

Some Assembly Required

A Thursday Prompt Story

Perfesser Bear

Malya was sitting at her desk when her phone signaled an incoming call. "*Beegle-eep*," she told the phone; since she was born with a harelip, she could not whistle. Her entire family was born with harelips, since they were, after all, Hares. Still peering into screens filled with endless columns and rows of numbers, she answered without looking at the calling party. "Malya Turfer."

The tawny face of a Puma filled another screen, its owner looking somewhat flustered. Keleyah Pahona, M.D., Malya's sister-in-law for all practical purposes (except that neither of them was technically married), was a friend and Malya's significant other's brother's -- suffice it to say, the women lived with brothers Cyrus and Sydney Metzger -- just not in the same house. "Of the day, Malya. Is Cy in?"

Malya shook her head, which set her marvelous ears in an exotic dance. "Cy is at some sort of techie conference back on Earth. Isn't Syd around? Or is it something..."

"*Yah*, I don't want Syd messing with this. He's got enough to worry about, and he's out flying some investors around, looking at the planet." Lentar IV had nothing if not open space, as long as you weren't planning to try to cultivate it. The soil was completely sterile, and fertilizing it was only a temporary fix.

"So... What's the problem?"

Keleyah leaned back from the camera, allowing a little more of the background and less scary big cat face to show. "Remember that rodent problem we were having a few weeks back?"

As a rodent, Malya brushed the unintentional affront aside; she could see Keleyah was upset. "A few mice came in with a shipment of something. Wouldn't they die off, soon enough?"

"I *wish*," Keleyah sighed. "If anything, they're thriving and multiplying. Last week I found -- or the cleaner robot found -- a litter of eight pups under the kitchen cabinets. I went a little *off*, I'm afraid. I ordered a device that was supposed to take care of the problem, but it is malfunctioning."

"This is why you wanted to talk to Cyrus."

"Yes. I need to stop the device."

Malya blinked. "Stop it? Can't you just turn it *off*?"

"I can't *catch* it!"

"I'll... be right there. See you in five." Malya broke the connection and reached for her jacket. Keleyah's place was a brisk walk away.

Kit, the AI for Keleyah's house, spoke in a feminine voice, "Good afternoon, Malya. I will tell Keleyah you are here."

"Thank you, Kit, and good afternoon to you." The wall slid open and Malya scuttled down the hallway through the reception area to the residence.

Keleyah sat in the kitchen with a badminton racket. She was watching the area next to the refrigerator when Malya walked in, looking up only briefly. "I think it went in there."

Malya got down on the floor and peered into the alcove. Two infrared sensors glowered balefully back at her. "Two IR eyes up front?"

"Yes. That's it."

"Well, it's gone to ground. We just need to --" A small white object, looking like an inverted bowl with tank treads, rocketed out from its refuge, running over her feet and into the next room. "Son of a--! You have a net in here?"

Keleyah gestured to a large one standing in the corner. "Syd's fishing net. I retrieved it from the boat this morning. It's a little ungainly to use in here."

Malya seized the net. "There's nothing to fish for on Lentar IV, anyway. I'm going hunting." She scurried off after the device. Wherever it went, it was invisible. "Gone. Well, I'll drive it out." She produced a flashlight from a pocket and probed under the living room furniture. After ten minutes, her patience and perseverance worn thin, she returned to the kitchen table. "What do we know about this thing?"

Keleyah pushed the packaging across the table to her. *Worldpath Better Mouse Trap*. The manual was open. "I'm going to make a steep. You want your usual?"

"Mmm hmm." She was absorbed in the bot's literature. "It says the batteries are good for sixty to seventy-two hours of 50% usage on a full charge. Did you charge it when it arrived?"

"Yes. I charged the cells before installing them."

"It could be days until the thing runs down. Can't you wait?" The white, tracked turtle jetted across the floor and crashed into her foot. A spot of blood welled up just over her shoe; Keleyah gravely handed her a paper napkin, which she used to dab the wound. Malya fixed the big cat with a frank stare. She spoke slowly and coldly, ears shadowing her face: "You realize, of course, that this means *war*."

