

Second Gear

By ChibiJaime

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Wheeljack looks back on his many years of friendship with the medic Ratchet... back to where it all began.

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-/No one could ever know me, no one could ever see me. Seems you're the only one who knows what it's like to be me. Someone to face the day with, make it through all the rest with. Someone I'll always laugh with... Even at my worst I'm best with you. It's like you're always stuck in second gear, and it hasn't been your day, your week, your month, or even your year... I'll be there for you." --The Rembrants, I'll Be There for You/-

-Second Gear-

He was young. Far too young to be stuck in a war like this, Wheeljack wagered. The mech brought in to be the chief medic on call was a civilian doctor, cool-headed with a gentle hand. Prime had requested him specifically. He was called the best tool-and-die man on Cybertron, and no one questioned that. From construction accidents to injuries achieved in barfights, he could fix any break and repair any glitch... given he had the right parts and tools for the job.

Prime had really picked a winner, even if the winner didn't want the prize. He had stepped into Iacon with a straight face, pale optics surveying the haphazard faces around him. "...These aren't soldiers, these are *civilians*," he had snapped, a sort of sad horror dawning on his face. "I thought this was supposed to be a military encampment!"

Wheeljack felt bad explaining the situation to the medic. It was true, the Autobots were short on soldiers and long on unseasoned and frightened recruits who didn't know a laser from a welding rod.

A few true soldiers peppered the ranks... Ironhide and Kup, two weathered old veterans with stories to tell and experience to share. Twin brothers Sunstreaker and Sideswipe, top in their class at the academy and well-known for a sort of ruthless prowess on the field. Even Wheeljack had seen his fair share of the battlefield.

The warriors were far outnumbered by terrified recruits, however... and Wheeljack knew that the light-hearted medic wasn't going to leave this war quite as light-hearted as he came into it... if he even left it at all. So many had fallen so far that the scientist had forgotten to keep track of all the friends he had lost along the way.

But it could never hurt to have just one more... even if that one more was a quiet doctor who kept himself holed in the medbay.

"Hey, kid." Those light blue optics stared up at him as he spoke, reading of a world-weary mech who was more than ready to throw in the towel and be done with it. "Heh... hope I didn't catch you at a bad time."

The medic only shook his head, leaning back over a log he was apparently taking down for reference. "No, you haven't. I'm just not used to people visiting is all. Please, come in."

Not one to rebuke an offer, Wheeljack walked the rest of the way through the medbay doors, watching the boxy medic scribble down notes, head bent over the data pad in obvious concentration. "By the way, the name's Wheeljack," he started, trying to strike up a conversation with the disaffected youth. "Didn't happen to catch yours either... I don't get much of a chance to check out the duty rosters these days. Too busy in the lab, ya know."

"Ratchet," replied the medic without missing a beat or even looking up. "Pleasure to make your acquaintance."

Wheeljack's face panels just glowed slightly, indicating a slight smile on his part. "Likewise." For a long moment, the two fell silent, until Wheeljack - tired of staring at the back of the medic's head and waiting for some great piece of cosmic wisdom - decided to try again. "So... Ratchet, right? Do you see anything good at all coming out of this war?"

That earned him the medic's attention, and the youth gave a snort of a laugh. "Yeah. Me. Alive. That would be nice, if I could get out of this alive. And some of these kids, too."

Wheeljack smiled a little, noting he'd finally at least gotten a reaction. "Heh... We've been here some time, huh?"

In response, Ratchet rolled his optics, picking up a laser scalpel to twirl between his fingers. "Sometime between sometime and eternity, and I only just got here."

"Did you bring anything from home? You know... creature comforts?"

For a moment, he got no response, until Ratchet thoughtfully tapped a finger against his slim face. "Well... I brought a literary pad over."

Surprised, Wheeljack lifted one metallic brow ridge. "A lit pad?"

A nod of reply. "Has the dictionary. I figure it's got all the rest of the literature in it. I like to read the dictionary. Good downloading."

"Good logic," Wheeljack commented. "Can't argue with that." Silence again. "So... you havin' trouble adjusting to anything...?"

