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## [121] [Flight of Mouse] (Raphaella Special)

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Raphaella's hands sweltered under the heat, a thin surface of murisium metal covering her palms as her fingers traced the inside of the combustion chamber, applying another hair-thin coating of her special Metalmouse metal. Enchantment and metal-laying in one, it was no simple task, even for the genius rodent. The flow of metal-energy required a flatness to it, with only a spike where her nails dug into the compartment. The goal was not just to guarantee that the chamber could survive the explosions therein without deforming, but also that it could contain and direct the blast properly. Inertia, heat, speed, viscosity, shockwaves, pressure, and math danced in front of Raphaella's very eyes.

Raphaella's hair was drenched, two Mousegirl assistants constantly rotating as they dried her brow and provided her with pieces of rusted iron to chew on and water. And once she reverse-crawled her way to where the nozzle would be attached, she pushed back inside to start anew, adding another layer.

This was her specialty, the gift she'd earned. As far as Raphaella knew, none could replicate what she was doing, only she could apply layers upon layers of enchantments and have them all sing to one another. It was a process that made the whole larger than the sum of each part.

It was the very conceptualization of a horde, but applied through engravings.

It'd been no simple effort. The horde had strip-searched every nail and every piece of rusted iron for the sake of this project. Thousands of collective work-hours spent bringing in the materials. Dozens of Mousegirls orbited around Raphaella's relentless progress at any given moment, the Metalmouse herself having consumed tens of times her bodyweight in metal, and sweated that a dozen times over.

All for the sake of creating the wings that would allow her horde to take to the sky.

Hours upon hours, days upon days, weeks upon weeks.

And then, at the break of dawn, the prototype was finished.

The whole horde was called upon to stare at the fruit of their labor, a murisium cylinder ten meters long and one wide. A sharp, conical tip, followed by the glass-covered "mousepit" where the pilot would control the vehicle. Further back, the second most

crucial element: the wings. Though their design was to be symmetrical and perpendicular to the cylinder - like the wings of a bird - for optimal gliding, Raphaella had discovered that it would not be optimal the faster the vehicle went. After a certain point they became a hindrance, holding back and preventing greater speed.

For now the solution had been to slant them slightly back, as per the designs of Lord Rick's papers. Yet that too wasn't a solution Raphaella liked; the numbers for how air would flow around the vehicle complained whenever she imagined going even faster. For now it would have to do, though, as there were limitations for how much she could imagine without actually testing, actually experiencing.

The third and last element, the fins near the nozzles, provided further stability. The thought of having a control system would not have occurred to Raphaella had Lord Rick not given her a very specific goal: the vehicle needed to be usable to protect Sinco. And a flying maiden that could only go in a straight line could not be useful, they might as well have strapped a Mousegirl to a spear and have the large-green-brutes throw them at the enemy.

Silently and as one, the horde approached the craft, each maiden reaching out to scratch their names into every nook and cranny of the vehicle. Raphaella's name was the one at the very tip of the device, right underneath the name they'd given the first of what would, hopefully, be a long line of craft: The Iron Horde.

"Prepare for a test-launch."

As one, they each took positions. While some of them began to push the vehicle towards the launch area, Raphaella was approached by a dozen of her sisters. Each of them carried a piece of gear for her to strap on her person. Padding for shock-absorption, followed by boiled leather, chainmail, and armor plates. On top of this came the carefully folded pack that contained the parachute, as well as a series of satchels with a myriad of substances that went from a cheesy snack to heal-berry juice to oil.

If there was ever such a thing as a mouse knight, then Raphaella's gear would've made them squeal with envy.

While the Metalmouse had spent countless hours building her machine, others had spent equal amounts of time testing and preparing for every eventuality that might go wrong.

"Safety First." They chanted the Lord's creed as nimble fingers adjusted the straps of every piece of the ensemble to perfectly fit Raphaella's compact physique.

