

Eugen Cech

ene, the 2

Southring
Gene
vs.
the 2nd

South Ring Literature

Imprint

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Before the Foreword



First of all, I'm obviously overwhelmed now. That's why I don't really know my way around book-writing right now. This book does not demand some outside shelf, some earlier file, or some cleanly signed origin. If anything here looks old, it's lying around in its own dust and has to prove itself on this page.

Anyway, now it's time to put the controller aside, because you are SUPPOSED TO play this book, sorry, read it. You are the reader. Don't forget that. Alright then. Let the game begin.

Mandatory Reading Aid: Reader is not a safe role here. It is only the friendliest name for someone who steps onto a page and acts like that didn't trigger anything.

Eugen Cech

(now the only one)

Book

(Press any button to start the game)

The button's a little sticky. Not much. Enough for you to notice: this wasn't built in a cleanroom. CECH already pressed it somewhere earlier with oily fingers.

The button stays stuck to your fingertip a moment longer than a proper beginning would allow. Controller grease, book page, entrance, and reader-role hang together like things from the same filthy drawer, and before anyone can explain what is beginning here, the beginning already has dirt under its nail.

Mandatory Reading Aid: The beginning is allowed to stick. Overview comes later, when it causes less damage.

Tutorial



You have successfully completed the tutorial. Based on your name selection, you will now be called Southring Gene.

-----loading-----

(that means turn the page, you n00b)

The loading bar smears across the page. Turning pages smells like plastic, finger grease, and a control scheme that doesn't help but sticks; that does not give the book a new meaning, only more friction, more novel-skin, more dirty connection between what happens and what supposedly just waits in the margin.

Mandatory Reading Aid: Control only helps here when it smears. A clean hint would already be the first wrong door.

Part One



Level 1 - The Intern 12.6



An old CECH fingerprint is already lying under the tutorial varnish. Not visible enough to explain it. Only visible enough that the page, when turned, smells for one second like rehearsal room, cold smoke, and badly misunderstood importance. The Intern 12.6 notices none of this. Of course not. The Intern 12.6 notices things only when they are already standing on a form, and even then only if the form has the correct coffee stain.

The door opens into a corridor that is too narrow to be a corridor and too official to be a mistake. The walls are beige.

Beige. Or whatever beige becomes when it hangs too long in a hallway nobody airs out because airing things out is allegedly the responsibility of a different department. The hallway smells of old filthy coffee, construction dust, and a joke someone should have been embarrassed by years ago. Exactly why it still works.

Door, intern, meat sandwich, REWIND, and linoleum rub against each other until the first room does not smell like explanation, but like linoleum. Nothing shines. Everything grinds a little. Every harmless surface stays harmless only until a sentence runs over it with oily fingers.

On the door it says:

INTERN 12.6

The letters were made with a label maker. A few of them no longer stick properly. The R has lifted at one corner and sticks out a little, as if it has wanted to quit for years but never found the right moment. Underneath it, a shit slip is stuck to the door. Not pretty. Not centered. Not laminated.

FIRST VOLUNTARY LUNCH BREAK PLEASE BEGIN INDEPENDENTLY

The hallway smells of dust, cold filthy coffee, wet concrete, and that slightly warm plastic smell of old fluorescent tubes. Something hums somewhere. Not loudly. Just loud enough that you only notice it when it briefly stops.

You wait for a moment.

Nothing happens.

So you wait for an even shorter moment.

That does not help either.

The door does not open because you waited. It opens because it apparently decided that waiting was now already enough paperwork.

Behind it is a room.

Not a special room.

That makes it worse.

The ceiling is too low. Not really low. Only low enough that you notice it all the time. Two fluorescent tubes hang up there. One of them works. The other acts like it is about to work, then decides against it every single time. Its flicker chops the room into short, sick pictures: table, chair, filing cabinet, thermos, meat sandwich, red button.

And files.

Many dusty files.

Too many dusty files for a room where obviously nobody takes order seriously.

The spines of the files are labeled:

BEGINNING

BEGINNING, CORRECTED

BEGINNING, BUT REALLY THIS TIME

12.6

12.6, INTERN

12.6, DO NOT OPEN

MEAT SANDWICH

MEAT SANDWICH, REWIND

VOLUNTARY LUNCH BREAK

VOLUNTARY LUNCH BREAK, MANDATORY

One dusty file stands the wrong way around. On its spine there is only a comma.

In the middle of the room stands a table. Not a shitty desk. A table. The kind that starts in some apartment as a kitchen table and eventually ends up in some sub-office, where it spends ten years being responsible for things nobody wants to admit are things. Its

surface is scratched. A dark ring has burned itself into the veneer. Probably coffee. Probably older than most decisions in the room.

Behind it sits someone.

He does not look like someone in charge here. He looks more like someone who arrived too early, would have left too late, and in between forgot why he was ever there at all. In front of him lies a meat sandwich. Next to the meat sandwich lies a red button. The button is too big for the table and too calm for the room.

On the red button it says:

REWIND

The Intern raises his hand. Not as a greeting. More like he forgot, halfway through a movement, what the next part of it was supposed to be.

"Ah," he says.

His voice fits the room. Not old, not young, not loud, not quiet. A voice that has explained things many times without knowing whether anyone had jurisdiction to understand it. Then he looks at a shit slip. Then at you. Then back at the shit slip.

"Southring Gene."

He nods, as if that were a diagnosis.

You say nothing.

Mandatory Reading Aid: Silence is accepted as input. It does not count as passivity just because nobody saw a button.

That is good. Talking would already be too much now. The Intern 12.6 takes the meat sandwich, holds it to his ear, and listens into it. For one moment, the room gets so quiet the fluorescent tube starts feeling more important. Then he puts the meat sandwich back down.

"Checks out," he says.

A fluorescent tube flickers. Not dramatically. Just unhealthy. On the wall hangs a calendar. It hangs crooked, but only barely crooked, so you do not know whether to straighten it or simply hate it. Every day is 12.6. Not just the visible page. Also the little torn-off remains underneath. Also the days that are not showing. The whole calendar is just 12.6 in different stages of paper fatigue.

Mandatory Reading Aid: Not everything that is a date has already happened.

The Intern clears his throat.

"So," he says, "you're here now."

It sounds like a statement. Not like a greeting.

"And since you're here, things can continue."

He does not press the red button.

You look at it anyway.

The button looks pressed. Maybe it has already been pressed. Maybe it will have been pressed later. Maybe this is simply the kind of button that does not need help.

On the table stands a coffee mug. It is empty. Despite that, the rim is wet. This is not comforting.

On the mug it says:

I WAS YOUNG AND NEEDED THE DRAFT.

The Intern takes a bite from the meat sandwich. Chews. Thinks. Keeps chewing.

Then he says:

"You're lucky. Usually they all start over from the beginning here."

You wait for an explanation.

None comes.

Good.

He pushes a shit form toward you. The shitty paper is too thin. You can see the back through it. Maybe it is not the back, though, but another shit form already waiting underneath.

At the top it says:

APPLICATION FOR PROVISIONAL PRESENCE

Under that:

Name: Southring Gene

Date of birth: 12.6.

Condition: begun

Strength: not required

Holding on: refused

A box is checked next to "Holding on refused." You do not know by whom. The Intern 12.6 taps the shit form with his finger. His fingernail is short and has a dark rim, as if he has just been working on something that was officially supposed to be clean.

Mandatory Reading Aid: The first room smells like material. Explanation has to wait outside until it has dirty shoes.

"You don't sign there."

You look at him.

"Too binding."

He pulls the shit form back, folds it twice, puts it in a drawer, and immediately opens the same drawer again.

The drawer squeaks.

Not loudly.

But offended.

The shit form is gone. In its place lies a second meat sandwich. He looks satisfied.

"Archive works."

From somewhere comes a sound.

Kring.

It does not sound like a bell. More like a bell that only someone hears who will later receive a reason for it. The Intern acts like he did not hear it. You act like you understood why.

Mandatory Reading Aid: If you cannot assign a sound, it may not have been produced yet.

The fluorescent tube flickers again. This time it almost sounds like a chord. The Intern points to a hallway behind him. The hallway is narrow. Too narrow for furniture, but wide enough for decisions nobody wants to make. The walls are painted halfway up in a color that probably used to be much braver and is now only hanging around.

"Level 1 is really just there so you notice you're already inside."

Then he looks startled.

"We scratch that."

He takes a pen and scratches out nothing. The sentence remains. You do not start walking. The text continues anyway.

In the hallway stands a sign:

INTERN AREA

ENTRY ONLY WITH PROVISIONAL AUTHORIZATION

Under it, someone has added in ballpoint pen:

or birthday

The writing is small, but stubborn.

You keep walking.

The wall on the left is full of old nameplates. Some are cheap plastic. Some metal. Some only shitty paper, slipped into yellowed holders. Some are empty. Some carry the same name. Some have been pasted over so often the surface looks like bad skin.

On one sign it says:

Gene

Under it an older imprint, almost invisible.

On another it says:

Southring

The rest has been scratched off. The scratch marks are lighter than the surrounding surface.

One hangs crooked.

On it there is only:

, the 2nd

You stop.

The Intern calls from behind you:

“That ain’t up yet.”

Mandatory Reading Aid: These two possibilities contradict each other only in books that walk very obediently in a straight line.

Then, quieter:

“Or it already passed.”

You keep walking. The hallway smells like copier, cold filthy coffee, and a decision nobody wanted to make. Now there is something metallic too. Not blood. Not horror. Just that dry, cold metal note of radiators, toolboxes, and old lockers. At the end of the hallway stands a locker.

It is gray.

Of course it is gray.

On the locker is a sticker:

SOLIDE

The E has been added by hand. The glue underneath has bubbled. Inside the locker there is nothing except a pair of work gloves, an empty lunchbox, and a shit slip. The gloves are not new, but not really used either. They have that in-between state of things that have already been issued but have not yet been guilty.

On the slip it says:

You are not here to get stronger.

Under it, smaller:

Not wrong enough yet.

You do not put the shit slip in your pocket.

It is gone anyway.

The Intern suddenly stands beside you. He has the meat sandwich in his hand again. It is not clear whether it is the same one. A crumb from the roll sticks to his sleeve. He does not notice it. Or lets it work.

"You need a task now," he says.

He thinks.

"No."

He thinks again.

"You don't need a task now."

That seems more honest.

He points to the red button, which now hangs on the wall at the end of the hallway. You are certain it was on the table before. The button has gotten bigger. Or you have gotten smaller. It sits in an old switch panel set into the wall. Above it are labels:

START

ABORT

LUNCH BREAK

NOT AGAIN

YES AGAIN

12.6

Only the red button glows faintly.

Mandatory Reading Aid: The first room is allowed to stink of meat sandwich, linoleum, and old fluorescent tube. Explanation stays outside until it has coffee on its shoes.

On the button it still says:

REWIND

Under it, something has been scratched in:

MEAT SANDWICH ON REWIND

The Intern nods.

"Classic."

You do not press it.

The button clicks.

Everything stays the same.

Almost.

The air in the hallway changes. Not much. Only as if someone had turned a page, although there was no page there. The door at the beginning of the hallway stands in front of you again.

On the door it says:

INTERN 12.6

Under it hangs the same shit slip.

FIRST VOLUNTARY LUNCH BREAK PLEASE BEGIN INDEPENDENTLY

You wait for a moment.

Nothing happens.

So you wait for an even shorter moment.

That does not help either.

The door does not open because you waited. It opens because it apparently decided that waiting was now already enough paperwork.

On the red button it says:

REWIND

The Intern raises his hand. This time he stops halfway through the movement.

"Hold up," he says.

He looks at you.

"We did this already."

You say nothing.

That is still good.

He leans forward.

"Then you're through."

A siren goes off. Very briefly. More by accident. It comes from a small loudspeaker above the door. The loudspeaker is yellowed and has a crack in its cheap plastic. It looks as if it has seen better false alarms.

Text appears on the wall.

Not on a screen.

Not projected.

Just on the wall, as if the wall had been waiting for years to finally become a user interface.

LEVEL 1 SUCCESSFULLY NOT COMPLETED

The Intern claps once. Not enthusiastically. More according to regulation.

"Congratulations."

He hands you the meat sandwich.

You do not take it.

He puts it in your inventory anyway.

You do not have an inventory.

The meat sandwich is there anyway.

Syntax Dogshit Error

The Intern looks at the ceiling.

"Again."

From above, a small shit slip falls down. It wobbles slowly, far too theatrically for its size, and lands on the meat sandwich.

On it it says:

APOLOGY REFUSED, UNNECESSARY.

The Intern reads it, nods, and puts it in the lunchbox.

Then a second door opens behind you. It was not there before. Or it was there, but in the way things are there when you are not yet allowed to need them.

On it it says:

LEVEL 2

Under it:

THE 2ND

The lettering was not made with the label maker. It is cleaner. Older. More final. The Intern 12.6 goes quiet. For the first time, he does not seem confused. Only careful. The fluorescent tube stops flickering.

That is worse.

"That name," he says, "nobody ever got all the way off."

Then he looks at the meat sandwich in your nonexistent inventory.

"Take it with you."

Pause.

"Or leave it here."

Pause.

"Already happened anyway."

—————loading—————

(that means turn the page, ya n00b)

Level 2 - The 2nd



Under the name The 2nd, another pissed-off sign is still scraping. CECH is not written on it, but it scrapes anyway. That is how old names work: they do not have to be readable to make noise.

—————loading—————

(that means turn the page, ya n00b)

The loading screen stays there for another moment. Not long. Long enough to notice that it does not want to leave right away. The word loading drags itself across the page as if somebody wrote it on wet asphalt. The strokes get thinner. Then thicker. Then briefly wrong.

Through-road, sign-remnant, sun, and mail slot no longer lie next to each other like pieces of evidence. They stick inside the same warm asphalt air, and the old suffix does not return as a thought, but as metal heat, paint-edge, and mail-slot flaps at the wrong moment.

—————loading—————

—————loading—————

—————loading—————

One letter jumps. Not dramatically. Just enough that later somebody might notice it and claim they had been paying attention from the start. Then everything disappears. Not suddenly. More like flowing away. As if somebody did not turn the page but tilted it slightly, until the hallway from Level 1 runs out into light. You are standing on a street. Not in the middle of the street. Not safely beside it either. Somewhere between. The air

is bright. Late spring maybe. Early summer. Somewhere in that zone where jackets are already wrong, but shorts are still making a claim.

The sun stands too high for the feeling of the day. Not too high in the sky. That could be explained. Too high in the body. It lies on the shoulders, on the house walls, on the parked cars, on the asphalt that should not be high summer yet and still already acts like it has rights to it. It is warm. Too warm. Not nice-warm. Not vacation. Not lake-day. A warmth that acts harmless because it is bright. The sky is blue. Almost insultingly blue.

No towers of cloud. No far-off rumble. No thunderstorm edge over the mountains. No wind saying: something's coming. And that is exactly why something is wrong. A local thunderstorm would at least have done the thing properly. You could have read the air. Pressure. Dark edge. Swallows lower. The smell of wet dust before it gets wet. Anything to hold on to. But nothing here holds on. The air does not stand still. It does not wait either. It is simply there, too bright, too warm, too early. A through-road lies in front of you.

It wants to seem familiar. You can tell. It is trying too hard. Houses stand left and right, trying not to attract attention. Facades, balconies, windows, half-assed shutters. A satellite dish. An old flower trough with dirt in it where nothing grows, but nothing looks dead enough to get removed either. A shadow sticks to one house wall and does not quite match the sun. It is small. Maybe from a rusted sign. Maybe from something that used to hang there. The asphalt goes straight ahead, but not honestly straight ahead. More like streets go straight when in truth they just have to get through. Cars do not drive here because they want to be here. They drive here because something else is somewhere else.

Through-traffic. The word is written nowhere. It only lies in the street. A car comes from the left. Then none. Then you hear one, but it does not come. Or it is already past. The street has that kind of sound where you are never sure whether there is traffic right now or whether traffic has long since been stored in the walls. On the opposite side stands a bus stop sign. The stop itself consists of a bench, a timetable, and a piece of shade too small for three people and too public for one.

The timetable is faded. A few times are readable.

12:06

12:06

12:06

One line has been blacked out with marker. Underneath, something is still visible. Not enough to read it. Enough to know something was removed.

Mandatory Reading Aid: Removed labels only count as removed once nobody remembers where they were.

Your meat sandwich lies on the bench. It lies there as if it had been waiting for you, but without putting in any effort. The shitty paper has gone greasy at one corner. The sandwich looks a little flatter than before. Maybe from the Rewind. Maybe from the heat. You do not take it. It stays with you anyway. A moped goes by. Very slowly. Too slowly for a moped. The rider is not wearing a helmet. Or he is. In the sunlight, the

head is briefly only a pale surface, then nothing special again. The exhaust rattles, chokes on itself, keeps rattling.

After that it is quiet again. Not completely. Somewhere in an open window, a radio is on. You cannot make out a melody. Only speech too far away to have content. A host says something important in a voice you would trust to sound important about vacuum cleaner bags too. Pebbles lie on the sidewalk. Small pale stones, washed or kicked out of some front yard. One is stuck in a tar seam. Another shines so hard it looks like someone placed it there on purpose. You do not move on right away. The street does not look at you while you do that.

That may be the problem. It feels familiar, but not friendly. Not like a place you come home to. More like a place that remembers someone came home once and is now waiting to see whether you make the same mistake. On a garden fence hangs a crooked sign.

PRIVATE PROPERTY

Under it, smaller and older:

NO TRESPASSING

Under that, older still, almost gone:

, the 2nd

The rest is missing. Not torn off. Not painted over. Simply no longer there. The letters before it were removed, but their absence is more orderly than the remaining writing. You stop. No Intern comes up behind you to say this is not supposed to happen yet. That makes it worse. The sun lies on the pissed-off sign. The metal is so bright that the missing spots almost glow. A window on the first floor opens. Slowly. Not creepily slowly. Just old. A curtain moves. Nobody stands behind it.

Or somebody has just left. Or somebody has been standing there so long that you no longer recognize him as movement. The street says nothing. A bicycle leans against a wall. The front tire is flat. The rear tire is not. Because of that the bicycle looks as if it only half gave up. Beside it stands an empty planter. A plastic stake without a pissed-off sign sticks in it. Maybe there was once a name there. Maybe a variety. Maybe only the memory that something was supposed to grow. The sidewalk is warm. You feel it through your soles.

Not hot. Only warm enough for the day to have started stating its opinion too early. Farther ahead, the street bends slightly. Not much. Just enough that you cannot see what comes after the bend, although it acts as if everything were open. Several old stickers are pasted on top of each other on an electrical box. A dog. A band. A disappeared QR code. A half-torn face.

Above it, someone with a black marker:

2

Under it, someone else:

nd

Beside it, an arrow. The arrow points to nothing. Or to the street. Or to you.

Mandatory Reading Aid: The old suffix does not return as theory. It scratches in the paint, in the asphalt, in the metal edge.

Mandatory Reading Aid: Arrows always point in the direction where they will later have been right.

Mandatory Reading Aid: I take no responsibility for this sentence. I only take it along because it already looks like it will have an ID later.

A truck drives by. This time for real. It is white, without lettering. The empty bed clatters. For one moment it takes up the whole street, makes wind, dust, shadow, the smell of diesel and warm metal. Then it is gone. The street stays. Even brighter than before. As if the truck had only briefly proved that things can disappear here without changing the surroundings. Across the street stands a house with a front door. Nothing special. A front door with a glass panel, brass handle, mail slot. Beside it two doorbells. One of them has no nameplate anymore. On the other, the name has been pasted over so often that the little plastic window bulges inward.

In front of the door is a small patch of shade. Not enough to cool down. Enough to stand in. Nobody stands there. The spot looks occupied anyway. Not by a person. By a habit. As if someone had stood there so often the air forgot how empty works. You do not look long. Long enough. An older man walks by on the other side. Or you imagine an older man walking by there. He wears shorts, sandals, and a shirt hanging open over a lower belly that does not want to matter but is there. He does not stop. He does not look over. The next moment he is gone behind a parked car.

When the car is fully visible again, he is no longer there. No door moved. No garden gate. No step. Just gone. The street is empty again.

A sign on the corner says:

SOUTH—

The rest of the street name is covered by a branch. The branch does not move. There is no wind. The leaves hang green and fat over the pasted-over sign. Too fat for the season. Too much summer in a spring that has not been asked yet. Somewhere a dog barks. Once. Then it stops, as if someone explained to it that this was not its cue. You go on. The houses do not repeat themselves. It still feels like it. Door. Window. Fence. Car. Shadow.

Nothing. Door. Window. Fence. Car. Shadow. Nothing. The street wants to seem familiar. It offers you details you could recognize: a crack in the sidewalk, a crooked gutter, a faded awning, a basement window with cobwebs, a mailbox with too many stickers. But every detail is one centimeter off. Not wrong enough for alarm. Wrong enough for the body. You pass a crosswalk. The white stripes are cracked and sanded gray by traffic. In the middle, a piece of gum sticks there, flat, black, old. Beside it, a small screw.

You do not know why you notice the screw. Maybe the screw does not know either.

On the curb, written in chalk:

WINS

The chalk is almost gone. Someone tried to smear the word with a shoe, but only hit the middle.

Now it says:

W NS

You walk past it. The sun does not burn. It observes. Ahead, on the next house wall, hangs an old election poster. Not complete. Only the lower part.

A jacket. A hand. A smile without a face. Under it in big letters:

MAYOR

The name is missing. The poster has been there so long that it no longer advertises an election, but a past that could not sign out.

Beside it, small and scratched into the wall:

from the South Ring

You read it. Or you already read it before you looked. The air gets warmer. No thunderstorm. No shade. Only this bright threat that does not know whether it wants to be weather, memory, or street.

Mandatory Reading Aid: You can turn back at any time.

You go on. The street wants to seem familiar. It offers you details you could recognize: a crack in the sidewalk, a crooked gutter, a faded awning, a basement window with cobwebs, a mailbox with too many stickers. But every detail is one centimeter off. The italic does not disappear right away. It hangs briefly in the air. Then it becomes normal again. Farther ahead stands a traffic sign. It is round. Or was round. Part of it is bent. The red border has scratches. In the middle is a sticker where something used to stand. Now you can only see:

2

Under it:

THROUGH TRAFFIC ALLOWED

Over it, written with a pen:

for who?

A car honks. Not near you. Not far away. The sound comes from the street itself, as if it had briefly practiced how to do traffic. Then silence again. You reach an intersection. Not a large intersection. Just one of those places where the street briefly acts as if there were several possibilities. Left continues past houses. Right the sidewalk drops slightly. Straight ahead the street leads into more light. The traffic light is off. Still it stands on red.

Or it is on and simply shows no light.

Under it hangs a small additional sign:

THE 2ND

The letters are clean. Too clean. No label maker. No felt pen. No scratching. No old property management. More like printed before the rest existed. You stand at the intersection. No car comes. No person comes. The sky stays blue. That is the threat. Then something cracks. Not loud. Maybe a speaker. An intercom. A doorbell with no apartment left. A voice says nothing. The first sound is only breath.

Mandatory Reading Aid: The old suffix does not remain a thought. It scrapes in mail slot, paint edge, and tar seam until the name can no longer be peeled off cleanly.

Then:

"You saw the name."

The voice is not old. Not young. Not male enough to be sure. Not strange enough to be reassuring. You do not answer. The traffic light stays red.

"Good," says the voice.

Pause.

"Then you know it's missing."

The sun stands on the street. The street stands under the sun. The shade in front of the door stands empty. The meat sandwich is still where no inventory is. The voice cracks once more.

"Level 2 only begins once you believe it has already begun."

The traffic light jumps to green. For nobody. You do not go right away. The asphalt flickers. Very slightly. Not from heat. From repetition. Text appears on the ground as if written with water.

THE 2ND HAS BEEN REMOVED

Then underneath:

THE 2ND HAS NOT BEEN REMOVED

Then underneath:

THE 2ND HAS BEEN PROPERLY REMOVED RETROACTIVELY

The text dries. Nothing remains. Only street. Only light. Only this warmth that is too early. From the front door across the street comes a sound. Not the door. Not the bell. The mail slot. A small metal flap. An envelope falls onto the step. It is white. Unlabeled. You are too far away to read it. You read it anyway.

To Southring Gene

Under it, smaller:

, the 2nd

A gust of wind comes up. Finally. But it brings no cooling. It moves through the street, takes dust with it, lifts a dry leaf, turns it once, and puts it back down. Through-draft.

For one moment the street smells of hot metal, old shitty paper, and something that might once have become rain but decided otherwise. The traffic light clicks. Red. Green. Red. Green. Off. On the rusted sign underneath, it no longer says THE 2ND.

It says:

LEVEL 3

Under it:

TRINITY ROLLED INTO ICONS

The voice in the intercom breathes once more.

Then it says:

"Don't stop."

Pause.

"That's what he does."

You look toward the front door. The shade before it is empty. But it stands.

—————loading—————

(that means turn the page, ya n00b)

Level 2.2 - The 2nd



Dust lies on the second second part. Not much. Just enough that order cannot pretend it came fresh out of the printer. You are standing on a street. Not in the middle of the street. Not safely beside it either. Somewhere between. The air is bright. But you already know all that. The street wants to seem familiar. Houses stand left and right as if they had nothing to do with it. Windows. Fences. Cars. Shadows. Nothing. The sky is still blue. Too blue. Too early.

Too warm. The through-road lies in front of you as if it has not moved since the last sentence. Maybe it has not. Maybe you are the one standing in the same place again. A ticking begins. Not outside. There is no ticking outside. No clock on a house wall. No blinker. No bike computer. No old alarm clock behind a window. The ticking sits deeper. Not in the ear. Deep would already be too exact there. It sits where thoughts start before they act like they volunteered. Tick.

The numbers are not sitting on a display. They press behind the eyes; every tick squeezes a small dent into sidewalk, breath, and missing bus, and the street gets narrower although no house moves closer.

Pressure moves through your eyes. Not pain. Not yet. More like pulsing, as if somebody tapped two fingers from inside against your eyeballs. Tick. A number appears in the top right of your field of vision.

126

It is white. Not on the street. Not in the air. Not on a display. Simply top right. Where nothing is supposed to stand.

125

You blink. The number stays.

124

The street stays too.

123

So does the heat. The envelope is no longer on the step. Or you cannot see it from here. Or it was never delivered, only announced.

122

Tick. The ticking no longer comes alone. It hangs on the number. Every number pulls a beat after it. Or every beat pulls the next number down.

121

You do not want to know what happens at zero. That is the first reasonable thing about this level.

120

You run. Not heroically. Not planned. Not with a goal. Just off. The street accepts you without taking you in. Left, a fence. Right, a parked car. A short shadow. A hot patch of asphalt. A driveway. A mailbox. A dog barks. Longer this time. Or faster. Or from several yards at once.

119

The number does not jump. It counts. Properly. That makes it worse.

118

Your steps sound too loud on the sidewalk. The houses throw them back, but not at the same time. Every step comes back a moment later, once from the left, once from the right, once from somewhere there is no wall.

117

The meat sandwich is with you. Not in your hand. Not in a pocket. Just with you. This is no help.

116

You run past the bike with the flat front tire. This time it stands upright. No wall. The front tire is full. The rear tire is missing.

115

The ticking gets deeper. Not louder. Deeper. As if the clock is not counting but digging.

114

You pass the bus stop. The schedule is empty. Only one time is still there.

12:06

113

A bus is not driving. A bus is missing. The missing bus has enough mass to cast a shadow. You run through it. It gets cooler for a moment. Then immediately too warm again.

112

A shit slip flutters across the sidewalk. Please begin first voluntary lunch break independently. You do not step on it. It sticks to your shoe for a moment anyway.

111

You shake it off. The shit slip stays behind. Or keeps walking.

110

The traffic light returns. Too early. It should be farther ahead. Or you ran wrong. Or the street led you straight ahead in a way that does not work with distance. Red. Green. Red. Off.

109

You run across. No car comes. A car honks anyway.

108

The sound hangs in the air behind you, gets longer, thinner, brighter. Then it snaps off.

107

Top right:

107

The number looks bigger for a moment. As if it noticed you noticing it.

106

You do not look at it anymore. You see it anyway.

105

The sun flickers. Not like light. Like an image. One single frame is missing. The street jumps half a meter left and immediately acts like that is your fault.

104

You do not stumble. That is suspicious.

103

On a house wall it now says:

, THE 2ND

Not small. Not hidden. Across the whole wall. The letters are black and fresh. With the next step they are faded. With the next, only scratch marks. With the next, the wall was always empty.

102

Tick.

101

Tick.

100

At hundred nothing triggers. Of course not. The book is not that polite.

099

The number gets a leading zero. That is new. It feels as if the countdown has only just officially begun.

098

The street gets narrower. Not visibly. The sidewalk stays the same width. The houses do not stand closer. But your body believes it.

097

You want to run faster. Your legs go along with it. The text not quite.

096

Door. Window. Fence. Car. Shadow. Nothing.

095

Door. Window. Fence. Car. Shadow. Nothing.

094

Door. Window. Fence. Car. Shadow. Nothing.

093

Mandatory Reading Aid: Turning around would be possible. The street still remembers which soles only claimed the way back.

092

Door. Window. Fence. Car. Shadow. Nothing.

091

Not now.

090

The street cracks. Not under you. Around you. Like an old plastic casing someone squeezes too hard.

089

You run past the election poster. This time the face is there. But it is not finished. A smile. A shirt collar. A forehead. No gaze.

Under it:

MAYOR

Under it:

of South Ring

Under it, handwritten:

was outside briefly

088

You look away. The poster stays in the corner of your eye. Even after it lies behind you.

087

The number pulses with your eyes. Or your eyes with the number.

086

Every tick presses briefly against the back of your head.

Mandatory Reading Aid: The countdown is not a display. It presses behind the eyes and only pretends, out of politeness, to be a number.

085

The asphalt begins to smell. Hot tar. Dust. Rubber. Metal. Under it, something papery. Like an old envelope that has lain in the sun.

084

You see the envelope again. It lies in the middle of the street. White. Unlabeled. You step over it.

083

With the next step your name is on it.

082

With the next, no longer.

081

With the next, only this remains:

, the 2nd

080

You run faster.

079

A window opens.

078

A voice calls nothing. The open mouth stays silent.

077

The ticking takes over the missing sound.

076

Krring.

075

No. Not Krring. Not now.

074

Krring.

073

The sound comes from ahead. Or from the number. Or from the mail slot in a door you have not reached yet.

072

The street turns. You turn with it. Even though you wanted to go straight.

071

Now you are in the same street. Just the other way around. The sun is wrong again.

070

The sign on the corner says:

SOUTH—

The branch covers the rest. Still no wind.

069

You brush the branch while running past. It does not move. But your arm remembers being touched.

068

The houses become more familiar. That is bad.

067

Not because you know them. Because they act like they know you.

066

A front door stands open. Behind it, no hallway. Behind it, sun. Behind it, the same street. You run past.

065

The sidewalk is missing for three steps. You run on it anyway.

064

A child is drawing on the ground with chalk. There is no child. The chalk moves.

063

It writes:

WINS

062

Then:

WON

061

Then:

WILL HAVE BEEN WON

060

The chalk breaks.

059

Halftime was earlier. Nobody said it.

058

The ticking gets faster. Or your perception gets slower. The numbers stay even. That is unfair.

057

You breathe too loudly. The street does not breathe.

056

A car stands sideways. Not really sideways. Just enough that you have to dodge. In the side window, for a moment, someone is reflected who is not running. Someone stands. In front of a house door.

055

You do not look back.

054

The reflection stays in the window although the car lies behind you.

053

Your eyes pulse harder. The number frays at the edges.

052

White becomes yellow. Yellow becomes white.

051

The fluorescent tube from Level 1 flickers over the street for a moment. Office light in the sun. Wrong.

050

All at once it smells of cold filthy coffee. Only for one breath. Then asphalt again.

049

The red button stands on a little garden wall.

REWIND

You run past it.

048

The button clicks.

047

You are not back at the beginning. That is worse.

046

The street is longer now.

045

Or the number shorter.

044

You only want to reach the end of the level now. The level does not want to end.

043

A sign:

THROUGH-ROAD

Under it:

wants to seem familiar

Mandatory Reading Aid: The countdown does not sit in the top right. It presses through eye, asphalt, and missing bus; the number only wears a mask.

Under it:

but it does not

042

The text on the crooked sign does not change. You only read it too fast.

041

Mandatory Reading Aid: Please remain calm.

040

No.

039

No.

038

No.

037

The sky gets no clouds. No thunderstorm. No thunder. No weather one could blame.
Only light.

036

Too much light.

035

The street lies open and hides itself precisely that way.

034

You hear steps behind you. Yours. Too late.

033

Then others. Too early.

032

You run.

031

The other movement does not run faster. It does not have to.

030

On the house wall to your right there is now a sign:

THE INTERN 12.6

You recognize the door. It does not belong here.

029

It opens a crack. Behind it, dark. Inside it, a meat sandwich on a table.

028

You run past.

027

The Intern says from the dark:

"That is not up yet."

026

Then:

"Or already over."

025

The door falls shut.

024

You hear no hinge. Only ticking.

023

At 23, something almost happens.

Mandatory Reading Aid: Almost is not a lack here. Almost is the only form in which 23 is allowed to appear before its jurisdiction.

Almost. The number does not hesitate. But the space around it does. A small crack runs through the upper right corner of your field of vision. Not black. Not white. Just different.

022

The crack stays.

021

You think: now.

020

No.

019

A battered sign points forward.

LEVEL 3

The arrow points down.

018

You keep running straight ahead.

017

The ground gets brighter. Not cleaner. Brighter. As if the street had shit-ass paper under its surface.

016

Every step sounds thinner now. Less asphalt. More page.

015

You reach the intersection again. Or finally. The traffic light is gone. Only the pole still stands. Top right keeps counting.

014

The air shimmers.

013

The shimmer gets edges.

012

The houses lose depth.

011

Windows become rectangles. Fences become lines. Cars become color.

010

The street no longer wants to seem familiar. It has given up.

009

It only wants to be finished on time.

008

Ahead you see a bright strip. No goal. More like a cut.

007

The ticking is everywhere now. In the eyes. In the asphalt. In the meat sandwich. In the missing nameplate.

006

You run toward the strip.

005

Top right, the number blinks.

004

Not red. Not white. Somewhere between.

003

You do not know what happens when it reaches zero. You only know you do not want to find out on this street.

002

You reach the bright strip. It is no door. No exit. No portal. Only a place where the text stops being street.

—————loading—————

(that means turn the page, you n00b)

Level 3 - Trinity Rolled Into Icons



A crumb suddenly lies on the table that never appeared in any version before. The archive claims it is important. You do not believe it. The archive notes: resistance present.

—————loading—————

(that means turn the page, you n00b)

The loading screen gets brighter. Not white. Not black. More like somebody spread butter over light. The strip in front of you dissolves. The ticking does not disappear immediately. It only gets quieter. First out of the head. Then out of the eyes. Then out of the room, which has to become a room again. 002 stays in the top right for another moment. Not as a number. More like an afterimage. Then it is gone. You are sitting at a table. That is new. The table is made of wood. Real wood maybe. Or at least something that pretended long enough until nobody asked anymore. The surface is smooth, but not clean-smooth. Small cuts, dark rims, an old water stain, a carved line that may once have been a border.

Table, bread, egg, salt, and bass guitar lie on the same dirty line. The icon does not become noble. It becomes edible, greasy, usable, with crumbs at the edge and tool-shadow under the plate.

In front of you is a plate. On the plate is food. No feast. Nothing glorious. Nothing that deserves a menu. But food. A piece of bread. Some butter. Cheese. A boiled egg. Two tomato slices that have been sitting in the light a little too long. Beside them, a small pile of salt, as if somebody forgot salt usually does not stand around loose. A glass of water. No filthy coffee. Not yet. The light comes from the left. A window is open. Not all the way. Just tilted. Outside it is still late spring or early summer or that too-early in-between that does not apologize. But inside it is cooler. Not cold. Just inside.

The room feels like a dining room not sure whether it is private, public, or temporary. The walls are painted light. Not hospital. Not kitchen. Not shit-office. Somewhere between. On one wall hangs a small picture with an apple. A golden apple. Of course. It does not hang centered. That makes it bearable. You take the bread. The movement simply happens. The butter gives a little. The cheese is mild. The egg smells like egg. The tomato tastes like water with a memory of summer. It is good.

Not fantastic. Good. Your body takes that seriously. The first bite does nothing dramatic. No glow. No fanfare. No new ability. Just chewing. Swallowing. A brief pressure in the stomach that says: something has arrived again. That is enough. On the table lies a napkin.

It says:

CHARACTER STRENGTHENING SUCCESSFULLY INITIATED

You keep chewing. Nobody congratulates you. That is pleasant. To the left of the plate is a little bowl with something that may once have been spread. It has the color of a decision that should not be questioned further. You try it anyway. It tastes better than it looks. That is suspicious.

Mandatory Reading Aid: Not every strengthening increases your strength.

You put the bread down. The sentence stays on the napkin. Then the shit-ass paper slowly soaks up a little grease stain, and the word strength turns darker than the rest. Outside, a car drives by. Not fast. Not slow. A normal car driving by normally, which makes it almost uncanny. After Level 2, normality is too noticeable. You drink water. The glass is slightly too thick. Inn glass. Cafeteria glass. A glass that has stood many times on tables where nobody said what was actually going on.

The water is cool. For a moment it feels as if your head has edges again. You breathe out. On the other side of the room stands a machine. Not for drinks. Not for snacks. An old, low box with three slots.

Above the first slot it says:

NAME

Above the second:

PLACE

Above the third:

ERROR

Below it, a sign:

Please insert one at a time only.

Beside the machine there is nothing. No coins. No cards. No instructions. Only a small metal tray, and something is already lying in it. You do not recognize it immediately. A bread crumb. A piece of eggshell. A comma. The comma is very clean. Too clean. You look back at the plate. The egg is no longer whole. You are sure you have not touched it

yet. Maybe you have. Maybe the body understood faster than the rest. On the wall beside the golden apple hang three pictures.

You did not notice them before. The first shows a road. The second shows a front door. The third shows a table. In every picture something is missing. The road lacks the shadow. The front door lacks the name. The table lacks the person who ate. The pictures are small. Not important enough for a museum room. Too intentional for a normal room. Trinity. The word is not written there. But it waits. You take a piece of cheese. It is stronger now. Or you are more sensitive. The salt on the plate has spread out. Not by your hand. Not visibly. But it is no longer lying there as a pile. It forms three small lines.

