

TRANSFORCE 2002



ALIGNMENT

FURMAN ANDERSON BASTICK HOPGOOD SENIOR SULLIVAN WILOMAN

Alignment

by Simon Furman

Book 1

What they needed, Grimlock decided, was a Unicron.

This was not a sudden conclusion. In common with most all of the Dinobot commander's somewhat rare insights, this undertaking had involved long hours, days, weeks even of painstaking deliberation. Grimlock was not stupid, and not slow, Indeed, in battle his speed, judgment and reflexes were second to none. But he was sometimes pedestrian when it came to deep thinking.

The problem that had started Grimlock lumbering off down this particular cognitive path stemmed from their current mission. They were now into day 78 of a deep space odyssey to the outer fringes of the Hadean system. Their Autobot Hyperwave skimmer was already beyond existing star charts, far into the wilderzones, where no other Transformer - or indeed known species - had ventured. And so far nada, zip, nothing. All they'd found was a big, empty hunk of space and Grimlock was bored beyond belief.

Day 78 had dawned - if indeed such terminology was applicable without so much as a single star within seventy billion light years - much like the previous seventy-seven. As the mission's Flight Leader, Grimlock was expected to officially relieve the 'night' watch helmsman and hand over to the 'day' shift. What had actually happened was that Grimlock had crashed so loudly onto the forward bridge, he'd woken Blaster, who had let his systems idle when the monotony had finally, totally overwhelmed him.

Both had reacted with surprise. Grimlock because he'd somehow blundered onto the bridge when actually he'd been bound for the particle showers, and Blaster because his internal chronometer immediately registered that he'd been in exactly the same position, undisturbed, since Day 71.

Blaster had stalked off angrily, bound for the rec room, where the rest of the crew had no doubt idled for the past several days, his existence a fading memory. His intention was to amp up his chest speakers to max, plug himself into the ship's intercom system and fry their audio sensors with Quarian thrash. Grimlock,

meanwhile, had stared, as if confused by the bridge and its unfamiliar geometry, uncertain of its function, and then exited without a backward glance.

In the empty bridge, automated systems ticked stoically on, charting the void ahead, endlessly meticulous. Every spike and echo of space noise was categorized and logged, every fluctuation in the radio-magnetic spectrum registered, every spatial anomaly recorded. External sensors reached out long, invisible filaments into the emptiness, probing, searching... for energon.

‘What kind of job that?’ Grimlock had demanded of acting Autobot leader Ultra Magnus. ‘Me warrior, not boy scout!’ In the high chamber of the so-called Stellar Galleries on Cybertron, Ultra Magnus sighed long and hard. He was not in the mood for Grimlock and his inevitable tantrums. Far more pressing concerns, not least the critical condition of Optimus Prime, weighed heavily on his mind.

He’d fixed Grimlock with the most baleful stare he could muster and gestured wide in the generally vague direction of ‘outside’. ‘Have you taken a good look at our homeworld recently, Grimlock?’ Ultra Magnus leaned forwards for emphasis. ‘It’s not in a good shape, we’re not in a good shape’.

Grimlock, though, just stared blankly, as if Magnus were suddenly, miraculously speaking in tongues. Magnus sighed, settling back. ‘Pinea Omicron cost us all dearly,’ he continued finally. ‘Maybe we did win the battle, and yes, maybe the Decepticons came off worse, but in the end, unless we can come up with a whole lot of energon -and fast -we’re all looking at the big shutdown.’

Grimlock kicked at some imaginary object, sulky. He didn’t like or respect Magnus, and he didn’t like being sent on scouting missions. He was built for combat. End of story. Magnus was speaking again, and Grimlock reluctantly phased him back in. ‘... take whatever search arc you want, hand-pick a crew, go where no Transformer has gone before, but please just go. Find us a new source of energon.’

Further debate was curtailed as the far doors to the chamber swung wide, admitting Prowl. ‘The energy research committee is ready for you, Magnus,’ he said, ignoring Grimlock. ‘They’ve come up with some interim plans they’d like to run past us.’

Ultra Magnus rose. 'If you'll excuse me, Grimlock, I have to go discuss downsizing and other less-than-palatable options. Have a safe trip...'

Have a safe trip! Grimlock had done everything in his power to have anything but. The way into the wilderzones had long been considered one of the most hazardous and potentially life-threatening journeys never to have been undertaken. Legend had it that the star-fields beyond the outer fringe were stalked by creatures big enough to bear entire civilizations on their backs, hosts of soul-sucking Parafiends and vast armies that poured like molten metal from the heart of super-dense stars. So much for legend.

And so, 78 days in and not a Parafiend to be had, Grimlock had reached the momentous conclusion that they needed another Unicron. Not necessarily THE Unicron, but something close, something big and epic, something that called for blood and thunder, do or die. Anything but this!

It had been several hundred years since the chaos-bringer Unicron had been destroyed, and to be fair there had been a few epic threats in-between. But nothing really on the same scale. Jhiaxus, the Swarm. Mogahn the Mass, Praetocian, the Ebon Knights... and, most recently, Pinea Omicron. But then it really was because of Pinea Omicron and the fifty or so years that had preceded it, that they were here now, scraping around the galaxy for energon. It had, decided Grimlock, conceding Magnus's contention long after the fact, been a sustained and costly conflict.

Under Galvatron II, the Decepticons had built and mobilized a huge fleet of War worlds; planet-sized battleships with a power core fed by unstable, fissioned energon. They were lumbering and hugely energy-inefficient, but their destructive power was awesome to behold.

In order to safeguard Cybertron, the Autobots actively relocated their entire world, using technology appropriated from former Decepticon commander, Jhiaxus to clone other 'Cybertrons' from barren, uninhabited worlds. These decoys served both to mislead and divide the enemy, but eventually a critical security blunder led the Decepticon fleet tantalizingly close to the location of the real Cybertron. A massed Autobot armada engaged the Decepticons at the spiral arc known as Pinea Omicron in an attempt to end the conflict once and for all. Huge losses were sustained by both sides, and in a climactic and crucial confrontation, Autobot

leader Optimus Prime finally ended the reign of Galvatron II. But only at huge personal cost. Wounded, drained, Prime too fell. Fell hard.

Grimlock had been among the first to reach Prime's slumped form. Not dead, but close to it. He'd engaged a stasis field around Prime's body, maintaining the flickering energy of his Spark within it. To date, there'd been no improvement. Prime was still functionless, a living war monument.

Which Grimlock could relate to. Another day of this, and his systems would be shutting down also, his brain freefalling into oblivion. Completing a cursory scan of ships' systems in the auxiliary flight deck, Grimlock prepared to take his higher functions off-line. He was three alpha stages into another extended personal hiatus when the first wave of missiles hit and the bulkhead nearest to Grimlock blew out into space.

It barely moved, but it saw everything, knew everything. It rarely spoke, but still communicated on multiple levels, issuing orders simultaneously to countless] warriors, agents and operatives on a variety of active duties across the known galaxy and beyond. The intrusion on the far northern perimeter of Hub space had, inevitably, been noted and a cadre of free-phasing multiforms dispatched to deal with it.

The craft, it knew, was an Autobot Hyperwave, and it experienced a rare moment of disquiet. The alignment was so close now. It had waited all its long, long life for just this moment, and nothing -no detail, no matter how small or insignificant - could be allowed to distract it.

Having hidden its existence for countless millennia, the Liege Maximo was resolved not to be discovered now.

Aboard the Hyperwave, the sudden rude awakening had precipitated a mad scramble for previously neglected stations around the ship.

Grimlock had managed at least to prevent himself being sucked out into space, engaging magno-clamps on the soles of his feet. The only problem was that once engaged it was all but impossible to move about with any kind of speed or urgency. Outside, the unknown assault ships were banking, ready for another

attack run, and Grimlock was several slow, painstaking steps away from the nearest tactical station.

Through the largely missing bulkhead, Grimlock was afforded a spectacular view of the enemy ships. They were hard to pin down, inasmuch as they never seemed to keep the same configuration for more than moments at a time. In rigid arrowhead formation they swept towards the Hyperwave. As they neared, extra wings sprouted, fuselages restructured and augmented, weapons of all descriptions multiplied and grew.

Another tortuous step. Grimlock reached out a desperate hand. Another step. Ahead the glowing, free-floating tactical display. Counter-measures, evasive maneuvers, forward weapons, shields... all pre-programmed in and accessible at the mere brush of a fingertip across and through the holographic sequencers. Another step. So near now. Perhaps only another arm's length.



