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PEST

BY RANDALL GARRETT
AND LOU TABAKOW

Einstein did not go far enough in his discussion of Relativity. Now consider the idea of what a "pest" is, for instance . . .

Koleen Makeer, sociologist, diplomat, and police officer, found herself suddenly in need of help; a situation which did not occur often to a member of the Galactic Service.

Not, let it be understood, that Koleen was superhuman; it was simply that there are very few situations in which G. S. officers will allow them-



selves to become embroiled unless they are masters of that situation. Unfortunately, her position was not one of Koleen's own choosing.

Judgment, in the spatiotemporal blur of ultralight velocities, is at best a touchy thing. Koleen had made a slight error in judgment which, quite luckily, did not result in her death. The Sqqinordian police cruiser had come too uncomfortably close to her course after having chased her better than fifteen hundred light-years from Sqqinor.

To evade it, she had made an almost suicidal dash at the last moment toward a nearby sun, rushing by it at a velocity far too great for the huge concentration of mass in the vicinity. It wouldn't have mattered much had she gone on in a geodesic line—the ship could have taken even that terrific strain. But Koleen asked too much of the ship.

In order to elude the pursuit that was boiling up so close behind, she changed course, turning four thousandths of a second of arc at almost precisely the wrong moment.

The ultralight generator warped, thereby killing the ship's mass-time field. Koleen suddenly found herself coasting gently toward a planet of the too-near sun.

A fatalist might have postulated that it was fate that permitted such a coincidence; any one of the millions of other religions in the galaxy might have credited it to some deity or other.

Koleen gave credit to neither—she didn't even bother to think about it.

Nevertheless, at the exact moment when her mass-time field ceased to function, Koleen's ship was pointed toward a planet which was as near to being urthtype as any she had ever seen.

Quickly, automatically, the planetary drive began to function.

For a fleeting second, Koleen wondered where she was. Somewhere, she knew, in the vast star clouds of the central galaxy. But her exact bearings she did not—could not—know. Only the ship's homing autopilot could ever get her home again from here.

As she brought the ship to a smooth landing on a broad green plain of the miraculously handy planet, Koleen began to suffuse the air around her with a terminology which was not only unprintable—a large portion of it was unspellable. Koleen prided herself on the fact that in the fifty-two years she had been with Galactic Service she had learned to speak fluently in one hundred and thirty-one different languages and had learned to swear acidly in another two hundred or so.

Her first mistake had been to make that asinine remark about how nice and clean Sqqinor looked from a couple of thousand miles up; a statement which had roused the ire of a vast majority of the eight million inhabitants who had listened to her viced speech. She had been cut off at once, of course, by the Censor for Public

Morals and had barely had time to make it to her ship before the Sqquirdian police had been ordered to arrest her.

On top of that, she had made one of the most stupid blunders in interstellar navigation—that of coming too close to a stellar concentration of mass.

The only solace she could offer herself was that she had successfully evaded the Sqquirdian cruiser—for a time.

After thoroughly villifying her own character, intelligence, ability, and personal appearance—the last of which had not been enhanced by the foul clothing and lack of bathing enforced by her stay on Sqquird—Koleen activated the front viewing plate and looked at the world outside.

She was completely surrounded by a vast spread of green which looked rather like a well-kept grass lawn. In the distance toward her right, she could see the lower slopes of a series of rolling hills. A glance at the sample intake indicator assured her that the air was breathable, although perhaps a little high in oxygen.

All in all, a very pretty place. But Koleen Makeer was not the explorer type. She would stay right inside her ship until she repaired its circuits. She was creeping up on the eighty mark, and middle-aged women, she reasoned, have no business prowling over the surface of a strange and possibly hostile world.

Koleen was one of those big, heavy-boned women that middle age doesn't seem to bother much. Her hair was beginning to gray a little, and she no longer possessed the beauty that accompanies the first flush of youth, but her features were handsomely regular, and her figure was still muscularly curvaceous. A woman doesn't survive long in the Galactic Service unless she keeps herself in condition.

