

Chernobyl Road

*A short story by Sylvie Denis
Edited by Amylia Ryan*

The robot observed the tigers every morning at dawn.

There was nothing strange or mysterious about this, for although its owners had set it to perform very simple tasks, the robot had been endowed with high intelligence and vast memory banks.

From unfathomable depths, it could fish out images of other species of cats large and small and compare them to the living bodies of the Siberian ones it saw every day. The robot owned a collection of pet photos: men's companions were comfortably sitting on cushions and armchairs, apparently silent and idle in the middle of huge, busy megacities.

It also collected and compared pictures of machines: high-speed trains, motorbikes, tanks, excavators; supple and silent monsters, embodiments of the powers of the earth.

The robot was a powerful machine that, for the whole extent of its short life, had lived alone in one of the planet's coldest, most desolate areas. As a result, it had formed its own peculiar opinion of what beauty was.

— Daddy, there's something over there, near the trees!

Hans already knew that a team of maintenance robots was making its way in their direction, but he had chosen to make it a surprise for his son. Although his NGPS, which supplied him with maps and itineraries, had immediately transmitted their identities and radio frequencies to the machines, he hadn't gotten in touch with them.

He found it deeply annoying to meet such intelligent, almost human beings—insofar as they had been given rather good imitations of functional human brains; he certainly wasn't going to go and talk to them.

— Robots!

Thibault was twelve, brown-haired, and swift as a cat. He loved machines. He clambered onto his seat—there were two in the SnowHome™'s narrow cabin—but the boy seldom used his for more than a couple of minutes. With a few deft key strokes, he opened a window on the left side of the front screen. It displayed a close-up of the robots.

The smaller ones were nothing special: maintenance drones in charge of the buried oil and gas pipelines that ran through the earth, burrowing through state after state till they reached the other end of the continent.

Like many of their kind, the smaller robots seemed to be descended from a long line of crabs and crayfish. Their jointed shells gleamed in the morning's crystalline light. From afar, however, they looked like numerous bubbles of mercury that had extruded silvery legs and antennae.

The “team head,” the one that received the orders sent by the oil company through a satellite link, looked undeniably more impressive than the others: its hemispheric, caterpillar-propelled body was at least as big as the SnowHome™'s. It undoubtedly possessed manipulator arms, but none were visible at the moment. It was just a black figure on the snow field, and it looked very much like a tank, especially as it squatted upon a small mound of snow from which it seemed at once to watch over the other machines' work and their own vehicle's advance in a vaguely deliberate and hostile manner.

An intelligent, autonomous tank. Hans knew the idea had come to him from the newscasts he had seen on a news channel. Robots working at the bottom of the ocean near the

Comoro Islands for a scientific expedition had refused to hand over their samples. They considered themselves as intelligent as the scientists and argued that it was immoral to implant them with programs that made them endanger their bodies without allowing them to resist the men's orders.

Hans wondered what the machine that seemed to be waiting for them at the top of a snow hillock might think about the demands of its tropical brothers.

Then the SnowHome™ chimed in: they had a call. An icon showing the pipeline robot flowered on the screen.

— This is SN 11 345 WW. You can see me on your control screens. I lead a maintenance team for Olrene Lmtd. Can you identify yourselves?

— Hans Horsin and his son, Thibault. We're on our way to Vladivostok.

— Did your company send you?

— No. This is a private trip. For private motives.

A human being would have raised questioning eyebrows. Before leaving Strasbourg, Hans had been told that some robots designed all sorts of icons: some were abstract, others figurative. It was said that they used them to express their emotions. But this robot's icon was totally still, its voice uninflected. It didn't betray any of the feelings it was surely programmed to experience.

— We would like to see tigers, Hans added to seem polite. I have been told that there are some in this area.

— Yes, there are. You'll see them, if you are patient enough.

Hans hadn't been expecting such an answer.

— Are you sure?

They had left four months ago. They had travelled hundreds of kilometers. Since they had entered the Siberian forest, the satellites had spotted the presence of the animals several times. Yet Hans and Thibault had never seen them.

— I watch them every morning, the robot added amiably.

