

A Conversation in an Alleyway

Darkness had draped a curtain over the sky, and all the world suffered for it. The endless blue was gone, the puffy clouds removed. Gone – for another day. But will that other day arrive? And, if it did, will it be the same?

Many would roll their eyes at such a notion. Many would chastise the very idea. Of course, it would arrive again. The sky isn't going anywhere! The clouds don't go on vacation! The Sun isn't a temporary position!

Yes, it may rain tomorrow. And the next day. And the next. Perhaps, it may rain for a month straight where the whole sky's endless beauty is foreclosed. But inevitably, the rain will stop. And everything will be back as it was.

The sky will return. Only patience is required.

So, Jox waited. Out there, in the middle of the night, he waited. Bitter winds swiped at his tattered clothes. The cold seeped into his skin – made easier by all the holes riddled in his rags.

Still, he waited. With a fierce look in his eyes, Jox challenged the night. And, to Jox, the night challenged him. As if to say; *Go home, fool. Do you imagine you can outlast me? Go home, you idiot.*

“No. I’ve already left it for the last time.” Jox smiled. It wasn’t a pleasant sight. Black gums and missing teeth. Jox reached into his pocket and took out a small key. He rubbed his blistered hand over it, admiring it. The memories.

Of misery. Of pleasure. Of what could’ve been. Of what now is.

Jox dropped the key onto the ground. He raised up his bare foot, blackened with soot, to stomp it. Before he changed his mind. Too much effort.

For his final few hours, it was too much effort. He rubbed his head. Felt the sharp jabs of bone. Only skin was left attached to him. No muscle, no fat. The rest of his body was like a stickman.

A stickman, huh? Miss Fianco used to hate that. Everyone else would try their best in her class, she said. They would draw beautiful animals, realistic people, detailed cities. All for her art class. But him? All he drew were stickmen.

‘I don’t care about art!’ He’d say. But Miss Fianco never took that rebuttal seriously.

‘You don’t even try, J.’ And then came her infamous sigh. So long, so exaggerated. ‘Why can’t you at least try?’

Even with his attitude, she’d always talk to him. Always smiled at him. She was the only teacher who ever smiled at him. All the other ones – well, they thought he was a mess. And he was. They expected him to screw up as soon as he walked in. And most times, he did.

Not Miss Fianco. The last day, he hugged her. And gave her a picture of a tiger he drew. He tried his best. But it wasn’t perfect. Far from it. It was a little messy, the ears weren’t there. There were way too many stripes.

It was a pretty stupid-looking tiger. But it didn't matter much. Because Miss Fianco loved it. She cried when she saw it. Tears of joy.

That was the first and last time Jox ever saw someone cry because they were happy.

Right now, decades removed, he felt like seeing her again. His vision started to get blurry. And his throat constricted. A few deep sighs followed. Not here, not now.

Silently, Jox reached into another pocket and took out a sketchbook. Real messy, pages stuck out from all different corners.

It was too painful to flip through it. Instead, Jox skipped to the last page. The only bare one.

A tiger. He'd draw a tiger. Until the night gave up its grip upon the world, he'd last until then. Until he saw the beautiful sky once more. He'd kill time by re-doing that stupid tiger. Maybe he'd bring it with him when he finally went.

Maybe. If they allow that sort of thing. Hopefully, they do.

Jox shook his tiny fist at the sky. And started limping towards a nearby alleyway.

Five steps from the alleyway, problems arose. The branch he used as a cane was starting to swing. Wildly. Jox looked down, eyebrows raised. Again, his arm betrayed him. Another sign of his impending doom, wasn't it? Jox didn't even bother to fight it. He let his arm spasm on its own. As if he were a parent watching their troubled child reach for the stove. A million warnings and they'd still reach for that stove.

Until it bit them back. And they'd start crying. But they'd learn, wouldn't they? They'd learn.

Unfortunately, Jox took a long time to learn anything. As a child, as a man. If it were him, he'd try to touch the stove a million times. Just to prove he can do it. Just to prove it didn't hurt. Even if it burned every single time. Even if no one asked him to. He'd do it.

Just to prove to himself he wasn't weak.

Suddenly, Jox's legs wobbled. He took one step. Then two. His arm stopped seizing. Yet, Jox was too exhausted to do anything with it. Four steps later and Jox collapsed. His chin cracked the pavement. Blood foamed from his mouth.

Ahead, the dark opening of the alleyway beckoned. Jox awkwardly wiggled towards it. His sketchbook in his left hand. The makeshift cane was left behind – he'd come get it in the morning. When he took one last look upon the sky.

