

A BRUSH WITH INFAMY—PROLOGUE

BY JIM SORENSON AND DAVID BISHOP

“Guilty” rang out the verdict, with no hesitation from the Quintesson adjudicating the proceedings. Actually, thinking back, it was probably something more like “We the jury, under the auspices of the Pax Cybertronica and in consideration of all relevant facts, treaties, laws, and statutes, do find the defendants guilty on all counts.” Even then, I think Swindle managed to get us acquitted on some of the charges. But the message was clear. Galvatron and Scourge would follow Cyclonus into oblivion. Clench, Doomshot, Krunix, and I were to be incarcerated indefinitely. Fracas was remanded to the custody of his original partner, Artfire, to be extradited to... I never found out. Surely not Nebulos. Nightstick alone escaped justice, perhaps because of Cyclonus’ great sacrifice. He became the space pirate known only as The Nebulon. I like to think that he lived out his natural life this way, though it’s more likely the humans hunted him down like a slaarg.

Of course, we all know what comes next: executions, the brief rise of Overlord, the horror of the Rending, and so on, right up until the dismal present with its Games and scattered infrequent Uprisings. But where did it start? One might be tempted to go back 7 million stellar cycles, to the founding of the colony that Galvatron would one day christen Master. Our ancestors named it Rebirth when we fled there, giving up their size and ability to transform to try to break the cycle of war. Worked for a while, until it didn’t, especially if you have a high tolerance for a stagnant bunch of oligarchs decreeing how you’ll spend your every waking cycle.

Maybe one need go back a mere three centuries, to an organic world called Nebulos. Slag, we—by which I mean Decepticons, of which I technically hadn’t quite joined yet—sure did a number on that place. It started with a standard infiltration protocol, that insidious algorithm Shockwave developed when he got left in charge for a few epochs, but spun very quickly out of control. Sure, Zarak, the ‘Con sent to oversee things, managed to get the Hive nations at war with the World Watcher alliance. But then the humans came in their ships and mucked up the secret war. We forged a Hive alliance, and ‘Con tech played very nicely with theirs. Too nicely. Zarak and Fausto Borx, the warped genius driving the Hive’s biomech advances, performed hideous experiments on captured Autobots and WW members. The things they did to the Autobot clones... But regardless, they proved that a hybrid being could provide remarkable benefits to processing capabilities. Thus was the Headmaster program born. Suddenly, instead of Hive elite troopers like Spasma and Skytread riding Rarigo and Tankette mechs, they were binary bonded to Apeface and Flywheels. And Pit yeah, it made a difference having a dozen Headmasters on the battlefield.

The Autobots followed suit, of course, with Muscles and Brawn volunteering to become the first Autobot Headmaster. Soon Furos, Stylor, Clobber, Xort, Zella, Firedrive, and others were using the same upgrade to form the heads of the Autobot commanders on the planet. To make things worse, Teslor and Arcana, the genius twins of the WW, soon expanded the process to include powerful weapons, and the Targetmasters were forged. For a time, warriors like Flintlock and Cybaxx and Spoilsport gave the Autobots the initiative. That is,

until the heroes Fracas and Nightstick tricked their Autobot masters, Artfire and Stepper, by swapping armor and defecting to the Hive cause, bringing with them Targetmaster tech.

The war was a bloody, carnage-strewn stalemate, until Fausto and Zarak changed the equation. Their genius created the first double-Headmaster, turning the entire city of Kinodia into... MegaZarak. Cerebros, who had bound himself to the human called Spike, responded in kind, and Fortress Maximus rose. Their battle shattered mountain ranges and scorched seas. Victory was nearly ours, but the Autobots used Fausto's daughter, Llyra, the mate of one of their human allies, as a distraction. MegaZarak hesitated at a key nanoklik, and all was lost. In the end, Fausto was killed and we were driven from the husk of Nebulos, but the planet would never again support life.

The humans declared enough. In their arrogance they overlooked their own role in the tragedy and demanded that Cybertronians never again spread their cancer beyond the worlds where they already held sway. They called it an Armistice, but the fighting continued, just... Contained. But Galvatron had tasted the power that was binary bonding, and his thirst would not be slaked. He conceived a new form of bondage, the Powermaster process, turning beings not into intellectual partners and sentient sidearms, but living batteries. There was only one problem... He had no more access to properly-sized organics.