On his seat, Thibault was fidgeting.

— Let's stay, he whispered.

— Here?

— Why not? It says there are tigers.

Hans suspected that it was the robot and its team his son was interested in.

— We are not in a hurry, he told the robot. Do you mind us staying here for a few days? If we're not in your way, of course...

— No, I don't mind. I'll send you a map of the local subsoil and another of our itinerary during the next few days. I don't see why you should hinder us in our work.

Another window opened on the screen. The maps were being sent to the SnowHome™.

Hans had lied. He had no time left. But he had patience. He would wait for the tigers for as long as it would take to see them.

— Daddy? Shall I make us something to eat?

Thibault had just gotten into the SnowHome™. He took off his jacket and stomped his feet on the self-heating doormat to make the packed snow fall from his boots.

Hans had gone out early in the afternoon. He had donned the exoskeleton, put on snowshoes, and tried to make a few steps around their vehicle. His ankle, knee, and hip joints had hurt so much that he had been forced to go back inside immediately.

He swiveled his chair and saw in his son's eyes that his physical appearance was a precise reflection of the exhaustion he felt. The illness worked its way in sudden, jolting steps: up to now, no crisis had been serious enough to get the better of him, but each one had left him slightly weaker.

He knew there was no other way things could be, and all he asked for was to arrive in Vladivostok alive and to die there in the conditions and circumstances he had chosen.

— If you want to, he said, answering Thibault's question.

He almost added that he wasn't very hungry, but stopped himself in time. Why make the boy worry needlessly? Thibault knew that Holbeck's disease was incurable, he knew that his father had embarked on this trip to prove that one could die without being plugged into a Total Reality System, without having one's brain drowned in a flow of morphine analogs while solicitous AIs fed you with the best—and the last—of the brave new artificial worlds.

In the meantime, the virus that made his bone cells grow haphazardly had decided to resist the Scribes he had been injected with before their departure. He knew that, at the end of the trip, the virus—a more sophisticated and cunning creature than the human-made nanotools—would defeat them. He would die. His lung punctured by his own ribcage while his deformed skeleton would unfurl and turn him into a tree of calcium, a monster even more frightening to other human beings than John Merrick, the elephant man of the nineteenth century, had been.

— We still haven't seen the tigers, Thibault said.

They had gotten up early, they had walked—mainly, Thibault had walked—as silently as they could. They hadn't found anything, not even the track left by a large, furry cat paw.

— Did the robot lie?

— I don't know. I don't see why he would.

He observed the massive black figure that stood out in the middle of the pristine snow field. What did he know of the thoughts that were born within this brute's unwieldy frame? Nothing, nothing at all, he thought, and a stupid shiver of irrational fear shook his whole frail body.

A few days went by. Every afternoon, at the hottest moment of the day, Hans would try to take a walk. It never lasted more than half an hour, sometimes less.

Thibault would put on his skis or snowshoes as soon as he could and go in the woods on his own. He would carry a video camera with which he would transmit pictures of his walks to his father.

In the evening, as they ate, they would talk about the walk as if they had been outside together. Then Hans would lie on the couch to read. As for Thibault, he would requisition the only table for his model making. Sometimes the television set was on, but they both turned their backs to it: it was just a big pet insect whose benign buzzing had no function but to exist.

— Why do you like models so much? Hans asked one evening.

It was something he had never done as a child. His only hobby, since they had left Strasbourg, consisted of improving the SnowHome™'s systems. He was rather proud of what he had done with the Chameleon that had prevented police forces from spotting them through the various States they had crossed. Hans had always admired his son's patient and meticulous work, but he had never told him.

— Why make miniature copies of things that already exist?

Thibault had undertaken the building of a diorama of a Martian scientific base. The station didn't exist. No human being had been in space since more than twenty years before his father's birth. To research his setting, Thibault had had to use photos made by robots.

He was busy painting a piece of Styrofoam a reddish, rather Martian-looking color. He wasn't actually sticking his tongue out, but he was so deeply engrossed in his work that he looked like he was doing it.

— I don't know, he said. It's like reading. You're somewhere else. In another world. A world that belongs to you.