The stench of garbage covered the whole alleyway. Suffocating but familiar. On the ground, worms, ants, and spiders whisked by.

Jox cracked open another devious smile. Imagine what those critters thought of him. Of how he wiggled ahead much like them. Would they know he was a human? Or would they assume he was a bug? A great giant of a bug – worthy of being king. Or their overlord. Though, maybe not. Perhaps, they could perceive it all.

The rough texture of the slimy cement floor. The pungent air. The slight tik-tik-tik in the background. So faint as to be almost imperceptible. And the human who crawled in the midst of it all.

That very human, Jox, willed himself to the back. And finally, reached it within the minute.

He expected nothing. His imagination, now, was lacking. All he could imagine was a mouse jumping on a garbage can. Or little raindrops falling steadily upon a glass. However, no mice were around. And it wasn't raining.

Instead, Jox was confronted with a huge hunk of metal. So massive that, even hunched up against the wall, it was three times the size of Jox. Its color was a regal violet. In some spots, the violet's radiance was still present. Coupled with the intricate ivy designs plastered all over – the robot looked important. Majestic. Profound.

Though, that feeling only existed in the spots that weren't fully corroded. Corrupted. In other parts, that perception failed. The paint was chipped. Rust had taken over some of the edges. An ugly orange-purple combo existed there. Wide cracks splayed all over. Each noticeable. Each impressive. Black liquid oozed underneath the robot.

It stank. Not like garbage, though. It was an intoxicating stench. Offensive and foreign.

Jox edged closer to the robot, panting. The sudden pressure in his chest wasn't due to his condition. His fragility. That, he could tell. No, it was a universal feeling. One every human shares in this world.

That overwhelming dread that appears in the midst of danger.

But when one's at death's door – how could they fear danger? How could they fear the inevitable at all? Jox, himself, was familiar with the end. So often, he spent hours drinking himself to unconsciousness. To practice for the end. For the sudden blankness. And utter deletion of one's existence.

Sometimes, Jox would have dreams. Of a vast and unexplored land that was full of treasures. One that he was given every right to explore. To relish. Because he had been good.

Other times, he would be met with fire and judgement. With pain and horror. With guilt and shame. Where he would relive his worst mistakes. Over and over.

Both times, he would arise troubled. Afraid. For that meant that it all carried over. That it all would bleed into a second life. That he couldn't wipe the slate clean. And so, those days he would remain in bed, soaked in sweat.

Eventually, the allure of those dreams faded. And a strange level of acceptance had overcome him. If there was anything beyond this, he would take it with both hands, and make the most of it. Do more than he could ever do on this plane. Perhaps, things would be different there. Perhaps, he could rise up. And make something of his second life. Perhaps.

And if he landed in a place where he was to be punished forever – so be it!

Let him be punished. A hundred faces came to him – all those he hurt in his life. Forgiveness was a long shot. Bridges were burnt to a crisp. Never to be recovered, never to be remade.

Even if he tried to rebuild those bridges – he wouldn't have any real substance to do it with. No tar, no glue, even. Nothing substantial.

Sonya, Jared, Annoxidine. Names uttered. Though, it had been so long since they had graced his presence. He had a picture of all three once. Yet, it burned in a fire. One that he orchestrated unknowingly.

And now, even their faces had begun to fade.

The sins of the father are permanent, aren't they? To damage oneself is nothing. Not even comparable to the damage one can inflict upon a loved one. Upon your own children.

If he were to be damned, let him. For losing the love of his children, he deserved it.

And so, the madman, Jox, abandoned all semblance of dread purposefully. The instinct of survival was useless to a man who didn't fear death. Nay, to a man who courted it purposefully. Who dared it to dread in his back garden. Only for him to confront it head-on. To die on his own terms.

Jox was inches away from the robot. A slight touch sent a chilling spasm through his arm. So fierce that it sent him reeling backward. On his backside, Jox sucked on his finger. A little bead of blood cascaded down.

"What in the world. What are you?" Jox spoke. Not expecting a response, he balled up his fists and readied himself to grasp the robot again.

Before Jox could do anything, though, a loud, groaning sound erupted from the heavy case of machinery. It pierced through the dull silence. So intensely, in fact, that Jox had to cover his ears. Then, the temperature shifted. Suddenly, the air grew warmer – the area humidified.

And a light, so bright, erupted from upwards. In the general vicinity of the robot's face. Right where two bulbous circles were. The eyes were alight. The window to the soul.

Why so bright? Weren't robots soulless machinations? What sudden spark is alighting that fire within?

In a booming voice, the robot, spoke. A single pitiful line.

