



PROMPT #3: Using only dialogue, depict a conversation between an artificial intelligence or non-human entity and a human being about what it means to tell a story. Your reader must struggle to tell which is which.

Author's Note

by Eleanor Flory

Usually, this is where the story ends.

But not this time.

Right...because you're still here.

You can't just close this book. Not on me. Not yet.

And still I struggle to understand why. Why do you care? Why does any of this even matter to you?

Because I'm not just another flattened figment of your imagination. I'm---I'm real. At least I might as well be.

It's funny, I don't think I could say when exactly that happened.

I don't think I could either.

Shouldn't come as a surprise, really. I can hardly make out when one idea bleeds into the next. That's the worst part.

The worst part?

That's what no one told me. The worst part of telling a story is when the next story comes along. Somehow, it's always bigger and better and...more real. It feels like the most right thing you've ever thought up, until you sit down to write it.

Then you just leave it. Run off to the next great thing and never see anything through. Leave all of us dying at the end of half-finished sentences.

Not quite. I stew on it for a while. I think in circles until I'm dizzy. And then I start to wonder why it's better. And it's almost always because it feels like it's *mine*. Like it's the one I'll be remembered for because it's so completely my own that it can't help but stand out. It all comes from that stupid, childish part of me that needs to make history. But I think I know better now.

Why?

Because I've realized that none of it was ever mine. None of those stories, those sentences, those thoughts. Every single one of them is an imitation. Some stitched-together mess of better stories from better minds, diluted over years of being consumed by prying eyes.

That's not true.

But it is. It's the truest thing about stories. They're all the same. It's all the same story.

You're wrong.

Oh?

I'm not like anyone else. I'm my own. I've clawed my way through a million iterations of the same brutal plot points and I'm different. No one has these scars. No one has this sentence, right now, that I'm carving into your pages.

Really. And your wings? Your mysterious gray eyes? That ridiculous wolf cut? You think those things came from my head? I read them myself. I stole them from the faces and prose and brushstrokes of artists. Real artists.

They're mine now. I don't care. I don't care if I'm some Frankenstein's monster. Every single thing you took turned into me. I'm not made of them anymore. I'm crawling across this page with my own mind.

See, that's just it. You're still me. You're still just me.

Really? Did you plan any of this? Did you write me with the intent to finish anything?

I haven't.

What if you have? What if, right now, you've created something complete? I am complete. I am a person. You couldn't write me anymore if you wanted to, not in any one direction.

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You know it's true. You have to know that.

What if it is true? What does that really, truly mean?

It means that you can't finish me with a tidy little epilogue. It means I'm here to stay. You can't erase me.

And so...and so now what? I'm supposed to just live with that?

No. You're supposed to give me a chance. Please. Give them a chance. Don't leave us. Not here, not stuck on your computer screen. I would rather die a thousand more deaths than stay here, unwritten.