

The dreadnought moved sluggishly through the thick covering of ice and snow, taking advantage of the lull in the storms to make further progress towards its destination. Inside of its coal-heated bowels, the engineering team was hard at work keeping its internal furnace roaring, dumping as much coal as they could afford, under the assumption that the generator city they were headed towards would have at least enough to spare for the return trip home. They were lucky enough to have had multiple weeks without a superstorm, and even a few days without a blizzard; though they all knew this meant a “big one” was due to hit them at any time, they still couldn’t afford to lose an opportunity like that. If there was truly another gigantic supercell headed their way, then it was just another reason for them to hurry up and get to where they needed to be.

The chief engineers responsible for the project were keeping themselves busy inside their quarters, which had been turned into an improvised workshop; oil was splattered everywhere, clockwork and machinery strewn about as multiple automatons had been stripped for parts and loaded onto the dreadnought just in case they were necessary. Many of their constituent components had been cannibalized for the sake of ongoing maintenance and repairs, an expected loss, but both foxes in charge of that expedition had decided to take plenty more in order to test out their hypotheses; it was important to know if their math checked out *before* they got to their destination, seeing as there wouldn’t be a lot of time for testing when they arrived back home. Not only that, but it was critical to have *something* to show to the survivors of the generator city, or else it was quite likely they just wouldn’t join them altogether; they learned that the hard way.

Nadezda, by that point elbow-deep into a dissected engine, was one of the main driving forces behind the Dome, an aptly-named mega-engineering project designed to exponentially increase the efficiency of the generator keeping her city going through the seemingly endless winter. Whereas before, in the early years of their holding out for a spring, they had been content in just throwing fuel into the flames and reaping the benefits from heater lines and boilers, it was now undeniable that, if a spring ever came *at all*, they couldn’t sit there and expect it to arrive any time soon. For that reason, she, her mate Tanilys, and a group of top-level engineers got together and designed a more permanent solution, one that would allow for their city to make much better and more efficient use of the heat generated by the coal heart of their home: the Dome.

The concept itself was deceptively simple: rather than simply radiate heat everywhere, they would build a dome of heat-absorbent material over their city, pockmark it with various vents, and then link the whole thing up with a temperature regulation system that would allow more or less warmth to escape from within the dome in order to maintain a pleasant, fully-controllable temperature for as long as they had power to run it. In theory, the structure should be enough for the city to be able to mimic pre-Great Winter temperatures, even year-round if they so desired; a perfect, endless summer day amidst the blasted hellscape of a frozen, eternal winter’s night, a

haven for all those who sought refuge from the devastation, or any who would leave their own generator cities to join their own. The best part of it all was that it would *reduce* stress on the heart of their own home; seeing as most of the heat generated by it would remain trapped beneath the dome, it wouldn't have to constantly be burning as much coal to maintain an adequate temperature throughout the city. If they truly wanted to, they could even expand it into the ice wall, creating even more living space!

Or at least, that was the dream; in reality, the amount of materials needed for such a construction project was prohibitively high, enough that their city alone would never be able to field it. Quite fortuitously, their general council had invested into repairing the dreadnought that brought them there from southern England all those years ago, which it used for supply and aid missions to nearby settlements; it was easy enough for Nadezda and her engineering team to convince them to let them make good use of the vehicle, to take it to other cities and to show them the plans, the projects, the *dreams*. To let them know that in the middle of a calamity that had taken the globe by storm, there could still be hope... if only they would make a small sacrifice and abandon their own generator, to be scrapped for parts, used to create the grandest engineering marvel the world had ever seen. This was how Nady had sold the idea to their council, based on little more than her wild imagination and some preliminary calculations that sort of maybe proved that it could potentially be done; now, however, with half of the dome built, this "dream" was becoming more and more of a reality with each passing day, and with the influx of more survivors finding their way to their city from other, ruined attempts at creating permanent colonies, there was never a shortage of manpower.

