



# Maw of the Inventor

The smooth chrome body of the Dycon 18 Special pulled up silently to the small concrete guard shed. The yellow hazard arm stared defiantly into the perched eagle on the front of the car's hood. The guard inside had been watching them approach cautiously. He stepped out of his guard post as the tinted window lowered down. He leaned down towards the window. "We're not expecting anyone this late," he said to the well-dressed driver. The driver said nothing and instead presented a sheaf of well-ordered papers. The guard didn't move to take them. The driver looked at the guard. "I'm sure you'll find everything in order, syr... Mathews," the driver said, reading the guard's nametag. "I'm sure I will," said the guard. He finally took the papers. He flipped through them, then flipped through them again. "I'm going to need to make a call. You understand." He walked back inside the guard house, and the driver could see him pick up a landline receiver. "Pig," the driver spat under his breath. The other man sitting in the back seat said nothing. He continued to read from a small black book. The guard spoke for several minutes, the only sound in the cold Colorado night the idling of the Dycon 18 and the faint chirping of insects. Finally, the guard walked back outside, holding the sheaf of papers. He handed it back to the driver with a smile. It wasn't a nice one. "Well, seems like it's all clear, gentlemen. Your safety is of, utmost, importance to us." The driver reached out to take the papers, but the guard held them tight. He wasn't smiling anymore. "We've got eyes all the way from here to Excelsion, fellas. This visit is a courtesy. Remember that." The arm blocking the way forward began to lift. The guard let go of the papers and began to step backwards. "Mr. Matthews," said the man in the backseat, almost absentmindedly. He turned a page in his book. The guard looked back at the car. "Hm?" The man closed the book with a snap. "Sorry, I thought it would be Mayhew tonight. Still sorting out the precision to the 433<sup>rd</sup> compression it would seem. Thank you for your time." The Dycon 18 sped off, through the gate, and down the windy road.

"Are you shitting me Matthews!? I was assured, no, promised, that the DMV would be kept LIGHTYEARS from this project. The security around this, I- I can't even begin to fathom the depths of incompetence required to..." The conversation continued unabated. Evans was livid, and when he got livid he got animated. Dr. Sirius Trell waited patiently outside the door to the office. A thin stream of smoke wafted up from the thin cigarette he held loosely in his lips, making the yellow halogen lights of the temporary base camp slightly hazy, like a streetlight on a foggy night. He reread the stack of documents he held in his arms, although he already knew the contents forwards and backwards. He scratched the patchy stubble that clung to his face. He had almost gotten used to it now, although when he looked at himself in the reflective surfaces of the equipment surrounding Site 24, it still made him wince. Dark bags hung under his eyes, his hair



unkempt, his labcoat filthy. Two weeks, almost 300 hours of work. He was almost falling asleep as he stood there, swaying slightly under the buzzing lights, so soft, so-

A pair of thin fingers plucked the cigarette out of his mouth. “Didn’t I tell you to quit these? They’re saying its bad for your health.” The woman in front of him took a long drag on the remainder of the crumbling paper, then threw it on the ground and stepped on it with her boot. “Christ, Charlette,” muttered Trell. “That was my last goddamn one.” Charlette shook her arms out, and did some squats. “Yeah, sure.” Her hair, normally fuzzy, was matted down in a lopsided ponytail. Trell knew she was as exhausted as he was. Her own lab coat was about two sizes too large, her own pair torn to shreds and burned to ashes respectively during testing. Their work had been getting sloppy, he knew that. But that was risk they were taking. This was an Alteration native to continental American soil. It was an opportunity that could not be passed up. The speed at which scientific equipment had been assembled, funding allocated, personnel reassigned... it was a whirlwind. Nothing was being shipped in, or out. Not even fresh water. They were down to their last few cases of bottled water, and two more nights of food. It had been grueling, but Trell could feel it, that they were on the edge that history turned on. It was an almost feverish force, driving them all onwards. To destiny. Charlette bent over backwards, hands on her back. “How’s the...” she finished the maneuver. “...Gossman calculations looking?” Trell shrugged. “Same as two days ago. The field doesn’t seem to react to changing the uh... the... shoot.” He flipped through a few papers. “The Seltzman radiation nor the increased... electron flow. The equipment should function as-” he cut himself off as he let out a yawn. “-intended,” he finished. He reached under his glasses and rubbed his eyes. He felt Charlette lean up against his shoulder. They stayed like that, watching Evan continue to rant and storm around his office. The two of them had known each other for years, both working in and out of various R&D projects together. These past 6 months, working here at Site 24, had really put them to the test. Every day, every waking hour, they were together, solving impossible problems and doing science, real science, on the most important development since the Manhattan Project. Despite the endless toil, the bone-aching hours, when he looked at her on his shoulder like that, he felt like he could do anything. He tried to slow his breathing down, hold his breath, like the moment would break if he did. He wouldn’t have minded if it went on forever.