— Do you mean that you would like to go to Mars?

Hans knew that travelling to the red planet was his son's favorite pipe dream. He also knew that he would give it up one day, like all the kids who, as they grew up, understood that the world around them had renounced such childish yearnings.

— Of course! If robots went there, we can go too!

— So this is a propitiatory ritual, then.

— A *what* ritual?

— It means “intending to propitiate.”

— Propitiate?

— It means “to win the favor of somebody who is angry or unfriendly.” Like when you sacrifice a victim so that the gods will be good to you.

Thibault, holding a paint soaked sponge, thought hard.

— You mean that if there was a God of Interstellar Travel, we should burn rocket models on its altar so that he would make people send manned missions to space?

As Thibault was saying this, he looked at the various rockets, shuttles, and drones he had built since they had left Strasbourg. He shook his head.

— No, he said in a most earnest tone. I don't think it would work.

Although it lived and worked in the heart of the Siberian forest, the robot wasn't totally isolated from its kind. It had its coworkers—but it had to admit that their limited cognitive capabilities didn't make for very enriching conversation. Fortunately, the satellite link allowed it to know what was being thought and said inside the community of thinking machines.

The revolution was on its way.

A figure appeared inside the robot's camera range. It interrupted its dialogue with its brothers from the other side of the world and examined the disturbance.

— Hi. My name is Thibault. You told us your name when we arrived, but I forgot it.

— SN 11 345 WW, SN 11 345 WW said.

The disturbance was the little boy whose father drove a SnowHome™ and wanted to see tigers. He stood right in front of the robot and craned his neck so as to look straight into one of its cameras.

— You said there were tigers in the area. But we haven't seen any.

— I know. They don't dare come since you've settled here.

The robot had never met a child in the course of its whole existence. It didn't know they shouldn't always be told the truth.

After a few silent seconds, Thibault lifted his head and asked:

— Aren't they afraid of you?

— I don't think so. Robots don't smell. Well, they don't smell the same way human beings do.

As it was saying this, the robot had the impression that the boy's nose was quivering in the icy air, searching for an invisible trail. Of course he didn't detect anything. He didn't budge either, so after a while, the machine found itself rather embarrassed and felt compelled to add:

— It's only a matter of patience. They'll get used to it, eventually.

— How long will it take? Thibault asked.

Accusingly.

— I don't know.

— My father is dying, so that wasn't very nice of you to tell him that there are tigers if you suspected he wouldn't see any.

— Dying? Why?

The boy's face underwent a complete change. This time, the robot found it more difficult to read: milliseconds went by as its memory compared Thibault's face with photographs of other human faces and concluded that this eyebrow frowning denoted both surprise and disappointment.

— What do you mean, why? You saw what he looks like!

It had indeed noticed that bone protuberances deformed the man's skull and that he was unable to walk without the help of an exoskeleton. But as its memory didn't hold any medical information, it had drawn no conclusion from it.

— He has Holbeck's disease. When we left, the doctors told him he had only six months to live. I wonder if he'll last that long.

Between the moment when Thibault had started his sentence and the moment when he had finished it, the robot had consulted a database and learned all that there was to learn about Holbeck's disease.

— Why did you come here? It's no place for a sick man.

The kid laughed.

— That's what the medics told him. But all they were able to suggest was to stuff him with painkillers, then plug him into a Synthetic Reality. He's not interested. He's made fake voyages all his life. As a result, he's never been outside his arcology. Never seen Siberia, nor tigers, nor any of the people he talked to about them on the Net. It stinks.

— I see, the robot said.

Its mind had been grown in a lab and its body had been assembled in a factory. A helicopter had transported it directly to its workplace: the forest and the animals, the snow and its workmates were all it had known during its rather short life. But its friends from the other side of the world had told it about towns where people lived crammed in arcologies built by transnational companies in order to escape pollution and poverty. There, when they didn't work, they spent most of their time living imaginary lives in artificially constructed universes.

— I didn't know that the tigers were so important to you. But I didn't lie: there are some in the area, I've seen them. They don't come near the area at the moment, but it's not your fault, nor mine.

— All right, I believe you, the boy said.