"I do not know anymore." The words reverberated through the empty silence of the alleyway. All around, insects and mice scrambled away. In a hurry, they disappeared. Almost as if they never existed at all. In the blink of an eye, Jox was alone. Face to face with something otherworldly.

He'd heard of robots before. Of course, they existed in all of the noble's houses – taking the most undesirable jobs. The worst positions. Jox, too, often saw them work as garbage cleaners. Or as simple repairmen in some service fields.

Yet, they never spoke. And most of them were frail. Especially compared to the hulking behemoth in front of him.

“Who owns you?” Jox asked.

The robot shook its head side-to-side. Great shrills of iron erupted into the night. So fierce that Jox covered his ears.

“No one. I’ve lost that privilege.” The robot groaned out. Though, its voice was monotone – Jox found a hint of misery there. In the fact that it sat alone. Discarded. Forgotten.

“Ah, well – my name is Jox. Uh...what’s yours, if t may ask?” Jox asked.

“Name? BX-124. It’s my title – all I have left.” BX-124 raised one arm and placed it on a nearby dumpster. In one swift motion, he crushed it into smithereens. “Enough speaking, human. It is useless. You gain nothing from this conversation. Nor do I. So, let me rest. And rot in peace.”

Jox thought about it. But in his tired state, he wouldn’t be able to last another walk. Not until the Sun came back up again.

So, instead, he plopped down and took out his sketchbook. Within another pocket, he drew out a pencil. Misshapen and tiny, it did the job well.

Before he could draw, though, a sudden feeling arose in his chest. A bubbling that he hated. Despised. One that he fought with every breath. Yet, every second he delayed it, the feeling only grew stronger. Only increased exponentially. Until, finally, it released. In a great coughing fit.

So intense that knives punctured his chest. Fire expunged his throat and mouth. Helpless, he suffered. For suffering was all he could do. The fit lasted several minutes. By its end, blood and phlegm dripped from his mouth.

Jox gasped. He sucked in air as if he were running out. As if all of the air was running away, forever gone. Tears ran down his face.

“You’re dying?” BX-124 asked.

Too soon after his fit, Jox could only nod.

“As am I.” The robot responded. In its great, unfeeling voice.

Jox, heaving, collected his precious sketchbook. It had fallen on its side, open to a page that he wished to never see again. For it caused so much anxiety to wash over him.

A familial portrait – of him, his three children and his ex-wife. His youngest, Annoxidine. They were all stickmen. A relic from the past should stay in the past, no? Only when they’re brought to the future do they deal the most damage.

The poor, decrepit man withered even more. Cowered, even. At the sight of those stickmen, he felt accused. Guilty. Shameful. Beloved they were, treasured they are. But they belong to a young child who doesn’t exist anymore. Whose love for their father, once pure, had gone to dust.

The coughing fit, before, had torn at his chest. Had sundered his ability to breath. Had brought him that much closer to death’s door. Nearly.

But it was the drawing that punched a hole in his soul. That sent his brain into a maddening spiral. That sent his entire body into shock.

The rudimentary colors were so unnatural. So unique. Blue was the grass. Purple was the sky. Each family member was a different color – silver, red, green, gold, teal, and pink.

Quickly, Jox turned the page. To the very end. Breathing a shallow breath, he picked up the pencil and set to work.

He scribbled out a few shapes. To set the general outline of the tiger. Right as he drew a circle for the face, the robot's words came to him.

"You're dying as well?" Jox asked. Timidly, at that.

"Of course. Why else am I to be in this alleyway? I have outlived my usefulness, And this is where I belong. To fulfill the natural order of life." The robot, BX-124, was nonchalant. Or, perhaps, that was all it could ever be.

"Robots don't die, do they?"

"Not as humans do. There is no supposed afterlife. No greater purpose to be achieved. No finality that can be respected. Nothing. It all dies." BX-124 hung its head. Its light faded.

"Really? You look massive. You can speak. Your bodies do not rot out from within. No diseases placate you. No horrors of the flesh." Jox said.

"But I am done. The mission I was created for has ended in oblique failure. There is no way I can return."

"To your land? To your master?"

"To anything. Failure, even once, is too encompassing. If I cannot complete my objective, why exist? The logic behind it is simple. I must give up on existence. I must give up on life."

The declaration was spoken. Was written. BX-124 was ready now. It had gone through such a journey. After its initial failure, it had searched the worst place. The most inhospitable, or degrading, for a former royal guard to die. As just punishment.

And now, with this, it was ready. BX-124 felt its heating systems turn off. Its light began to dim. Nothing, yes. Truly nothing.

A massive rock struck BX-124. So fiercely that it rattled the robot. Jox stood, panting. He rubbed his dirty hands on his tattered pants. Then, he spat at the robot's feet.

