Molten

by yozra

Summary

A 'broken' automaton is brought to Moniwa's workshop, and he is the most beautiful person Moniwa has ever seen.

Notes

I don't really know.

Two months ago

The air inside Moniwa’s workshop was an infusion of earth and ember, a workout for the lungs when each inhale and exhale was leaden with metal. For Moniwa it was second nature to breathe these fumes, the clean air sweeping his lungs whenever he walked outside instead being the one to make him light-headed and woozy.

On this warm autumn day (every day was a warm day when he worked in a room with a furnace) he sat in the front workshop just outside the pool of light falling through the window, on a chair with peeling varnish that rocked every time he shifted, one front leg being shorter than the rest. To the untrained eye, the bronze plate he was inspecting may have looked like armour, scratched and
dented from battle, and grooves of abdominal muscles alluding to the wearer’s strength.

They wouldn’t have been wrong about the last part. But the chestpiece actually belonged to an automaton in need of dire repairs, to be refreshed and readied for a home party in three days’ time.

At the bang against the door he raised his head; he was sure it wasn’t a fashionable new way of knocking.

A scrape and some clatter and the door swung open, sunlight stretching to reach across the floor just a finger’s width short of touching his toes before metal crashed and crumpled before his eyes, dropped by the man standing tall at the doorway, the light giving him a heroic glow.

“We need you to take this useless thing off our hands – it’s broken.”

_The only thing that’s broken is your head._

Despite the mental defence mechanism that had been inconspicuously constructed throughout his education to trigger at each slight, Moniwa didn’t say this part out loud. He was a smithery, a craftsman, an artisan, and just as he was a constructor and repairer in the physical world, he had the smarts to apply his skills in the mental one, too. He had crafted himself a filter, a simple counter-mechanism that consisted of gritting his teeth, counting to five, and mentally voicing the mantra ‘they’re having a bad day’, its meaning dented and thinning but still intact. Similar to the plate he held in his hands however, he knew he would have to forge himself a new one soon.

So although the sight of the customer tossing the automaton to the ground wrenched his heart and boiled his blood, Moniwa inhaled a composing breath and asked, “What’s wrong with him?”

After all, he had a reputation to upkeep. Not his, but the Date name he represented, the school he had graduated from which led to him establishing a business for repairing damaged automatons, or taking unwanted ones off people’s hands for a price. Reviews for his shop were flawless, though that in itself was a flaw; in a world where scepticism and distrust formed the very foundation of each thought, margins of error unacceptable and fingers pointing to everywhere but the self, it was suspicious to come across a service that had not been marred with the smallest of black marks.

“It’s loud. Constantly talking, clattering about because it never stops moving. We got it because it wasn’t an eyesore like the cheap, exposed models, but we should’ve just stuck to them – and we paid triple for this!”

Moniwa stood, placed his current work carefully down on the chair, and went to kneel by the metal mound, resting his hand on the forehead.

It was warm; he jerked his hand back.

“Aone!”

Moniwa watched the customer eye the door leading out back, beyond which steady footsteps grew heavier as they neared – the man’s eyes widened and he took a step back.

“Aone, assist this man with the paperwork, I’m taking this one out back for inspection.”

Moniwa pulled the lifeless body and threw it across over his shoulders, wobbling once on his left foot as he heaved himself and the load up.
He walked to the backdoor, pausing as he lined up next to his apprentice.

“Invoice him for the cheapest model,” he said, voice hushed. “I don’t want him to kick up a fuss.”

He shot a side glance to find Aone shooting one back, almost questioning if anyone would ‘kick up a fuss’ when he was the one providing customer care.

(Anyone whose knowledge on automatons was limited automatically assumed Aone to be one from his sheer size and silent stares, but he was in actuality a human, and a very promising blacksmith.)

“People try all sorts,” Moniwa replied, and continued on through.

The backroom was smaller and dimmer from the small slit that was a window facing north. It was filled with scraps and metal body parts that had been too valuable to waste. If it was within his power to save the automatons he did so, but not all were so lucky; to those, he muttered a prayer to thank them for their service and for permission to recycle their parts to be used on others.

He lowered the automaton onto the lone chair and crouched to inspect his face.

In a word, he was beautiful. The customer could have been charged triple the triple amount paid and it still wouldn’t match his worth.