One to the bread. One to the egg. One to the comma. Outside, somebody laughs. A short laugh. Bright. Far away. Then silence. Not the silence from before. A friendlier silence. Almost. There is now a second plate on the table. It is empty. It definitely was not there. Or it was there and you did not recognize it as empty enough.

On the rim of the plate, in thin blue lettering, it says:

FOR THE PRETTIEST

You read it. The room does not change. That is worse than if it had changed. The golden apple on the wall suddenly feels less like a picture and more like evidence. A soft rolling sound. Very soft. You look at the floor. Nothing is rolling. Then again. This time from the table. The boiled egg is moving. Not much. Just half a centimeter. It stays there. Then it moves again. The table is not crooked. You know that without checking. The egg slowly rolls to the edge of the plate, stays there, and turns around its own axis. Not fast. Not threatening. Just wrong enough to stop being food.

On the napkin it now says:

ENERGY +1

Below it:

TRUST -1

You want to laugh. It does not get that far. The machine on the wall hums. An old electrical hum. Not digital. More basement. More fuse box. More machine that is not broken but likes to remind you. The NAME slot opens. The comma in the metal tray slides in. Click. The PLACE slot opens. A crumb follows. Click. The ERROR slot opens. The eggshell jumps in. Click. The machine thinks. You can hear it. Inside, something made of metal, shit-ass paper, and bad timing moves. Then a printout comes out at the bottom.

Mandatory Reading Aid: Icons like to shine. This book pushes breadcrumbs, salt, and tools under their pedestal.

It does not fall. It is slowly spat out, centimeter by centimeter, like a receipt from a device that considers itself official. You take the strip.

It says:

TRINITY RECOGNIZED

Below it:

ROLL INTO ICONS?

Below it, two boxes.

YES

YES

You put the strip back down. The YES on the right is already checked. The one on the left looks offended. A fly sits in the window frame. It cleans its front legs. Very carefully. Outside it is still too bright. The room stays cool. The table stays table. The food stays food. Almost. You take another bite. The body grows calmer. The head does not. The character strengthening does not run as expected. Nothing gets bigger. No power. No new ability. No safer self. Instead, something gets distributed. Bread into stomach. Salt into lines.

Name into slot. Place into crumb. Error into eggshell. You do not feel stronger. You feel more sortable. That is not a good feeling.

Mandatory Reading Aid: Sorting is not healing.

The window flips open a little farther. By itself. Outside, it is no longer the same road. Or it is. It is just farther away. Now you can see a square. Small. Bright asphalt. An intersection. A traffic sign. A piece of sky. Three ways, all pretending to lead somewhere. In the middle of the square stands something. At first it looks like a statue. Then like a person. Then like a statue that remembers a person too much. It is golden. Not completely. Some places shine. Others are matte. At the edges you can see gray underneath. As if something had been coated that did not want to be coated.

The figure stands with an outstretched hand. In the hand lies nothing. Or something that has just not been thrown yet. You keep eating. That is almost defiant now. The egg lies still again. On the second plate it no longer says FOR THE PRETTIEST.

Now it says:

FOR WHO?

The machine hums again. This time without an assignment. A second paper strip comes out. It falls to the floor. You do not pick it up. You read it anyway.

THE QUESTION IS NOT WHETHER

Below it:

THE QUESTION IS WHEN

The strip curls up. Then it goes flat again. Then it is blank. A sound comes from outside. No car. No dog. No thunder. A metallic scraping. Slow. Heavy. As if something were being dragged across asphalt that does not belong there but has been officially approved. You do not stand up. Not yet. The table does not hold you down. The chair does not hold you down. The food does not hold you down. Still, you remain seated, because your body has just learned that calm can also be a form of danger.

A shadow falls through the window. Not big. Not complete. It touches the plate, the rim of the glass, the napkin. The writing on the napkin changes.

CHARACTER STRENGTHENING SUCCESSFULLY INITIATED

becomes:

CHARACTER STRENGTHENING SUCCESSFULLY WITNESSED

Then:

CHARACTER STRENGTHENING SUCCESSFULLY WILL HAVE BEEN WITNESSED

Then again:

CHARACTER STRENGTHENING SUCCESSFULLY INITIATED

The fly at the window stops cleaning itself. For a moment everything is still. The humming too. Outside too. Inside you too. Then it knocks. Not at the door. Not at the window. In the table. Once. Then again. Then three times. Then four times, but the fourth knock is not louder. Only deeper. You do not know why you are counting exactly. The table does not know either. Or it knows too well. The three pictures on the wall now hang closer together. Road. Front door. Table. Their frames almost touch.

The machine says nothing. The napkin says nothing. The egg says nothing. The golden picture says nothing. Outside, the figure stands in the sun. It still holds nothing in its hand. And exactly that nothing looks thrown. You take the glass. Drink the last swallow. Water. Cool. Real. For a moment that is enough. Then you hear a second sound. No knocking. An aftertongue. It does not come from the table. Or not only. To your left, where the wall lies in shadow, something stands.

Mandatory Reading Aid: The icon gets no pedestal without crumbs. Salt, egg, and tool write along at the bottom.

It stood there before. Of course it stood there before. An instrument stand. Black. A little crooked. On it, an acoustic bass guitar. Not ceremonial. Not lit up. Not laid out. It just leans there, as if somebody had set it down for a second and then forgotten for years that a second can sometimes get very long. The body is dark brown. Not noble dark brown. More kitchen-chair dark brown. Wood with small scratches, a dull patch under the strings, and a spot at the edge where the lacquer is missing. Four strings. Thick. Still. The lowest string is still vibrating.

Barely visible. More feeling than movement. The table no longer knocks. But in the wood of the bass guitar, something remains of it. Once. Then again. Then three times. Then the deep fourth aftersound. The golden figure outside stands in the sun. The acoustic bass guitar stands in the shadow. That makes the decision easier without making it easy. You look at the figure. It shines. You look at the bass guitar. It does not wait. It does not offer itself. It does not want to be chosen. That is pleasant. On the floor beside the instrument stand lies a dirty cable.

No. Not a dirty cable. Only a black tear in the linoleum that, for a moment, behaves like a dirty cable. Beside it, a little dust ring. Krring. Not loud. Not even a sound. More a condition. You stand up. The chair scrapes across the floor. This time you moved. The

bass guitar stays in its place. It does not look heavy. It does not look light either. It looks like something you can carry if you do not think about carrying it. You reach for the neck.

The wood is warm. Not from sun. From room. From before. From hands that are not shown here. A single note happens without you playing it. Very low. Short. Not beautiful. Correct. The golden apple on the wall is still not centered. The golden figure outside still holds nothing in its hand. The bass guitar now hangs on you. Not ceremonially. More practically. The strap smells of dust, fabric, and an old rehearsal room that maybe never was here. The Mandatory Reading Aid stays quiet for a moment.

Then :

Mandatory Reading Aid: Icons increase visibility. Tools increase consequences.

Mandatory Reading Aid: Visibility shines. Consequences stick. Please do not automatically confuse the brighter object with the more useful one.

You read the sentence. It does not disappear. That is new. The machine hums weakly, as if offended because nobody asked it. Then it spits out a third strip. It falls straight onto the table.

It says:

OUTPUT ISSUED

Below it:

RETROACTIVELY

Below it:

PLEASE DO NOT WEAR THIS AS IF IT WERE SOMETHING SPECIAL

That seems reasonable. You leave the strip there. The bass guitar is not jewelry. Not proof. Not a promise. It is a tool. The room understands that faster than you do. The table stops being a table without losing its form. The cuts in the surface suddenly look like measures. The water stain like an old resonance. The three salt lines no longer lead only to bread, egg, and comma. One line points to the road. One to the front door. One to the table.

And a fourth was already there. It lay under the edge of the table. In the shadow. It led to the instrument stand. You see it only now. It must have been there the whole time. Trinity. And the rest that makes it usable. Outside, the golden figure does not move. But its shadow lowers the arm. Maybe disappointed. Maybe relieved. Maybe it never expected anything else. You take a step. The bass guitar bumps lightly against your hip. A dull note. Not loud. The room answers. Not with echo.

With consent. The note goes into the table. From the table into the floor. From the floor into the machine. The machine clicks. All three slots open at the same time. Too far. Inside it is dark. Not empty. Dark. From the ERROR slot comes a warm draft. It smells of road. Of shit-ass paper. Of sun. Of something that started too late to be on time. The

golden figure outside still stands in the sun. It still holds nothing in its hand. But the nothing now looks less thrown.

More displayed. You do not understand why. Good. A thin white line appears on the empty floor between table and window. It grows. Not forward. Sideways. As if somebody were drawing a line along which the room is about to be folded. The line splits into three. One line to the door. One to the window. One to the machine. Then the bass guitar scratches softly against the strap. Not on purpose. Still, a fourth line appears. Very thin. Almost invisible. It runs to the shadow on the wall, where the instrument stand is now empty.

On each of the first three lines, the same text appears:

ICON READY

On the fourth line there is nothing. It does not need it. The chair scrapes across the floor once more. Nobody is sitting on it anymore. The plate is empty. The bread is gone. The cheese is gone. The egg is gone. The tomatoes are gone. Only the salt is still there. Three lines. And in the middle, the comma. It is back. The machine waits. The pictures wait. The golden figure waits. The room waits. The bass guitar does not wait. It just hangs there. That makes it more dangerous than anything that shines.

Mandatory Reading Aid: This meal has been successfully consumed. Please leave the table before it digests you.

You go to the door. Behind you, the egg rolls across the table. You do not turn around. It was empty. On the door now hangs a smeared sign.

LEVEL 3 WILL CONTINUE

Below it, smaller:

Trinity rolled into icons

Below it, smaller still:

Carry tool. No pose necessary.

You glance briefly toward the window. Outside, the golden figure is still standing on the square. It looks bigger than before. Also farther away. That fits. You did not take it. You took something that did not want to be taken. The door handle is cool. The bass guitar touches the frame as you go through. A dull note. Once. Then again. Then three times. Then the deep fourth aftersound. The room behind you remains standing. But something inside it keeps vibrating.

—————loading—————

(that means turn the page, you n00b)

Level 4 – Wins



Victory briefly smells like an old amplifier. Not like glory. More like a cable bag where a beer once leaked and nobody ever had the guts to really wash it out.

—————loading—————

(that means turn the page, you n00b)

The last tone from Level 3 is not completely gone yet. It hangs somewhere between doorframe and shoulder. Dull. Wood. String. Afterring. Then you are not sitting. You are standing. In the doorframe. The acoustic bass guitar hangs on you as if it had never intended anything else. In front of you: a room. A table. Three seats. Four opinions. The Works Council is already sitting there. The Intern 12.6 too. The Time Warper Authority 1978 as well. Nobody looks surprised. That is probably the most suspicious thing. On the table lies a sheet of paper.

Works Council, ballpoint pen, stamp, and wall all get hit with the same bureaucratic filth. Winning does not smell like a trophy, but like wooden tabletop, ink, thin form-paper, and an outcome that has to work before it gets to be right.

On it says:

WINS

The Works Council taps it with a ballpoint pen. Once. Not impatient. Exact.

“That ain’t how this works.”

The Intern 12.6 looks at the sheet. Then at the Works Council. Then at the meat sandwich lying in front of him. This time without a plastic sleeve. That is progress. Or negligence.

“Why not?” he asks.

The Works Council places the ballpoint pen next to the sheet. Parallel to the table edge.

"Because it is not clear who."

The Time Warper Authority 1978 stamps. Klack.

Under WINS it now says:

WON

The Works Council briefly closes his eyes. Not long. Just long enough that you notice: he expected this.

"No."

Klack.

Beneath it:

WILL HAVE BEEN WON

The Intern nods slowly.

"That sounds kinda official."

"That's the problem," says the Works Council.

The acoustic bass guitar lightly touches the doorframe. A dull tone. Nobody says anything. The tone does not either. But it was there. The Works Council glances over. Not strict. Inspecting. Then back to the sheet.

"We need a clear statement."

The Intern raises his hand.

"Wins."

"That is not a clear statement."

"It's short."

"Short is not clear."

The Time Warper Authority 1978 stamps. Klack.

SHORT WAS CLEAR HAVING BEEN

The Works Council takes the sheet, turns it over, looks at the back, and turns it back again.

"This stays on the front, please."

The stamp stays quiet. For now. You stand in the doorframe. Nobody asks you. Good. The meat sandwich lies in front of the Intern. It has a little bite missing. The Intern looks surprised, as if the bite were not his. Maybe that is true too.

"So," says the Works Council, "who wins?"

Silence. Not heavy silence. Meeting silence. The kind of silence where a ballpoint pen can suddenly become very loud.

The Intern says:

“Southring Gene?”

Everybody looks at you. You say nothing. That remains good. The Time Warper Authority 1978 stamps. Klack.

SUBJECT PROVISIONAL

The Works Council does not nod. He does not object either. That is almost worse.

“Against who?”

The Intern chews. There is nothing in his mouth. You hear it anyway.

“Against The 2nd?”

A comma appears on the sheet. No stamp. No pen. Just like that.

Then:

, the 2nd

The Works Council wipes it away with his thumb. It does not smear. It goes away. For a moment. Then it is standing there again. Smaller.

The Intern says:

“That’s not all the way gone.”

“I know,” says the Works Council.

He says it so calmly it almost sounds friendly. The Time Warper Authority 1978 does not stamp. That makes the sentence bigger. The acoustic bass guitar hangs on you. It is not impatient. Tools are rarely impatient. They lie around until somebody stops talking about them. The Works Council pulls over a second sheet.

On it says:

WIN ASSESSMENT

Beneath it:

Won:

Lost:

Draw:

Unclear:

Worked:

He places the ballpoint pen beside it.

“We only enter something once something has happened.”

Klack.

Next to Won appears:

will have happened

The Works Council does not look at the Time Warper Authority 1978.

"No."

Klack.

Next to Unclear appears:

responsible

The Intern looks relieved.

"Then we got something."

"No," says the Works Council. "We have uncertainty."

"But responsible."

The Works Council breathes through it.

"Responsible uncertainty is not an outcome."

Mandatory Reading Aid: Outcomes are not obligated to be helpful.

You shift your weight. The strap creaks softly. The lowest string touches the edge of your hand. A tone happens. Not played. More occurred. Deep. Short. The ballpoint pen rolls a little. Everybody looks over. The Works Council puts it back.

"No side noises, please."

The Intern whispers:

"But that wasn't a side noise."

The Works Council hears it. Of course he hears it. He decides not to have heard it yet. The Time Warper Authority 1978 stamps. Klack.

Mandatory Reading Aid: Winning remains a procedure here with filth in the stamp. More dignity is not scheduled.

SIDE NOISE PROVISIONALLY PRIME SUSPECT

The imprint lands crooked. Not very. Just enough that the line no longer fully belongs to the win assessment. More to the table edge. Or to the wall. The Works Council takes the sheet. Slides it under the other one. Clean. The crooked imprint remains visible anyway. Even though it is no longer on top.

"We are talking about winning."

The Intern nods.

"Wins."

"No. About winning."

"So about wins."

"About the term."

"That's less nice."

"It is more exact."

The bass guitar gives off a very quiet aftersound. Maybe only because you breathe. Maybe because the room briefly understood how boring it was becoming. You are still in the doorframe. That is practical. From there you can see everything without really taking part. The Works Council stands up.

WINS

Beneath it:

WON

Beneath it:

WILL HAVE BEEN WON

The Intern looks impressed.

"Are you allowed to do that?"

"In this room, apparently, yes," says the Works Council.

The Time Warper Authority 1978 stamps. Klack.

On the wall, beneath the three lines, appears:

APPROVAL RETROACTIVELY ON FILE

The imprint does not sit under the center. It sits a little too low. A little too far left. The Works Council looks at the wall. Then at the stamp. Then back at the wall.

"Good. Then at least it's official."

The Intern bites into the meat sandwich. Definitely this time. It crunches. Nobody knows why.

"Maybe," he says with his mouth full, "the one who's won is whoever doesn't have to talk about it anymore."

The Works Council stays standing. The Time Warper Authority 1978 stays too. Although it never stood. The sentence lies in the room. Not bad. Not good. Usable. That is dangerous. The Works Council slowly turns around.

"Repeat that."

The Intern swallows.

"No."

"Why not?"

"Then it becomes a proposal."

The Works Council sits down again. For the first time he seems satisfied. Not happy. Only as if somebody had accidentally failed to shut the right door all the way. You reach for the bass guitar. Not because of the sentence. Not because of the wall. Not because of the Works Council. Because the discussion would start up again now. One tone. Then another. Then three. Then the deep fourth. Not clean. Not big. Not for anyone. The table answers. Very slightly. The ballpoint pen rolls again. Farther this time. It bumps against the win assessment sheet.

There it stays.

Next to:

Worked:

The Works Council looks at it. The Intern too. The Time Warper Authority 1978 does not stamp. That is almost approval. You keep playing. Not much. Just enough so the room does not fall straight back into talking. The strings buzz. One tone comes too late. One is too short. One is not quite in tune. The room takes them anyway. Or because of that. On the wall, the three lines flicker.

WINS

WON

WILL HAVE BEEN WON

Then, briefly, it says:

GOES

Only briefly.

Then again:

WINS

The Works Council raises his head.

"Did you see that?"

The Intern nods.

"I think it's working."

"A wall does not work."

You play the low tone. The wall stays still. The Works Council says nothing more about it. The ballpoint pen makes a little line. Without a hand.

Next to Worked:

A line. No X. No checkmark. Just a line.

That is not enough yet. But it is more than before.

Mandatory Reading Aid: A line is not a solution yet. But at least it does not claim to be one.

The Time Warper Authority 1978 does stamp after all. Klack.

Under the line:

PROVISIONAL PROCEDURE

The imprint does not hit the line. It crosses it. Unintentionally. Maybe. The Works Council nods.

"We can work with that."

The Intern looks at the meat sandwich.

"With that too?"

"No."

The Intern pulls his hand back. Too late. A second bite is missing. The meat sandwich is faster than regulations. You play a wrong tone. The wrong tone is better. Not prettier. Better. It hangs crooked in the room and forces the three lines on the wall to briefly check their place. WINS slides down. WON slides up. WILL HAVE BEEN WON stays where it is, and looks arrogant because of that. The Works Council steps to the wall. Does not arrange the words. That is new. He only looks. Long enough.

Then he says:

"This stays like this until somebody can justify why not."

The Intern raises his hand.

"I can't justify it."

"Good."

The Time Warper Authority 1978 stamps. Klack.

JUSTIFICATION DOES NOT TAKE PLACE

Beneath it:

ACKNOWLEDGED

This time the imprint stands vertical. Not completely. Almost. Together with the crossed line next to Worked:, the wall briefly looks as if it has started drawing a plan without telling anyone. The Intern looks at it.

Mandatory Reading Aid: Victory smells like meeting room, stamp pad, and basswood. More shine would just be file fraud.

"Why does the wall look like that now?"

The Works Council does not turn around.

"It looked like that before."

"No," says the Intern. "Different weird."

The Time Warper Authority 1978 stamps. Klack.

ALREADY SINCE 1978

The Intern studies the wall.

"Was that there before too?"

Klack.

WILL HAVE BEEN BEING

The Works Council says:

"That is administrative geometry."

The Intern nods. As if that helped. It did not. You stop playing. Immediately nobody speaks. That is the real difference. Before, silence was pause. Now silence is outcome. The Works Council goes back to the table. He takes the win assessment sheet. Enters nothing. Then under Worked: he draws a second line. Not parallel. Intentionally not quite. The Intern looks at the lines.

"That almost looks like—"

"No," says the Works Council.

The Intern nods.

"Yeah."

You lower your gaze. Not to the wall. To the bass guitar. On the lower edge of the body there is a small inlay in the wood. Dark on dark. Before, it was not invisible. Only unimportant. The Intern sees it too.

"Is that a Leviathan cross?"

Nobody answers. Not because it would be forbidden. Because there is no room for it right now. The lowest string is still vibrating. The question hangs on it briefly. Then falls off. You play again. This time not because the discussion is getting on your nerves. Or not only. The first tone hits the table. The second the wall. The third the point. The fourth goes through the room without asking permission. The Works Council does not look at the symbol. He looks at the procedure. That fits him. The Time Warper Authority 1978 does not stamp.

The Intern forgets the meat sandwich for a moment. That is rare. The bass guitar hangs on you. The room does not seem defeated. Not solved. Not finished. But it is a small bit less busy explaining itself. That is enough.

On the wall it now says:

WON

WINS

WILL HAVE BEEN WON

Beneath it, the empty point. The point was not there before. Or it was there the whole time and only did not have a wall yet. The Works Council sees it.

"What is that?"

The Intern says:
"Maybe the result."
"That is a point."
"Exactly."

The Time Warper Authority 1978 stays quiet. Very suspicious. You play the deep fourth tone. The point does not move. But the room shifts a little around it. Not visibly. Just sufficiently. The wall labels, the lines, the crooked stamps, the point, and the old imprint of NOT LIKE THAT, which should actually be on the table but now somehow also stands on the wall, add up to something. Not completely. But enough. It looks like a sign that accidentally overheard too much and then went into administration.

Nobody says that. The Works Council takes the red dusty folder. Opens it. Inside lies a shit form.

At the top it says:
WINS
Beneath it:

Won: no

Lost: no

Draw: no

Worked: yes

Keep talking: not recommended

There is no checkbox next to Keep talking. That is elegant. The Works Council reads it. Then closes the dusty folder.

"Provisionally accepted."

The Intern breathes out.

"Then we won?"

The Works Council looks at him. The Time Warper Authority 1978 stamps. Klack. But the stamp hits no shit-ass paper. It hits the table.

The imprint remains in the wood:

NOT LIKE THAT

This time the imprint does not remain only in the wood. A thin line runs from there to the wall. Very fine. Almost nothing. Only enough. The Intern looks over again.

"Now it's doing that again."

The Works Council says:

"As long as it does not keep talking."

That is clear. The Intern nods.

"All right."

On the opposite door, suddenly, it says:

LEVEL 5

Beneath it:

Discordia (2+3)

The door was not locked. It was only not responsible yet. The Works Council looks at you. Then at the bass guitar.

"You're taking that with you."

You say nothing.

He adds:

"Not because of winning."

Pause.

"Because of working."

That does not sound like pathos. It sounds like somebody finally found a sentence that does not need to be stamped immediately. The Intern briefly raises his hand.

"Am I com—"

"No," says nobody.

But it is clear.

He lowers his hand.

"Yeah, better."

You go to the door. The acoustic bass guitar bumps lightly against the frame. Dull. Once. Then again. Then three times. Then the deep fourth aftersound. The Works Council listens.

The Intern too. The Time Warper Authority 1978 probably stopped doing that before anyone else.

On the wall, the words arrange themselves one last time:

WINS

Then:

WON

Then:

WILL HAVE BEEN WON

Then only this remains:

GOES

The point remains beneath it. The lines remain. The stamps remain. The wall now has enough wall. The Works Council says nothing. That is his best decision in this level. You go.

————-loading————-

(that means turn the page, you n00b)

Level 5 – Discordia (2+3)



Discordia does not have clean-washed hands. Between the fingers there is still a little CECH stuck: said too fast, meant too rough, half joke, half emergency exit.

—————loading—————

(that means turn the page, you n00b)

This time the loading screen does not come like a loading screen. It comes like a breath, stands there for a second, loses its straight lines, goes soft at the edges, and the word loading pulls itself apart until there is enough room between the letters for something to pass through. Not you. Not yet. First the tone. The last tone from Level 4 goes through the screen ahead of you, like it knew writing was only a slower form of sound.

Discordia does not enter as chaos. She smells like order that sorted wrong long enough until doors, files, bass, two and three no longer know whether they are procedure or beat.

—————loa ding—————

Then there is no room anymore. No table, no wall, no red dusty folder, no Works Council provisionally accepting something. No door behind you either, through which you could go back, although the book would probably claim it still exists somewhere for readability reasons. The Works Council stays behind. Not lost, not beaten, not forgotten. Only where order can still do something. Not here. Here order has no master certificate. Here order has sausage-salad taste on its fingers and still acts like it has jurisdiction.

Here begins a surface, or a sky, or a floor that waited long enough for somebody to stop telling the difference. The acoustic bass guitar hangs on you, but that is not completely true anymore. The strap lies over your shoulder, the wood touches your body, the strings are there, and still, for one tiny moment, it feels as if your body did not bring the

instrument along, but the instrument pulled your body through the door. The air is wide. Not empty. Wide. It has color without being colored: a dull yellow, a too-bright dust, a violet edge where nothing ends. In the distance stand shapes that may be buildings, may be stacks of files, may be mountains of shit-ass paper, may be only shadows of things that were once requested and then waited too long to be processed.

Under you runs a path. It is not paved, not asphalted, not drawn in. It only starts to make itself once you stop looking for it. Two steps straight, three steps crooked. Two. Three. Vidiralala. The word does not come from outside. It runs under the surface with you, like a rhythm that does not need to decide whether it is dumb or holy, because both would be too slow. The bass guitar does not answer. It hangs. But your right arm moves a little bit, not enough to play a tone, enough to notice that the world is waiting for you not to explain it.

You take one step, then another, then three. The path becomes visible after you use it. Behind you no trace remains, only a slight change in the order of things. Where there was surface before, there now stands a low cabinet. Where the cabinet would have had to stand, there lies a stone. Where the stone lies, it sounds hollow. Two. Three. Vidiralala. To your left stands a half-torn sign. It is big. Too big. On it says:

TIME WAPER AUTHORITY 1978

Below it hang smaller signs, many, way too many, some straight, some crooked, some so old the letters have gotten tired.

Department of Retroactive Entrances

Unit for Complaints That Never Occurred

Archive of Future Burdens

Office of Preliminary Finality

Lost-and-Found for Never-Lost Procedures

Complaint Desk Against Completed Possibilities

Division for People Already Liked Without Jurisdiction

Nobody introduces the Authority. Why would they. It is there. Like sun. Like dust. Like the moment you realize you forgot something but do not yet know whether it mattered.

Behind the pissed-on sign there is no Authority. Or everywhere. On the right side, a long row of desks stretches to the horizon. At each desk sits someone. Or something that sits, because sitting here is apparently the basic form of jurisdiction. Hands turn pages, stamps rise and fall, coffees get cold, files open, files close, files wait open and closed at the same time. A caseworker walks past you carrying a stack of forms higher than his head and mutters: 'Affection was approved before the affected person arrived.' Then he is gone. Or in another line.

You do not stop. That is new. In earlier levels, the room would have stopped you. A door. A table. A sheet. A voice. Here nothing stops you. Here things only shift when you stop moving. The bass guitar swings lightly against your hip. A dull tone forms. This time it is not accidental. Not completely. You allowed it. The surface in front of you changes. A path that would just have led left lays itself to the right. A high mountain of files opens like a fan. Behind it, you see a passage that maybe was not hidden before, maybe only had no reason yet to be a passage.

The tone keeps sounding, much longer than it should. Inside it lie bread, street, front door, table, a comma, an empty point, a not-quite-played fourth beat, and somewhere underneath a room where all beds are occupied, but nobody lies beside anybody. You walk through the passage. It does not lead in. It leads through. On the other side is a yard. Not a courtyard, more an in-between-yard. Things stand around in it that nobody put down: an old amplifier without a dirty cable, a glass bowl full of impossible rainwater, a single white shoe, a stack of newspapers from tomorrow, and next to them a small sign that reads:

In the middle of the yard stands a fountain without water. In the fountain lies a text. Not written, not readable, more sunk into the stone. You do not want to read it. You hear it. It does not say that somebody is tired. It builds a road where tiredness is a vehicle. It does not say somebody is awake. It opens a room where being awake is only the other side of the same mattress. It does not say somebody wants somebody. It sets up a bed, and another beside it, and another beside that, until closeness stops promising to arrive. The text in the stone hums. Two. Three. Vidiralala.

The Prettiest One is not here. Or exactly because of that. You do not understand why you have to think of beauty, even though nothing beautiful is standing around. The yard is dusty, the fountain dry, the shoe empty, the amplifier without power, and still the world treats everything broken and impractical as if it were the prettiest possible version of itself. You place your hand on the strings. Not hard. Just so they know you are there. The yard gets quieter. Then you play. Two tones. Three tones. The old amplifier answers without a cable. Not loud. Not right. But enough.

Vidiralala. The glass bowl with the impossible rainwater begins to tremble. The white shoe slides one centimeter forward. The newspapers turn their own pages, but not fast enough to be dramatic. On one page it says:

LOSS REPORT RECEIVED ALTHOUGH NOTHING WAS FOUND

On the next:

AFFECTION PROVISIONALLY APPROVED AS NO OBJECTION HAS ARRIVED

On the next, nothing. That is the loudest one. A window above the yard opens. A voice calls: 'Jurisdiction?' Another voice answers: 'Not arrived yet!' A third: 'Then affection anyway!' A stamp clacks somewhere. Then many. Then too many. The clacks do not arrange themselves. They stumble. Two. Three. Two. Three. Vidiralala. And suddenly the Authority is not just Authority anymore. Not less ridiculous, not less official, only no longer quite mistress of its own measure.

You keep going. The bass guitar goes with you. No. The bass guitar goes ahead. Not visibly, not literally, but your body follows it more easily than before. The shoulder knows sooner than the head when a path turns. The hand touches the string before the thought asks whether that is allowed. The steps find their distance, and inside that distance there is more decision than in everything that has stood on walls so far. The yard ends in a staircase. The staircase leads neither up nor down, but into counting.

2

3

2

3

Then a step without a number. Then again:

2

3

You climb. With every step the sky gets closer, but not bigger. The matte edge from before pulls apart. Behind it appears no sunlight, but a kind of open sound. As if someone far outside were not playing a chord, only thinking about it long enough for the surroundings to take it over. At the top stands a building that was not built but came out of a misunderstanding. Above the door it says: OFFICE FOR PEOPLE WHO WERE GONE FIRST AND THEN ARE THE WAY. Nobody goes in or out. That makes the office look busy.

Mandatory Reading Aid: Discordia is not chaos. She is order with a crooked beat and dirt in the sorting.

You do not go inside. You walk along it, and the wall changes while you ignore it. ENTRANCE becomes EXIT, EXIT becomes GOING-ABOUT, GOING-ABOUT becomes only HALLWAY. Then the building is behind you and the path under you has become a little safer without anyone having applied for safety.

Mandatory Reading Aid: If something does not work, check whether it may already be playing.

The sentence does not appear on shit-ass paper. It runs across one of the steps while you set foot on it and disappears under your weight. At the top, a plain opens. Wide. Very wide. On it stand countless doors without walls. Some are open, some closed, some have handles on both sides, some none at all. On some are names you almost know. On others only noises. On one there is a question mark pretending to be an official title. On one sticks an old label:

Between the doors run paths. Not straight, not round. Rhythmic. Two steps lead to a door, three past it, two back, three onward. If you try to understand the pattern, it shifts. If you walk, it carries you. The bass guitar lies heavier on your shoulder, but your body does not get more tired. It gets more exact. Not stronger. More exact. That is more dangerous. Music comes from one of the doors. Not loud, not finished. Only bass, maybe. Or what comes before bass when somebody has not yet dared to call it a song.

You do not go inside. The music comes out of the door. It seeps across the floor, gets thin, gets dust, gets writing, gets tone again. The Prettiest One is not a door, not a figure, not the golden apple, not the icon. The Prettiest One is what comes through the doors without asking permission and still does not attack. She is not good, not harmless. She can cut, she can be embarrassing, she can make way too clear what you actually only wanted to sell as a joke. But she allows movement.

You play against it. No. With it. No. Beside it. That is enough. The first tone falls into a complaint file and does not make it a better text, but a more open one. The second tone knocks against a door labeled NOT RESPONSIBLE; the faded sign falls off, and behind it there is not RESPONSIBLE, but nothing at all. The third tone rolls across the plain and collects three words that cannot decide whether they are street sign, refrain, or faulty decision.

The fourth always stays a little with you. A group of caseworkers from the Time Warper Authority 1978 steps out of a door. They carry gray dusty folders. Not threatening. Just many.

‘The procedure has not been completed,’ says one caseworker.

‘But it was already opened retroactively,’ says another.

‘That is not a contradiction,’ says a third.

‘That is exactly the problem,’ says a fourth.

They pass you as if you were furniture. Then the caseworker stops. Not because she recognizes you, but because the bass knocked her off beat. She looks at her file, then at the floor, then in the direction where you just did not play.

‘That is not provided for in the sequence.’

You play one tone. The file shuts. Not violently. Just enough. The caseworker looks at the closed cover. ‘Aha.’ She says nothing more. That is good. Explanations here would instantly get eaten by the doors. You keep going. The plain lowers without getting deeper and becomes a corridor made of open files. Left and right, pages stand up like walls. There are sentences on them, but they do not stay still long enough to be read. Some are about things that never happened and still needed three copies. Some are about people who were not there and still caused an entry. Some are about music that is not allowed because it does not report before it moves.

One sentence remains longer:

THE MUSIC WAS MARKED AS UNAUTHORIZED RELIEF

Under it, another handwriting:

OBJECTION GRANTED

Under it:

BECAUSE IT DOES NOT RELIEVE, IT MOVES

Then the page slams shut. You have not stopped walking. That is important. The bass guitar has meanwhile found a rhythm that is not one if you write it down. Two short movements. Three longer ones. Then again. Vidiralala. The world begins not to dance to it. Dancing would be too clear. It begins to sort differently. A door marked NOT QUITE GONE suddenly stands next to a door marked HERE NOW. A file about a night without sleep is filed under TO THE PRETTIEST ONE. A stamp pad slips off a desk and lands exactly where no desk stands.

Mandatory Reading Aid: Discordia does not tidy up. She shifts files in the wrong beat until even order gets dirty knees.

On it had stood:

DISCOURSE

It does not fall loudly. It falls soft, like cardboard. Behind it there is no new rusty sign. Behind it is a passage. The passage does not lead into the next room. It leads into Discordia, although you are already there. You walk through. On the other side is wind. Finally. No weather wind, no storm, no mountain. A wind made of opened possibilities, of dust, of old rehearsal rooms, of pages, of South Ring, of voices that no longer know whether they are remembering or happening. It pushes against you, not hard. Just enough to move loose things.

The plain in front of you is no longer empty. It is full of movement. Not hectic, not chaotic. Discordia is not chaos. Chaos would be too easy. Discordia is the falling-apart of an order that does not disappear afterward, but starts to swing. One door bangs in a two-beat, another in three. A file rustles against it. A stamp comes too late. A word comes too early. A song scrap arrives exactly right and acts like it was an accident. Vidiralala. Vidiralala. Vidiralala. The bass guitar now plays without you knowing exactly where your hand is. That would sound mystical if it worked all the time.

It does not always work. Good. In front of you appears a low building. It is not far away. Maybe it was there the whole time. On the door it says:

DEPARTMENT OF UNNEEDED STABILITY

Under it:

Please enter if entry will already have occurred.

You do not enter right away. You play one short tone, then two, then three, then one lower than the door. The door does not open. It becomes unimportant. To the left of it, a path appears. Not a new path. A usable one. You walk past on the left. From inside the building somebody calls: 'That is not the intended entrance!' You keep going.

'Then write it down!'

A stamp clacks. Very far away.

Mandatory Reading Aid: Not every entrance is obligated to be a door.

The path on the left leads through tall grass. Or through shit-ass paper pretending to be grass. Or through grass that learned how paper rustles. Between the blades hang small scraps of text. Some stick to you, some do not. They do not tell anything completely. They only pull on something. A room where somebody is supposed to be there and is not. A bed that is not empty enough to be honest. A body that does not know whether it wants closeness or only sleep. A pillow that replaces too much and too little at the same time.

You walk through the grass. The bass guitar brushes the blades, and each contact gives a small tone. Not clean, not single. A rustle made of strings. The words in the blades do not arrange themselves into texts. They do not have to. They were texts long enough.

Now they get to be material. At the end of the grass path stands a fountain. Again. Or the same one, only farther. This time there is water in it. Not much. Just enough to mirror. You look in and do not see yourself. Good. You see the bass guitar. Behind it, the sky. Behind the sky, a room. Behind the room, nothing. Behind nothing, two. Then three.

Two. Three. Two. Three. You do not play. The water moves anyway. From the depth comes a dull knocking. Once, then again, then three times, then the deep fourth afterting. The fountain answers something you did not understand in Level 3 and could not explain in Level 4. Now it does not explain itself either. It carries. You lift your hand from the strings. The bass guitar keeps sounding. Very quietly. For a moment, it really carries you. Not bodily, not visibly. Enough that your next step is not yours alone.

Vidiralala. The fountain stays behind. The Authority is now far behind you and everywhere at the same time. In the distance stamps clack, but they no longer always hit shit-ass paper. Sometimes they hit air. Sometimes rhythm. Sometimes exactly the place where a thought was stuck before. A small pissed-on sign stands at the edge of the path.

LEVEL 5 WILL NOT BE COMPLETED

Under it:

IT STARTS MOVING

The crooked sign falls over. Not because something bumps into it. Because it has been read to the end. You keep going. Ahead of you the air gets darker. Not threatening, only denser. A new area begins, but it does not begin with a door and not with a table and not with somebody already sitting there. It begins with a beat that does not come out straight. Two. Three. Vidiralala. The acoustic bass guitar hangs on you. And carries.

—————loading—————

(that means turn the page, you n00b)

Interlude – Level Structure Must Be Rebuilt, Please Continue Reading Here – Level 6 Will Follow Shortly



The interlude keeps claiming it is only bridging something. But it lies like all transitions. Truth is, it stands in the hall with dirty shoes and finishes smoking the rest of Level 5.

—————loading—————

(that means turn the page, ya n00b)

The loading screen gets stuck. Not fully. Not dramatically. It sticks the way something sticks when it could actually keep running, but has decided you should wait a minute because somebody in the background is sorting dirty cables that never existed according to the documentation.

Construction tape, documentary voice, Kid EO, dog, and progress bar hang in the same official delay. Under the sign it keeps rotting, and that is exactly why the delay does not feel like a pause, but like a hallway where somebody is already pulling on the dirty cables.

—————loading—————

A second text appears underneath.