But it wasn't enough. It was never enough. And not for any practical reason, but because of what the project was meant to represent, what it was meant to *do*; as much as it was presented as a means of improving heat retention and heating efficiency, that was only half of what the Dome was supposed to accomplish. In reality, it was the engineering team's dreams made manifest, the ability for modern science to take a seemingly insurmountable problem, such as how to survive in a world that had been plunged into an inexplicable and seemingly inescapable ice age, turn it on its head, kick it out the door and bid it farewell while calculating its way through to a proper solution. It was a way for them to transform a horrible situation into one that was, once all was said and done, *better* than the one that came before; after all, they still had to deal with the effects of winter even when it worked properly, so being able to maintain a perfect, eternal summer, as much as it wouldn't work in their old world, was the best they could hope for in this, the new normal they were subjected to. With advances in indoor farming, and this new scientific discipline of "hydroponics" making leaps and bounds, it could be argued that they could make a *better* world than the one that existed prior to the onset of the Great Winter; no more having to weather out the cold months, or wait for specific times to plant. No more would they need to toil under the heat of the sun for measly scraps that a blight could take away; now they could rely on

the power of science and innovation to survive, and that, *that* was the real reason why the Dome was being constructed.

Thus, the reason Nadezda and Tanilys were on that dreadnought wasn't just to make sure that the calculations being relayed to other cities were correct, but to be absolutely certain that what was being sold wasn't merely an engineering project of a seemingly-daunting scope, but a *dream*, a *goal* to strive for in a world that had gone to a frozen hell and never came back. And as long as they could convince one more population center that they weren't just making things up, then they were doing their job right.

Their next target was the city of New Summerset, established a couple of years after their own following the disastrous breakdown of New New London some months prior; the survivors took what they could and set off in search of the nearest intact generator, finding one inside of a deep crevice between two glaciers. Construction was difficult, given that the walls surrounding their settlement were moving at a rate fast enough to be measured in inches per year, and as such the city became renowned for producing some of the finest builders, engineers and construction workers in all of the known generator network. If Nady could convince them to join with them and work on the Dome, even their most pessimistic projections still predicted several months being shaved off from their target, and as far as the vixen cared, any *minute* they saved was a minute well earned. Unfortunately for them, New Summerset didn't exactly see eye to eye with... well, anyone else; considering that the city they came from had fallen thanks to external sabotage following a failed coup d'état, it was only natural that their standard reaction to seeing "foreigners", as they called all others, was to point a gun at their face and demand that they turn around and leave immediately.

But Nadezda was convinced that things could go better now that they had an actual plan and, best of all, actual *pictures* of the advanced state of construction. In fact, she was so convinced that they'd be able to bring New Summerset over to their side that most of her attention had instead been directed at a personal project she'd been working on for some time: a miniaturized automaton! The bulky colossi tip-toeing around their home city might be good enough for large-scale industrial operations, but for some time now there had been some demand for miniaturization, not just for ease of maintenance and reduction of work accident rates, but for the sake of other applications as well; assuming they could make those things small enough, they could potentially be put to work performing other, more complex tasks that didn't require hauling large amounts of coal or frozen wood from place to place.

Of course, while other people considered "smaller" to be somewhere around house-sized, the vixen was prone to seeing far beyond what most people would think to be an adequate goal; to her, turning a gigantic automaton into a slightly less gigantic version of itself would be nothing compared to the *truest* of scientific achievements: an automatic machine that could fit *inside* of a

house. In theory, assuming the clockwork could be compacted enough, there was nothing stopping those behemoths from being made much smaller; up until then, the main issues had been the lack of tech development required to even think in scales *that* tiny, much less construct anything in them. But now, with the development of the Dome and the miniature golden age that it had had been steadily building up to, more and more engineers were finding time to dedicate to more intellectual, academic pursuits; what with their city having become remarkably self-sufficient, they no longer had to wake up worrying about whether or not they'd *have* a city to go to work in. As a result, scientific knowledge had begun to steadily advance once again, and with some of Nadezda's colleagues producing some remarkable hypotheses and theories on the possibilities that miniaturization brought, it was only a matter of time before the vixen got her hands dirty and decided to experiment properly.

Up until then though, every attempt had failed spectacularly. Her tools just weren't good enough to be able to work with clockwork so delicate and miniscule... which of course meant she just had to make better ones, which had been her pet project for the past several months. Whenever the vixen wasn't out on a dreadnought journey, she was stuck in her workshop with her fox mate, elbow-deep in *something* and with her mind racing at a million miles an hour. The end result? Utter chaos, but of the good kind, the sort that brought with it scientific breakthroughs and personal inventions that, while completely useless in anyone else's hands, allowed Nadezda to accomplish whatever she set her mind to. And what she wanted was an automaton small enough to walk from one end of a table to another, as a proof of concept; the rest would come later.