The automaton’s skin was sun-bleached leather, coarse and paled and opposite to the impeccably smooth and unblemished ceramics of the desirable high-end models; however the grafting was so seamless it was practically impossible to trace unless he pressed his nose right up against the skin. The automaton’s hair falling past his eyes shone in white gold, except at the roots where it streaked with tarnished silver; when Moniwa sank his fingers in, it was like touching gossamer, he had never come across hair this light and fine and hair-like, and that was comparing it to the softest materials used. He returned his attention to the face – irises glowed like cooling molten metal, sparks flying inside the orbs when an object hammered his interest and – Moniwa snatched his hand back, realising the automaton was awake.

“I’m Bokuto,” the automaton – Bokuto – said, his voice matching the confidence of his permanent grin and unlike anything he had ever heard uttered by an automaton. “Are you giving me a check-up?”

Before Moniwa could begin to form an answer, Bokuto unbuttoned his shirt and thumped his chest – there was a click of release – pulling open a door wide enough for two hands to comfortably slip through, letting light pour out from within.

If Moniwa had been shocked before, the sight inside the chest paralysed him.

There was a heart.

Admittedly it was inorganic – the molten yellow swirling at the centre was the same as that of the automaton’s eyes and contained within an oval glass – but compared to the static panel of weak, colourless energy powering the automatons on the market, the thin vessels branching weaving themselves between the whirring metal radiated warmth and gave everything life.

Moniwa began to reach in – and pulled his hand back before it passed through the door.
“You can touch it! Nothing’ll break, the metals are tough and the glass isn’t just any old glass – it’s *flexible* glass!” Bokuto said this proudly, like he had been the inventor.

“Flexible—” Moniwa had only heard rumours of the mythical, indestructible material. “Did the gods make you?” he breathed, tearing his gaze away only to glue it onto Bokuto’s eyes. That could be the only plausible explanation.

The gold in Bokuto’s eyes flickered as he faltered. “I’m sure he’s just a normal old man…”

“Old man? You… remember your creator? But what about—” Moniwa wasn’t sure how to approach the delicate topic of being shut down. “I wondered how you switched yourself on just now.”

“We can’t be switched off,” Bokuto said, slightly surprised. “The old man said that’d be like humans being killed only to be revived without a trace of their past life – a branch of the undead.”

Moniwa lowered himself down heavily onto the floor.

The automaton jump-clattered out of his chair. “Sit down here!”

“No, it’s fi—”

Bokuto hooked him from under the arms and lifted him up, lowering him down surprisingly gently onto the chair. He then crouched before him, their positions reversed as the light in his eyes travelled across Moniwa’s face.

“I’ve decided – I’m going to guard you!”

Moniwa stared at him. “You… you’re going to guard me?” It was unheard of for an automaton to assign themselves a person.

“You don’t have one do you? And I like you a lot more than the previous one – you’re nice!”

“I’m just a blacksmith repairing or selling or” – Moniwa hesitated – “dismantling automatons.”

Bokuto blinked slow, once. “So?”

“Wouldn’t you prefer to be somewhere… higher up? With your level of intelligence?”

Bokuto’s eyes dimmed. “You don’t want me here?”

“That’s not what I meant! I just… want to give you options. Better options than—” Moniwa thought of his workshop – tools hanging off the wall in a long line, furnace burning on the other side, shells of various body parts leaning in piles against the wall and stacked on the floors; it was cramped and stuffy and dingy and not a place suited to an automaton of Bokuto’s calibre.

“I don’t decide to do things I’m not sure on! And this place is cosy – I like it!”

Moniwa knew battling with him was only going to prolong the inevitable outcome. He gave a sigh and a weary smile.

“All right, Bokuto. I would be happy if you stayed.”
Two weeks ago

The process of breathing life into an automaton depended not just on a person’s skill but also their ability to infuse a part of their soul. It was an ancient method that was treated as an impractical technique in most schools – a dead art. Thankfully his school touched upon the subject even if knowledge on the art was limited, so he knew the first basic steps, but he had never met anyone with the strength or knowhow to create someone like Bokuto.

Moniwa chewed on his lip as he stood next to Sasaya, watching Bokuto chatter away to Sakunami and Obara, the two in awe and throwing question after question while they circled him or peeked inside the door willingly opened wide.

“What do you think?”

He visited Sasaya on occasion, who – as a fellow graduate of Date – worked on his own business forging tools a couple of hours walk towards the other side of the city.

