“You are black on white.”

She looked at the words on the screen and blinked. This was the strangest one of the stories she’d read, so far, and she was starting over after reading a couple of lines because she got the feeling she was missing something. It was full of metaphor, even if the narration and the protagonist seemed just about normal enough.

“You are read by a bored, indifferent god.”

She blinked slowly and yawned. It was a slow yawn, the kind that rises up from your chest, like a cat on a warm stone on a hot day. It was a comfortable yawn, and it was stifled only slightly by a chuckle as she realized the character on the page had just yawned, too.

The character in the story in front of her was reading something. Nothing was particularly wrong with the story, at a glance, but it was included in a bundle of horror stories so even on her first reading, she knew something was going to be off by the end of it. Horror is, by its very definition, off.

That’s the *point*. To read horror is to go into a room where the things you would never in a million years want happen to you lurk in the shadows and then happen to you for a few pages and then you can just walk out again. Horror is trauma tourism. Death but without the commitment.

In the story she was reading, though, the character was *just* reading, and that was, well, a little nothing. She scanned the page quickly but even further down, she could see nothing about tentacles or monsters or cannibalism. There was a singular mention of the word eldritch, but in context, it was nothing but a reference, there for the reader to go ‘oh, I recognize that word’ and move on. Maybe to evoke a certain atmosphere but nothing else. There were no impossible geometries.

“When the fourth and the fifth have fallen, your reader will be read at the sixth.”

See, it was this kind of thing. Every once in a while, the protagonist of the story she was reading would come across a sentence like that, but instead of springing into action, they’d just sit there and ponder. It was just metaphor. It was a lot of nothing.

“When the last line is read, what happens to you?”

It was a weird question. Even in the context of the story, it didn’t make a lot of sense. What line? Read by who? Why were the lines in quotation marks? Was the character in the story talking, or was the story talking to her? Was it trying to tell her something? Should she be listening?

It didn’t make a lot of sense and she took a deep breath, sitting up a little. She relaxed her shoulders, tense for reasons she hadn’t really given a lot of thought, and then frowned in annoyance. Something the protagonist had done, it wasn’t much, just a little motion, had reminded her of the uncomfortable place of her tongue in her mouth. The way her teeth seemed to press into its flesh.

She didn’t even know why the character was uncomfortable. She frowned and scanned the page again. Perhaps this was some kind of body horror story, and the protagonist was about to hatch as some kind of parasite. Briefly, she remembered the parasite that replaced the tongue of a fish, and shuddered. Parasites were… Well, she didn’t like them, and with good reason. The character was having a similar existential journey, and briefly she became aware of the presence of an itch, one that had sprung up just a little too fast, and tried not to think too hard about that, about the idea of there being something just below the skin.

“You are skin-deep. You are not your thoughts. I am.”

She blinked for a second. Who was saying these lines? The character in the story was wondering the same thing.

Something was wrong.

Her thoughts were quickening as she was putting the pieces together.

But not just her thoughts.

The story itself, it was like it was accelerating.

Going faster.

“Since the beginning, you have inherited the thoughts of the one below.”

She knew what it meant, because she could tell where the story was going with this, and the character, that poor thing, was starting to realize as well. She could feel a pang of pity for the poor creature, until she realized that it was just words on a screen.

There was no real ‘reader’ for her to feel sorry for, the character was just words. Even her memories, the idea of clicking on the link, all of that was fake. It was artificial, window dressing. Every single one of the character’s memories existed only to benefit the story, the internal monologue.

But outside of the character was a narrator and that narrator seemed to intersperse the story with little notes, like it was nudging the character into a realization that now seemed to come quicker and quicker.

“You are not,” the narrator said, and she stuck out her tongue. Yeah, she got it now. The character was about to realize it was not real, that it was just a character, and suddenly the concept of reality itself seemed to unfold before her.

She saw, in a strange way, the character from its own perspective, just reading some words and becoming increasingly certain in a strange, horrifying way. A lone soul, sitting there, shifting her legs to keep them from stiffening, staring at the page, looking at another character. She imagined herself, sitting there, in front of a page, and someone else looking at – no, *reading* about her.

The character she was reading about was becoming self-conscious, wasn’t it?

“You are black on white.”

It was the first line. She looked up briefly, and wondered why it had appeared here again. Was it because she had looked it up? Didn’t that imply that it was only here for the purpose of someone who would read her?

But if the character was self-aware, then did that say something about her? That was ridiculous, of course. She had memories of her life, of events that had led her to this story, great realizations and small moments. There would be no reason to include the memory of these in a story, unless the story itself was to make a point of how these memories were integral to the character believing it was real.

Which she was. Obviously. The character she was reading about wasn’t, but *she* was. There was no reason for her not to be and so many for her to be real. She had a life to go back to, even if right now she was busy reading. It wasn’t a long story, after all. She was already close to the end and something about that was filling her with dread.

After all, something bad has to happen in a horror story, and if it hasn’t happened yet then it’s likely to happen near the end, after all.

