

It doesn't feel like all that long since we had a big Transformers crossover event. In fact, it's been just under a year since the last part of "Dark Cybertron" was published. Nevertheless, here we are again. Long awaited, "Combiner Wars" has begun. It's immediately clear that this is an issue under a number of pressures from various sides. As an issue of The Transformers it needs to feature characters from that title. As a follow up to Transformers: Punishment made by the same creative team it needs to transition from that story to this one cleanly. As the start of "Combiner Wars" it needs to set the stage for the story this event is telling. As the beginning of such a crossover it needs to be a jumping on point for new readers. As the start of a greater period of connection between IDW and Hasbro it has to make sure it can justify and integrate the new product. You could get exhausted just thinking about it... Luckily John Barber does a nice job of funneling all these competing drives into a fairly natural story, however it's not a seamless one. There are definitely moments where the monologue driving the story will begin to drone for longtime readers and you can feel the issue accelerating unnaturally towards the end, as it races to fit all it needs into its pages before the titanic finale the crossover needed to get started with a bang. While Barber completes a litany of tasks this issue was required to complete with aplomb, the results are sometimes stiff and somewhat predictable compared to the usual quality of the series. I mean, we all know where this is going, Menasor and Superior are on the covers of this issue and the next. I think Barber was well aware of this and, accordingly, the strongest parts of the issue are those where Barber turns one of the myriad of mandated scenes towards characterization. Swindle's chats with Motormaster, Wheeljack's growing discomfort among the Autobots, and Optimus' conference with the Lost Light leadership prove amusing because Barber grants these sequences wit and naturalism, while other moments, like Prime and Windblade's fight with the Decepticons feels a little too by the numbers to match the series' usual standard. But while the various components are hit and miss, Barber's usual strengths usually pull the issue through when they're allowed to express themselves. The politics of Cybertron remain as entertaining as ever and getting more of Optimus Prime and Starscream squaring off is absolute gold. Prime has dealt with visionaries like Megatron and honest villains like Swindle or Motormaster, but watching him grumblingly accept that Starscream hasn't done anything wrong is tremendously fun. I also love how Screamer snatches the moral high ground from Prime, reminding the Autobot leader that only one of them was elected. Much as I found Starscream a little simplified this issue, as if Barber was afraid that writing him as slick as in issues #20 or 33 would confuse new readers, it's admittedly uncomfortable to realize/be reminded that you're totally cheering for a military dictator put in power by nature of his importance to a corrupt and theocratic regime. Swindle's narration will be greatly appreciated by new or lapsed readers, offering both exposition and commentary. Nonetheless, there's a level of detachment that, while it suits the character, is somewhat distancing from the story. There's a noir-y brass to the narration that doesn't immediately jibe with the story but recalls Swindle's voice from the Sunbow cartoon and builds to an impressive peak for the final page. Livio Ramondelli remains a powerhouse of the giant robot genre. There's truly no one working in comics today who can churn out such gorgeous, realistic mecha especially on a consistent basis. Ramondelli remains perfectly suited to depicting the scarred world-weary world of the Transformers. If there's anything 'wrong' with Ramondelli's style it's that it can be stiff and occasionally unclear. The last time we print readers saw Ramondelli's work, it was during Transformers: Punishment, and, understandably, Ramondelli's contribution to this issue doesn't quite measure up to that story. A good part of this is the fact that this is a talkier issue with less interesting settings. Even those locations that show up in both often look

more interesting in Punishment because of the demands of its script. Ramondelli keeps us an appropriate distance from the action, but, while the compositions are clear, the lighting is a little uniform through most of the issue and that can slow the reader's ability to process what's going on in the scene. Nevertheless, Swindle and Motormaster prove fine subjects for the veiled, gritty style, their unique optics standing out in the dark, and the scene on Caminus looks great. There's a moment here or there where Starscream looks a little off model or Windblade reverts to her "Dark Cybertron" stiffness, but I doubt most would give it a second glance, save to admire Ramondelli's work. Our moodily lit last glimpse of Starscream stands out as a particularly beautiful piece of work. Ramondelli also gets to show off some slightly different skills through a pair of holograms. The first set belong to Starscream, and take advantage of the issue's bold coloring to stand out. The simplicity of the designs is a nice contrast with the rest of the issue's intense detail, yet the care put into rendering how they interact with the air and light gives them a subtle realism of their own. The second set is a long distance communication with Transformers: More Than Meets The Eye. While it can take a moment to get used to Ramondelli's depictions of the MTMTE characters, it's really interesting to see him truly working in such a two-dimensional style. Especially after the last set it would have been easy to use Star Wars-style holograms in this instance, but I think the choice to utilize such a different style gives the issue an additional visual pop. I'd be very interested to see more of what Ramondelli can do outside of his traditional look. A Thought: While it looks unlikely, with the prominent position Swindle is occupying, one has to wonder if we might see some sign of Bruticus during "Combiner Wars". Swindle's absolute willingness to make a deal has earned him more fans than perhaps any other member of the "special teams" that make up the combiners, however he's still a Combaticon. Between mentions of an "ultimate combiner" in upcoming solicitations and the potential irony of seeing Swindle himself turned into a weapon there's a natural logic to it. It also would make a lot of sense as the rivalry between Superior and Menasor has been played up in early promotional materials before introducing Bruticus' opposite number Defensor. Perhaps most interesting of all is the fact that Bruticus has long held a special connection to Starscream, the seeming mastermind of this arc, since he brought the behemoth online in the original G1 cartoon. With only five more issues and no sign of a Bruticus toy the odds are against it, but you know it would be awesome. The post Transformers #39 appeared first on Weekly Comic Book Review.

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