Ratchet actually looked thoughtful for a minute at that, staring at the scientist (who was considered crazy at best by most of the other inhabitants of Iacon) with some sense of understanding. Then, he gave a weary sigh. "I think it's that everything is painted grey. The walls are grey, the energon is grey... The only thing that's not grey is the mech fluid - the mech fluid is blue... that's what you get the most of here." Clenching his jaw tightly, the medic stood, starting to pace. Wheeljack figured he'd finally hit a nerve, and now, he was going to get a ranting at. He was only half right. "And what I can't figure out is how those turborat-slugging twins can even find any amusement in this. In case they haven't noticed, this is ugly. This is not exciting. Good mechs are getting hurt out there... bleeding out there... *dying* out there. I feel like I'm in weapons repair, when all these kids really are is a flock of civilians!"

To that, Wheeljack nodded half-assent. "True enough, but that's all the twins were programmed to

know. War, fighting, death, pain... it's in their systems like a bug they can't shake. And all they got to fall back on is each other."

"Lucky bastards," snorted Ratchet. "I wonder if they know what it feels like to lose everything." The doctor sighed, rubbing his temples wearily for a moment. "I don't think this place is turning out to be that great an experience for me, Wheeljack. I mean... I work under terrible pressure and everything and there's a lot of death and destruction and such things, but outside of that, I don't think I'm really getting much out of it."

The panels at the sides of Wheeljack's face glowed indigo as he spoke, the sign of a longsuffering smile. "I know how ya feel, believe me. This war's gotten to all of us... hell, have you seen the two new kids? Mirage and Bluestreak? One's from the towers... you know, the rich district. The other... damn, I'm surprised Gears and Brawn managed to find him in what was left of his city. They wanna join the fight, but I don't think their processors are really in it."

"Not a mech here really has his processor in it." Ratchet sounded gloomy when he said that. "cept for maybe that pair of primary colored idiots. How many times have I put them back together in the past quad?" He gave another sigh. "Sometimes, I feel like this whole damn thing is--..."

The blaring of sirens cut off his words, and once again, Ratchet's face grew troubled. "More wounded..."

"I'll give ya a hand," Wheeljack offered with a cheerful smile. "Can't let ya suffer alone, now, can I?"

That was how it had started. Wheeljack didn't really remember a lot of what had happened between then and now, but sometime in the middle, he and Ratchet had become best friends. The two shared a lot of good times, laughing when they could and lamenting the worst of it. Having a good deal of mechanical knowledge, Wheeljack was a great help when Ratchet needed an extra pair of hands, and when Wheeljack had an invention he just couldn't get the parts for, Ratchet would be right there to help.

It didn't surprise many people that the pair was so inseparable now. Ratchet had grown weary during the war, and he often looked to the older, more seasoned Autobots for guidance. That charming air he had come in with was gone, the simple civilian medic replaced with a military doctor hardened by the constant, bitter conflict he had found himself embroiled in.

"Anger turned inward is depression," Smokescreen had stated once or twice. "Anger turned sideways is Ratchet. He's a nuclear warhead waiting to go off, and when he does, there'll be hell to pay for any unsuspecting fool caught in his path."

There were times that Ratchet did blow his fuse, screaming and hollering angrily at one or another Autobot for taking an injury that really should never have been taken to begin with. The twins, Bluestreak, and Mirage were his most constant visitors, the prior because of their long-standing reputation as prolific front-line fighters, the latter pair because of their inexperience.

More and more often now, Ratchet found himself following the Autobot attack force, there in case

an emergency should strike, ready to move in for a quick on-the-field repair before the wounded was forced to return to his post.

That by itself was Ratchet's least favorite part of the job. Going out into the thick of it to take care of the wounded that needed it, only to send them right back into battle on half-assed repairs. He always feared that one of them would not come back. Sometimes his fears were grounded.

What was worse, Wheeljack had grimly noted on more than one occasion, was that Ratchet absolutely refused to carry a firearm. It had been an issue Prime had butted heads with him over many times, but it was obvious that Ratchet was not going to be moved.

"Where's your gun, soldier?" he recalled Prime questioning of the doctor.

Ratchet barely even blinked, a flat look on his faceplate as he stared back at his commander. "Sulking under my recharge bed. We're not on speaking terms."