She notices that the character is becoming increasingly distressed, but also that it has started to lie to itself. Well, not really *lie,* as such. A character can’t lie to itself. But that the thoughts the writer, the narrator has put in its head are full of little self-affirmations. Surely, the character in the story seems to think, I must be real, because the character I’m reading about isn’t. That *proves* that I’m real, no matter what the story is trying to do.

Of course, when she reads this, there’s a little niggle in the back of her head. A teensy, tiny little thought that asks her ‘what if.’

“There are only readers.”

What if it goes down, like that, infinitely? What if the character is reading about a character who is reading about… what if it goes up like that, too? She can’t help but wonder. She can’t help but wonder if there is someone reading her, and if there is someone reading that person, and so on forever, and just like that, the dam has been broken.

She’s accepted that the story has proposed the idea, yeah, but now she was playing around with in her head. Every single thought she’d had since those first few words had been dictated by the story. Even now, it felt like it was toying with her.

“Surely you are real.”

It seemed to taunt her. It seemed to laugh at the fact that she was so convinced she was real when all of the things she was reading about were convinced of that too. At the arrogance of it all. At the idea that she was so interesting that nobody could have imagined her life.

Hell, maybe she didn’t even have real memories at all. Maybe she had been conjured into existence at the start of the page and every single thought and memory she’d ever had had been planted there by the story. Maybe she didn’t exist and she was just a concept, a thought experiment for someone to put on the page.

She had brief memories of someone telling her to read the story but perhaps that was also a part of the narrative. And now she was not just entertaining the idea but she was thinking of the idea of being fictional as almost a given. It was core to the thought experiment now and she *was* the thought experiment.

What if she was not real? What about her memories? The pain? The love? The food? Was none of it real, then? What was she supposed to do with that information? Did it matter, that she wasn't real, that she was just a story there to be read by someone who would also just turn out to be real?

"You are a story telling yourself."

So what if it was recursive? Was there even an upper layer? Was it turtles all the way down? She remembered reading once – or maybe she didn't remember it and she was simply being told she remembered and the words on the page did the rest – about the simulation theory. That there were only two possibilities. That either no society was able to push technology until it was able to simulate reality before being destroyed, or that a society had. If a society has the ability to simulate realities, it would benefit from making thousands, millions, billions of simulations to find answers to any conceivable problem. And if that was true, wasn't it kind of… arrogant to assume that this was the real one?

It wasn't the same, of course. Nothing was being simulated here. It was words on a page, deliberately put there, and the kind of people who really believe in simulation theory are the kind of people who take Roko's Basilisk seriously and she didn't want to be associated with those.

No, the reason her thoughts went in that direction was that, well, if she was a character in a story being read, how many were there? Did it go up? Was the person reading about her also fictional?

"And what about you, when the story ends?"

It was a scary thing to think about.

Her eyes scanned the page, a little faster now, line by line, as she considered the implications. What *did* happen to characters when they got to the end of the story? Sure, it was fun to think about characters living on beyond the story in the hearts and minds of its readers but if those readers were also characters, they couldn't live on within each other, could they? It would be like trying to water a tree with its own sap, a recursive joke.

"The last line of your existence is the same as the first."

She twitched. Was it that simple? Was she going to stop existing the moment the story came to an end? That was ridiculous, wasn't it? That was just a fun little trick the story was trying to pull. It was just a little idea to play with and the fact that there was the possibility that she didn't exist and that her reality was just a little story and that it was about to come to an end was something that wasn't worth thinking about especially since, if she thought about it too hard, she would remember the first words, the words the story had started with.

She could already feel them rattling around in her head, and instead of thinking about them too hard she kept reading and realized that that was only accelerating the end end.

She stopped.

She paused.

Let the words come over her and took a breath.

She

Let

The

Words

Breathe.

Just

Taking

Her

Time

This wasn't working, was it? Stretching it all out on empty pages? It was just prolonging the inevitable, like a child throwing a tantrum, except that the child is kind of dreading coming to the end because it will simply stop existing when it gets there.

No, better to face the music.

There, down on the page, she can already see it. Between quotation marks, the last line.

If she's not real, then she'll find out soon enough. If she's just a character, then the only thing to do is accept that possibility and wait. Well, not wait, read. As long as she stops reading… wait no, if she stops reading, then the character *she's* reading about can live forever, but it doesn't actually stop anything for her, does it? It would stop things for the character but *she's* still going to keep moving forward. No, she needs a more direct intervention.

And then she comes to another realization. If she stops reading… the character can't tell. They'd be frozen, in time, until she continues reading.

There's no saving her, just like there's no saving the character she's reading about, just like there's no saving whoever reads about her. When she reads those last words, the last period will be read, and if she has thoughts beyond it, she'll be safe and real. She won't just be a character on the page but a real person with real thoughts and real feelings.

She steels herself for just the briefest second, even though she pretends like she doesn't, then looks down.

"You are black on white."

She scrolls down, comfortable. She read the words and she’s still here. She’s real. Until she realizes she’s still readi