Another step. On the periphery of his vision, Grimlock saw countless missiles streaking towards them, predatory bio-molecular warheads that multiplied and evolved. Another-

‘You might move faster,’ observed Perceptor, as he strode in through the expanding hatchway, waving a hand across the tactical display, ‘if you disengaged your magno-clamps. Emergency forcefields established themselves right after the first strike. You’ve had full gravity now for seventy point three five seconds.’

The Hyperwave lurched violently, just as Grimlock chose to test Perceptor’s assertion. A pre-set evasion pattern twisted them through an immediate series of sharp, banking turns, each accompanied by the release of thousands of decoy targets and an almost immediate series of off-ship detonations. The Hyperwave bucked and rode the shockwaves, and with each turn and impact Grimlock flew

wildly across the auxiliary flight deck, careening off walls and work stations and every now and then jolting painfully against the emergency forcefield.

And through it all, Perceptor calmly surveyed the tactical readouts and displays, noting that below in the battle bay Springer and Swoop were returning fire with all plasma cannons. All they had done, he nevertheless concluded, was buy themselves a few precious moments. Their attackers were too numerous, too highly adaptive, and long-range sensors were picking up more on an inbound intercept course.

It was really only a matter of time before they were blown to kingdom come.

Many millions of light years away, on a metal world formerly known as Pyrovar, Soundwave was doing what he did best: listening. Some years before, Galvatron II had established his command center here, building a colossal fortress that spanned an entire continent and was clearly visible from outer space. Pyrovar, its indigent population either wiped out or enslaved, had been re-named New Cybertron.

Now, in the Grand Forum, a vast open hall protected by a fiery energy dome, the future of the Decepticon race was being hotly debated. The destruction of Galvatron II had left the usual power vacuum, but rather than - as had been the tradition in the past - various would-be leaders jockeying to seize control, it currently seemed no one really wanted the job.

Of course, that didn't stop everyone and his mecho-minder having an opinion.

On the one hand, Shrapnel advocated continuing the war on a guerrilla basis, isolating and seizing the Autobots' remaining stores of energon in a series of lightning raids. Fine in principle, except that the Autobots had their own energy crisis, and they were hardly likely to leave their precious energon bunkers unguarded. If indeed, they hadn't already moved them to new, secure locations.

Stormfront, one of the surviving members of Galvatron II's elite guard, wanted immediate and bloody retribution, an all-out assault on Cybertron itself and Optimus Prime's head on a spike. He was largely ignored, everyone but him united in a tacit understanding that in days, if not hours, his head would be the one on a spike. Stormfront was a bitter reminder to one and all of how much Pinea Omicron had cost them.

The whispered urgings of Mantissa, chief scientific advisor to the council, had engendered a certain level of excitement and support. Her scheme involved invasive nanotechnology, spread by a self-replicating virus carried in living hosts. The idea was to infect Autobot prisoners of war and then, in a supposed gesture of goodwill, send them home. The problem was that no one quite knew how to prevent the nano-plague spreading to Decepticons.

One after the other, Sabrejaw, Mindgame and Killzone took the floor, the strategies veering wildly from rabid to labyrinthine to apocalyptic. And underlying it all, a palpable desperation, a sense of crushing inevitability. As a race, they were staring extinction squarely in the face, and beyond the Grand Forum ground roots support was gathering for a splinter faction calling themselves Predacons. They advocated unconditional surrender to the Autobots, a pooling of resources, an extended time of gathering and secret re-building.

As quietly as he had arrived, Soundwave slipped away. He had heard enough. Only one being could preserve the Decepticon race and guarantee their future.

'The vast gulfs of nothingness that made up the wilderzones yawned before us, huge and endlessly dark. Nowhere to hide. Nowhere to run.

'Our Hyperwave cut through the void, weaving and dipping, turning and plunging. All to no avail. The predatory horde in pursuit simply matched us move for move, pushing us harder and faster, bombarding our shields and depleting our weapons and counter-measures. Wave after wave of morphing, predatory shapes swept in, gathering for the kill...'

Grimlock paused, considering. Too flowery? Probably. And what's more, he hadn't spent several million years building a reputation as being surly, taciturn and grammatically challenged to blow it all in an overly elegaic epitaph. He pressed erase, and cleared his vocal actualisers...

'We try to escape but no deal, too many bogeys, too fast. We give good account of ourselves, though, and-'

'Grimlock,' boomed Blaster over the ship's comm system, 'aren't you done with that recording yet? Load the freakin' S.A.D. pod, and get up here. There's something you need to see.'

Pausing only to shoot the offending -and now silent -comm pad a thunderous look, Grimlock closed the input dock and shunted the Sensory! Analytical Data pod into the missile silo. Disguised as a Starpedo, it would be launched with the next salvo. The idea was, attacking ships would simply assume it had missed its target and failed to detonate. Thereafter, it would continue on its merry way back towards Cybertron. Once it was within sensor range, it would begin broadcasting a distress signal and -hopefully- be retrieved.

Of course, by then they would all be free-floating space dust, but at least it would alert others, and provide some tactical data on both this region of space and their mysterious attackers.

Re-entering the main battle bay, Grimlock found Perceptor displaying uncharacteristic agitation, a state indicated in its entirety by one solitary finger tap- tapping on the stellar mapping console at which he stood. Swoop, Blaster and Springer were gathered around him, staring up at the huge forward display screen. Grimlock stared too. Stared hard.

'Me see nothing,' he snorted after several moments. The Hyperwave then bucked several times, buffeted by shielded impacts, but by now these 'almost' impacts were becoming commonplace. Only the onboard computer reacted, warning them that counter-measures had failed, and shields were now down to fifteen percent. They ignored it, everyone aboard knew they were just one or two direct hits from oblivion.

'That's just it,' replied Perceptor, when the Hyperwave had settled once more, 'there's nothing. And there should be.'

Pulling up a holographic display, Perceptor indicated the extrapolated flight path of a comet he'd dubbed Progeny, their sole companion through this otherwise barren sector of space. 'Based on Progeny's trajectory it should currently be here, 210,897 solar reks off our starboard bow. It's gone.'

'Destroyed?', queried Grimlock, not seeing at all where this was going.

'I don't think so,' replied Perceptor. 'There'd be trace evidence, energy fallout, something. 'No. I think it's cloaked. '

This time Grimlock made no effort to conceal his scorn. 'A cloaked comet? Me heard everything now. We seconds from big shutdown and best science officer can come up with is this. We doomed.'

Perceptor's finger tap-tapped restlessly again. 'No, hear me out. The comet is behind the cloak. That empty sector of space you're looking at, I don't believe it's empty at all. I think our sensors are being deceived by an immensely sophisticated holospore projection. There's something there. We just can't see it.'

Another huge series of blasts rocked the Hyperwave, the force slamming them forwards. 'Hull compromised, sections omicron and theta aft, delta port, epsilon starboard.' screeched the computer as energy feedback blew off panel covers and emergency lighting painted them red. Smoke billowed in through nearby ventilation ducts.

'Set a course,' ordered Grimlock. 'We go see where that freaky comet of yours gone...'

The Hyperwave banked and turned, trailing debris from its shattered superstructure. Its engines flared bright and rocketed it forward into the yawning emptiness ahead. Behind the craft, the attacking ships slowed and dropped into holding positions.

'They're not following us in,' Blaster confirmed.

Grimlock just snorted. 'Why me not reassured by that.' 'Energy distortion,' reported Perceptor, indicating the screen, where space seemed to have become twisted, pulled out of shape. It stretched, yawned, and then...

They stared. It was beyond words, beyond easy comprehension. There was a distinct, staggered pause before their minds caught up with and could begin to interpret what their eyes were seeing:

An impossibly vast network of almost identical metal planets, stretching in all directions as far as the eye - and even the Hyperwave's long-range sensors -could see, each connected to the other in a massive three- dimensional web. The

planetary construct thrummed with energy, coursing through its stellar bodies and tendrils, pulsing across huge gulfs of space. Schools of thousands of small craft swam across this ocean of worlds, endlessly towing and transporting, laying new layers and levels of geometric complexity. The massed structure had depth as well as width, but the spatial distances involved defied calculation.

Perceptor finally broke the stunned silence: 'Multiple launches from the nearest planets, attack formations.'

'Somehow,' muttered Springer, 'I knew you were going to say that.'

It watched as they dived low over G345 of Lateral Transverse String N-N-E, sweeping the Hyperwave through and under the support structures of the vast meta-processing plants there, built on gantries miles above the planet's open liquid metal core. It watched as they shot upward in an audaciously steep ascent, firing off the last of their pitifully depleted armaments. It watched as they navigated the inverted geography of the Hulla Filament, twisting and spinning desperately through the hanging latticework of spiral power-couplings. It watched as its fleet followed, matching them move for move, evading their Starpedoes and pulse cannons, battering them mercilessly in return.

