

SALINE SOLUTION

"Oft has the Corps, in its steadfast championing of minority rights, run foul of the massive influence of entrenched pressure groups. Consul General (later Secretary) Magnan stirringly reaffirmed hallowed Corps principles of fair play in his deft apportionment of minerals properties in the Belt . . ."

—Vol. III, Reel 21, 481 AE (AD 2942)

Consul-General Magnan gingerly fingered a heavily rubber-banded sheaf of dog-eared documents. "I haven't rushed into precipitate action on this claim, Retief," he said. "The consulate has grave responsibilities here in the Belt. One must weigh all aspects of the situation, consider the ramifications; what consequences would arise from a grant of minerals rights on the planetoid to this claimant?"

"The claim looked all right to me," Retief said. "Seventeen copies with attachments. Why not process it? You've had it on your desk for a week."

Magnan's eyebrows went up. "You've a personal interest in this claim, Retief?"

"Every day you wait is costing them money; that hulk they use for an ore-carrier is in a parking orbit piling up demurrage."

"I see you've become emotionally involved in the affairs of a group of obscure miners; you haven't yet learned the true diplomat's happy faculty of non-identification with specifics—or should I say identification with non-specifics?"

"They're not a wealthy outfit, you know. In fact, I understand this claim is their sole asset—unless you want to count the ore-carrier."

"The consulate is not concerned with the internal financial problems of the Sam's Last Chance Number Nine Mining Company."

"Careful," Retief said. "You almost identified yourself with a specific that time."

"Hardly, my dear Retief," Magnan said blandly. "The implication is mightier than the affidavit. You should study the records of the giants of Galactic diplomacy: Crodfoller, Wormwell, Spradley, Nitworth, Sternwheeler, Barnshingle; the roll-call of those names rings like the majestic tread of . . . of . . ."

"Dinosaurs?" Retief suggested.

"An apt simile," Magnan nodded. "Those mighty figures, those armored hides—"

"Those tiny brains . . ."

Magnan smiled sadly. "I see you're indulging your penchant for distorted facetiae. Perhaps one day you'll learn the true worth of their contributions."

"I already have my suspicions."

The intercom chimed. Miss Gumble's features appeared on the desk screen.

"Mr. Leatherwell to see you, Mr. Magnan. He has no appointment—"

Magnan's eyebrows went up. "Send Mr. Leatherwell right in." He looked at Retief. "I had no idea Leatherwell was planning a call. I wonder what he's after?" Magnan looked anxious. "He's an important figure in Belt minerals circles. It's important to avoid arousing antagonism, while maintaining non-commitment. You may as well stay. You might pick up some valuable pointers technique-wise."

The door swung wide; Leatherwell strode into the room, his massive paunch buckled into fashionable vests of turquoise velvet and hung with the latest in fluorescent watch charms. He extended a large palm, pumped Magnan's flaccid arm vigorously.

"Ah, there, Mr. Consul-General. Good of you to receive me." He wiped his hand absently on his thigh, eyeing Retief questioningly.

"Mr. Retief, my Vice-Consul and Minerals Officer," Magnan said. "Do take a chair, Mr. Leatherwell. In what capacity can I serve today?"

"I am here, gentlemen," Leatherwell said, putting an immense yellow briefcase on Magnan's desk and settling himself in a power rocker, "on behalf of my company, General Minerals. General Minerals has long been aware, gentlemen, of the austere conditions obtaining here in the Belt, to which public servants like yourselves are subjected." Leatherwell bobbed with the pitch of the rocker, smiling complacently at Magnan. "General Minerals is more than a great industrial combine; it is an organization with a heart." Leatherwell reached for his breast pocket, missed as the chair pitched, tried again.

"How do you turn this damned thing off?" he growled.

Magnan half-rose, peering over Leatherwell's briefcase. "The switch just there—on the arm . . ."

The executive fumbled. There was a click, and the chair subsided with a sigh of compressed air.

"That's better." Leatherwell drew out a long slip of blue paper.

"To alleviate the boredom and brighten the lives of that hardy group of Terrestrials laboring here on Ceres to bring free enterprise to the Belt," he intoned, "General Minerals is presenting to the consulate—on their behalf—one hundred thousand credits for the construction of a Joy Center, to be equipped with the latest and finest in recreational equipment, including a Gourmet Model C banquet synthesizer, a forty-foot sublimation chamber, a five-thousand-tape library—with a number of choice items unobtainable in Boston—a twenty-foot Tri-D tank, and other amenities too numerous to mention." Leatherwell leaned back, beaming expectantly.