For several minutes, she sat looking out at the green, meadowlike plain surrounding her without actually seeing it. Her mind was concentrating on the damage that might have occurred to her only means of transportation.

She suddenly realized that she was a little afraid to go down to the drive room and look, and that realization alone forced her down the narrow tubeway toward the drive compartment.

Then, for better than four hours, she meticulously searched the impressed circuits for damage. Area after area showed clear on the tester. Nothing. Then she climbed up over the massive plastoid circuit housing and opened up the ten-centimeter-square shield that covered the stasis generator.

The inside was covered with the shiny blackness of condensed metallic vapor. The short strip of neodymium in the transphase area had been completely vaporized by the energies that had blasted through it.

With a sigh of relief, Koleen opened

the spare-kit beneath the housing.

A cold hand grabbed hard at her throat. Empty!

Almost frantically, she pawed through the kit for the replacement strip that should have been there. The kit remained empty.

Then she calmed herself and bitterly consigned the idiot inspector who had forgotten to check her spare kit to the various hells of half a hundred civilizations. Almost sadistically, she pictured herself applying red-hot needles to some of the tenderer part of his anatomy.

She thought bitterly: *If I didn't know better, I'd think I was being plotted against!*

If only something had gone wrong with the impressed circuits! There was nothing simpler than re-impressing them on the molecular structure of the great plastic cube.

But no! It had to be the neodymium strip; a little piece of metal the easiest thing to replace imaginable.

All she needed was something to replace it with.

Warily, hopelessly, Koleen climbed down off the drive generator, made her way forward to the sleeping compartment, plopped down on her narrow bunk, and stared at the wall.

If the Sqqinordians decided to search, it would be only a matter of days until they pinpointed her.

And sweet-talking her way out of this one was strictly impossible; the tentacled Sqqinordians were about as

receptive to her charms as a hunk of granite. If she wanted to avoid a first-hand knowledge of the notorious Sqqinordian prison system, she'd better figure out a way to replace the ruined part.

Oh, sure! Replace the ruined part; as simple as that. The trouble was, how did one go about picking up a strip of neodymium on a primitive planet? From space she had seen no signs of cities or other indications of an advanced technology.

How did one go about locating a deposit of rare earths? How did one go about separating neodymium from the dozen other closely related elements?

Of course, she could always start toward home, using her planetary drive—that is, if she could figure a way to up her normal life expectancy from one hundred and fifty years to one hundred and fifty centuries.

She wrinkled her nose distastefully; she could already smell the fetid odor of a Sqqinordian prison.

The unbelievably bad luck that had caused that particular part of the drive to blow was canceled out by the equally unbelievable good luck that had put this particular planet in her path.

She smiled wryly to herself as an old axiom came to mind:

Every action has an equal and opposite reaction. Any change will have to be for the better.

That one releasing thought permitted

her to sleep. Exhausted as she was from the long periods of wakefulness that had been required to allow her to evade the Sqjinordian pursuit, it was not until then that the tension actually released itself.

The warning vibrator woke her. Refreshed by sleep, her normally highly reactive mind came fully awake at the first touch of the vibration. Something alive and moving was within range of the ship's detectors.

Moving quickly, she entered the control room and activated the transparency control of the front viewing screen. Before her spread a vast carpet of green resembling a well-kept lawn. A few kilometers to the right the level expanse gave way to a series of gently rolling slopes that led to a group of low undulating hills. The grasslike vegetation flowed over the hills in the same unbroken carpet.

Except for the greenish growth, no sign of trees or any other sort of plant life was visible, certainly no moving object that could have activated the vibrator.

She pulled on her bulky space armor, deciding that safety was more important than comfort in the present situation. Checking to make sure that her Ludenbergs were fully charged, she gingerly opened the lock and stepped out.

