trouble...."

"Yes, I'm afraid there's trouble," the major said. He looked up at them, and spread his hands helplessly. "There isn't any easy way to tell you, but you've got to know. There's been an accident, out in the Belt."

"Accident?" Greg said.

"A very serious accident. A fuel tank exploded in the scooter your father was riding back to the *Scavenger*. It must have been very sudden, and by the time help arrived...." The major broke off, unable to find words.

For a long moment there was utter silence in the room. Outside, an elevator was buzzing, and a typewriter clicked monotonously somewhere in the building.

Then Tom Hunter broke the silence. "Who was it, Major?" he said. "Who killed Dad? Tell us, or we'll find out!"



## 2. Jupiter Equilateral

For a moment, Major Briarton just stared at him. Then he was on his feet, shaking his head as he came around the desk. "Tom, use your head," he said. "It's as much of a shock to me as it is to you, but you can't afford to jump to false conclusions...."

Tom Hunter looked up bitterly. "He's dead, isn't he?"

"Yes, he's dead. He must have died the instant of the explosion...."

"You mean you don't know?"

"I wasn't there at the time it happened, no."

"Then who was?"

Major Briarton spread his hands helplessly. "Nobody was. Your father was alone. From what we could tell later, he'd left the *Scavenger* to land on one of his claims, using the ship's scooter for the landing. He was on the way back to the *Scavenger* when the rear tank exploded. There wasn't enough left of it to tell what went wrong ... but it was an accident, there was no evidence to suggest anything else."

Tom looked at him. "You really believe that?"

"I can only tell you what we found."

"Well, I don't believe it for a minute," Tom said angrily. "How long have you and Dad been friends? Twenty years? Twenty-five? Do you really think Dad would have an accident with a mining rig?"

"I know he was an expert engineer," the major said. "But things can happen that even an expert can't foresee, mining in the Belt."

"Things like a fuel tank exploding? Not to Dad, they would never happen. I don't care what anybody says...."

"Easy, Tom," Greg said.

"Well, I won't take it easy. Dad was too careful for something like that to happen. If he had an accident, somebody *made* it happen."

Greg turned to the major. "What was Dad doing out there?"

"Mining."

"By himself? No crew at all?"

"No, he was alone."

"I thought the regulations said there always had to be at least two men working an asteroid claim."

"That's right. Your father had Johnny Coombs with him when he left Sun Lake City. They signed out as a team ... and then Johnny came back to Mars on the first shuttle ship."

"How come?"

"Not even Johnny knows. Your father just sent him back, and there was nothing we could do about it then. The U.N. has no jurisdiction in the belt, unless a major crime has been committed." Major Briarton shook his head helplessly. "If a man is determined to mine a claim all by himself out there, he can find a dozen different ways to wiggle out of the regulations."

"But Dad would never be that stupid," Greg said. "If he was alone when it happened, who found him?"

"A routine U.N. Patrol ship. When Roger failed to check in at the regular eight-hour signal, they went out to see what was wrong. But by the time they reached him, it was too late to help."

"I just don't get it," Greg said. "Dad had more sense than to try to mine out there all by himself."

"I know," the major said. "I don't know the answer. I had the Patrol ship go over the scene of the accident with a comb after they found what had happened, but there was nothing there to find. It was an accident, and that's that."

"What about Jupiter Equilateral?" Tom said hotly. "Everybody knows they were out to get Dad ... why don't you find out what *they* were doing when it happened, bring them in for questioning...."

"I can't do that, I haven't a scrap of evidence," the major said wearily.

"Why can't you? You're the Mars Coordinator, aren't you? You act like you're scared of them."

Major Briarton's lips tightened angrily. "All right, since you put it that way ... I *am* scared of them. They're big, and they're powerful. If they had their way, there wouldn't be any United Nations control on Mars, there wouldn't be *anybody* to fight them and keep them in check. There wouldn't be any independent miners out in the Belt, either, because they'd all be bought out or dead, and Earth would pay through the nose for every ounce of metal that they got from the Asteroid Belt. That company has been trying to drive the U.N. off Mars for thirty years, and they've come so close to it that it scares me plenty." He pushed his chair back sharply and rose to his feet. "And that is exactly why I refuse to stir up a mess over this thing, unhappy as it is, without something more than suspicions and rumors to back

me up ... because all Jupiter Equilateral needs is one big issue to make us look like fools out here, and we're through."