Everything was quadruple-checked. Though only Raphaella knew her creation inside and out, every one of her sisters had intimate knowledge of what to look for, and how to fix it. They poured over the machine with zeal, every inch carefully revised, reviewed, and reported upon.

It was ready.

The Iron Horde was gingerly placed atop two metal rails that'd been raised slightly, pointing it towards the sea. There was a large gathering near the beach, this was no small event, and the Lord had personally gone out of his way to put the entire city on high alert. Every available maiden that could help would help. Flying maidens would scout for possible ferals, swimming maidens would be out into the water to fish Raphaella out in the event of an accident, running maidens would keep to the outskirts of the city to do the same in case the accident happened there.

Rick had voiced his concerns that he hadn't been given time to check everything about the design, but he trusted Raphaella and the horde's assessment.

With trepidation and a galloping heart, Raphaella marched to her creation, clambering into the mousepit while her sisters fastened her to her seat. One by one, she went through the pre-flight-check, confirming that every lever and every cable worked as it should.

"All checks confirmed." She called out, and the call was answered by her sisters, a bit loudly since Raphaella had stuffed her ears with damp cloth. Despite their best efforts, they had not been able to find a way to lower the noise from their prototype nozzles.

"Fire-wood loaded." Someone called, closing the hatch to the deposit of supercharged enchanted explosives that'd been given to them by the Hobgoblins of the tribe.

"Ammonium nitrate loaded." Another called, closing a separate hatch.

"Water loaded." A third added.

"The Iron Horde is hot! All non-essential hands clear!"

Raphaella took a deep breath, closing her eyes, sinking into her padding as she grasped on to the metal of the ship. Slowly, she began to spread her energy through the craft, extending her sense of touch to every inch of its surface. She'd done this countless times during its construction, the feeling came naturally to her. With this sense of the metal of the craft, she gave everything one more check, and turned her focus outward.

This flight would be crucial, not just to prove the concept worked, but also to give her invaluable data.

“You ready?”

The Lord’s voice spoke softly, yet it echoed louder than the cacophony of activity around her. Raphaella met his gaze and nodded once.

“Alright then.” He mirrored the gesture, stepping away and towards the safe area.

“Closing mousepit!” The horde called out, and the special glass dome was brought over. Raphaella fastened it from the inside, carefully locking the safety release mechanisms into place.

“Clear!”

Then there was silence.

Raphaella’s senses hovered over the elementally charged stones within the combustion chamber. Her heart hammered against her chest as her fingers tightened their grip. It was too late to consider backing down, but the thought didn’t cross her mind. Her eyes rose to the cloudy sky above.

Dialing the output to three disks, she pulled the lever.

***“What do you mean it has no means to land!?”***

The Lord’s shrill voice was drowned out by the explosion. The firewood and ammonium nitrate mixed within the combustion chamber, a spark of elemental fire setting them off. Magic and chemistry sang in tandem as the force of the blast met the enchantment in the combustion chamber. Expanding gasses compressed, fire and heat fighting to escape but finding no path out.

The forces contained within the machine demanded release, the shockwaves captured and harnessed by the enchantments that lined the inside of the combustion chamber, priming them for release.

A second pull of the lever heralded another contained blast, and the whole apparatus rattled. Outside, there was a commotion of some sort, but Raphaella’s focus was entirely on the Iron Horde. The combustion chamber tried to deform under the forces within, but held strong. The elemental stones lining the choke-point leading to the closed nozzle rattled from the contained inertia.

A third pull of the lever, and the limits of the chamber were starting to be reached. She could sense the metal sucking up her energy as it sought to bend.

She pulled the second lever, and the nozzle opened.

The magic shifted from containment to release.

Superheated gasses and steam found a way to escape, and the Metalmouse was thrust into her seat as the whole machine let out a deafening roar. Suddenly the world around her was no longer still and she was in the air.

It was faster than she'd ever gone before, but it was clear she wasn't moving with sufficient speed for airflow to sustain flight.