She noted that the green vegetation was mosslike and extended in an unbroken line to the horizon. Nowhere

on the bright sunlit meadow could she see a moving form. She was about to reenter the lock to check the vibrator, when a peculiar scratching sound caused her to freeze in mid-stride. The rasping sound seemed to be coming from the hull. Something was on top of the ship!

You idiot! Falling for the oldest ambush in the book! If only they don't—

She eased out her Ludenbergs, and slowly raised her eyes toward the top of the hull.

Perched across the top of the ship were a group of cuddly-looking little animals closely resembling the koala, except for the fact that they had huge earlike appendages that stood erect like a rabbit's ears.

The group of little animals sat and gazed unblinkingly at her as though wondering what she was. As she gazed back a tremor shook them and the ears flopped down and hung flabbily like those of a hound, while the little creatures continued to stare at her.

Finally one of them stood and sedately began to climb down the sloping hull. Koleen couldn't help smiling at the solemn, precise maneuvering. It reached the ground and on its hind legs walked slowly toward her. She backed a couple of steps and raised her Ludenbergs in warning, but the little creature paid no attention to the threatening gesture.

It looked up at her with its solemn brown eyes and, raising its ridiculous floppy ears, brushed her armor-en-

closed calves with the tips.

She looked down with a smile.

"Well—if you're not a cute little fellow!"

Then, to herself: *Careful, Koleen. It may act like a kitten, but it's alien. It could be looking for the softest place to bite.*

She smiled at the thought of any animal, alien or not, biting through the tricarboluminum armor.

The little creature sat back on its haunches and gazed at her appealingly.

Feeling secure in her space armor, she reached down and lifted it into her arms. As she rubbed its smooth fur with her sheathed hand, it nestled closer against her and continually brushed her face-plate with the tips of its long ears.

"What's the matter, fella? Starved for affection?" she asked.

The little animal suddenly began to squirm and she dropped it to the ground, where it quieted and once more sat back and gazed at her.

Koleen stared back. *Well, if there's no intelligent life on this planet, at least it's plentifully supplied with pets.*

She lifted the little animal in her arms and stepped toward the lock of the ship. Koleen hesitated for a moment, and then shaking her head, gently lowered the little creature to the ground.

"No!" she said. "You'd better stay out."

Inside her ship, she stripped off the

bulky armor, donned a pair of shorts and a sweat shirt, and once more took stock of the situation.

If the planet boasted any inhabitants with a high technological advancement, they took pains to keep the evidence as well as themselves well hidden. No, it was more likely that this was an unspoiled Eden completely overgrown with a layer of thick moss which evidently served as food for the gentle herbivorous little creatures who inhabited it.

Her planetary drive would easily bridge the distance to any of the sister planets in the system, but she doubted that she had enough time to make a star map and discover where any other planets might be. For that matter, it was more than likely that this was the only planet in the system capable of even supporting life. Despite the conjectures of theoretical biology, no form based on anything but carbon had ever been discovered.

She could use her ultrawave radio to ask for help, but long before it arrived the Sqqinordians would home in on her. She had no doubt that the receivers on the Sqqinordian Police Cruisers were all tuned and waiting for just such an attempt on her part.

No! The only answer was to flash into ultralight and be hundreds of light-years away before the Sqqinordians could locate her. With a good lead she could reach home sector before they could close in.

What she needed was a tiny strip of

neodymium!

She decided to try her luck at locating a deposit of the rare earths, though how she would go about the difficult task of separating out the neodymium—

I'll worry about that after I find the ore, she thought optimistically.

She pulled a one-piece coverall over her shorts and zipped it up. Her Ludenbergs would make good digging tools set at low power. She grabbed up an empty plastic container, folded it, and stuffed it into a pocket.

Got to have something to carry the ore—if I find any.

She had scarcely stepped out of the lock when the little animal was rubbing against her leg. It was the same one she had picked up before, judging by its markings. The rest were nowhere in sight.