Sasaya crossed his arms and leaned back against the wall. “Honestly? Haven’t a clue. Never come across anything like it. Have you been to see Kamachi?”

Moniwa shook his head hard. “I daren’t take him on a trip any longer than to the outskirts of the city, I already have a hard enough time trying to keep him out of trouble taking him grocery shopping.”

The first time Moniwa had taken Bokuto outside for the simple task of picking up vegetables, he had to constantly drag him back from invading people’s space while endlessly apologising from person to person as they walked. If he hadn’t been doing that he had been answering Bokuto’s questions in a hushed tone hoping Bokuto would get the hint that he should quieten down. Their trips improved slightly – Bokuto had learnt the concept of personal space.

“You reckon someone’d think to steal him? Try to pull him apart?”

Moniwa already had this conversation with Bokuto, asking why automatons hadn’t advanced to his level. Bokuto answered with four words – time, money, resources, energy; he didn’t need to expand further.

“In the current world we’re living in? He’s unprofitable, both to create and sell.”

“Even for warfare?”

It was a genuine concern. Of course the potential was there, and he was sure there were official
and unofficial factions working to develop the idea. Though from what Moniwa had learnt as a student, automatons refused to animate on malignance, as though such emotions had been locked out by higher forms.

Moniwa prayed they wouldn’t change their minds. “I like to believe the gods would keep that from happening—”

“Hey, Moniwa!”

Moniwa looked up at Bokuto’s yell, seeing his eyes shining.

“Obara says there’s a market down town, can we go visit?”

Moniwa smiled. “Give me another five minutes.”

Another loud clatter had Moniwa thinking Bokuto was going to break something from his buoyancy and then he turned to Sasaya, about to ask about the market when he noticed him staring.

“What?”

“You remember the last line of Date’s oath?”

Moniwa gave him a questioning look. “‘I swear to forge from the heart, to heed the sonance and fulfill the resounding yearns of metal.’”

Sasaya nodded, then looked towards Bokuto again. “It takes on a whole new meaning with that hunk of metal over there.”

Moniwa returned to gazing at Bokuto, trying to decipher Sasaya’s words.

They left with loud goodbyes and a promise from Sasaya that he would visit soon, then headed for the market. Bokuto examined every row and every stall, Moniwa doing his best to ignore the vexed glowers and daggers while responding to each of Bokuto’s exclamations and excited pointing. Though he was still not comfortable, he was beginning to grow an immunity to other people’s unwanted ‘concerns’. He even believed there may come a time when he would cease to care.

On their return path along the outer city wall, a rare blanket of silence fell between them. Every few paces Moniwa threw a side glance to see Bokuto in quiet contemplation, though his spirits were high because of the bright flames in his eyes.

“Tell me more about your creator,” Moniwa finally said, unable to stand the strange atmosphere. “You said he was just an old man but… I still find that hard to believe.”

Automatons never remembered anything about their past. They had an inbuilt switch that shut down and wiped their memories clear as a blank slate, ready for an exchange of hands or destruction.

Bokuto hummed in thought (and Moniwa thought it was such a human thing to do). “He didn’t act like a god. He ate. He forged. He slept a lot too. The model before me helped him out with the heavy lifting and repairs while I was being built. I was up and moving for about three months when he left with a traveller.”
“There are more of you?”

Bokuto’s fingers squeaked as he curled each of his fingers in count; Moniwa made a mental note to oil them later. “Seven. I’m the last one so far as I know.”

“Why did you leave?”

The flame in Bokuto’s eyes dimmed and steadied at a rusty red. “The old man had some trouble with the collectors. He usually sold small pieces – toys and trinkets – to get by but less people were buying. The man who brought me to your workshop came in one day and wanted to buy me off him. The old man – he didn’t like to sell us, he always gave them as gifts to people who needed it. He got angry and walked out, but I told them I would go with them for a price. They left the money. I left a note. And then I left.”

“Didn’t you… say goodbye?”

“I wrote I’m going on an adventure and I’ll be back when I’m done.”

“How are you so independent? What about the authentication process so you recognise the people you have to guard?”

The rusty red burnt in anger. “We go by our code of honour. The previous owner and his family, they didn’t have a clue what they were doing with me anyway, I just told them to press a few things here and there and they thought their job was done.”

“But why did you decide to stay with me?”