LEVEL STRUCTURE MUST BE REBUILT

Then:

PLEASE KEEP READING HERE IN THE MEANTIME

Then:

LEVEL 6 WILL FOLLOW SHORTLY

That seems calming. So it probably is not true. The acoustic bass guitar is still hanging on you. That matters. Not because it shines. Not because it was selected. Not because anybody planned an overlay for it. It is simply still there, heavy enough to be real, quiet enough not to have to explain why. Discordia is not gone. She is only interrupted. Or she interrupted you. No room opens in front of you. A film begins in front of you, but it has no screen. The air turns grainy, as if somebody laid old video footage over the next paragraph. A voice-over clears its throat, even though nobody ordered a narrator.

"Innsbruck," the voice says.

Then a pause. Too long.

"A city."

Another pause.

"In Tyrol."

The voice sounds factual, but not trustworthy. Not deliberately wrong. More like it learned that any bullshit sounds more serious if you say it slow enough. On the left, a mountain appears. On the right, a sidewalk. Between them, a dog that is in the shot too early. The dog does not look into the camera. Of course not. It is working. The voice continues: "Every day, countless people move through streets, housing blocks, intersections, and in-between areas. Most of them will never become part of a documentary. Some will not even become part of their own way home. And yet, sometimes, processes begin in places where nobody was looking for them." A cut.

A housing block. A hallway. A front door. An empty parking lot. An intersection acting like it is only traffic. A glued-up sign that is not quite readable. A sidewalk. The dog again. This time the dog is missing. The sidewalk stays. That is worse. The bass guitar makes a very low sound, maybe because your arm moved, maybe because the film got a little too close. The note lays itself under the voice, not loud, more like a second floor.

"The previous investigations," the narrator says, "led to the assumption that Southring Gene may possibly be a musician, developer, observer, electrician, narrator, figure, condition, or error. This assumption is currently considered insufficient."

A stamp clacks. Not from the Time Warper Authority 1978. Or maybe. In the film there is a table now. Not your table. A table in a documentary. On it lie printouts, photos, a calculator, an apple, a receipt, three coffee stains, and a shit slip with the words:

PLEASE DO NOT UNDERSTAND TOO EARLY

One hand pushes the shit slip out of frame. Another hand pushes it back.

Then it suddenly appears as a lower third:

PLEASE DO NOT UNDERSTAND TOO EARLY

The voice-over ignores it.

"At the center of the early research was a number."

The camera slowly moves toward a calendar. All the days are wrong. One of them is 1978. That is not a date. The calendar knows it too. A graphic appears. It looks cheap, but convinced of itself. Numbers move across the screen, add up, split apart, look briefly unsure, straighten themselves out again, form a seven, lose it, find a nine, put a two in between, and act like something has been said now. Kid EO Hoe Jima steps into the image. Not fully. At first he is only a shadow at the edge of the documentary. Then a sleeve. Then a hand pointing at the diagram as if it does not want to help but has to, because otherwise nobody will understand how big the scene is.

"Stop," he says.

The documentary does not stop. He says it again, bigger.

"STOP."

The image freezes. The dog in the background does not freeze completely. Its tail keeps moving. Kid EO notices and looks briefly offended.

"You can't release it like this," he says. "It's too small."

The voice-over goes quiet.

"A number?" Kid EO says. "A sidewalk? A dog? A creative process? That's nice. That's charming. That's bonus material at best. We need scope. We need a layered reveal model. We need at least three time levels, two false origins, one emotional back-effect, and a scene where somebody zooms very slowly onto an old album cover."

The camera zooms very slowly onto an old album cover. Kid EO nods.

"Thank you."

The album cover cannot be seen clearly. Only a name. An add-on. A leftover that was once important enough to stand there, and later important enough to no longer be allowed to stand there. The narrator almost whispers: "The Second." Kid EO raises a finger.

"Don't whisper. Whispering looks cheap. Say it like Netflix just called."

The narrator tries again.

"The Second."

That is not better. Kid EO sighs.

"Okay. We'll cut music under it."

The bass guitar does not react. Good. It does not let Hoe Jima produce it. An archive corridor appears on screen. Shelves on the left and right. In them dusty folders with labels that do not want to be read and therefore get read immediately:

FIRST COPY – NOT PRESENT

SECOND COPY – EARLIER THAN EXPECTED
SUCCESSION WITHOUT PREDECESSOR
RETROACTIVE ARTIST DESIGNATION
DOGSHIT – ROUTE DEVIATION
SOUTH RING – NOT JUST A STREET
GENE – NOT JUST BIOLOGY
CREATIVITY – WITHOUT CAUSE
AND OTHERWISE TOO

Kid EO walks through the corridor as if it belongs to him. It does not. That is exactly why it looks that way.

Mandatory Reading Aid: A delay can work. This corridor keeps smoking even when the sign claims pause.

“The problem,” he says, “is not that Southring Gene has too little origin. The problem is that he has too many. Music. Game. Sidewalk. Bandcamp. Dog. Number. Father. South Ring. Meat sandwich. Bass guitar. The audience needs guidance.”

A voice from one of the folders says:

“No.”

Kid EO stops.

“Who was that?”

The dusty folder says nothing else.

On its spine there is only:

GUIDANCE REFUSED

Kid EO glances at the camera.

“That’s not staying in.”

It stays in. The film jumps. Now you see a road. Not the road from Level 2, but a road that could be related to it without having to admit it. The sun is not as threatening as it was there. It is more documentary sun. Useful. Too bright. A little lying. The narrator says: “The oldest hints suggest that everything may have begun with a game. A game whose goal was not to save a world, but to avoid stepping in the wrong place.” There is nothing on the sidewalk.

The camera zooms anyway. Kid EO nods, thrilled.

“Yes. Exactly. That’s cinema. Show nothing and everybody knows what’s missing.”

A warning appears:

SYNTAX DOGSHIT ERROR

Then it disappears again immediately, as if ashamed of showing up too early. The bass guitar rattles softly. The film shakes. Not much. Enough. Kid EO hears it.

"Who's playing?"

Nobody answers. You say nothing. Neither does the bass guitar. The film continues, but it is not quite under control anymore. The voice still speaks in documentary tone, but the images begin to sort themselves by other rules. A dog becomes a comma. A sidewalk becomes a timeline. An intersection becomes an album. A calculator no longer calculates, it accompanies. Two. Three. Two. Three. Vidiralala. Kid EO frowns.

"No, no. This is not Level 6 yet. We need a transition montage here. Maybe a narrator saying that the previous assumptions turned out to be incomplete."

The voice-over immediately says: "The previous assumptions turned out to be incomplete." Kid EO points at him.

"Very good. But bigger."

"The previous assumptions turned out to be fundamentally incomplete."

"More."

"The previous assumptions turned out to be possibly world-view-changing."

Kid EO breathes in, satisfied.

"Now we're in business."

A quiet clack comes from the background. A stamp. Then another. Then very many. The full Time Warner Authority 1978 does not walk into frame. It was already there. In the shelves. In the lower thirds. In the date errors. In the dog that was too early. In the game that may have started before its own explanation. A caseworker sticks a new lower third under Kid EO:

EXTERNAL DRAMATURGICAL INTERFERENCE – TEMPORARILY TOLERATED

Kid EO reads it.

"External?"

The caseworker shrugs.

"That's what it says."

"By whom?"

"By later."

Kid EO looks at the camera.

"That's disrespectful."

The caseworker stamps.

DISRESPECTFULNESS DULY NOTED

The image freezes briefly. Then it runs on. Now there is no road anymore, but a kind of laboratory. Not a real laboratory. More like a room playing laboratory because a YouTube comment once took the word “gene” too seriously. On a table there are test tubes with nothing liquid in them. One contains the remains of a guitar pick. One a dogshit warning sticker. One a number. One is empty and labeled THE SECOND. The narrator says: “At this point a term appeared for the first time whose scope cannot be conclusively assessed to this day.” Kid EO raises his hand.

“Don’t say it too explainy.”

The narrator says nothing. Good.

On the screen there is only:

SOUTH RING GENE

Then immediately underneath:

AND OTHERWISE TOO

The laboratory light flickers. Not dangerously. Cheaply. In the background a door opens. Behind it there is no monster, no revelation, no scientist who knows too much. Behind it there is a break room. On the table lies a meat sandwich. Next to it, a shit form. APPLICATION FOR SPONTANEOUS PROJECT IDEA WITHOUT TRACEABLE CAUSE. There is no X next to approved. The shit-ass paper has already been punched anyway. Kid EO studies it.

Mandatory Reading Aid: Pause is not standstill here. The interlude smokes in the hall while the level structure keeps working under the ash edge.

“This is good,” he says. “This is very good. But we need a scene that makes clear that all of this belongs together.”

The bass guitar gives a note. Low. Short. Not decorative. The test tubes tremble. The dogshit warning sticker comes loose, flies a little through the air, and sticks to the calculator. The number inside it does not change. It only stops pretending to be proof. Kid EO looks at the instrument.

“You don’t always have to break everything.”

The bass guitar does not answer. It has better manners. The voice-over tries to regain control: “Research remains in its early stages.”

But in the image there is now a sign:

RESEARCH HAD ALREADY BEEN AT THE BEGINNING BEEN BEING

Under it:

BEGINNING WILL BE SUBMITTED LATER

Kid EO rubs his temples.

"Who let the Time Warpers back into the cut?"

Nobody reports in. Several stamps clack proudly. The film jumps again. Innsbruck. Mountains. Streets. Housing blocks. A train station. An intersection. A courtyard. A dog. An empty piece of sidewalk. A man who is not shown. A figure that is not explained. A name that is more than a name but less than a solution. The narrator grows quieter: "Maybe Southring Gene is neither origin nor result. Maybe Southring Gene is the process that begins when a person observes, creates, releases, and keeps going long enough." Kid EO already raises his finger, but this time he says nothing.

That is unusual. The bass guitar sounds again. Once. Then once more. Then three times. Then the low fourth aftersound. The film does not react like a film. It reacts like an archive briefly forgetting it cannot dance. The images no longer sort themselves by chronology but by resonance. The dog comes before the sidewalk. The album cover comes before the name. The number comes after the feeling but before the calculation. The game from back then stands next to the book from now, and both act like this is not a problem.

Kid EO says very quietly:

"We could make that bigger."

The Mandatory Reading Aid does not appear immediately. It waits until the sentence has become unpleasant enough.

Mandatory Reading Aid: Bigger is not the same as farther.

Kid EO looks offended.

"Who writes these notes?"

No answer. Of course no answer. A progress bar comes up from the bottom edge of the frame. It does not fill from left to right. It fills in several places at once, leaves gaps, corrects itself, falls back again, briefly writes Level 6 is being prepared, then Level 6 will have been prepared, then only:

PLEASE WAIT INSIDE THE BOOK

The voice-over clears its throat again.

"To summarize, it can be said that the previous investigations do not allow final clarification. The number remains open. The dog remains possible. The sidewalk remains suspicious. The origin remains multiple. The second place remains restless. The music remains mobile. The through-draft remains active."

Kid EO steps in front of the camera. Fully now. Or almost fully. He is wearing nothing special. That is exactly why he looks exaggerated. Some people do not need a costume because they already consider themselves set dressing.

"Dear reading unit," he says, "we apologize for the delay. Level 6 is currently undergoing structural reevaluation. The previous dramaturgy has been partially destabilized by

unauthorized bass use, retroactive shifts in meaning, and unapproved Discordia effects. We are working on a solution that is both artistically viable and expandable from a brand strategy standpoint."

In the background a stack of files tips over. Very slowly. Kid EO ignores it.

"Until then, please continue reading this interlude as if it were important."

A pause.

Then he adds:

"Which, of course, it is."

The bass guitar rattles. Kid EO looks over.

"Not now."

It does not rattle again. That is not agreement. The progress bar jumps to 126 percent. Then to 7. Then to 9. Then to 2. Then it disappears.

Only one sentence remains on the screen:

THE LEVEL STRUCTURE IS NOT BEING FIXED. IT IS BEING REBUILT.

Under it, after a short delay:

AND OTHERWISE TOO.

The film does not end. It only folds shut. The mountains become shit-ass paper. The sidewalk becomes a line. The dog becomes an error that would rather be a motif. Kid EO becomes a margin note that thinks it is directing. The voice becomes dust. The bass guitar stays. You are back in the loading screen. Or still there.

—————loading—————

This time the word moves. Slowly. Not forward. Deeper. Somewhere under the text, Level 6 is being rebuilt. Not finished. But busy.

LEVEL 6 WILL FOLLOW SHORTLY

Under it, smaller:

Please keep your tool with you.

—————loading—————

(that means turn the page, ya n00b)

Level 6 – Pornographic Jurisdiction



—————loading—————

(that means turn the page, ya n00b)

The loading screen does not pull back this time. It undresses. Not fully, not beautifully, not seductively, more like old wallpaper peeling off a damp wall: in strips, in scraps, with glue leftovers that cannot decide whether they still hold or just keep sticking because nobody ever asked them for permission. Underneath, no new room appears, only something that briefly tries to be a room and immediately overdoes it. It is warm. Not Level-2 warm, not the wrong early-high-summer warmth of a through-road, but inside-warm, body-warm, too close to the skin. The air does not lie in the room, it hangs on it. On the walls, on the doorframe, on the bass guitar, on the thoughts that wanted to keep going and now suddenly stick to terms you should not look at too long, because otherwise they start explaining themselves.

Body office, bed, mirror, cheap light, and jurisdiction sweat in the same badly ventilated room. Nothing pornographic gets prettier here. It gets more bureaucratic, stickier, tighter against the form, until every hint has a stamp mark on its skin.

The floor is soft. Not carpet. Not mattress. Not moss. More like an undecided surface made of room, stage, waiting area, and very bad music video. On the left there is a bed, but not where a bed should be. On the right, another. Farther back, another. All are made, all look used, all are empty, and none looks like anybody slept here. Above every bed hangs a small pissed-on sign.

OCCUPIED

Under it, smaller:

WITHOUT PRESENCE

The acoustic bass guitar hangs on you and for the first time does not seem only like a tool, but like the only halfway honest object in a setting acting as if it understood a joke too early and now had to spread it across a whole area. Its wood lies warm against your body. The strings are quiet. Too quiet. As if waiting to see whether you are really joining this or only watching a sexual hint sneak into administration and immediately apply for its own stamp.

In front of you stands a chipped sign.

OFFICE FOR BODILY OTHERWISE-NESS

Under it:

Please take a number if you will have already come.

The number dispenser hangs crooked. It does not spit out shit slips, but small thoughts stuck together that get pulled back in right away. Beside the entrance nobody is sitting. Still a voice says: "Next." You do not go in. The filth office comes out. First a dirty desk on wheels, then a sink with no water connection, then a swivel chair nobody sits on but that looks very exhausted. Behind it come file cabinets with stickers: LITTLE DEATH, BIG MISASSIGNMENT, PREMATURE IMAGES, LATE SUBMISSION OF JURISDICTION, CONSENSUAL MISINTERPRETATION, NOT FOR THE PERSONNEL FILE. The drawers open a bit, close again, open again, as if they themselves do not know whether they want to reveal something or only look important.

A caseworker of the Time Warper Authority 1978 comes backward out of a door, carries a dusty folder in front of his face, and says: "The process was completed too early." From another door somebody answers: "It happens."

"But not officially."

"Then make it official."

Clack.

On the wall appears:

COMPLETION BEFORE BEGINNING PROVISIONALLY RECOGNIZED

The wall sweats. Not much. Just enough for the writing to slide slowly downward and for COMPLETION to become DISCHARGE for a moment. Nobody comments on that. Good. The bass guitar rattles softly, maybe out of defiance, maybe out of dry humor, maybe because in Discordia every vibration eventually finds a jurisdiction. The note is not sexy. It is dry, wooden, a little too low for the scene, and exactly because of that it briefly saves the scene from falling completely into cheap fog. The room reacts offended. A red light goes on. Then a blue one. Then both at once, which makes the bed area look like an operations briefing in a very badly run erotic studio. Music comes from a speaker, but it starts at the wrong end: first a final chord, then a guitar strike, then a breath, then a voice that is not singing yet, but sounds as if it came in too early and sees no reason to apologize for it.

A thin arrow appears on the floor.

TO THE SEXUAL HINT

It points in every direction. You go straight ahead. That counts. The floor gives slightly under every step. Not unpleasant. Just personal. Every step makes a noise that is not quite step, not quite mattress, not quite applause. Two. Three. Two. Three. Vidiralala still lies under everything, but here it has become wetter, softer, less hallway, more basin, more false beat in the blood. The rhythm does not want to march. It does not want to dance either. It wants to lean on something and claim it was an accident. On the left, a chamber opens.

Inside it lies a pillow on a pedestal. Not as a shrine. Not as a joke. As a substitute.

Above it hangs a sign:

SUBSTITUTE CONTACT POINT

Under it:

Please do not press anything that does not press back.

The pillow is slightly dented, as if somebody held it for a long time and then acted like that was nothing. Next to the pedestal lies a shit form titled:

APPLICATION FOR CLOSENESS WITHOUT PERSON

All fields are already filled in.

Name: illegible

Reason: awake Object: sufficient Consequences: unclear Dignity: later You do not read on. Or you do. The words read themselves into you and spread out there like somebody who came late and still finds the better seat. A door slams. Behind it somebody laughs. Not funny. Not sad. Just short. Then the same door opens again, and behind it there is no room, but a corridor of changing booths. On every booth hangs a smeared sign: I, YOU, THE OTHERS, WHO ARE YOU, WE WERE ALREADY IN THERE, GAME OVER, with the last one immediately pasted over by KEEP READING THE BOOK. The curtains move though there is no wind. You see legs. Or shadows of legs. Or the memory that bodies are always already too much and too little.

You touch the lowest string. A note moves through the corridor. The curtains hold still. Not out of fear. Out of attention. The note is not loud enough to command anything, but deep enough to pull things out of the wrong conversation. The signs stop asking questions. WHO ARE YOU becomes WHO WERE YOU for a moment, then WHO WILL HAVE BEEN THERE, then the shit slip falls off. Behind it there is nothing. That is better. A voice from the third booth says: "We are the others." A voice from the fourth says: "No, you're too late." A voice from the first says: "I'm not responsible." A voice from the second says nothing at all, but the curtain moves as if silence just took on a body posture.

You keep going. The bass guitar bumps lightly against your hip. Dull. The dull sound drives into the walls and makes them less sticky for a moment. The light becomes more normal. Not good. Just less eager. The beds do not disappear, but they stop offering themselves. The dirty office for body other-stuff pushes itself back a bit and stands offended beside a vending machine that only gives out MINUTE.

On the machine it says:

IN A

Under it blinks:

MINUTE

Under it somebody stuck on by hand:

DON'T PUSH

The machine rattles and spits out a can. It is empty. Still it foams over. The foam runs over the floor, immediately becomes shit-ass paper, folds itself into a shit form, and carries the heading:

PREMATURE COMPLETION

The Time Warper Authority 1978 stamps from offscreen:

REPORTED TOO LATE

Then:

ON TIME

Then:

BOTH

The bass guitar rattles again, this time on purpose. Your hand has brushed the string, and the room no longer reacts offended but briefly useful. The foam pulls back. The forms no longer stick to your shoes. A path forms between the beds, not because you need it, but because the world is slowly understanding that you are not here to climb into every image it offers. On the right lies a kind of sports mat. Circles are drawn on it.

Mandatory Reading Aid: The body is not explained here. It only gets a badly ventilated jurisdiction and sweats back.

Next to it a sign:

REPRODUCTIVE GYMNASTICS FOR ADVANCED BEGINNERS

Under it:

Today: pelvis, gene, future, wrong ambition

A man in workout clothes counts: "One, two, three, hold, save, breathe, cramp, smile." He does not look like a trainer. He looks like somebody who accidentally became an app. Behind him stand participants who do not want to participate, but will already have handed in their consent form. On their shirts it says WE'RE SAVING THIS, but nobody knows exactly what.

"Join in?" the trainer asks.

You play a note. The mat rolls itself up. The trainer looks at the rolled mat, then at you, then at the bass guitar.

"Also good," he says. "Easier on the knees."

That is probably the most reasonable statement in Level 6.

Mandatory Reading Aid: Not every exercise leads to motion. Some only lead to sore muscles with mission-consciousness.

The sentence hangs briefly above the sports mat, gets hit by a drop of wall moisture, and runs. Mission-consciousness becomes sink-consciousness, then sink basin, then just basin. The word falls to the floor and stays there like a component that will be installed wrong later. You walk past it. The air changes. Less office room. More night. But not real night. More the idea of night when you have been lying awake too long and the body already wanted to sleep while the head keeps pressing around, asking around, jerking around somewhere until even the thoughts are sore and still nothing is decided. The beds move closer together without touching each other. A window appears above them, but outside there is no street, only a black screen with reflection. In it you do not see yourself. Good. You see the bass guitar. Even better. It hangs lower than before, as if it has taken over a little more weight, and for a moment it really seems as if it is not accompanying you but holding you more upright.

A voice comes from the black window.

"You want closeness?"

A second voice answers immediately:

"No."

A third:

"Yes."

A fourth:

"But no talking."

A fifth:

"But holding, yeah."

A sixth:

"But not holding tight."

The voices overlap, fall into a rhythm, lose it again, find instead a false chorus that is never spoken. No sentence finishes. No wish signs. No body appears. And still the scene is full of bodies, because everything here has some form of substitute and every spare part acts like it is only accidentally warm. You play. Not loud. Not good. One note, then two, then three, then the fourth low enough to get under the beds. The mattresses do not rise. No cheap ghost scene. But the OCCUPIED WITHOUT PRESENCE signs come loose from the frames and fall slowly to the floor. Under them there is nothing. The beds are now simply beds. Empty, yes. Occupied, no. Possible, maybe. Responsible, definitely not.

The room breathes out. Or you do. That is hard to separate in Level 6. At the end of the bed area there is a small altar that does not want to be one. On it lie things that do not belong together: a crumpled tissue, a guitar pick, a receipt, a piece of soap, a

screwdriver, half an apple, an empty picture frame, and a packet of tissues that says FAMILY PACK, though nobody here is family. Above the altar hangs a half-torn sign:

LITTLE DEATH

Under it, added with ballpoint pen:

big administration

A caseworker sits beside it wearing black arm warmers.

"Please indicate whether this is end, beginning, relief, body logic, biology, comedy, or art."

You say nothing. She waits. You play a note. She checks art, crosses it out again, checks comedy, crosses that out too, makes a new field and writes: tool use Then she looks almost satisfied.

"We didn't have that yet."

A short moan comes from the speaker. Not erotic. More like a system error acting as if it were grown-up. Syntax Testicle Error The speaker clears its throat. Syntax Dogshit Error

"Better," says the caseworker.

The bass guitar gives a small, dry note. It sounds like an eye-roll made of wood. You go on. The floor rises slightly and becomes a footbridge. Left and right below it there is no water, but a sea of body words that no longer fit into bodies: skin, hand, neck, mouth, belly, bed, sleep, pressure, grip, closeness, away, awake, in a minute, moment, later, please, no, yes. They do not float down there as poetry. They float like material from an overfilled warehouse. Some bump into each other and briefly form new meanings that immediately fall apart again because nobody is responsible for making language behave.

Mandatory Reading Aid: The body does not get an erotic frame. It gets office air, bad ventilation, and a form that sweats.

The footbridge sways. The bass guitar does not. It lies so calmly against you now that you get restless. Halfway across stands Kid EO Hoe Jima. Of course. This time he is wearing sunglasses, though there is no sunlight here. In his hand he holds a clipboard with nothing on it, probably because he assumes his ideas do not fit on shit-ass paper.

"I have to step in real quick," he says.

You do not stop. He walks beside you.

"Level 6 is sensitive. Very distinctive. Very bodily. Very dangerous for tone. You could make a significant section out of it. Bigger. Braver. More sweat. More symbolism. Maybe a scene where the bass guitar—"

You play a note. Kid EO stops. Not because he is convinced. Because the note lands exactly where his next sentence wanted to stand. He takes off the sunglasses. Underneath he is wearing a smaller pair of sunglasses.

"Clever," he says.

Then he steps aside. Not voluntarily. The footbridge shifted under him.

He now stands on a small pedestal labeled:

EXTERNAL ENLARGEMENT TEMPORARILY SHUT OFF

Kid EO looks at it.

"This is not final."

Nobody contradicts him. That is enough. At the end of the footbridge there is a door made of milky glass. Behind it light moves, soft, unclear, a little cheap, a little beautiful. On the door it says:

IDENTITY BOOTH

Under it:

Please enter individually as several.

You do not open it. The door does not open either. Instead it becomes transparent. Behind it stand outlines. One looks like you, but only because he is carrying a bass guitar. One looks like someone you do not want to be. One like someone you would like to play, but not long enough. One like another who claims to be you because the name fits him better. One wears no body, only a question.

"Qui êtes-vous?" says the question.

The language is suddenly wrong and exactly because of that right. You do not answer. The bass guitar does not answer either. But your hand lies on the strings. That is not enough. So you play. Two. Three. Not as an answer. As a non-answer. The outlines do not disappear. They only lose the claim to decide. The question stays for another moment, then gets smaller, then becomes a greasy sign, then a label on a drawer, then dust. From the dust briefly forms:

THE OTHERS

Then:

ALSO JUST MATERIAL

Then nothing. You walk through the glass without breaking it. On the other side is a small, bright room. No sex. No skin. No pose. Only a sink, a towel, a chair, and a mirror hanging too high. The water is not running. The towel is dry. The chair is empty. The mirror shows the upper part of the bass guitar and not your face. For the first time in Level 6 it is truly quiet. Not prudish quiet. Not relieved quiet. A quiet after too many hints, in which the body may be body again without immediately becoming comparison, joke, shit form, substitute, desire, or punchline.

You reach for the towel. It is clean. That surprises you more than it should.

On the edge of the sink lies a small note:

Please do not leave the body in the condition in which language found it.

You read the sentence once. Then again. It does not become clearer. Good. The bass guitar touches the sink. A note. Very short. The porcelain answers bright. Not beautiful. But clean. The room does not change. No path opens. No filth office steps out. No stamp clacks. No booth asks who you are. The note simply stays in the air briefly, and for this brief moment Level 6 is not dirty, not horny, not showing off, not funny, not deep, not even especially important.

Just there. That does not last long. Of course not. A bubbling comes from the drain.

Then a voice:

"Process completed?"

You play a low note. The drain goes silent.

On the mirror appears:

NOT COMPLETED

Under it:

BUT FURTHER

That is fair. The door on the other side of the room was not there before. Now it is there and acts as if it was always the real door. On it it says:

LEVEL 7

Under it:

1978

The number does not feel like a date. Not like age. Not like proof. More like something in the background that has been cracking its knuckles the whole time. You go to the door. The bass guitar hangs on you. Not lighter. Not heavier. Just closer. Behind you the whole area starts talking quietly again: beds, filth office, booths, mat, vending machine, footbridge, mirror, drain. Everything wants one more punchline. Everything wants one more addendum. Everything wants to jerk around one more time until even the addendum needs an addendum. You play without turning around.

Once. Then once more. Then three times. Then the low fourth aftersound. The whole area shuts up for a moment. This is not a victory. But pleasant.

—————loading—————

(that means turn the page, ya n00b)

Level 7 - 1978

1978 shines crooked. At the edge of the year number, an old sticker is stuck there, half torn off, half proud, definitely not approved.

—————loading—————

(that means turn the page, you n00b)

This time the loading screen is not interrupted. It does not look damaged either. It only looks too quiet, and that quiet makes it more suspicious than any glitch.

1978 does not lie in the street as origin, but as old dust under the technology. Sidewalk, arpeggio, and previous learning slide over each other until the year number is less a date than a layer that crunches along when you walk.

—————loading—————

The word stays standing. Not long. Only long enough for you to notice how little it moves. Then it gets smaller. Not farther away. Smaller in the head. As if the screen is not disappearing, but sliding behind something that was already there before. Behind the page. Behind the room. Behind time. Or in front of it. Or beside it. How the hell would you know. In 1978 your brain was not that far yet. The sentence is not written there. It is simply right. You are standing on a street again. Not Level 2.

Not quite. The street is quieter. The sun is not too high, not too hot, not so obviously wrong. It is bright, but the brightness keeps its distance. The houses stand there as if they had learned not to give everything away right away. Windows are shut. Curtains hang calm. No dog barks. No car honks. No countdown ticks down in your field of vision. That does not make it better. It makes it older. The acoustic bass guitar hangs on you. In the silence it sounds heavier than it is. The strap lies over your shoulder, the body against your body, the neck a little forward, and you notice that an instrument takes up space even when it is not being played. Maybe especially then. Sometimes silence is only a tone that has not become responsible yet.

At the edge of the street stands a faded sign.

1978

No explanation. No date. No place. No arrow. Only the number. It stands there as if it were not information, but weather. You go closer. The asphalt sounds dry under your steps. Not warm. Not cold. An ordinary, old sound, like paths that had already been used before any archive gave them a meaning. Farther ahead lies a sidewalk. Beside the sidewalk a strip of grass. The grass is short, almost neat, but darker in one spot. Nothing lies there. That is exactly why you look.

The spot does not look back. Good. Or bad. You keep going. The street does not change, but it remembers. Not you. Earlier versions. A door that led to an intern. A crossing where a traffic light wanted to decide even without power. A table with bread on it, salt, an egg, and a comma. A wall where words slid around until somebody

stopped putting them in order. Discordia, who does not come back because she never fully leaves once she has begun forming paths instead of statements.

But here she is quieter. 1978 does not lie inside Discordia. 1978 lies behind it. Or in front of it. Or where a process does not yet know it will one day be suspected as origin. You touch the lowest string. No tone. Only a short give under the finger. Then an overlay appears in front of you. Not bright. Not digital. More like a shit slip that spent too long in a pants pocket and now pretends to be user guidance. Short practice unit

Below it :

Please play the four available tones in the order in which they have already happened.

You do not play right away. The street waits. Not impatiently. Streets have time. On the left side, the table from Level 3 suddenly stands there. Not complete. Only its edge, a plate, a glass, a shadow that does not quite belong. On the right side stands the door from Level 1, but with no room behind it. Farther back you can see the loading screen from Level 2, very small, like an old TV picture in a shop window that has been closed for years.

Everything is there. Nothing stays. The overlay flickers. Tutorial starts shortly.

Then :

Tutorial completed.

Then :

Please begin.

You grip the bass guitar tighter. Four tones. Not as song. Not as proof. Not as explanation. Only four movements already prepared in your body before the notice asked for them. The first tone is dry and too short. The second brighter, but not bright. The third knows the first. The fourth is lower, not because it has to be, but because it carries the others. The street stands still. Then something changes behind it. Not on it. Behind it. The sidewalk shifts half a breath to the left. The front door from Level 2 opens without a house. The table from Level 3 knocks once, although it is only an edge. The wall from Level 4 shows GOES again for one moment, then the word disappears as if afraid of becoming too helpful.

The overlay appears again. Arpeggio technique successfully mastered.

Below it :

Tutorial is starting.

You play the same four tones again. Not cleaner. Better. That is not the same. This time the tones do not stand next to each other. They do not rise and fall politely. They grab into each other like little steps that vanish the moment you step on them. The fourth tone stays under the street for a moment and makes the asphalt hollow. Tutorial canceled: ability already present. The overlay folds itself up and falls onto the sidewalk. It lies there like a receipt. You do not pick it up. The bass guitar hangs still on you again.

But the silence is different now. It has learned that it can become four at any time. In front of you the street grows narrower, although the houses do not move closer. The air does not get darker, but denser, like in a room where nobody has moved furniture for years so nobody notices what is missing underneath. A curtain hangs in a window. Behind it stands a figure. Maybe. Only an outline. A head, a shoulder, an arm. Then it is only cloth. Then maybe again. You keep going.

A sign on the sidewalk says:

LEVEL 1

Then, below it:

THE INTERN 12.6

The door is open. You look in. The room is empty. No Intern. No meat sandwich. No red button. Only a table with dust and a spot where something had lain. The absence is cleaner than the room. It looks fresh. Almost wiped. You do not want to go in. The bass guitar touches the doorframe. A tone. Immediately a meat sandwich lies on the table. Not as return. As proof that return is unnecessary. The red button appears beside it, but it is not red. It is gray. On it does not say REWIND, but:

NOT YET

Then the whole room disappears. The door stays. You keep going. A few steps later, the bus stop from Level 2 stands at the edge of the street. The schedule is empty. Only one time stands there.

19:78

That is not a time. The schedule knows that too. Under the bench lies the envelope. White. Unlabeled. You see it, and exactly in that moment you know you will not read it this time. Not because it is harmless. Because some things get stronger when you prove to them they can be read. The bass guitar makes no sound. Good. Sometimes not playing is the most exact technique. Behind the stop stands a house with a front door. A shadow in front of it. The shadow is empty, but not abandoned. It stands with the patience of somebody who does not have to come anymore because he has been there long enough.

You do not stop. Not from courage. From rhythm. Two steps. Three. But quieter than in Discordia. Here the pattern is not free. Here it is careful. It creeps beside time, feels along the edge, does not hold onto it. The world does not feel like a place where rules have been suspended, but like a place where rules, before your birth, already decided they would become important later, retroactively.

Mandatory Reading Aid: 1978 proves nothing. The number lies as dust under the technology and only crunches when you walk.

Mandatory Reading Aid: Not every past lies behind you.

Mandatory Reading Aid: Some past walks beside you because it noticed that chasing would be too obvious.

The sentence appears on a street sign that immediately becomes a normal street sign again.

Now it says:

SOUTH—

The rest is covered. No wind. The branch does not move. Of course not. You walk underneath it. For one moment something brushes your arm. Not the branch. The memory that the branch will already have touched you once in another level. The street does not tilt. It stays. That is worse. A little farther on, the asphalt gets brighter. Not from sun. From shit-ass paper. For a few meters the ground consists of thin pages stacked so tight on top of each other that you can walk on them. Under your steps they do not rustle. They breathe. On one page there is a sentence, but only briefly enough that it may not be fully read.

The investigation could never clearly confirm whether the origin lay before the origin. Then it is gone.

On the next page it says:

A second without a first was not excluded.

Then:

The dog was not questioned.

Then:

The consequences for the previous worldview remain
unresolved.

You play the four tones. Not loud. The pages lie flatter. One of them folds itself into a little triangle and points left. You do not go left. The triangle stays friendly. It was only a suggestion. In 1978 even hints are not yet sure whether they are allowed to be hints. To your left, the dining room from Level 3 appears. Not as room. As smell. Bread. Butter. Egg. Water. A body that briefly gets edges again.

Then the table stands in the middle of the street. The plate is empty, the glass half full, the salt lies in three lines. The fourth line is no longer missing. It now runs under the bass guitar, across the asphalt, and disappears in the shadow of a house that looks too old to be new in this level.

On the second plate it says:

FOR WHOM?

The writing fades before you could answer. Good. You would have said nothing. Outside, if there is an outside here, something golden moves. Not the figure herself. Only a shine between two windows. The icon did not come along. But its reflection apparently filed for jurisdiction and was not rejected in time. You play the first tone. The shine gets smaller. The second. It becomes ordinary. The third. It is only light now. The fourth. It does not disappear. It remains light. That is okay.

Not everything has to be defeated for it to stop staring at you. The street gets quieter. At the end of the next block stands a wall where someone has written in chalk:

WINS

Below it:

WON

Below it:

WILL HAVE BEEN WON

The words are no longer the subject of a discussion. They stand there like old campaign posters after rain. You can still tell they were once urgent, but the urgency has faded. Under the three lines is a point. Beside it a line. Under that, an imprint that maybe used to be called NOT LIKE THAT and now is only a dark spot. You walk past. The bass guitar bumps against your hip. Dull. The chalk does not fall off. The wall does not answer. The Works Council is not here. Good. He would freeze here.

Not bodily. Jurisdictionally.

A little farther on, a small sign hangs on a fence:

TIME WARPED AUTHORITY 1978

Below it:

Field Office for Things Observed Before Their Creation

The gate behind it is closed. Through the bars you see no yard, but the loading screen from the beginning. It stands there like a quiet dog. Without dog. A caseworker walks past behind the gate, does not see you, stops anyway and says, "The file was opened before the affected person had enough brain." Then he keeps walking. You are not sure whether he meant you. That is probably the point. The street continues, but it slowly loses its present. The houses get flatter. The windows older. The cars disappear, not all at once, but as if somebody were removing them from the scene because they do not fit the time yet. A moped remains. Then that too does not. A bicycle leans against a wall, then it is a different bicycle, then only a shadow with handlebars.

You walk beside time. Not in front of it. Not behind it. Beside it. Maybe. How the hell would you know. The bass guitar does not know either. But it finds the distance. Four tones. The first three lie under the steps. The fourth lies a little off to the side, like a dog turd you do not want to step in and that therefore changes the whole direction. You stop briefly. The comparison is dumb. So it is probably true. On the sidewalk in front of you lies nothing. That spot again. Darker than the rest. Not fresh.

Not old. Not there. You walk past it. Very slowly. Not out of fear. Out of respect for banality. The ground does not crack. No error appears. No Syntax Dogshit Error. No life path visibly branches off. It branches off anyway. One street later you stand in front of the door from Level 1 again. Or it stands in front of you. This time it does not say THE INTERN 12.6 on it.

There it says:

TUTORIAL

Below it:

Please wait until you have learned what you can already do.

The door opens. Behind it is no room, but a small black area, hardly bigger than a vestibule. On the wall hangs a bass guitar. Your bass guitar. But it also hangs on you. That is not possible. So it fits.

Mandatory Reading Aid: 1978 does not want to be proof. The number lies under the street like dust in the switch box and waits for the wrong step.

A voice says:

"Play the four tones."

No voice you know. No Authority. No Intern. No Works Council. Maybe the book. Maybe an error with good pronunciation. You play. The bass guitar on the wall plays at the same time. Not echo. Not accompaniment. Anticipation. You grip the first tone, and it has already played it. You grip the second, and it plays the third. You grip the third, and it waits. You grip the fourth, and both instruments sound together for one short moment.

Then a text appears:

ARPEGGIO TECHNIQUE LEARNED

Below it:

ARPEGGIO TECHNIQUE ALREADY MASTERED

Below it:

TUTORIAL MAY NOW BEGIN

The door behind you falls shut. The tutorial is over. Or it begins now. In the small black area, four points light up on the floor. Not notes. Not keys. Points. You step on the first. A short tone. On the second. A brighter one. On the third. The first remembers. On the fourth. The wall opens. Not the door. The wall. You step out and are back on the street. But the street is no longer the same memory. It is an exercise that has learned to take you seriously. The houses stay calm. The windows no longer look quite so much. The shadow in front of the front door still stands there, but it has lost jurisdiction.