She reached down and roughed its fur without slacking pace. Twice, before she reached the lower slopes of the hills, she almost fell as the little creature threw her off balance rubbing against her calves.

The second time she paused and pointed back toward the ship.

"Get lost, you little *pest*," she commanded, with mock severity.

It fell back on its haunches as though hurt and gazed at her with limpid brown eyes.

She reached down and tenderly rubbed the top of its head.

"Don't get offended," she said half-teasingly, half-tenderly, "but you are a little pest."

It squirmed away at her touch, then stood erect and let its ears droop in so comical a manner that Koleen couldn't help grinning.

In a slight depression between two hummocks she stopped and looked around. The same unbroken carpet of green stretched out in all directions.

Koleen smiled wryly at her predicament. She had read once that the rare earths were quite common. Good. But quite common where—on one certain planet, or on any planet? On the surface or deep underground? In mountains or on alluvial plains? Did they come pure or mixed with other metals?

She looked at the little animal who sat regarding her quizzically.

"Can't you be some help, you nuisance? All I need is a tiny piece of neodymium about this big." She formed a "U" with her thumb and forefinger.

The ears stood up and the little creature turned its head from side to side in a ludicrous manner.

"Oh, never mind, come on," she laughed. Turning, she started off toward a hill that looked somewhat higher than the rest. A hill indicates rock strata close to the surface. *There might be a chance—*

The moss was fairly slippery, which made navigation of the hillside rather difficult, especially with the little animal tagging at her heels. Finally, she reached a moss-covered outcropping and stopped.

Carefully, she burned away the

vegetation with her Ludenberg, then kicked away the ashes and dust. Rock. She cut out a chunk of the rock, dropped it into the container, and went on.

Hours later, she had collected better than eighty samples, each tagged and numbered. The spectroscope on the ship would tell her whether any of them contained traces of the ore she needed.

Behind her, the flop-eared little creature gazed interestedly at her every motion.

Catastrophe came as she was climbing down a fairly steep hillside. The animal rubbed against her legs and, off balance as she was, Koleen slipped on the moss and fell, twisting her leg beneath her.

She started to get up and an excruciating pain shot through her ankle.

She sat on the soft moss and looked at the little creature who had backed up a pace.

"Now what do I do?"

Then, at its beseeching look: "Oh, it's not your fault. I guess you can't help it if you *are* a pest."

It crawled up on her lap trustingly, waving its ridiculous floppy ears.

Tenderly Koleen hugged the little beast to her, whereupon it began to wriggle in her arms until she let it tumble back to the ground. It raised its ears and regarded her unblinkingly.

Koleen slipped off the sweat shirt

and made a tight bandage which enabled her to hobble painfully back to the ship with the little beast tagging along at her heels like a well-behaved puppy.

By the time she reached the ship dusk had come, and the mighty grandeur of the Central Galactic star clouds blazed in the sky.

The Pest followed her into the ship and watched quietly as she bathed her ankle.

She examined the injured member with the penetroscope and found, to her relief, that the pain was caused by nothing more than a strained tendon.

She wrapped it tightly with a bandage which enabled her to move about without too much pain.

As she leaned back to relax, the Pest came to her and crawled up into her lap. It raised its ears and brushed her face softly with the tips.

She grimaced at the tickling sensation.

"You *are* a pain in the neck," she informed him, holding her head out of reach.

He looked up at her and she smiled down tenderly.

Koleen felt the little body stiffen, and then began to struggle. She let him slide down to the floor where he once more grew quiet and stood regarding her.

She started to get ready for a shower still feeling unclean after her sojourn on Sqinor. Then she looked down at

the little creature and slipped back into the coveralls.

"Come on, Pest," she said, lifting it and carrying it into the control cabin. "You wait here until I bathe. I feel like a goldfish with you staring at me all the time."

She closed the door, pulled off the coveralls, and switched on the water.