Bokuto turned, the colours flaring back to golden yellow. “I liked the sound of you. And then I opened my eyes and I liked the look of you. And so I decided to guard you.”

Bokuto made it sound so simple. Somewhere inside, Moniwa knew it was anything but.

* * * * * *

Two days ago

“Open up, Bokuto, I’m checking your innards.”

“No!”

“I need to repair everything that’s not in working order.”

“It’s all working pretty much!”
Moniwa was almost tempted to grab a hammer and throw it so it just missed Bokuto’s head, if only to get the point across he was being hard-headed.

“You can barely move your arm. And any more rattling and I’ll have the whole street complaining about the noise. How are you going to guard me if a group comes in through that door trying to steal things in my workshop?”

It was a cheap move but one that worked; Bokuto’s eyes opened wide at the realisation he would be useless.

Moniwa picked up the hammer and waved it threateningly. “Open up, or I’ll do it for you.”

Bokuto curled his movable left hand into a fist and bumped it hard against his chest – Moniwa peered in the opening.

“What in the name of Date—”

There was a whole new reason why Moniwa couldn’t take his eyes off the intricate mechanism.

The stacked cogs stuttered and jarred, others that had fitted perfectly before now ground their teeth as they fought to be the first to run full circle. Screws were rattling loose, some hanging at the ends of their threads and threatening to fall, metal bars and pipes jittered and he ran a hand along the closest two; they were bent unnaturally, like someone had pinched and pulled too hard.

But all of these issues were fixable. The biggest problem was what was amassing within the glass.

Patches of residue like cooled iron. The golden liquid was losing its glow and Moniwa glanced up at Bokuto’s eyes that refused to look at him, just barely orange but probably because Bokuto was adamant in keeping the colour and flow close to normal so Moniwa wouldn’t realise.

There was comfort in knowing the glass was indestructible when the parts were pushing into the vessels as they strained for more room, but that also meant Moniwa had to find a solution from the inside.

First thing first, he would repair what was repairable.

“You’re going to have to be immobile while I work on this.”

Bokuto must have heard the hardness in his voice because he only nodded in reply.

Moniwa pushed his emotions aside and got to work. He tightened the screws irrelevant to releasing the bent pipes, loosened others so that he could pry open the clamps holding them in place and rolling them between his fingers to slip them out. From the angle he was sitting at least the cogs seemed to be in working order – a chipped tooth and Moniwa would have been in serious trouble.

He moved over to the table, finding a small rod thin enough to insert into the pipes, pushing it up to the bend where he began to repeat the slow process of heating and hammering to straighten the metal. Measuring and cutting a new piece would have been easier, but Moniwa preferred to repair wherever possible, naturally to prevent waste, but also because he disliked throwing anything of the original parts of the automaton away. Even more so for Bokuto.
All the while he cursed himself for his inattention. His mind had been consumed by his most recent repair, an automaton in bad shape after the owner had a conflict. He had half a mind to refuse, the incident had been a petty dispute of who was of higher standing. However, his ethic was to repair what could be salvaged, and he had a funny suspicion they would have thrown the automaton away if he sent them away.

He hammered harder.

He had worked day and night – thinking back now, Bokuto had been oddly meek during this three day period, not a single word spoken as Moniwa concentrated on finishing his task, a handful of broken naps and the odd mouthful of food and drink that magically appeared within his reach when he needed minimal sustenance.

He cried out at the heavy metal falling onto his finger, releasing the hammer to send clattering onto the stone floor.

“Moniwa—!”

“I’m fine.” His finger throbbed but no cuts, and he could still bend it. He reached down for the hammer. “I’m nearly done.”

Indeed, it didn’t take long to finish his task, and to set the pipes back in their place. Moniwa checked as much of the machinery as he could under the low glow, brought a mirror in case to check behind the mechanism and found it in working order – for now.

“Can you move your hand?”

Bokuto raised and lowered his right arm, clenched and unclenched his hand. “It’s working fine.”

Moniwa closed the door with a firm click, his hand still resting on his chest.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t want to bother you.” Bokuto’s voice was uncharacteristically quiet. “Can I... see your hand?”

Moniwa set his tools down by his feet and offered his left hand palm-side up for Bokuto to see. Sooty and smudged, nicks of scars around the edges, patches of burn marks and black under his fingernails practically permanently inked into his skin. His left forefinger was crooked from a past slip where a larger hammer struck and shattered bone; it was now swollen from the earlier mishap and his skin was acquiring a new hue of purple-blue.