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The women sat on the kitchen stools with their feet tucked up; Keleyah with her heels on the rungs, out of reach of the machine's spear. Malya's feet were much longer, and so, problematic; she sat perched on the seat with her feet flat in front of her rump, holding the booklet between her knees while she committed it to memory. She tossed the book back in the box in disgust. "Nothing. There isn't even anything in the troubleshooting section."

"Syd and I went over it last night, but it's only gotten troublesome today, since Syd left."

"Oh, *snap*," Malya spat, "is there anything online?"

Keleyah lapped at her tea distractedly. "I haven't really looked." She glanced at her phone. "I've got a patient coming in a few hours; I'll have to meet her at the Infirmary instead."

"Better call her now. Hey, can I use your network?"

"You know where it is. Pull up a comfortable chair."

Malya folded herself up in a swivel chair and started whispering search parameters into the network's microphone. "*Worldpath, mouse trap, B-2400c, issues*. Search." The screen filled up with text. She scrolled

down until she found an entry that wasn't mostly obscenities. Opening the link, she read a forum page that seemed to go on forever. People were not happy. This was certainly not an isolated incident. There was an undercurrent that there was some kind of fix, a user-applied correction that would set things to right, but no one seemed to be addressing it directly. There it was -- click to access another page on the same forum. She scrolled down the new page, but it was just as evasive as the previous one. Malya sipped her tea and read. Here's the page you want... It was a link to a page on a completely different site. About three screens down, she found a comment from some technically inclined individual.

For Worldpath Better Mouse Traps in the B-2200 and B-2400 series, ensure the Auxillary Processing Unit (APU), included in the package next to the battery charger, is installed correctly. It cannot be shipped installed because WARP-field travel causes problems with the positronic matrix. Without it, the trap will behave in a defensive/offensive manner until you mount the APU correctly.

Malya set her tea down with a *bang*. "Keleyah? I think I found it."

The Puma wandered over, warily watching her feet as she walked. "What did you find?"

"Did the trap come with some little chip kind of attachment? It should have been in the box."

"*Hmm*. No, there is a little recess between the charger and the power pile, but there was nothing in it when it arrived. I presumed it was for some optional attachment for a more sophisticated line."

"Well, it's gone all primitive until we can get that thing installed. There's nothing in the manual about it, and precious little online."

"So, the machine is essentially running around on a sort of R-Complex, a reptilian brain, until it has this extra brain to work with. How sublime."

"Personally, I don't find anything sublime about this little monster spearing my feet. I don't much care if it has a brain like a Scale. I want to catch it and fix its little wagon."

"That's the problem. Do they tell how to catch it?"

"How do you catch a mouse? Hide in the corner and make a noise like a cheese?"

That elicited a blank look from Keleyah, who, not having grown up in the Human World, missed some of the nuances of Human humor. "Wait. Bait?"

"*Yah*, mouse bait, I --" A sly grin spread across Malya's face. "That's the way. Entice the little foot stabber into a trap. A trap for a trap."

"You need a box. Something the machine won't notice. I think I have just the thing." Keleyah cautiously tiptoed to the reception area and returned with a large, round-cornered box. "The machine sees by infrared. One of my biosensors came with this container; it's perfectly IR transparent. The trap should register it as open air."

"Perfect. Now all we need is the bait."

"Did you see any mice on the way over?"

"I did not, and I don't know of any pet stores on Lentar IV."

The women's eyes met, and they knew what they had to do. Furs had a game called *Chip, Chop, Chow*, which is similar to *Rock, Paper, Scissors* and they used it for the same purpose.

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Syd returned shortly before suppertime. Keleyah met him at the door with a big hug and the usual *schmaltz*. Syd noticed Malya sitting in the living room and waved. "Hiya, kiddo. What brings you here tonight?"

Keleyah spoke over her shoulder as she headed for the kitchen. "Malya helped me with that problem with the mouse trap. She's staying for dinner, while Cy is still on Earth.

"Oh that's good. What was the problem, anyway?"

The Hare paused. "It was missing a part. Keleyah has a new one on order. In the meantime, we pulled the battery out."

"Well, I'm glad it was something simple. You know, I don't remember seeing anything about it in the manual. How'd you figure it out?"

Malya grinned. "It was right on the box. We just didn't know how to interpret it." She showed Syd the package. In the bottom left-hand corner, in small letters it read:

SOME ASSEMBLY REQUIRED.