She was just beginning to enjoy the feeling of being clean for the first time in weeks when the cabin door swung open. Two eyes regarded her with undisguised fascination.

"I thought that door locked!" she cried.

She toweled herself vigorously while the little creature watched unemotionally.

She slipped into a robe and, scooping him up, unceremoniously dumped him outside the ship and closed the lock, checking to make sure it *was* locked.

Then she emptied the sack of rock samples and began preparing them for the analyzer.

Five minutes per sample. Eighty samples. Nearly seven hours had passed before she got the final reading from the machine. "Minute trace only."

Such a small amount that even the analyzer couldn't compute it. *None* of them contained neodymium.

Methodically, Koleen searched every square inch of the tiny ship to see if by chance the replacement strip somehow had got misplaced. No dice.

The precious strip of metal was lying unnoticed at the bottom of some canine-bred mechanic's kit.

The strain of the past hours coupled with her injured foot was beginning to tell on Koleen, and she found her head nodding. Popping a "Nosleep" pill into her mouth, she sat down once more to try to figure out something.

No new ideas. She had exhausted every possibility. Every possibility? What a laugh! She had done nothing. But what was there to do? If only there had been some form of life on this planet with at least a rudimentary intelligence, she might have somehow been able to obtain the ore.

Instead, the sole inhabitants had to be a bunch of teddy bears.

Pest *was* a cute little fellow, though. He must have belonged to *someone* or *something* once, else why was he so starved for affection?

A *wild* animal doesn't crave affection!

Or did they? She couldn't know. Even if there were intelligent beings, she had no way of contacting them.

Still, it wouldn't do any harm to see.

She sprang to her feet and opened the lock. Pest stood there as though waiting.

"Come on in, you little devil," she cried.

He ambled in and, ignoring her this time, began to inspect the interior of the ship much as a puppy in a strange



place. He pawed around the controls and then seemed to find the radio interesting.

"Yes, Pest? Do you know something?" she cried excitedly.

At her voice he turned and sat back on his haunches, regarding her solemnly.

She cried exasperatedly, "Now I expect teddy bears to talk. I must be going off the deep end."

A sudden loud *bip* from the detector cut off her self-condemnation. She hopped painfully into the control room and looked at the screen.

A Sqqinordian cruiser had flashed by only a few light-years away!

Still, that *bip* shouldn't bother her

too much. After all, it might simply mean that the Sqqinordian cruiser had given up the chase. They could only know the approximate volume of space where she had disappeared, and they might assume that she had eluded them permanently.

But somehow that didn't fit in with Sqqinordian psychology. She and they were a long way from both her own destination and Sqqinor, but *they* could radio for help and *she* didn't dare to. She could feel the uncomfortable thought scratching at the base of her prefrontal lobes:

They're not giving up. Not yet, anyway.

Koleen closed her eyes and mas-

saged the bridge of her nose with a thumb and forefinger. Her foot bothered her intensely, and her head had begun to ache from lack of sleep. For the hundredth time she cursed the inspector who had forgotten to put the spare strips in place, and cursed herself for not double-checking.

Something touched her leg, and she opened her eyes.

"Hello, Pest. What do you want now?" It was soothing to have the little creature around. Somehow, her deep-seated maternal instinct bathed all her troubles in a roseate aura when it was permitted to come to the fore.

"C'mere, you." She picked him up and began absently to caress the soft, smooth fur on his head. As usual, Pest squirmed and snuggled closer, his floppy ears-that-were-not-ears gently caressing her face.

"You're cute," she said, "but you'd be a lot cuter if you weren't always underfoot. Now get down. I have work to do." She set him down on the deck again and as she did so, Pest pricked up his ears, then let them droop disconsolately.

Koleen stood up and walked over to the refrigerator, trying to ignore the twinge in her bad leg and the chafing from the bandage. There didn't seem to be the slightest trace of hunger in her, only pain and weariness and worry. Still, she had to eat.