“I’m supposed to be guarding you but you’re the one who takes care of me,” Bokuto said, running a thumb over his finger.

“That’s because you need regular care,” Moniwa replied. “So that you can help me when it’s necessary.”

“What about your regular care though? You haven’t been looking after yourself recently.”

“I can go a few days without proper food and rest.” Moniwa curled his fingers into a loose fist; he couldn’t curl his forefinger all the way. “Tell me why the inside of the glass looks like metal’s
cooling, Bokuto.”

Bokuto clattered with a shrug. “I don’t really know.”

Moniwa watched Bokuto, trying to get him to open up with his unwavering stare, but Bokuto was still being stubborn; he wasn’t going to get a truthful answer. He changed questions. “Does it hurt?”

Another shrug. “You know I can’t physically feel anything. But... it doesn’t make me feel good inside.”

Moniwa reached out with his right hand to run it through Bokuto’s hair. “I’ll find a way to heal you.”

Bokuto’s eyes didn’t reflect the same hope.

* * * * * *

Two hours ago

Sitting at his desk, open books hanging off the table kept in place with the weight of more open books, Moniwa crossed out yet another equation that didn’t match. He leaned back with a creak of his bones and a moan from the chair, staring up at the brown panels of his ceiling as he dug his fingers into matted hair and exhaled a thin breath.

He had spent the past two days in his room, leaving Aone to take orders while he combed through his old textbooks in the hope that he could scavenge the smallest scrap of hint on Bokuto’s heart. He had taken another peek inside this morning, found the black spreading like mould.

He didn’t need to be told what would happen once the energy stopped flowing.

Hands rested on the curve between neck and shoulders, and he groaned as they rubbed in precise circles with just enough pressure to ease the muscles loose.

“Your hands feel like they belong to the gods,” Moniwa said, closing his eyes.

“I can’t be a god, I’m not even human.”

His eyes snapped back open.

Bokuto said it wistfully, longing in futility to be like him, and though Moniwa couldn’t pinpoint the exact reason, it sounded like a clue to the mystery inside the glass.
“You’re more human than any of the humans here.” On this earth. At this city. In this very room.

Thumbs worked between his shoulder blades and another bout of silence fell over them.

“I wish there was something I could do for you that would equal the satisfaction I feel from your hands.”

The movements may not have stopped, but they wound down.

“I’m sorry, that was insensitive—”

“There is.”

Moniwa turned his head to find those eyes, red like heated iron, burning into him.

Oh.

If Moniwa was correct, this stare had a very dangerous meaning.

“Oh?” Moniwa tried to keep his voice steady as he feigned ignorance. “What’s that?”

“I don’t mean what you can do – you wouldn’t have to do anything, you’d just…” Bokuto’s hands stilled. “I want to... explore you. Not even that if that’s not what you want. I want – I just want... you.”

Moniwa laughed weakly. “It sounds like you want me for yourself, Bokuto.”

“If you’ll let me then—”

“Didn’t you say you don’t have a way of receiving the senses?”

“If I could… to you… seeing you would be enough to make me feel like I do.”

Moniwa’s breath hitched.

Friendships between automatons and humans were frowned upon. Automatons were built to guard, to serve. The most basic types retained their bulky metallic structure, with their voiceless affirmations and inanimate stares, the strongest and most durable. On the other end of the spectrum were the design automatons, useless for security but competent entertainers of song and dance, and an effective way of displaying the amount of wealth one had to waste on a superfluous addition to their home.

To be caught being intimate with an automaton resulted in an immediate destruction to a person’s reputation and being shunned out of society. Relations between people were formed out of necessity, no matter how short, taut, and ready to snap they may be, but escaping into the cold metallic arms in search of warmth proved the human’s incapacity to live in this harsh world. It proved they were subordinate, were lesser than the machines (because it was never the human trying to pleasure the machine, not when machines had no means of feeling sensations).

Moniwa turned back to face the books and papers. “Bokuto. You know the rule no one speaks but everyone knows… don’t you?”
“That’s the rule mankind made without thinking about—” There was some clatter, Bokuto’s hands leaving his shoulders. “I’m – I’m going downstairs – I’ll sleep there tonight, I’ve been thinking I should anyway these past couple of weeks, there isn’t a lot of room here—”

“Past couple of weeks?” Moniwa turned, resting his arm onto the back of his chair to watch Bokuto edging back. “Is that how long you’ve been feeling these... emotions?”

