A better mousetrap

The appliance of science.

Mike Resnick

Men have always talked about building a better mousetrap, just the way they talk about a car that runs on water rather than gasoline, or nuclear fission that doesn't have any harmful by-products. But it wasn't until they reopened the Heisenberg Space Station out between Europa and Callisto that they realized they *really* needed a better mousetrap.

The first team of scientists — four men and two women — docked their ship there on 2 November 3014 AD, at exactly 7:43 p.m. H.T. (Heisenberg time). They buttressed the hatch up against the entrance to the station, sealed it, then opened both doors and stepped into the station, the first humans to do so in more than 900 years.

Exactly 43 seconds later, one of the women screamed, and the other jumped onto a chair that was bolted into the floor. Three of the men started cursing, and the fourth, a wimpy little fellow, fainted dead away.

It seemed that some of the station's inhabitants were waiting for them. They'd been there nine long centuries, and were glad to have some company. Having just eaten the last of the huge stores of preserved food that prior crews had laid in, they were even happier to have a new source of protein.

"What are they?" asked the wimpy scientist when they woke him up.

"Mice," said the nuclear physicist. "Or maybe rats."

"I don't care what they are!" said the roboticist from atop her chair. "Get them away from me!"

"No problem," said the biochemist. "I'll whip up a fast-acting poison and lay it out for them."

At which point the wimpy scientist fainted again.

So the biochemist mixed up the poison, and left it out for the mice, and the crew went about setting up their workstations, ate dinner and went to bed, expecting to find a few hundred dead mice in the morning.

What they found were some plump mice, happily licking their chops and looking for more poisoned bait.

"They've evolved," said the biochemist. "They've obviously developed an immunity to poison. I suppose we'll just have to find some other way to kill them."

"I know just the thing," said the nanotechnologist. "I'll design a mechanical microbe that will invade their systems and attack them from the inside, and I'll slip it in some cheese."

The mice came, and they saw, and they ate — and they came back the next morning looking for more.

"I don't understand it," said the nanotechnologist. "Those microbes would kill any one of us. Why didn't they kill the mice?"

No one knew, so they captured one of the mice, drew blood samples, stomach samples, gene samples and still had no answer. The best suggestion came from the biochemist, who theorized that their forced evolution had created an internal environment so hospitable to microbes, even engineered ones, that the microbes ignored their programming and set up shop in the mice's intestines.

The roboticist tried next. She created an army of tiny metal warriors and sent them forth to do battle under chairs and beds, inside bulkheads, wherever the mice were hiding.

That was when they learned that the mice had evolved mentally as well as physically, and that their commanders were far superior at warfare to the roboticist, who had programmed her metal army. The robots were outflanked and outmanoeuvred, and finally surrendered only 17 hours into the battle.

The nuclear physicist didn't do much better with his jerrybuilt disintegrator ray. The mice were impervious to it, and the only harm it did was to two bathrooms and the coffee-maker in the galley.

"Well, I'm all out of ideas," said the biochemist.

"The dirty little swine have beaten us at every turn," muttered the nuclear scientist.

"Idiots!" said the wimpy little scientist disgustedly.

"The mice?"

"No," he said. "I was referring to my colleagues."

"You should talk!" snapped the roboticist. "All you ever do is faint."

"I have never denied my limitations," said the scientist, "though it is thoughtless of you to refer to them. Just for that, I've a good mind not to solve your problem."

"So you think you're the one who can build a better mousetrap?" she said sardonically.

"Most certainly."

"Even though they've withstood poison, microbes, military robots and disintegrator rays?"

"Yes."

"Okay, hot-shot. What will you need?"

"Just a little help from our geneticist."

"And nothing else?"

"Not at the moment," said the scientist.

So they left him and the geneticist alone for a month and tried not to notice all the damage the mice were doing. And then one day the scientist announced that the better mousetrap had been created and was ready to perform its function.

The others all snickered at him.

"That's *it*?" asked the nanotechnologist when he displayed it. "That's the better mousetrap that we've been waiting for all month?"

"You don't really think something this primitive is going to work, do you?" demanded the biochemist.

"Oh, ye of little faith," muttered the wimpy scientist.

They all laughed. (Well, they laughed at Newton and Einstein too.)

Within a week every mouse on the station had been eliminated, including three that had somehow migrated onto the docked ship. It had been swift, efficient and devastating.

"Who'd have believed it?" said the roboticist as they all gathered around the better mousetrap.

"Where did you ever hear about something like this?" asked the nanotechnologist.

"Sometimes you have to read books that aren't exclusive to your field of study," answered the scientist.

"Meow," agreed the better mousetrap. ■

Mike Resnick is the all-time leading award winner, living or dead, for short science fiction, according to *Locus*, the trade journal of the science-fiction field.

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