The door to the office slammed open. Evan was still holding the landline to his chest, the long-suffering cord hopelessly wrapped around half a dozen objects in the office space behind him. He was slightly out of breath. “Dr. Sirius Trell and Charlette Gunster do you as the primary technicians and representatives of the Forgesun R&D head office think we can turn on the machine in the next ten minutes?” Trell and Charlette looked at each other. Trell nodded. “That’s what we came down here to tell you. We’re all set for a test run.” Evan nodded vigorously. “Good. GOOD!” He put the phone back to his mouth. “Alright Matthews, let the good and the brave through. We’ve got it covered.” He slammed the receiver back on its base, and without a pause clapped his hands together. “Suit up, people. Let’s get to work! WHOO!”



The headlights of the Dycon 18 glared over the passing trees. The road was poor, clearly a job done in haste. Edwald could see the tracks where trucks loaded with something heavy had actually destroyed the asphalt as they drove over it. No pride in their work. He glanced in the review mirror. The dark spot behind them made the turn about half a mile back. Amateurs. A tail like this would have had him kicked out of the- “They want us to know, Edwald.” He brought himself out of his reverie. “Sorry syr?” His passenger was back to his book. He was slowly chewing on his bottom lip, brow furrowed in concentration. “They want us to know... its why the trail is so sloppy. But that cant be right. I don’t think you were supposed to notice.” He looked up, staring out at nothing. His bookish face was still young, the barest hints of thinning starting to appear in his otherwise thick brown hair. He had a pencil over his right ear.” Suddenly he pocketed the book. “Stop the car.” Edwald immediately did, pulling off to the side of the road without question. He had learned to just accept the eccentricities of his client long ago. The passenger stepped out. He held up a hand, feeling the breeze against his palm. He pulled out the book again. He flipped back and forth between pages, mouthing words and numbers to himself as he slowly paced back and forth. He finally sighed; the frustration evident. “I don’t get it. This is accurate at the 433 compressions, I know it is. But nothing has occurred even close to 200 compressions, and it's getting worse by the minute. I don’t know how I could have messed this up so badly, unless-” He froze. “Unless...” He strode back to the car. “Edwald, take us back to the main gate. If its down, drive through it. Stop for no one.” Edwald nodded curtly. “Very good syr.” The moment his charge was seated, he pressed down on the accelerator, cranking the wheel to the right. The tires squealed as he pulled the Dycon 18 around. It would be a quick trip back to the gate.

The machine was a strange one. It had been surrounded by a wooden structure that was long torn away, replaced by concrete supports where needed. The remaining tower of crisscrossing metal beams were almost haphazard, especially when supporting the massive, towering pole that stretched above the tree line. Topped with a fat metal ball, it swayed in the wind. The structure wasn’t steel, or any other known metal. There were several unexplained additions to the structure as well, and a portion of it descended underground. Everything was hooked up to something, or somethings. They could see Site 24 on every spectrum, every conceivable way to measure anything was onsite and staring directly at the machine. When Evan, Trell, and Charlette walked out of the temporary office structure, they walked into buzzing activity. Final checks on machines, technicians talking and directing. It seemed like chaos, but almost everything was settled. Charlette immediately walked off towards the foreman for the elctro-quantitative rig system to do a final once over. Her suit was purple, unlike the standard orange. She had asked for the color change so her mom could see her in any group photos they took while working. It was a testament to her expertise in spectro-gradient tuning the request was granted. As they walked, they finished putting on the last of the pieces of the custom, heavy duty insulation suits provided by Forgesun Industrial. Trell sealed the rubber edge of his faceplate to the neck of his suit. “Ok, once we’ve got the suit checkovers complete, lets get the preliminary start up sequence in-” Evan jerked his head towards Trell. “What!? Skip the check overs.” Trell



continued for a moment before it registered. “-order of the... what?” Evan shook his head quickly. “It’ll be at least 20 minutes, even if we rush, and the damn DMV is on the way here right now. If they get here before we run it, this whole operation will get shutdown before you can say ‘Jingleheimer filling.’” He tightened the seals on his gloves. Trell was so tired. “Evan, we can’t... the voltage we’re dealing with, it’s not the kind that lets you make a second mistake.” Evan sighed angrily. “You think I don’t know that? There won’t be a mistake if we all do our jobs correctly. I’ve been doing work on units ten times more dangerous than what juice we’ve got here for twenty six years, junior.” Evan turned towards Trell, his haggard face reflected in Evan’s faceplate. “We are on the edge of the greatest scientific discovery this side of the freakin’ television, Sirius. Don’t pussy out on me now.” He clapped a rubber glove on the doctor’s shoulder. “Let’s make some history, huh?” With that, Evan walked away towards the machine. Trell opened his mouth to speak, but found he had no words. Finally, he started moving again. The safety inspections found problems in the suits once every ten thousand checks, and even then, only compromising damage in a million. It would be fine. Sirius began walking towards his station. It would be fine.