Metal rattled from within Bokuto. “No. I mean, yes, I’ve been feeling emotions but that’s because I already have emotions, like the other day when you tightened the screws and straightened everything out I was really happy, and then last week when you told me we wouldn’t be able to make that fair because you had to finish by the deadline, that made me sad—”

“Bokuto.”

Bokuto stopped talking. His grinning face looked like a mask, the same as those people wore when they wanted to prevent others from discovering how they truly felt – Moniwa almost expected it to fall apart.

“Tell me what you feel for me.”

There was a clunk as Bokuto’s back hit the door. “No.”

“Does it have any connection to what’s happening inside of you?”

There was no reply, just Bokuto waiting.

If they were found out he would lose everything. Everything he had built, everything he possessed, everything he hoped to have in the future. Here, they would never be able to keep themselves off the radar of distrustful eyes always looking to find a speck of fault. Moniwa may manage, but Bokuto – regardless of whether or not people knew he was an automaton, he was already approached with caution. Their only option would be to up and leave for another city – another land – but rumours had a way of chasing the scent to its source and it wouldn’t take long before he had to move again.

Not just that, but it would affect the handful of people around him who he respected and treasured. Aone. Sasaya. Kamasaki. Date, one of the few schools that taught the older methods, would find their reputation destroyed, lose students, shut down.

He shouldn’t.

But.

Moniwa had weighed his options only twice in his life.

Once was when he was a teen choosing his future. He had always loved working with metal, of polishing rust and smoothing abrasions. The feel of slotting one piece into another – a perfect fit – and seeing the sheen reflecting back his contentment. But becoming a top craftsman meant spending hours in his workshop getting practical, and then hours in his apartment studying and drafting plans. Any spare moment was spent on upkeep, and going down this path meant giving up human interactions. Considering the mentality of the general populous, the decision came to him easily.
The second was now.

Moniwa pushed himself off the chair and approached Bokuto step by careful step so as not to startle the automaton that could easily grip the door handle his hand hovered over and dash out.

“Bokuto.” Moniwa slowly held out his hand. “Can I see your hand?”

Bokuto looked down at his own hand. “Why?”

“I’d like to check something.”

A moment’s waver, then Bokuto raised it out towards Moniwa, steady despite his nerves.

Moniwa wrapped one hand around Bokuto’s and then ran his fingertips along his palm; rough and cracked even though Moniwa kneaded it regularly with an emollient. The energy burning inside Bokuto made it warm, though there was a considerable drop in temperature compared to a few weeks ago. Still, if this hand touched him along more intimate areas, it would feel no different on his skin than if a person had touched him.

No, that was a lie. It would feel more real, because Bokuto’s every deliberate touch, every thoughtful move would be made in an effort to sate him.

He remembered Sasaya’s words and finally understood their meaning.

“Bokuto.”

Moniwa looked up to the golden eyes in turmoil, wanting so much to have permission while wary of the rules that bound them.

“I swore an oath to my school.”

Bokuto started to pull away, but Moniwa gripped his hand around him, pulling him back.

“By dismissing your confession I would be breaking that oath. But even without it, I would still say what I’m about to say to you now. So don’t ask if I mean it, because I do.”

Bokuto looked to him, the light flickering between orange and yellow, hoping, yet not daring to hope.

“I’ll offer you my feelings in return for yours if you want them. I’ll give myself to you... if you want me.”

The light in Bokuto’s eyes began to glow.

And then fingers furled quiet and careful around his hand.

*   *   *   *   *   *
Two minutes ago

Moniwa’s chest still heaved as he lay on the bed staring at the ceiling, his mind and body spent.

There was no returning now.

A faint afterimage of Bokuto’s eyes remained in his vision, having stared into the orange intensifying to yellow, and then a yellow-white that was brighter than when he glanced up at the midday sun, but he couldn’t tear his eyes away – not until the last few moments where he desperately clung on, begging Bokuto to continue to the end.

Did he feel guilty?

A little. He had, in the end, lost the battle against temptation.

But Bokuto needed to satiate his desire for an emotional connection. And if that meant Moniwa had to become fuel, he would gladly sacrifice himself and everything he had built in an effort to keep Bokuto alive.