*Faster.*

She pushed the second lever, closed the nozzle, and pulled the first, unleashing another explosion within the combustion chamber. Raphaella then pulled the second lever twice more and then pulled the first lever again. With the nozzle opening, another burst of speed throttled her further, accelerating the machine to higher speed.

*Faster.*

She increased the load per lever-pull from three to four and loaded three more times, allowing the magic to contain and harness the shockwaves, then provided it with release. The sound of the wind was practically as loud as the explosions that rattled the machine with every lever-pull.

*FASTER.*

With bated breath, she shifted to five. Now that the combustion chamber was properly primed, it could tolerate the stronger forces. Her energy was spread throughout the entirety of the vehicle, and with it she could sense the wind as it attempted to rip the Iron Horde apart. The flow was indeed different to what she'd experienced at ground level, and it was also acting differently not just with her increased speed, but also the further up she went.

*FASTER.*

Six per pull, and she could feel the shift of airflow moving fast enough that even this gigantic piece of metal was now being sustained not by the propelling force of the blasts but from its wings.

Raphallea grit her teeth, maniacal energy pouring through her. Though she wished to push the craft to its maximum speed, she reminded herself of the Lord's maxim: Safety first.

Gathering data to create a better and safer aircraft was crucial. So, with the entirety of her attention kept on how the outside forces interacted with the craft, Raphaella began

to play with the different ways to control the machine. The designs had hammered out the basic principles in how to control it mid-flight, but they hadn't been entirely certain of what might prove more or less useful. So with careful tweaks and nudges, she began to test.

One button made it turn slowly, a lever made it spin, this made it dive, and this made it climb. Superhuman reaction speed and perfect hand-eye coordination allowed Raphaella to react to the most minute sign of danger before it could escalate out of control. Every few seconds she primed the chamber with explosives and pushed it to regain lost inertia as she maneuvered her way back towards Sinco, using the compass to head north back towards the city.

Needing to flip the craft upside down to get a better view of what was beneath her, she panicked a little when she realized the city was nowhere to be seen. There was only cold black water in every direction.

"Safety first." She spoke it as a prayer, gripping the controls tightly.

This was outside safety parameters. She'd been too excited and not realized she should've turned back sooner.

"Safety first." She shuddered, fighting back the urge to push the craft to its limits just so she could hopefully reach land as quickly as possible.

The only thing keeping her hand was knowledge that doing so could spell her doom. She'd already consumed more than half of her fuel, the only way to get back was to glide as much as possible and use gravity to her advantage.

With the course set, Raphaella began to climb, pushing past the low-hanging clouds to maximize altitude. Her vision became stark white as she plunged into the fog. The enchanted compass was her only guide, north was to the continent, towards land, towards safety. So using her own senses as they permeated the machine, she pointed the craft on a steep climb away from the pull of gravity.

She climbed.

Every time she released the nozzle, the explosion was used to push her altitude. Then she would immediately level out to a glide until the chamber was ready for the next release.

Up and up and up.

As she kept moving upwards, she found herself short of breath and trembling. An unintended but fortunate design of the ship allowed her to use heat from the combustion

chamber to heat the mousepit. It was enough that she wouldn't freeze, but her breath was becoming short and her energy was starting to reach its limits.

In a flash of light, the Iron Horde broke past the clouds. Sunlight streamed through, the sky a dark blue hanging overhead. Raphaella's thoughts came to a stutter as her head whipped around, trying to take in the sea of white that surrounded her.

She was flying, flying higher than anything-

“SCREEEEEE.”

Every sense in her body screamed out at the instinctual realization a predator had spotted her. Contained within the cockpit and restrained to her equipment, Raphaella's visibility was heavily restrained, limited to the position of the Iron Horde.

A flicker of blue came from above, and Raphaella yanked on the controls on instinct.

She sensed the object that missed her not because she saw it, but because the turbulence had nearly sucked her into a nosedive. Raphaella fought to regain control, priming the combustion chamber, timing its release to the next flash. Banking left, then right, Raphaella's head kept turning this way and that, looking for the threat.