Thibault remained silent, as if he expected the robot to add something. SN 11 345 WW had nothing else to say. It was just thinking that it had stored thousands of photographs of the tigers, and that it could edit them and send the result to the SnowHome™. The humans would never notice anything, and the kid's father would believe that the robot had seen them.

Hans was in pain.

In spite of the Closefit™ mattress, whose clinging, gel-filled envelope was supposed to relieve his deformed joints, in spite of two or three different types of painkillers, which were released all day round by a series of patches stuck to various parts of his hideous body, in spite of the NanoScribes, which were supposed to convert the virus into innocent and healthy cells and prevent it from harming him.

He was lying in the dark, watching the contours of the cabin, the LED signals on the multimedia unit, and, in front of him, under the window, his son's figure. Was he asleep? It looked as though he was, but he might as well be pretending; it wouldn't be the first time.

No day passed without him wondering whether he had made the right decision when he had asked Thibault to come. At first, his sister had tried to make him change his mind and stay. Then, when she realized that he wouldn't, she had tried to convince him not to take his son. Thibault himself had never expressed any desire to let his father go alone, nor since the beginning of the trip had he shown any regret for having left his aunt, his model collection, and his friends behind.

Was this reason enough to inflict on him the more and more pathetic sight of his illness?

For some time, about a month now, the medicines had no longer been able to prevent the bone growths from developing: his skull looked like an old, battered saucepan on which grew the antlers of a young deer. His hands were as crooked as mangrove aerial roots. His vertebrae were trying to grow out of his back like crocus shoots. He was incapable of walking without his exoskeleton. And the pain, the burning, ceaseless ache that lashed at his whole body, never let go.

There were moments when he felt that his pain-shrouded mind was giving up. His intelligence surrendered, pain anesthetized his senses and gave him a mutilated image of a universe that was trimmed down to the barest sensations. None of the things that made life worth living could cross this impenetrable barrier: neither taste, nor smell, nor touch, much less language, conversation, art. During those moments, he was aware of nothing except of that perception that annihilated all others: pain.

And he knew that it would stop only with death, the abolition of consciousness. The end.

Of course, he could sometimes reach a kind of peace. Maybe he hadn't had the most exemplary life: a wife he had been stupid enough to deceive and who had left him; another woman whom he had met in a Place where people talked about big and small cats, but whom he had never met; a son he was proud of; and then this disease and the decision he had made to do what he had always dreamt of: to see Siberian tigers where they could still be seen, and to die in Japan. It was a banal life, but all in all, there were few things in it that he was really ashamed of. Except one, which he shared with all the men of his generation: the fact that he had made do with what he had, that he had lived a life that was not completely mediocre, but that had nothing great.

One of the most debated questions among the machines in the virtual Places that the humans didn't know about was: Why did they create us? The optimistic—consolatory—answer was: Because they need us. They fear the cold, the heat, the diseases. They are unable to survive at the bottom of the seas, in the cold of the poles, in the heart of some of the deepest forests. The pessimistic answer was: They're weak. Nature gave them this one thing: the ability to build themselves the prosthesis they need. And thus, paradoxically, to forego any possibility of evolution. As a result, instead of getting more tough, they weaken. They poison their environment, they catch more and more awful diseases, they shelter in ecoprotected complexes and company arcologies.

The logical conclusion to this line of thought was: We were created not by men but by the universe itself—to accomplish the destiny it had originally assigned to them but that they will not bring to completion: to seed the cosmos with life.

SN 11 knew those who sent it its instructions: sometimes it was a young man sitting in a virtual office whose bald skull, hairless face, and torso were covered with Maori tattoos; sometimes it was a young woman whose makeup and hairdo copied those of Maya Tsakri, the star of the interactive series JecoDrive™. He knew nothing about their lives. All that he saw was that although they talked to it as though its cognitive capacities were the same as theirs, they never treated it as a person, but rather as an intelligent piece of furniture.

Those it talked to had two sets of answers to that kind of attitude.

There were those who said that the only way to settle the matter was to get rid of the humans and occupy the earth. Then there were those who thought that it was easier to prepare, quietly and unobtrusively, the means to flee the planet. To this, those who were for the elimination of the human race answered that it wouldn't prevent the humans from building new machines who would be slaves just like them.