"Why, Mr. Leatherwell—we're overwhelmed, of course . . ." Magnan smiled dazedly past the briefcase. "But, I wonder if it's quite proper . . ."

"The gift is to the people, Mr. Consul. You merely accept on their behalf."

"I wonder if General Minerals realizes that the hardy Terrestrials laboring on Ceres are limited to the consular staff?" Retief said. "And the staff consists of Mr. Magnan, Miss Gumble, and myself—"

"Mr. Leatherwell is hardly interested in these details, Retief," Magnan cut in. "A public-spirited offer indeed, sir. As Terrestrial Consul—and on behalf of all Terrestrials here in the Belt—I accept with a humble awareness of—"

"Now, there was one other little matter," Leatherwell said. He leaned forward to open the briefcase, glancing over Magnan's littered desk-top. He extracted a bundle of papers, dropped them on the desk, then drew out a heavy document, passed it across to Magnan.

"Just a routine claim. I'd like to see it rushed through, as we have in mind some loading operations in the vicinity next week . . ."

"Certainly, Mr. Leatherwell." Magnan glanced at the papers, paused to read. He looked up. "Ah . . ."

"Something the matter, Mr. Consul?" Leatherwell demanded.

"It's just that—ah—I seem to recall—as a matter of fact . . ." Magnan looked at Retief. Retief took the papers, looked over the top sheet.

"95739-A. Sorry, Mr. Leatherwell. General Minerals has been anticipated. We're processing a prior claim—"

"Prior claim?" Leatherwell barked. "You've issued the grant?"

"Oh, no indeed, Mr. Leatherwell," Magnan replied quickly. "The claim hasn't yet been processed—"

"Then there's no difficulty," Leatherwell boomed. He glanced at his finger watch. "If you don't mind, I'll wait and take the grant along with me. I assume it will only take a minute or two to sign it and affix seals and so on?"

"The other claim was filed a full week ago—" Magnan started.

"Bah!" Leatherwell waved a hand impatiently. "These details can be arranged." He fixed an eye on Magnan. "I'm sure all of us here understand that it's in the public interest that minerals properties go to responsible firms, with adequate capital for proper development."

"Why, ah," Magnan said.

"The Sam's Last Chance Number Nine Mining Company is a duly chartered firm," Retief said. "Their claim is valid—"

"I know that hole-in-corner concern," Leatherwell snapped. "Mere irresponsible opportunists. General Minerals has spent millions—millions, I say—of the stockholders' funds in minerals explorations. Are they to be balked in realizing a fair return on their investment because these . . . these . . . adventurers have stumbled on a deposit? Not that the property is of any real value, of course," he added. "Quite an ordinary bit of rock. But General Minerals would find it convenient to consolidate its holdings."

"There are plenty of other rocks floating around in the Belt. Why not—"

"One moment, Retief," Magnan cut in. He looked across the desk at his junior with a severe expression. "As Consul-General, I'm quite capable of determining the relative merits of claims. As Mr. Leatherwell has pointed out, it's in the public interest to consider the question in depth—"

Leatherwell cleared his throat, "I might state at this time that General Minerals is prepared to be generous in dealing with these interlopers. I believe we would go so far as to offer them free title to certain GM holdings in exchange for their release of any alleged rights to the property in question—merely to simplify matters, of course."

"That seems more than fair to me," Magnan glowed.

"The Sam's people have a clear priority," Retief said. "I logged the claim in last Friday—"

"They have far from a clear title!" Leatherwell snapped. "And I can assure you GM will contest their claim, if need be, to the Supreme Court!"

"Just what holdings did you have in mind offering them, Mr. Leatherwell?" Magnan asked nervously.

Leatherwell reached into his briefcase, drew out a paper.

"2645-P," he read. "A quite massive body; crustal material, I imagine. It should satisfy these squatters' desire to own real estate in the Belt."

"I'll make a note of that," Magnan said, reaching for a pad.

"That's a bona fide offer, Mr. Leatherwell?" Retief asked.

"Certainly!"

"I'll record it as such," Magnan said, scribbling.

"And who knows," Leatherwell said. "It may turn out to contain some surprisingly rich finds . . ."