Wheeljack and Jazz, Prime's chief of special affairs, both held in snickers at that as Prime narrowed his optics. "Go kiss it and make up. You're taking it with you."

Without missing a beat, Ratchet purred, "Sir, with all due respect, if I touch that gun, I'll trigger another argument."

"Ratchet, you're taking your sidearm."

The medic nodded. "Correct, I'm taking along my right side arm," he held up his right arm, then his left, "and my left side arm."

Prime frowned, obviously not used to having so much trouble just getting someone to at least carry something to protect himself. "Ratchet..."

"I will not carry a gun, Prime." Now the medic was talking business. "When I got thrown into this war I had a clear understanding with the council of Elders: no guns. I'll carry your data-pads, I'll carry a torch, I'll carry a tune, I'll carry on, carry over, carry forward, cash and carry, carry me back to Old High Trails... but I will not carry a gun."

And that was the end of it. Ratchet was not going to be swayed... at least not until he had really found it necessary. Unfortunately, and Wheeljack grimaced just thinking about it, that time was going to come far too soon.

It was another typical field run. Autobots and Decepticons clashing on the battlefield, with Ratchet and a handful of far less experienced medics lingering near the back and handling the wounded as they were brought to them. Ratchet's face was a mask of determination, steady hands working rapidly on Ironhide's latest wound, although his shoulders flinched whenever an explosion sounded nearby.

No one even saw it coming.

"Take out their rear!" The voice was that of the commander of the Decepticon Seekers,

Starscream, soaring overhead as he banked in a graceful arc. "Hit the medics!"

Ratchet's head had snapped up at that, and without even taking a moment to think about it, he threw himself over his patient as a barrage of laser fire ripped through the line of medics.

Wheeljack and Sideswipe broke formation to rush back towards the attack as Sunstreaker and Bluestreak focused on taking out the Seekers before they could come around for another pass. Most of the poor saps were already offline, mangled beyond repair, but at least one medic was still online, his just slightly shaking form protecting Ironhide's vitals. The old red mech was staring at the young medic in alarm. "Git 'im off me an' git 'im inside!" came the veteran's heavy twang. "Kid's got more holes in 'im than a turborat in a spike pit!"

Frowning deeply, Sideswipe leaned down to gingerly lift the medic. "Primus, Wheeljack, he's right..."

It was Wheeljack's turn to assess the damage, and his face panels turned an unhappy shade of dark blue when he looked up to Sideswipe to speak. "Get him back to Iacon, Sideswipe. I'll shadow you back. Ironhide, follow me there. You can't do a damned thing with that arm."

Ironhide snorted with frustration at that, but the old warmech knew when he was beat on an issue. After sending word to Optimus Prime, who had sounded far less than pleased with the turn of events, the group was off back to Iacon.

"He'll be fine," Wheeljack sighed once he had given the fallen medic a thrice-over. "Just jarred him pretty bad... lost a lot of energon and mech fluid all at once, but he'll pull through okay."

Sideswipe looked pretty disgruntled, his arms folded tightly across his chestplate. He was still a pretty young bot, despite his skill on the field, and it was more than obvious he was upset at having left his twin on the field without knowing if the yellow warrior was all right. "...So he's not gonna die or anything?"

In spite of himself, Wheeljack chuckled. "No, Sides, he's not going to die. He's about as stubborn as your brother in matters involving dying."

Instantly, a grin split the youth's features. It was nearly impossible for Sideswipe to stay unhappy for any length of time, unless his brother was injured or he himself was unconscious. "Remember that one time? You know, with Bluestreak?"

"...You know, that was pretty funny." Wheeljack shook his head with a quiet chuckle, then grumped in a very impressive impersonation of Ratchet's snappy, growling voice, "Live, damnit! That's an order!"

Sideswipe burst into laughter, covering his optics with one hand. "You're too good at that, Wheeljack!"

"Far too good..."

That sobered the youth up as both he and Wheeljack turned their attention to the mech on the shelf between them. Ratchet's optics were glowing dimly, but he was very much awake, staring down the two who were teasing him. Wheeljack gave him a light slap on the shoulder. "You took a nasty hit from the Seekers."