It was cold, and it was tasteless, and she had to force it down, but she seemed to feel a little better after-

ward—a little more relaxed.

Suddenly, a new thought came. Maybe she could get something on her receiver that would give her some sort of information. If she could disconnect the transmitter section so the instrument wouldn't spray her location all over space, she might be able to listen in on Sqquordian communications.

At least it was something to do, something to keep her mind off the stink and horror of a Sqquordian prison cell.

She prowled around through the tool locker until she had everything she might need, went back to the control room, and squatted on the floor in front of the transceiver unit. After making sure that the power was cut off at source, she removed the stelloid panel that protected the sensitive circuits from dust.

Then she plugged in the circuit tracer and began to feel her way around among the complexities of the circuits and pseudo-circuits before her.

Disconnect here—reconnect there—rebalance—change—add—subtract—replace—

So intent was she on her work that the noise didn't seem to register for a moment. Then the crash was repeated, and she stood up quickly and walked as rapidly as possible back to the tool locker.

On the floor of the room sat the Pest, his ears drooping sadly, in the midst of the disarray that had fallen

from an open cabinet.

Koleen closed her eyes in a mixture of relief and dismay. The particular cabinet he had opened didn't contain any of the more delicate instruments, only cutters, clamps, and hammers. But this was the last straw; the little monster was going out now, and it was going to stay out. Even the companionship it gave wasn't worth the trouble.

She snapped out a harsh, hard epithet, stepped forward, grabbed it by the scruff of the neck and almost jerked it to its feet before she saw that its left foot was caught beneath a heavy machine hammer.

And, in that instant, all her resolution collapsed within her.

Her grasp on the Pest became more gentle, almost a caress. "Poor little fella! Does it hurt?" she asked softly.

Carefully, she lifted the hammer from the foot and eased it over to one side. "Quit squirming, stupid, you'll hurt yourself."

She picked up the little animal, carried it into her bunk, and opened the medical cabinet in the wall. Holding tight to the leg, she held the foot in the focus of the penetroscope and looked into the binocular eyepiece.

It was hard to tell, from the peculiar bone structure, whether everything was as it should be or not. There were no sharp edges, so it was probable that nothing was broken, but there might be something out of place.

"Now quit squirming!" she ad-

monished the Pest again. With much difficulty, she managed to get the unhurt paw underneath the 'scope for comparison while holding the other to keep the Pest from hurting himself. As far as she could tell, the bones had not been hurt by the blow.

The musculature and tendon structure, too, seemed normal. About all she could find was a couple of surface areas where the cells had been crushed and the tissue bruised.

Finally she stood up and released Pest. "I think you'll live. I imagine it hurts a bit, but maybe that will teach you not to stick your nose where it doesn't belong."

Pest sat looking at her with an altogether inscrutable expression on its wide-eyed face. Koleen couldn't help grinning at the pestiferous little thing.

"Come on, bub, you're still going outside. I have work to do, and I can't be bothered by your shenanigans." She picked him up and carried him to the air lock.

"Out you go. But don't go too far," she added, placing him gently on the mosslike vegetation.

She closed the lock behind her and went back to the control room to the partially disabled transceiver.

Nearly three hours had passed before the two components were separated from each other enough to permit her to pick up signals without giving out any in return. Not until then did she energize the receiving sec-

tion and set it to the frequency used by the Sqqinordian Police.

The speaker hummed quietly to itself, but otherwise no sound came forth.

Perhaps, after all, they had actually given up the chase. Come to think of it, why did she consider herself so important to the offended moral code of Sqqinor? There was only one question: How long would she have to wait before she could safely send for help?

She looked at the detector screen. Nothing.

That, at least, was some consolation.

Should she, perhaps, get some sleep? The thought seemed to bring an almost unbearable weight down on her brain.

Great Heavens, yes, you fool! Get into bed!

"Glygghithabordikolbixozz!" ejaculated the receiver imperatively.