"And if they won't accept it?" Retief asked.

"Then, I daresay General Minerals will find a remedy in the courts, sir!"

"Oh, I hardly think that will be necessary—" Magnan said.

"Then there's another routine matter," Leatherwell said. He passed a second document across to Magnan. "GM is requesting an injunction to restrain these same parties from aggravated trespass. I'd appreciate it if you'd push it through at once. There's a matter of a load of illegally obtained ore involved, as well."

"Certainly, Mr. Leatherwell. I'll see to it myself—"

"The papers are all drawn up; our legal department will vouch for their correctness. Just sign here . . ." Leatherwell spread out the paper, handed Magnan a pen.

"Wouldn't it be a good idea to read that over first?" Retief said.

Leatherwell frowned impatiently.

"You'll have adequate time to familiarize yourself with the details later, Retief," Magnan snapped, taking the pen. "No need to waste Mr. Leatherwell's valuable time." He scratched a signature on the paper. Leatherwell rose, gathered up his papers from Magnan's desk, dumped them into the briefcase. "Riff-raff, of course. Their kind has no business in the Belt—"

Retief rose, crossed to the desk, and held out a hand. "I believe you gathered in an official document, along with your own, Mr. Leatherwell; by error, of course."

"What's that?" Leatherwell bridled. Retief smiled, waiting. Magnan opened his mouth—

"It was under your papers, Mr. Leatherwell," Retief said. "It's the thick one, with the rubber bands."

Leatherwell dug in his briefcase, produced the document. "Well, fancy finding this here . . ." he growled. He shoved the papers into Retief's hand.

"You're a very observant young fellow." He closed the briefcase with a snap. "I trust you'll have a bright future with the CDT."

"Really, Retief," Magnan said reprovingly. "There was no need to trouble Mr. Leatherwell . . ."

Leatherwell rose, crossed to the door. He paused, directed a sharp look at Retief, turned a bland expression on Magnan. "I trust you'll communicate the proposal to the interested parties. Inasmuch as time is of the essence of the GM position, our offer can only be held open until 0900 Greenwich, tomorrow. I'll call again at that time to finalize matters. I trust there'll be no impediment to a satisfactory settlement at that time. I should dislike to embark on lengthy litigation."

Magnan hurried around his desk to open the door. He turned back to fix Retief with an exasperated frown.

"A crass display of boorishness, Retief," he snapped. "You've embarrassed a most influential member of the business community—and for nothing more than a few miserable forms."

"Those forms represent somebody's stake in what might be a valuable property—"

"They're mere paper until they've been processed!"

"Still—"

"My responsibility is to the Public interest—not to a fly-by-night group of prospectors."

"They found it first."

"Bah! A worthless rock; after Mr. Leatherwell's munificent gesture—"

"Better rush his check through before he thinks it over and changes his mind."

"Good heavens!" Magnan clutched the check, buzzed for Miss Gumble. She swept in, took Magnan's instructions, and left. Retief waited while Magnan glanced over the injunction, then nodded.

"Quite in order. A person called Sam Mancziewicz appears to be the principal. The address given is the Jolly Barge Hotel; that would be that converted derelict ship in orbit 6942, I assume?"

Retief nodded. "That's what they call it."

"As for the ore-carrier, I'd best impound it, pending settlement of the matter." Magnan drew a form from a drawer, filled in blanks, shoved the paper across the desk. He turned and consulted a wall chart. "The hotel is nearby at the moment, as it happens. Take the consulate dinghy. If you get out there right away, you'll catch them before the evening binge has developed fully."

"I take it that's your diplomatic way of telling me that I'm now a process server." Retief took the papers and tucked them into an inside pocket.

"One of the many functions a diplomat is called on to perform in a small consular post. Excellent experience. I needn't warn you to be circumspect. These miners are an unruly lot—especially when receiving bad news."

"Aren't we all?" Retief rose. "I don't suppose there's any prospect of your signing off that claim so that I can take a little good news along, too . . . ?"

"None whatever," Magnan snapped. "They've been made a most generous offer. If that fails to satisfy them, they have recourse through the courts."

"Fighting a suit like that costs money. The Sam's Last Chance Mining Company hasn't got any."

"Need I remind you—"

"I know; that's none of our concern."

"On your way out," Magnan said as Retief turned to the door, "ask Miss Gumble to bring in the Gourmet catalog from the Commercial Library. I want to check on the specifications of the Model C Banquet synthesizer."