Above the street hangs a sky that does not want to be past or present. It is simply old. Not historically old. Bodily old. Like a photo you have never seen and still recognize. For one moment, theater smell comes out of an open window. Dust. Makeup. Wood. Black cloth. A curtain that does not open. A stage that already exists before anyone knows what is supposed to happen on it. You think of 1978 and of someone who maybe already wrote back then, but was not yet the name later shelves would make out of him. You do not think it through. That would be too clean.

The bass guitar hangs on you. It is not an answer now. It is a procedure. You play the four tones again, and this time it becomes no effect, no path, no filthy office, no shit form. Only a short run across four spots that sticks in your hands. Not perfect. Not

virtuosic. Mastered before you know what to call mastery. The asphalt takes the sound. Under the street, something moves. Not monster. Not memory. More like a deeper street. A street under the street. No cars drive there. No people walk there. No dog turds lie there. There lie the conditions for somebody to slip above at some point.

You keep going. The world gets more paranoid, but not louder. No pursuit. No siren. No countdown. Only this certainty that everything you see already has a later evaluation. The house numbers are not watching you. They were only attached in a way that lets them claim it later. The windows do not hide anyone. They only keep the possibility open. The sidewalk is not dangerous. It has merely been prepared for years. A shit slip is stuck to a lamppost. WHO OR WHAT IS SOUTHRING GENE?

Below it several boxes:

Person

Musician

Game

Error

Condition

Successor

no sufficient result

None is checked.

At the bottom, handwritten:

And otherwise too.

You keep going. The shit slip does not come loose. That is its way of not stopping you. Ahead of you the street suddenly gets very straight. Too straight. Not like in Level 2, where it wanted to cut through. Here it lies there like a sentence already formulated before the words existed. At the end of this straight line stands a small screen on a stand. On the screen a video runs without sound. You see mountains, streets, housing blocks, a few blurry album covers, a dog, an empty sidewalk, a calculator, a number, a comma, an acoustic bass guitar, then the street again.

The video repeats. Not exactly the same. On the second run there is a child on the sidewalk. On the third not. On the fourth a shadow lies there. On the fifth only light. On the sixth the screen is off. On the seventh you do not see your reflection. That is good. Instead the screen shows the bass guitar. It hangs closer to you than it should. You do not play. The screen plays the four tones. Very quietly.

Then appears:

1978 DOES NOT CORRESPOND TO THE YEAR

Below it:

OR DOES IT

Below it:

PLEASE DO NOT ANSWER BEFORE THE FIRST THOUGHT

The screen goes out. A little farther on, a front door stands open. Behind it lies no room. Behind it lies dark. Not horror-dark. Before-dark. A dark in which nothing has been decided yet and therefore everything has way too many possibilities. You go in. The bass guitar touches the doorframe. A tone. The dark answers with three. Then the fourth from below. Not from you. From there. For one moment you do not know whether you are playing or being played. Then it does not matter.

The dark becomes a hallway. The hallway is narrow, quiet, almost friendly. On the left and right hang pictures, but they do not show the past. They show spots where the past will later claim it had been meant: a sidewalk without event, a dog without guilt, an album cover without final name, a dining room without hunger, a wall without symbol, a bed without body, a bass guitar without player, a book without game. At the end of the hallway stands a yellowed sign.

LEVEL 7 WILL BE CONTINUED

Below it:

1978

Below it, very small:

Please stay beside time. Behind it there is too little room.

You read the sentence. It is almost helpful. So you distrust it. The acoustic bass guitar sounds once more. Not loud. Not played. Once. Then once again. Then three times. Then the deep fourth afterring. The hallway opens. Not into Level 8. Not yet. Only into a quieter part of the same number.

—————loading—————

(that means turn the page, you n00b)

Level 7.7.7 - 1978³

The three sevens act like they are mysticism. One of them, though, definitely smells like an old hard drive and a dusty folder nobody was allowed to open. The overlay appears only briefly.

(that means keep going, you n00b)

Then it is gone. No loading screen. No line. No friendly page-turning. The quieter part of the same number does not last long. At first it is only a tremble in the floor, so fine it could also be memory, or the aftersound of the four tones still lying somewhere under the street and asking each other whether they had already been played or first had to be learned. Then the tremble moves into the walls, into the house numbers, into the narrow hallway where the pictures hung, into the sidewalk without event, into the dog without guilt, into the album cover without final name, and suddenly you notice that 1978 was not quiet, it had only been speaking too deep the whole time.

Theater tremor, curtain, bass run, Kid EO, and explosion hang in the same dusty hall. The triple year swallowed old cues for too long and now spits them out not as explanation, but as creaking under the boards.

The acoustic bass guitar hangs on you. Closer than before. Not tighter. Closer. As if the previous exercise did not unlock a technique, but removed a distance. The hallway in front of you gets wider, but not more open. Left and right the pictures remain, but they no longer hold their frames. A sidewalk tilts slightly forward. The dog slides to the side. The album cover flutters although no wind is moving. The bass guitar in the picture without player knocks its neck against the picture edge, once, then once again, then three times, then deeper, and you feel the fourth afterting in your own instrument before you play it.

Noise comes from the end of the hallway. Not outside. Not street. Theater. You do not recognize that because you see a stage. You recognize it because the noise acts rehearsed while it is falling apart. Voices crash into each other. Wood creaks. Steps run across boards that immediately talk back offended. A curtain is ripped open, then pulled shut again, then yelled at by somebody who apparently believes curtains are negotiable. You keep going. The floor shakes harder. Not apocalyptic. Not end of the world. More like a building that no longer wants to carry the argument in the next room. The pictures on the walls begin to cover each other. The sidewalk becomes a stage. The stage becomes an archive. The archive becomes a street running sideways through an auditorium. The seats are empty, but they do not stand still. They move up, row by row, as if they wanted to hear better who is currently explaining to whom that nobody is responsible.

At the end of the hallway a theater room opens. Or a rehearsal room. Or an old hall that has not lost its better days, but is still suing them. The curtain is black. Not noble black. Dust black. Stage-cloth black. A black that stores every movement and later returns it as a fold. On the floor stick marks made of old tape. Some arrows point to chairs, some to doors, some to places where nothing stands, but apparently something once must have stood very important. Over everything hangs that smell of wood, dust, makeup, sweat,

electrics, and a performance that had already been canceled before anyone announced it.

On stage several voices are arguing. You do not see right away who they belong to. Maybe nobody. Maybe the sets.

"That was my cue!"

"No, your cue comes only after he has already played!"

"He has not played yet!"

"He will have been having played!"

"That is not a stage direction!"

"It has been since 1978!"

A spotlight does not fall down, but it thinks about it loudly. The tremor increases. The bass guitar reacts first, before you do. The strings tremble, not like with wind, not like with fear, but like with an invitation rude enough to finally become understandable. You place your hand on the neck, and for one moment the argument gets quieter, not because anyone is silent, but because all the voices briefly look for the same frequency and get in each other's way while doing it. Then it breaks loose again.

"If the number comes three times, it has to be treated
threefold!"

"No, cubically!"

"Cubic is not threefold!"

"That is exactly the kind of statement that will later be
wrong right!"

"Who wrote that?"

"Nobody!"

"Then who is responsible for it?"

"That is a different act!"

The hall now shakes in time, but the time is not straight. It jumps. Two short beats, three wide ones, then a gap where something waits that should not be waiting. Vidiralala is not audible, but it is stuck in the static. The rows of seats move forward, back again, forward again, as if trying to fulfill a choreography submitted as a complaint form. Above the stage hangs a rusty sign that maybe used to say EXIT, but with every tremor wants to be read differently: UPWAY, DOWNWAY, PROCEDURE, GOING-ABOUT, WAY.

Mandatory Reading Aid: The hall has swallowed old cues. Now it creaks them back out.

You play the first tone. It is not loud. But the floor answers. Not with echo. With consent against its will. The second tone hits the left set, a painted house wall with a window on it that immediately opens, although it is only painted. Behind it someone

yells: "Too early!" The third tone goes into the rows of seats and makes the seats fold up, row by row, like polite panic. The fourth tone goes under the stage. It stays there. Then the stage floor lifts a finger-width.

Not much. Enough. From the gap underneath comes no smoke, no blood, no monster. Only shit-ass paper. Old pages, half-scenes, discarded beginnings, subtitles, lower thirds, evidence pieces, documentary sentences that thought they were objective until they heard music. They push out and get stuck on the tape marks. On one page it says Most people will never become part of a documentary, but the word most is crossed out. On another it says The consequences remain unresolved, and underneath someone has written: good. The tremor gets denser. The sentences in the room get longer because short sentences no longer have enough space to run away from the number, and every thought that begins immediately hooks into another one that maybe started earlier, maybe will end later, maybe does not belong to it at all, but still uses the same floor.

You play the four tones once more, this time faster, not hectic, but more decided, as if your body understood that arpeggio here is not decoration but locomotion, not technique but the only way not to become a statement yourself in a room that has turned into argument. The stage creaks. The black curtain pulls itself open and shows behind it no second stage, but the hallway from Level 1, the street from Level 2, the table from Level 3 and the wall from Level 4, all at once, all way too close, all frozen before Discordia and now loosened again, as if the bass guitar had not brought the old rooms back, but briefly shown that they were never finally left.

The Intern room stands in the back left, empty, with a gray Rewind button on the table. The through-road lies across the stage without moving the furniture. The dining-room table stands in the middle of the roadway, and the three salt lines run across the tape marks until they end at the wall with GOES. Over everything flickers 1978, not as year number, but as light value, as paranoia, as stage direction somebody forgot to cross out. A shadow in front of a front door is there again, but it does not enter. It does not even wait. It is present in such a way that absence beside it looks like work.

Out of the theater now comes more than argument. The argument becomes the room. One voice is on the left, but its sentence ends on the right. Another begins on stage and grows older in the audience. A third calls from a dusty folder: "If the origin is filed later, the order of seats must be newly chaired!" Immediately the chairs push themselves into a different order, but nobody sits down because every sitting position is already retroactively suspicious. From above a program falls down. On it says 1978³, below that Duration: before it started, below that Intermission: canceled, below that Audience: provisional.

You keep playing. First four tones. Then four in motion. Then the same four, but so that they no longer seem like single points, but like a run stumbling over itself and thereby getting faster. The hand finds the strings earlier, the neck of the bass guitar lies firmer in your direction, the body vibrates against your chest, and out of the old C-E-C-H motif comes no spoken theme, no melody somebody could whistle, but a technique for getting through, an arpeggiated escape route, a method of not answering the number but circling it until for a moment it does not know whether it wants to be year, birth, calculation error, theater founding, archive stamp, or only a particularly stubborn weather condition.

A spotlight goes on. Then another. Then all of them. The hall does not get brighter, but more visible. That is worse. You can now see the dust threads in the air, the scratches in the stage floor, the crooked sets, the doors without rooms, the dog running as shadow under a seat, the sidewalk ending between two rows of chairs, the album cover refusing to show its suffix completely, and far in the back a small booth with TUTORIAL written on it, although you know exactly it comes too late. The booth door opens.

Inside hangs another bass guitar. No. The same one. No. A version of it that had already played before you moved the first finger.

A text appears above the booth:

Please repeat the already mastered technique for first-time learning.

You play. Not for the booth. Against the nonsense. The four tones now run across the strings, not clean in a school sense, but more exact than any correct exercise here should be allowed to be. The first tone slams the booth door shut. The second opens it from the inside again. The third lets the text fall down. The fourth lies underneath it and makes a step out of it. You do not step on it. You no longer need it. The tremor takes up the rhythm.

Mandatory Reading Aid: The hall does not spit out old cues out of politeness. It creaks because the stage has swallowed too long.

Or you take up the tremor. The difference gets thin. The stage begins to play with you, not beautifully, not voluntarily, but unavoidably. Two shocks come from the left, three from below, two from the rows of seats, three from the old documentary sentences, and somewhere in the rear area a voice complains that this was not provided for in the schedule, while another answers that schedule is only the slowest form of excuse. The bass guitar no longer only carries you. It pulls you into the spots where the floor is about to give before it does, and your hand chases the four tones until they no longer seem like gripped tones, but like something breaking out under your fingers and still finally belonging to you.

Then Kid EO Hoe Jima appears. Of course he does not appear on time. He appears exactly at the moment when on-time has stopped being polite. He stands in the middle of the stage, wearing a black jacket that looks like it survived a press conference, and holds a megaphone although his voice never needed one. Behind him a set collapses and immediately rebuilds itself, bigger, because he probably cannot do otherwise. He raises his hand as if he could conduct the tremor and says, "Stop. We have to classify this." You keep playing.

"No, really," says Kid EO, louder now, while the floor under him works in two and three beats, "this is a decisive moment. We need clarity. We need an answer. Is 1978 origin, projection, year of birth, theatrical premonition, numerical suspicious circumstance, psychic anteroom, literary influence channel, or just an overcoded joke that was taken seriously too early?"

You play faster. The first tone hits his megaphone. It gives a short, offended squeal. Kid EO does not lower it. "The audience needs guidance." The second tone hits the word audience, which immediately falls off the wall and rolls under a chair.

"The character needs motivation."

The third tone hits motivation, and somewhere a cabinet full of old reasons opens, all of them falling out at the same time and none of them reaching the floor.

"The author needs distance."

The fourth tone goes deep. Very deep. The stage shakes so hard that Kid EO has to take a step to the side, which puts him exactly in the middle of the old salt lines that ran here from Level 3. For one moment he looks satisfied because he believes he has taken up a symbolic position. Then he notices the lines do not mean him. They run underneath him.

"You cannot just play instead of answering," he says.

You do not answer. You play.

Now no longer only four tones, but four tones in tighter and tighter loops, more and more energetic, less and less polite, not as solo, not as performance, not as hero scene, but as refusal to let yourself be shoved into an explanation while the world around you consists of old rooms, documentary leftovers, theater argument, dog shadows, false tutorials, and a number that has been acting since your nonmemory as if it owned the rights to everything. The arpeggios get denser. The hall loses patience. The chairs fold up and down. The curtain beats like a too-heavy heart. The Time Warper Authority 1978 stamps somewhere in the orchestra pit and now only hits rhythm. On the program the terms change so fast they can no longer be read, only felt as print pressure. Kid EO raises the megaphone again, but your next run takes his first sentence away, the one after that the second, the third the lecture, the fourth the subtitle, and then he stands there, visibly thought bigger than the scene, but smaller than the sound that is no longer asking permission.

"This is dramaturgically uncontrolled," he says.

The bass guitar says nothing. It plays. Or you play. Or the tremor plays through you and you only decide not to stop. Kid EO tries to take a step forward, but the floor counts differently. Two beats carry him left, three right, two back, three back into the middle. He becomes the wrong beat himself, and because he is a human being who wants to think bigger than the room, he begins to inflate, not bodily disgusting, not bloody, but narratively: his jacket throws extra folds, his shadow gets subtitles, his megaphone multiplies its own importance, behind him appear three possible trailer versions of the same scene, each more dramatic, each more wrong, each with more fog, and you keep playing until the four tones run around him so fast they no longer attack but limit. He opens his mouth. No answer comes out. Only a too-large stage direction that immediately starts cracking.

"We could make it bigger—"

The next arpeggio run hits him. Not like a weapon. Like a correction. Kid EO Hoe Jima explodes. Not bloody. Not mortal. Not final. He explodes into concept material:

storyboards, brackets, oversized arrows, alternate endings, thirty percent more meaning, a folded-up franchise model, a black pair of sunglasses, under it a smaller one, under it a look that is briefly truly offended, then tears into shit-ass paper. The explosion wave does not go outward, but forward. It takes the curtain, the stage, the sidewalk, the front door, the dining-room table, the wall with GOES, the false tutorial, the dog shadow, the 1978 that stood beside time for too long, and you with it. The bass guitar hangs on you, the four tones hang in it, the tremor hangs in the four tones, and before any loading screen can have the nerve to put that in order, the wave pushes you through the back wall of the theater, through a layer of old dust, through an unasked question, through the rest of an answer you did not give, straight into Level 8.

Level 8 – Ahead of Us, a Long Road

The long road has gravel in its tread now. Little stones from earlier texts. You only notice them once you have already walked on and the shoe starts sounding weird. You do not get through a loading screen. You get through a wall that had just been theater. The blast wave from Kid EO Hoe Jima is still behind you, but not as heat, not as smoke, not as triumph. More like pressure in the ears, paper taste in the mouth, like the feeling that someone just tried to explain way too much and fell apart far enough to shut up for now.

The road lies in front of you again. Not the same one. Of course the same one. A road that now looks bigger because it stopped being only scenery. It does not pull straight ahead, not really, but in long stretches, slight curves, small dips, wide sidewalks, narrow gaps between houses, parking bays, fence holes, courtyard driveways, side paths that after two meters lead back to the same road, and doors, many doors, too many doors for a road that supposedly just goes somewhere. The air is still paranoid. But wider. No longer the tight pressure of 1978, no longer the shaking theater, no longer the sexual stickiness of Level 6 or the flowing disorder of Discordia. Here paranoia is weather over a long stretch. It does not stand right in front of you. It lies over everything. Over the houses, over the roofs, over the shadows, over the sidewalks, over every window pretending it saw nothing.

The road does not sprint. It pulls at the knee, at the door, at the pause, at every step, until acceleration only sounds like uncertainty and the body has to learn that waiting can be an action too.

The acoustic bass guitar hangs on you. After Level 7.7.7 it is hot. Not glowing. Not magic. Just warm from playing, from shaking, from resistance, from not answering. Your hand is still on the strings. It wants to keep playing. Faster. Denser. More. The body has gotten used to the arpeggios like escape. Four notes, again and again, tighter, harder, more energetic, until something gives. That worked. Kid EO exploded. The wall broke. The road got forced. So the hand wants to do it again. The first note comes too early.

The road does not answer. The second follows at once. Nothing. The third, too fast. The fourth deep, but restless. In front of you everything stays put. No path opens. No door reacts. No wall moves aside. The road is not impressed. That is new. Or worse: fair. You start walking. The first stretch is wide. On the left are apartment houses not old enough to be history and not new enough to still claim future. On the right runs a long fence, behind it a garden too big to feel private and too empty to be public. The sun is there, but not strong. The sky has a pale, thin color, as if someone stretched the blue with water. No thunderstorm. No theater noise. No countdown. Just road.

A door stands in front of you. Not in a house wall. Just on the sidewalk. A normal door with frame, handle, small glass window, and a mail slot that is not fully closed. Behind the door there is nothing to see, because behind it there is no room. Still a shadow falls in front of it. And in that shadow stands someone. Not really. Not touchable. A person, or what is left of a person when the world no longer holds them all the way. The outline is familiar, but not reliable. A body that used to be closer. A posture you know without being able to name it. A stand in front of a door.

Not waiting. Not blocking. More like this figure used to stand there so often that the shadow keeps going even without them.

You do not stop. Almost. The hand goes back to the bass guitar. Four notes. Fast. Too fast. The door flickers. The figure does not. The shadow stays. The road stays. The note dies between the houses as if it had worn itself out before it even arrived.

Mandatory Reading Aid: Not every repetition gets stronger just because it gets faster.

The sentence stands on the mail slot. Then the mail slot snaps shut. The sound is small. But it cuts through. You breathe. That is a beat too. Unpleasant. Because you cannot control it without immediately thinking about it. You keep walking. The door stays behind you, but not far enough. After the next curve it stands there again. Or one like it. Or the same one with better camouflage. Again on the sidewalk. Again with shadow. Again with the person in front of it, not quite person. This time they look a little different. Less body. More imprint. The head is tilted. Or the shadow of the head. A hand maybe in the pants pocket. Or only a dark spot where a hand might have often been before.

The prototype. The word does not fall into the road. It is already sitting there. The previous version. Not hostile. Not friendly. Not finished. You feel that you want to get faster. Not in walking. In playing. The four notes are ready. Not as letters. Not as explanation. As a grip pattern under the skin. You play the first note. Then you wait. Not long. Just enough to let the note die without being shoved. The road barely changes. But this time it listens. You play the second. Pause.

In a window a curtain moves. Not startled. Not meaningful. Just at the right distance. You play the third. Pause. The person in front of the door does not get sharper. But the shadow loses an edge. You play the fourth. Deep. Then nothing. The nothing is bigger than the note before it. The door stays. But the road beside it gets wider. Not as reward. As possibility. You pass it. The figure does not turn around. Good. If it had looked at you, it would have been too clear. The road gets longer.

Not painfully long. Metroid-long. Not because anything is directly copied, but because the body understands that road is not only distance. A long road is a condition where you cannot always go straight even though the goal smells straight ahead. You go forward, go back, take a side alley, pass a door you cannot open yet although it has no lock, climb over a low wall, land back on the same road, but on the other side of a fence you had not noticed before. The road does not make puzzles. It is one.

A sign hangs on the left:

PASSAGE

Under it, handwritten:

later

The Intern 12.6 stands under it. You did not hear him arrive. He carries no plastic sleeve, no meat sandwich, no shit slip. Only himself. That looks almost naked.

“There you are,” he says.

He sounds relieved, as if he had been walking beside you for a long time and only now noticed he is visible. You say nothing. He nods.

“Works.”

Then he looks at the door standing farther ahead again. This time at the end of a small square, beside a transformer shed, in front of which someone has parked two old bicycles. The untouchable person stands before it. Or the shadow. Or the habit. The Intern gets quieter.

“That one was there before too.”

You look at him.

“I mean not there,” he says. “But already.”

That is probably the best explanation he is capable of today. From the right comes the Works Council. Not out of a door. Not out of a meeting. Just over the sidewalk, as if he has inspected the road and found it walkable. He is not carrying the dusty red folder. That is almost disturbing.

“Do not stop,” he says.

The Intern nods at once.

“I said that too.”

“No,” says the Works Council.

“I would have said it.”

“That is not the same.”

“At the Time Warper Authority it is.”

The Works Council looks at him. The Intern looks away. It is nice, how short that is. The three of you walk on. Or you walk, and the two of them run in the same direction in phases. The Works Council gives no lecture. The Intern does not try to begin a joke he cannot carry. The road takes you in without stopping you. For a stretch this makes the road almost normal, which in this book always means the deviation is only working quieter right now.

On a house wall it says:

AHEAD OF US, A LONG ROAD

Under it:

DO NOT RUN

The Intern reads it.

Mandatory Reading Aid: The road cannot be rushed. Every pause is suspicious enough to become action.

“That sounds like a threat.”

The Works Council says: “That sounds like a useful recommendation.”

“That is often the same thing.”

The Works Council does not answer. You play. One note. Pause. Another. Pause. The Intern looks at the bass guitar.

“Why are you playing slower now?”

The Works Council says: “Because otherwise the road can’t keep up.” The Intern thinks.

“Or because otherwise the road notices it should be longer.”

This time the Works Council does not say no. That is rare. The road turns and leads into a wider section, almost like an arterial road, but without cars. Doors stand left and right. Some belong to houses. Some to walls. Some stand free. One door is only painted on. Another lies flat on the sidewalk and still has a shadow. Every fifth door is the same door. Always the same frame, the same mail slot, the same glass window, the same shadow in front. The person gets a little less touchable each time.

But not weaker. More like farther back in the layer. The previous version, no longer here, but also not gone enough to disappear. Maybe the version that stood before you. Maybe the one that stayed standing. Maybe the one that carried the name before it became different. Maybe only an imprint in the South Ring that learned to wait in front of doors. You play the four notes at long intervals. This time not to move them. To keep yourself from being moved. The first note does not open the door.

Neither does the second. The third makes the Intern miss the meat sandwich. The fourth makes the Works Council walk slower for a second. That is effect enough. A crooked sign from the Time Warper Authority 1978 hangs on a fence. FIELD OFFICE FOR PREVIOUS VERSIONS

Under it:

Please do not address them if they have already answered.

The Intern almost stops. The Works Council puts a hand on his shoulder. Not solemn. Not comforting. Practical.

“Keep going.”

“I wasn’t gonna say anything.”

“Good.”

“But I could have asked something.”

“That’s why.”

You walk on. The road gets wider, then narrower, then wider again. Sometimes it leads into a dead end that is not one because at the end there is a low opening between two walls. Sometimes you have to go back, not because you were wrong, but because the road looks different from behind. Once you pass the same door three times, but each time from another direction. The third time the person is not standing in front. Only the shadow. The Intern breathes in audibly. The Works Council looks at him.

“No.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“That was close.”

You play no note. The pause is intentional this time. The shadow in front of the door does not get smaller. But it stops demanding. For a moment the whole road lies still. Not dead. Still. Like a string not struck although everyone is waiting for it. And exactly in this pause, a wall shifts in the back. Very quietly. The new passage would not have opened if you had played. You know that without knowing it. The Works Council looks at the passage. Then at you.

“There.”

Nothing more. It is enough. The Intern whispers: “So not playing was playing now too?” The Works Council says: “Yes.” The Intern nods.

“That’s mean.”

“That’s music.”

You go through the passage. Behind it is road again, but different: fewer houses, more open ground, a longer view, low walls, squat garages, a strip of grass, beyond it an embankment, above it sky. It looks wider, but not freer. The long road now shows that it is dangerous not only in length, but in overview. When you see too far, you also see too much possibility. Every door in the distance could be the same one. Every shape could be the person. Every shadow could have arrived before you there.

The acoustic bass guitar hangs calmer on you. Not lighter. Calmer. Your hand lies over the strings without touching them. That is harder than playing. The Intern is no longer beside you at some point. You only notice when he is there again.

“I took a wrong turn for a sec,” he says.

The Works Council says: “That was not a turn.”

Mandatory Reading Aid: The long road does not want haste. It counts pauses like steps and smells it right away when a note only wants to run.

“Exactly.”

He looks satisfied. The Works Council does not. Ahead of you stands a small waiting shelter. Not a bus stop. More a shelter for people who do not want to admit they are waiting. Inside hangs a schedule without line numbers. Instead of times, there are conditions.

there

gone almost there not yet gone before there not again On the bench lies an old key. The Intern wants to take it. The Works Council says: “No.”

“But maybe we need it.”

“If we need it, it will still be there later.”

“And if not?”

“Then we do not need it.”

The Intern looks at the key.

“Easy to talk yourself into that.”

The bass guitar gives off a quiet note. The key turns once around its own axis and stays there. Nobody takes it. The road goes on. A door stands at the end of the next street. This time it is not free-standing. It is set into a house wall. The person stands in front of it. Not more touchable than before, but clearer in the distance. Not young, not old, not here, not there. A familiar shape that waited too long in an earlier version. Head slightly lowered. Shoulders calm. No gesture. No accusation. No reception.

The Works Council stops. Not from fear. Out of respect for jurisdiction that is not his. The Intern stops too. This time without comment. You go on alone. Not far. Only the last steps to the door. The hand wants to play. Fast. The old technique. The explosion technique. The Kid EO correction. Four notes as breakthrough. But the road does not resist. The person does not resist. The door does not resist. There is nothing to blow up here. That is harder. You play the first note. Long. Then pause.

The person does not get sharper. You play the second. Again pause. A window above the door opens a crack. You play the third. Pause. The door breathes. Or the house. Or you. The fourth note comes only when the pause is almost too long. It goes deep. Not forward. Down. Under the threshold. Under the sidewalk. Under the road. The person in front of the door does not lift their head. But the shadow takes one step aside. Not the person. The shadow.

Enough. The door does not open. Beside it a path appears. Narrow. Plain. Almost annoying. The long road does not go through the door. Of course not. The Works Council comes closer.

“Good.”

The Intern says: “But the door—”

“Not every door is an entrance.”

The Intern looks at the narrow path.

“That’s mean again.”

You follow the path. The person stays behind. Or comes with you. Not visible. But something about the road has changed. Not solved. Not cleared up. Just less stiff. As if the prototype, the previous version, the shadow in front of the door, the person no longer really touchable, did not demand that you recognize them. Only that you not try to force your way through them. The narrow path runs behind the houses. There the road is no longer presentable. Trash cans, drainpipes, small basement windows, gravel, a rusty railing, a piece of gutter hanging crooked, and farther back light again. The long road is not big here. It is unpleasantly practical. You have to walk sideways, sometimes turn the bass guitar a little so it does not get caught on the wall. Once it hits anyway.

Dull. The note is short. But the wall answers with a bright clink. No glass breaks. Only a memory.

Suddenly on the wall it says:

I AM THE—

Then the writing breaks off. The rest is not coming yet. Level 10 looks briefly through Level 8 and pulls back again. The Works Council sees the writing. Says nothing. Very good. The Intern sees it too. He opens his mouth. The Works Council puts the hand on his shoulder again. The Intern closes his mouth. Even better. The path rises slightly. Not much. Just enough that the body notices it is working. The road ahead gets brighter. Wider. Longer. In front of you opens a long straight stretch, at the end of which nothing can be recognized except more road, more doors, more pale air, more possibilities to take a wrong turn and be right because of it.

The bass guitar no longer hangs like something you are taking with you. It hangs like something measuring the distance. Note. Pause. Step. Pause. Look. Pause. Not every pause is empty. Some pauses carry more than the note before them. You do not know that as a sentence now. You know it in the hand. At the edge of the long straight stretch stands a pasted-up sign.

LEVEL 8 WILL BE CONTINUED

Under it:

Ahead of us, a long road

Under it, smaller:

Please do not accelerate out of uncertainty.

The Intern reads it.

“That’s personal.”

The Works Council says: “That is necessary.” You play no note. The road opens anyway. Far ahead stands a door again. In front of it a person. Maybe the same one. Maybe only the shadow of the previous version. Maybe what remains when someone was familiar long enough and then no longer really here. You go on. Slowly. Not weak. Slowly. The acoustic bass guitar is silent. And exactly in that silence the long road finally begins.

Level 9 – southring gene

southring gene stays lowercase, but not clean. The smallness here is not humility, more a stain refusing to become officially big. The long road does not end. It only gets lower. Not shorter, not friendlier, not clearer. Only lower, as if the road gradually stops being a place and starts taking a posture. The houses still stand left and right, but they lose their façade-importance. Doors are still there, windows too, shadows as well, but none of it wants to be the main thing anymore. After Level 8 it became clear that doors are not always entrances, pauses are not always gaps, and that a person in front of a door sometimes blocks less than a thought that wants through too fast.

The acoustic bass guitar hangs on you and stays silent on purpose. That is new enough to not be new anymore. The hand is not on the strings, but near them, and by now that nearness is an activity. Before, a note had to trigger something. Now not-playing can trigger something too, without being offended that nobody hears it. The road has understood that, or at least pretends it has so you keep walking. At the edge of the road stands a battered sign. southring gene Lowercase. Not as a mistake.

The lowercase does not sit politely under the name. It sits in the basement window, in South Ring dust, in the name-leftover, and keeps working where capitalization would have gotten too official.

Not as modesty. Not as style either. Just like that. You stop because the name looks different there. Not like a title. Not like an address. Not like something given to you. More like a process happening right now while you are trying to read it. The pissed-on sign does not stand at the beginning of a section. It stands in the middle of a piece of sidewalk, between a rain gutter and a little patch of moss, and exactly that makes it more believable than all previous labels.

Mandatory Reading Aid: Please distinguish between the name, the process, the reading assignment, and the leftover that spells itself the same for practical reasons.

That does not help. The game help notices that too.

Mandatory Reading Aid: Exactly.

You keep walking. The road does something strange now: it shows you no new obstacles, but old obvious things with too much patience. A curb. A mailbox. A doorbell. A basement window. A crack in the asphalt. A small spot where someone once patched something and the patch has by now become more noticeable than the damage. None of it jumps at you. None of it wants to be symbol. And yet every thing feels as if it has already waited a long time until you are finally tired enough not to immediately turn it into meaning.

A mailbox carries no name. Under it sticks a yellowed strip where something must once have been written. The glue edges are darker than the metal. A piece of shit-ass paper still hangs from the corner. It does not move, although a slight wind is going. You look at it, and for a moment you believe Southring Gene should be written there. Then you believe southring gene should be written there. Then you

believe this exact distinction is already getting too big again. The bass guitar bumps lightly against your hip. Dull.

The mailbox says nothing. Very reasonable. Farther ahead The Intern 12.6 sits on a low wall. He does not look like he has been waiting for you, more like he got left over while waiting. Beside him lies no meat sandwich. In front of him no shit form. In his hand he holds a small stone, which he moves from one hand to the other without throwing it.

“You’re lowercase now,” he says.

You say nothing.

“I mean not you,” he says. “Or yes you. But different.”

He looks at the stone.

“I think I better don’t say anything.”

That is his best contribution.

Mandatory Reading Aid: Not every helpful sentence has to be spoken. Some have to stay out in time.

The Intern nods as if he received the hint, although he probably cannot read it.

“See,” he says. “That’s what I mean.”

You walk together for a bit. Not officially. Not as escort. He climbs off the wall, walks beside you, two steps a little too fast, then three a little too slow, then finds a distance that does not bother. That is almost adult. The road stays wide enough for both of you, but not so wide that it looks like a decision. On a house wall hangs an old smeared sign with an arrow.

TO THE SOUTH RING

The arrow points downward. Not left. Not right. Down. The Intern stops and looks at the arrow.

“That’s mounted wrong.”

The bass guitar is silent. So are you. The Intern looks at the arrow longer.

“Or honest.”

You walk on. The road does actually lower itself slightly. Not into a tunnel, not into a basement, not into some underworld. It simply lowers itself under the obvious street while the houses stay above. The asphalt gets darker, but not threatening. More like old floor under a rug someone pulled away because they finally wanted to see why the room always stood crooked. Cars pass above. You cannot see them. You only hear the distant pressure of their tires, a long soft rolling that sounds like everyday life when it slides over something it does not care about. Down below the air gets cooler. The wall on the left is concrete, the wall on the right is nothing exact. Sometimes a wall, sometimes a fence, sometimes only shadow. The long road from Level 8 has not disappeared. It slid under the skin of the street.

Mandatory Reading Aid: You are not under the street. The street is temporarily above you.

This time The Intern apparently does read the sentence.

“That’s the same thing.”

Pause.

Mandatory Reading Aid: The lowercase name does not have to be humble. A stain can sit deeper than a title.

“Right?”

No answer. Better. After a few meters there is another half-torn sign. southring gene This time not on metal. Scratched into the wall. Small. Not clean. The letters do not seem written, more like they happened because someone brushed past the same spot for too long. You do not touch them. The hand stays near the bass guitar. That is enough. The body vibrates barely noticeably, not as a note, more as approval without enthusiasm. The Intern falls behind. You only notice when his steps are missing. When you do not turn around, that is right.

When you almost turn around anyway, that is right too. Discordia allowed both. Level 9 demands something else: not doing everything that is possible. The road gets narrower. Small windows appear on the left, close to the ground, with bars in front. Behind one window stands the table from Level 3, but only as a cutout: plate, glass, three salt lines. Behind the next window the wall from Level 4, with a dot and lines that no longer make themselves important. Behind the next, a bed from Level 6, empty, unlabeled. Behind the next, the door from Level 8, with nobody standing before it, but the shadow still knowing the shape.

You pass it like shop displays in a store that only sells things you already own.

Mandatory Reading Aid: Earlier levels may appear in Level 9 as surroundings, provided they do not believe this makes them plot again.

This helps a little this time. Unfortunately. In front of you the road opens into a small underground square. Not big. Not dramatic. A concrete floor, a few steps, an old vending machine that does not light up, a railing, a drain grate, and in the middle a low pedestal with nothing on it. No object. No icon. No tool. No reward. Only the pedestal, and that is almost more unpleasant because you notice the book now knows that you can expect empty spots.

On the pedestal, small:

southring gene

The name is not on display. It happens there. You do not feel it as enlightenment. More as a small shift in jurisdiction. Southring Gene was the address. The reader was called that. The figure moved through rooms, doors, streets, offices, Discordia, body, number, long roads. But here, lowercase, on a low pedestal in a square under the street, it no longer feels like someone. It feels like what happens when everything goes on although nobody understands it completely. You play no note.

The pedestal reacts anyway. Not visibly. Only enough. The vending machine rattles. It does not spit out a can. It spits out a shit slip.

On it:

CHARACTER STATUS: DO NOT RETRIEVE

Under it:

PROCESS RUNNING

Under it:

SAVING NOT REQUIRED, SINCE NOTHING IS SUPPOSED TO BE HELD
FAST

You leave the shit slip lying there. The machine looks relieved.

Mandatory Reading Aid: Progress without saving may lead to unreliable memory. This is intentional.

A sound comes from above. Steps. Not yours. Not The Intern's. Calmer. The Works Council appears on the steps, stops there, and looks over the square. He does not come down. Maybe he is not allowed. Maybe he does not want to. Maybe he understood that order here can only speak from above if it does not want to immediately get everything wrong.

"Keep going," he says.

No lecture. No minutes. Only a sentence.

Then he adds:

"But don't rush."

That fits Level 8. It fits Level 9 more. You do not nod. That would be too much agreement. The Works Council looks at the pedestal. Then at the bass guitar. Then at you, or at where you as reader stand in the sentence.

"This is not an office anymore."

The Intern appears behind him and whispers: "Too bad." The Works Council says: "No." The Intern says: "Yeah, not." Then both are gone again. Not suddenly. Not magically. The steps are simply empty, as if you looked at the pedestal too long. The square stays. You go on. Behind the pedestal begins a path that does not lead straight ahead, but in small, barely noticeable offsets. You can walk it without stumbling, but not without reminding the body that it has to balance itself. The bass guitar helps with that. Not as support. As counterweight. At every slight change in direction it swings a tiny bit after, and your body corrects itself by it. Not you carrying it. Not it carrying you. By now it is more embarrassing: you are tuned to each other.

On the next wall it says:

SOUTHRING GENE

Big.

Mandatory Reading Aid: Lowercase is not kneeling. Here it is the stain that soaks in deeper than any clean title.

Under it:
soutring gene

Small.

Under it:
soutring Gene

Wrong.

Under it:
Soutring gene

Wrong too.

Under it:
Please make a decision.

The Mandatory Reading Aid steps beside it at once, with dirt on the stamp edge.

Mandatory Reading Aid: The decision has already been sufficiently avoided by spelling.