Koleen snapped erect in her seat with the sudden realization that she had been half dozing.

"Plironobinnusdrothyliaqq!"

Koleen couldn't understand it, but she recognized it for what it was. Scrambled Sqqinordian!

A sudden bright line crossed the detector and vanished. Less than eight light-years away and moving away from Sqqinor! She glanced at the recorder. During the few minutes she had dozed, no less than three traces had crossed the field of the detector. And all in the same direction!

They could not possibly be the same ship; the Sqqinordian forces were going to comb the area until they found her!

The black, dank walls of a Sqqinordian prison suddenly loomed around her, terrifying in their almost solid reality. There was nothing she could do but wait. They would comb every stellar system in the vicinity.

As long as she didn't use her drive, they wouldn't be able to locate her at stellar distances, but if they ever got within two or three billion miles of her, they could easily spot the latent energies in her ship. That meant they would have to cut their drive somewhere in the vicinity of every star and give their detectors a chance to find her.

She put her hand to her head. *Think! Think!*

She visualized the cone of space they would be searching; its apex at her last known position and its base—

Depending on the number of ships that were searching for her, she had, at least, two days.

The receiver kept up its intermittent harsh nonsense. Another bright line crossed the detector.

Come on, gal, pull yourself together! There was, after all, only one way out. She would have to call home, tell them what had happened, and let the Sqqinordian police pick her up. At least that way she wouldn't have to spend too much time in their padlocked sewers.

With an effort, she forced out of her mind the unpleasant realization that she would have to spend weeks—perhaps months—in the filthy, disease-ridden environment of the Sqqinordian prison system, eating the sickening unclean messes that would be pushed into her cell six times in every rotation of Sqqinor.

Forget it! If it's inevitable, lean back and enjoy it. It isn't as if I'll be there forever.

For the first time in years, loneliness seemed to creep into the ship with her. And, almost automatically, she went to the air lock and opened it. Pest was waiting there, patiently.

“Come on in, chum. I’m giving a going-away party. We’ll get a bite to eat and I’ll have a big bath and a good night’s sleep before I call in.”

She turned and walked back inside allowing the little animal to follow her, in its stately, deliberate manner.

Koleen knew full well that within an hour of her calling home the Sqqinordians would have her fully covered—boxed in—and under arrest for violation of their Morality Code. Therefore, any comforts she was going to enjoy would have to come now, before she called.

Pest didn’t seem to appreciate any of the food she offered him. He didn’t exactly turn up his nose at it, he simply seemed to look curiously at it as though he were trying to figure out what it could possibly be.

As far as Koleen was concerned, it tasted good. Now that she had decided upon a definite plan of action, the tension in her mind had completely relaxed. Even the horrors of Sqqinor couldn’t disturb her equilibrium too much, once she had made up her mind to face them.

After the meal, she stripped off her coverall, stepped into the shower, and scrubbed herself thoroughly. She softly hummed the “Ballad of the Vagabond Lover” to herself and grinned inwardly when she thought of the additional scandal that would fall on her when the police cruisers picked her up and found that she had just bathed.

As she rubbed herself vigorously with the towel, the Pest stood watching her, his ears standing up on his head, giving him the appearance of a fat, slightly frightened jackrabbit.

“Where am I going to put you to keep you out of mischief while I take a nap? Come on.”

She picked him up and carried him squirming into the sleeping compartment. There, she sat him in her bunk while she made a soft bed from some of her clothing.

“I don’t know whether you sleep or not, but if you do, here’s as good a place as that moss outside. For a while, this is going to be your sleeping quarters.”

Koleen picked him up again, put him on the floor of the closet and pushed it shut.

“Good night, fella.”

And then, for the first time in too many hours, she lay back on her bunk and collapsed into dreamless sleep.

She didn't even notice it when the closet door swung softly open. Pest stood blinking at her with his soft, large eyes.

Six hours later, feeling better than she had for days, Koleen set to work on the transceiver to connect the two sections together again in order to call home.