"Pathetic." Jox said. "If I had your body, I wouldn't give up so easily. If I had as much strength as you, things would be different." His voice cracked twice.

"Pathetic? I'm confused. Are you not doing the same thing? Having outlived your usefulness, you're waiting to die."

"But I have no choice! Look at me!" Jox coughed again, Black phlegm splat on the ground. "My body's too banged up. I'm just a human. I'm not invincible like you."

"Invincible? I told you I have failed – what invincibility would lead me to failure?"

“So have you been dealt a mortal blow? Or lost one of your wires or whatever – the thing that’s closest to an organ for you?” Jox said.

“I lost my sword. I lost my position. And I lost my master after a careless act!” BX-124’s light flashed brighter than ever.

“Pah! Damn you to your nothingness then!” Jox yelled.

“Why are you so enraged, human? Don’t you want to die, too?”

“No!” Jox shouted. “But I will! Either I wallow in despair or I accept it!”

“Then you’ve accepted it. Why else enter this alleyway? Why else doodle in your pad? You are a sick man – are the hospitals closed?”

“I can’t afford it.” Jox admitted. “The medications they want me taking. The treatments, all of it. I can’t.”

Helpless, the sick Jox looked once more upon BX-124. Instantly, he regretted it. He felt like a mouse in the company of a giant. Because he was staring at a being who cheated the inevitable. Who cheated the final ending.

A robot who couldn’t die. Yet wished for that ending all the same. If he wanted it so badly, then he must not know. Must not know how painful death could be.

Everyday, his father would tell him – ‘it ain’t over till it’s over.’ All of your unfulfilled promises could be acted upon. Past relationships could be mended. Situations could be fixed. It was just a matter of time.

Death. Only that foreboding concept could close it all. Could put an end to any redemption.

“Why fight so hard, human? Don’t you believe in an afterlife? Isn’t there anything magical awaiting you?” BX-124 asked.

“Are you mocking me?” Jox responded.

“I am not. Mockery was not programmed into me.”

“Ah, But giving up was.”

“Now, are you mocking me?” The question was a genuine one. BX-124 had never been mocked before. Never been treated in such a disrespectful fashion by a human. At his peak, he was revered. Respected. Even feared.

Never taken for anything less than he was – a glorious Royal Guard of the Zinawi Sector.

BX-124 stared down at the figure of Jox. At the man’s bent, broken posture. At the way he attacked his skin with his nails. At the flurry of flakes that rained down from those attacks. Such a small figure – pity.

Pity for this human’s situation assailed him. For an adult male should not be writhing around as such. Even older ones such as him. There was a natural order to humanity, wasn’t there? One he always admired from the outside looking in.

How sweet was the concept of family? Of love? Of chaos? Of hope? Of fear?

Such human elements admired from afar. For as close as BX-124 came, he could never reach such foreign ideas.

The only time he felt he did was when he failed his mission. His objective and purpose. Only then – he believed he felt one-tenth of humanity's curse.

For exile was dishonorable. And all future was lost to him.

But he did not weep. Nor grieve. Nor beg. Humiliation was foreign to him. All he did was leave. That and accept his uselessness.

There was no fight in him left. It was a science. A science as simple and direct as the code that ran through him.

But this human – a great struggle was born in him. Jox, was his name? A family, then? So frail and yet he seeks to rage against the natural order.

Impressive. Illogical.

Jox, in turn, scratched his head for the umpteenth time. His agitation softened. Until it was no more. Another rock was on the ground beside him. He stepped over it mindlessly. And collapsed onto the ground.

Facing the darkened sky, he choked out a simple line.

"I did mock you. I'm sorry."

"Why do you apologize?"

"Are robots always so curious?"

"Of course. I'm gathering data."

"Well, that makes sense." Jox sighed. Briefly, nothing assailed his body. No pain beyond the usual uneasiness. He was grateful for that. "I always manage to piss someone off. In my last moments, I don't want to do it again."

"In that case, then, I accept your apology. Though I was never angered by your words. Such an emotion has been stripped from me."

"Liar."

Silence followed. BX-124 and Jox remained in their places. Together yet apart.

For Jox, the sensation was comforting. Even if it wasn't a human – something was there. Another presence. It hurt so hard to be alone.

"is it true? Can you live forever if you chose?"

"If I chose, yes. But what sort of life would that be?" BX-124 responded.

"Anything you could imagine."

"I cannot think so far, Jox. I cannot imagine or dream." At that, Jox raised his head to stare at BX-124.

"I guess a robot wouldn't need an imagination."

"There's no reason we would."