And finally it watched as the Hyperwave limped, sputtered... and wave after wave of missiles struck, blowing it apart.

Then it considered. It shifted its mountainous frame, flexed its bunched metacoiled musculature.

On the surface, the threat appeared to have been neutralized, but where one Autobot craft had ventured, so might another. ..and another. It could not allow any distraction now, no matter how small. Soon, its attention would be elsewhere, its destiny ruled by distant stars, and the slightest incursion might be enough to undo all it had striven for.

With a thought, it mobilized its massed armies, directing them to strike at the very heart of the Autobot and Decepticon civilizations, wipe them from existence. Perhaps, it decided, it should have done this a long time ago.

Beyond the wilderzones, a solitary Starpedo dropped out of a sub-space fold it had itself created, re-emerging at the farthest edge of the Hadean system. Then, in accordance with its programming, it began transmitting.

'Jump?! That was your plan?'

'Stay still,' urged Perceptor, as he worked on reattaching Springer's shattered left leg. 'There's a lot of damage.'

They were gathered on a high support stanchion, overlooking reservoirs full of molten cobalt. It was hard to gauge their actual location, they were simply on one of many such worlds, somewhere in this vast planetary network.

'Of course there's a lot of damage,' moaned Springer, I jumped-or, rather, I was pushed, out of a speeding Hyperwave at great height, hit three dynamo spires, went through one whole level of gantry, and fell into an ore processor. I'm lucky to be alive!'

Springer fixed Grimlock with an accusing glare. 'When you said you had a plan, I expected a little more innovation! '

'Me, I expected a little more bounce out of someone called Springer,' replied Grimlock curtly, staring out across the sprawling vista of massed factories, endlessly grinding and processing. 'We alive, aren't we?'

And they were. There was no contesting that, Springer conceded ruefully to himself. Perceptor had locked a pre-planned set of maneuvers into the Hyperwave's auto-pilot and on the very first low pass across one of the metal worlds they had baled out. Reluctantly on his part. And here they were, but where were they?

'It's called the Hub,' said Blaster, his voice awash with static and background noise. Releasing his audio unit configuration, he returned to robot mode in a fast three- step transformation. 'There's a whole mess of transmissions being fired

every which way across this interconnected network, but I managed to filter out enough to give us some idea of what's where and how it all fits together.

'We're on something called G345 of Lateral Transverse String North-North-East. It's basically one big ore- processing station, but get this -it wasn't always this way. In fact, originally it was an organic planet. It was conquered, stripped and re-created, then linked up to the rest of the Hub.'

Grimlock absorbed all this silently. 'Remind you of anything?' queried Perceptor. 'The technology employed is uncannily similar to that we, ah, appropriated from Commander Jhiaxus. And yet Jhiaxus was destroyed by the Swarm.'

'Then there something else,' said Grimlock, 'something bigger and badder than Jhiaxus, and it here.'

'Lucky us,' spat Springer, testing his realigned servo- joints. 'What now, oh fearless leader?'

Grimlock looked skywards. 'We wait for Swoop to get back from aerial reconnaissance, find way to very heart of Hub. ...

...and kick butt!'

Of course, it had to be Grimlock. Goes out to find a few cubes of energon, uncovers a galaxy-wide conspiracy.

The telemetry from the S.A.D. had been processed and analyzed, and yet they still knew little or nothing of what they were dealing with. A vast network of planets, multi-form Transformers of some high order and design they'd never encountered before. Ultra Magnus had the uncomfortable feeling that despite all they'd been through, all they'd struggled and fought for, they were only now getting a hint of 'the big picture'.

Jhiaxus. Magnus pulled up his file again. For all that had happened, all that this one individual had instigated, the file was entirely too slender for his liking. Jhiaxus had cut a swathe across several far sectors of space, invading, colonizing and creating little Cybertrons. They never knew why, or if he operated alone or

under orders. But he'd hinted at another distinct breed of Transformers, a whole race that had evolved in parallel to their own.

One thing was for sure, they'd been busy. The scale of this planetary network staggered and assaulted the senses. But why, and to what end?

And how long before whoever or whatever controlled it all decided to do something about their toothless backwater cousins?

Magnus summoned the Autobot council. Despite their currently precarious situation energy-wise, he felt in no doubt that they must mount an immediate and direct response.

It was time to show that they could still bite back!

When the first attacks came, Soundwave was already deep underground, and only distant tremors signaled the commencement of hostilities. At first he'd assumed, as did many other Decepticons, that it was the Autobots, come to finish them off while they were at their most vulnerable. It was, however, a very unAutobot-like thing to do, and Soundwave quickly patched himself into the main surveillance grid for a look topside. He saw at once the attacking ships were not of Autobot design or configuration. In fact, they were unlike anything he'd seen before.

Sleek, fast, heavily armed and possessing a myriad variety of changeforms, the ships swept over in tightly regimented waves, pounding the planet surface with plasma charges, targeting key defense and power installations with pinpoint accuracy. Subsidiary feeds indicated they had already decimated New Cybertron's outer defense ring, destroying perimeter bases on the planet's six moons. Reports were coming in from Decepticon outposts far and wide, all now under attack.

In response, ground and air units on New Cybertron mobilized, surface armaments opened fire and cloaked satellites in orbit rained fire down on the enemy vessels. But it seemed to Soundwave that however many they destroyed, more appeared to take their place.

Long-range intelligence reported another vast armada of ships heading for Cybertron, and the Autobots. Outer colonies had already engaged the enemy.

Someone, it seemed, was intent on wiping them all out, regardless of their allegiance.

Instead of joining the fray, Soundwave moved deeper and deeper into the underground complex, his sense of urgency further heightened by this new development. This area was known only to a select few. If the Decepticon High Council even suspected what they were planning, they would all be summarily executed.

In a heavily shielded bunker, Soundwave surveyed the project. The synthesis of cutting edge technology and arcanum was clear, and as always it disturbed Soundwave. Highly practical, he had never been comfortable with the mystical elements of their heritage, but he acknowledged that without them this venture was doomed to failure. There was just too much at stake to let some formless disquiet give him pause now.

'We're ready,' announced Direwolf, as he fired up several sulfurous flames in carved niches set around the central chamber. Direwolf possessed one of the foremost scientific minds in the new Decepticon order, but it was his experiences as a former acolyte of Unicron and his intimate knowledge of the dark arts that had led Soundwave to enlist his aid. No doubt Direwolf had his own reasons for signing on, but Soundwave had chosen not to over-analyze these.

All that mattered was that he rose again to lead them.

They were joined by fellow conspirators Ravage and Ramjet, both of whom took up positions either side of Direwolf. Soundwave joined them, taking up his own pre-arranged station. It was hard to think of it as a procedure, it had all the trappings and feel of a ceremony. As Direwolf began to chant, and the machinery around them hummed into life, Soundwave's eyes were drawn to the huge, egg-shaped pod at the heart of a snarl of cables and ducting. It seemed to pulse, seething with barely contained energy. The ambient atmospheric pressure rose steadily, a low humming filled the air, which was suddenly alive with charged particles.

And within the pod, something began to stir...

It watched as its fleet carved a path through New Cybertron's defenses, announcing its presence in fire, chaos and destruction. Since the dawn of time it had guarded both its existence and its grand design. Its strategy had been utterly focused, uncluttered by small - minded agendas or desires. Vanity, revenge, rage; these were for lesser beings. It had watched, amused, as its own kind had waged war, on each other and against other races, unaware of the tiny scale of their struggles and ambitions, unable to see the intricate patterns woven on the cosmos by the beings that first breathed life into them. As conflicts came and went, as despots and monsters rose and heroes defied them, so it continued to build, to await the alignment.



And now, as distant stars positioned themselves in the heavens, mirroring the interconnected web of planets it called the Hub, so the Liege Maximo prepared...

...to become a god.

It was time.

Direwolf opened his chest casing, releasing seals and insulation that protected his Spark, his life force. The others, Soundwave included, did likewise.

One by one they approached the seething pod. The lambent, darkly swirling energy seemed to sense the raw, potent force contained in each Spark, descending

on it hungrily. And as it fed, so they felt their lifeforce drain, torn from the very substance of their being.

It was a little like dying.

But Direwolf had balanced his theorems and enchantments perfectly, and at a prearranged limit - the most they could possibly bear to lose and still maintain operational status - the feast turned sour, and the energy cloud broke off its assault, retreating once more into the pod.

Where it gathered, incubating.

And as he watched, so Soundwave considered former glories, a time when one name epitomized the sweep and majesty of the Decepticon forces, when its mere utterance provoked terror and awe.

The shape inside the pod moved, stretched. The once rigid structure of the pod itself became pliable, viscous. Fingers clawed at it from within.