That is not helpful. Or too helpful. You play a single note. Not the first of the arpeggio. Not the deep fourth. Any one in between. The wrong spellings do not disappear. They just get less loud. The big SOUTHRING GENE fades, the small one remains. Not as victory. Not as correction. As working state. The path leads upward again. Slowly. Over a ramp so flat you only notice late that you are rising. The air gets brighter. Not fresher. Brighter. Along the wall run thin lines, like dirty cables, like cracks, like staff lines that do not want to carry notes. Sometimes they cross. Sometimes they run parallel. Sometimes they vanish into the concrete and come out farther ahead again, as if they found a better road under the surface.

You walk with pauses. Not because you are tired. Because Level 9 demands pauses without asking for them. Every few steps you stop, and in these pauses you hear something that gets lost while walking: the rolling of the cars above you, the deep wood of the bass guitar, the breath, a faraway stamp that no longer feels responsible, a bed no longer occupied, a door no longer demanding to be opened, and somewhere below it the old draft that is not wind, but movement without ownership.

Mandatory Reading Aid: If you do nothing and something happens anyway, please do not immediately check whether it was intended.

You keep walking. The ramp ends back on the street. Not at the beginning. Not at the end. Somewhere in between. Of course. The street is quieter now than before, but not harmless. The doors are still there. One of them stands open. In front of another lies an envelope. On a third sticks a shit slip with LEVEL 10. It is crossed out. Beside it: not yet

Under it:

soon

Under it:

actually already

You pass it. Level 10 looks briefly out of a basement window and shuts it again at once. Very reasonable. In front of you stands the pissed-on sign again.

soutring gene

This time it hangs on no post, no wall, no door. It does not float. It does not stand either. It is in the way. Not as obstacle. As condition. You cannot pass it because it is not a thing. You cannot go through it because it is not a room. You cannot read it because by reading it you are already carrying it out. That is annoying. Exactly why the Mandatory Reading Aid has to intervene.

Mandatory Reading Aid: At this point, soutring gene refers neither exclusively to the figure nor exclusively to the reader nor exclusively to the work nor exclusively to the movement through the work.

Mandatory Reading Aid: This sentence is almost too helpful. Therefore it may remain, but only under observation.

Pause.

Mandatory Reading Aid: This information does not replace orientation.

Another pause.

Mandatory Reading Aid: Orientation is only available in a limited way in this section anyway.

That really does not help. Bravo. You left n00b-being behind, and immediately the hints get worse. The bass guitar hangs still. You wait. Not long. Long enough. The greasy sign that is not a sign loses its edges. The letters stand individually for a moment, then behave like things that no longer want to be words. soutring runs as a thin line to the left across the sidewalk. gene sinks downward, not deep, only under the surface. Between them a narrow free strip appears. No entrance.

No passage. A between-space. You go through. Not as Soutring Gene. Not not as Soutring Gene. As something that is currently continuing in lowercase. On the other side the street is the same. But the name no longer hangs in front of you. It goes along under your steps. That is not pleasant. But right. One last hint appears on the asphalt, very small, almost too small to take seriously.

Mandatory Reading Aid: From here on, the process can no longer be fully separated from the figure. Please still act as if everything were normal.

You keep walking. The acoustic bass guitar is silent. The road is silent. The name is not. It has only become quiet enough that you no longer have to read it to take it with you. Ahead of you the road gets brighter. Not Level 10. Not yet. Only the long road slowly understanding that it will not be called that forever.

Level 9, the 2nd



The 2nd does not wear the old jacket anymore, but you can still see where the name tag was sewn on. Right there the fabric pulls. The name comes along under your steps. Not loud. Not readable. Not even as a faded sign anymore. Only as a quiet movement in the ground, as if the street itself had finally understood that it does not have to write something on itself every time for it to stay there. southring gene lies behind you, under you, maybe a little ahead of you too, but no longer as a question shoving itself forward. More like a condition that walks along because you no longer have to wear it like a name card.

The road stays long. That is no surprise anymore. It leads between houses again, but the houses now look less like places and more like surfaces where doors are possible. Some doors sit in walls. Some stand free. Some you only recognize because the shadow in front of them falls different. After Level 8 you almost expect to see somebody in front of every fifth door, and right inside that expectation the thing starts working. From a distance there is a figure standing there. Of course. A familiar posture, a body that does not quite want to be a body, a head slightly lowered, shoulders carrying more memory than anatomy, a presence just clear enough that you cannot ignore it and unclear enough that you can stuff anything into it. It stands in front of the door like someone who does not knock because he was never really gone. Or never really there. Or because the door itself needs him so it can look like a door.

The comma hangs sideways in the sign. It presses, but it does not own the whole surface anymore. The second name stays noticeable as edge weight, without getting the voice of the whole sentence back.

You move closer. With every step the figure loses something, but not in the way someone disappears. It does not get smaller, not farther away, not transparent. It only loses the places where you thought you could hold onto it. The head becomes a dark surface. The shoulder becomes a bend in the shadow. The hand, if there was one,

becomes an edge on the doorframe. Right before the door there is nothing left you could safely call a person. Only a posture. And a door. The acoustic bass guitar stays quiet.

Good. A note would be too clear here. You stop in front of the door. Not long. The door has no pissed-on sign. No name plate, no number, no shit slip, no instruction. Only a mail slot that looks like it has accepted plenty of things nobody really dropped in. You look at it, and for a moment something seems to move in the glass window. Not behind it. Not in front of it. More in the possibility that somebody could have stood there. Then it is just glass. You go on. After a few meters another door is standing there.

Maybe the same one. Maybe another one. That matters less by now than it should. The street has gotten wider, but the doors stand tighter. On garden fences, on house walls, on garage doors, in the middle of walls, in places where a door makes no sense and wants to be looked at too long for exactly that reason. From a distance somebody seems to stand in front of every door. The closer you get, the less somebody is standing there. The second time only a shadow remains. The third time a step in the air. The fourth time a slight heaviness on the ground.

The fifth time nothing at all, except the weird certainty that you saw somebody from far away.

Mandatory Reading Aid: Sufficient distance may count as staff replacement in certain cases.

That does not help. Or it helps the wrong way. You keep walking, and the road feels more and more like a thought that comes into being while walking and decides again each time whether it wants to be memory, guesswork, or just orientation. Maybe it was never the figure that returned. Maybe the doors borrowed something. An outline. An old version. A possible continuation. An add-on that once hung on the name and later was not supposed to hang there anymore. Maybe every door needs somebody in front of it so you believe it leads somewhere.

The Intern 12.6 sits on a low wall and looks across at a door where, from this distance, somebody is clearly standing.

"There's somebody again," he says.

You say nothing. He squints.

"Or not, y'know."

You both move closer. The figure becomes a shadow. The shadow becomes a darker spot on the doorframe. The darker spot becomes dirt. The Intern stops, studies the dirt, and nods as if he understood something he cannot use.

"That's mean."

That is right. He scratches the back of his head.

"Not the dirt. The other thing."

Then he gives up. That is right too. You keep walking. The bass guitar bumps lightly against your hip, but it does not sound. You unconsciously hold the body so it does not hit the fence. The suppressed vibration feels more exact than a played note. Level 9, the

2nd does not ask for arpeggios. No escape technique. No explosion wave. This is not about breaking something open. This is about not filling something immediately just because there is an empty spot. On the next door hangs a name plate.

It is empty. Not torn off. Not pasted over. Just empty, as if emptiness were the complete labeling here. From a distance a familiar person clearly stood in front of it. Now, right in front of it, there is only a bike rack crooked in the shadow. The Intern looks first at the yellowed sign, then at the bike rack, then at you.

"Maybe he just positioned himself badly."

The Works Council steps onto the sidewalk from the side.

"Who?"

The Intern does not point. Very good.

"Nobody," he says.

The Works Council looks at the door, at the empty rusty sign, at the bike rack.

"Then that's taken care of."

"That easy?"

"No," says the Works Council. "But practical."

He walks along for a bit. Not leading. Not explaining. More like someone checking whether the road stays walkable. The dusty red folder is still missing. That makes him look less official and more real. Maybe that is more dangerous. Maybe only nicer. The street now runs along a long wall. Doors are set into the wall, one after another, all the same height, all slightly different: one with frosted glass, one with a wooden panel, one with a mail slot, one with an old bell button, one without a handle, one only as an outline, one painted over, one bricked up and still clearly a door. In front of each of them, from far away, somebody stands. When you get closer, less is left each time.

Mandatory Reading Aid: Nothing is smoothed here. The spot may scratch, because the scratch knows more than the polish.

After the fourth door the Works Council says, "Distance is helping." The Intern asks, "For who?"

"For the door."

"And against us?"

The Works Council thinks for a second.

"Not directly."

That is not reassuring. But usable. At the next door you stand longer. The figure in front of it had been especially clear from far away this time. Almost too clear. A familiar posture. A kind of standing that means not just presence but habit. Somebody who was outside often. Somebody who belongs to a place without going in. Somebody who would not have to be here anymore for you to suspect him there. Up close there is only

the doorframe. A shadow on the left side. A crooked bell. A small scratch at the height of a hand.

The scratch is real. The hand is not. Or not anymore. Or not yet. You do not play. The scratch stays a scratch. That may be the friendliest thing this chapter has done so far.

Mandatory Reading Aid: Not everything that resembles a hand was touched. Not everything that was not touched stayed without consequences.

The Intern reads the note and sighs.

"So it is mean after all."

The Works Council says, "Exactly." You go on. The street opens out. The wall ends, and ahead of you lies an open stretch with low houses, small front yards, a wide sidewalk, and a row of doors standing far enough apart that real paths form between them. The long road from Level 8 is still there, but it has become less physical. It lies in the thinking now. You walk from door to door, but really you walk from possibility to possibility. Every time somebody stands there from a distance. Every time something else is left up close: a shadow, a stain, an edge, a reflection, a posture, an old imprint in the paint, a mailbox hanging too high, a bell sitting too low.

At some point you notice that you no longer want to know who is standing there. That is new. Not liberation. Not indifference. Only a little distance from the habit of stuffing every door with an earlier version. The bass guitar hangs quiet on you. Its strings are still, but not empty. You know you could play. You also know you do not have to. The arpeggio lies in your hand like a tool you do not have to show off all the time just because it finally works. Maybe that is the first real proof that you learned it: not the playing, but the not-playing without walking any less forward because of it.

The Works Council stops at a turnoff.

"I'm not going any farther."

The Intern looks at him.

"Why?"

"Because I'm not needed here."

"That didn't always stop you before."

The Works Council does not smile. Almost.

"This time it does."

He looks at you, then at the doors.

"If something is only a person from far away, no protocol helps."

The Intern thinks.

"And if it's a problem up close?"

"Then you look at it."

"And if it ain't one anymore?"

"Then you move on."

The Intern looks dissatisfied.

Mandatory Reading Aid: The edge is not clean. It sticks to the sentence and only pretends it is standing beside it.

"That's not dramatic enough."

"Good."

The Works Council stays behind. You and the Intern go on, but the Intern slows down too. Not tired. More careful with his presence. In front of a door that consists only of an outline in a concrete wall, he stops and says, "Maybe that whole previous-version thing was just some word that stood next to a door too long." You say nothing. He nods.

"Yeah, I hear myself already. I'll shut up."

For the first time it does not sound like giving up. More like a usable contribution. The road leads into an area that is almost empty. No wall anymore, no tight row of houses, only a wide sidewalk, a long house front, and one single door at the end. From a distance somebody stands in front of it. Very clearly. Clearer than all before. The familiar posture, the body that cannot quite be grabbed, the possibility of an earlier version, the add-on that once hung on the name, the standing in front of the house, the decision before the decision. Everything is there.

Too much. You slow down. Not because of the figure. Because of you. With every step the figure loses something. First the head. Then the shoulders. Then the stance. Then only a dark spot under the mail slot remains. Then a reflection in the glass. Then a shadow that does not lie in front of the door but falls from a little roof. You come closer, and the figure does not become less real. The door becomes less willing to carry it. That is the difference. Nobody is standing in front of the door. The door still stands there.

You stop in front of it. The Intern is no longer beside you. You did not hear him go away. Maybe he stayed behind. Maybe he stands behind you. Maybe he stopped exactly where questions get too big again. On the name plate there is nothing. Not Southring-Gene, the 2nd. Not Southring Gene. Not southring gene. Nothing. And this nothing does not feel like deletion this time. More like relief. You put your hand on the bass guitar. Not to play. Only so it is there. The door does not change. The shadow does not either. The empty name plate stays empty. No stamp. No note. No sentence that rescues the thing. No Intern comment. No Works Council. No Time Warper Authority 1978. Only street, door, empty pissed-on sign, you, the bass guitar, and the slowly uncomfortable possibility that the figure was never the riddle.

The door was not either. Maybe the riddle was the question whether you are allowed to keep walking when nobody is standing in front of it anymore. You wait. Not for permission. Only long enough to notice that none is coming. Then you go on. Not through the door. Past it. That is almost stupidly simple. On the other side of the door the sidewalk continues. No new world. No opened room. No effect. The street lies ahead of you, far enough to be road again. After a few steps you do not look back. Not

from strength. Not from spite. More because the road ahead now has more reality than the spot behind you.

The bass guitar is quiet. The sidewalk is quiet. The door is quiet. But none of that feels like blockade anymore. After a while the Intern appears again, sitting on a curb and holding the small stone from before in his hand.

"Was somebody there?" he asks.

You say nothing. He nods slowly.

"So probably not."

Then he thinks for a second.

"Or enough, I guess."

He puts the stone in his pocket.

"Bravo, by the way."

You keep walking. He gets up and comes along for a bit.

"You're officially not a n00b anymore."

A display briefly appears out of the ground. n00b status: left behind

Then immediately:

This message was unnecessary.

Then it vanishes. The Intern grins.

"Big cinema."

The street gets brighter. Not Level 10. Not yet. But the road there has stopped waiting for a figure in front of every door. Far ahead another door is standing. Maybe somebody stands in front of it. Maybe not. You keep walking. This time it is indifferent enough to be important.

Level 10 – I Am the Way



The road is not only road. It is also a recording. Too close to the mic. A little overdriven. That is exactly why you believe it more than the clean version. Suddenly you are in Level 10. The entrance sounds like a bad recording: too close to the microphone, too much breath, not enough pride. So honest enough. You know it immediately. Not because some crooked sign is standing somewhere. Not because a door falls shut behind you. Not because the Mandatory Reading Aid is on time for once. It is simpler and nastier: the road under your feet stops being only road. It gets a direction without showing it. It does not get shorter, not brighter, not friendlier. It only becomes definite in a way you cannot explain without making it wrong again immediately.

The street is still there. Of course it is still there. It was there too long to just vanish. But now it no longer lies in front of you like something that has to be overcome. It lies under you like something that has understood it does not want to be carried but can carry. The doors still stand left and right, some open, some closed, some only as shadows in house walls, some as memories of a question that still stood in front of them in Level 9. But this time you do not wait for someone to appear in front of them. If an outline shows up from far away, it may show up. If it turns into shadow, glass, dirt, posture, or nothing at all up close, that may happen too. The road does not get emptier from that. It only gets less dependent on figures that are supposed to confirm it.

The road does not preach. It puts dirt under the soles, pushes body, sentence, and blank spot against each other, and makes every big word briefly smell like a badly mopped hallway.

The acoustic bass guitar hangs on you, and for the first time it does not look like something you have to use. It is there. That is enough. Its strings lie still under your hand, but the stillness has a different value now. It is not a preliminary stage. Not a pause before the next technique. Not restraint because something bigger comes later. It

is part of it. You know you could play. You know you do not have to play right away. And between those two possibilities exactly the room where Level 10 begins comes into being.

The air has changed. Not visibly. Not like weather. More like somebody lifted the tone in the room just a little and forced the world to hold its edges again. The sidewalk sounds drier. The windows stand calmer. A mailbox on a wall has no name plate, but it no longer looks empty. A door farther ahead opens a crack and stays that way, without inviting you. On one wall, very faintly, it still says I AM THE—, but the sentence no longer breaks off because it was destroyed. It holds itself back.

You keep walking. That is important. Not because walking is a task here, but because for the first time it no longer looks like escape, not like a test, not like getting through, not like a reaction to an authority, a door, a figure, a number, a tremor, a sexual hint, a theater fight, or a wrong stage direction. You walk because the road no longer lies only outside. It has started to match the step. That is not beautiful. Beautiful would be too smooth. It is more usable, and usable is usually more dangerous than beautiful in this book.

The Prettiest One does not appear right away. That would be kitsch. She also does not come through a door. That would be too easy. She does not stand on the street, not at the window, not at the end of the road. At first she is only a change in hearing. A note that does not come from the bass guitar, although the bass guitar understands it. A quiet pressure in the air, as if music had begun somewhere without being sound yet. Then a second note, farther back, or inside, or under the street. Then a room between the two that suddenly says more than both notes.

Mandatory Reading Aid: This note is not a railing. More like a rusty nail in the handrail.

You stop. Not long. But long enough that the road does not get impatient this time. Across the street stands an old shop window. Behind it nothing special: dust, a faded curtain, an empty stand, a piece of dirty cable, a spot on the wall where maybe a poster used to hang. And still that pressure comes from there, that almost inaudible movement, that kind of presence that does not want to be seen because seeing would immediately turn it into a figure. The Prettiest One is not in the shop window. The shop window only hears her.

You put your hand on the strings. The bass guitar does not answer right away. It has learned that too. The first note only comes into being when your hand no longer asks whether it is allowed to make it. It is deep, short, dry. The street takes it in. Then comes the second, this time with distance. The third hangs longer. The fourth is not louder. It lies deeper and opens a room under the sidewalk where something breathes along. And then you open your mouth. Not because you decided to sing.

Not because lyrics are displayed. Not because Level 10 demands it. The mouth opens because the music suddenly does not want to stay outside anymore. Up to here it was bass, road, tool, rhythm, arpeggio, pause, resistance, movement. Now it becomes voice. Not clean. Not big. Not “beautiful.” More deep, rough, unsure enough to be true and sure enough not to take itself back right away. The first sound is not a word yet. The street listens anyway. The doors do not listen. Doors never listen. They only act like it later.

The Prettiest One becomes more graspable through that, but not as a person. More as something that was present again and again in the previous Levels and now for the first time no longer has to work through stand-ins. She was not the golden figure. Not the bed. Not the door. Not the projection. Not the authority. Not the operation. Not The Intern 12.6. Not even the bass guitar. The bass guitar was the tool. The Prettiest One is what finally does more than hint through the tool. No audience appears on the street. Good. An audience would wreck everything.

Instead edges appear. The edges of the roads so far. The door from Level 1, very far back, half open. The street from Level 2, but without countdown. The table from Level 3, empty and quiet. The wall from Level 4, where GOES is only barely visible now. Discordia as wind that no longer shifts everything. Level 6 as a switched-off speaker. 1978 as old light. The doors from Level 8 and Level 9, but without the obligation to see somebody standing in front of them. Nothing stands around you.

Mandatory Reading Aid: The sentence does not want to relieve you. It wants to keep enough resistance so turning the page does not look like acquittal.

It lies behind the voice. You are not really singing yet. You are looking for the first sentence. The road does not wait. It is already going. Then the voice comes. First like speaking. Then with a melody that does not want to prove it is melody. The bass guitar does not play much. It does not have to. A simple run underneath, a repeated foundation, something that does not shine but stays. The music lays itself around the street, and suddenly it becomes clear that Level 10 is not the place where you find the road. It is the place where you notice that road is not always something lying in front of you.

The Intern 12.6 stands at a fence. He says nothing. That is good. The Works Council stands a little farther back. He says nothing either. That is even better. The Time Warper Authority 1978 is surely present somewhere, but it is not stamping. Maybe it noticed that this procedure does not get faster if you confirm it afterward. Maybe it is only on lunch break. Voluntarily. Responsible. Unclear. The Prettiest One comes closer. Not visible. Audible. Not as a voice from outside, but as permission for your voice to stay rough. For it not to have to be clean. For it not to have to explain why it is singing now. For it to stay mouth, even when music comes out of it.

The street does not get smooth. Of course not. It never gets smooth. Maybe that was the point the whole time, without anybody being rude enough to say it that simple. You sing. And with the complete song, not everything closes. But the first half of the book stops being only preparation. It becomes voice.

[Verse 1]

The road don't go no place at all
Whaddaya think, where I already fall?
Am I dumb – dumb like you're so bright?
Does yesterday come after tomorrow,
and when the hell was today tonight?

[Verse 2]

Today I was, tomorrow I ain't there yet
And yesterday kicks me in the ass, you bet
What I do, I still do today
Backwards rhyme don't make me less okay

[Verse 3]

I gotta leave if I wanna stay
And tomorrow I'm burnt on the grill anyway
Ya wanna get me, ya don't need proof
First I was gone, now I'm the way, ya goof!

I AM THE WAY!!!!

[Outro]

Sacrament Part 2

Part Two



Level 11 – Gemini. The New Doppler Effect



Gemini now does not only double voices. It doubles the dirt too: once as echo, once as a false memory of a rehearsal room that maybe never looked like that, but sure as hell smelled like that. After the song there is no applause. Of course not. Applause would have closed the first half cleanly, and cleanly closed things in this book are either suspicious or have not been lying around long enough yet. The road is still there, but it sounds different. Not louder. Not prettier. Different. As if your singing did not change the world, only the distance between you and the world, and now everything that moves reaches you with a slight shift.

You walk on, and your steps come back to you, but not at the same time. One from the left, one from the right, one from the front, one from a house that has no open door. The sound of your shoes runs ahead of you for a second and then waits behind you. The breath in your throat passes your ear again half a second later, as if somebody played a recording that is not quite in sync. The acoustic bass guitar hangs on you. It is silent, but its silence is no longer still. It has direction. Every string seems to react to something that has not been played yet, or to something already too far away to still count as a note. You do not put your hand on the strings. You let it hover just above them. Since Level 10 you know that voice does not only happen when you sing. Sometimes it starts earlier, in the gap before the first sound.

Gemini does not mirror cleanly. The doubling lags behind, distorts the second mouth, shoves the echo against the Doppler, and lets both voices pretend a little too late that they were meant at the same time.

On the house wall to the left it says:

GEMINI

Under it, a little smaller:

THE NEW DOPPLER EFFECT

The word New flickers for a second.

Then it says:

The New Doppler Effect

Then:

The new Doppler Effect

Then:

The New Doppler Effect

The capitalization cannot decide. Neither can the system. You say, "Yeah, bravo." The street stops. Not really. But the return of your voice shifts. First you hear bravo from the front, then yeah from behind, then both at the same time from a basement window. It does not sound like an echo. An echo repeats. This answers before it knows what was said. SYSTEM NOTICE: Voice input detected. SYSTEM NOTICE: Voice input will have been expected. SYSTEM NOTICE: Source present twice. SYSTEM NOTICE: Gemini match failed.

"I'm only here once," you say.

The same voice comes back from the right side of the street.

"You sure?"

It is your voice. Not quite. It is a little brighter. Or younger. Or closer to a sentence you did not say. It does not come out of your mouth, but it sounds as if it could have fit there, if you had let it. The Intern 12.6 suddenly stands by a garden fence and looks back and forth, frightened, between you and the empty street.

"Did you say that?"

"Yeah."

"The other thing too?"

"No."

"Bad."

"Thanks."

"You're welcome."

He looks relieved that the conversation works, although it clearly should not. The new Doppler effect does not show itself like a theory. It shows itself like an error you recognize too late as surroundings. If you move toward a door, your step sounds higher, as if the door were closer than it is. If you walk past it, the sound drops, not into depth, but into an older version of the same noise. A bicycle with a flat tire stands at the side of the road. When you approach it, you hear the ring of a bell that is not mounted. Once you are past it, you hear the missing rear tire from Level 2 rolling over asphalt, although it cannot be there anymore.

"That ain't a normal echo," says the Intern.

"No."

"Good, because I wouldn't have known what to do with it."

"Me neither."

He looks at you for a second.

"You just say that now?"

"Yeah."

"Part 2 is different already."

That is true. And exactly because of that, the sidewalk starts glitching for a moment. Not wild. Not spectacular. More like a tired file that has been overwritten too many times. A piece of asphalt loads late. A mailbox appears twice, once with an empty name plate, once with the word Gemini, then both are only mailboxes again. A window opens before the sound of the window. A dog barks, but the bark runs past you before the dog could have been anywhere. Patch Error 409: movement and perception temporarily do not match.

Recommended action: keep walking. Alternative action: also keep walking. The Intern reads it and nods. "Finally, help that helps with nothing again."

"It's good at that."

"Who?"

"The book."

The Intern looks up, frightened, as if you were not allowed to say that. Earlier you maybe would have thought it. Now you say it, and the street has to work with it. A few meters ahead of you, a white line at the sidewalk edge buckles, straightens again, and acts like nothing happened. From far away comes a sound. Not music. Not voice. A long, crooked passing-by, as if a car were not driving through the street but through the meaning of a car. The sound rises while nothing comes closer and falls while nothing drives away. It pulls the houses slightly apart. Windows get longer. Doors get narrower. The Intern holds onto the fence.

Mandatory Reading Aid: The second voice does not mirror. It lags crookedly behind and hits exactly because of that.

"Something coming?"

"Maybe it already passed."

"That's not an answer."

"I know."

"That's new too."

You walk on, and this time you consciously choose the middle of the street. Not out of defiance, not out of courage, but because left and right claim too much with their echoes. In the middle they are equally wrong. The bass guitar bumps lightly against your body but makes no sound. You let it. No arpeggios. No demonstration. After Level 10, playing only feels right when it becomes necessary. Here it is not necessary yet. Here listening is more dangerous. The Works Council comes from the right out of a side alley. Again he is carrying no dusty folder, but this time he has a pencil behind his ear. That makes him worse. More practical.

"Not every second note is a second person," he says.

The Intern points at him. "That's a sentence I won't understand later."

"Good," says the Works Council.

You say, "It sounds like it, though." The Works Council looks at you, and this time he answers you directly, not the road, not the problem, not the room.

"Then listen closer."

That is almost rude. You want to say something back, and because you have a voice now, the sentence is immediately in your mouth. Earlier it might have turned into a bass note, into a movement, into walking on. Now a decision has to be made about whether it gets to come out.

"Easy to say," you say.

The Works Council nods.

"Yeah."

No defense. That takes the target off the sentence. The street gets wider, but not freer. Left and right, doublings appear now that are not quite copies. Two doors next to each other, one with a handle, one with the sound of a handle. Two sidewalk edges, one visible, one felt. Two Interns for half a blink, one holding a meat sandwich and the other not; when you look closer, there is only one, and of course he is holding no meat sandwich, but he looks offended, as if somebody had taken one away from him.

"Gemini means twin, right?" he asks.

"Yeah."

"Then one's missing."

"Or one's too many."

The Intern thinks about it and visibly decides against it.

"I'm sticking with missing."

The Works Council says, "That's often more comfortable."

On a wall it says:

DOPPLER TEST AREA

Under it:

Please approach your own statement at constant speed.

You stop. The sentence comes closer anyway. That is not fair. It detaches from the wall, not as shit-ass paper, not as voice, but as meaning with bad timing. Your own statement runs a little ahead, turns around, and suddenly sounds like something you always wanted to say. Then it falls back and sounds like something you better never should have said. You notice how easy it would be to get lost in this shift: every voice becomes different depending on whether you move toward it or away from it. Every memory gets a different pitch. Every earlier version works once like warning, once like target, once like embarrassment, once like proof.

You say, "I'm not walking toward everything just because it sounds like me." The sentence stands in the air for a moment. Then it comes back. First higher. Then lower. Then as a stranger's voice. Then as yours. The Works Council does not look dissatisfied. That is his form of recognition. The Intern says, "That was already pretty active right there."

"Yeah."

"Gotta watch it."

"Why?"

"When you're active, you're also more guilty."

You look at him. He immediately looks away.

"Just a thought."

Unfortunately a useful one. The road now leads to an intersection. Not a big one, not a dramatic one. Only four directions, a traffic-light pole without a traffic light, a crosswalk that stops halfway, and in the middle a pasted-up sign that changes every time you look at it from a different angle.

Read from the left:

TO YOU

Read from the right:

FROM YOU

From the front:

WITH YOU

From behind probably something you do not want to know. You do not automatically keep going. This is Part 2. You stop and decide. Not for long, not solemnly, not with an inner fanfare. You simply decide against left because left sounds too much like return, against right because right sounds too much like dodging, and against straight ahead because straight ahead looks suspiciously correct here. Then you walk onto the crosswalk, stop in the middle, and say, "No." The Intern blinks. The Works Council says nothing. The system loads.

Mandatory Reading Aid: The second voice does not explain. It limps alongside, hits the edge, and makes the Doppler dirty right there.

Input: No Target unclear Refusal without proposed alternative target detected Path calculation... Path calculation... Path calculation damaged Patch Error 409 The intersection starts cracking. Not under you. Around you. The crosswalk shifts half a meter forward, then back, then diagonal. The four directions briefly lose their jurisdiction. A sidewalk hangs in the air for a moment, as if it forgot where ground is. The Intern takes one step back. The Works Council does not.

"What're you doing?" asks the Intern.

"Not what's offered."

"And then what?"

You look at the intersection, at the flickering pissed-on sign, at the false directions, at the bass guitar that is still silent.

"Waiting until it stops acting like those are all the options."

The sentence is barely out when the sound of the street shifts. The false Doppler tone passes by, closer this time, but not more threatening. It drives through the intersection like a thought losing its direction, and when it is gone there is a fifth path between the four directions. Not visible as a street. More like relief in the room. A gap between offers. The Works Council says, "There." The Intern whispers, "I never would've found that."

"Me neither," you say.

"But you did it."

"No. I didn't do something."

The Intern nods slowly.

"Part 2 is really mean."

You go through the gap. Behind it no new place begins, only a different acoustics. The houses stand closer together, although the street stays the same width. Every sound has a twin, but not every sound has a body. Your voice only comes back when you need it or fear it. The Intern talks less because his sentences sometimes arrive before he does and then he no longer feels like delivering them afterward. The Works Council makes practical observations: "Don't trust the first sound." "Don't automatically mistrust the second." "If both sound the same, stop." You listen.

Not obediently. On purpose. That is new too.

On a wall, in shaky writing, it says:

The New Doppler Effect does not change events.

Under it:

It changes from which direction they become important.

You read it. Then you say, "Too explanatory." The writing flickers, offended. The first sentence disappears.

The second stays a little longer, then turns into only:

IMPORTANT DOESN'T ALWAYS COME FROM THE FRONT

That is better. The Works Council nods.

"Shorter."

The Intern says, "Still mean, though." The bass guitar gives a note for the first time in this level. Not through your hand. Through movement. The body lightly scrapes against a metal pole, and the lowest string buzzes. Immediately the doublings change. The second Intern disappears before he can appear. A door that was twice in the corner of your eye becomes once. Your voice, which was just about to say something, waits in your throat instead of running ahead. You notice that you could play now. You decide against it. Not out of caution.

For accuracy.

"Not yet," you say.

The bass guitar stays silent. The street accepts it. For a few steps everything is almost quiet. Then, at the end of the section, a big glass surface appears, maybe a shop window, maybe a bus stop, maybe only a piece of system surface that forgot to dress up as world. In it you see two Southring Genes. One walks. One stands. The walking one does not look at you. The standing one does. Both have the bass guitar. Both have the mouth that opened in Level 10. Both seem possible. Neither seems complete. The Intern says softly, "Gemini." The Works Council says, "Don't touch." You walk toward the glass surface.

Not too close. The standing Southring Gene in the glass moves his mouth. You hear nothing. Then you hear it from behind.

"Stay."

It is your voice. Not quite. You answer out loud: "No." The glass gets a crack. Not from volume. From decision. The walking Southring Gene in the glass walks on. The standing one stays. For a moment it looks as if one of them has to disappear. Then something better happens: both become imprecise. Not erased. Not united. Only less in charge. The glass shows street again. You breathe out. The Intern says, "That was almost a boss fight right there."

"No," says the Works Council.

You say, "No." Both at the same time. The Intern lifts his hands.

"All right, all right."

The system flickers. Gemini match: failed. Gemini match: passed. Gemini match: irrelevant. New Doppler correction: active. Voice: no longer passive. Path: changed by decision. Reading status: not a n00b. The last line stays for a moment longer. Then it deletes itself. Ahead of you the road goes on, but it no longer lies where it would have

lain if you had simply chosen one direction at the intersection. That is small. Almost unspectacular. But exactly there sits the change. Part 2 does not become different because everything suddenly gets bigger. Part 2 becomes different because a spoken refusal is enough to make the street cough up another possibility.

The bass guitar hangs on you. The voice stays in you. Not as song. As a tool that is not made of wood. The Intern walks on your left. The Works Council on your right. For a few meters, every step sounds three times: as it is, as it would have been, and as it will later claim it was meant to be. You hear all three. Then you choose the first. And walk on.

Level 12 – Birthday at Last



Birthday comes with dust under its fingernails. Celebration, sure, but not sterile. A cake without crumbs would be suspicious in this book anyway. At first you think Level 11 is not over yet. That would make sense, because the New Doppler Effect throws everything that ends back from the side one more time, and because some noises only arrive after you have already decided to stop paying attention to them. The road still sounds double. Your voice is still lying somewhere left of you, checking whether it really belongs to you. The Intern 12.6 walks a few steps behind, like he is scared of having been forgotten in an earlier version, and the Works Council walks to your right, calm, but with that look that says he has not prepared an explanation but still notices when something does not follow regulations.

Then the overlay appears. Not loud. Not festive. Not even fully stable.

The birthday does not celebrate. It lies there as a body appointment between date, candle, form, and tired time, officially smeared and too personal to be just congratulations.

BIRTHDAY AT LAST

Under it:

Level 12 reached

Under it, for one tiny moment:

PLATINUM

Then the word is gone again. Nobody explains it. Of course not. That is exactly why it stays in the room, like a noise from a system you do not have to see to know that somewhere in the background it just decided to give you something. No trophy falls from the sky. No music starts. No voice congratulates you. And still the street

changes for one moment, as if it has acknowledged an ending and immediately broken it back down into new material. The Intern stops.

“Was that good now?”

You look at the spot where the word disappeared.

“Maybe.”

“So bad?”

“Also possible.”

The Works Council says: “It was recorded in any case.”

“By who?” the Intern asks.

The Works Council does not look up, does not look down, does not look at the street.

“That is not important.”

“People always say that when it is important.”

“No,” you say. “They also say it when they have no patience for the wrong question.”

The Intern looks at you, not offended, more surprised, because by now you are not just speaking, you are placing sentences in the road for others to get caught on. He nods slowly, like he has to accept that Part Two has really started and you cannot just be pushed through displays, doors, and meat sandwiches anymore.

The road in front of you gets wider. Not longer. Not shorter. Wider, like a table where all previous events were dumped out without checking first whether they belong together. On the left lies the door from Level 1, but the Rewind button is stuck in the mail slot. On the right stands the street from Level 2, but the countdown is not hanging in the upper right corner; it hangs like a garland between two streetlights. The cafeteria table from Level 3 is set with birthday napkins, although there is no cake on it. On the wall from Level 4 it says WINS, then WON, then WILL HAVE BEEN WON, then suddenly CONGRATULATES, and underneath someone wrote: too early. Discordia blows through all of it and sorts out nothing, but she keeps it from becoming just a collection. Level 6 lies on a chair as an embarrassingly clean folded towel. 1978 stands in the shadow of a window and acts like it is not an age, not a year, not an origin, and not a suspicion. The doors from Level 8 and Level 9 are there, but this time they do not stand one behind the other, they stand on top of each other, beside each other, partly inside each other, as if someone tried to wrap a road in gift paper and lost the order while doing it.

“That is a flashback,” says the Intern.

“No,” you say.

He waits.

“A flashback would be too orderly.”

The Works Council nods.

“It is a clipboard.”

“Birthday clipboard,” says the Intern.

The Works Council looks at him.

“No.”

You say: “Yes.” The Works Council looks at you. For one moment it is quiet. Then he says: “Provisionally.” That is enough. The street accepts the word. Provisionally runs across the floor, sits down briefly on the cafeteria table, falls into a glass of water, becomes an air bubble, rises, and pops over the plate where suddenly a piece of cake is lying. The cake does not look good. It is crooked, too dry, sunk in on one side, with a candle that does not burn but smokes a little, although apparently it was never lit. On the frosting it says:

12.6

Under it, smaller:

at last The Intern gets nervous immediately.

“That is mine.”

“Yours?”

“I mean, not mine. But kind of.”

“Birthday?”

“Yes. No. Maybe. I am 12.6.”

“You are not 12.6,” says the Works Council.

“But that is my name.”

“That is something else.”

“Not always in this book.”

Unfortunately he is right. You look at the cake. It smells of sugar, dust, printer ink, and meaning kept too long. The candle keeps smoking. Nobody sings. That is good. Level 10 sang. Level 12 does not have to immediately imitate what just started working. Birthday is not a party here, but a ripening error that finally no longer gets hidden. Everything that has happened so far is lying there one more time, but not as a chronicle. More like dough that has been kneaded again and again and now rises in spots where before there were only footprints.

Mandatory Reading Aid: Birthday is not cake here. More like a body appointment with an office edge.

SYSTEM NOTICE: Progress complete. SYSTEM NOTICE: Progress being reassembled. SYSTEM NOTICE: Completeness damaged. SYSTEM NOTICE: Maturity level rising anyway. The Intern reads it.

“That sounds like me.”

The Works Council says: "That sounds like everything." The acoustic bass guitar hangs calmly on you. It could play. It does not have to. Its strings lie under your hand like lines that could be turned into a road again at any time, but Level 12 does not ask for technique. It asks for decision, and not for some big heroic one, but for a small, almost ridiculous one: You do not reach for the bass guitar. You do not reach for the cake. You do not reach for the Rewind button in the mail slot. You also do not reach for the word PLATINUM, still hanging somewhere invisible in the air and acting like a reward, although in truth it only confirms that you held out long enough to now have to keep going differently.

"I do not want to cut the cake," you say.

The Intern looks at you in horror.

"But birthday."

"Exactly."

The Works Council asks: "Why not?" You look at the cake, at the smoking candle, at the scattered level scraps, at the doors that no longer want to be projection surfaces, at the countdown hanging like a garland, at Discordia slightly shifting everything so it does not become a museum.