And thus did his gaze turn to our world. Autobots and Decepticons alike knew of our existence, but our ancestors' gambit worked. We were too small, not versatile enough, not industrialized enough to be worth bringing into the war. They were content to raid Paradrone for its energon, Gigantion for its manufacturing, Omnitron for its soldiers, Opulus for its wealth. Us they left alone. But then Galvatron realized that the few paltry Headmasters and Targetmasters he had were not enough, not if he was to stand against the humans, who he had come to see as his real enemy. And there was a whole planet of us, ripe for exploitation. Or liberation, depending on one's perspective.

Which brings you to my story. Because when Galvatron came, I welcomed him as a savior. Our 7 million stellar cycle history had begun as an attempt to embrace peace, but it had slowly rotted from the inside out. At the top of society were the eternal triumvirate of Apex, Diac, and Hi-Q, who called themselves the Optimus after the infamous once-and-future Autobot commander; the rest of us lived to serve them. Some of us decided that there was more to life than being another bot's lackey. Two visionaries, Doomshot and Clench, formed a society dedicated to peaceful protest of the policies of the oppressive Optimus. I might never have joined had not my conjunx, Kari, been unjustly imprisoned merely for voicing her dissent. Her passion fueled me, and my engineering acumen soon led me to become a ranking member. But the Optimus called us a disease upon the body politic, a Malignus, and drove us underground. We were pursued by the likes of Hunter and Daburu Leo and Silencer, and many of us perished... But this only fanned the flames of rebellion.

Thus did Galvatron find us, and thus were we receptive to his message of throwing off shackles. It's ironic, isn't it? Ours is a history of oppressor and oppressed, changing places on a never-ending dance stretching back to time immemorial. Galvatron himself had never partaken in the binary bonding process; his distaste of organics was too great to ever allow that, even if both his top lieutenants had taken the Targetmaster upgrade. But we of Rebirth, of Master, we suited his proclivities just fine. To my pride, and shame, I perfected the Powermaster process, and adapted Head and Targetmasters to our unique Cyberbiology. I

wouldn't subject others to a process I wouldn't try myself, and became the first Powermaster. Galvatron, ever shrewd, convinced the Malignus leadership to join with him, and thus did the first Triple-Threat Master come to be. And with our power, Galvatron was nigh-unstoppable, like unto a living god. I still remember the taste of that power. Part of me still yearns for it. We rampaged through the streets of Astrotopia, our capital, and imprisoned the Optimus. Optimus loyalists fled, and we Malignus and our supporters rejoiced.

But where the Decepticons go, can the Autobots be far behind? They learned of the reversal of Rebirth, of how the Optimus were deposed, how the planet was rechristened Master, and they came. Of course, we had been busy. A new generation of Head, Target, and Powermasters were waiting for the Autobots. We slaughtered them, but they kept coming. They freed the surviving Optimus, and created their own new generation of Cyberdroid partners. Their leader took the sacrifice—for one cannot be long bound to three other egos and retain one's spark integrity—and Triple-Threat Prime was born. His clashes with Galvatron shook the heavens, but were indecisive.

Faced with the prospect of defeat, the Autobots dusted off Fortress Maximus himself, now bound to Daniel, son of Spike, but we were waiting. Zarak had found himself two new partners. Eschewing another scientist—he was confident in his own intellect, and wanted to avoid anyone with deep emotional attachments—he sought out a being of base cunning, and thus was his Headmaster partnership with Dante secured. And to further cement his superiority, he underwent the Powermaster upgrade with the steetfighter Caliburn, to give him an edge in combat. When MegaZarak and Fortress Maximus clashed next, their penultimate battle, this time it was the Autobot who flinched. Perhaps he was hesitant to visit the destruction that had scoured Nebulos down on Master; perhaps he was simply outclassed. He was bested in space, and Master was Decepticon territory... For a time. But with the Autobots in retreat, Galvatron's implacable hunger turned inevitably to the human blockade.

Galvatron may have been insane—he wasn't called The Mad Tyrant for nothing—but he was also terribly shrewd. He had seen firsthand the awesome and terrifying power wielded by the Terrans, and intuitively grasped that only a wholly unexpected vector of attack could succeed. (Having his intellect and ego co-mingled with myself and my compatriots also tempered him. There is no question that, when bonded, it was his will that propelled us. But Doomshot's slowburning drive, Clench's manipulative cynicism, and my own scientific perspective all combined to make him—to make *us*—truly a force unique in the cosmos. Gestalt technology seems so primitive, so crude, when compared to the elegant subtlety of bindary bonding.) It is clear, at least to me, that only Galvatron could have devised the stratagem that so nearly strangled the nascent Terran empire in its crib—the Grendel Gambit.

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