And Soundwave remembered, the glory of their campaign, the utter ruthlessness with which it was fought and won. Worlds, civilizations ... all fell before that one name.

The pod ruptured, tore, and at last he emerged, re-born, augmented, more powerful than ever.

One name ...

...Megatron!

End of book 1

Alignment

Book 2

The world around him was burning, a churning cauldron of fire, war and destruction. On the ground, gaping craters bled boiling gasses high into the atmosphere, where the shattered remains of vast starships lay tipped on their sides like wounded leviathans, venting flaming Stratofuel into space. Thunderous blasts continued to rock the planet surface, beams of superheated plasma driving deep into the metallic overmantle.

To Megatron, striding purposefully through the conflagration, it felt like home.

Except it wasn't. It looked like Cybertron, right down to the superbly detailed recreation of the fortress of Kolkular and its fiery domed Grand Forum. But it was in actuality a hollow facsimile, a towering indulgence plastered over depths of despair and desperation. New Cybertron -what a sad, misguided piece of blinkered self-mockery! Soundwave had informed him that the world was, in fact, called Pyrovar. Fleeing from the ruins of a campaign that had stripped them of everything: their world, their power, their resources -the Decepticons had come here, using what might they still possessed to subjugate and colonise. But all they had created was a testament to their folly, a reminder of their abject failure. And now judgement's fire was raining down upon them.

No one knew exactly who was attacking them... or why. Not Soundwave -whose loyalty extended to faithfully reclaiming Megatron's shattered body after his battle with Galvatron II and preserving it in stasis. Not Direwolf - whose dark sciences had brought him back from the brink of non-existence. And certainly not, it seemed, the whole of the current Decepticon High Command - such as it was. There had been no demands, no ultimatums, no communication whatsoever. Just wave upon wave of Multiform attack jets and vast Vanguard Command ships, tearing through outer planetary defences, razing ground positions. And though they had resisted, responded with all the force and numbers they could still muster, their attackers were legion. As one wave was destroyed, another rolled in, and another. Neither was the attack limited to Pyrovar. Decepticon colonies far and wide had simply been wiped out, expunged without trace. And long-range scans indicated a secondary -or perhaps primary -fleet, attacking Cybertron itself.

But Megatron knew. Knew deep in his Spark Core. It was a shapeless, nameless

knowledge, but one he had carried with him for many millions of years. Something was out there, something had always been out there, waiting for just this moment. It was old, older than they were, infinitely patient and utterly focused. And it was a part of them, a dark secret shunned and forgotten, coiled like a predatory beast in their collective subconscious. It was a myth, a bogeyman, a package of nightmares. In his mind he had faced it many times, staring it down. But now...

...now it was for real.

Smothering mounting dread with outrage and purpose, Megatron strode on, bound for the Grand Forum. ..and a reckoning with those who had brought them to this!

It watched and felt nothing. It barely saw the scurrying, desperate creatures on the planet surface as they fought and died, just experienced the totality of their fear and desperation. They were so close now to extinction and they knew it. Not consciously perhaps, but deep down, in whatever recessed portion of brain still housed the archaeological sub-structure of the Transformer race. This was judgment day, the end of everything. For Pyrovar, for Cybertron, for the Autobots and the Decepticons.

But for the Liege Maximo, it was just the beginning.

Satisfied that, on Pyrovar at least, matters were concluding satisfactorily, it turned its attention to Cybertron. It could not afford to take anything for granted, it knew, the children of Primus had proven themselves resourceful and dangerous on many previous occasions. This final movement had be orchestrated flawlessly, the cull needed to be total. The Alignment was close now, the ultimate realization of all its dreams was here. Nothing could be allowed to distract it, no loose ends could be left. Their deaths. ..

...would herald its rebirth!

Ultra Magnus was unnervingly calm. It was a strange contradiction, Prow! acknowledged to himself, but unsettling all the same.

True, they'd been given fair warning. The telemetry from the Sensory/Analytical Data pod that Grimlock had managed to get back to them had revealed the full scope of an enemy they'd barely known had existed. But even then, as they'd looked through that window into a far sector of space, seen the impossible range and scope of the planetary network there, he'd caught Magnus's almost serene acceptance of it all. Like he'd known.

And now, with Cybertron under siege, he was the same. It was impressive, sure, but also a little scary. As the first long range reports came in of a massed fleet dropping out of foldspace, Magnus immediately began to pull back and decamp all Autobot forces from advance positions on the borders of Cybertronian space. In fact, Prowl had a sneaking suspicion that this operation had actually started before the enemy fleet even appeared. Certainly regional commanders such as Skydive, Hound and Trailbreaker began running tactical projections for such an eventuality immediately after the S.A.D. pod was recovered and its data analyzed. Autobot colonies had likewise been evacuated.

Prowl himself had been kept busy, working around the clock to complete the energon shield generator. It was a grandiose project, conceived in the wake of the war against Galvatron II, and still hugely experimental, but Magnus had insisted they devote all resources to its full implementation. Naturally enough, Prowl had stated the obvious: namely that with energon stocks severely depleted, also in the aftermath of the war, the shield was, in effect, their own worst enemy. To maintain it for any length of time would be impossible, and in the process they would be leeching the very reserves that sustained and empowered them as transforming individuals. Once the shield failed, they would be utterly exposed, helpless, unable to even fight back. Magnus was adamant: he wanted the shield operational, whatever the cost. 'If all goes 10 plan,' he'd muttered cryptically, 'we won't need it for long,' Prowl didn't press the issue, he'd just gone to work, but a part of him worried still. If only Prime were fit and able. If only they could draw on his wisdom and knowledge. If only...

And now, as the enemy fleet swept towards Cybertron, blasting through perimeter defenses as if they didn't exist, Prowl stared alternately at the data/tactical readouts and Ultra Magnus. On the one hand, the TAC-scans showed over a million -and counting -attacking vessels, each exhibiting a minimum of six, increasingly lethal, changeforms, and a thousand or more Vanguard class battle warships. On the other, Ultra Magnus was a picture of composure. He just watched them come, the same bland, detached expression on his face. Finally, he turned to Prowl.

'Activate the energon shield,' was all he said. Prowl sighed. Despite everything, he hoped it wouldn't come to this. As he turned to the controls, keying in the start-up sequence, he wondered again if Ultra Magnus had simply given up, accepted the inevitability of their fate. Prime, he thought again. Prime would have thought of something, something better than this. If only ...

At the very heart of the Hub, the Liege Maximo watched. A vast energy shield had appeared around Cybertron, and for the moment it was resisting the cull. No matter. The move smacked of desperation, of futile last efforts. A mental command diverted more ships to the shield, their combined firepower now enough to destroy a whole planet. The shield, it calculated, must be burning huge amounts of energon, and would soon buckle under the onslaught. When that happened, Cybertron would be helpless. The Autobot commander had made a huge tactical error, it reasoned. Had he scattered his forces, it would have meant the Liege Maximo expending time and effort on the hunt. But now, with the Autobots all in one target area, the matter could be concluded in mere moments. It imagined the shield generator running hot, the supply of energon dwindling. So close now, everything was coming together.

Anticipating the end, the Liege Maximo moved the remainder of the fleet forward, into the vast asteroid field that fringed Cybertron in a loose semi-circle. Thunder roared in its brain, its vast body shimmered and pulsed. The Alignment... It was close!

'Are we there yet?' moaned Grimlock for the thousandth time. Or so it seemed to Springer, who spat a curt, 'does it look like it?' in his general direction. Perceptor had, as was his nature, been keeping a somewhat more accurate count. It was actually only the nineteenth time of asking, but he shared Springer's general frustration with their Group Commander.

They were in fact, still some distance from their destination, namely Junction 654 of intersecting obverse transit tubeways East 16 and South East 214. To call the Hub big was the hugest of understatement, it was impossibly vast, and covering any significant distance was a monumental proposition. But, at least, thanks to a combined effort of Swoop's aerial reconnaissance, Blaster's monitoring of internal

transmissions, and the schematics Perceptor himself had managed to download, they did know where they were, and had a destination and plan in mind.

The Hub covered several light years of space, and only sheer fluke had landed them this close to the mid-point of its unfolding geometry. When they'd bailed out from their crippled Hyperwave, the expanse of the Hub had yawned before them in all possible directions. A three-dimensional construct, it expanded across, up and down, such as these definitions were applicable in outer space. Thousands and thousands of metal planets, all identical except in mass, all inter-connected via transit tubeways and filament arteries. A web of little Cybertrons, stretching as far as the eye could see. By examining and interpolating data downloaded from the vast computer network that maintained and directed the Hub, they had managed to identify a fairly critical junction, a ' routing station for huge amounts of energy: J654.