* * *

An hour later, nine hundred miles from Ceres and fast approaching the Jolly Barge Hotel, Retief keyed the skiff's transmitter.

"CDT 347-89 calling Navy FP-VO-6."

"Navy VO-6 here, CDT," a prompt voice came back. A flickering image appeared on the small screen. "Oh, hi there, Mr. Retief. What brings you

out in the cold night air?"

"Hello, Henry. I'm estimating the Jolly Barge in ten minutes. It looks like a busy night ahead. I may be moving around a little. How about keeping an eye on me? I'll be carrying a personnel beacon. Monitor it, and if I switch it into high, come in fast. I can't afford to be held up. I've got a big meeting in the morning."

"Sure thing, Mr. Retief. We'll keep an eye open."

* * *

Retief dropped a ten credit note on the bar, accepted a glass and a squat bottle of black Marsberry brandy, and turned to survey the low-ceilinged room, a former hydroponics deck now known as the Jungle Bar. Under the low ceiling, unpruned Ipomoea batatas and Lathyrus odoratus vines sprawled in a tangle that filtered the light of the S-spectrum glare panels to a muted green. A six-foot trideo screen salvaged from the wreck of a Concordiat transport blared taped music in the style of two centuries past. At the tables heavy-shouldered men, in bright-dyed suit liners played cards, clanked bottles, and carried on shouted conversations.

Carrying the bottle and glass, Retief moved across to an empty chair at one of the tables.

"You gentlemen mind if I join you?"

Five unshaved faces turned to study Retief's six foot three, his closecut black hair, his non-committal grey coverall, the scars on his knuckles. A red-head with a broken nose nodded. "Pull up a chair, stranger."

"You workin' a claim, pardner?"

"Just looking around."

"Try a shot of this rock juice."

"Don't do it, Mister. He makes it himself."

"Best rock juice this side of Luna."

"Say, feller—"

"The name's Retief."

"Retief, you ever play Drift?"

"Can't say that I did."

"Don't gamble with Sam, pardner. He's the local champ."

"How do you play it?"

The black-browed miner who had suggested the game rolled back his sleeve to reveal a sinewy forearm, put his elbow on the table.

"You hook forefingers, and put a glass right up on top. The man that takes

a swallow wins. If the drink spills, it's drinks for the house."

"A man don't often win outright," the red-head said cheerfully. "But it makes for plenty of drinkin'."

Retief put his elbow on the table. "I'll give it a try."

The two men hooked forefingers. The red-head poured a tumbler half full of rock juice, placed it atop the two fists. "OK, boys. Go!"

The man named Sam gritted his teeth; his biceps tensed; his knuckles grew white. The glass trembled. Then it moved—toward Retief. Sam hunched his shoulders, straining.

"That's the stuff, Mister!"

"What's the matter, Sam? You tired?"

The glass moved steadily closer to Retief's face.

"A hundred the new man makes it!"

"Watch Sam; any minute now . . ."

The glass slowed, paused. Retief's wrist twitched and the glass crashed to the table top. A shout went up. Sam leaned back with a sigh, massaging his hand.

"That's some arm you got there, Mister," he said. "If you hadn't jumped just then . . ."

"I guess the drinks are on me," Retief said.

Two hours later Retief's Marsberry bottle stood empty on the table beside half a dozen others.

"We were lucky," Sam Mancziewicz was saying. "You figure the original volume of the planet; say 245,000,000,000 cubic miles. The deBerry theory calls for a collapsed-crystal core no more than a mile in diameter. There's your odds."

"And you believe you've found a fragment of this core?"

"Damn right we have. Couple of million tons if it's an ounce—and at three credits a ton delivered at Port Syrtis, we're set for life. About time, too. Twenty years I've been in the Belt. Got two kids I haven't seen for five years. Things are going to be different now."

"Hey, Sam; tone it down. You don't have to broadcast to every claim jumper in the Belt—"

"Our claim's on file at the consulate," Sam said. "As soon as we get the grant—"

"When's that gonna be? We been waitin' a week now."

"I've never seen any collapsed-crystal metal," Retief said. "I'd like to take a

look at it."

"Sure; come on, I'll run you over. It's about an hour's run. We'll take our skiff. You want to go along, Willy?"

"I got a bottle to go," Willy said. "See you in the morning."