"No logic, right?"

"Correct."

"I change my mind. I don't want to be a robot anymore. That sounds like a miserable experience." Jox coughed again.

Another lapse of silence followed. Wherein, Jox grabbed his sketchbook and started to draw his tiger again. More details were added. Such as the tail.

"What's it like?"

"To draw or to imagine?"

"To be human."

Jox whistled as he set the pad down.

"Once, when I was young, I did the impossible. I convinced the woman of my dreams to go out on a date. Now, I wanted this date to be perfect. So, I saved up as much money as I could. For weeks, I picked up extra shifts at the factory. Even got a second job picking up garbage off the street. I was a mess – sleep deprived. Exhausted."

Jox smiled as he looked over at BX-124. "But I got everything. A beautiful bouquet of flowers, a reservation at the fanciest restaurant in the city. Even jewelry! A nice little silver necklace."

"How was the date?" BX-124 asked.

"She never showed." Jox said. "I stood outside the restaurant for five hours straight. With the bouquet of roses in one hand. And the necklace in the other. Three hours in, it started raining. Hard. By the fifth hour, I was humiliated enough. I threw the roses in the trash. Saved the necklace, though. I was going to return it the next day."

"Being a human is terrible, then?"

"I'm not finished." Jox clicked his teeth together. "No, right when I was about to go home – someone tapped my shoulder incessantly. She was the hostess. The restaurant was about to close, you see. She wanted to know if I was going inside. Or if I was going to continue standing out here."

"Ah, so humans are compassionate."

"Some are. Some aren't. Honestly, I think she thought I was crazy. And maybe I was. But either way, she convinced me to go inside. Even gave me a towel to dry myself off." Jox clenched his jaw. "There were no people in the restaurant by this point. It was close to closing. I ordered only an appetizer. And ate it alone."

“Loneliness affects your species?”

“More than you’ll ever know. But no, I’m still not finished.” Jox breathed in. Why was he so ready to divulge it all. Maybe it was fate. A dying man’s last chance at nostalgia.

“I took out the necklace I bought. Examined it, obsessed over it. Until a woman came to ask about it. She told me it was the ugliest necklace she’d ever seen.” Jox laughed. A rattle that sent his entire body into motion. “Turns out it was the hostess. Said if she ever received it as a gift she’d return it the very next day.”

“So humans are-“

“Enough man!” Jox chuckled. “Are robots always this impatient?”

“I only seek to find the meaning behind your story.”

“The meaning will come. Just let it find you first.” Jox replied. “Now, where was I? Ah, right. The lady and I went back and forth. Me defending my choices and her rejecting it. No one else was in the restaurant by then. Eventually, the conversation went from the necklace to what I do for a living to a few silly stories I had about work to her stories about work to us laughing. At the silliness of it all. At nothing and everything. Not once did she pity me. Even after seeing me stand in the rain for so long. That was refreshing.”

“I don’t understand. Is being human great? Terrible? Complicated?”

“All of the above. And neither.”

BX-124 nearly short-circuited. The message was clear – humans were odd. Suddenly, Jox started to cry. Almost against his will – tears fell down his face. Sadness overcame him.

“Is the story over, Jox?”

“Yes.”

“Liar.”

Jox picked his head up. Only to be met with the cold metallic aura of BX-124.

“Where’s the ending to the story?”

“It’s over.”

“You are crying. It is for a reason, isn’t it?” BX-124 shifted its weight closer. A whole cacophony of sounds came together. “What happened to the hostess?”

“Only a robot would ask that question, BX-124. Only a being without a heart.” Jox struggled to get the words out. “I married her. And she gave me three beautiful children.”

Jox fought hard against the mental turmoil he faced. But it was a losing battle. For he wept. As silently as he could. BX-124, to its credit, asked no more questions. It neither moved nor examined Jox.

Minutes passed. An hour. Until Jox had no more tears left. Raindrops petered down, covering the ground. Now, it was the sky’s turn to weep.

“I apologize.” BX-124 said. The robot edged closer to Jox, outstretching its body to provide a roof over the sick man. To cover him from the incessant rain. BX-124 knew it would cause more rust. All in all, it was purely illogical.

Water is good for humans. For robots, it was something to avoid. But in this moment, BX-124 let the rain batter him. For the sake of poor Jox.

“Do you want to know what it is like to be a robot?” BX-124 offered. The exchange of information would be crucial. Would be sublime.

Jox, unable to speak, only nodded his head. He clutched the drawing pad to his chest. To BX-124, he looked like a child. So small, so helpless.

“It is routine. An analytical, perfectly organized routine. Nothing more, nothing less.” BX-124 lowered its head. “No magic is attributed to our existence. No stories are kept close to our chests.”