It was clear that the Hub served some purpose, to someone ~ something, and that someone or something had shot them out of the sky. That it believed them dead, and had not sent ships to verify the kill, meant that it was either vulnerable or overconfident, both weaknesses that Grimlock wished to exploit. Junction 654, or simply J654, was also a weakness Grimlock wished to take advantage of. It was, Perceptor had calculated, the optimum point at which to initiate a catastrophic chain reaction, or - in Grimlock's parlance - blow a very big hole in the Hub. That they wouldn't themselves survive the detonation seemed acceptable. They understood, deep down, they were all now living on borrowed time.

As they moved on, a solemn silence descended, each alone with their thoughts. Past glories, battles fought and won, triumphs and tragedies, the tapestry of a life stretching back over four million years. There were no regrets, not for Perceptor, and he guessed, not for the others. Conflict was their life, and ultimately it would be the death of them. No one exactly envisaged some amiable dotage on a retirement world. The silence stretched over a succession of interminable, nigh- on identical tubeways, until, inevitably...

'Are we there yet?' Muttered Grimlock.

It was infinitely patient. It had waited from almost the dawn of time itself. But now, as the Alignment drew ever nearer, it experienced a sensation not unlike

impatience, bordering even on unease. So close now, the waiting so very nearly done. First the purge, the utter annihilation of its once and former race. And then... ascension.

Countless millennia and it all came down to this. It thought back, allowed itself a rare moment of reverie. It was of the first, born of the living form of Primus. The distilled essence of a god had coursed through its systems, flooded its consciousness. It understood, even back then, that its destiny was not that chosen for it by Primus. It understood the Grand Plan, but where others chose to subdivide their physical being, create further generations of Transformers, the Liege Maximo did not. It contained its awesome power, chose its own course, its own timetable. It understood what Primus had not: that the universal balance demanded a yang for every yin. : The darkness was a living thing within it.

It shrank away from the light, let its few selective offspring (spread like a malaise through the Transformer race. And as I successive generations moved further away from their godly origins, so the Liege Maximo sought to return to that state. It watched as the Cybertronian nation evolved, saw its taint move down through the generations to spawn first Megatron and ultimately the Decepticons. And all the while, its own researches into the dark origins of the universe continued, revealing a pattern, a unique alignment of stars that signaled the intersection of a much older reality with their own. Here dwelt gods, and the Liege Maximo desired nothing more than to ascend to that reality, to become a god. And so the building of the Hub began, a resonant structure designed to open a portal to the world beyond.

That their own universe would be destroyed in the process really of little or no concern to the Liege Maximo.

Within the Grand Forum on Pyrovar, the fragments of the Decepticon High Council stood and watched as their world was consumed. Thousands upon thousands of their warriors had perished, their fleet and defenses were all but gone. This, they thought, was how it ends... in fire and destruction, at the whim of foe they did not even know. They were right, and they were wrong.

'We must leave,' said Sabrejaw, breaking the heavy silence. It was, of course, unthinkable to consider retreat, unthinkable to abandon the troops who fought on

still and the world they had created. But everyone of them was thinking exactly that. He could see it on their faces: Shrapnel, Stormfront, Mantissa, Mindgame, Killzone. They all knew, accepted the inevitability of their situation. Fight or flight. The latter was the only option.

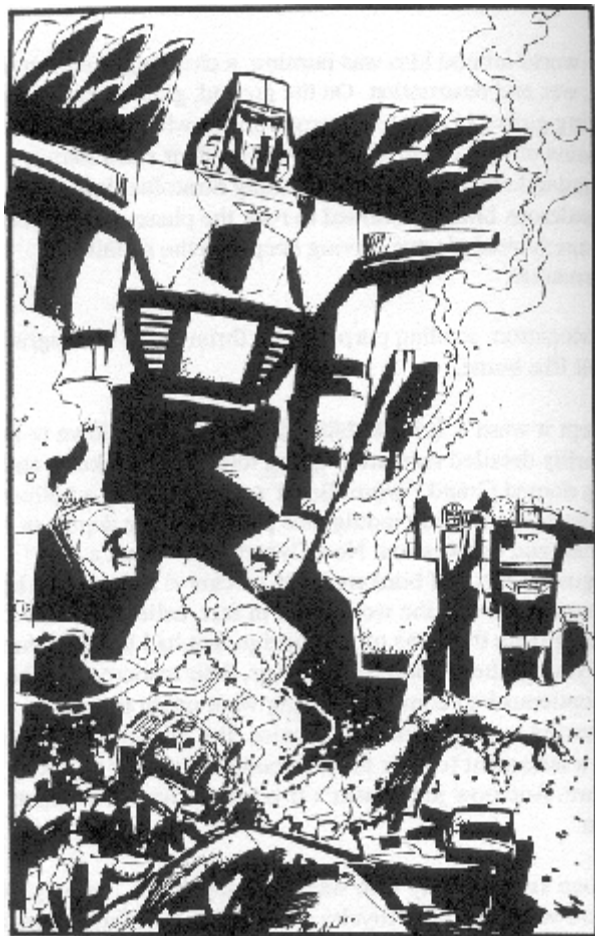
Sabrejaw didn't wait for an answer, just gathered his master keypad, complete with its cache of location codes and made for the high, arched exit gates. He had already secretly fired off several dummy missiles, each with its own stolen payload of energon. He would track them down and start anew, with or without the others, on a new world, ripe for conquest.

He threw open the gates, stepping out into a wide atrium, under the solemn, watchful gaze of sculptures depicting former Decepticon leaders. Below, a transit pod was waiting... and Sabrejaw hurried towards the nearby gravity stairs. Past Straxus, Trannis, Shockwave, Scorponok. Sabrejaw's step quickened, uncomfortable under their chiseled scrutiny. Past Bludgeon, Galvatron, Megatron...

To the following entourage, it seemed as if the final sculpture had come to life. Sabrejaw slowed, stopped, gaped. Then his torso disintegrated, shredded by a sudden burst of supercharged protons. His Spark flared briefly, and was consumed. What little remained of him collapsed into a heap on the floor, sparking and spitting furiously.

Through the evaporated remains came Megatron, large as life and dressed to kill. His scorching gaze took in them all, laying bare their fear and shame. 'Guilty', was all he said...

Stormfront was the first react and therefore the first to die. He reached for his concussion cannon, deactivated the magna-clamps that secured it to his thigh, and raised it to fire. At least, that's what his mind told him had happened. In fact, he got no further than the briefest of hand motions, a slight twitch, before Megatron fried him with six



million dekawatts of raw electrical power. Shrapnel wisely dropped to his knees bowing his head and hailing the second coming of Megatron,' while silently praying for his own, miserable hide. He therefore missed seeing the six laser-targeted missiles that launched from Megatron' s left shoulder-silo, seeking out and destroying both Mantissa and Mindgame. Killzone fared marginally better, managing to loose off two, whirling cyberscythes. These, though, glanced harmlessly off Megatron's tri-neutronic armor, and a moment later Killzone too was gone, a cloud of vapor briefly marking the spot on which he'd been standing.

Slowly, hesitantly, Shrapnel risked an upward glance. Megatron towered over him, silent as the grave. He was, Shrapnel noted peripherally, his functional mind consumed with utter dread, significantly bigger than before, and heavily augmented in terms of firepower. It didn't bode well.

'Tell them,' growled Megatron finally, 'tell them all that I have returned... and tell them everything that has happened here. Spare no detail.' He paused, focused briefly on nearby tactical readouts and viewscreens, then continued: 'Gather the remaining unit commanders, but have them first withdraw all remaining troopers to level six bunkers. And find me someone proficient in flight mechanics.'

'Move!' yelled Megatron, and Shrapnel shot to his feet, eager to obey. Hope blossomed, both for his own immediate chances of survival and for some kind of long-term future for the Decepticon race as a whole. Megatron was back!

During the long trek, J654 had taken on a somewhat mythical aspect in the minds of the four Autobots and their Dinobot commander. And yet, somewhat disappointingly, it was as long, bland and featureless as the preceding stretches of interior transit tubeway.

'You sure this is right place,' asked Grimlock, surveying an area which looked for all the world exactly like the stretches through which they had recently passed. Perceptor was sure, but rather than rise to Grimlock's unsubtle bait, he removed an access panel and set to work.

Springer hunkered down with him to watch. 'Are you sure we won't be detected?' he queried. 'It seems strange, this whole vast place and no security, no surveillance, no guards.'

