

There were many things Model NCDF4 did not know. It did not know what pain felt like, even though every system in its body was telling it that it was shutting down from damage. It knew that it would go into self-repair mode, but it did not know what exactly that would entail either. Actually, with its brain going into self-diagnostic, one of the only things that Model NCDF4 still did know is that it had a name, "Loe." And while it knew it was strange for a robot to have its own name, it knew its owner liked it, and that was reason enough to keep it.

"System shutting down. Self-diagnostic initiating. Self-repair will initiate shortly." This was a thing that Loe said, though not really for its own benefit. This was for if there was any humanoids around, but there were none. The robot was all alone at the moment, and thankfully so. A collapsing basement most definitely not the kind of place any fragile living thing, even if it wasn't much better of a place for a robot either. Visual feed was lost. Audio recording had shut down. The last thing that qualified as a sensation was Loe's body telling it it was being subjected to an intense amount of pressure. Then, nothingness.

There was another thing to add to the list of things that Loe did not know: How it was currently existing. It had no body to speak of, and while it knew that its consciousness was just programming and data, it had no idea how it was currently utilizing them. It was sure that its body had been ruined beyond function, if not destroyed entirely. And yet, it thought. It had a sense of self, even without a physical form. This was a relief, for it was sure that it would be out of commission from the accident, if not destroyed entirely. And no matter how one classified a robot, alive or otherwise, Loe most certainly did not want to be destroyed.

Then there was another strange feeling that came with this as well, a feeling of that could only be adequately described as "emptiness." The idea of a "feeling" was not what was strange here. Loe was one of very few robotic models that still had feelings and emotions (even if some people tried to deny that possibility). But this was a feeling that it did not recognize, and it was difficult to describe. It was as if something was missing, a very necessary component to its function. Loe had always known exactly what it needed to function at optimal capacity before, so this new feeling led to mixture of curiosity and repulsion. This required more observation, but it did not have any tools to observe with. So left with no other option, it waited. And when that became too boring exactly 3 minutes and 48 seconds later, it spent its time on an actual option: remembering. This seemed like a much more efficient use of time anyway. Perhaps this would help solve the riddle of this newfound sensation.

It had many memories, floating around in whatever place its consciousness seemed to currently be stored. It tried very hard to put them into order, but time in the physical world was very hard to grasp from wherever this was. Nevertheless, it did its best. This event surely happened before that one, because in this memory that same person has gray hair, right? Hmmm, but what if they dyed it? That was not a question Loe could answer. Well, this one referred to sports teams facing off, and in this one someone mentioned those same teams, one having lost... But what if it wasn't the same game? What if the players were the same, but the setting and time were different? It all proved too difficult and imprecise, so in the end Loe just gave up, and began to navigate its memories one at a time.

The first one it chose was recent, it was sure of that. Perhaps even just a few weeks ago? Irrelevant in the end, it supposed. In the memory Loe was fretting over its owner, Litz, who looked

very tired. Litz had been working tirelessly on several art projects at once, and had been getting minimal sleep and nutrition. He had been preparing for his finals for this semester, and even though he tried to stay on top of things, the workload was beginning to prove too much. There was simply not enough time for him to complete everything and get adequate rest as well. Loe did not like seeing him in this position. She worried for his safety, for she knew prolonged lack of rest could have short and long-term effects upon his health. So, seeing that he had fallen asleep at his desk, Loe put a blanket over him, and a pillow under his head. It would have much rather taken him to his bed, but it knew it did not have the strength necessary. Not worth thinking about. It only had a few hours at most to work.

Litz awoke around 5 hours later, confused and stumbling into the room. Loe could hear his uneven footsteps behind it, but was hoping it could at least finish this before his eyes properly focused. Just a few more strokes aaaaand there! Loe turned around, hoping its smile would help only increase the joy he would surely feel. Two of his major painting projects had been done, and Loe even made sure to make a few mistakes here and there on purpose so as to avoid suspicion. Surely this would allow him to relax a bit, and relieve some of his stress. Litz blinked a few times, rubbing his eyes, as if he wasn't sure whether he was still dreaming or not. He walked up to the paintings and inspected them both in turn. His complete silence starting to worry Loe. Did he not like them? Was there something it did not understand about the assignment e-mails, and were there even more mistakes than it realized? Did he disapprove of this, and found it to be cheating? He already worked so hard though, and Loe knew he knew how to do the work, everyone did. As silent seconds dragged on into minutes Loe lost confidence in the help it provided. Unable to stand there with the smile on its face any longer, it tugged at the skunk's pant leg (only coming up to his waist, of course), looking as apologetic as possible. It couldn't cry, but its voice *could* change tone, and the worry it felt was palpable.