He crossed the room to a wall cabinet, opened it, and pulled out a scarred aluminum box. "We found this in the cabin of the *Scavenger*. I thought you boys might want it."

They both recognized it instantly ... the battered old spacer's pack that Roger Hunter had used for as long as they could remember. It seemed to them, suddenly, as if a part of him had appeared here in the room with them. Greg looked at the box and turned away. "You open it," he said to Tom in a sick voice.

There was nothing much inside ... some clothing, a pipe and tobacco pouch, a jack knife, half a dozen other items so familiar that Tom could hardly bear to touch them. At the bottom of the pack was the heavy leather gun case which had always held Roger Hunter's ancient .44 revolver. Tom dropped it back without even opening the flap. He closed the box and took a deep breath. "Then you really believe that it was an accident and nothing more?" he said to the major.

Major Briarton shook his head. "What I think or don't think doesn't make any difference. It just doesn't matter. In order to do anything, I've got to have evidence, and there just isn't any evidence. I can't even take a ship out there for a second look, with the evidence I have, and that's all there is to it."

"But you think that maybe it wasn't an accident, just the same," Tom pursued.

The major hesitated. Then he shook his head again. "I'm sorry, but I've got to stand on what I've said. And I think

you'd better stand on it, too. There's nothing else to be done."

It should have been enough, but it wasn't. As Tom Hunter walked with his brother down the broad Upper Ramp to the business section of Sun Lake City, he could not shake off the feeling of helpless anger, the growing conviction that Roger Hunter's death involved something more than the tragic accident in space that Major Briarton had insisted it was.

"He didn't tell us everything he knew," Tom said fiercely. "He didn't say everything he wanted to say, either. He doesn't think it was an accident any more than I do."

"How do you know, are you a mind reader?"

"No."

"Well, Dad wasn't a superman, either. He was taking an awful risk, trying to work a mining rig by himself, and he had a bad break. Why do you have to have somebody to blame for it?"

"Keep talking," Tom said. "You'll convince yourself yet."

Greg just jammed his hands in his pockets, and they walked in silence for a moment.

For Tom and Greg Hunter, Sun Lake City had always been home. Now they walked along the Main Concourse, Tom with the aluminum box under his arm, Greg with his own spacer's pack thrown over his shoulder. They didn't talk; rather than being drawn closer by the news of the tragedy, it seemed that they had drawn farther apart, as though the one common link that had held them together had suddenly been broken.

Finally Tom broke the silence. "At least there's one thing we can do," he said. "I'm going to call Johnny Coombs."

He shortly found a phone booth and dialed a number. Johnny had been a friend of the family for years; he and Roger Hunter had been partners in many mining ventures in the Asteroid Belt before Roger had taken his position with Jupiter Equilateral. If Johnny had any suspicions that Roger Hunter's accident had been more than an accident, he certainly would not hesitate to voice them....

After a dozen rings, Tom hung up, tried another number. There was no answer there, either. Frowning, Tom rang the city's central paging system. "Put in a personal call for Johnny Coombs," he said when the "record" signal flashed on. "Tell him to contact the Hunters when he comes in. We'll be at home...."

They resumed their silent walk. When they reached H wing on the fourth level, they turned right down an apartment corridor, and stopped in front of a familiar doorway. Tom pressed his palm against the lock-plate, and the door swung open.

It was home to them, the only home they had ever known. Soft lights sprang up on the walls of the apartment as the door opened. Tom saw the old bookcases lining the walls, the drafting-board and light at the far end of the room, the simple chairs and dining table, the door which led into the bedroom and kitchen beyond. The room had the slightly disheveled look that it had had ever since Mom had died ... a slipper on the floor here, a book face down on the couch there....