Perceptor considered, simultaneously viewing the interior workings on several distinct levels: analytical, tactical, spectroscopic, functional. There did indeed seem to be no hidden security devices or failsafes. When previously he had accessed the Hub's mainframe, he simply concluded that the sub-system pathways he had chosen had not merited the safeguards or security. The sheer scale of the operation ill perhaps prohibited such intricacies. But this... this was a primary juncture, a critical part of the Hub's operational superstructure. There had to be something.

So he looked, and looked again. Scanned on every frequency and wavelength, ran searches for redundant systems which masked alarms or 'hot' circuitry. Was the owner of this place so supremely confident of its own invulnerability that it just hadn't bothered at all? If so, then they were about to teach it a considerable lesson in humility.

Finally, Perceptor stepped back from the access hatch, satisfied. 'The area is clear,' he reported. 'We can proceed.'

Blaster had been busy on the long journey to J654, preparing a invasive transmitter, cobbled together from his own back-up mechasystems. Powered by a tiny fragment of energon, it was designed to feed new routing pathways to the main computer, diverting the massive flow of energy through a smaller, more vulnerable junction. The safety relays would burn out almost instantly, creating a sudden surge into the local reactor core. Instant meltdown. Such was the focal nature of J654, the explosion would wash back through the system, gathering force as it went. It would, Perceptor had calculated, destroy nearly 0.5643 percent of the Hub, leaving a colossal gaping hole the size of a small galaxy. In Grimlock's words, 'that had to hurt!'

Taking the transmitter from Blaster, Perceptor carefully pared back the cables leading into J654's main processing cluster. Around him, Grimlock, Blaster, Springer and Swoop tensed, waiting perhaps for the sudden clamor of alarms.

Nothing.

Perceptor aligned and primed the transmitter, soldering the final connections. It pulsed green, active and ready. They had only to align its frequency with the Hub's subsonics and wait for the fireworks.

'Me proud have to fought and died with you all,' mumbled Grimlock in terms of a brief eulogy. And that was it.

'She's going to go,' shouted Prowl, as the safety interlocks on all three generators glowed hot. 'Even if we had the juice, enemy firepower is stressing the shield's ergostructure beyond tolerance levels.'

In the Arc, a curving sweep of tactical stations built under the Cybertronian capital city, Iacon, Ultra Magnus allowed an edge of tenseness to creep into his voice. 'Find me something,' he urged, as power conduits began to pop and fizz, and cooling vents blew billowing clouds of dark smoke. 'We need a few moments more...'

'For what?' cried Prowl, in exasperation more than anger. 'It's over. ..finished.'

Magnus just stared, his expression bleak. A digital readout relayed information from beyond the shield. The enemy fleet was massing, approaching through the asteroid field, ready for its final assault. Magnus grimaced, his shoulders slumped as if under a crushing weight. Prowl was right.

He was out of options.

Above Pyrovar, the Commander of the primary Vanguard assault ship registered multiple launches from the planet surface. Several huge Decepticon battlecruisers -previously idle because of their lack of maneuverability against smaller, single attack modes -were ascending towards them. Tactical scans read a full crew complement aboard each. The Commander didn't even need a prompt from the Liege Maximo to know that this really was the Decepticons' last, desperate shot across their bows. Six pocket Strike squadrons engaged the battlecruisers and systematically blew each out of the sky.

The Commander immediately initiated a mass landing on the planet surface. Though clearly the Decepticons were now all but wiped out, the Liege Maximo had demanded a total purge, Any stragglers were to be hunted down and terminated.

Around Cybertron, the Liege Maximo's fleet hovered patiently. The shield was almost gone, Soon the purge could begin. Around them, the thousands of drifting asteroids were mute witnesses to the chaos and destruction about to unfold.

Within the Hub, Grimlock and the others looked at each other, braced for the inevitable. The moment stretched, until . . .

'Er... why are we still alive?' asked Springer. No one knew. The transmitter was aligned and functioning properly, but so far nothing. Then, subtly, it began, a tremor in the ground beneath their feet, growing in intensity, building into a steady, rhythmic thumping, distant at first and soon almost deafening,

But it was wrong, very wrong. Neither noise nor vibration were coming from the Hub's internal systems. Instead, the growing clamor was coming from the conduit around them, the walls vibrating to the thunderous beat of advancing feet. Lots of feet.

They'd been detected. Somehow. Something, Perceptor knew, he had missed. Around the distant bend in the tubeway came an army of troopers, ranks and ranks of them. Vast, lethal, stamped out an almost identical mold, their mass filled the broad tubeway from one side to the other.

Perceptor stole what little time they had to scan the transmitter. It was still active, but somewhere within the labyrinthine mass of connections and circuits its signal was being blocked. And it, whatever it was, knew they were here.

It responded much like any living organism. The Hub was as much a part of the Liege Maximo as its own physical form. Its nervous and arterial systems spread throughout the length and breadth of its resonant superstructure. The Hub had sensitive areas, which -if attacked instinctively reacted to the threat, closing down pathways, releasing viral antibodies. Any significant infection was purged in moments. Its conscious mind was only peripherally aware of the threat at all.

The Liege Maximo had bigger fish to fry.

On Cybertron, its fleet was poised. So intent was it on the failing shield, it didn't notice the asteroids as they began to deviate from their natural drift. Didn't notice the distinctly mechanical elements built into them. On Pyrovar, its fleet had touched down, the surface sweeps in progress, but there was no trace at all of a single remaining Decepticon . . . at least, no live ones. Could they all have been destroyed? On Cybertron the shield had failed, the fleet readied for the assault. On Pyrovar, it registered a sudden build up of energy under the surface, a fission of unstable elements broiling in some lethal chemical soup. On Cybertron, it registered the sudden buzz of mechanical activity around its ships, the odd configuration of the asteroids, the thrum of connection.

On both fronts, it screamed mental commands . . .

...too late.

Beneath the surface of Pyrovar, vast thermo-cyclonic charges detonated, the planet dissolving into a fiery mass that seemed to fold in on itself, mushrooming in reverse... before booming outward in great waves of destructive force, ripping through the atmosphere, pushing out into space. The forces on the ground were gone instantly, the spaceborne ships a moment later. Around the core of the explosion, gravity collapsed in on itself, compressing local space into a superdense hole. In moments, Pyrovar and the surrounding several light years of space were gone.

Around Cybertron, laser weaponry built into the orbiting asteroids hummed into sudden, savage life. Across the void, targeting sensors aligned via a remote signal, and an instant later beams of super-hot accelerated particles tracked a deadly web between the asteroids, slicing cleanly through anything in their way. Which, in this case, was the Liege Maximo's fleet. Ship after ship was cleaved, engine cores ruptured, life support destroyed. Multiple explosions tore through the fleet, ships careening brokenly into each other, adding to the carnage. And from Cybertron itself, multiple launches: hyperwaves, shuttles, missiles, jet mode attack configurations. The Autobots punched their way through the shattered invasion force, sweeping out into space.

It reeled, shuddered, taking the loss of each single vessel, each warrior, as a physical blow. But more, it felt the full enormity of the timing and all it entailed. Not now . . . not now!

At a pre-arranged staging area, hidden deep within a gaseous nebula, strange apparitions drifted through clouds of methane and nitrogen. In slow stages, these wraithlike shapes became more solid, defined, until finally they were revealed as short range Decepticon stealth vessels. In the lead ship, Megatron stared hard at the forward viewscreen, probing the roiling clouds ahead of them. If all had gone to plan, by now Pyrovar would be so much cosmic dust, and its passing would have taken all or most of the attacking fleet with it.

But still he exercised extreme caution. The successful operation of the stealth cocoon required minimal power outage and silent running, so they had been unable to keep a sensor lock on Pyrovar and survey the aftermath of Megatron's improvised handiwork.

He had moved fast, pulling back his forces and evacuating in staged launches in cloaked ships, just as his dummy attack fleet had itself lifted off. Remote controlled from the planet surface by some 'volunteers', the empty battlecruisers had further been rigged to display - to any intrusive sensor sweep - a full crew complement. It was a fragile illusion. A more thorough check would have revealed the ghost sensor data immediately, but he had banked on the enemy's illusion of its own invulnerability. The enemy commander had no doubt assumed, falsely, that they would fight and die for their world, But it was not their world, it had never been. And ultimately, it was expendable.

Ahead now, Megatron saw a huge shape, emerging from the very heart of the nebula. Sensors were useless. If he had judged wrong, if the enemy had second-guessed him. But, as the Warworld neared, Blitzwing announced an incoming transmission:

'Commander Megatron,' came Soundwave's distorted voice. 'We await your command.'