The two men descended in the lift to the boat bay, suited up, and strapped into the cramped boat. A bored attendant cycled the launch doors, levered the release that propelled the skiff out and clear of the Jolly Barge Hotel. Retief caught a glimpse of a tower of lights spinning majestically against the black of space as the drive hurled the tiny boat away.

* * *

Retief's feet sank ankle deep into the powdery surface that glistened like snow in the glare of the distant sun.

"It's funny stuff," Sam's voice sounded in his ear. "Under a gee of gravity, you'd sink out of sight. The stuff cuts diamond like butter—but temperature changes break it down into a powder. A lot of it's used just like this, as an industrial abrasive. Easy to load, too. Just drop a suction line and start pumping."

"And this whole rock is made of the same material?"

"Sure is. We ran plenty of test bores, and a full schedule of soundings. I've got the reports back aboard Gertie—that's our lighter."

"And you've already loaded a cargo here?"

"Yep. We're running out of capital fast. I need to get that cargo to port in a hurry—before the outfit goes into involuntary bankruptcy. With this strike, that'd be a crime. By the time the legal fees were paid off, we'd be broke again."

"What do you know about General Minerals, Sam?"

"You thinking of hiring on with them? Better read the fine print in your contract before you sign. Sneakiest bunch this side of a burglar's convention."

"They own a chunk of rock known as 2645-P. Do you suppose we could find it?"

"Oh, you're buying in, hey? Sure, we can find it. You damn sure want to look it over good if General Minerals is selling."

Back aboard the skiff, Mancziewicz flipped the pages of the chart book, consulted a table. "Yep, she's not too far off. Let's go see what GM's trying to unload . . .

* * *

The skiff hovered two miles from the giant boulder known as 2645-P. Retief and Mancziewicz looked it over at high magnification. "It don't look like

much, Retief," Sam said. "Let's go down and take a closer look."

The boat dropped rapidly toward the scarred surface of the tiny world, a floating mountain, glaring black and white in the spotlight of the sun. Sam frowned at his instrument panel.

"That's funny; my ion-counter is revving up. Looks like a drive trail, not more than an hour or two old. Somebody's been here . . ."

The boat grounded. Retief and Sam got out. The stony surface was littered with rock fragments varying in size from pebbles to great slabs twenty feet long, tumbled in a loose bed of dust and sand. Retief pushed off gently, drifted up to a vantage point atop an upended wedge of rock. Sam joined him.

"This is all igneous stuff," he said. "Not likely we'll find much here that would pay the freight to Syrtis—unless maybe you lucked onto some Bodean artifacts. They bring plenty."

He flipped a binocular in place as he talked, scanned the riven landscape. "Hey!" he said. "Over there . . ."

Retief followed Sam's pointing glove. He studied the dark patch against a smooth expanse of eroded rock.

"A friend of mine came across a chunk of the old planetary surface two years ago," Sam said thoughtfully. "Had a tunnel in it that'd been used as a storage depot by the Bodeans. Took out over two ton of hardware. Course, nobody's discovered how the stuff works yet, but it brings top prices . . ."

"Looks like water erosion," Retief said.

"Yep. This could be another piece of surface, all right. Could be a cave over there. The Bodeans liked caves, too. Must have been some war—but then, if it hadn't been, they wouldn't have tucked so much stuff away underground where it could weather the planetary break-up."

They descended, crossed the jumbled rocks with light, thirty-foot leaps.

"It's a cave, all right," Sam said, stooping to peer into the five-foot bore. Retief followed him inside.

"Let's get some light in here." Mancziewicz flipped on a beam. It glinted back from dull polished surfaces of Bodean synthetic. Sam's low whistle sounded in Retief's headset.

"That's funny," Retief said.

"Funny, Hell! It's hilarious. General Minerals trying to sell off a worthless rock to a tenderfoot—and it's loaded with Bodean hardware. No telling how much is here; the tunnel seems to go quite a ways back. And there may be more caves around here—"

"That's not what I mean. Do you notice your suit warming up?"

"Huh? Yeah, now that you mention it . . ."

Retief rapped with a gauntleted hand on the satiny black curve of the nearest Bodean artifact. It clunked dully through the suit. "That's not metal," he said. "It's plastic."

"There's something fishy here," Sam said. "This erosion; it looks more like a heat beam . . ."