Would it be necessary to reconnect them completely? No, she decided, definitely not. She didn't need the scrambler, and the transceiver co-ordination was unnecessary, since she neither needed nor expected a reply to her message.

If she could—

The stelloid cover came off again, and she began to reconnect leads in the more vital places. She ignored the subtler interconnections that fused the two units into one smoothly integrated instrument—they didn't count just now.

Bent! Bzzzzzzzz!

Koleen turned quickly. Pest was standing over one of the testing machines. He had quite obviously pushed the master switch.

"Here, you! Get away from that!" Koleen grabbed at the little animal. Pest, startled, backed off. In the process, he stumbled over another piece of equipment and fell, crashingly, into the transceiver unit!

Disaster! As the little beast picked itself up from the debris, Koleen could only stare, her brain numb with shock.

Then sudden, flashing anger boiled to the surface.

"Why you little—!" She lapsed into Waldusian, a language which probably contains more shockingly foul expletives than any other language in the galaxy.

She grabbed him by one paw, dragged him bodily to the lock, and, with one well-aimed foot, sent him sprawling across the mossy vegetation. As she slammed the lock behind her, the Pest sat up. The expression in his eyes was, somehow, not quite so unfathomly blank as before.

Inside, Koleen stared at the transceiver. A closer, less emotional look showed that the wreckage was not as bad as it had looked at first. If that blockhead inspector hadn't forgotten to check the replacements for the radio, too, there might be a chance that she could repair the instrument before the Sqquordinians got there.

She opened the replacement kit, pulled out a drawer, and looked inside. The proper units were there all right, but they hardly even registered upon her consciousness.

Beside them, its green identifying stripe plainly visible across its center, lay a small *neodymium* strip.

Her brain seemed to shift suddenly into high gear without going through the intermediate stages of reasoning.

Had she taken the trouble to check herself, she would have found that less than eight minutes elapsed between the time she found the strip and the time she had secured it and was back at the control panel.

Cautiously, she lifted the ship above the planet's atmosphere, aimed it at a right angle to the Sqqinordian's line of search, and cut in the ultradrive. It would take them at least three minutes to get a line on her, and even more than that to align themselves along her course of flight. By then, she would be well away from them and could set her homing device to get her back home.

Half an hour later, she cut in the autopilot. She didn't know where she was, with respect to home, but the pilot did. It would get her there safely.

Then, having nothing better to do, she turned to the repair of the transceiver.

She thought grimly: *At least I don't have to worry about that Pest any more!*

Galoth to the Assembly: It is gone. As soon as it found the metal strip, it reacted as expected and removed itself from our world in order to escape its pursuers.

I wish to extend my apologies for not discerning its trouble earlier, but it was not until the thing became unconscious that I was able to discern what went on within its brain. Only with the aid of the metal strip could it leave.

The Assembly to Galoth: How can we

be sure it will not return to our world?

Galoth: Neither it nor its pursuers know where our planet is with reference to their own. Their minds are of such small capacity that they must leave such orientation to a device in the ship. It is fortunate that I was able to find its need before it was able to use its home calling device. Had it done so, our world's location would have been known to them. As it is, I had to partially destroy the mechanism so that the thing would not call.

The Assembly: Have you ascertained what it was that caused such a disturbance along our neural bands?

Galoth: Partially. Our appearance was such that it called forth an emotional effect which filled our neural receptors with unwanted signals, thereby causing uncontrollable squirmings. Even when our receptors were lowered and inactive, contact with the creature was impossible because physical intimacy brought forth even stronger reactions. When the creature finally became unconscious, I was able to make enough contact to discover its need for the metal strip and its intention to use the calling device because the emotional reaction was inoperative.

The Assembly: It is good. The creature's telepathic disturbance was so great that it disrupted our communication almost to the breaking point. Our congratulations on your solution of the problem. At least we don't have to worry about that pest any more.

THE END