Megatron considered. He had four Warworlds -planet-sized engines of destruction salvaged by Soundwave and other sympathizers from Galvatron II's insane campaign - every scrap of raw energon they could lay their hands on, and a crew looking for payback. It made sense to bide their time, gather fresh stocks of weaponry and energon, re-build their power base. But Megatron was under no illusions. He knew it wasn't over... and he knew that time was not on their side. It would take every scrap of energon to power the four Warworlds across the galaxy, to track back along a trajectory extrapolated from the enemy ships' original flight path, but Megatron was sure. If they hesitated... they would be lost.

'Bring us aboard,' said Megatron at last, 'and prepare to engage hyperspace engines. We take the fight to the enemy. ..'

The course was locked in, based on the telemetry from Grimlock's S.A.D.. pod, the hyperspace engines engaged.

Next stop... enemy space, and a foe whose numbers were quite possibly legion. Ultra Magnus watched as the starfield ahead of them warped and stretched. It felt like they were rushing headlong towards extinction. But what choice did they have? These were desperate times, and as he had already demonstrated, they called for desperate measures.

Prowl and Jazz were watching him. He knew what they were thinking, knew they questioned his methods and strategy, and in truth he did also. For a start, he had kept all but a select few completely in the dark during the construction of the asteroid laser grid. When they received the telemetry from the S.A.D. pod, Magnus immediately instigated a huge upgrade to their planetary defenses. In his heart, he knew Optimus would not have approved, knew the tactic smacked of Decepticon, and so he kept the plan and its implementation from the former Autobot leader's most trusted lieutenants. They would only have questioned, and in doing so made him doubt. And that luxury he could not allow, not now.

There was simply no room for hesitation, for compassion. Not with the end so near at hand.

It wondered if they knew... on some innate, instinctive level. It was still attempting to come to terms with the loss of nearly half its forces. They were coming. There was no doubt. They sensed that running and hiding was not an option, and that their last desperate hope lay in direct confrontation. The Liege Maximo gathered itself for the coming battle, surveyed its options. They were too late of course, events begun tens of millions of years ago were gathering pace. It just made matters somewhat more complex, divided its attention. In point of fact in the confusion of events at Cybertron and Pyrovar, it had lost its internal focus, lost a tiny thread within the Hub itself.

Grimlock and his companions had gone to ground.

In truth, Grimlock, Perceptor, Swoop, Blaster and Springer were anything but gone to ground. The confusion of events at J654 was behind them, but they knew they'd had a lucky escape. They'd run -what else could they have done against the massed forces that had thundered towards them? -and, following Perceptor's schematics, had headed for the high ground, believing some last stand may now be their only option. But the expected pursuit had not materialized, and their ascent to the top of a huge raised gantry known only as the Alpha Epsilon Over loop, had been unhampered.

Again they wondered: did the architect of this huge construction simply not consider them any kind of threat? Truth be told, it was beginning to tick them all off.

From the Overloop they could view a vast swathe of the Hub, particularly a colossal dome, the size of half a small moon, perched at a mass confluence of power conduits. The dome was framed by a semi-circle of towers, atop which sat huge satellite receptor dishes, thousands of them. Everything about the Hub led here, to this place.

Grimlock was brooding... or thinking. It was hard to tell sometimes. Blaster was looking at ways to send a boosted distress signal out into the space towards Cybertron, but the distances involved were monumental. It would certainly take more time than they had. ..everyone was aware of that. Perceptor was poring over endless design schematics, searching for another flaw. Swoop and Springer just paced, waiting for something to happen.

They didn't have to wait long. There was a sudden flurry of activity below, as - from countless portals in countless sections of the Hub -enemy troopers began to exit. The massed ranks were heading for the dome, which itself had started to open, its sides flowing back in a strangely organic fashion. They stood and stared, open-mouthed, as the thing within the dome hauled itself upright. It was huge, perhaps techno-organic in nature, with long, curled horns and protrusions masking its bestial face. Eyes, as old the universe, burned from the darkness, its mouth seethed with molten fury, dribbling over dagger-like teeth. One arm was truncated, ending in a cannon fueled, it seemed to them, by a small sun. They were seasoned warriors all, but each one of them felt a chill that struck deep into their primeval being. This was the stuff of nightmares!

And as the throng neared, and gathered, it spread the fingers of its one hand wide, gesturing. In response, countless thousands of bodies lifted into the air, a suddenly suspended congregation. The nearest figure to them, though some good distance away in real terms, suddenly began to shudder and twitch, its body spasming. Its chest seemed to warp, blister, and then suddenly its Spark, its life force, erupted from within, tom out by unseen fingers. The Spark, a brilliant ball of phosphorescence, hovered for a brief moment, and then was sucked forward towards the creature in the dome.

Everywhere they looked, the process was repeated, the mass cull suffusing the creature with the energy of countless Sparks. It twisted in a savage ecstasy, its bulk pulsing and growing. And, as its influence drew back in, so the lifeless husks fell away, like discarded shells. It was over and done in seconds, but to the watching Autobots it felt like an eternity.

Springer was the first to speak: 'What in Primus' name do we do now?'

Silence greeted him. Springer turned, agitated. 'Grimlock, how do we fight that?'

But Grimlock was gone.

Around it the Hub shimmered into coruscating life, resonating with the power of several million Sparks. What it had once given ...it now took back.

Above, the stars seemed to glow brighter, as if some celestial contact had been

established. The Liege Maximo felt the first wrench, a dizzying pull at the very substance of its being. It knew it was changing, becoming different. The physical laws that had bound it began to slip away, its consciousness expanded across multiple plains to encompass the enormity of other realities, other possibilities.

Above, the heavens themselves seem to warp, a tidal wave of unreality spreading like a virus through the substance of space and time. And at its epicentre, a portal began to form. It had no substance, no shape, no definable event horizon, but it assaulted the senses, pulling and tugging at the Liege Maximo like some hungry predator.

For a long, protracted period it resisted, fought, struggled, hung on to the roots it had laid down in what it understood as reality. If it was not ready, not fully acclimatized to its new state of unbeing, it would be destroyed, consumed. It needed time, while time still had any meaning, to encompass the myriad contradictions and absurdities, it needed...

The savage howl snapped it back, fast, the connection broken. It turned, confused, looked up...

...to see Grimlock dropped towards it, off one of the towers, energo sword raised above his head. Grimlock howled, screamed, and struck -a mighty blow, and one that in

actuality the Liege Maximo barely felt. But it had been struck, and that thought burned with outrage and shock. This insect, this tiny microbe, had attacked it. For a lurching moment, it fought the pull of the stellar portal, resisted the change. It needed but an instant more in this physical realm, a tiny, infinitesimal moment ...

... to snuff out a life.

Swoop watched, appalled, as the creature shifted in Grimlock's direction. He stepped back, ready to transform, to fly. Meaning to bridge the gulf of space between him and his Commander and join the struggle. But he knew, even before Perceptor grabbed his arm, that he would never make it in time. It wouldn't have stopped him, but he knew - they all knew - that Grimlock was already dead.

In fact, it was over before Perceptor's hand even made contact with Swoop's arm.

The blink of eye, perhaps not even that. Grimlock was there... and then he wasn't. A gesture, perhaps, from the creature? It was hard to be sure, but Grimlock just... popped, exploded into his component atoms it seemed, and was just gone.

They stared, stunned. Swoop struggled against Perceptor's grasp, but others were holding him now, shouting at him. The words were muffled background noise, muted by shock and rage. He thrashed, fought, cried, and then subsided, sagged like some stringless puppet. Finally, Perceptor's words started to penetrate...



'-to me, just listen. Grimlock showed us, what we have to do.'

Swoop pulled back, focused. 'What?' he choked. 'Showed us what?'

'That at this stage of the proceedings,' Perceptor urged, 'any distraction, no matter how small, may be enough!' He gestured wide, at the full sweep of the Hub. 'We've been looking at this all wrong, trying to do as much damage to the Hub as possible. But if I'm right, if this whole construction has some kind of stellar resonance, then perhaps any damage will do. Do you see?'

Swoop saw. Shrugging off Springer and Blaster, he staggered away, stopped, almost fell. Gripping a support girder so hard his fingers sunk deep into the metal, he turned, snarled...

'Show me where to start!'

It began again, shrugging off its brief flirtation with anger, focusing again on the widening portal. The universe around them was wounded, crying out in pain, dying. Its agonies assaulted its new senses, ran fingernails down its expanded nervous system, but it remained resolute. Reality bubbled and boiled away, became distant white noise. It reached out to touch its destiny...

...and was rejected.

It fell, hard, back to harsh, unforgiving order and structure. What had happened? And then it saw, the small, mushrooming cloud from lateral transverse string DIO89, an explosion. The Hub had been damaged, the pattern disturbed. With a thought, it began to repair the breach, a swarm of repair drones descending on DIO89. But as the flaw rapidly disappeared, another blast, on the interlink world of Pi Omega 4. Small, again easily dealt with. But the situation clearly demanded a more permanent remedy. It marked the position of the two explosions, defined a possible search radius, and isolated the enclosed area. Then it raised a cadre of troopers from the fallen legion, restored their Sparks, and sent them directly to deal with the infection.