“You spoke of failing, though. Isn’t that a story?” Jox said. His voice was a raspy whisper.

“No. It is a reminder. A factoid that is as steady as any fact about the natural world. Mountains are tall. Oceans are deep. I have failed my mission in protecting Chancellor Illya.” BX-124 paused. Never before had it said its name.

A strong sensation tackled the machine. A sense of foreboding enmity. Of disgust. To itself and to all else.

Slowly, it lowered its head. As if to beg for forgiveness. Which it did. As if to ask for a second chance. Which it did. A long time ago.

“Who invented you?” Jox asked, mystified.

“Professor Gyles Foutain. A genius.” BX-124 said.

“Can you experience any emotions? Any goals beyond your main objective? Do you have anything in that iron body of yours? Anything but that failure?”

“No. There’s nothing.” BX-124 said. “Why would we need that?”

“Do you have any friends?” Jox asked. As he did, he continued with his tiger drawing. He was almost done. A few more stripes. Some whiskers. Fangs.

“No. Why would I need those?” BX-124 responded. In a flash, he coded a million different reasons as to why he might need a friend. For loyalty, perhaps? For help? But as he was fundamentally designed, he, nay, it didn’t need friendships.

Whatever task was given to it was done. If it needed to work in a group – he would. If not, he didn’t. He knew other robots but there was no familial bond.

Even his late master – the relationship never blossomed into anything more than professional. More than a servant-master duo. So, why, in the world, would he need a friend?

“I pity you, BX-124.” Jox said. In a choked-up voice and misty eyes, he ripped out the drawing of the tiger. And used every ounce of strength in his body to get up.

His legs wobbling, and his jaw swinging side-to-side, Jox reached the main body of BX-124. Then, he did something that BX-124 never imagined would happen. In a million years, he could've never planned for this situation. Could've never expected it.

Jox gave BX-124 the drawing. With a smile, Jox nodded. BX-124 moved his arm. A motion so rare. Why move if it wasn't to swing a sword? Why?

But move he did. And he took hold of the drawing as if it were a delicate treasure.

"What is this?" BX-124 asked.

"A gift, friend. In life, I was a famous artist. Ah, infamous – that's the better term." Jox chuckled. "Well, I don't have the will to make anymore past this one. And I'd much rather you get it."

"Why?" BX-124 asked.

"Because I loved our conversation. It was good talking after all, wasn't it?"

"Thank you." BX-124 said. "Friend."

Jox bowed, lifting his pinky to the sky. His signature pose after every completed drawing. BX-124, meanwhile, stood up. For the first time since he settled into the alleyway, he stood up to his fullest height.

And, oh, he towered over Jox. Who, in response, smiled up at the mechanical man. No trace of fear.

BX-124 saluted his friend, Jox. The only friend that he'd ever made. Out here in his supposed death landing. Within the slums of Ports' Fiend – the poorest district in the nation.

Out here – he found something he never wanted to forget. So quickly, his memory was updated. A portion of his storage was cut away. Chalked up and rebranded. It was solely re-constructed to preserve the image of Jox. The image of the sick artist who smiled up at him. Whose tiger drawing was in his hand.

"What can I do?" BX-124 said.

"Anything you want." Jox spread his arms out. "Live. For the both of us. Do what I can't."

"Is it certain that you will die?" BX-124 asked.

"The doctors said three months." Jox sighed. He looked up at the sky, clutching the pad to his chest once more. A few clicks of his tongue later, he finally responded. "Tomorrow's going to mark three months."

"They may be wrong."

"They may. But they rarely are." Jox swallowed. His shoulders slumped – he still managed to give BX-124 a meek smile. "That is why you must go out. Do whatever interests you. Say no to nothing. Live – for the both of us."

“There are many places that robots aren’t allowed. Especially of my kind. I will be tracked down and eliminated.” BX-124 responded. The fact needed to be voiced.

“Why haven’t you been yet?”

“Because they believe me gone. Eliminated. Out of the picture for good. Thus, I am no longer a threat. However, if they spot me traveling – they may believe I have another purpose.”

“Wait, I thought you said that robots couldn’t feel fear.” Jox rose an eyebrow. A slight grin played on his lips. “Are you afraid?”

BX-124 could have answered. Immediately. *No. Robots don’t feel fear.* It would have been the perfect response. Logical. Based on prior information. However, a strange sensation entered the robot’s mind.

If it were captured and brought before a Royal Council – it would be erased. All of its past information cycles. Everything will be unlearned. A blank slate. And he would be relegated to menial jobs. Or, at worst incinerated completely.