It looked as though Dad had just stepped out for an hour or so.

Tom was three steps into the room before he saw the visitor.

The man was sitting comfortably in Roger Hunter's easy chair, a short, fat man with round pink cheeks that sagged a

little and a double chin that rested on his neck scarf. There were two other men in the room, both large and broad-shouldered; one of them nodded to the fat man, and moved to stand between the boys and the door.

The fat man was out of his seat before the boys could speak, smiling at them and holding out his hand. "I wanted to be sure to see you before you left the city," he was saying, "so we just came on in to wait. I hope you don't mind our ... butting in, so to speak." He chuckled, looking from one twin to the other. "You don't know me, I suppose. I'm Merrill Tawney. Representing Jupiter Equilateral, you know."

Tom took the card he was holding out, looked at the name and the tiny gold symbol in the corner, a letter "J" in the center of a triangle. He handed the card to Greg. "I've seen you before," he told the fat man. "What do you want with us?"

Tawney smiled again, spreading his hands. "We've heard about the tragedy, of course. A shocking thing ... Roger was one of our group so recently. We wanted you to know that if there is anything at all we can do to help, we'd be only too glad...."

"Thanks," Greg said. "But we're doing just fine."

Tawney's smile tightened a little, but he hung onto it. "I always felt close to your father," he said. "All of us at Jupiter Equilateral did. We were all sorry to see him leave."

"I bet you were," Greg said, "he was the best mining engineer you ever had. But Dad could never stand liars, or crooked ways of doing business."

One of the men started for Greg, but the fat man stopped him with a wave of his hand. "We had our differences of



opinion," he said. "We saw things one way, your father saw them another way. But he was a fine man, one of the finest...."

"Look, Mr. Tawney, you'd better say what you came to say and get out of here," Greg said dangerously, "before we give your friends here something to do."

"I merely came to offer you some help," Tawney said. He was no longer smiling. "Since your father's death, you two have acquired certain responsibilities. I thought we might relieve you of some of them."

"What sort of responsibilities?"

"You have an unmanned orbit-ship which is now a derelict in the Asteroid Belt. You have a scout-ship out there also. You can't just leave them there as a navigation hazard to every ship traveling in the sector. There are also a few mining claims which aren't going to be of much value to you now."

"I see," Greg said. "Are you offering to buy Dad's mining rig?"

"Well, I doubt very much that we'd have any use for it, as such. But we could save you the trouble of going out there to haul it in."

"That's very thoughtful," Greg said. "How much are you offering?"

Tom looked up in alarm. "Wait a minute," he said. "That rig's not for sale...."

"How much?" Greg repeated.

"Forty thousand dollars," Merrill Tawney said. "Ship, rig and claims. We'll even pay the transfer tax."

Tom stared at the man, wondering if he had heard right. He knew what Roger Hunter had paid for the rig; he had been with Dad when the papers were signed. Tawney's offer was three times as much as the rig was worth.

But Greg was shaking his head. "I don't think we could sell at that price."

The fat man's hands fluttered. "You understand that those ships are hardly suited to a major mining operation like ours," he said, "and the claims...." He dismissed them with a wave of his hand. "Still, we'd want you to be happy with the price. Say, forty-five thousand?"

Greg hesitated, shook his head again. "I guess we'd better think it over, Mr. Tawney."

"Fifty thousand is absolutely the top," Tawney said sharply. "I have the papers right here, drawn up for your signatures, but I'm afraid we can't hold the offer open."

"I don't know, we might want to do some mining ourselves," Greg said. "For all we know, Dad might have struck some rich ore on one of those claims."

Tawney laughed. "I hardly think so. Those claims were all Jupiter Equilateral rejects. Our own engineers found nothing but low grade ore on any of them."

"Still, it might be fun to look."

"It could be very expensive fun. Asteroid mining is a dangerous business, even for experts. For amateurs...." Tawney spread his hands. "Accidents occur...."

"Yes, we've heard about those accidents," Greg said coldly. "I don't think we're quite ready to sell, Mr. Tawney. We may never be ready to sell to you, so don't stop breathing until