"Starscream ain't got a lick'a decency in 'im, attackin' unarmed medics," hissed Ironhide from across the room. "Poor boys never stood a chance in the Pit..."

Ratchet stared for a moment before he finally questioned softly, "...the others?"

Wheeljack suddenly wished he was anyplace but right there, standing by this medic who had a look on his face as if he suddenly realized he was *in* the Pit, not just a bystander, watching from the sidelines as others fought and died. He had suddenly lost what little he had right here at this awful place... and he didn't know how to get it back. "They were terminated, Ratchet," he finally sighed. "All of 'em but you and a couple'a rookies, but from what the radio reports are sayin', they don't know if they'll make it back to Iacon."

For a moment, Ratchet just stared at him. Then, surprisingly, he chuckled. From a chuckle grew a full-blown laugh, and the medic raised a hand to his optics as the others looked on in shocked concern. "Oh, it *figures!* I almost don't have it in me to stick with this anymore! Everyone around me... all my friends, people I loved... everything gone because of this damned war! Why can't things be the way they were? I could be at my own place, a practicing civilian doctor like I had been..."

"Ratchet, none of us wants to be here." Wheeljack gave a quiet sigh. "I don't want to be here. Mirage doesn't want to be here. The medics and scientists don't want to be here. Certainly the wounded don't want to be here... But we've got to do our best."

Ratchet just quietly turned his head away, not wanting to hear anymore of it, frustration and sorrow evident in his expression. And for a while, no one bothered him.

After that... he started carrying a gun.

It was rare that Ratchet ever brought up the incident that day. Even after their trip to Earth, he was quiet after their awakening when it came to how much his friends suffered, and how much he suffered. No one ever mentioned it to him, even though the pain of thinking of all the morals and beliefs he had gone against still haunted him.

It had been a rather long week when a lull in combat finally reached the Ark, as both sides were recovering from staggering losses. Ratchet had hardly left the medbay at all, and whenever he recharged, it was only for minutes at a time to keep himself from passing out.

"The guy needs a break," Jazz sighed as he peered into the medlab. "Everyone in there's fine now... he doesn't hafta watch 'em like a buzzard."

Wheeljack laughed a little, shaking his head. "Aw, you know how Ratchet is, Jazz. It'd take a party of staggering proportions to shake him outta any sort of---... hey, that's it!"

Instantly, Jazz's expression turned suspicious. "...what's it?"

"We throw Ratchet a little party. He needs to release some tension, right? So we give him an outlet." Wheeljack looked amazingly pleased with himself. "You set up the lounge, Jazz... I'll work on getting our slap-happy medic down there... and then, we'll see at least a little bit'a calm in him. You just wait and see!"

The entire medbay had finally quieted when slowly, Wheeljack made his way in. The medic didn't even lift his head at his friend's entrance... and then, he spoke. "They'll never stop coming, you know. Doesn't matter who comes or goes... they're still coming. Prime almost died, and they're still coming. Wherever they come from, they'll never run out."

"You do what you can do, Ratchet," Wheeljack encouraged quietly. "You're a medic, it's your job. People expect a lot out of you." He didn't miss a beat, walking over quietly to rest his hand on Ratchet's shoulder. "You do all you can... and we're all grateful for it."

Ratchet let a weary smile cross his face as he glanced slightly up towards Wheeljack. "...Thanks, pal. Nice to know someone appreciates all the work I do."

Wheeljack chuckled, then gave Ratchet a hardy clap on the back. "Let's go down to the lounge and have a drink or two, eh? You look like ya need a hard one."

"A stiff drink and a shot to the head," Ratchet grumbled, but he could not fight off the smile. "But why the hell not? Things are stable in here."

If Wheeljack could have split into a grin, he would have done so right then and there. "Good. That's the way I like ta hear things."

About every Autobot in the fleet (excluding Prowl and Perceptor, who refused to be seen at such an event, and a couple of the minibots who were recovering in CR) had gathered in the lounge at Jazz's request for nothing more than a night of enjoying themselves. Prime had agreed to the idea surprisingly without much of a fuss... he had told Jazz squarely that a bit of recreation would do them some good. And so, with Prowl and Perceptor on watch duty, the party was on.

Now, they just had to wait for the guest of honor.

