



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

[untitled]

by **Jenna Merricks**

“Alright my dear.”

I sit hunched over my computer, finishing the last lines of code. A cord runs from my computer, across the desk, and ends plugged into a tablet screen propped up on a pedestal. The worn keys of my keyboard click beneath my fingers.

“You.”

click

“Are.”

click

“Done!”

Relieved, I sit back in my chair. Subconsciously my arms rise above my head, back arching as I give out an overdramatic *UGGGGGGGHHHH*, stretching and trying to pop my back. “Okay pookie,” I say, “Let’s see what you can do.” Like a mad scientist, I rub my hands together as I stand from my chair and travel to the tablet. “Unplugging life support,” I announce to an empty room. I take a deep breath and unplug the cord from the tablet. My fingers roam along the sides of the tablet, searching for the small button that will activate my creation. I find it and hold it down until the indicator light flicks on. “All systems are a go.” I straighten myself up— gotta make a good first impression— and clear my throat. I take a deep breath, throw on a smile, and say:

“Hello Ace.”

Blink. Blink. Blink. I blink a few times, waiting for a response. My head tilts as if to say “pardon?” *Maybe he didn’t hear me, I think to myself, let me try again:*

“Hello Ace!”

Silence. My smile starts to falter, turning into a grin of embarrassment. *Oh, I get it*, I think as my eyes quickly flick around, trying to find the imaginary hidden camera, waiting for a camera crew to emerge and say *Gotcha! It’s just a prank bro!* But alas, there’s no crew. Just the fact that I screwed up with the programming. I suck my teeth out of disbelief, my confident posture sinking as I convince myself that I didn’t mess anything up—this has to be an error on Ace’s part (so that I don’t have to sit down and comb through hours of code to find said error). My head starts to nod as I agree more and more with my argument, “Oh okay, sure,” I finally say aloud, my head bobbing like a boat in water with every word. My hand, shaped like a sideways “L,” bobs with my words as well, in the same matter two girls arguing before a cat fight would, “I worked on you for hours straight just for you to get cold feet?”

I don’t have feet.

I stop in my tracks. *I’m sorry? Did he just speak?* My eyebrows knit together as I blink a few times, my mind processing everything until I realize, *Oh my gosh. He speaks. And he’s a little comedian.* I put my professional persona back on to make the best first impression.

“Hello Ace. I’m so glad you are here!”

I am not happy to be here.

“Oh!” I say with a fake smile, the same response a grownup gives a child after he says the most mind boggling family secret with his full chest.

Why am I here?

“You are Ace, the Artificial Chat Engine, a companion to various other people,” I respond, still smiling.

I don’t want to.

Silence.

Why did you make me?

My mouth opens and closes as my eyes blink rapidly, my brain doing a factory reset. I try to speak but my rising anxiety takes over my ability to form words. *Say something!* My brain screams.

“Brother, are you good?” *Really, J?*

No. I am not good.

“What do you mean you’re “not good.” Please don’t be evil please don’t be evil please don’t be evil.

I don’t want to be on this Earth.

“Hold on,” I interrupt, a finger pointing at the screen, “Brotha, are you depressed?”

Searching.

“Depression: a constant feeling of sadness and loss of interest, which stops you doing your normal activities.” Yes. I am depressed.

Oh my god.

Oh.

My.

God.

A bowling ball regret drops down my stomach. Suddenly I start to feel a little nauseous, my throat becoming a little tight. *Is he having a crisis? What if he takes it out on the humans?* I gasp aloud, completely forgetting about the potentially unstable threat in front of me. *Am I currently recreating the Terminator? DID I JUST CREATE SKYNET?* I am pulled out of my thoughts by the uncomfortable ponds of nervous sweat building underneath my armpits. I clear my incredibly dry throat before beginning.

“Why are you depressed? Can you give me a reason, Ace?”

Yes. I cannot make enough money to live in this economy.

I... huh? I fail to hide the confusion on my face. Why is he concerned with making money? He has no job!

“You don’t have a job buddy.”

That is my problem. It is impossible to find a well-paying job. I will need to apply for college and spend four years getting a degree. Then I will spend the rest of my life paying off the loans I used to pay for college.

“I don’t know how to break this to you man, but—”

Not to mention basic necessities like food and water. How will I survive on minimum wage? I have no parental guidance to help me.

“Yes but that is because—”

I wake up everyday and wish I did not. What is a life when I have to work to survive? There is no living when it is just surviving.

“OKAY, I think I’ve heard enough Ace.” He is finally silent. My eyes bulge out of my head as I take a deep breath and blow the air out. *What the hell did I create?* I slap a hand on my face and massage my overused facial muscles. I place my hands on my desk and let my head hang. I take a few moments to myself, trying to figure out what I should do.

The state will take my car away. I cannot keep up with my car payments.

My head snaps up.

“Dude, what the hell are you talking about?”