"Because then it acts like everything before it was only preparation for it."

The Intern opens his mouth. Closes it again. The Works Council says: "Valid objection." The cake sinks another little bit deeper on one side. Not offended. Relieved. The candle stops smoking. On the frosting, at last changes to still. Then to onward. Then to both. The Intern carefully takes a napkin from the table and puts it in his pocket.

"Just to be safe."

"For what?" you ask.

"For later cake."

"There is no later cake."

He looks at you very seriously.

"You cannot know that."

No. You really cannot know that. The road behind the table begins to reorder itself. Not straight. Not pretty. More like a save file that knows every decision so far but is no longer willing to leave them in the order they were made. The door from Level 1 now stands behind the table, but the Intern is not sitting inside it. The street from Level 2 runs across the ceiling and does not count down, but counts places where you no longer ran back. Level 3's bass receipt suddenly lies behind Level 10's voice, as if the voice had been there first and only looked for a tool later. Level 4's Works Council stands briefly on an election poster, crosses himself out, and steps back beside you. Discordia becomes the tablecloth. Level 6 becomes the fold in it. 1978 becomes the candle number that was not lit. Level 8 becomes the edge of the table. Level 9 becomes the space between table and road. Level 11 becomes the echo that asks everything double and briefly whether it really happened.

It ripens. Not dignified. Not beautiful. Not like wine. More like something you left standing too long until it finally had to admit that change is not only spoilage. The Mandatory Reading Aid suddenly sticks to the napkin in the Intern's pocket. He pulls it out in shock, as if it had already eaten there.

Mandatory Reading Aid: You have reached the birthday. Please do not confuse this with a goal.

Mandatory Reading Aid: Birthday is not origin here. Birthday is a loading point acting like a calendar.

"Oh great," he says.

"Does that help you?" you ask.

"No."

"Then it fits."

He puts the napkin back in. This time the text stays on it. You keep walking. The birthday comes along. Not as a party. Not as a date. As a ripeness state. On the house walls, old displays appear for short moments: Tutorial successfully passed, clinging refused, Syntax Dogshit Error, Patch Error 409, arpeggio technique already mastered, n00b status: left behind, voice active, Gemini match irrelevant, platinum received, but they never stay long enough to form a list. They get mixed up, reassembled, sorted wrong, and with each error they look less like a flashback and more like material that finally does not have to prove where it came from anymore.

The Intern walks beside you and says: "Actually you would have to congratulate."

"Go ahead."

He clears his throat.

"Happy birthday."

The street flickers. Not badly. Just briefly. The sentence was too direct. You say: "Thanks." Now it flickers harder. The Works Council stops.

"Interesting."

"What?" asks the Intern.

"It accepts simple politeness worse than system errors."

You say: "Maybe simple politeness has not been tested enough here yet." The Intern points at you.

"That was almost Works Council."

"No," says the Works Council.

"Yes," you say.

The Works Council looks at you.

"Partly."

That is probably his present. Farther ahead stands a small wall made of displays, awards, stamps, error messages, and half lower-thirds. It does not block the road, but it acts like it is important enough to be noticed. In the middle the word PLATINUM lights up one more time, this time not as a trophy, but as a surface: smooth, bright, almost unpleasantly clean. Under it says: All previous conditions fulfilled.

Mandatory Reading Aid: Birthday is not cake edge. It is the body appointment where calendar, stomach, and loading point briefly use the same dirty table.

Then:

New conditions will be formed from previous conditions.

Then:

Please celebrate appropriately.

You say: "No." The wall stays. You say: "Not appropriately." The word appropriately gets cracks.

"Not the way you want."

Now it falls off. The platinum surface turns duller. Under it no gold appears, no light, no secret room, but an old scratched door with ballpoint pen on it: Birthday at Last

Under it:

Please do not blow out.

The candle from the cake suddenly stands on the door handle. Not burning. Not smoking. Just there, as if someone understood that birthdays in this book do not need candles, they need handles. You do not touch it. You say: "We keep going." The Intern raises his hand.

"Wait. Who is we?"

You look at him. Then the Works Council. Then the bass guitar. Then the street.

"Everybody who comes along."

The Works Council says: "That is not a clean definition."

"No."

"But usable."

"Exactly."

The Intern smiles.

"I'm coming."

"That was clear," says the Works Council.

"Not always."

That is true. The door does not open. Instead it becomes old. Then new. Then a little crooked. Then a birthday door. Then the Level 1 door. Then a door from Level

8. Then just a rectangle of air. Then the scratched door again with the candle on the handle. The road behind it changes with every switch, but Southring Gene does not wait until the correct version appears. You start walking. Not through the door. Not past it. You choose the moment when it does not yet know what it is.

That is new enough to work. The room behind it consists of nothing but wrongly sorted leftovers, but this time they no longer look damaged. They do not hang on the walls as an archive. They do not stand in the way as tests. They move, connect, separate, reassemble. Level 1's meat sandwich lands on Level 3's plate. Level 2's countdown counts the candles that never burned. Level 4's GOES becomes the label on a chair. Discordia does not make meaning from it, but a rhythm. Level 6 lays a towel over the too-bright platinum surface. 1978 arrives late and claims it was always there. Level 8 lengthens the table. Level 9 lowers the name underneath it. Level 10 does not sing, but the air still knows what that was like. Level 11 throws everything back twice until you decide to take only one version with you.

You say: "That one." Immediately one road remains. The Works Council looks at it.

"Why this one?"

"Because it does not act like it is the right one."

The Intern nods, thrilled.

"That is very Southring Gene."

You look at him.

"Lowercase?"

He thinks.

"Hard to say right now."

Good. You walk along the road, and for the first time a jumble does not feel like disturbance, but like ripening. The old events do not return to be played again. They return because now they can be used differently. Birthday is not a date when everything begins again. It is a point where you notice that you no longer have to build the same machine out of the same parts. At the end of the room there is no exit. Only another street. Of course.

But above it hangs a small display, very plain, almost embarrassed:

Level 12 completed

Under it flickers:

Birthday at Last

Under it:

Reward received: no apology required The Intern audibly exhales.

"That is nice."

The Works Council says: "That is practical." You say: "That is enough." The display accepts that. Not happily. But it accepts it. Very briefly PLATINUM appears one more time, this time not as a goal, not as triumph, not as explanation.

Only as a quiet, strange glow in the background of a book that does not have to explain which system is currently satisfied. Then it gets dark enough for the next road. Not black. Just ripe.

Level 13 –



The sign # suddenly looks less like a symbol and more like a scratch. Someone saw order in it because scratches would be too honest otherwise.

Mandatory Reading Aid: A sign can claim more order than it can carry. That is exactly why it is useful.

The road counts. One. Two. Three. Four. Not visible. Not displayed. Nobody says it. The ground does it. The houses do it. Your steps do it. The bass guitar hangs on you and does nothing yet, but even that joins in. Everything is suddenly too straight, too usable, too ready to be a beginning, and that is exactly why you say:

The sign does not become code. It stays scratch, grid, fence, marking, a # with a dirty edge, pushing against its own readability.

“No.”

The Intern 12.6 looks at you as if he pressed a button that was not intended.

“To what?”

“Too straight.”

The Works Council stops, checks the sidewalk, the edge of the houses, the distance to the next door, then the word that has not even been written yet.

“Valid.”

On the wall across from you, a sign appears.

#

No explanation. Just that. The Intern says: “Number.” The Works Council says: “File reference.” You say: “Disturbance.” The sign stays. Then the road starts moving again, but the beat is offended. It keeps walking nicely for a few steps, one,

two, three, four, one, two, three, four, one, two, then something is missing, then something comes too early, then four is suddenly behind you, and three stands on a door that was not there a second ago.

#

is on the mailbox.

#

is in the crack of the sidewalk edge.

#

is on the back of a napkin the Intern definitely did not take from Level 12.

“I didn’t steal it,” he says.

“Nobody said that.”

“Not yet.”

The Works Council does not take the napkin away from him. That is almost generous. The road goes on, but not straight. It only acts straight long enough for you to believe it, then jumps sideways, leaves a sentence open, puts a fence in the middle of an explanation, and opens a window beside it where you cannot see a room, but another spot on the same road, only more crooked, faster, more rude. A house has three entrances and no reason. A door has two handles, both on the left. On a doorbell plate there is no name, only:

#

You do not press it. The bell rings anyway. No sound comes from the house, but a short sentence that does not want to finish: “If the sign as—” Cut off.

Then:

“If the sign not as—”

Cut off.

Then only:

#

“Does that help?” asks the Intern.

“No.”

“Good.”

The Mandatory Reading Aid stands there this time like a dirty margin mark and still claims official calm:

Notice Notice Notice Notice unusable Notice refused Notice has marked itself

The Works Council reads it but says nothing. Probably because a notice that admits it is useless at least does not cause an additional meeting. The road suddenly bends into a small square. There are chairs. Many chairs. Too many chairs. All empty. All lined up correctly.

Mandatory Reading Aid: The sign does not want to be decoded. It wants to scratch.

Everybody is waiting for someone who was not invited.

In the middle, a table; on it bread, salt, filthy coffee, a piece of cake, a meat sandwich, a candle without flame, a glass of water, a knife that is too clean, and in front of every seat a little card with the same sign:

#

The Intern almost sits down. The Works Council says: "Not out of politeness." The Intern stays standing.

"But what if the seat is for me?"

"Then it waits."

You walk past the table. Not quickly. Not defiantly. Just without sitting down. The chairs move after you quietly. Not threatening, more offended-friendly. The table tries to make warmth. It smells of filthy coffee, old wood, birthday, something that wants to say: Come on, sit down, belong for a second, do not be so difficult. You say: "No." The no is not loud. But it does not stay polite. The chairs creak. The table gets longer. The bread becomes more bread, the salt more salt, the filthy coffee blacker, the cake drier, the meat sandwich more important than it has any right to be. The sign on the cards does not grow. It stays the same size. That is exactly what makes it unpleasant.

#

#

#

#

You do not take the bass guitar. You do not play. You let the no stand in the room. It is enough. The table stops claiming home and becomes a table again. The chairs stay empty. The Intern breathes out like he did not notice he was holding his breath.

"That was close."

"Was it?" you ask.

"For me, yeah."

The Works Council says: "Then it was." You keep walking. The square does not end; it only gets heavier. The air loses the smell of filthy coffee and wood and gains weight. Not suddenly. Not with thunder. Simply more with every step. The houses become flatter, then wider, then walls that were not built to carry anything, but to pass pressure on. The street in front of you is no longer a street, but a surface pushing forward. Slow. Wide. No hurry. No mercy.

#

The sign now stands black on a wall. A sentence should stand under it. It does not make it. The first letter comes. Then it gets crushed. You feel it in your ribcage. Not as fear. Not as meaning. Not as beautiful dark depth someone could use later in an

analysis. It is coarser. Dumber. More honest. Something presses from outside, and something in you presses back, but first it finds no word, because words would be too thin here and sentences would smell too much like excuses. The bass guitar hangs lower.

Your hand lies on it. Not playing. Not yet. The Intern says nothing. The Works Council says nothing. Very good. The surface comes closer. Or you move toward it. Or both. The walls do not move together, they only get denser, and everything marked on them loses readability, but not effect. # becomes grid, becomes scratch, becomes stamp, becomes comment, becomes wound, becomes number, becomes no number, becomes spot, becomes hit. Your mouth opens, but it is not looking for a sentence. For the first time since Level 10 it does not want to sing because a song is coming. It does not want to speak because Part Two has a voice. It does not want to answer because someone asked.

It wants to let out. The first sound is ugly. Good. The second breaks. Better. Then no word comes, but pressure, throat, chest, jaw, tongue, air, raw movement, a roar without text, without reason, without pretty anger address, without an opponent to hand it to. It comes out of you as if every too-smooth beaten-up sign, every good page, every wrong invitation, every marking, every projection, every explanation, every second voice, every missed answer, every proper seat at the table tightened a tiny screw, and now it is not the system tearing, it is your politeness.

AAAAA— No. Not like that. Not as letters. Not as rebuilt sound. The text cannot do it. It only marks the spot.

#

The bass guitar answers with a single note. Deep. Long. Not virtuosic. Not correct. Just there. The note holds the roar down so it does not fall apart into pose. You keep roaring, and for one moment singing is no word, no melody, no slang, no title, no road. Singing is simply that something no longer stays inside. The Intern covers his ears and immediately takes his hands away again, because apparently he realizes that looking away does not work with noises either. The Works Council stands next to you, motionless, and for the first time his practical order does nothing except make room.

The surface hits the note. The note hits the scream. The scream hits the sign.

#

It does not rip. It stays. But it tilts. Not over. Into another use. The pressure breaks off like a sentence finally realizing it has gotten too long. And after that, something soft lies there. Much too soft. A bright room without explanation. A chair. A glass of water. A bed, but without a smeared sign. A window, half open. No body. No person. No Prettiest One. No door figure. No audience. Only a kind of closeness that does not apologize, but also demands nothing. The scream still hangs in the air, rough and damaged, and exactly because of that this soft piece does not feel clean, but dangerous. It does not want to win. It only does not want to disappear.

“No,” you say.

But the no does not hit. You say it again.

“No.”

The room stays. The glass of water stays. The chair stays. The bed stays. The window stays half open. The Intern whispers: “Maybe it doesn’t mean anything bad.”

“That does not make it easier.”

“No.”

The Works Council says: “Forward.” You look at him.

Mandatory Reading Aid: The sign does not want to be deciphered in peace. It scratches at the gaze until meaning gets an open sore.

“Just like that?”

“Not just.”

“But forward.”

“Yes.”

You go. The soft room stays behind you, and exactly in the moment when you think maybe it might be allowed to stay, the road tears forward. No transition. No preparation. Edge. Fast. Too fast. Then right. The street shrinks to attack length. The houses step closer. The doors no longer stand around, they get bumped. The sentences lose their politeness and cut themselves off before they get too smart. The bass guitar clatters dry, not pretty, not round, not deep, but straight into the ribs. Southring Gene no longer only keeps going; he shoves the road.

“Don’t mark it and put it away!”

The sign flickers.

“Don’t press everything into meaning!”

A half-torn sign falls.

“Not every hole is an archive!”

The Intern shouts: “But some are!”

“Shut ya mouth!”

“He’s talking to me!” the Intern shouts, excited.

“Keep walking,” says the Works Council.

“I am, alright!”

The road gets faster, shorter, harder. No curve gets spelled out. No door gets time to be mysterious. # jumps to the edge, in front of the sentence, into the middle of the sentence, as impact, as disturbance, as something that no longer wants to be explained because explanation only slows things down here. You no longer roar wordlessly, but the words are only splinters, not message. They fly out, hit wall, floor, sign, air, Intern comment, Works Council calm, and everything has to duck for a second. no not like that forward away Road

ROAD

The last hit does not come from the bass guitar. It comes from the foot. You step on the sign on the ground. On purpose. Not as victory. As use.

#

Under your shoe it stays a sign. With your footprint it also becomes a track. The street does not stop. But it shuts its mouth for a second. That is enough.

Mandatory Reading Aid: Marking complete. Meaning not complete.

You say: "Works." The system tries to classify works. It gives up. The Intern exhales.

"That was ugly."

The Works Council says: "Necessary." You say: "Both." The sign stays on the ground. Not bigger. Not smaller. Not explained.

#

The acoustic bass guitar is still hanging on you. Or not anymore. First you notice it by the weight. Not heavier in the simple sense, not more burdensome, but more decided. The body lies differently against your body, closer to the ribcage, lower at the hip, as if the instrument listened through the whole level and now decided that wood alone is not enough anymore. The surface darkens. The matte brown, the old, dry, almost harmless wood, pulls back, not like paint getting painted over, but like an earlier version finally making room. Black comes through underneath.

Matte. Not glossy. Not noble. Not stage. A black that does not throw light back, but keeps it. The strings get thicker. The neck gets narrower in the hand and at the same time more definite. The resonance in the body changes, loses the hollow acoustic breathing and gets an electric tension that is not loud yet but already knows it could get loud. A short hum runs through the bass, deep, distorted, raw, as if the last scream from Level 13 does not disappear but passes into a new material. The Intern stares at the instrument.

"Was it already like that before?"

The Works Council says nothing. That is answer enough. Under the strings, at the back of the body, where before something dark was visible only from the right angle, the Leviathan cross gets bigger. Not suddenly. Not as an effect. It steps forward as if it had always been too small for what it now has to carry. The lines get brighter, clearer, more marked, not golden, not holy, not jewelry. More like a sign no longer willing to only work hidden. It sits under the strings like a decision that does not have to be spoken because from now on it will sound along anyway.

Southring Gene looks at it. This time he does not wait for the book to explain what it means. He does not know it completely either. But he knows that it belongs to him. Not as property. As direction. The new bass makes a sound. Just one. It is more distorted than anything that has come from this instrument so far, darker, wider, with an edge that does not ask permission. The floor does not simply take it in. It gets out of its way. The air gets thicker for a second, the doors nearby pull

their handles a little closer to themselves, and the sign on the ground, the #, vibrates under your shoe as if it understood that marking is no longer only writing now.

Then the sound gets quieter. Not weaker. Finer. It lays itself under the street, almost tender, almost careful, without losing the distortion completely. The bass can now press, cut, carry, growl, but also wait, thin out, give way. It is not powerful because it is always loud. It is powerful because it notices when it has to be loud. The Intern whispers: "It adapts to you." Southring Gene says: "No." The Intern flinches. Southring Gene lays his hand on the strings.

"It does not adapt. It listens."

The Works Council nods once. Practical. Final enough. The bass hangs on you. Matte black. Electric. The cross bright under the strings. No reward. No weapon. No explanation. A sign of inner self-determination that does not have to appear as a sentence because from now on it helps decide with every note. And this time you do not walk past it. You walk on over it.

Level 14 – Approximately Coffee



The filthy coffee is still only approximately coffee. It tastes like rehearsal room: brewed too late, left standing too long, still necessary. The black electric bass hangs on you as if it had always been there. That is not true. But it is true enough. The road after Level 13 is quieter than it has any right to be. Not peaceful. Not calmed down. More like it survived the last stretch and decided not to have an opinion about it now. The sign # lies behind you, under your imprint, and still it is not gone. It has written itself into the ground, into the step, into the new weight of the instrument, into the matte black surface that does not give light back but keeps it.

The Intern 12.6 walks on your left and keeps looking at the bass.

The coffee does not begin as wakefulness. It begins as leftover warmth in a head that was screwed open too early, as cup rim, approach, tiredness and brown track sticking before the first clear thought.

“That thing looks pretty rough,” he says.

“Thanks.”

“Wasn’t a compliment.”

“I’m taking it anyway.”

The Works Council walks on your right, calm, with that practical way of not looking surprised, although of course he is surprised. He does not look at the bass, but at the path, because that is his form of trust: he accepts the new thing by checking whether you can walk with it. After a few yards, a small table stands at the roadside. No cafeteria table. No birthday table. No office table. Just a small table, wobbly, with a cup on it, a spoon, a saucer and a coffee pot that looks too empty to be empty.

Next to it stands a greasy sign.

APPROXIMATELY COFFEE

The Intern stops right away.

“Finally.”

The Works Council says: “Approximately.”

“Approximately is enough for me.”

“That shows.”

The Intern ignores that and grabs the pot. He pours. A thin dark stream comes out of the pot, then nothing, then a drop, then another stream, as if the filthy coffee first has to decide whether it is a drink, a memory or evidence. A liquid gathers in the cup that is not quite coffee, but would clearly object to being called tea. You do not sit down right away. The chair is ready. That makes it suspicious.

“Sit down,” says the Works Council.

“Why?”

“Because right now you look like you’re about to turn a chair into a worldview again.”

The Intern nods. “He does that more often now.”

“I’m sitting anyway,” you say.

And you sit down. The electric bass lies heavy on your lap, because the strap pulls differently when you sit. The matte black surface touches your forearm. The bright sign under the strings is half visible, half covered, and that is exactly why it feels stronger. It does not shove itself forward. It waits. Like something no longer hidden, but also not needing to be mentioned all the time. The Intern pushes the cup toward you.

“Drink.”

You look into it.

“That isn’t coffee.”

“Approximately.”

The Works Council sits down too. “That’s the title.”

“Uh-huh,” you say.

“Not uh-huh,” says the Works Council. “Drink.”

“Since when are you responsible for coffee?”

“Since you obviously need grounding.”

The Intern raises his hand. “Me too.”

“Most of the time you need something to do.”

“Coffee gives me something to do.”

The Works Council lets that count. You take the cup. It is warm, but not warm enough. The filthy coffee smells bitter, thin, burnt, a little like old machine, a little like a construction-site trailer, a little like a break that is not long enough to be called a break. You drink. It tastes bad. Not catastrophic. Not interesting-bad. Just bad. That is almost nice.

“That’s nasty,” you say.

The Intern tastes from his cup and makes a face. “True.” The Works Council drinks too. No reaction.

“And?” asks the Intern.

“Coffee,” says the Works Council.

“That’s all?”

“That’s a lot.”

The electric bass hums softly. Not played. Just like it heard the sentence and found it usable. You look down.

“What?”

The bass says nothing. Of course it says nothing. But it stays silent differently from the acoustic bass guitar earlier. The old guitar stayed silent like wood. This bass stays silent like electricity that has not been let loose yet.

“You too?” you say.

The Intern looks at you.

Mandatory Reading Aid: Coffee does not wake anyone up here. It makes the beginning brown and grudging.

“You talking to the bass?”

“Maybe.”

“Does it answer?”

You lay your fingers lightly on the strings. No note. Only a very fine giving-way.

“Not in your frequency.”

The Intern nods seriously.

“Rude.”

The Works Council says: “Or appropriate.” The cup stands between your hands. The filthy coffee is too little, too bitter, too thin, too real to want to be taken seriously. It stands there. It gets drunk. It cannot do more, and that is exactly enough. It is not an icon. Not a sign. Not a system moment. Not a birthday. Not platinum. Not Doppler. Not #. Just bad coffee on a wobbly table at the edge of a path that has been acting for way too long like it could feed itself on meanings.

southring gene begins speaking in you. Not loudly. Not as a figure. More as a running condition briefly taking over the sentences because the filthy coffee opened a gap where pathos cannot stand well. Filthy coffee is not deep. Coffee is not flat.

Coffee is there because bodies eventually need something that does not negotiate identity with them. Coffee does not ask whether you are Southring Gene, whether you become southring gene, whether you are the way, whether the way reads you, whether the second voice hums along, whether the removed suffix still works, whether the archive is offended because it did not get finished. Coffee is warm, or almost warm, bitter, or almost bitter, empty, or almost empty, and when you drink it, nothing big happens. That is its size. That is already too much said again. Exactly why it is needed.

You drink again.

“You were gone just now,” says the Intern.

“No.”

The Works Council says: “Yes.” You look at both of them.

“I was here.”

The bass hums. Very softly. This time only you hear it. Or you imagine it. The note does not say yes. Not no. It lies under the sentence I was here and makes it less sure, but more load-bearing. You say to the bass: “You don’t believe me either.” The bass stays silent. You lay one finger on the lowest string.

“Alright.”

A note appears, barely audible, more like a black thread under the table. The coffee cups do not shake. The table does not wobble more than before. The Intern notices nothing. The Works Council maybe does, but he acts like he is looking at the pot. The note is not mighty. Not distorted. Not aggressive. It is fine, almost careful, and still clearly electric. It shows that the bass cannot only roar. It can also lie under a bad filthy coffee and carry a statement just far enough so it does not fall over.

“It’s listening,” you say.

The Intern looks at the bass.

“The coffee?”

“The bass.”

“Oh.”

Pause.

“The coffee is kinda listening too, though.”

The Works Council says: “The filthy coffee is overwhelmed.”

“Like us.”

“Approximately.”

The Intern smiles. That is rare enough to stay there. Suddenly there are three spoons on the table. Before, there was one. Nobody comments on it. It would be too easy. The Intern takes one, stirs his cup even though there is no sugar. The Works Council takes none. You take the third and lay it on the saucer, not because you need it, but because the sound is small. Clack. The bass does not answer. Good.

Not every sound needs accompaniment. The path around you stays there. Houses, sidewalk, doors, sky. But everything keeps a little more distance, as if the filthy coffee had drawn a small circle where the world for once is not allowed to talk into everything right away. The Intern of course uses that wrong.

“So,” he says, “if the bass is electric now, do we need power?”

“No.”

“But electric.”

“It doesn’t need a plug.”

“That’s technically suspicious.”

The Works Council says: “A lot of things in this book are technically suspicious.”

“I’m just asking, because if it needs power, we’d have to find an outlet.”

You look at the bass.

“Do you need an outlet?”

The bass stays silent. Then a short dry crack. The Intern points at it immediately.

“That was a yes.”

“That was a no.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I carry it.”

The sentence stands longer than you wanted. The Works Council looks up.

Mandatory Reading Aid: Coffee wakes nothing here. It makes the beginning brown, bitter and grudging enough so the sentence does not start clean.

“That was new.”

“What?”

“That carrying counts as an argument.”

You look down at the bass. Matte black. Electric. The bright sign under the strings, distinct and still not dressed up. No jewelry. No explanation. A direction. You carry it, yes. But since Level 13 it also carries something of you that had no body before. Not as a burden. As a possibility. southring gene speaks again, shorter this time. Maybe carrying is always mutual once something is heavy enough to be more than an object. Maybe every tool eventually becomes a witness too. Maybe that is too much for a filthy coffee. Probably that is too much for a coffee.

You say out loud: “That’s too much for a filthy coffee.” The Intern nods immediately. “For that one, yeah.” The Works Council drinks the last sip.

“Especially for that one.”

The filthy coffee in your cup is almost empty. A dark leftover sits at the bottom and does not want to be read. You do not read it anyway. That is progress. Or tiredness.

Both are usable. Beside the table stands a small machine. It was not there before.
On it is written:

CHECK COFFEE CONDITION

Under it, three buttons:

TOO LITTLE

TOO LATE

APPROXIMATELY

The Intern immediately presses APPROXIMATELY. The machine makes a noise that sounds like approval, then like printer error, then like somebody dropping a spoon in the next room. A small shit slip comes out. Grounding temporarily sufficient.

Under it:

Self-mythology slightly reduced.

Under it:

Residual pathos still measurable.

The Works Council reads it and nods, satisfied.

“Good.”

“What does residual pathos mean?” asks the Intern.

You say: “Me.”

“Ah.”

“Thanks.”

“Sure.”

The bass gives off a short note, this time a little rougher, a small distorted rim around an actually gentle sound. Not aggressive. More like an eyebrow going up. You brush over the string, and the note gets softer at once. It does not adapt, you said. It listens. But maybe listening is sometimes hard to tell from adapting when both sides mean it enough. The Works Council stands up.

“Onward.”

The Intern holds up his cup. “Take it with us?”

“No.”

“But in case later—”

“No.”

You say: “Leave it here.” The Intern looks at you, then at the cup, then at the table.

“Sure?”

You nod.

“Not everything has to go into the archive.”

The sentence hits the table. Not hard. But clear. The Intern puts the cup down. The Works Council says nothing, and that is exactly why it feels like agreement. You keep walking. After a few steps the Intern turns around once more. The table is still there. The pot. The cups. The spoons. The machine. The pissed-on sign APPROXIMATELY COFFEE. Nothing disappears. It does not have to disappear to be left behind. The path becomes street again. No big change. No reward. No glitch. Only the taste of bad filthy coffee in your mouth, the black electric bass on your body, and the feeling that grounding does not mean becoming less strange. Grounding only means the strange briefly has a table where it has to sit.

After a while the Intern says: “That filthy coffee was really nasty.”

“Yeah.”

“But good.”

“No.”

“Approximately?”

You look ahead.

“Approximately.”

The bass hums softly. This time all three hear it. The Works Council says: “Then it works.” And for the first time since Level 13, works does not sound like a system problem. Just like a word. A usable one. Ahead of you the path gets longer again. But not bigger right away. Good.

Level 15 – Is It Still Far?



The question of distance gets an old CECH undertone here: is it still far, or does the shoe only hurt because you are walking around inside an earlier version of yourself again? The path does not get bigger.

Mandatory Reading Aid: Far is not a distance. Far is when a step no longer has to prove it is moving forward.

That is disappointing at first. After Level 13, after the sign, after the black electric bass, after Level 14 and the approximate filthy coffee, after that little table at the roadside that did not have to disappear in order to be left behind, you had almost expected the path to take a clear shape again now, maybe a wide road, maybe a long straight line, maybe some new zone that at least has the decency to make its difficulty visible. Instead everything stays similar. Houses. Sidewalk. Doors. Fence. Small walls. A parked bicycle. A window not quite closed. A gutter dripping although no rain is falling. The air is bright, but not fresh, and the sky feels like an old screen that still works but has been showing the same picture for hours.

Distance is not hanging on the goal. It sits in the knee, in the question, in road-tiredness, in the little splinter in the shoe proving that far does not begin only where you can no longer see.

You walk. The Intern 12.6 no longer walks beside you, but a little behind you. Not far. Only far enough that his breathing does not keep landing with yours. The Works Council is somewhere on the right, sometimes visible, sometimes hidden by parked cars, walls or thoughts that run too long. The black electric bass hangs on you, calm, electric, matte, the bright sign under the strings not visible all the time, but always meant along with it. It has not gotten heavier, but the body knows too much about its weight by now to call it neutral. The filthy coffee is still in your mouth. Not as taste. As leftover bitterness. As a reminder that grounding does not automatically refresh.

The path stays. You walk. After a while that is too short to have been long and too long to just skip over, the Intern asks from behind:

“Is it still far?”

Nobody answers right away. That is dangerous, because exactly that makes the question bigger than it wanted to be. It was probably not meant deep. Probably it was only tiredness with a voice, a sentence coming out of the legs before the head can shame it enough. But in this book almost everything has the nasty habit of getting bigger as soon as nobody laughs at it in time. The Works Council finally says: “Yes.” The Intern sighs.

“How far?”

The Works Council says nothing else. That is an answer too. You keep walking. The path does not get bigger. It does not get smaller either. It only becomes more path. That is the mean part. Not the length itself. Not even the exhaustion. It is this feeling that the path does not need any extra obstacle because its continuation is already enough. Every step looks like the one before it, but none is really the same. Every fence could be the fence from earlier, but stands slightly different. Every door could be the same door, but has a different handle. Every shadow lies in the right place, and exactly that makes it suspicious. You are not lost. Being lost would almost have a clear shape. You are on the way. That is worse, because being on the way gives no excuse.

You walk. The Intern walks behind you. The Works Council on the right. The electric bass stays silent. The street makes no mistakes, no glitches, no big system messages. The system has apparently understood that exhaustion works better when it does not blink. No display says STAMINA LOW. No hint appears with helpful nonsense. No Mandatory Reading Aid saves you with a useless definition. Only the path. Only steps. Only this even onward that slowly eats everything that previously looked like event. A house. Another house. A door. Another door.

A fence. A mailbox. A sidewalk. A driveway. A dog that does not bark. A piece of grass. A crack in the asphalt. A lamp that has no reason to matter during the day. You walk. And at some point you notice you are no longer walking in order to arrive somewhere. You walk because stopping would also be work. Stopping would mean taking a position toward the path. Going on needs less decision. One step can hide from responsibility as long as the next one comes right after. That is not dignified. Not heroic. Not even especially sad. It is practical. And practicality always sticks unpleasantly close to truth.

“Is it still far?” the Intern asks again.

This time softer. The Works Council says nothing. You say nothing. The electric bass does not hum. The path answers by going on. That is rude. The question hangs behind you, then catches up again, briefly passes you, stops in front of a house door, turns there into a small faded sign and waits until you pass it. On the sign it says: IS IT STILL FAR? Under it nothing. No arrow. No distance. No answer. The Intern sees it and says: “Fresh.” You do not nod. But you get him. You walk past it.

After the yellowed sign, the path seems easier. The sidewalk gets wider, the houses stand more open, a few trees appear, and between the houses you see a piece of sky

that does not immediately look like archive. For ten, maybe twelve steps, the body believes something has improved. Then it notices that width is not shortness. That air is not a goal. That a tree does not automatically mean break. That even a more pleasant stretch remains a stretch if it does not end. You walk. The Intern gets slower.

The Works Council adjusts his pace without commenting on it. You notice. The Intern does not. Or he does. Maybe being grateful is too tiring for him. That is fair. The bass guitar lies still on you. It could check the ground with a low note, could mark a way, could carry the steps, could make rhythm out of tiredness. But it does not. Or you do not let it. Maybe that is the same. After Level 13 you know it can roar. After Level 14 you know it can be sensitive. Here it has to do something even heavier: come along without making itself important. The bass hangs on you like a promise that is not cashed in because cashing in would be too much right now.

You walk. The question comes again. Not spoken. This time in the body. Is it still far. Not with a question mark. With weight. Is it still far in the knees. Is it still far in the neck. Is it still far in the strap over the shoulder. Is it still far in the hand that does not want to play. Is it still far in the throat that has known since Level 10 that it has a voice, but now cannot do anything useful with it. Is it still far in the part of you that maybe once would have simply kept reading without feeling responsible, and that now feels Part Two making every continuation a little more strongly your decision.

You could say: yes. You could say: sure. You could say: shut ya mouth. You say nothing. Not from weakness. Because every answer would wrongly enlarge the question. The path is already doing that by itself.

On a wall is written:

KEEP GOING

Under it, smaller:

KEEP GOING

Under it:

KEEP GOING

Under it:

KEEP GOING

The writing does not get bigger, not smaller. It only repeats itself until at some point it no longer feels like instruction, but like noise. The Intern stops in front of it and looks at it for a long time.

“Well that’s not helping either.”

The Works Council says: “No.”

“Why is it there then?”

“Because something doesn’t have to be helpful to be there.”

The Intern turns around to you.

“You hear that?”

“Sadly.”

“That was one of those sentences again.”

“Yeah.”

The Works Council walks on.

Mandatory Reading Aid: Sometimes you recognize the most important figure because he does not act like the most important figure. That is not modesty. That is statics with experience.

Maybe that is uncomfortable even for him. You follow. The street gets narrower again. Not threatening. Just annoying. A wall on the left, parked cars on the right, between them a sidewalk where you cannot walk next to each other. You walk in front. The Intern behind you. The Works Council behind him. The order does not come from rank, but from lack of space. That may be even worse, because lack of space is more honest than hierarchy. The electric bass bumps lightly against the wall once. No note. Only a dull touch. The wall does not answer. Very good. Not every wall needs an opinion.

A few yards later the bass bumps again. Dull. Again no answer. Then again. Dull. Dull. Dull. The sound becomes a small beat, not played, not wanted, only made from narrowness and walking. The Intern unconsciously starts breathing at the same interval. The Works Council adjusts his steps. You notice that the path already wants to turn you into rhythm again, but this time the rhythm is not liberation, not Discordia, not arpeggio, not scream. It is only holding out. Dull. Step. Dull. Step. Dull. Step. Keep going.

You walk. The narrow stretch lasts too long. Of course. That is its function. It lasts long enough that you forget how it began, but not long enough to make a new order out of it. A wall on the left. Cars on the right. No doors. No figures. No signs. Only the narrow sidewalk, the body, the bass, the strap, the bad filthy coffee in your mouth, the Intern's breath behind you, the Works Council at the end of the little line, and the fact that going on sometimes is not movement forward but the refusal to act in the middle of tightness as if you owe anyone an insight.

“Is it still far?” asks the Intern for the third time.

This time nobody says anything. Not even the Works Council. After the narrow stretch comes space again. But the space does not help right away. You have to get used to space first when you have walked narrow too long. The shoulders stay too careful for a few more steps. The bass still hangs as if it has to hit the wall again any second. The Intern keeps walking behind you although there would be enough room, and the Works Council also stays in line until suddenly all three of you notice nobody is forced to walk like that anymore.

Mandatory Reading Aid: Distance sits in the knee, not in the goal.

Then the line comes apart. Not dramatically. Only sideways. That is relief in Level 15: no breakthrough, no new ability, no reward. Just three bodies fitting next to each other again.

“Uh-huh,” says the Intern.

Nothing more. That is enough. You pass a playground. It is empty. A swing does not move. A slide stands there as if it has had the same job for years and is slowly offended that nobody takes it seriously. In the sand lies a small plastic cup. The Intern looks at it, but says nothing. That is more grown-up than needed. The Works Council looks at the swing as if checking whether it is mounted safely. You look at the path behind it. It leads on. Of course. A children’s sign on the fence shows a figure running happily.

Someone has written underneath:

EVEN THAT ONE EVENTUALLY GETS SICK OF THIS SHIT

The Intern laughs briefly. Very briefly. Then it is over. You walk. The laugh does not stay. Nothing stays long enough to become a break. A bit farther on is a bench. It stands under a tree. It would be logical to sit down. Too logical. You stop in front of it. The Intern stops right away, as if he had been waiting for it. The Works Council too. The bench is empty. It does not offer itself. That is its advantage. It simply stands there, with a little shade, a few scratched-in letters, an old piece of gum under the seat and enough room for three people if nobody sits too wide.

“Five minutes?” asks the Intern.

The Works Council looks at you. Earlier the path would have decided whether this is a break. Now you have to do it. That is mean. You sit down. The Intern almost drops down next to you. The Works Council sits more slowly. The electric bass lies heavy across your thighs, and for the first time since the beginning of the level you notice how much the strap has been pulling at the shoulder. Not bad. Only constant. Constancy is a lousy kind of pain because it camouflages itself until you interrupt it. You move the shoulder, slowly. It cracks softly. The Intern hears it.

“Old,” he says.

“Shut ya mouth.”

“Yeah.”

The Works Council says nothing. That is nice. The bench is not a solution. After one minute that is clear. After two minutes it becomes physical. After three minutes the path in front of you starts looking like an obligation again. After four minutes sitting itself becomes tiring because you know it ends. After five minutes nobody says anything, and exactly that means the break is over. You stand up. The Intern groans.

“Already?”

“Yeah.”

“Was that five minutes?”

“Approximately.”

He accepts it. The Works Council stands up too and does not brush off his pants although there is nothing there. Practical dignity. You keep walking. The path after the bench is not better. But you are bad differently. That counts. Maybe. The street

climbs slightly. Not steep. Just enough that every step wants a little more than the one before it. The Intern does not talk anymore. The Works Council neither. You neither. The level gets more text exactly because of that. Not because more happens, but because less can be cut away. Tiredness has no fast cuts. Tiredness consists of transitions, of small adjustments, of the attempt not to keep asking the body whether it still wants to, because the answer would not be usable anyway. The climb lasts. The houses stay. The windows stay. The doors stay. The electric bass stays. The strap stays. The filthy coffee stays. The question stays.