He came to realise the reason no one pulled apart a piece of their soul to breathe life into the animated metal. Very few people in this world could bear the responsibility required for such a sacred act. Even fewer could give themselves up completely for an inorganic object. That was the price in exchange for creating a masterpiece in the image of themselves.

He sat up on his elbows, breathing steadied and skin cooled – he shuddered – but still no sign of Bokuto who said he would return with warm water. Moniwa threw the blanket around his shoulders and pattered up to the door, opening it a fraction.

Bokuto sat slouched on the floor, his head hanging between his knees.

“What’s wrong—?”

Bokuto jumped, then jumped up in a crash that made Moniwa wince.

“Sorry, I was just going—”

“Are you regretting it?”

Bokuto stopped. His eyes wandered over Moniwa and then he looked away, hanging his head.

“How can I? You’re everything I want. But I thought you might—”

“I don’t.”

The shadow that seemed to cast around him didn’t lighten.

Moniwa came to stand beside him. “Are you worried about what might happen?”
The sound of whimpering whirrs echoed from inside.

“I have an idea, Bokuto. Why don’t we go and visit your creator?”

Bokuto raised his head. “What?”

“I’d like to meet the person who created you, so I can learn some of his trade and know more about you. I doubt anything as serious as what we experienced these past couple of days will happen, but I don’t want to be caught off guard. And you said so yourself, you told him you were going on an adventure and you would return. You won’t have much of one if you stayed here.”

“But your shop—”

“Aone can look after it. And Kamachi said a while ago Koganegawa was interested in learning about automatons, he can help him.”

“But what about food, money—”

“I have enough, and we both have skills we can sell. It’ll work out.” Moniwa put his hand on Bokuto’s arm, a gesture to reassure him even if he couldn’t feel it. “Do you know where he lives?”

“Not the exact location…” Bokuto’s eyes dimly flickered like he expected Moniwa to sigh from his inability to gather useful information; Moniwa gave him an encouraging smile. “I… remember mountains. The travellers who dropped in always wore thick cloaks.”

“Then we head north-west – we can even make a stop at Kamachi’s, he’s out that way. Explain to him what’s going on, he can probably help with provisions.”

The light in Bokuto’s eyes brightened a fraction, though it continued to flicker.

“Just one more time, Moniwa – are you sure?”

Moniwa ran his hand along Bokuto’s arm, toasty warm. “Between my graduation and you arriving two months ago, I spent every spare moment working on automatons. On repairing them, polishing them – dismantling them. But the one thing I have always wanted to learn was to create them. Because I knew there had to be more to your kind than producing them in succession for the market, selling them to people who have no care for anything except themselves. The automatons lack any soul because the people who make them have no soul. Maybe I don’t either—”

“You do!”

The smile came easy on Moniwa’s face. “You would say that. All right, let’s say I do – I don’t possess the power to change the world. And even if by some miracle I acquired such power, I still wouldn’t be able to change the world, I wouldn’t know where to begin. But I’m confident in the basic skills I possess and the skills I could potentially acquire to create something that would touch the heart of at least one person who roams lost. It’s far from a perfect solution, but it’s what I can currently offer.”

Moniwa paused, averted his gaze.

“But that’s still not the reason. These past two months you have been in my life as bright as the light you have coursing through you, and you lit up every corner darkened by my shutting out the
world. I wasn’t living, I was merely enduring and – what you gave me moments ago, I never thought I would feel anything remotely close so long as I lived. I want to be with you, and if that makes me a reprobate in everyone else’s eyes, so be it.”

Moniwa looked up to see a drop of glistening gold stream from Bokuto’s right eye. “Wait – are you – you can cry?!”

Bokuto made a loud noise like a gear was screeching against another, an imitation of a sniff. “Course I can... supposed to be human, aren’t I...”

Moniwa wiped the tears away with his thumb, realising too late what he was doing. But the liquid didn’t scald, just glowed on his fingers for a few seconds before cooling into a thin film of ash.

“I’ll say it again – you’re more human than any of the humans walking this earth. One day we’ll all remember what we were meant to be.”

“You already do.”

“Because you reminded me.” Moniwa began to slip his hand away. “We should get some rest so we can start planning tomorrow—”

Bokuto grasped his hand, clutching like his life depended upon it.

“I want to watch you again.”

Moniwa glanced up at the golden half-moons lighting up the dark, and smiled.

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