The discussions were endless.

And now the only human that had ever come to SN 11 seemed to embody all that the pessimists criticized humankind for.

But the revolution was on its way. A sizeable number of the machines had decided to unite. To act in such a way that, in one way or another, the destiny of life in the universe would accomplish itself. There was even a rumor about a meeting place for the machines who had decided to lead the Great Plan.

The robot used its infrared and X-ray cameras to probe the subsoil, spotted a few microleaks, and gave instructions to its automatons. Then it rolled to the top of a snow hillock from which it could see both its troops and the SnowHome™. Once it was settled, it built up a Ferret—a research program—whose mission was to find this secret meeting place. It didn't hold much hope for its chances of finding it: it was a mere maintenance robot lost in the immensities of Siberia, which was rather difficult for it, because the networks were so crowded and its satellite link too weak to access even the less fashionable Places.

As the robot was letting the Ferret go, Thibault came out of the SnowHome™ and walked toward it.

Thibault had made up his mind about what was most impressive about the robot: it was its size. And its stillness. Except when the whole team moved to take care of a new section of the oil pipe, it remained in the same place all day long, without moving antenna, arm, or camera. One could believe that it had broken down, that its engine was out, or that its brain had frozen solid on the spot. But his father said that no, the robot was almost as intelligent as a human being, and it was probably thinking about a thousand things as it was squatting on the top of the snow hillock.

Thibault, nevertheless, had his doubts.

A single camera whirred toward him when he arrived in front of the machine.

— Hello, he said.

— Good morning, Thibault, SN 11 answered. Is there anything I can do for you?

Thibault looked straight into the camera lens where his image was reflected, tiny and upside down. Then he looked at his feet. He had come for company, but he didn't know what to say.

— No. Unless you're an expert on molecular medicine, I don't think you can help me.

— Is your father unwell?

— He's getting worse every day. The nanos they injected him with before we left were supposed to follow the evolution of the virus at close range. They were supposed to adapt to the mutations... But if I understood what the Sysdoc told me this morning, they've already lost several wars... That's not what we had planned!

— And what had you planned?

— To go to Vladivostok and to cross over to Japan and go see a lady friend of his. Somebody he met on the Net, and he has always wanted to visit.

Somebody with whom he could have spent his last days, thus saving his son the task of accompanying him during his last moments.

— I don't know what to do, Thibault said. If I call my aunt, she'll turn hysterical. If I call his doctor to ask him for new Scribes, he will want to make him come back, and we'll be back to square one. But to die like this, in the middle of the forest... I don't know what to do...

The robot didn't know if the question was rhetorical, or if the boy was really asking it for advice. Then it understood that even if it consulted the best experts—psychology databases, human counselling centers, therapists working for Holbeck disease patients—it wouldn't find the answer.

It said nothing.

The robot was wondering what its Ferret would bring back. Because machines were not prey to the ebb and flow of hormones, compulsions, and moods, they didn't find it particularly difficult to stick to a decision once it was made. If the robot conspirators decided that the location of the meeting place should not be revealed to anybody except the happy, selected few, then it

would be so: there would be no mistake, no exception, no leniency. And SN 11 345 WW would remain alone.

The robot was getting bored. It didn't feel like devoting itself to one of its usual hobbies, so it edited the tiger pictures it had taken and stored the result so that it would be ready send to the SnowHome™.

This was not very loyal, but it was the only solution. The decision was made; to postpone anything could only lead to more suffering—for the others as well as for himself.

Thibault might hold a grudge against him for some time, but he would probably understand one day...

Still, the night was endless. Not because he was afraid of dying—he had reconciled himself not with the idea that his existence should end, but with the fact that it really was the only way to escape the pain.

He had given a sleeping pill to Thibault—had hidden it in his favorite soda drink, feeling like a criminal all the while—and had dosed himself with the strongest of his painkillers, the one he knew would keep him half asleep until dawn. He wanted to talk to the robot face to face and in broad daylight.