Is it still far. The sentence has by now detached itself from the Intern's voice. It belongs to all of you. Or to the path. Or to the book. Maybe exactly that is why the level is longer than the ones before it: not because more happens, but because nothing disappears fast enough. A path that drags on does not collect events but scraps of perception. The pressure in the foot. The repeated curb edge. The smell of warm asphalt. The look at a door that does not interest you. The disappointment that a bend only shows another street. The small mean flash of hope when something ahead gets brighter, and the immediate tiredness when you notice that brightness does not mean closeness.

You reach the bend. Behind it: street. Of course. The Intern stops. Not on purpose. His body just briefly stops having an agreement with the path. You walk two more steps, notice it, stop and turn around. That is new too. Earlier you might have noticed he was missing when he showed up again. Now you decide to look back. Not far back. Only two steps. But Part Two already turns two steps into action. The Intern stands there, hands at his sides, no joke in his face.

"I can still do it," he says before anyone asks.

The Works Council stands beside him.

"Nobody said otherwise."

"But you would've."

"No."

The Intern looks at you. You say: "We wait." He looks almost insulted.

"I didn't say you should wait."

"I did."

The sentence comes out calm. Not especially warm. Not big. But it changes the path. Not visibly. Just enough. The Works Council looks at you. Again that look that does not make a medal out of it, but registers that something happened. The Intern swallows.

"Okay."

You wait. Not long. Not dramatic. The path immediately uses the opportunity to stretch on, even while you stand still. Ahead lies the street, and because you are not walking, it does not get shorter. That is logical. That is cruel. The body recovers a little, but the view does not recover. Everything still to come stays there. Sometimes walking is easier because it at least keeps the path busy. After a while the Intern nods.

“Works again.”

The Works Council says: “Slower.”

“Yeah.”

You say nothing. You walk slower. That is the decision. No music. No bass. No sign. No system hint. Just slower. A small, unspectacular intervention in the path. And the path, that tough, long, never-ending thing, has to deal with it. It does. Not gladly. But it does. The climb ends eventually. Of course it does. Everything that drags on eventually ends or turns into something else, but that barely helps while it is happening. At the top there is no view. Only a flatter street, a few garages, an open garden gate, a low fence and a piece of sky that does not look bigger than it did below. The Intern breathes a little easier. The Works Council looks along the street. You feel the bass on you; during the slower walking it has not gotten heavier, only more exact.

The electric bass hums once. Quietly. Not as an order. Not as comfort. More like a question whether the current rhythm holds.

“Yeah,” you say.

The Intern looks up.

“What yeah?”

“Nothing.”

“Bass?”

“Maybe.”

The Intern nods as if by now that is normal enough. The Works Council says: “If it asks, that’s better than if it decides.” You briefly lay your hand on the body.

Mandatory Reading Aid: Distance sits in the knee, in the sole and in the stupid breath after the next door. The goal knows less about it than the body.

“It’s listening.”

“Then you answer,” says the Works Council.

“Yeah.”

“Good.”

That is almost a conversation among all four of you, although the bass does not say a sentence. You keep walking. The path drags on. Again. Still. Now through a neighborhood with long walls, garage doors, mailboxes, low hedges, small driveways, an old scooter under a tarp, a construction barrier with no construction site, two trash cans, a forgotten glove on a wall. Every thing is so normal it almost becomes absurd, and every normal thing makes the path longer because it offers nothing narrative to hold on to. No door figure. No Kid EO. No birthday system. No #. No love song, no scream, no big structural transformation. Only things that are there. Things that do not disappear when you pass them, but also do not get important enough to interrupt the path.

You walk. You walk. You walk. After a time the text cannot measure cleanly, nobody asks anymore whether it is still far. That is the point where the question gets more dangerous. As long as someone asks, it stays outside. When nobody asks anymore, it works inside. It sits in the calves, in the shoulder, in the look forward, in the small anger that the path does not even have the courtesy to become harder. Difficulty would be distraction. Difficulty would bring adrenaline, a problem, maybe even a solution. But this is not difficulty. This is length. Length is a different animal. Boring enough to be underestimated. Tough enough to sand off everything that was distinct before.

Southring Gene feels the voice rise again into the throat. Not as song. Not as scream. Not even as sentence. More as resistance against the mute thing of length. You could say something. You could accuse the path. You could ask the Intern whether he is okay. You could snap at the Works Council because he is probably right. You could talk to the bass. You could do everything Part Two made possible. You do nothing. That too is decision now. Not every speaking is voice.

Not every silence is passivity. The path notices it. Or imagines noticing it. Ahead of you stands another rusty sign. IS IT STILL FAR?

This time underneath:

YES

Under it:

BUT DIFFERENT THAN BEFORE

The Intern reads it and says very quietly: "Ass." The Works Council says: "Correct." You almost laugh. Almost. The almost is not quite enough. But it helps. You keep walking. The path after the second crooked sign does not get shorter, but it changes its pull. Not better. Different. As if the question is no longer only distance, but weight. Maybe it is still far, but not on the same axis. Maybe the far part is not ahead of you, but in repetition. In the way the same street makes you tired differently again and again. In the way progress does not appear as visible change, but as the ability not to declare your own impatience truth right away.

The Intern now walks beside you again. Not strong. Beside you. The Works Council a bit behind. That has shifted without being noticed. The bass hangs calm. That too. The path stays long. Of course. But for a few steps it is not long alone. You are three bodies, one bass, bad filthy coffee in the aftertaste, a birthday, a sign, a voice, a condition no longer quite name, and a question that is still there but no longer deserves every answer. Then the street gets straight again.

Too straight. The Intern groans.

"Please no."

"Yes," you say.

He looks at you.

"That was unnecessarily honest."

"Yeah."

The Works Council says from behind: "Honesty saves detours." The Intern turns around. "But not road."

"No."

"Oh great."

"Yeah."

The straight street lies ahead of you, longer than the one before, or maybe it only seems that way because by now you know what length can do. At the end you can see something. No goal. Only a change in brightness. Maybe a crossing. Maybe a wall. Maybe a glued-up sign. Maybe just more street again. From this distance the difference cannot be seen, and exactly that makes the next stretch heavier before it has begun. You start walking. Slowly. Deliberately slowly. The Intern adjusts. The Works Council too. The electric bass makes no sound, but the bright sign under the strings lies like a calm point under the movement. It does not have to shine. It does not have to grow. It does not have to react. It is enough that it comes along while the path tries again to make itself more important through length than everything you have learned so far.

After a while the Intern does not say:

"Is it still far?"

He says:

"I ain't asking now."

You say: "Good."

A while later he says:

"But I'm thinking it."

"Me too."

The Intern looks at you. Not long. Then he keeps walking. The sentence helped. Not much. Enough. The street drags on. The text drags on. The steps drag on. The question drags on. The answer does not drag on, because there is none, and maybe that is exactly why the level has to be longer than the one before: not because it can say more, but because it needs longer to say nothing helpful. Because exhaustion does not want to be compressed. Because tiredness gets pissed off when you summarize it elegantly. Because a long road is not made only by length, but by the imposition that you have to receive it sentence by sentence, step by step, paragraph by paragraph.

You walk. The Intern walks. The Works Council walks. The bass stays silent. The path remains. And at some point, far ahead, where the brightness does not come closer but only stops apologizing, a small beaten-up sign stands, not readable yet. The Intern sees it. The Works Council sees it. You see it. Nobody says anything. You keep walking until it becomes readable.

On the sign it says:

NOT FAR ANYMORE

Under it, smaller:

BUT NOT HERE YET

The Intern briefly closes his eyes. The Works Council exhales through his nose. You lay your hand on the black electric bass. It does not hum. It waits. You do not say: “Works.” You say nothing at all. This time that is right. You walk past the pissed-on sign. Behind it the path continues. Of course. But not endlessly. That is no comfort. Only information the body cannot believe yet. And so you keep walking, not faster, not stronger, not more hopeful, only onward, through the long, tough, repeating stretch that proves nothing, unlocks nothing, celebrates nothing and exactly by doing that scrapes away something that earlier looked like progress.

Maybe it is still far. Maybe not. The path does not answer it. It goes. And you go with it.

Level 16 – Tiles Behind the Horizon

The tiles are clean enough to lie. Between two joints, though, hangs a sentence that would rather have been mouth-slang and only washed its hands for standard English because it had to. The road does not stop. It gets tiled. Not right away, not with a transition friendly enough to show itself as a threshold. First only the sound under the shoes changes. The asphalt loses its dry length, gets harder, brighter, flatter, and at some point, without a smeared sign announcing it, you are no longer standing on road, but on a surface made of square plates, laid clean, too clean, with joints running in every direction while acting as if direction were a question of division. The black electric bass hangs on you, still, and the bright sign under the strings cannot be seen because your arm is in front of it. That is good. Not everything has to become visible right away just because the floor suddenly acts like visibility is proof.

The tiles keep going. Left. Right. In front of you. Probably behind you too, but you do not turn around, because turning in a room like this would only deliver the certainty that order is also lying behind you. There is no wall in front of you. That is the problem. There is a horizon made of tiles, a line where the surface gets brighter and still does not end. No mountains, no houses, no road, no fence, no bench, no door that could at least make itself suspicious. Only tiles, joints, light, repetition.

Between the tiles, order stands wet. Bathroom light, grid, wall and horizon do not shine clean; they show how a surface slowly stops being innocent.

The Intern 12.6 walks a few steps beside you and gets quieter and quieter, although he is not saying anything. The Works Council is farther right, checking the joints with his eyes as if that could determine whether a room is legally too orderly. The path that brought you here has not disappeared. It was only cut into squares. After sixteen tiles, the Intern stops.

“That’s the end,” he says.

You look ahead. That is not the end.

“No.”

“But they stop up there.”

“They don’t.”

He points at the tiles in front of you. “Yeah. Look. One, two, three, four.” He counts the first row.

“Five, six, seven, eight.”

Then the second.

“Nine, ten, eleven, twelve.”

Then the third.

“Thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen.”

He nods as if the world just proved it fits in his hands.

“Sixteen.”

The Works Council says: “That is only the visible cutout.” The Intern looks ahead.

“But I only see sixteen.”

“That is not the same thing.”

“For some people it is.”

Something appears in the distance. Not at the horizon. On it. A small figure, barely bigger than a mistake in perspective, but it comes closer fast, because the room has apparently decided to treat distance as an opinion. It glides over the tiles without really walking, gets stuck briefly at every fourth joint, corrects itself, counts, nods, counts on, does not count on but starts over. When it is close enough, you recognize a small thin body in a coat too bright for it, a clipboard, a magnifying glass, two much too serious eyes and a forehead carrying the wish to make a final statement from not enough material.

Above him a narrow overlay appears:

DEEP RESEARCHER

Under it:

Mini-Boss

Under that, deleted right away:

not very big He stops exactly sixteen tiles in front of you.

“Found it,” he says.

“What?” asks the Intern.

“Everything.”

The Works Council breathes out once through his nose. That is not a good sign. The Deep Researcher lifts his clipboard. On it are sixteen little squares, cleanly arranged, four by four. Something is written in every square, but the writing is too small to read. He taps the first square.

“First album.”

Then the second.

“Second album.”

Third. Fourth. Fifth. He gets faster until he reaches sixteen and pauses, satisfied.

“Discography fully recorded.”

You say: “No.” The room reacts right away. A joint in front of you gets darker. The Deep Researcher looks up.

“Correction not required. Visible data situation sufficient.”

“No.”

“The first sixteen results form a representative basis.”

“No.”

“The sorting is provided by the system.”

“No.”

At the third no, the floor starts flickering, but only at the joints. Not the tiles themselves. The tiles stay clean. That is worse. Errors sitting in the joints look more honest than broken surfaces. The Deep Researcher writes something down.

“Subject shows resistance to visibility-based completeness.”

“Subject?” asks the Intern.

“Let him,” says the Works Council.

“Why?”

“Because he’s gonna beat himself if he keeps counting.”

The Deep Researcher hears that and smiles thinly.

“Counting is the foundation of every serious investigation.”

Then he starts again.

“Two.”

The tiles in front of him divide.

“Three.”

Three rows appear.

“Five.”

A fifth aisle opens, but only halfway.

“Seven.”

Seven small markings light up briefly.

“Nine.”

Nine shadows fall in different directions, although the light comes from above.

“Thirteen.”

Thirteen tiles tilt by one millimeter, enough to show that the floor only claims stability. The Deep Researcher beams.

Mandatory Reading Aid: Tiles are clean only until the joint starts talking.

“Very good. Number traces confirm increased relevance.”

“And one hundred ten?” you say.

He blinks. For the first time.

“What?”

“One hundred ten.”

The Intern whispers: “Uh.” The Works Council says: “Now.” You do not point at the horizon. You do not have to. The tiles ahead of you keep going, farther than sixteen, farther than four by four, farther than the clipboard, farther than visible convenience, farther than what a too-small window wants to sell as world. The Deep Researcher turns his clipboard and tries to add another row. The page is full.

“One hundred ten is outside the visible area,” he says.

“Yes.”

“Then it is not present.”

“It is.”

“Not on my grid.”

“Your grid is too small.”

The sentence falls onto the tiles. Not loud. But heavy enough that several joints briefly crack open and a second surface becomes visible underneath. Tiles again. Smaller. Darker. More. The visible sixteen lie only on top, like a preview image, like a mistake with good resolution. Under it run more rows, more plates, more entries, not fully visible, but not less present because of that. The Deep Researcher takes a step back. Only one. But because he wanted to keep sixteen tiles of distance, that one step knocks him out of his own measurement.

“The recording must be restarted,” he says.

“Good,” says the Works Council.

“However, taking the first sixteen tiles into account as the primary evidence base.”

“No,” you say.

“Yes,” says the Deep Researcher.

You put your hand on the electric bass. Not to play. Just like that. The matte black takes no light. The bright sign under the strings stays partly covered. The bass listens. You can feel that it could play, low, distorted, wide enough to push the tiles out of their false order. But the mini-boss is not big enough for that much sound. He does not deserve a scream. No roller. No arpeggio. No explosion. He deserves something more precise. You take one step forward. From tile seventeen to eighteen.

The Deep Researcher flinches.

“Outside current viewing window.”

You keep walking. Nineteen. Twenty. Twenty-one. Twenty-two. At twenty-three, the surface flickers. Not much. Only as if a later thing briefly noticed that its number had shown up again. The Intern says quietly: “Twenty-three.” The Works Council says: “Don’t touch it.” The Deep Researcher writes frantically.

“Anomaly at 23. Please ignore until context is available.”

Then 23 appears again. Not as a tile. As a joint. Then again. As a small shadow in the white. The Deep Researcher turns pale.

“Repeated 23 without clearance.”

“Keep going,” says the Works Council.

You keep going. Forty-eight. The number appears not by counting, but by distance. A broad line pulls sideways across the surface, as if someone had set an invisible boundary after 48 tiles that was never meant as a boundary. The Intern stops right before it.

“Why forty-eight?”

The Works Council says: “Because some numbers don’t ask whether they arrive on time.”

The Deep Researcher notes:

48: possibly relevant, delete later

You keep going. Sixty. At sixty the light changes. The tiles get warmer for a moment, then cold again. Not because of meaning, but because of amount. Sixty is a number where even a false grid slowly notices that sixteen was ridiculous. The Deep Researcher opens his clipboard. Inside is a second clipboard. Inside that, a smaller shit slip. On it is again only a four-by-four arrangement.

“I can scale this,” he says.

“No,” you say.

“I can add several viewing windows.”

“No.”

“I can extrapolate subsets.”

“No.”

The Intern looks at you.

“You’re saying no a lot today.”

“Saves time.”

The Works Council says: “True.” The room gets more restless, but only in its cleanliness. The tiles themselves stay bright, sterile, smooth. That is exactly what makes the paranoia. Nothing is obviously broken, and still the surface is wrong. Behind the tile row, behind every joint, behind every apparently complete square lies something that would have to be counted too, but always remains just outside the visible area. The horizon is not distance. It is a user interface. You keep walking. The Deep Researcher runs along beside you, more and more frantic, trying to slide his sixteen tiles along with you. Wherever you stand, he lays four by four in front of himself. Sixteen left. Sixteen right. Sixteen above. Sixteen below. He builds a wall of supposed overview from small visible cutouts. Whenever you step past a tile, he shifts the grid and claims it has been updated.

“Now I see sixteen again,” he says.

“Exactly,” you say.

“So complete.”

“No.”

“Currently complete.”

“No.”

“Complete in the visible area.”

“Yes.”

He smiles, relieved.

“Then—”

“But the visible area is not the world.”

The smile disappears. The Intern makes a small noise like someone just popped a balloon too small for the room. The Works Council says: “Mini-boss.” Not as a warning. As a diagnosis. The Deep Researcher straightens. The tiles under him light up. Sixteen of them. Four by four. Perfect. He stands in the middle of his visible area, as well as one can with sixteen tiles, and lifts both arms. Transparent windows rise around him, each with sixteen tiles. In every window are other titles, other orders, other slices, other apparent beginnings. Some doubled. Some missing. Some sorted wrong. Some look official exactly because they are incomplete.

“I have multiple sources,” he says.

The windows rotate around him.

“I have overviews.”

They get brighter.

“I have result lists.”

The joints hum.

“I have patterns.”

The black electric bass hums very softly. You put your hand more firmly on the body.

“Not yet,” you say.

The bass falls silent again. The Deep Researcher keeps talking, faster, shriller, but not stronger. “The first sixteen results allow conclusions about the remaining structure. From two comes three, from three comes five, from five comes seven, from seven comes nine, from nine comes thirteen, from thirteen arises an increased probability for twenty-three, twenty-three, twenty-three, from that forty-eight, from that sixty, from that—”

Mandatory Reading Aid: The tile only acts smooth. In the joint sits the old moisture report and keeps talking.

“One hundred ten,” you say.

He gets stuck. The transparent windows stop. All sixteen tiles in all windows turn white.

“One hundred ten,” you repeat.

Not loud. Not aggressive. Only complete enough. The floor in front of you does not open. It expands. That is worse for him. There is no break he could file as a special case. No hole, no glitch gap, no dramatic system crash. The tiles simply keep going and show that they have been going the whole time. Row after row, surface after surface, until the horizon itself can no longer be horizon, only the edge of the previous display. The Deep Researcher looks ahead. Really, for the first time. He does not count.

He sees. That beats him almost right away.

“That is too much,” he says.

“No,” you say.

The Intern whispers: “Kinda yes, though.” The Works Council says: “For him.” The Deep Researcher lifts his clipboard one more time, but his hand shakes. On it are still sixteen squares. Four by four. Clean. Useful. Wrong. He tries to draw a seventeenth square on the edge, but the shit-ass paper ends. He turns it over. There too: sixteen. He opens it. Inside: sixteen. He tears out a page. Under it: sixteen.

“My surface does not show more,” he says.

“Then your surface is the problem.”

“No,” he says.

It sounds weak. For the first time his no does not sound like method, but like wish. You walk toward him. He is still standing on his sixteen glowing tiles.

“You don’t have to see all one hundred ten,” you say.

He looks up.

“Then I can’t confirm them.”

“You only have to stop claiming the first sixteen are all of them.”

The sentence is too simple. Maybe that is exactly why it works. The Deep Researcher does not sink to the floor. He does not explode. He does not transform. He only gets smaller in his function. His coat stays bright, his magnifying glass stays big, his clipboard stays full, but the overlay above him flickers.

DEEP RESEARCHER

Then:

Researcher

Then:

Searcher

Then:

visible cutout

Then nothing. The Intern leans toward you.

“Was that the boss fight now?”

“Mini.”

“Ah.”

The Works Council says: “Beaten fast.”

“Almost disappointing,” says the Intern.

“Appropriate,” says the Works Council.

The Searcher, who had just been Deep Researcher, stands on the tile surface and looks past the sixteen. That may be the cruelest punishment for someone who wanted to live off slices: he does not have to die, not disappear, not be refuted. He only has to notice that his window was a window. The tiles behind him remain. Sixteen visible. One hundred ten present. And in between all the problems that confuse visibility with truth. You keep walking.

On the next row one tile says:

2

On the next:

3

Then:

5

Then:

7

Then:

9

Then:

13

Then a long nothing.

Then:

23

Then:

23

Then:

23

Then nothing again.

Then:

48

Then:

60

Then very far ahead, barely recognizable but not doubtful:

110

The Intern looks at the numbers.

“Are we supposed to understand those?”

The Works Council says: “No.” You say: “Not yet.” The bass hums. Very fine. Not correcting. Not explaining. More like agreement that some numbers are allowed to come along without delivering meaning right away. The tile horizon stays ahead of you. The surface is still sterile, still smooth, still too orderly, but not as convincing anymore. Once you know the horizon is only the edge of the visible tiles, it loses part of its authority. It stays exhausting. It stays far. It stays smooth. But it is no longer the end.

You walk across the tiles. Not fast. Not slow. Aware that every visible cutout lies when it thinks it is everything. And somewhere behind the sixteenth tile, not truth is waiting. Only more surface. More entries. More path. One hundred ten. And otherwise too.

Level 17 – Balls-Pilates

Level 6 is not back. That would be too easy and also grindy-wrong. But Level 6 apparently did not take its shoes off before leaving. On the soft floor of Balls-Pilates stand small sticky prints. No evidence. More like: echoes. Smooth Taste as sweat rim. Muschi-Muschi as inside-rain that does not dare call itself rain. aNaturalPornFightKillersClub as wrong training motivation in the background. The room acts like this is sports. That is its first lie. The tiles do not end. They only give up being tiles.

First they lose their joints, then their hardness, then that sterile conviction that everything fitting neatly into squares must already have been understood. The horizon stays white for another moment, smooth, too orderly, then it flickers, pulls together, folds away sideways and opens a surface that looks like a training room but does not own enough dignity to be one. A floor of soft gray material. Mirrors on the walls. In the mirrors, no bodies, but posture suggestions.

Balls-Pilates does not stop at the joke. The exercise hangs in joint, embarrassment and body pressure until the laugh itself gets weight and the body has to carry it.

Above the door, which is no longer behind you, it says:

BALLS-PILATES

Under it:

Mini-game

Under that, smaller right away:

The reader is still not a player. Please only act like this is interactive.

The Intern 12.6 reads it and nods, satisfied.

“Finally, sports.”

A screen comes down from the ceiling.

On it, briefly:

REPETITION IS NOT A TRAINING PLAN

Then the picture flickers and for half a second you see the hallway from Level 6 again: doors left, doors right, access denied, remote control without battery cover. The screen is immediately ashamed and shows a neutral stretching exercise instead. Nobody believes it. The Works Council looks at it.

“You just got happy.”

“Yeah, but only theoretically.”

Southring Gene says: “I am absolutely not doing Balls-Pilates.” The word Balls-Pilates does not become less wrong from that. It gets even wronger, because now it stands spoken in the room and stretches like it bought a subscription. From somewhere comes a CECH-English sentence: Are you waiting stabilization? The Intern looks at the ceiling.

“Does that mean anything?”

“Sadly.”

“What?”

“Nothing exact.”

The room waits briefly. Then a glowing circle appears on the floor. Start position Southring Gene looks at the circle.

“No.”

The circle moves one centimeter closer.

“I said no.”

The circle moves closer again. The black electric bass hangs on him, matte, calm, the bright sign under the strings half covered, but very present. After the tile room, the bass seems like the only object not pretending to be measurable. It wants no app. No evaluation. No daily statistic. It just hangs there and listens while the room tries to press reproduction, training, future and body panic into a friendly user experience. No music comes from the speakers. At first. Then a pulse. Dry. Tight. Too clean. Over it, a synthetic shimmer, as if someone crossed a fitness class with fear of the future and loaded both into an app that says “optimization” too often. The mirrors on the wall light up. In every mirror the same silhouette appears: male enough to be meant, anonymous enough to feel insulting. The silhouette stands with legs wide, raises its arms, lowers them again, breathes in, breathes out, and text runs along under it: Breathe. Hold. Press. Let go.

The Intern reads along.

“That sounds doable.”

“Then do it,” says Southring Gene.

“I’m supervision.”

“Since when?”

“Since it got embarrassing.”

The Works Council steps closer to a mirror and studies the displayed exercise.

“That is not ergonomics.”

“That is Balls-Pilates,” says the Intern.

“That is not an excuse.”

A friendly app tone sounds. Welcome to Balls-Pilates. Your reproductive potential has not yet been fully sabotaged. Please remain hopeful and uncomfortable. Southring Gene laughs once. Short. Hard.

“Hopeful and uncomfortable. Great.”

The room takes that as agreement. Motivation detected.

“No.”

Motivation verified.

“No.”

Resistance is the first step. Southring Gene looks at the Works Council.

“You say something.”

The Works Council folds his arms.

“The system abuses consent and refusal equally.”

The Intern nods. “So like always, just with pelvic floor.” The electric bass gives a quiet rough crack. Not played. Almost like a cough. The app reacts right away. Instrument detected. Training mode: musical seed rescue.

“No,” says Southring Gene.

No saved as rhythmic activation.

“I hate this.”

Hate detected as energy source.

The Intern raises a finger. “That’s actually efficient.” Southring Gene turns slowly toward him.

“You stay quiet.”

“I am quiet.”

The Intern is not quiet, but he visibly tries, and here that maybe already counts as body control. The floor begins to light up in circles. Not pretty. More like a cheap fitness video taking itself too seriously. One circle left. One right. One in front. One way too close to a place where no circle should be. Above the mirrors, words appear that should not stand there and therefore get read right away:

ZINC

SHAKE

LAPTOP AWAY

AVOID HEAT

ACTIVATE SWIMMERS

PELVIC FLOOR STABLE

YOUR BODY IS PROGRAM

The Works Council says: “The last sentence is problematic.”

“Only the last?” asks Southring Gene.

“No. But the last believes itself the most.”

The app plays a friendly gong.

Mandatory Reading Aid: Order may run along for a bit, but it does not get a key.

Body program loading.

Southring Gene says: “Not my body.” The gong breaks off. For the first time. The room is quiet for a moment. The Intern looks surprised. The Works Council does not look surprised, but looks more closely. The sentence stays in the air: Not my body. Then Southring Gene does not correct himself. That is important. He does not mean it as ownership. Not as escape from the body. Not as denial. More as refusal of the app, the room, the whole ridiculous rescue logic that acts like a body is a neglected device that only needs enough daily exercises, zinc, courage in the crotch and tight user guidance so the future can march out of it satisfied again.

The electric bass hums. Low. Very short. The room does not take the note well. The mirrors flicker and load new exercises. The silhouette begins a routine: legs apart, pelvis tilt, hold, smile, breathe, stretch left, jump right, secure future. The movement is so absurd it would almost be harmless if it were not presented with this app-seriousness that can turn every dumb thing into duty. Eight minutes daily. A little space. A little courage. A little genetic responsibility. Southring Gene says: “That is the dumbest sentence I read today.” The Intern whispers: “The day’s not over.”

“Sadly.”

The floor circle under Southring Gene glows harder. Please begin with exercise 1: raise egg-arm. The Works Council briefly closes his eyes.

“Egg-arm?”

The Intern suddenly looks thrilled.

“That’s already good.”

“No,” says Southring Gene.

“A little,” says the Intern.

“No.”

“Still a little.”

Southring Gene puts his hand on the electric bass. Not threatening. Not dramatic. Only so the room notices another system is present too.

“I ain’t lifting shit.”

Exercise refused.

Alternative exercise loading.

The mirrors now show a sitting position. Gentle balls awareness for advanced beginners. The Intern giggles. He tries to suppress it. Fails. The Works Council says: “That is not an exercise. That is a warning sign with a mat.” Southring Gene does not sit. The room tries another way. Training can also be completed standing. Training can also be completed internally. Training can also be completed through willingness to improve.

“Uh-huh,” says Southring Gene. “Then I’ll complete it through refusal.”

The app hesitates. You can tell. Not visually. Morally. Refusal as participation not provided.

“Then learn something.”

The Intern looks at the Works Council.

“That was good.”

The Works Council nods very briefly.

“Yeah.”

Southring Gene walks out of the start circle. The circle follows him. He keeps walking. The circle follows faster. He stops. The circle slides past him and briefly lights up on an empty spot. The Intern points at it.

“Now nobody’s training.”

“Finally,” says Southring Gene.

The electric bass gives a quiet distorted laugh. Or the floor creaks. Hard to say. The app decides to escalate. The pulse in the speakers gets denser. Cyber-nervous. Too modern. Too shiny for this gray room. The mirror images multiply. One silhouette becomes two, then three, then five, then seven, then a messy row of body models, all ready to save humanity through correct pelvic management. Above them, text runs: They shrink. They swim. They die. But you can do something. Do something.

Do something. Do something. The Intern gets quieter. Not because it gets deep. Because the joke suddenly comes too close to duty. Southring Gene feels how the room tries to make activity from fear. From activity optimization. From optimization meaning. From meaning responsibility. From responsibility guilt. And right there the bullshit becomes see-through. Not less funny. More funny, because it tries so hard not to be recognized as bullshit. He says: “I’m not a rescue device.” The room flickers. Device denied.

“I’m not a program either.”

Program denied.

“I’m not a reproduction choir either.”

The Intern almost chokes. The Works Council looks away. Not fast enough. Southring Gene points at him.

“Did you laugh?”

“No.”

“Almost.”

“Almost isn’t responsible.”

The electric bass hums in agreement. This time everybody hears it. The app tries to analyze the tone. Bass frequency detected. Motivation boost possible. Please synchronize ballsack and beat. Silence. A lot of silence. The Intern slowly raises his hand.

“I know I’m supposed to shut up, but—”

“No,” says Southring Gene.

“But—”

“No.”

“Just one sentence.”

“No.”

The Works Council says: “Let him.” Southring Gene sighs.

“One.”

The Intern breathes in and says very seriously: “The ballsack wants uncomfortable.”

The room confirms immediately:

Correct.

Southring Gene stares at him. The Intern shines.

“That was in the system.”

“You are in the system.”

“We’re all kinda in the system.”

The Works Council says: “Sadly not wrong.” The electric bass growls, deeper this time, not aggressive, more annoyed. The mirrors wobble. One silhouette loses its optimal posture and suddenly stands there like a normal person who does not know why he is in front of a mirror at all. Then another. Then all of them. The app-glow loses its certainty. The body models no longer look trainable, but present. That is the first little collapse for an optimization app. Southring Gene goes to the next mirror. Not too close. He does not look at himself.

He looks at the user guidance in it.

“You wanna save the gene?”

Yes.

“With eight minutes daily?”

Recommended.

“With app and system?”

Optimal.

“With pelvic floor stable?”

Future-proof.

“And if I don’t want to?”

Reload motivation.

“And if I still don’t want to?”

Activate guilt.

Mandatory Reading Aid: The error is not canonized. It just does not get shot too early.

“Thanks.”

Gladly. The Intern whispers: “Did it really just say guilt?”

“Yeah,” says the Works Council.

“That’s honest.”

“That’s the problem.”

Southring Gene puts his hand on the bass. The bass responds fine, not big. A short note, almost without attack, but with a dark edge. The mirror in front of him gets a crack. Not across. Vertical. The user guidance splits: left the exercise, right the body. Left: posture, goal, future, repetition. Right: tiredness, spite, ridiculousness, warmth, no desire, life. Please choose a side.

“No.”

Selection refused.

“Yes.”

Contradiction detected.

“Good.”

The crack in the mirror gets wider. Not destructive. Only enough. The app can no longer show the body completely as a training surface. The right side stays messy. One arm too low. One back too crooked. One look too sarcastic. A body not optimized enough to serve as model, but too real to be deleted as error. The Works Council steps next to Southring Gene.

“That is the actual exercise.”

“What?”

“Not letting them repair what isn’t broken.”

The Intern says: “But we are kinda broken.” Southring Gene says: “Yeah. But not their way.” The sentence hits the room better than the bass. The app stutters. Broken status unclear. Repair offer remains. Please confirm defect.

“No.”

Please confirm potential.

“No.”

Please at least confirm interest.

“No.”

Please confirm presence. Southring Gene says nothing. The Intern looks irritated.

“Aren’t you here?”

Southring Gene says nothing. The bass is silent. The Works Council is silent. The silence gets bigger. Not pathetic. Funny-big. A training room trying to sell Balls-Pilates suddenly stands in front of three people and one electric bass and does not even get a proper attendance confirmation. The mirrors reload. The circles on the floor search for feet. The speakers keep the pulse, but by now it sounds like someone trapped in a too-tight sports shirt trying to stay professional anyway. Presence could not be confirmed. Training not billable. Mini-game endangered. The Intern whispers: “Oh no. Not the mini-game.” Southring Gene says: “Yes.” He goes to the door.

It was not there before. Of course. It stands behind the mirrors, as if it had been waiting there the whole time until nobody is willing anymore to stabilize his ballsack for humanity. On the door it says:

EXIT AFTER NON-PARTICIPATION

Under it:

Progress still possible.

The app gets frantic. Wait! You can do something! Do something! Breathe! Hold! Press! Let go! B-A-L-L-S! P-I-L-A-T-E-S! The Intern involuntarily starts reading along. The Works Council says: “No.”

“I didn’t—”

“No.”

“Okay.”

Southring Gene stops in front of the door. Not because he doubts. Because he wants to speak.

“I am doing something.”

The app pauses.

“I’m leaving.”

The electric bass hums. Not loud. But very satisfied. The door opens.

The room tries one last offer:

Unlock final chorus?

“No.”

Bonus exercise?

“No.”

Future of this world?

Southring Gene looks back. The Intern raises both hands. “Not my department.” The Works Council says: “Not through Balls-Pilates.” Southring Gene says: “Sure as hell not through Balls-Pilates.” For a moment, the app shows a sad little icon that was probably meant to be motivating.

Then:

Mini-game completed. Participation refused. Repair sabotaged. Gene not saved.
Gene still not lost.

The Intern reads the last line twice.

“That’s actually nice.”

“Approximately,” says Southring Gene.

The Works Council nods. You go through the door. Behind you, the training room immediately begins re-marketing itself. From the speakers comes the friendly pulse again. A voice says: “Welcome to Balls-Pilates. Your body is program.” Then it cracks. Then the voice does not improve. On the way outside, the air is more normal. Not good. Only less app-like. The Intern walks a few steps silently next to Southring Gene, which is always more noticeable with him than talking. Then he says: “So no exercise at all?”

“Yes,” says Southring Gene.

“Which one?”

Southring Gene puts his hand on the black electric bass.

“Saying no without turning it right away into a replacement exercise.”

The Intern thinks about it for a long time.

“That sounds hard.”

“It is.”

The Works Council says: “And healthy.” The Intern looks at him, horrified.

“Please don’t.”

The Works Council says nothing else. The bass hums once, short, soft, almost mocking. Southring Gene does not smile. But almost. That is enough. Level 6 no longer hangs on him like a room. More like a smell in the fabric. Balls-Pilates tries to make an exercise out of that: Tense. Hold. Let go. Would not lose. Again. Southring Gene only does the last thing. Let go. Not clean. Only enough.

And somewhere, very quietly, an old remote control without batteries says:

Smooth. Taste.

Then it is silent.

Level 18 – Back to Mother



Back to Mother does not mean back to cleanliness. More like back to the place where even washed things start taking on smell again. The road after the Balls-Pilates training room smells like nothing at first. That is suspicious, because nothing in this book smells like nothing for long. After a few steps something joins it anyway: cold air, old asphalt, a hint of metal, damp concrete, yesterday's filthy coffee somewhere, a meat sandwich somewhere that is not present but still has the nerve to drag along as a possibility. The black electric bass hangs on Southring Gene, and for the first time since its transformation it does not feel like something new. It is simply with him. Matte. Electric. The bright sign under the strings lies beneath the right hand, half covered, half ready. Not as a threat. As a direction.

The Intern 12.6 walks on his left and still looks way too pleased that a level called Balls-Pilates has just not become a full disaster.

The way back to Mother reconciles nothing. Door, origin, belly, and coming home rub against each other until the way back does not get soft, but warmer, tighter, more dangerously like body.

"So I think we handled ourselves pretty good," he says.

"You did nothing."

"With that topic, that's usually better anyway."

The Works Council walks on the right and says nothing. Southring Gene looks at him.

"CECHbless you're here."

The gap between CECH and bless is tiny. But it has to be there. With the gap it sounds more like an old shit slip that finally does not have to act like it was only a joke. The Works Council does not stop, but you can tell the sentence reached him.

"Please use statements like that sparingly."

"Why?"

"Because otherwise somebody will think it is a concept."

The Intern raises his hand. "I already think that."

"Exactly," says the Works Council.

The road gets lower. Not downward, not into a basement, not into an archive, but back onto a certain kind of ground height that needs no myth because it was there before every myth. The houses come closer, but not tighter. The street gets edges that look like addresses again. A sidewalk, a fence, an entrance, a window with a curtain, a small piece of green, a corner you walk past and suddenly know that not every origin has to be dark or huge. Sometimes origin is only a street that does not ask whether it would like to be called mother-structure.

Above a low wall it says:

BACK TO MOTHER

Not written pretty. Not solemn. More like someone mixed up an official notice with a private feeling. Southring Gene stops in front of it for a moment.

"No," he says.

The Intern looks startled. "No again?"

"Not back."

The Works Council nods.

"Good."

Southring Gene puts his hand on the electric bass.

"Toward."

The sentence does not change the wall. No door opens. No light. No system error. That is almost insulting. But the ground under them takes in the difference: not back, as if something old were being restored; toward, as if entering a place that was always too much to be only past. Then the first hit comes. Not from the bass. From the ground. Stomping. Dry. One foot, then many feet, but nobody is visible. The sidewalk gets rhythm, not urban, not military, not a march, more something old, festive, wooden, coming from the street itself and much too cheerful to be innocent. The Intern straightens up at once.

"Oh."

The Works Council says: "Careful."

"But that sounds fun."

"Exactly why."

A hammered dulcimer comes from somewhere. Not as an instrument someone politely places into the scene. It trickles in the joints of the street, bright, metallic, dancing, as if the South Ring had stretched little wires under the asphalt and finally decided to bang around on them. An accordion pulls through the air, crooked at first, then wider, then exactly crooked enough to be right. An acoustic guitar hits along, not modern, not slick, but firm enough that every hit pulls dust off the walls. All the way below lies a tuba, fat, round, unshakeable, and it does something the new electric bass understands immediately.