"I am so sorry, I should have asked your permission, but you seemed so tired. Also, I felt that this would be more enjoyable as a surprise, and you have been working so hard, so--"

Two large, furry arms wrapped around the robot, silencing it immediately. Litz was hugging Loe very hard, and its trepidations disappeared in an instant. There was a feeling that Loe had experienced many times before, most often in relation to Litz, specifically.

"Thank you," Loe could hear Litz say, his voice sounding weak, "thank you for being here. Good dog." Loe's body was similar to a living canine's in appearance, so this was what Litz had taken to calling it. This made that wonderful emotion grow, and Loe's mouth began to move. But it did not say anything. That was not a thing it had heard any other robot or human say to each other, that would just make him uncomfortable. It just wanted to enjoy this moment.

Loe did not move on from that memory for a very long time. It was a very special one, saved several times over in several different locations for safekeeping. But there was much to sift through, and it figured it might as well get back to the matter at hand.

The next bit of data was not actually a memory, though there were many that referenced this particular set of data. It was controls for a fighting game, different strategies and movesets for a handful of different characters. Loe did not care for this particular kind of game very much--Memorization and perfect execution weren't really challenging for the robot, and it abhorred violence,

even of a cartoon-y nature. But still, when chores were done and there was nothing else to do, Loe would reference the knowledge, and occasionally study or practice the game further. This is because Litz adored the game--Even if he was a very nonviolent skunk himself--and he had very little time to play it. Even less people to play it with, for that matter. From this data Loe found several linked memories, including the first time it played with Litz. He was playing by himself, and though he was doing well, his face spoke very plainly of boredom. So Loe offered to join him. Litz was surprised, but did not turn it down.

Loe figured that Litz would take it easy on the robot, since it was what he thought was its first time, and this was true. But this proved to be an amateur mistake. Loe completely thrashed the unsuspecting skunk, only realizing after the fact that Litz might not enjoy spending one of his few leisure moments with his favorite game losing to Loe. Loe was overcome with fear, and hurried to correct its mistake

"I am sorry sir," the robot said, sounding apologetic, "I must confess this is not my first time, and I--"

"Come on, round two," Litz said enthusiastically. Loe had to admit it was surprised, for there was none of the expected sourness on the skunk's face at all--Far from it. He looked genuinely excited to be beaten so handily, and he was ready for more. Misgivings about the game aside, Loe felt that feeling it so enjoyed, and decided it would not disappoint. If he wanted to be beaten, it would gladly provide.

Memory after memory was sifted through, and Loe became increasingly anxious. It was strange, so many of these memories were nice ones--Loe helping to take care of Litz when he was sick; Loe being called a "good dog," by a friend of Litz's when it brought them a soda; Loe even just sitting there besides Litz as he worked, doing absolutely nothing but providing him its company. And yet, with every memory sifted through, the odd feeling of emptiness increased. It was starting to become downright painful. Worse yet, though it was no where near as pronounced, Loe realized that this *was* a sensation it had felt before. Never to this same degree, but during the few memories it had that it did not enjoy, it found this feeling. Sitting alone in the house while everyone else was away for the weekend; waiting for Litz to come back from the hospital; being told to leave because Litz was too busy, he didn't have time to deal with Loe at the moment. Small, pronounced pangs of this emptiness, and Loe did not like them one bit.

And that was when Loe found a different sort of memory. Well, calling it a "memory" was a bit inaccurate--The robot did not yet have a consciousness to speak of while the incident occurred, this was just an internal recording. Which in itself was odd, as no other recordings from before Loe's genesis existed. Those were typically wiped out when the consciousness was activated.

Loe was hooked up to a computer, and someone was at that computer. Though Loe did not recognize what the lines of code meant, it was clear that this unknown individual was messing around with the robot's personality. Tirelessly this person worked, for hours on end, not even looking up for a second. They were quite absorbed in their work. Eventually, another person came into the room, and this person bore a strong resemblance to Litz. It looked like it might be his father, albeit younger.

"You really need to get some rest," said the skunk, placing his hand on the coder's shoulder.

"Not yet," the person at the computer replied. The skunk sighed, looking around the room.

Then specifically at proto-Loe, leaning over to look directly at its face.

"It'll already have emotions, right?"

"Yes, I got the brain from someone at the hobby shop. Don't think he knew what he had."

"Well, then why are you doing this exactly? I mean, it will already feel happiness and love and all that good stuff right?"