There, hundreds of meters overhead, was a maiden. Barely visible, its body shimmering with the same blue as the sky, a maiden with icy wings that spanned a dozen meters, her body covered in feather and frost, her eyes murderous and proud.

Raphaella had stepped on to its domain, and would pay the price.

Above the feral, a dozen chunks of ice formed, each larger than the Iron Horde. The creature threw them at the mouse, giving chase to the loud and obnoxious intruder. Raphaella banked hard, pushing the craft to its limit before releasing another burst of speed.

This time, she'd not been fast enough.

One of the attacks hit, metal screamed as part of the tail and nozzle were torn by a brutal impact. Raphaella's mind screamed from the disrupted feedback, pulling desperately on the parts of the controls that still responded to break from the downward spiral.

The predator, sensing weakness, gave chase, folding her wings and dropping towards her with the intent to finish her off.

Raphaella's first instincts were to load the combustion chamber with another blast. But the nozzle couldn't close properly, and the chamber's integrity was compromised. To do so would mean blowing up the rest of the craft. She grit her teeth, this was not how it'd been meant to be!

"SCREEEE!" The distance between them was closing in fast.

No time to hesitate.

She bumped the disks to the maximum it could allow per lever-pull: twenty. Her other hand was already undoing the safety pins on the mousepit's glass cover as well as the straps that kept her tied to her seat. Gritting her teeth, she fought against every instinct that told her to burrow and snuggle into the deepest, tightest hole.

Sharp claws grasped at the metal of her remaining wing, vicious territorial wrath clinging to the Iron Horde and, ironically, providing a modicum of stability.

"I'm sorry." Raphaella whispered for what had been the best creation in her life.

The glass dome exploded outwards, smacking the feral in the face, stunning her for half a second. At the same time, Raphaella pulled the burst lever and jumped out into the void.

An explosion of heat, steam, and fire turned her fall into a spiral. The feral screamed in fury, all participants plunging into the cloud, and Raphaella had no longer any frame of reference other than the knowledge that she was plunging at increasing speed. Dimly, she could vaguely sense the debris of her project had passed her, an eerie red glow of flames flickering in and out before they were gone.

With nothing but her armor to protect her from the feral, she pulled her powers inwards, wishing herself to become invisible for whatever senses the predator might have, pretending to be a piece of falling debris. All the while, the wind screamed in her plugged ears, the moisture of the cloud dampening every inch of her body and chilling her to the bone.

Raphaella knew not to open her chute too early, to do so would be courting death.

Surrounded by nothing but the glaring whiteness of the clouds, the Metalmouse held her breath, trying desperately to sense the predator.

The veil lifted and she realized she was now exiting the lower end of the cloud. She could see the ground, a sea of browns and greens. She'd overshot Sinco by a lot, the sea was no longer visible. Where was she? Raphaella wondered this as her eyes darted all around her, looking for any signs of the feral that'd knocked down the Iron Horde.



With no alternatives, she pulled the purple chute out. The spider-silk complained under the tension, but at least this had worked as intended. They'd tested the parachute over a hundred times, with the spider-lady being their main supplier, to guarantee that it could be as sturdy as possible.

Now Raphaella's descent was entirely in the whims of the wind. The Metalmouse kept looking around in search for any signs of the debris of her craft. Surely it hadn't fallen that far, right? The only thing she considered might look like a candidate was an angry black plume of smoke going up well over the horizon. Had they pulled that far apart during the fall? Or had the feral never truly let go of the rocket?

Either situation was at least somewhat fortunate as it meant Raphaella didn't need to find a way to escape an overly angry predatorial feral.

Her luck was only turning for the better when she spotted a small village in the distance, with wispy white smoke rising up in clear signs of life.

The thoughts of finding refuge were momentarily dashed when she noticed the wind taking her towards some trees. The circular design of the parachute made it impossible for her to maneuver without having wind-based powers, and the Metalmouse screeched in anger as her chute tangled into the high branches.