The silver Dycon 18 pulled into a lonely gas station, headlights putting the “Colorado Springs” sign into view for a moment. Shutting the engine off, Edwald stepped out delicately. Had he known this excursion would have taken them to these backwater woods, he wouldn’t have brought such an excellent taste in shoe wear. He moved to begin filling up the car. “Don’t,” his charge said. He stopped halfway through the motion. He had the book in one hand. With the other he pointed to the headlights. “They’re still on.” Edwald looked towards them in confusion. “That’s odd syr. Perhaps a malfunction with the vehicle? It should have no impact on refueling...” he tapered off. The plain man slowly brought a hand towards the metal pole of the awning over the gas station. Sparks jumped to his hand. He turned back to Edwald. Edwald felt himself involuntarily flinch from the look in his eyes. Dr. Edgar Simmons, head of the Department of Motor Vehicles Research and Development sub-department, had found something that captured his attention. Greed was not the word for the look, nor curiosity or pride in a successful application of a methodology. It was the same look on a child’s face when they opened Christmas presents, or when a dog smells its owner come home. It was unburdened joy. Edwald broke eye contact. Dr. Simmons walked over to him. “How far away are we from Site 24? No! Don’t tell me. About... twenty miles! That puts the output at... yes... then it would have to... over the... hmm...yeah. Yeah!” the excitement was building in his voice. Edwald interjected. “Syr, what should we do? I can drive to another station.” Dr. Simmons waved his hand. “No, Edwald. We’re going back. Once there’s no more of this electric discharge... well, hold on.” He looked at his book again, muttering to himself. “No, we’re fine. We’ll wait it out here. This is as far it goes. But back to 433<sup>rd</sup> compressions? So, its distance is related to the Alteration. The distance is likely related to how Altered it is, and how much the Alteration has an impact on its surroundings, though that’s complete conjecture.” He slapped his forehead. “Absal, you sly dog!” He chuckled. “That’s another five I owe you! Good grief.” He started scribbling in the book.



Edwald watched for a moment, then leaned against the Dycon. He had a feeling they were going to be here for a while.

Everyone was in position. Charlette waved to him as she walked to the sensor display about equal distance from him to the machine. He waved back. Evan was standing at the base of the structure, hand just above the start switch. His hooded face looked around one last time. Trell met his eyes. He felt the excitement in the air, the palpable anticipation. Despite his concerns, despite the conditions, he wouldn't want to be anywhere else. Everyone was still. Evan held up three fingers. Two. One. He pulled the lever. Nothing happened. Trell checked his equipment. A slight change in electro-magnetic fields, and a gentle discharge of ionized radiation. He looked up at Charlette, then Evan. Evan threw up his hands as if to say 'what the hell?'. He felt a pang of disappointment. There should have been much higher readings based on the preliminary...

The ground pulsed, once.

Then it started, at the farthest edge of his perception. So faint he wasn't sure he could hear it. It almost sounded like singing. A gentle hum, to a tune he couldn't even begin to fathom. He breathed in. The humming got louder. Hair stood up all along his arms. He could feel the buzzing in his chest, in his bones. He breathed out. Evans started twitching, then thrashing. He started to raise a hand towards him. He breathed in. Evans was looking right at him. His eyes were smoking pits, his suit's helmet filled with blue flickering light. Something popped inside it, covering the inside of the faceplate in red. He breathed out. Evan was still standing, his body still dancing to the music that had killed him. A hole in the suit. His breath caught in his throat. He took one step back. Clarkson backed up, his rubber glove brushing against the site railing. A flash of light, his whole arm engulfed in flame. Trell saw bone. Another step. Charlette. He couldn't see her. A tree burst into flames. Then another. His equipment sparked and smoked. He started to itch where his gloves met his suit. He was running. He heard the buzzing around him as arcs reached off of him, into the air, into trees. The humming was getting louder. He saw a man struggling to take off his helmet, desperate to get away from the noise. He was dancing to Evans' song before long. He breathed out. Charlette. Where was Charlette. He stopped running. Turned around. It was a sight that drew a roar of anguish out of his throat. Against the roaring flames and arc bolts of lightning streaming off the bulb at the tower's peak, the slight figure of Charlette casting a long shadow towards him. She was right next to the lever. Evans' suit was next to it, still twitching. He thought he saw her look back for a moment. Then she grabbed the lever. She put her whole-body weight on it, in case she could finish the action. There was a spark. She began to dance. The lever went down.

All at once, the humming stopped. The silence rushed in, almost as loud. The world around him burned, the trees ablaze in every direction. Why was he still alive? He couldn't breathe. He felt himself falling, falling down to earth. Through the blurred vision of the faceplate, laying there in the inferno of Site 24, he saw a butterfly. It had purple wings, a soft flowing trail of light glittering behind it. It vanished as he sunk into oblivion.



“We found one!” The voice cut through the fog. He tried to move, push himself up. He was still in his suit. It was awkward to move in, and his mouth was parched. “Whoa there, Dr. Trell. Steady.” He staggered to his feet. He had to find her. He froze. Two Ar-15's were pointed at him, a plain looking man holding a small black book standing between them. There were a number of men in black suits moving around behind him through the charred woods. “Don’t worry, we’re from the Government. We’re here to help. I think you have a lot to tell us.”