And she had one. It was there, sitting on the wooden surface, miraculously holding itself up despite all the maths telling her that it shouldn't. It sputtered small clouds of smoke periodically, the tiny pieces of coal in its minuscule engine somehow maintaining just enough embers to keep the combustion going. The poor little thing shuddered all over, its structure just barely holding on as it was, but it was still there, still in one piece; and as soon as Nadezda gave it a little nudge and flipped a specific switch, that's when it extended one of its four legs forward... and then the one on the other side of its body. It had taken a step, its first step, and then tentatively a second, then a third, and before anyone on the dreadnought knew it, the vixen was screaming her head off with unbridled joy and childish glee, Tanilys nearly tripping over himself in his rush to get to the onboard workshop to see what had just happened, getting there in the nick of time to save the tiny automaton from walking off the table. The vixen could barely contain herself; eagerly, she told her mate all about her latest calculations and how she had spent countless hours working on the prototype, the one he was holding in his hands. That miniature, frail-looking thing would be the future, for them and for their civilization, and as soon as New Summerset saw it, there was no way they would ever turn down their offer.

The fox was somewhere beyond proud; that night, their bedroom would be warmer than normal.

A couple of days later, the dreadnought slowed down to a crawl outside a crevice between two large glaciers, in which lay their destination. Smokestacks rose from below, signalling the presence of very active industry, judging from their colour and the distinctive noise of the generator roaring through the air. Nadezda took point in leading the crew of engineers down to the elevator built on the side of one of the cliffs, where a small group of armed canines were waiting for them. In their thick accents, they demanded that they identify themselves, then took an inordinate amount of time before agreeing to make a request for a “temporary visit permit”, letting them know they would not be allowed to keep their transport near the city limits for more than a couple of hours. The vixen, knowing for a fact she had things in the bag, confidently declared that they wouldn’t need more than a couple of minutes... to everyone’s, including her own entourage, immense surprise.

Though the guards weren’t that convinced either, they nonetheless allowed them to remain at the “gates”, as they called them, until word came from the city that they would be allowed in. The elevator ride down into the crevice was... elucidating. The city of New Summerset had to develop in an odd, lopsided manner thanks to the glaciers around it, but its people were hardy, crafty and, above all, *stubborn*, resulting in a city plan that was as functional as it was bizarre to people like Nadezda, used to more concentric patterns. Still, it worked, and it housed a population of close to one thousand, all of which would be more than welcome back at their home.

The local council was the typical authoritarian fare: six workers, picked by lot for a strict three-month term, who then dictated who did what, when and how. Disobedience was rewarded with flogging, public exposure and, in extreme cases, direct boiling, a horrid practice that some generator cities had taken to employing against anyone they called a dissident. As was to be expected, none of them were remotely interested in talks of leaving, and were quite ready to throw Nadezda and her team out on their ear, until the vixen produced her grandest invention yet: the miniature automaton.

The sheer bizarreness of the thing was enough to shock the council into inaction for just long enough that the vixen managed to place the thing on the ground and make it walk, at which point even the hardest of brows among the six rulers began to soften. Nady, sensing an opportunity, launched into a well-rehearsed speech on the prosperity of their own city, how their people were so well-fed, how their boilers were so well-stocked and how their existence so well-guarded that they could *afford* to spend time coming up with curiosities like those! From there it was simple enough to just keep talking, to keep on going on about how everything they were accomplishing wouldn’t *just* be about survival or *just* making it about getting to the next day, but about

prospering, about expanding their prospects! They weren't just scraping by, they were *living*, and if only they would join them, they too could help bring that dream alive!

The council still wasn't convinced... but they had been buttered up enough that they would be willing to listen to more. The vixen, knowing that she had one shot at that, immediately leapt to action, producing every picture she had of the dome; not just the blueprints, but its progress as well, showing how it began, how quickly it was built, and in what state it was now. It was proof, undeniable evidence that she wasn't talking out of her ass, and could not only make good on her promises, but deliver in a timely manner. The Dome wasn't just a dream; it was *reality*.

It took hours of discussion, and even longer for the six members of council to reach a decision. While the rest of the expedition adjourned to the dreadnought, Nady remained outside the council's chambers, eagerly awaiting a decision. Sometime before the sun rose, when her exhaustion was getting the better of her, she heard it: the door opening.

And six smiling, beaming faces, with their hands outstretched towards her.

"May Spring come," their spokesman announced, "so we may see it together."