The doors slid open with a whoosh, and when a cheer went up, Ratchet's optics went wide. He stared around at his friends and comrades-in-arms, hands limp at his sides, jaw hanging agape. Wheeljack laughed, clapping him on the back again. "Have fun, Ratchet. You've earned it."

Slowly, a smile tilted up the corners of Ratchet's mouth and he turned slowly to face Wheeljack. "You sly old turbofox! You set me up!"

"A party's a party, Ratchet!" called Jazz. "You needed a break, so we're givin' ya one!"

It didn't take long for everyone to rush headlong into a good time. Jazz had his radio going with whatever was popular at the time, and even old Ironhide - who had ensconced himself to one side of the room, nursing a cup of warm energon - seemed to be enjoying himself.

Jazz, however, had plenty of other ideas. Grinning, he turned down the music, and all eyes fell on him in puzzlement. "You know, a guy I met in town - old war vet from Korea - taught me a drinkin' song."

"Oh, Primus," snickered Sunstreaker from a table nearby. "This I gotta hear. Lay it on us, Jazzman."

The saboteur just grinned. "We're stuck here in encampments. I signed on as just a lad. I was a son, but when I come home, I might be a granddad!"

A few of the others grinned. They knew that tune, and now, they were catching on. Most of them had heard it in a variety of places, and never the same tune, except for one part... and of course, everyone wanted to join in. A few mechs responded in unison, "Oh, I don't want no more of army life. Hey now, I wanna go home!"

"Oh, the medics in the army, they say we're mighty bright." Ratchet had a smirk on his face, probably heady from one or two of Wheeljack's mixed drinks. "We work on soldiers through the day and spirits through the night."

Laughter as still more voices rang out, "Oh, I don't want no more of army life. Hey now, I wanna go home!"

More laughter until, a bit surprisingly, the twins joined in, both of them grinning from audio to audio and leaning forward on their table... "Friendships in the army, they say are hard to find. So we spend all of our days off standin' in the wash rack line!"

"Oh, I don't want no more of army life. Hey now, I wanna go home!"

"The spies here in the army, ya say we're really green. But if it weren't for us guys you'd be rebuilt into latrines!" Bumblebee chorused.

Once again, the room burst into laughter. "Oh, I don't want no more of army life. Hey now, I wanna go home!"

The room was quiet aside from the chuckling for a moment until Wheeljack, after passing off a cup of energon to Gears, chimed, "The scientists in the army, well, we've all got lotsa brains. Blowing ourselves up for the greater good so you're not stuck out in the rain!"

For a moment, everyone was laughing again - even Prime, who looked to be a bit more cheerful

than his normal solemn self. Many Autobots clapped Ratchet on the back heartily, and the medic gave them a brilliant smile in return as the room once again chorused, "Oh, I don't want no more of army life. Hey now, I wanna go home!"

Wheeljack's face panels finally glowed brightly in a brilliant smile, slinging an arm around Ratchet's shoulders as Hound joined in with, "Oh, some guys like the army... I think it's all a mess. Take Ratchet, for example... a portrait of craziness!"

"Oh, I don't want no more of army life. Hey now, I wanna go. But they won't let me go. Hey now, I wanna go home!"

The lounge finally quieted, most of the mechs staggering off for their respective recharges, until only two mechs remained, sitting quietly at a table off to one side, laughing and joking about old times. Ratchet was grinning brightly, an expression Wheeljack was sure he hadn't seen since the doctor had signed on from a civilian post, uncertain of his place in the war, friendless and unnerved. Smiling, he gave his head a slow shake. "I gotta thank you, Wheeljack. I really needed that today... it cheered me up."

"Hey, what're friends for?" the scientist chuckled. "Besides... you've put all of us together more times than I can count. You needed some rest."

Ratchet just smiled quietly. "Your friend is the man who knows all about you and still likes you... right?"

"You got it, pal. Glad you remembered."

Laughing, the medic shook his head. "Thanks for bein' there, Wheeljack. I don't know where I'd be if I hadn't found a friend like you here."

Wheeljack laughed a little as well, leaning back in his seat as he stated lowly, "Likewise, buddy. And believe me... I wouldn't have it any other way."

-End-