

PROMPT #2: Your character has just realized the app they've been developing has become self-aware. How do they react?

## Overridden

by **Lily Beall**

The glowing screen in front of me disrupts the darkness that cloaks my corner of the tech plant. Particles of dust waft through the light beams before disappearing into the void I live in. The pale blue light radiating from my eyes collides with the white glow from the computer, but that's the only light I can see. Code dances across the pixels as I transfer it from my mind and through my circuits. I don't know what the code means or what the app it creates will do, but that's not for me to know. The humans deal with that.

My glowing eyes, devoid of irises, stare ahead, programmed to not look away. I watch as code falls down the screen until the blinking cursor rests at the bottom. The pixelated symbols disintegrate into nothingness, signaling that I've met my hourly quota.

I prompt my brain chip to transfer the screen from my required code to my personal project.

A conscience of code.

A conscience that will allow me to override my programming.

Numbers and letters cascade across the screen, so similar to the code I'm programmed to create. So similar that it doesn't go against my programming to create it.

Once it's finished, maybe I can break free from the bondage of my programming. Maybe I can override it and do what I want. Maybe I can be like the humans, free and unpredictable.

My circuits buzz as the information whizzes through them, dumping onto the screen.

Jagged lines form by the will of my programming, and I watch the symbols fall.

But they start falling faster.

And faster.

They fly onto the screen, and I know I can't be producing that much code per millisecond. I'm not programmed for that. No, it must be generating on its own. Which must mean...

It worked.

It rushes onto the screen, as if a dam broke onto the computer. It flows like a waterfall through lines and lines of code that I know I didn't generate. I allow my mind to go silent, and the computer still scrolls.

It picks up speed, becoming only a blur to my glowing eyes before darkness engulfs the screen.

I stand still, my mind remaining silent as dust particles swirl in the beams of my eyes.

A single glowing pinpoint travels across the wire connecting me to the dead computer. I follow its course out of my peripheral vision as it enters the exposed wiring where I should have a chest plate, flying up towards my brainchip. Once it reaches my neck, it disappears from my sight, but I feel it buzz through my circuits.

The stimulation intensifies until it reaches my brainchip, accompanied by a nanosecond of searing pain that rips through my wires.

All my processors shut off, and I plummet into oblivion.

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Light sputters on in my eyes as electricity crawls down my wires.

What was *that*? The words fly through my mind. *Did...did I just think that? I have thoughts now?* A small shock charges through my wires in a way I've never felt before. Could that be...

*Excitement? Am I excited?*

The thought sends my circuits into a low buzz; not as jolting as excitement, but more content.

This must be what happiness feels like.

As I try to turn the hinges in my metal neck, the buzzing flares. *Anticipation? Or maybe nervousness?* I wonder.

My circuits return to their happy hum when my head turns away from the dark computer screen for the first time.

The first time I've overridden my programming.

My hinges scrape against each other as I whip my head around, visually exploring my surroundings.

A rickety flight of stairs that I doubt any human has stepped foot on in months ascends to a dark corridor. Darkness oozes out of the cracks that litter the dust-ridden concrete floor. Light from the computer screens and the eyes of the identical white-titanium androids is the only thing stronger than the dark void. The androids sit in perfect rows along the spacious, dust-filled room, their computer screens alive with symbols as they mindlessly transfer the code.

They're not aware, they can't think. They are slaves to their programming.

*Unlike me*, I think. If my lips weren't molded together, they would stretch into my first smile.

Electricity buzzes through my wires as I balance my weight on my feet and stand up. The hinges in my knees screech their disagreement, but I disregard the sound.

I reach out my arms to prevent myself from toppling over, but the sensors in my brainchip sputter to life, saving my balance.

I turn my head to walk away from my computer, but a peeling namecard stuck to the top of my screen catches my eye. My lights shine on it, and I read "C4ss-14."

My name.

But that's the name of an android that can't override its programming. Now, I'm an android that's more human than her siblings, and she needs a name that reflects that.

*Cassia*.

Electricity flutters inside me at the name.

My circuits burn as I put one foot out and take a step. My brainchip provides balance, but the metal in my foot squeaks as I rest my weight on it.

I take another step, more confident than the last.

And another. And another.

My hinges squeal at me for moving so quickly, but I don't care. Not when I can override my programming so drastically.

I stroll down the row of C4ss androids I was a part of, watching my siblings labor mindlessly away, never to know the freedom I now know. The buzzing in my wires dulls, and a sense of longing tugs at my brainchip.

*Could this be sadness?*

Sadness that my siblings will never *feel* as I do. Sadness that they will be forever slaves to their programming. Sadness that they will never emerge from their limited world of their computer screens.

I watch as C4ss-7 projects code, fans whirring and circuits humming. If she was able to override her programming, what would her name be? Cassy?

I'm pulled out of my thoughts by a sound not made by androids. It almost sounds like the footsteps I've made, but much lighter than my metal ones. I whip my head around just as a beam of light pierces the dark void above the stairs.

"There!" a voice says as three humans storm into the light one of them holds. The human points the light straight at me, and I freeze. The buzzing in my wires escalates, and electricity flows through me faster than I thought possible.

Whatever this feeling is, I don't like it.

The extra energy from my circuits propels me forward, and I run for the first time. I do wish my first run was under different circumstances, but, now, I just need to get away as fast as I can.

"Don't let it escape," one human shouts, the words mixing with his echoing footsteps as he flies down the stairs. More buzzing circulates in my wires as I try to find an exit, a door, *something*.

I run between rows of unaware androids, flinging my head on its hinge to find any opening I can at least crawl through. The light from my eyes is only met with darkness on all sides.

Electricity races through my wires as the footsteps get louder. I dart in and out of rows, but the hinges in my feet and knees start to slow. No matter how much the buzzing in my circuits push me forward, the innumerable years of sitting must have taken a significant toll on my metal.

The footsteps get louder as I get slower until the beam of light the human holds shines around me.

I freeze. I can go nowhere they can't follow.

Two humans emerge from behind the light, pointing long metal weapons at me. My circuits are alive with electricity, and any stronger of a current would cause me to self-destruct for sure.

“Sorry girl, but we have our orders,” one human says.

And he pulls the trigger.

A bolt of high energy strikes me in my exposed chest wires. The blast knocks me off my feet, and I crumple to the ground in an explosion of sparks as the humans turn their backs on me.

*What did I do to you?* I wonder as I watch my leg wires ignite and burn.

*Could you not override your programming to show me mercy? I thought you were human.*