

Castle Ohlord was a burly fellow that sprung upon the world like a leopard chasing its spots. "Oh, oh," he would be wont to say as he went from village to village testing out the functionalities of their various machineries. He was a systems tester, you see, a professional one at that, although it is true that his accreditation had lapsed some years back due to an awkward disagreement with the then assistant secretary for the Learned Council of Systems.

## CHAPTER WHAT THE FUCK ARE WE DOING WITH OUR LIVES?

[assessment in action]

"I said Goddamn," I said to my friend Lucy, who apparently did not hear what I said the first time I said it. We were at the end of another boring shift of "reference work" and I was coming down with a rare-for-me sickness due to the fact that I had been interacting with too many foreign substances, such as my relations who were still visiting from abroad.

SADIE Rose Rosen had now officially crossed the line between good at her job and very bad at her job. *Please fire me*, she thought as she comprehended the depths of her incompetency.

"Are you writing again? To what end?" said Sadie to Sadie.

"Um, catharsis?" responded Sadie. "My legs are itchy. I don't like pants."

Footsteps could be heard moving through the bridge. Sadie clicked the butt of her science pen maybe twelve times. "Click-y click. Click-y click. Click-y click." You get the point. She sighed. She yawned.

"That's a big yawn," said Sadie to whoever was listening, attempting to convey the largeness of her most recent yawn. More footsteps. Various dings and such. The rustling of papers and chairs. More footsteps. Sadie yawned again, because her story was so fucking boring. What sort of hell was this, this life? *What are those? Interconnected geckos?* thought Sadie as she looked at the latest exhibit, titled ART + MATH COLLIDE. Just then, Sadie's brain exploded.

"What do you mean she's dead?" said Gus to the records keeper, a bit exasperated.

"I can check again, if you'd like. Perhaps a new update came in."

"Puzzles? *More* puzzles? But why? Doesn't she realize that she is never going to solve this?"

"She wrote herself into a box."

"She was always in a box. This is eternity."

"Can she hear us?"

Sadie Rose Rosen looked around her enclosed space. *The fuck is going on?* she thought. She blinked. "Well," she asked the quasi-fictional character, "How are our systems?"

Castle Ohlord shrugged as he tossed his bag over his shoulder and walked out across the bridge.

"She can't do that."

"She's in a box."

"What?"

"These characters have not been properly introduced."

Sadie Rose Rosen blinked and found herself sitting at the reference desk in the department of Science and Technology at her local university library. *What the fuck?* A retired professor slash citations expert walked by and Sadie FUCK FUCK FUCK FUCK *What the fuck?* thought Sadie, her mind not quite--*Oh shit, here comes another one.*

"But I thought she was dead."

"No, that was just the *fictional* character."

"It's too complex. It's not going to hold."

"Where's the motivation?"

ERROR. ERROR. ERROR.

"I'm not going to pretend I know what I am doing." The semi-lost student of life approached the desk. "How do I find this book?"

"Oh, well, you see," said the not-so-professional Sadie, "you are *inside* the book right now. I mean," she gestured to her surroundings. *Is the author dead?* she thought. "Um, third floor." *Fuck! We are clearly under some sort of coordinated attack.* "Yawn." Sadie blinked. Time was moving. Yeah. Sure. Time was definitely moving. It was slippery. Like a slippery eel? "You'll never find what you are looking for. Never." Just then, Sadie's head exploded.

"But we already finished this book. Twice."

Mel gave \_\_\_\_\_ a don't look at me look and swatted at a fly. *That tickles*, they thought at the fly.

"And," continued \_\_\_\_\_, "I'm just telling you right now. I'm not going to take this deadline seriously. There's just no way."

"Not to mention that everything falls apart whenever we try to focus on another character." Ged looked at Quantum. "What?" continued \_\_\_\_\_. "What is it?"

"This isn't a movie."

"What?"

"It's a book."

"Huh?"

*Something went wrong. This is not the book I started writing. What happened to the narrative thread?*

"These distant objects are like breadcrumbs leading us to Planet X. The more of them we can find, the better we can understand the outer solar system and the possible planet that we think is shaping their orbits--a discovery that would redefine our knowledge of the solar system's evolution," Shepherd added.

"Who are you calling trans-Neptunian?"

Sweat dripped down our mind-body as we attempted to settle [fundamental] questions of identity. *We'll ride this train until it vomits all over our shorts*, we thought to ourself. "Burp."

"Hey. Hey lady!"

*Oh fuck. Now what?*

"What are you doing there? You alright?"

Suddenly, something rolled up to our fore. It was a sign.