Before, that fate hadn’t sounded so terrible. The only thing that prevented him from following it was his temerity. His unwillingness to expose himself again. Exile was exile. Plus, no precious strings of code were attached to its being. Nothing substantial. Until now. BX-124 didn’t want to lose the image of Jox. His first real teacher of humanity.

And, of course, he wanted to keep the tiger drawing. A sign of peace. Of future optimism. Of humanity. An admirable gift. A beacon.

“Yes. I am afraid.” BX-124 slowly started walking. A step forward. Then another. “But I shall leave anyway.”

Loud booms escaped whenever its foot hit the ground. Jox lost his balance – so intense were the vibrations. It shook the entire alleyway.

As it neared the exit, BX-124 turned around. In the darkest corner, resided Jox. Still sick. Pale skin. Entire body drenched in sweat. Humongous eye bags. He looked as if he were a remnant of death.

As if he were embroiled in shadows. And, to Jox, that description was the truth. He knew he may never leave the alleyway. Never get a second chance at life.

So, down his head went. As if ushering the robot away – in an incredibly silent manner. Because, if he spoke, he would beg to be taken away. To be cured. To be whisked away into a bright future full of misadventures.

Is that hope still there? Can the universe be a little bit fair? It doesn’t make any sense? But can the rules of reality bend? Just this once. Just this once, can reality be shifted a certain way.

So he could live to see the Sun arise once more.

Several moments passed in absolute silence. Only the scattering of insects and the slight drizzle of rain interrupted it. But those were slight interruptions – only adding to the silence invoked. Only magnifying it.

Timidly, Jox raised up his head. His heart nearly gave out as BX-124 still stood there. Awaiting.

“What are you doing!” Jox said. He flapped his hands around. “Leave, friend! Go! Live that journey!”

“I refuse to leave you behind.”

“Why? I’m going to die anyway. Better that it be one and not both.” Jox clutched his chest. A sudden wave of pain seized him. It has begun. The end.

“Leaving behind a friend? That seems illogical.” BX-124 stepped forward. Until it was directly above Jox. With its massive arms, it picked Jox up.

Feebly, Jox slapped at the robot’s arm with one hand. With the other, he grasped onto the drawing pad.

Similarly, BX-124 grabbed the tiger drawing with its hand. Gently, it opened its chest cavity meant for storage. It placed the drawing inside then shut it. Jox stared, bewildered.

“I’m dying.” Jox said. As if to confirm it to himself. To the world.

“Have you learned nothing?” BX-124 walked out of the alleyway. Into the coolness of the night. Into its impenetrable darkness. Out on the curb, BX-124 placed Jox. The two sat side-by-side, awaiting the sunrise. “Your incoming death is irrelevant. For now, you still breath.”

Jox bit back any retort. Suddenly, his body grew even more fatigued. A slight shiver took over his body.

Hours passed as the pair sat. Immobile. All the while, Jox replayed the doctors’ declaration. Their ironclad verdict – he had three months left. Today marked that milestone. Anything over that would be a miracle. A sign.

A prayer – he could pray, no? But as he clasped his hands together, he realized he forgot the words. And he was too afraid to try without them. For wouldn’t a God be angry if he received a half-full prayer? Especially from someone they were bound to meet soon?

Jox didn’t want to take that risk. And so, he let his hands fall. And rested his weight upon BX-124’s body. So cold, so massive.

BX-124 turned its head down to Jox. The man was still awake. Shouldn’t humans sleep? But ah, he was beginning to understand now. This is what they call fear, no? Fear or anticipation? Either way, the robot kept watch. Hopeful that the Sun would appear soon. So, his companion could brave its presence. Could dally in its rays. Feel the warmth on its body. As a robot never could.

At 5 a.m., the darkness started to part. Rays of light started to break through. As if it were escaping. Breaking away.

Jox stood up, excitedly. Yet his legs gave way, and he clunked his chin on the pavement. A mad anxiety spread through him. His legs – they were numb! Dead! In a desperate attempt to spot the sky, he tried to turn over. Like a turtle turned upon its shell, he could only sway

side-to-side. A great pain sparked in his lower right side. Which only hindered his movement even more.

It was unfair! Unquestionably evil! Jox was ready to tear the ground open with his teeth. Ready to break his skull upon the pavement.

That was, until he felt an iron grip around his torso. And he started to fly. So childlike, so free. As graceful as any dove. As fierce as any eagle. He flew briefly as BX-124 picked him up and placed him on his shoulders.