Cutting herself off, Raphaella quickly climbed the tree to retrieve the chute, carefully tearing it into strips and stuffing them into her bag before doing a full self-check. No heavy injuries, only minor dehydration, definitely too much sweating. Despite the disastrous exit from the Iron Horde, she was still fully loaded with all her gear.

Popping an emergency almond-cheese ration, mostly for emotional reasons, she began making her way towards the village.

Lord Rick had been strict in his instructions, if she ever got lost, she was to find the nearest safe space and wait for rescue.

Raphaella wasn't entirely sure how they'd rescue her, but she trusted the Lord would not lie to her about such things. But exposing her presence to the humans would undoubtedly be dangerous. So with a careful chittering and a watchful nose, she sought out the local Horde for refuge.

“This is the wreckage alright.”

Rick sighed as he stared at the remains of the ‘rocket’ that the damn crazy Metalmouse had designed. Or at least the biggest piece. Over a third of the rocket was missing, and what remained was a mix of half-molten slag, charred bluish murisium, and chunks of ice. How ice had managed to pierce through three inch thick fantasy metal was beyond him, but it had to be the same sort of elemental bullshit that allowed a winged cannon to fly the way it had.

“Looks like the locals have been busy.” Urtha commented idly, pointing at the parts that’d been cut off. “You sure your mouse’s alright?” The Orc was forced to raise her voice a little as the chilly winds blew all around them.

There was no snow yet, but over the four days since leaving Sinco, the temperatures had started to drop sharply. “I know she’s calm and alive, but that could mean anything.” Rick replied, shaking his head. “Her emotional state is very narrow and focused. I’m mostly sure she’d be considered to be on the spectrum if she were human, but honestly I am not qualified for this sort of thing. That’s more Alice’s ballpark.”

“I hope you’re not thinking of getting a human lover.” The Orc’s voice was playful, but only half-way. “I doubt she’d survive for long.”

“Yeah, as if I don’t have my hands full already.”

Urtha snorted. “You say that as if you aren’t bonded to more maidens than I can count.” In this aspect she was, strangely, proud. It oozed out of her, through the forced neutrality of her face and into how her large calloused hand pulled him a bit closer.

“And yet I only have one tribal wife.” He chuckled. “God the term just makes me imagine people dancing around with only body paint for clothing.”

“I’d like that.” Her squeeze was a bit more emphatic this time, growling possessively.

“Are you two done or should we wait until after you fuck?” Sheel asked loudly. “Unlike you two, we’ve got husbands to go back to.” The Hobgoblin’s words earned a wave of chuckles and nods from the other maidens from the tribe. “Just because the Chieftess will hunt you down the moment you set foot in the city doesn’t mean we ought to get our asses frozen over out here!”

Rick had the modesty to sputter a little, realizing that he’d once more lost track of things. It was like being a teenager in the sense that his hormones were rampaging and pushing his libido into overdrive. The source of it was, of course, Monica. The feline’s

heat had gone from mere randy to medically concerning. Kiara, Dia, and Eva were now on guard rotation over the Sabertooth.

Four days away from Sinco, far enough the bond with the Sabertooth was barely a whisper, and the emotional backlash could still creep in if he wasn't careful. Urtha had been more than happy to "give him company" during this mouse-rescue operation, but honestly it was an eye-opener. Until now Rick hadn't truly realized how strongly his own emotions could be influenced by those he was bonded to.

Meeting the Elf Queen again might help him shed some light on the matter.

He needed to learn as much as he could before they executed their plan with Kiara.

"Fine. Sheel, take half with you, stay here and pick everything up. We're going to be dragging that thing back to Sinco." Rick called out, earning groans of complaint. "The rest of you, with me. We need to find the pilot as well as every missing piece. We're not that far off from Aubria and I'd rather not take needless risks."

With the tribe split off, Rick took his own half and followed the bond.

The villagers had not been amused.