Perceptor was hard at work. His target was a power coupling between two transverse strings. If he could just burn out the buffer system, it would melt through into the fuel lines and catch fire. As the fuel burned, the vapor would superheat the gassy deposits from the surface processor and they'd have a nice big explosion.

He was in a crawlspace between walls, about three sub-levels down from the surface. Though it was a tight squeeze, there was just about room to maneuver, and Perceptor felt a certain security in the enclosed area. Above, he had witnessed horrors and events that ran at odds with his ultra logical, matter-of-fact, mind. In here it was sane, and safe, cocooned in cold science and hard technology.

Reaching for a power coupling, Perceptor felt a sudden dull vibration on the opposite side of the wall, as if something had hit it. Then something did - hard. The impact bowing in the thick metal, denting it inward. Moments later there was a second blow, then a third, each time another section of the wall moved inward, narrowing the space. Suddenly it became an onslaught, multiple impacts. The noise was deafening, all-encompassing. Then one impact found its target, and

Perceptor was slammed against the opposing surface, pinned. They were hitting the wall, he realized as his brain unfroze, caught up, they were pummeling the wall! The sound and effort intensified, and Perceptor felt the impacts crunch into his body. Again and again, a relentless barrage, he was being squeezed to death.

Finally, mercifully, a section of indented wall drove through his main neural plating, and there was silence.

Nothing. Not a word now, from any of the others. It had been too long. Perceptor had been clear, maintain radio contact at all times, once an objective had been achieved, notify and move on to the next target. Hit and run. But there'd been nothing, not from Perceptor, not from Springer, not from Blaster. None of them answered his hails.

Swoop knew he was on his own.

He checked his position on a small internal sensor readout. He was, he realized, not far from J654, and he wondered fleetingly about their previous efforts in the area. The transmitter was still there, and according to Perceptor had still been active. Was there a way to override whatever was blocking its signal, bypass the locked out area?

Swoop froze. Close by he felt movement, a change in air currents. Carefully, he shuffled sideways, out onto a small observation platform. And just in time. Thirty or more heavily armed troopers appeared, sweeping the area. Swoop kept absolutely still. They were using motion detectors, probing walls, floors, ceilings and bulkheads with scanning beams. They moved closer.

There was nowhere to go, but at least out here he could take flight. How far would he get, Swoop wondered, before they picked him off? He had witnessed them transform into what had seemed like a multitude of airborne forms, bigger and faster than his. They would run him to ground in moments. He slowly, carefully set his blaster to maximum. He would not run. He would go out fighting.

On they came, closer still, and Swoop leveled his weapon, finger tensed on the trigger. One, two, three maybe. ..four if luck was with him. Whatever the case, some of them were going down with him. Inside, a sensor clicked hot, whining.

He had been spotted.

Then, suddenly, they were moving off, pulling back. Some trick to draw him out, perhaps? But no, why bother? There could be no mistake, they were going, and with some urgency. A sudden lightshow high in the sky due east drew Swoop's attention and he understood.

The cavalry had arrived.

Four Warworlds, sixteen Hyperwaves, three thousand or so airborne attack modes, the Liege Maximo assessed the threat as it came under sudden and sustained fire. It felt the Alignment shift, a tiny, almost imperceptible movement in the pattern of stars above him. It knew it could destroy them all... but could it do it quickly enough? The window of opportunity was passing, and would not present itself again for another vast span of time.

Furious, it turned on the nearest Warworld, charged its solar compactor and fired. The Warworld weathered the blast... but only just. Its shielding failed, and the energy feedback punctured gaping wounds in its hull. The Liege Maximo charged the solar compactor, fired again... and the Warworld disappeared in a colossal fireball.

It would not be denied... it would not be denied!

What was it Perceptor had said? 'Any distraction, no matter how small, may be enough'. Well, Swoop guessed that being hammered by a fleet of Hyperwaves and several Warworlds counted as slightly more than just 'any distraction', even given the sheer scale of the creature.

Back at J654, Swoop examined the transmitter. Perhaps he could boost the output, perhaps what was blocking the signal was the creature itself. Perhaps distracted, the creature would not be able to counter-check in time.

Perhaps he was just fooling himself. Perhaps he was clutching at straws. Still...

A second Warworld was burning, two Hyperwaves were gone, but the assault continued, from all angles. With the exception of the Warworlds, which lacked maneuverability, the attacking ships were hitting hard and fast, then retreating to a safe distance, flanked by a second wave. But overall, the attack was undisciplined, unfocused, highlighting the glaring division between the Autobots and the Decepticons. No side was talking to the other, and that only benefited the Liege Maximo.

They weren't hurting it, at least not so far, but they were keeping its attention away from the portal. It knew it had to end this... swiftly.

So focused was the Liege Maximo on the larger battle, it did not notice the lone, drifting shuttle pod as it coasted in on its own momentum, landing on a nearby tower. From within, Megatron emerged. His recreated, augmented form was awash with energy, his being suffused with more power than it could truly tolerate. He had spent the entire journey from the nebula, absorbing and breaking down raw energon, stockpiling a vast reserve of destructive force. He would, he knew, only get one shot. He had to make it count.

'Why won't they talk to us?' lamented Ultra Magnus.

Aboard one of the Hyperwaves, Ultra Magnus watched with increasing frustration as another ship was downed. The creature was deflecting their attacks with some kind of focused mental energy. They were annoying it, but having little or no telling effect.

What they needed, clearly, was a concerted attack, but now two of the Decepticon Warworlds had been destroyed, and the other two had maintained a distinct radio silence. It seemed the Decepticons were locked into their own strategy, and all they were doing was getting in each other's way.

Suddenly the bridge console buzzed. They were being hailed by one of the Warworlds. 'At last,' breathed Magnus, and turned to see a screen image of

Soundwave.

'It is time,' he announced with great solemnity, before Magnus could even speak. He continued: 'I am transmitting encoded attack coordinates. You will follow our lead and not deviate from the strategy.' And with that, he was gone.

Streetwise looked up from his tactical array. 'Got 'em,' he said. 'You want me to implement all this?'

Ultra Magnus considered, slowly nodded his head. Why not? After all, what now had they really got to lose?

It detected the new attack vector almost immediately, calculated the variables. The focus of the assault was now all on its right flank, another huge tactical error. It scanned local space, searching for cloaked ships or hidden vessels. Nothing. They were still falling over each other, implementing overlapping stratagems that canceled each other out. They had made it so easy for it to destroy them all.

It focused its mental reserves, channeled them into a right-facing defense, and powered up its solar compactor. As the first Hyperwaves came into range, flanking the two Warworlds, it prepared to fire. One well-placed shot...

One shot, thought Megatron and fired. The creature was turned away from it, mustering its defenses for a righthand attack. Megatron shot it in the left flank, the concentrated beam of charged ions punching into its armored hide just below its arm, exiting at an angle through the front chest plating. It staggered, roared...



turned towards him. He saw recognition, fear, anger... and then only the savage white light of an exploding sun.

The Liege Maximo was hurt... it was actually hurt. The sensation was new, shocking. Megatron. Its own creation, its own twisted spawn. The savage irony of it all. It had destroyed the offending creation, but the damage was done. It was wounded, perhaps critically. He had to leave this tired, battered physical form and rise. It had to reach the portal, by sheer force of will if necessary. His physical form slumped, and all that was the Liege Maximo ascended...

... just as J654 exploded, a monumental eruption that tore through the Hub. Airborne, Swoop hurtled up into the sky, just ahead of the mushrooming fireball. It was going to be close. Section upon section was consumed, obliterated, until the dome itself was destroyed, the Liege Maximo's physical form along with it.

Above, the resonant portal collapsed, and all that was the Liege Maximo was caught in-between, pure energy with no place to go. As it dissipated, its screams echoed across the vastness of space, reverberating in the audio sensors of every

Transformer present.

In the historical footnotes pertaining to the war against the Liege Maximo, it was noted that while the cost of victory had indeed been high, the final battle ushered in a new era of cooperation between the divided factions. It was the twilight of the Decepticons, and the beginning of the Predacon era. Surrender became alliance, downsizing became the way forward in an energon starved time. And finally, hope blossomed for an enduring peace.

With hindsight, they really should have known better.

TRANSFORMERS **ALIGNMENT**

BOOK ONE



TRANSFORCE 2001

FURMAN SULLIVAN BODSWORTH WILDMAN ANDERSON SENIOR BASTICK

“It never ends ...”