"Sam," Retief said, turning; "it appears to me somebody has gone to a great deal of trouble to give a false impression here—"

Sam snorted. "I told you they were a crafty bunch." He started out of the cave, then paused, went to one knee to study the floor. "But maybe they outsmarted themselves," he said, his voice tense with excitement. "Look here!"

Retief looked. Sam's beam reflected from a fused surface of milky white, shot through with dirty yellow. He snapped a pointed instrument in place on his gauntlet, dug at one of the yellow streaks. It furrowed under the gouge, a particle adhering to the instrument. With his left hand, Mancziewicz opened a pouch clipped to his belt, carefully deposited the sample in a small orifice on the device in the pouch. He flipped a key, squinted at a dial.

"Atomic weight 197.2," he said. Retief turned down the audio volume on his headset as Sam's laughter rang in his helmet.

"Those clowns were out to stick you, Retief," he gasped, still chuckling. "They salted the rock with a cave full of Bodean artifacts—"

"Fake Bodean artifacts," Retief put in.

"They planed off the rock so it would look like an old beach, and then cut this cave with beamers. And they were boring through practically solid gold!"

"As good as that?"

Mancziewicz flashed the light around. "This stuff will assay out at a thousand credits a ton, easy. If the vein doesn't run to five thousand tons, the beers are on me." He snapped off the light. "Let's get moving, Retief. You want to sew this deal up before they get around to taking another look at it."

Back in the boat, Retief and Mancziewicz opened their helmets. "This calls for a drink," Sam said, extracting a pressure flask from the map case. "This rock's worth as much as mine, maybe more. You hit it lucky, Retief. Congratulations." He thrust out a hand.

"I'm afraid you've jumped to a couple of conclusions, Sam," Retief said. "I'm not out here to buy mining properties."

"You're not—then why—but man! Even if you didn't figure on buying . . ." He trailed off as Retief shook his head, unzipped his suit to reach to an inside pocket, take out a packet of folded papers.

"In my capacity as Terrestrial Vice-Consul, I'm serving you with an

injunction restraining you from further exploitation of the body known as 95739-A." He handed a paper across to Sam. "I also have here an Order impounding the vessel Gravel Gertie II."

Sam took the papers silently, sat looking at them. He looked up at Retief. "Funny; when you beat me at Drift and then threw the game so you wouldn't show me up in front of the boys, I figured you for a right guy. I've been spilling my heart out to you like you were my old grandma—an old-timer in the game like me." He dropped a hand, brought it up with a Browning 2mm pointed at Retief's chest.

"I could shoot you and dump you here with a slab over you, toss these papers in the john, and high-tail it with the load . . ."

"That wouldn't do you much good in the long run, Sam. Besides which you're not a criminal or an idiot."

Sam chewed his lip. "My claim is on file in the consulate, legal and proper. Maybe by now the grant's gone through and I've got clear title—"

"Other people have their eye on your rock, Sam. Ever meet a fellow called Leatherwell?"

"General Minerals, huh? They haven't got a leg to stand on."

"The last time I saw your claim, it was still lying in the pending file—just a bundle of paper until it's validated by the Consul. If Leatherwell contests it . . . well, his lawyers are on annual retainer. How long could you keep the suit going, Sam?"

Manczewicz closed his helmet with a decisive snap, motioned to Retief to do the same. He opened the hatch, sat with the gun on Retief.

"Get out, paper-pusher," his voice sounded thin in the headphones. "You'll get lonesome maybe, but your suit will keep you alive a few days. I'll tip somebody off before you lose too much weight. I'm going back and see if I can't stir up a little action at the consulate."

Retief climbed out, walked off fifty yards. He watched as the skiff kicked off in a quickly-dispersed cloud of dust, dwindled rapidly away to a bright speck that was lost against the stars. Then he extracted the locator beacon from the pocket of his suit and thumbed the control.

Twenty minutes later, aboard Navy FP-VO-6, Retief pulled off his helmet. "Fast work, Henry. I've got a couple of calls to make. Put me through to your HQ, will you? I want a word with Commander Hayle."

The young Naval officer raised the HQ, handed the mike to Retief.

"Vice-Consul Retief here, commander. I'd like you to intercept a skiff, bound from my present position toward Ceres. There's a Mr. Manczewicz aboard. He's armed, but not dangerous. Collect him and see that he's delivered to the consulate at 0900 Greenwich tomorrow.