As they approached the place, a dozen or so maidens popped out, dressed in leather armor and wielding spears. Their tunics had no heraldry or distinguishing colors, but the man standing among them had all the signs of being their leader. It was someone approaching his fifties, with graying hair and flanked by two Hounds.

"Halt! What is the purpose of your presence here?" He called out a hundred meters away, practically shouting at the top of his lungs.

"Urtha, with me, the rest of you stay put." Rick just continued approaching the group. Every meter made the group increasingly tense, with the maidens placing themselves in front of the human with clear intentions.

Once he was roughly twenty meters out, he told Urtha to wait and continued on his own.

Unbothered by the terrified and confused guards, he continued his approach until they moved out of the way. "I've come here for one of my maidens. Metalmouse called Raphaella, she should've shown up a few days ago." Rick called out, taking close notice of the poor state of the gear the maidens wore. It was roughed out, worn to nearly the breaking point, with some of the maidens themselves having sunken cheeks and weary eyes. "I'll pay you for the hassle and be on my way."

To emphasize his words, he pulled out a pouch of gold coins.

Greed flashed across the man's features, the weary fear changing to apprehension mixed in with something else. "We haven't seen any visitors. Metalmouse would've been remembered." He frowned ever so slightly. "Why? She run away with a thief or something?"

"Or something." Rick's attention on the man shifted over to the side at a granary, and frowned. "Raphaella, you ok over there?" He called out, the bond perking up with some surprise.

The doors opened, and five maidens marched right out. The first in line was Raphaella, carrying a chunk of flattened murisium metal larger than she was. Its surface was littered with numbers, scribbles, and designs. The Metalmouse led the way, armored as she was, moving directly towards Rick as she held the piece of metal over her head like some sort of gigantic platter.

"Improvements." She declared, walking right past and handing over the plate to the nearest Orc. "Do not break or scratch. Very important."

"Who're these?" He called out, pointing at the other girls that'd followed her, each carrying their own sheet of scribbled metal.

"New sisters." She answered. "They have joined the Cog Horde."

"S-S-Sinco?" The ignored man called out, his voice now laced with terror. "You're... you're the guy who murdered Lord Thorley."

"One and the same." With a sigh, Rick grasped the money pouch on his hip and threw the whole thing at the feet of... he guessed the village elder? Major? It didn't matter. "For the troubles, and the girls." He returned his attention to Raphaella. "We're going to have a serious talk later about not trying to bankrupt the city with a prototype."

"Recycling is important." Raphaella pointed at the sheets of metal. "Bring back, break down, rebuild, remake, better, improved." She frowned. "Need weapons to defeat the bird."

"Bird?"

The Metalmouse pointed up to the cloudy sky. "Ice bird attacked me." She proclaimed with the same tenacity as if this fact had been an insult to her honor. "The Cog Horde will not forget."

Very much aware that it didn't look like she was going to be stopped, Rick opted to make a mental note of things. When they got back to Sinco, he'd need to take a more active participation in the design process. He'd probably better train the girl on topography, or

at least insist the “plane” would have a second seat for someone with a better sense of direction.

“We’ll talk about revenge against the ice-bird later. What I’d want to know is how you made the whole thing work.” He muttered, taking her hand and walking away from a group of stupefied villagers.

“Ice bird?” Urtha perked up as they got closer. “You talking about the Frostcaller?”

The sudden sense of apprehension in her voice gave Rick pause.

“I... think she is?” He glanced at the pilot.

“Above the clouds, she got angry, shot ice, had to retaliate with the plane, but was shot down.” Said pilot shrugged. “Detailed report is there.” She pointed at one of the metal sheets.

“Father.” Urtha’s voice grew tense. “If that was the Frostcaller... I’ve heard stories. Every time anyone went to try and hunt the damn thing, those winters were bad enough it even reached the areas our tribe typically settled in.”

“And Raphaella flew into her domain and blew up a plane on her face.” Rick sighed as he stared up, watching as a snowflake slowly drifted down.

By his estimates, they were barely just entering this world’s equivalent of October.