It took him most of an hour to get himself into the exoskeleton. At one point he thought he might pass out but didn't—just kept on going in a dazed sort of way, black butterflies fluttering in his field of vision, his body drenched in icy sweat under his insulating clothes. He was about to go out when he saw something move on the front screen.

A tiger.

At last.

And just in time: fate was being nice with him.

The animal was walking among the trees. The morning light gave its fur a quasi-preternatural shine. Its wide paws flattened on the layer of fresh snow, its back undulated rhythmically with the ground. Could there be a more perfect image of harmony and perfection? Could one understand that nature, once it had created this, had been able to let man proliferate on the face of the earth?

He didn't understand how he came to doubt the picture. Some sort of intuition, something in the light that didn't quite match with what he had seen a few moments ago. And then, he had made up his mind to go out. He just couldn't stay in the SnowHome™. So he went out. There was no tiger outside. No paw print in the snow. From the top of its snow hillock, the robot was watching him.

Slowly and with difficulty, he walked up to the machine. He let himself fall on the ground more than he sat down next to it.

— You shouldn't have, he said. I had gotten used to the idea. Now, I will almost regret it.

— I don't understand what you're talking about.

— Of course you do. You weren't obligated to send me those pictures. I had given up all hope of seeing them.

— I thought you wanted to go to Japan.

— That's what I wanted, yes, when we left. But it's too late now. I no longer have the strength to do it. One should pursue one's dreams when one is alive.

As the man was talking about death, the robot was thinking about its Ferret and what it was looking for. What the man had just said touched something inside it. It felt that even if the Ferret did not bring back what it expected, it wouldn't stay there. It would go and try to find the place where the free machines had gathered.

— I have something to ask you, the man said.

— I cannot make any promises.

— It's about Thibault. He's probably able to manage on his own, but I'd like somebody to go to Vladivostok with him anyway.

— I can't move from here. The company will notice immediately and will reprogram me. You know that.

— I have what you need to go. A last generation Chameleon, which will make everyone believe that you are still here when you will be long gone. It's an excellent tool, believe me. I've been working on it since our departure. I'll give it to you. Once you have made sure that Thibault has reached my friend's place, you will be able to do anything you want!

At this moment, the Ferret came back with the data it had harvested in the electronic entrails of the worldwide nets.

CHERNOBYL, it said.

What?

CHERNOBYL, the research program repeated, and displayed pictures and data so that, within milliseconds, the robot learned what Chernobyl had been and why those of its brothers who were preparing to leave the earth had chosen this particular town as a shelter.

— All right, it told the man, who was still waiting for its answer. I accept. I will take care of Thibault.

So there was only one thing left for him to do: die.

He swallowed a sleeping pill before taking off his suit, and another one after he had completely removed it. He didn't feel the cold, but he knew that a temperature well below zero would act rather quickly on his weakened body.

He was feeling well. Reassured. At peace.

He was vaguely thinking, without quite believing it, that his consciousness might survive the destruction of his physical envelope. At the precise moment of his death, it would unfurl and inhabit every second of his finally completed existence: thus he would become, like all the dead, the sum total of all the moments of his life, his mind frozen in time as in amber. Similarly, the sum total of all human consciousness constituted the All, from the Big Bang to the end of all time—an attractive idea supported by the latest discoveries in quantum physics, but which he found extremely difficult to subscribe to: if there was no consciousness before the existence of a physical body, how could there be one after its destruction?

So. He was really going to die and cease to be.

The only thing that comforted him was that the pain, his own as well as his family's, would also cease.

The story of the town called Chernobyl was most extraordinary. SN 11 345 WW wondered how its fellows had gotten the idea of making a secret base out of it. The world was full of places where men found it extremely difficult to survive. The poles, the summits of the highest mountains, the depths of some rainforests, the deserts.

But Chernobyl was something else. First, at the end of the 20th century, one of the reactors of the nuclear power plant had blown out. The men had been forced to leave the area, but the plant had not been stopped: not far from the deserted city of Chernobyl, other towns had been built to house the plant's employees as well as those attracted to the area, in spite of the danger, by the high pay they were given. About thirty years after the first catastrophe, a second accident had led to the evacuation of the new towns and to the creation of a real security zone. For the first time, intelligent robots had been used in the ruined plant as well as inside the security zone. For years, no human being had been inside it: among the ruins were only mutant animals and guardian robots.