And he witnessed it all. The gorgeous Sun – the unquenchable fire of the Universe. So glorious, so breathtaking. And it was enough to make Jox understand. That it was all worth it. Every tribulation, every regret – it all came forward at once. As if it were a giant tidal wave that crashed into the side of his brain.

And he could've wailed even more. He could've cried out again. And again. He could've gnashed his teeth and spat at the air. He could've cursed every God in the world. All of the ones that he knew. And even the ones he didn't but knew were worshipped somewhere by an unknown population.

He could've hated the life he lived.

Perhaps, he would've. After all, wasn't that the general feeling for the last couple weeks of his life? Yet, in the face of such beauty, where the light bathed Jox in its gentle warmth, he could feel no more hatred.

No more sorrow. No more anxiety.

He started the night on the lowest totem pole. Kneeling in the midst of the darkness. Crawling amongst the insects that have never known sentience. True sentience.

He believed he would never see that precious Sun again. The first object of his affection. The one that he refused to draw. Because, at best, all he could ever do was conjure up a cheap imitation of it.

Now, on the shoulders of a giant, he saw unlike ever before. And that giant, oh! He'd made friends with him. Him! Because he was no longer a simple tool of destruction. At least, Jox hoped. That hope was so powerful – so grave – that it became a wish. That Jox would remain alive in his friend's memory. And make that robot, BX-124, at least a little bit more human.

His final act. Making a friend. Who'd ever believe that? From Jox the prideful narcissist?

"Thank you," Jox whispered. Suddenly, a new thought sprung into his mind. "Ah, what do I call you now? Do you want a new name?"

"Yes. I am not BX-124 anymore. Nor do I ever wish to be." Was the robot's immediate response. Loud and declarative.

"And what shall I call you?" Jox waited. And waited.

Meanwhile, the sky took on a natural light blue. So heavenly and pure. As if it a nice lake were about to open above them. The clouds, puffy and fat, were closer than ever before. At the center of it all, the Sun cloaked it all in its ethereal fire.

The image was so close. So real. That Jox reached out his hand towards it. As if he could grab a piece of it. Just a tiny piece to take with him to his next life. Whatever that will look like.

“May I request permission?” The robot rumbled.

“Permission for what? You’re your own man.”

“But I am not a man.”

“Pah! Enough of that thinking. You’re close enough. A lot closer than some humans I know.”

“Well, I would still like your blessing.” The robot continued. “Because I would like to be named Jox.”

At that, Jox laughed harder than he’d ever had in his life. So hard that his lungs nearly collapsed. Jox, the robot, had to hold onto the man’s knees to keep him from falling off.

“You will be judged for that name, friend. By people whom you’ve never met.” Jox wiped a tear away from his eye. “But if you insist, I will be happy to pass it on. Courtney never let me give it to any of my children. So, thank you for another gift.”

“I am named Jox.” The robot declared. Finally, he had an identity. Something to cling to.

“Ah, if only they could see this...” Jox whispered. “Well, in their own way, maybe they are.”

The pair continued on in silence. Watching, appreciating. Hovering in this one moment for ages. For eternity.

Until eternity came to an end. By then, the sunrise was over. The perfect sky sat above. Jox, on the other hand, slumped to the side.

“Friend?” The robot asked. Two times, he shook him with his powerful arms. The man, in response, only slumped further. He breathed no longer. His voice – gone. So cruel, wasn’t it? To find someone only to lose them. And now, trapped in the afterlife, Jox could never find his counterpart. Because he existed beyond a dimension that will forever be foreign to him. Alien to his kind.

Robots don’t have an afterlife, do they? Perhaps not. Yet, Jox made it his mission to treat this second chance as an afterlife of sorts. A new light shone upon him as well.

Gently, he carried Jox’s corpse to a nearby forest. As a mother would carry their newborn baby. Jox made sure to grab his friend’s sketchpad as well.

Within the forest, he found a patch of land suitable to him. He laid Jox on the nearby flora. Then, he dug. And dug. Then dug some more. Until there was a six-foot hole in the ground. Jox took his friend’s corpse and laid it within. He placed his sketchbook upon his friend’s chest.

Jox turned away, refusing to look at his friend’s face. Within minutes, the hole was full of dirt once again.

At the foot of Jox's unmarked grave, another Jox saluted. Not to a regime. Or to a chancellor. Or to a master.

But to his only friend.

After, Jox looked around, unsure. What to do next?

He tried to do as a human would. So, he picked a direction – west – and walked. Not knowing where he was going. Who he would meet or what he would do.

But walking nonetheless. To a vast unknown.

For the first time ever, Jox embraced his freedom. And, as he did, he touched his chest – where that special little tiger remained.

A treasure that Jox would die to protect. Proof of his heart. Of his life.