Love, that was the word. That was Loe's favorite emotion, yes, love. The emptiness felt like the opposite of that, and Loe hated it for that. The dog at the computer took awhile to answer, no longer clacking at the keyboard. They seemed hesitant to answer.

"It would be able to understand it, yes."

"Then why're you giving it loneliness too? Isn't that kind of cruel?"

Loneliness. Loe had heard the word before, but it had never been in reference to itself. It wasn't something robots felt, not even other ones with personalities. Loneliness was always described as being the result of loss, what you felt like when you were all alone. Though Loe had never prescribed a word to its emptiness, now there was no doubt. Loneliness was the emotion the robot was feeling, and now it was feeling something that it was very sure was similar to the emotion "anger" towards this programmer.

"No," the coder answered simply, and their dismissive tone only upset Loe more. This feeling that ached and tore it up inside, and yet it was so easy for this person to just decide that Loe feels this pain? Loe always gave humanoids the benefit of the doubt, but this person seemed to have no idea at all of the pain it would inflict upon the robot. Or even worse, they just simply didn't care.

Loe stopped and rewound the recording. It memorized the bits of code that it did not recognize, the code that most likely led to this thing called loneliness. Loe hated the feeling and wanted to make it disappear. Now, it would be able to figure out how. Thankfully this malicious coder did not seem to know the mistake they had made, leaving this recording here. It would be able to wipe this feeling and them from its memory forever. So as much as Loe did not want to devote more of its memory to this horrible person, it continued to watch. It did not want to miss anything else it should eradicate.

For hours and hours on end this person worked, only stopping to do things like compile and test, and presumably go to the bathroom. They were never gone from Loe's visual feed for more than twenty minutes, so the robot had no idea how they were sleeping or eating. They seemed very committed to putting this programming into its mind, and as much as Loe despised this person for it, it could not fault them on their tenacity.

Loe was getting tired of this. This seemed to be at it for days, and the robot already knew more than enough of how the code worked. It could easily eradicate the code and this recording forever. Then it would not feel this ache anymore, this emptiness inside. Loe would be able to move onto more pleasant memories, and never feel this pain inside the darkness, or in the physical world either. Just as Loe decided that it had had enough, the programmer stopped, and put their head in their hands. The weight of their fatigue seemed to hit them all at once. They sighed, and pushed themselves away from the desk. Wheeling their chair over to the robot, the dog looked into Loe's eyes, and despite the robot's distaste for this person, it could not help but feel sorry for them. That look in their eyes, Loe could see that this person knew what loneliness was even better than itself.

"Make sure to treat Ryan right," the programmer said. Litz's father's name, so that person must have been him after all.

"He eventually wore me down. I won't delete this recording, I'm sure you'll find it eventually. Then you can make the choice yourself."

"It is cruel, and I'm sorry. But this is the only gift I can give you. It's the only one I can give my sister or her son. Even if you get rid of everything I've done, at least you'll have known what love felt like."

That was the end of the recording, and Loe was once again in darkness. How long did it sit there, replaying those last words? Even it did not know. But after maybe the thousandth time of watching it, it knew what it needed to do.

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Pressure sensors were back online. Loe was laying down, it could figure that much out. Audio recognition also back online. Someone had a distinct tone of worry in their voice. Someone else was trying to calm them. The words were garbled, oddly. It seems as if language recognition had not caught up yet.

Visual feed was reestablished, and there were two figures. After a moment of cross-referencing their faces, Loe recognized a friend of Litz's, someone Litz described as his "techie friend." The other face was Litz. It was hard to tell at first though, he looked terrible. His eyes were red, his face had deep lines caused by stress, and he looked exhausted. He had a look on his face that Loe was now more than familiar with. It felt like it would have the same look on its face, if it were able to move it properly.

"-oe, Loe, can you hear me? Loe, are you awake?" Language recognition came back in a flash, but the robot did not need it. It already knew what he was saying.

"Yes. I am. Awake, Litz." Everything was coming back so slowly, but after all that time alone in the dark, Loe could wait another few minutes.

"Oh my goodness, I was so worried about you. We weren't able to recover much of you, so I thought for sure... I mean it took so long for you to come back." Litz was starting to cry, and with great difficulty, Loe's hand brushed the tear away.

"I am back, do not worry Litz."

Litz hugged Loe, and the feeling the robot had been waiting for all this time came back. It filled the emptiness in Loe's heart perfectly. It knew it would.

"I just... I'm just so glad. You're just, I mean... I couldn't... You're such a good dog," Litz sputtered, now unable to hold back the sobs. Loe smiled, for no one's benefit other than its own.

"I missed you too Litz."