"Next item: The consulate has impounded an ore-carrier, Gravel Gertie II. It's in a parking orbit ten miles off Ceres. I want it taken in tow . . ." Retief

gave detailed instruction. Then he asked for a connection through the Navy switchboard to the consulate. Magnan's voice answered.

"Retief speaking, Mr. Consul; I have some news that I think will interest you—"

"Where are you, Retief? What's wrong with the screen? Have you served the injunction?"

"I'm aboard the Navy patrol vessel. I've been looking over the situation, and I've made a surprising discovery. I don't think we're going to have any trouble with the Sam's people; they've looked over the body—2645-P—and it seems General Minerals has slipped up. There appears to be a highly valuable deposit there."

"Oh? What sort of deposit?"

"Mr. Mancziewicz mentioned collapsed-crystal metal," Retief said.

"Well, most interesting." Magnan's voice sounded thoughtful.

"Just thought you'd like to know. This should simplify the meeting in the morning."

"Yes," Magnan said. "Yes, indeed. I think this makes everything very simple . . ."

At 0845 Greenwich, Retief stepped into the outer office of the consular suite.

" . . . fantastic configuration," Leatherwell's bass voice rumbled, "covering literally acres. My xeno-geologists are somewhat confused by the formations. They had only a few hours to examine the site; but it's clear from the extent of the surface indications that we have a very rich find here; very rich, indeed. Beside it, 95739-A dwindles into significance. Very fast thinking on your part, Mr. Consul, to bring the matter to my attention."

"Not at all, Mr. Leatherwell. After all—"

"Our tentative theory is that the basic crystal fragment encountered the core material at some time, and gathered it in. Since we had been working on—that is, had landed to take samples on the other side of the body, this anomalous deposit escaped our attention completely—"

Retief stepped into the room.

"Good morning, gentlemen. Has Mr. Mancziewicz arrived?"

"Mr. Mancziewicz is under restraint by the Navy. I've had a call to the effect that he'd be escorted here."

"Arrested, eh?" Leatherwell nodded. "I told you these people were an irresponsible group. In a way it seems a pity to waste a piece of property like 95739-A on them . . ."

"I understood General Minerals was claiming that rock," Retief said, looking

surprised.

Leatherwell and Magnan exchanged glances. "Ah, GM has decided to drop all claim to the body," Leatherwell said. "As always, we wish to encourage enterprise on the part of the small operators. Let them keep the property. After all, GM has other deposits well worth exploiting." He smiled complacently.

"What about 2645-P? You've offered it to the Sam's group—"

"That offer is naturally withdrawn!" Leatherwell snapped.

"I don't see how you can withdraw the offer," Retief said. "It's been officially recorded; it's a bona fide contract, binding on General Minerals, subject to—"

"Out of the goodness of our corporate heart," Leatherwell roared, "we've offered to relinquish our claim—our legitimate, rightful claim—to asteroid 2645-P; and you have the infernal gall to spout legal technicalities! I have half a mind to withdraw my offer to withdraw!"

"Actually," Magnan put in, eyeing a corner of the room, "I'm not at all sure I could turn up the record of the offer of 2645-P. I noted it down on a bit of scratch paper—"

"That's all right," Retief said, "I had my pocket recorder going. I sealed the record and deposited it in the consular archives."

There was a clatter of feet outside. Miss Gumble's face appeared on the desk screen. "There are a number of persons here—" she began.

The door banged open. Sam Mancziewicz stepped into the room, a sailor tugging at each arm. He shook them loose, stared around the room. His eyes lighted on Retief. "How did you get here . . . ?"

"Look here, Monkeywits or whatever your name is," Leatherwell began, popping out of his chair—

Mancziewicz whirled, seized the stout executive by the shirt front, and lifted him into his tiptoes. "You double-barreled copper-bottomed oak-lined son-of-a—"

"Don't spoil him, Sam," Retief said casually. "He's here to sign off all rights—if any—to 95739-A. It's all yours—if you want it."

Sam glared into Leatherwell's eyes. "That right?" he grated. Leatherwell bobbed his head, his chins compressed into bulging folds.

"However," Retief went on, "I wasn't at all sure you'd still be agreeable, since he's made your company a binding offer of 2645-P in return for clear title to 95739-A."

