

It's really pretty amazing how enamored Transformers fans are with the Decepticon Justice Division. All it took was two short issues to make them some of James Roberts' most beloved characters. A flashback to one of their raids was sufficient to get readers all atwitter. Well, for the first time since issue #8, we get to spend some real time with Tarn. Perhaps as a consequence of that fierce-burning adoration, I expect that this issue will clash with some readers' image of the DJD. We really knew very little about these characters and I imagine that Roberts' reality differs wildly from the extrapolations of his fanbase. But while it's hard to give up believing the myth the DJD sell their enemies, as Tarn himself puts it, "Even someone with the most rudimentary grasp of Megatron's teaching must realize that a Decepticon utopia cannot accommodate any form of religion." Roberts thoroughly enjoys playing with his readers' expectations about the DJD, mixing humor and regret into their singleminded zealotry at just the right moment to undercut simple understandings of Tarn's character. Likewise, those who remain engaged and attentive will find that the most charming moments of life in the DJD often hide unsettling shadows. The dialogue is sharp and rather pointed. Tarn is always lecturing, always performing, and his words are accordingly chosen with care. Roberts is similarly careful. Though the structure he employs is multifaceted and effective, the plot is, seemingly, the least of his worries. What's more important is working the necessary exposition into the story naturally before it comes into play. The threads of the story stop abruptly short, lingering so that they can all collide at the right moment. Occasionally it's too obvious that Roberts has ulterior motives, but for the most part he pulls it off. Perhaps the most importance example of this misdirection is the idea that this book is focused solely on Tarn. It isn't. Though it laughs at 'show not tell' "The Permanent Revolution" is almost as much Nickel's story as it is Tarn's. The diminutive bot is obviously a favorite of Roberts' and seems poised for a role of some importance in the ongoing narrative. Ultimately the little seen but often felt relationship between Tarn and Nickel drives the story. It's also a treat to meet the IDW incarnation of Deathsaurus, who Roberts sets up as an effective offshoot within the Decepticon faction, respecting his role as Megatron's successor in the Japanese Victory series. Roberts calls upon the Victory manga in particular for this version of the confusingly named warlord and, while he plays a clear second fiddle to Tarn, the fun of seeing two of the Decepticons' big guns face off is worth the price of admission. Indeed, while the first two sections of the story tickle the mind, it's the last chapter that really hooks the reader. Controversial guest artist Hayato Sakamoto executes his duties admirably, mixing drama and comedy into his strong renditions of the Decepticon Justice Division. Tarn and co. carry with them both the power of their massive metal forms and the terror of their brutal occupation. Sakamoto style is fairly comparable to series regular Alex Milne's but there's definitely a more rubbery quality, a greater stretch to his characters. Sakamoto also lacks the sharp slender quality of Milne's MTMTE, presenting bots defined in the horizontal dimension rather than the vertical. Occasionally this can go too far, as in Deathsaurus' first appearance, and the bots can look squat and decidedly thick. That same panel also demonstrates how distracting it can be when Sakamoto overdoes the cartoony look. There are other awkward panels. One of Tarn hurling a glass just looks fundamentally wrong in regards to the motion depicted and an early image of a dental inspection is decidedly weird. Nonetheless, these are balanced out by a number of excellent compositions. Tarn's eyes are a frequent subject that Sakamoto clearly puts extra effort into depicting, crafting extremely specific and lovely panels for Tarn's reaction to Megatron's addendum, his disgust as he leaves his first victim of the issue, the look on his face in the Nuke tank, and more. One also has to mention the ruthless acolyte's long night of the soul, a one page sequence that uses strong

framing and a clever trick with its caption boxes to really express the loss Tarn is going through. There's also a bevy of cute little details, like Sakamoto's impressive attempts to replicate Atilio Rojo & Guido Guidi's styles on the statues of their respective Megatron designs or the DJD's use of bendy straws. It's clear that the details are important to Sakamoto and it makes a difference. Joana Lafuente's colors are always lovely, but they're particularly noticeable this issue. It seems as though the tones Lafuente employs on Sakamoto's work are a bit richer than the lighter, vaguely pastel, palette that's become characteristic of Milne's work on the series. The brighter colors bring out the intensity of Tarn's black and purple and help the highly primary Deathsaurus to pop. The first scene is particularly gorgeous as the intense colors of a Decepticon 'revolutionary' glow in the light of an especially artful sunset.

Some Thoughts: Though there are still a couple of questions, this issue helps tie together many of the mysteries surrounding the "successful" Lost Light, including revealing the nature of Brainstorm's involvement, explaining a bit about the Black Block Consortia, and clarifying the timeline. It's still seems like Rewind was unconscious for a long time but it really does show how well planned this series has been. One thing that has long been incongruous with the story the modern Transformers comics are telling is the repeated mentions of Megatron's galactic imperialism. Most stories about the Decepticon cause have focused on class and mode struggles on Cybertron, however there's been a quiet but constant mention of an anti-organic ethos within the Decepticons. It was easy enough to dismiss that as spillover from the contemporary movie franchise, which featured a Megatron with an equally poorly defined hatred for organics, or a simplification of the Decepticon willingness to farm and ruin organic planets for fuel, however, never bet against the IDW Transformers' ability to integrate disparate ideas into a cohesive whole. While I'm not sure that I like the idea of Megatron being such an obvious hypocrite, it definitely makes sense of many years of hints and seems to be building towards a greater story. As one would expect, this issue is significantly more awesome if you read Tarn's lines in Keith David's voice, as Roberts intended.

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