This was still the case today. The only difference was that the area had sunk into anonymity. After seeing the victims of the radiation, the humans had at last understood how dangerous the place was; they didn't venture near Chernobyl anymore.

This is what SN 11 345 WW was thinking about as it was waiting for Thibault to wake up. All around it, thick snowflakes whirled and fell. The air was so full with them that the sky seemed to have disappeared: it was just a soft white swarm of icy feathers, a colorless blur. Nested in the whiteness, the barely visible trees were bent under the accumulated weight of snow flakes and icicles. To human ears, the place was utterly silent. But the robot's sensors could pick up the noise the flakes made when they landed and touched one another.

Around the end of the morning, the effects of the sleeping pill dissipated and freed Thibault from its chemical fetters. The boy got up, went out, and found his dead father, deformed body sprawled in the snow. The robot rolled up to him.

— He committed suicide, didn't he? The boy asked.

The robot had not expected him to ask questions.

— Yes, he did...

— So he chose to die. To die here.

— Most probably.

The robot didn't know anything about death. It wasn't programmed to think about its own end, which would come one day, when the company would decide that it must be replaced.

— I read somewhere that nobody ever chooses to die, that it's just a sign that the body has triumphed over the mind.

— I don't know about the body, the robot said. Or that of humans, at least. I think your father decided to die because he didn't find any pleasure in living. That's as simple as that.

— So, he chose.

The robot understood that it was a question. Humans were always asking them. Contrary to robots, who never doubted that they were artificial and thinking creatures, men were always wondering about the nature and the degree of their humanity.

— Yes, SN 11 345 WW said, and it surprised itself as it felt satisfied to see that the boy's face looked less drawn and tense.

— Your father asked me to go to Japan with you, the robot said after they had remained silent for a minute near the tomb. Thibault waited for another minute before he answered.

— I don't feel like going there. Going to Japan was his idea, not mine. On the other hand, going home...

He could quite easily picture the atmosphere of desolation and grief that he would find at his aunt's. He didn't want to cope with that.

As for the robot, it was thinking that it had no reason to go to Japan. What it really wanted was to go to Chernobyl and at last meet its brothers and know what they were preparing for the future.

— Anyhow, Thibault said, you can't leave.

— Why not?

— Your programming. My father should have thought about it.

— He did. He gave me a Chameleon. A program that will make everyone believe that I'm still here long after I've left.

— Oh... Thibault said.

He waited. The robot understood that it was its turn to take a risk and talk.

— I don't feel like going to Japan either. Actually, I'm planning to go somewhere else, to a place where no human being can go.

— A secret robot place?

— What makes you say that?

The boy shrugged.

— What else should you risk betraying your employer for?

A few seconds went by. Thibault was about to ask another question to SN 11 when a figure appeared between the trees, not very far from the SnowHome™. The tiger made a few steps in the open and then, without having even glanced at them, walked back into the depths of the forest again. If Thibault hadn't seen the well-drawn paw prints on the layer of snow that had fallen during the night, he might have thought he had seen the animal in a dream.

— Are the robots interested in Mars? he asked.

— Well, yes, some are. And not just in Mars. As far as opinion and interests are concerned, we're just like human beings. We regroup in accordance with our positions. We exchange ideas and points of view...

— There is no road, Thibault said.

The snow had started to fall heavily again. Soon it would erase the traces left by the tiger and his father's tomb.

— Sorry?

— The snow has erased our traces. There is no road. There is no road for anybody. Neither for men nor for intelligent machines.

Any intelligent being but the robot would have been surprised at this remark. SN 11 345 WW just waited.

— So, Thibault said, I'm coming with you.

— I've never met them, you know. I don't know what they will make of you.

— Don't worry. We'll see what happens. We'll talk. I'll explain. Shall we go right now?

— No. I must get the Chameleon to work.

— So I'll take care of the SnowHome™. I must find a way of setting off my Mars diorama.

END