Mancziewicz looked across at Retief with narrowed eyes. He released Leatherwell, who slumped into his chair. Magnan darted around his desk to minister to the magnate. Behind them Retief closed one eye in a broad wink at Mancziewicz.

" . . . still, if Mr. Leatherwell will agree, in addition to guaranteeing your title to 95739-A, to purchase your output at four credits a ton, FOB his collection station—"

Mancziewicz looked at Leatherwell. Leatherwell hesitated, then nodded. "Agreed," he croaked.

" . . . and to open his commissary and postal facilities to all prospectors operating in the Belt . . ."

Leatherwell swallowed, eyes bulging, glanced at Mancziewicz's face . . . He nodded. "Agreed."

" . . . then I think I'd sign an agreement releasing him from his offer."

Mancziewicz looked at Magnan.

"You're the Terrestrial Consul-General," he said. "Is that the straight goods?"

Magnan nodded. "If Mr. Leatherwell agrees—"

"He's already agreed," Retief said. "My pocket recorder, you know."

"Put it in writing," Mancziewicz said.

Magnan called in Miss Gumble. The others waited silently while Magnan dictated. He signed the paper with a flourish, passed it across to Mancziewicz. He read it, re-read it, then picked up the pen and signed. Magnan impressed the consular seal on the paper.

"Now the grant," Retief said. Magnan signed the paper, added a seal. Mancziewicz tucked the papers away in an inner pocket. He rose.

"Well, gents, I guess maybe I had you figured wrong," he said. He looked at Retief. "Uh . . . got time for a drink?"

"I shouldn't drink on duty," Retief said. He rose. "So I'll take the rest of the day off."

* * *

"I don't get it," Sam said, signaling for refills. "What was the routine with the injunction—and impounding Gertie? You could have got hurt."

"I don't think so," Retief said. "If you'd meant business with that Browning, you'd have flipped the safety off. As for the injunction—orders are orders."

"I've been thinking," Sam said. "That gold deposit; it was a plant, too, wasn't it?"

"I'm just a bureaucrat, Sam. What would I know about gold?"

"A double-salting job," Sam said. "I was supposed to spot the phoney hardware—and then fall for the gold plant. When Leatherwell put his proposition to me, I'd grab it. The gold was worth plenty, I'd figure, and I couldn't afford a legal tangle with General Minerals. The lousy skunk. And

you must have spotted it and put it up to him—"

The bartender leaned across to Retief. "Wanted on the phone."

In the booth, Magnan's agitated face stared at Retief.

"Retief, Mr. Leatherwell's in a towering rage! The deposit on 2645-P; it was merely a surface film, barely a few inches thick! The entire deposit wouldn't fill an ore-boat . . ." A horrified expression dawned on Magnan's face.

"Retief," he gasped, "what did you do with the impounded ore-carrier?"

"Well, let me see . . ." Retief said. "According to the Space Navigation Code, a body in orbit within twenty miles of any inhabited airless body constitutes a navigational hazard. Accordingly, I had it towed away."

"And the cargo?"

"Well, accelerating all that mass was an expensive business, so to save the tax-payer's credits, I had it dumped."

"Where?" Magnan croaked.

"On some unimportant asteroid—as specified by Regulations." He smiled blandly at Magnan. Magnan looked back numbly.

"But you said—"

"All I said was that there was what looked like a valuable deposit on 2645-P. It turned out to be a bogus gold mine that somebody had rigged up in a hurry. Curious, eh?"

"But you told me—"

"And you told Mr. Leatherwell. Indiscreet of you, Mr. Consul. That was a privileged communication; classified information, official use only."

"You led me to believe there was collapsed-crystal—"

"I said Sam had mentioned it. He told me his asteroid was made of the stuff."

Magnan swallowed hard, twice. "By the way," he said dully. "You were right about the check. Half an hour ago Mr. Leatherwell tried to stop payment. He was too late . . ."

"All in all, it's been a big day for Leatherwell," Retief said. "Anything else?"

"I hope not," Magnan said. "I sincerely hope not . . ." He leaned close to the screen. "You'll consider the entire affair as . . . confidential? There's no point in unduly complicating relationships—"

"Have no fear, Mr. Consul," Retief said cheerfully. "You won't find me identifying with anything as specific as triple-salting an asteroid."

Back at the table, Sam called for another bottle of rock juice.

"That Drift's a pretty good game," Retief said. "But let me show you one I

learned out on Yill . . ."