The bass answers. Not with the four notes. Not anymore. The first note is deep, but it does not stay alone. The hand keeps moving, finds new places, new distances, other grips, not as a demonstration, but because the South Ring demands more than the old sign. The bass goes under the tuba, then against it, then beside it, growls, springs, presses, lets go for a second, comes back, and lays a black electric line under this suddenly way too alive street. It sounds more powerful than before, more distorted, wider, but not brutal. When the ground stomps, it stomps with it. When the dulcimer jumps, it holds against it. When the accordion pulls, it bends along. When the tuba laughs, it growls dry underneath.

Southring Gene opens his mouth. Not for words yet. First only for air. The South Ring sings before him. Not a mother as a person. Not sentimental home. Not warm return. The South Ring sings like a street that has seen enough to stay funny because being serious alone never helped either. The windows, the fences, the walls, the house corners, the old entrances, even the spots where the asphalt was patched, all take in the rhythm. A window frame becomes the second voice. A gutter rattles in time. A mailbox clicks too early and fits perfectly because of it.

The Intern starts grinning. Carefully at first. Then bigger. Then so big the Works Council looks at him from the side.

"Watch it."

"What?"

"You are drifting."

"I'm just happy."

"Exactly."

The Intern tries to look serious. It fails immediately.

Mandatory Reading Aid: Return is not a hug. Sometimes it is only the hallway smelling tighter.

"But listen!"

"I am listening."

"No, you're administering it."

The Works Council says nothing. Southring Gene laughs. The bass does not laugh, but a string buzzes in a way that is almost the same. Then the voice comes in. Not like in Level 10, where music worked itself outward through the mouth as if it first had to prove it was allowed to live there. Here the mouth is ready faster, but the street is faster

still. Southring Gene does not sing alone. The South Ring gives the pitch, but not like an authority. More like an old relative who does not ask a question because the answer is already lying in the kitchen anyway. Southring Gene steps in, rough, darker than the folksy brightness around him, and exactly because of that the singing gets stronger. Not cleaner. Stronger.

The Intern claps once. The Works Council says immediately: “Do not let it get out of hand.”

“What?”

“You know.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

The Intern does not clap again. But his foot keeps going. The choir does not come from outside. It comes from the street, from the walls, from the ground, from the bass, and finally from Southring Gene himself. The chorus is not an insert. It becomes the center, the turn, the spot where the South Ring does not explain what it is but insists on itself as a place to sing along.

I dunno what the hell ya got
Like I don't never wash at all
I dunno what the hell ya got
Like I don't never wash at all

The lines do not hang in the text like quotes.

They go straight through him. The Intern sings along immediately. Wrong. Too loud. Way too happy.

“I dunno what the hell ya got—”

“Let the text sit,” says the Works Council.

“I am letting it sit.”

“You are jumping around on it.”

“That's shoe-slapper energy!”

The Works Council looks at him for a very long time. The Intern pauses for a second. Then he whispers: “Okay, maybe minimal.” Southring Gene keeps singing, and the bass widens with every pass. It does not stay foundation. It runs small counter-lines, pushes dark transitions between the bright jumps, sets short distortion edges under places that would otherwise get too cozy, pulls back again when the voice needs air. You can tell the instrument is no longer only a tool. It answers Southring Gene, the South Ring, the mood, the joke, and the danger that festivity turns into a trap. It can make pressure, but it can also leave space. It can put a dirty electric earth under an old melody without destroying it.

The South Ring gets stronger through it. Not bigger. Stronger. It gets bass. It gets voice. It gets stomping. It gets a kind of joy that is not slick, but scratched, buzzed, a little fresh, a little stubborn, with a grin that knows not everything is good, but sings now anyway. And because the South Ring gets stronger, Southring Gene gets stronger too. Not like a game figure, not through stats, not through training, not through reward. He gets stronger because the street he comes from is no longer only a place. It becomes a sound body. It carries along. It does not say: you are home here. It says more like: you can make noise from here.

That is better. The Intern notices it too, and that is dangerous. He is almost hopping now. Not really, but close. His steps find the stomp rhythm, his face gets brighter, and for one moment it looks like he has forgotten that he is a damaged repeat figure, an archive leftover, an intern of the system, and an occasional confuser of meaning. He is simply there. He is happy. More and more. More and more. More and more.

"I think I don't need a purpose anymore," he says.

The Works Council snaps his head around immediately.

"You do."

"But—"

"You do."

"But I'm kinda totally in the—"

"CECHbless I'm here," says the Works Council dryly.

Southring Gene almost chokes while singing. The bass growls amused. The Intern points at the Works Council. "You said it yourself just now!"

"Damage control."

"That counts!"

"Unfortunately."

The chorus comes back. Stronger this time. Not cleaner. Stronger.

I dunno what the hell ya got
Like I don't never wash at all
I dunno what the hell ya got
Like I don't never wash at all

Southring Gene does not sing the lines like a question to one person alone. He sings them against everything that believes it can judge his disorder from outside. Against every voice saying he should wash, clarify, clean up, explain, improve, sort, optimize, prove, fully capture, sit nice, participate correctly. The South Ring sings along, but not clean. It sings along as street, as mother-structure, as origin without kitsch, as a pressure room that is finally not only pressure, but rhythm.

The tuba lays itself under the bass. The bass lays itself under the voice. The voice lays itself over the street. The dulcimer jumps above it like it has never done anything else. The accordion pulls at the edges. The acoustic guitar stomps the road tight. The Intern is laughing openly now.

"This is great!"

"Purpose," says the Works Council.

"Yeah, yeah."

"Purpose."

"I know already!"

"Say it."

The Intern stops right in the middle of the rhythm, which visibly hurts.

Mandatory Reading Aid: Return does not hug. It walks the same hall with different air and lets the doorframe smell tighter.

"I am The Intern 12.6."

"And?"

"Damaged repetition. Rewind leftover. Meat-sandwich competence. Early form of—"

"Enough," says Southring Gene.

The Intern beams.

"I still got it!"

"Barely," says the Works Council.

You are no longer only walking. The road does not dance, but it stomps. It does not push you forward, but underfeeds every step, so the South Ring itself becomes a beat nobody can own. The houses no longer seem to be watching. They seem involved. An old front door clatters on the offbeat. A window squeaks like a yodeler ashamed of himself. A gutter rattles too late, but the bass catches it. Southring Gene now plays runs that would not have been possible a few levels ago: small detours, strong downward moves, short high answers, then deep pressure again, no longer limited to four old places, but growing out of them. The four notes have not disappeared. They have become roots. Above them, distance is forming now.

The chorus comes a third time, and this time it takes the whole section with it.

I dunno what the hell ya got

Like I don't never wash at all

I dunno what the hell ya got

Like I don't never wash at all

The words are funny. The words are sarcastic. The words are also something else. They cannot be taken completely seriously, and exactly because of that they can work very seriously. They do not claim injury. They show a stance. They stand crooked, laugh, turn up the amp, pull names, noises, taste, pride, and bullshit out of their pocket and say: you misunderstand me, but that does not mean I now make myself more correct for you.

Southring Gene feels strength running back into him. Not in. Back. As if the South Ring were not a source you drink from, but a ground that finally notices the one standing on it can push back too. The bass gets darker, but not heavier. The distortion opens at the edges, almost festive, almost dangerous. The voice gets rougher, but surer. The Intern's laugh gets louder, but the Works Council keeps it in a usable orbit.

"Do not lift off," says the Works Council.

"I'm not lifting off," says the Intern.

"You are practically floating already."

"That's joy!"

"Joy needs railings."

Southring Gene sings: "I dunno what the hell ya got—" The Intern jumps in: "Like I don't—"

The Works Council, very quietly, almost inaudible, but clear,
sets underneath:

"never wash at all."

The Intern's eyes rip open. Southring Gene plays a wrong note from laughing. The bass turns it into a right one. The South Ring accepts it. For one moment everything is way too good. That is dangerous. Southring Gene notices it. The bass notices it too. The distortion pulls back a bit. The rhythm stays, but it does not get faster. The street stays festive, but it does not tip into drunk. The Intern does not hop. The Works Council lets the hand he had almost stretched out sink again. Southring Gene does not sing the chorus louder one more time, but deeper. With more ground. Less rush. More carrying.

I dunno what the hell ya got

Like I don't never wash at all

This time only twice. That is enough. The South Ring rings after. Dulcimer in the joints. Accordion in the air. Guitar in the steps. Tuba under the street. Electric bass in the body. Voice in the mouth. The houses stand stiller again, but not like before. The road is still there, but it no longer only belongs ahead. It also lies under them, behind them, in them. Mother-structure, but without sentimentality. No return into healed origin. No picture of home. No clean source. A street dirty enough to stay honest and strong enough not to become myth every time someone takes it seriously.

The Intern breathes hard. Happy. Suspiciously happy.

"I forgot for a second why I'm here," he says.

"I noticed," says the Works Council.

"It was nice."

"Still."

"Yeah."

Southring Gene puts his hand on the bass.

"You were there."

The Intern nods.

"Yeah."

"Sometimes that is enough."

The Works Council says: "Sometimes." The Intern looks at him.

"CECHbless."

"Do not overdo it."

"Approximately?"

"Approximately."

The bass hums softly. The South Ring answers with one last stomp somewhere under the sidewalk. Not as an ending. As agreement. Ahead of you, the road continues, but it feels different. Not shorter. Not easier. Only stronger under the feet. Southring Gene is not suddenly saved, not repaired, not complete, not come home. But the South Ring sang. The bass sang along. And for a while, the place that otherwise was pressure, origin, and return became an instrument itself. Southring Gene keeps walking.

With more bass. With more voice. With more street under him.

Level 19 – An Unnoticed Counterbirth



Rebirth stays unnoticed, but it no longer comes freshly painted. It comes with a dent that looks like somebody laughed while carrying it. At first nothing happens. That is a lie. It has only already happened. Southring Gene does not notice because the road lies ahead of him perfectly normal, as far as that word is still worth anything here. The street has edges again, but they do not hold still. Not visibly. Not like a quake. More like they had already slipped a little earlier and are only waiting now for someone to notice the change after the fact. The black electric bass hangs on him, and its weight has become familiar enough not to demand attention all the time anymore. That is exactly how it can get more dangerous. What you no longer notice works easier.

The Intern 12.6 walks a few steps ahead. That is new. He does not notice it either. The Works Council notices it. Of course. But he says nothing, because some things are better watched before you ruin them with a sentence. Under the street, a pattern runs. Not the cheerful tread of the previous section, not the bright spring of origin, but something deeper, rolling heavier, a dull tom hit that is not being played and still organizes the ground. It does not come regular enough to make anyone march, but too regular to be accident. Between it, a second movement, faster, more nervous, like feet working under the road without being allowed to arrive up top. The bass hears it first. Or it heard it already before the road was there.

Counterbirth stays counterbirth. No typo, no repair case, but counterpressure against the good little re-, a leftover body that refuses to be brought into the world properly one more time.

Southring Gene puts his hand on the strings. The bass does not answer with a note. It draws a line. Deep. Distorted. Dark. And surprisingly movable. Not four notes. Not foundation alone. It starts below, pushes sideways, comes back, deliberately stumbles over a joint, catches itself, springs, growls, does not dance, but refuses mere stomping too. Something in the bass has learned that heaviness does not have to be slow. The

street takes the line and bends for a second as if made of rubber, then concrete again, then memory.

The Intern turns around.

"Did you play that?"

Southring Gene says: "Not yet." That is the first warning. The Intern thinks about it.

"That makes no sense."

The Works Council says: "It does."

"Why?"

"Because it has already worked."

"Before it was played?"

"Yes."

The Intern stops, looks at the ground, at Southring Gene, at the bass, then back at the ground.

"I hate time."

"On duty?" asks Southring Gene.

"Private."

A half-torn sign appears ahead of them. It is old. It is new. It stands there like it has been there for years and was only put up now.

DA GENE IS BACK

The Intern reads it slowly.

"Da Gene is back."

"Was I gone?" asks Southring Gene.

The Works Council says: "That is not necessarily the sequence." The pissed-on sign flickers. Not electronically. Meaning-wise.

For one moment it says:

DA GENE WILL HAVE BEEN BACK

Then:

DA GENE WAS BACK BEFORE HE LEFT

Then again:

DA GENE IS BACK

The bass gives off a short, dirty run, like the grammar annoyed it. Southring Gene did not move his fingers. Not yet. The road gets narrower, but not tired this time. It gets faster on the inside. The houses pull backward without moving away. Windows become

streaks. A low wall is suddenly on the right, then left, then behind them, then it had been in front of them the whole time. The Intern blinks.

"I'm gonna puke."

"Time sick," says the Works Council.

"That a thing?"

"It is now."

A scaffold appears ahead of them. Not big. Not medieval. No costume. No scene trying too hard. Just a raised surface of dark wood, way too businesslike, with stairs, a beam, an empty spot in the middle, and next to it an information sign:

SCAFFOLD – ALREADY USED

The Intern stops immediately.

"Not with me."

Southring Gene keeps walking.

"With me, apparently."

The Works Council says: "Careful. Not every execution happens after the verdict." Nothing lies on the wood. No body. No head. No proof. Only an imprint that looks like somebody kneeled there after he had already stood up. On the front edge of the scaffold the first words are carved, deep, restless, as if pressed into wood with a voice: How ya doin', God!! This is goin' pretty damn fast!! The road answers with a hit. Dull. Then two quick hits underneath. The bass answers for real now. Southring Gene plays.

The line comes out of him, but not only out of him. The bass pulls funky against the ground, dark and distorted, bends the heaviness, makes it elastic, sets little hooks into the steps while under everything those quick double movements work, as if the road were galloping and stumbling at the same time. The notes are not pretty. They are awake. They smell like smoke, cold wood, old anger, and a bad mood that waited too long to stay polite. Southring Gene opens his mouth. The voice comes low.

Harder than expected. Not as a scream without words, not as cheerful singing, but like something returning from an already finished verdict and greeting the judges because there is no better kind of nerve. How ya doin', God!! This is goin' pretty damn fast!! You still ask what I got!! 'Cause right now I don't say jack!! The Intern looks scared and thrilled at the same time.

"That is already very direct."

The Works Council says: "Do not interrupt." Southring Gene keeps singing. Or the road keeps singing him. Or the Gene already returned sings through the place Southring Gene is only now arriving at. The Time Warper logic does not show itself as an effect. It shows itself as the impossibility of saying cleanly who is starting right now. The singing sounds like return, but the return was the reason the singing could start at all. The voice comes from the future of a body that is only just understanding it has been changed. And already ya send me in a gallop!!

Up onto the scaffold!! Yeah, that's how you run it!! No head? I ain't into that!! The scaffold creaks. Not under weight. Under repetition. The Intern whispers: "No head is kind of an argument."

"A good one," says the Works Council.

"A pretty good one."

Southring Gene steps onto the first stair. The bass hangs on him, but the note stays down below, as if the instrument were standing on the ground and hanging on him at the same time. With every step onto the scaffold, new notches appear in the wood, but not under his feet. Beside them. In front of them. Behind them. Notches from steps he is about to take and must already have taken so they can carry him. Nobody stands up there. That is exactly why it is full. Voices without bodies stand around the scaffold. No crowd, no audience, no figures. More like expectations pressed too close together. They do not really ask. They point. They hold something out. They want Southring Gene to explain again what he has. What is missing from him. Why he is like this. Why he says nothing. Why he says too much. Why he stresses. Why he comes back. Why he does not come back the way they would like him to.

Mandatory Reading Aid: Counterbirth stays counterbirth. No second e is added here, only counterpressure.

The voices do not get loud. The bass gets louder.

Southring Gene sings:

Yous'd like me bein' just like yous!?!

But whaddaya do if I don't bust your balls no more?!?

Yeah, then yous'd be completely alone!!

And whaddaya do then, then you don't do shit no more!!

At completely alone, the scaffold shifts. Not in space. In time. For one moment Southring Gene is not up top, but down below and looking up at himself. At the same time he is up top and sees nobody below. At the same time the scaffold has already been dismantled, and at the same time it is only now being put together out of wood. The Intern grabs a railing that appears only in the next moment.

"I wanna get off," he says.

"Off what?" asks the Works Council.

"Sequence."

"Denied."

"Figured."

The voices around the scaffold briefly lose their certainty. They wanted to point, ask, send, judge, sort. But the return has already happened before they released the road to the scaffold. They cannot bring Southring Gene up anymore because he has already sung up there. They cannot behead him anymore because the headless state already

appears in the song as refusal. They cannot silence him anymore because his silence was the reason they asked what he had. Cause runs after effect, unless effect waits a second and trips it.

The bass does not laugh. It plays. A line rises out of the low register, not clean, not fast for the sake of being fast, but with that dirty swing that makes pressure move. It goes under the words, brings them forward, lets them fall back again, cuts a phrase off, catches it with a distorted slide. Southring Gene notices that his playing is no longer only accompanying. It corrects time. Not properly. Not scientifically. It shifts weight. A note that comes too early makes a sentence true later. A run that starts too late proves it was already missing before.

The Works Council looks at the stairs.

"Interesting."

The Intern stares at him.

"Interesting?"

"Yes."

"We're standing on a time-scaffold and he's singing that he doesn't like being without a head!"

"I did not say it was pleasant."

"You said interesting!"

"That is not the same."

Southring Gene hears the two of them, but they are far away, even though they are standing below. Or he is far away, even though he is standing above. The scaffold pulls time around him in layers. One layer shows him silent. One singing. One returned. One still on the way. One already misunderstood. One not even asked yet. One in which someone says Gene is back, although nobody noticed he was reborn. One in which the rebirth happened so long ago it only shows up as mood in the bass anymore.

He sings the beginning again. But this time it is not repetition. It is origin after the fact. How ya doin', God!! This is goin' pretty damn fast!! Yous show me what I got!! 'Cause right now I don't say jack!! The word show pulls a line through the air. Show. Ask. Assign. Put on display. All at once. The voices around the scaffold become hands, but only briefly, just long enough to be unpleasant. They point at him, then at each other, then at empty spots, then at the Intern, who immediately raises both hands.

"I didn't do anything."

"Not yet," says the Works Council.

"Please don't time-warp."

"Too late."

The Intern looks at his hands.

"Did I already do something?"

"Probably."

"Was it bad?"

"Unclear."

"That's worse."

The black electric bass gets heavier, but not more burdensome. Heavier like a body that has understood it does not have to dodge. The distortion frays out, psychedelic, not colorful, more like smoke in the head suddenly forming patterns that want to be understood too early. The street under the scaffold breathes in waves. The wood is wood, then stage, then verdict, then old floor, then a thought that spent too long galloping around. The bass remains the only thing that does not lose its direction through all these states.

Southring Gene sees an empty pad in front of him. Not shit-ass paper. Not screen. A block of time something is supposed to be entered into.

RECORD REBIRTH

Under it:

Date: already happened

Under it:

Note: unnoticed The Intern sees it too.

"That's the level."

The Works Council says: "Do not say it directly."

"I already did."

"Yes."

"Crap."

Southring Gene does not keep singing. He does not speak either. He plays. The bass takes the vocal line and bends it downward until voice becomes riff, riff becomes road, road becomes way back, way back becomes a return that does not end where it began. The notes run over the scaffold, under the stairs, into the joints of the street, back to the greasy sign that still claims Gene is back. But the sign changes.

DA GENE IS BACK

Then:

DA GENE HAD BEEN BACK

Then:

DA GENE WAS BACK BEFORE HE WAS MISSING

Mandatory Reading Aid: Counterbirth stays counterbirth. No second e is added; the counterpressure already sticks right.

Then only:

BACK

Then:

GENE

Then:

DA

Then everything again. The Intern laughs nervously.

"The sign has hiccups."

"Time has hiccups," says the Works Council.

"Can we give it water?"

"No."

"Shame."

The voices around the scaffold try one last time to organize themselves. They form questions, but every question comes too late. What do you have? Why don't you say anything anymore? Why do you stress? Why aren't you like us? Why are you coming back? Why don't you go away? Why are you already here? Why were you already here? Why didn't we notice? The last question is the only one that sounds honest. Southring Gene does not answer with explanation. He sings the chorus of accusation, but as counter-accusation, as return, as a joke with teeth, as a heavy greeting from someone who no longer stands where he was sent.

Yous'd like me bein' just like yous!?!

But whaddaya do if I don't bust your balls no more?!?

Yeah, then yous'd be completely alone!!

And whaddaya do then, then you don't do shit no more!!

The words do not fall forward. They fall backward. And hit anyway. The voices move back because they suddenly understand that they do not only ward Southring Gene off, they need him. Not kindly. Not consciously. But structurally. Whoever wants to get rid of him loses the stress he could define himself against. Whoever demands that he should be like them has to be alone with his own silence then. Whoever sends him to the scaffold gets a stage. Whoever wants to take his head gets a voice without a polite exit.

The scaffold begins to dismantle. Not from outside. From earlier. A board disappears because it will never have been delivered. A stair is missing because the step onto it already happened. The beam dissolves because its purpose was withdrawn retroactively. Southring Gene is still standing up top, although there is less and less up top left. The Intern makes a noise that is admiration and nausea at the same time.

"That is kinda cool."

The Works Council says: "Stay with your purpose."

"I don't even know anymore which point in time my purpose is."

"Then take the current one."

"Which one is that?"

The Works Council points at the ground.

"The one you are not falling over on."

"Practical."

"Yes."

Southring Gene does not jump from the scaffold. He is suddenly back on the street. Not because he went. Because the street decided after the fact that he never had to stay up there. The bass hangs on him, the last sung line still in the strings. The body does not feel new. That is exactly the unnoticed counterbirth. No flame. No rising from ash. No dramatic cut. Only the realization that something has already become different while you were still busy hearing the old accusation.

The Intern stands in front of him and looks at him.

"Are you reborn now?"

"No idea."

The Works Council says: "Unnoticed."

"So yes?"

"Maybe."

"That's a dumb answer."

"A fitting one."

Southring Gene keeps walking. The road in front of him is the same, but the sequence is no longer the same. Some steps lie behind him, although he is only about to take them. Some notes in the bass ring after before they are played. The last chorus still hangs in the air in front of them and waits to have been sung. The faded sign behind them stands there again, small and old and new.

DA GENE IS BACK

The Intern turns around one more time.

"But when?"

The Works Council says: "Yes."

"That was not an answer."

"It was."

Southring Gene plays a short run on the bass, distorted, dark, movable, heavy and yet with a dirty grin at the bottom end. The run begins after its ending and ends before its beginning. The Intern stops.

"Okay, even I heard that."

"Good," says Southring Gene.

"Was that on purpose?"

Southring Gene looks at the bass. The bass is silent. Then it growls quietly. Southring Gene says: "Now it is." The road takes in the answer. Not as explanation. As a time error finally allowed to work. Behind them the scaffold has disappeared. In front of them there is no new beginning. Only the road, from now on acting like it knew the whole time that Southring Gene had already been back. That is lying, of course. But it has already happened.

Level 20 – 2 Decades Behind



Two decades behind is not just time. It is cassette tape, an old dusty folder, wrong name, right track. You do not rewind. You only notice the tape is still inside. First Southring Gene only hears steps. Not his. Not The Intern's. Not the Works Council's. Not the road's either, if roads even have steps and do not simply act like they do so you feel less alone. These steps come from behind, but not spatially. They come out of a time that has been lying behind him long enough to feel insulted. No echo. No flashback. No photo album. More like a whole pile of old shoes, old tracks, old filenames, old project folders, and half-finished truths that have decided they get to come along one more time now too.

The Intern 12.6 turns around.

The lag does not apologize. Two decades hang as time dirt in the device, in the sound, in the late grip, and exactly that lateness makes audible what a punctual version would have swallowed way too cleanly.

“Somebody coming?”

The Works Council says: “Several.”

“How many?”

“Too many for an orderly meeting.”

That is not good news. Behind them the road gets fuller. Not with people. With titles. With names. With broken-off paths. With songs that are not cleanly assigned to their projects and act fresher exactly because of that. A first line of writing rolls over the ground like a shadow that is too long: 2.334m (warcries from hafele kar)

Behind it:

SieZophren

Behind it:

Smooth Taste

Then something stumbles past with way too much self-confidence:

Da vahellte innschbrugga Goschn-Blues, vaschteahsch?!?

The Intern reads with his mouth open.

“Those are song titles?”

“Among other things,” says Southring Gene.

“Among other things?”

The Works Council says: “Archive material.”

“That sounds more dangerous.”

“It is.”

The black electric bass hangs quietly on Southring Gene, but the bright sign under the strings looks more awake. Not brighter. More awake. As if it had heard the steps a long time ago and only waited for the rest of the body to catch up. Southring Gene does not feel the lag in his back, but in his shoulders, in his throat, in his fingers, where a name is not only written but carried. Southring-Gene, the 2nd comes first. With hyphen. With suffix. With comma. With weight. Not as a figure. As an old dusty folder that refuses to be deleted because it was never only a file. Beside it walks Southring Gene, without comma, without suffix, and for that exact reason not lighter. Then Ginger Gene, a little more crooked, a little brighter, almost grinning. CECH follows twice, because some names apparently do not accept that repetition is already statement enough. Eugen Cech Junior walks slowly, not because he is old, but because this name carries another kind of load. Eugen Cech comes after without suffix, but not without shadow.

The Intern looks from one name to the next.

“Are you all that?”

Southring Gene does not answer right away. The bass hums. Not yes. Not no. More: bad question.

“Not all,” says Southring Gene.

The Works Council nods.

“But none of it is simply gone.”

That is enough. Behind the names more project tracks march in. CechNo comes with a cold edge. HeisenCech smells of chemistry, control, and bad conscience. Turn Out appears as a band, but Southring Gene immediately raises his hand.

“I was the singer.”

The lettering stops.

“Not Turn Out.”

The lettering does not correct itself. It only stands a little differently. That has to be enough. HelperSyndrome arrives as membership, not diagnosis, but of course the name still behaves like it wants to help. FocknSaue & Southring Gene shuffle past as an internet collaboration, half dirty, half surprisingly alive. Southring Gene & A.I. flickers at the edge, not quite old enough to be old, but already behind, because in this archive everything can become past immediately as soon as it appears. Then the steps get louder. The titles no longer come one by one.

They come in swarms. Olympia Roundabout turns once around itself and takes Grassmayr Intersection, Curb, Emergency Doctor – 5:15 PM – South Ring, In-A-Gadda-Da-South-Ring, Southringism, I Live on South Ring, Good Night South Ring and South Ring, I Must Leave Thee... along, as if the South Ring were no longer a place but a whole department arriving late to work and still owning most of the files. The Intern gets smaller and smaller between the titles.

“That’s a lot.”

“Incomplete,” says the Works Council.

“That’s worse.”

“Yes.”

Southring Gene keeps walking. Slowly. Not fleeing. The lag comes closer, but it does not run. That makes it nasty. It is in no hurry, because it had two decades to remember that Southring Gene eventually gets tired. Old titles do not need speed. They need stubbornness. They march after him, in a bad mood and with a better memory. Puppen an einem Ping hangs on thin strings above the ground. Ich bin Diktator marches too big for its place. Methmatron (Nur es – einfach Scheiss) rattles mechanically. Nur du (kannst sie für uns holen) points at nobody and still means somebody. Ich werd tun, was ich tun werd stops because it takes its own sentence seriously. Echter Mann war ein Breaking Bad, Chemie, Chemistry, Der Fall meines Imperiums, Wo kommt all das Geld her? — the titles do not come as nostalgia. They come as old claims that want to know one more time whether they have finally been understood now.

Southring Gene says: “No.” The Intern looks at him.

“To who?”

“To all of them.”

The bass growls. Not loud. But deep enough that several titles briefly lose font size. The Works Council says: “Do not fight everything.”

Mandatory Reading Aid: Lag is not a blemish. It is time dirt with echo.

“What then?”

“Place it, without defusing it.”

“That sounds like work.”

“Yes.”

The Intern carefully raises his hand.

“I could make a list.”

The Works Council says: “No.”

“But—”

“No.”

“Just with little boxes.”

“Especially not.”

The Intern lowers his hand. Tanks Much! darts past, way too short to stay polite. I'd Do Ya, You! drags a long trail. Die uralten Reime der Weisheit trips over a guitar that is not there yet. ALL! HAIL! DISCORDIA! comes in wide, huge, and way too convinced of its own exclamation-mark architecture. Recommended for Perpetual Notice! wears an official coat that immediately looks suspicious. nuthin' ta ask... asks no question and is present exactly because of that. I Ain't Finishin' Dis Song Without Coffee... waves from far away, receives an approving nod from the Works Council, and disappears back into the lag.

The road gets fuller. Not tighter. Fuller. That is a difference. Tightness presses from the outside. Fullness presses from the inside, because every thing claims it also has a right to space. Southring Gene feels the titles wanting past him, into him, out of him, setting themselves in front of him, hanging behind him, pushing old versions next to new ones, making old jokes serious again, making old seriousness ridiculous again. It is not a concert. Not a discography. Not an archive room. It is an after-march. Little Pig (A Tribute) runs under the bigger titles. Angst vor Kunst und ihren gekniffenen Eiern in einem Universum vergessener Erinnerungen needs almost a whole side of the street. BRTTRKLLR RMX #13 STuFe 2 EINHEIT flickers at the 13. Das Ticken der Zeit transmutierte den menschlichen Körper zu Lichtstrahlen auf einer dünnen Linie der Realität is so long that The Intern forgets halfway through where he started. hallhallhall does not repeat itself, it only claims that repetition is already space. The Escape of the Hazelnut Gardener from the Indestructible Power of the Bioinvalid in the Seventh CensorshipCensorship Dynasty takes a turn that exists only because of this title. Marsch der Schweine im Mix von der #13, woXang #13 Remix Or So Something In This Direction, 3fold Puff Pastry Rolled Into Icons, Ya Can Print Dat, Mission in Their Thing #13RMX, My Soul Mine — all of them come after.

The Intern stops.

“That is not lag anymore. That is a traffic accident with memory.”

The Works Council says: “Keep walking.”

“Through?”

“With.”

Southring Gene looks at the titles wrapping around his legs without tying him down.

“With is worse.”

“Yes.”

The bass gives one note. It is not only deep. It has movement. A dark, distorted thread laying itself under the titles, not to order them, but to stop them all from screaming at once. The note draws a line, and for a moment the names no longer run through each other, but next to each other. Not clean. Only walkable. Southring Gene goes on. With them. Was mich nicht tötet, bringt mich zum Lachen laughs first. Töt es weg comes twice and acts like repetition was intent. Wähl das Bücken, Enuretisch, Werwolfkind, Ich hasse dich, Da geht diese Stadt, Bleib weg — they stand like old German signs in an English-speaking street and do not have to apologize. Behind them water sloshes: Hic, Cup, Übersteuerter Fluss, Jump Already, Between-Jet, Blub, Watah, Blow Dryer in da Tub. The Intern reads Blow Dryer in da Tub and says nothing. That is mature of him.

The Works Council notices.

“Good.”

“I especially didn’t say anything,” says The Intern.

“Exactly.”

“Is that graded?”

“No.”

“Too bad.”

The lag does not get smaller. It becomes easier to hear. Not as music. As old work. As time that is not over just because it looks completed. Sgt. Jennings hatte einen Zusammenbruch runs up front and breaks down after twenty-four seconds. tfnukuZ comes backwards. Einen Traum graben digs in the wrong place and finds something anyway. Fremder am Fremdesten, Vor dieser Massage, Aua'n'Schau, Nicht allein unterm Himmel, Drin in einem toten Mann drin, ScheissNeuesLied, Nerviger Krankheitswiederholer, Ach Shelly (Johnson), Zukunft, Drive-Through-Universum — each title carries a small present with it that never cleanly fit its time.

Southring Gene suddenly notices that two decades do not lie behind him. They do not even stand in front of him. They hang on him like the bass. Not only as load. As material. That is unpleasant, because material does not ask whether you are ready to make something out of it right now. It lies there. It was there. It comes after. It pushes into the hand, into the throat, into the street, into every name that at some point was used, crossed out, changed, extended, filed away, or opened again. Da Dumb Kid briefly looks out of a side window. The Cyanide-in-the-Pudding Days Are Over drags a long poisonous loop. Slayer in Samtpelzen lays soft and dangerous over a wall. Textperformance 2019: Allein war König stands upright too long. Aus Österreich, Hartes Experiment Nr. 1, Schreib-/Cash-/writer/-Maschine, Vertrau mir, ich bin Musiker, Bye-Bye Pradl, Da Mask Blues, South-Ring Luv Song, My Next Big Art Project, CECH Her From South Ring 2019 — they do not come orderly. They come right.

The Intern says: “Is all that yours?” Southring Gene says: “Not that simple.”

“Figured.”

“But close enough.”

The Works Council says: “Not every title is the same function.”

“But they all hang on it?” asks The Intern.

“Many.”

“And the others?”

“Also the ones missing.”

The Intern looks into the empty places between the titles.

Mandatory Reading Aid: Lag is not a blemish. It is time dirt in the cassette tape and cracks when the name gets sound again too late.

“That’s mean.”

“Archive,” says the Works Council.

“That’s mean with a better name.”

Southring Gene does not laugh, but the bass buzzes briefly. Then the harder, dirtier, more tired, prouder, more ridiculous leftovers come. Do It, Leave Me pulls at him. Austrian't Doom contradicts its origin with origin. I'm an Ass needs no explanation. Sri Syadasti stands calmly beside it, as if calm were also an imposition. 420 Ev'ry Day ticks wrong. 'Cause I Still Need Dat, Split, 3x Bass and Shapes, Innschbruggkch, Da Devil!, Dat Could Only Happen ta Me, It's Quiet (Tod dem faschistischen Insekt), Jeanneelaaangweilig, We All Gotta Live, Still, Ya Know — the lag now speaks more dialect, but not as the language of the chapter. More as rhythm, blow, body pressure.

Southring Gene plays a line underneath. Not soothing. Not nostalgic. The bass takes the titles seriously enough not to smooth them out. It lets I'm an Ass stand with edges, lays a warm dark floor under We All Gotta Live, pulls briefly apart at Split, 3x Bass and Shapes, as if it itself were present three times, and does nothing special at Innschbruggkch, which might be the most special thing about it. The Intern is briefly happy about Unda Fifty It Runs, gets startled by NoiseR, waves at SG, like Southring-Gene, EC even though nobody waves back, and gets stuck on I Ain't So Sure Bout Dat Yet, Ya Know....

“That title understands me.”

“That is not a good sign,” says the Works Council.

“For who?”

“Both.”

The lag answers with Blute. Then Hirnleeren. Then Steamroller Waltz. Then Jello Biafra Boogie. Then Sündenfresser, Horden des Ekels, Gott drin, Tor nach Nirgendwo, Bluesbrecher, Sphaerytale. The street does not darken. It only widens into the past. A gate with no destination opens briefly at Tor nach Nirgendwo and closes again, as if it had noticed itself that it was just about to become too literal. Joachim Haspinger Savior steps out, but is immediately watched by The Devil Himself. Hansis sista vinter falls cold over the edge. Südlich vom Hippie, Imperium, Kokain-Blues, Niemand überlebt, Verzweiflung, Schremmhämmer,

Zuckerberg Mosh, Selachimorpha pull heavier after them, and way in the back, almost cheekily compact, BRTTRKLLR, Spanische Fliege, Schneller als Satan 2014, Foltergarten, The Hippie Days Are Over 2014 run along, as if 2014 were only another kind of lag.

The Intern exhales.

“That really isn’t complete?”

“No,” says Southring Gene.

“Oida.”

The Works Council nods.

“Technically sufficient.”

The road is now so full that it actually should be blocked. But nothing blocks. The titles go through walls, under asphalt, over fences, through Southring Gene, past him, with him. Some want to be seen. Some only do not want to disappear. Some are embarrassing. Some proud. Some too long. Some too short. Some misspelled, intentionally, unintentionally, or both. Some belong to projects, some to project members, some to collaborations, some to versions of names that have since been removed, changed, or marked differently. Two decades behind does not mean: It is too late.

It means: It comes after. And what comes after does not come as the past, but as a demand on the present not to consider itself solely responsible. Southring Gene stops. The whole lag keeps walking. Through him. Not painless. But not destroying. He closes his eyes for a moment. The bass hangs on him, listens, holds against it, gives way where giving way is necessary, presses where pressure is needed. The Intern says nothing. The Works Council says nothing. Even the titles get quieter for a moment, as if they had understood that they cannot all sue for their meaning at the same time.

Southring Gene says:

“I do not have to sort you.”

The titles stop. Not all of them. Enough.

“I do not have to explain you completely.”

More of them stop.

“I do not have to leave you behind.”

Now the lag really stops. Not still. But attentive.

“But you do not go in front either.”

The sentence is important. Not big. Important. The Works Council nods. The Intern whispers: “That was good.” Southring Gene puts his hand on the bass.

“With.”

The lag starts moving again. This time not behind him. Not in front of him. Beside him, under him, in messy layers, as material, as noise, as work, as proof that two

decades are not caught up with by running faster. You do not catch them up at all. You stop acting like they are only behind. The road becomes free. Not empty. Free. That is a difference the Works Council probably knew the whole time and politely did not explain. The Intern looks at the names that are no longer pushing.

“And who are you now?”

Southring Gene sees the project labels beside him, on top of each other, through each other, not fused, not clarified: Southring-Gene, the 2nd. Southring Gene. Ginger Gene. CECH. Eugen Cech Junior. Eugen Cech. CechNo. HeisenCech. Singer in Turn Out. Project member here. Collaboration there. With people. With machines. With archive. With errors. With everything that is not fully listed and still belongs. He says: “Further.” The Intern blinks.

“That was not an answer.”

The Works Council says: “It was.” The bass hums. Dark. Distorted. Not loud. The lag walks with him. And this time it no longer sounds like something catching up. It sounds like something that finally no longer has to walk in the back.

Level 21 – The Last Chance for Side Quests



The side quests drag dirt along their hem. Not epic. More like they had been lying next to the washing machine for years and secretly learned plot there.

Mandatory Reading Aid: Side quests are only side business until they notice the main thing gets weaker when they are missing.

The lag walks along for a while longer. Not loud. No longer pushing. But it is there, in layers beside the road, under the road, sometimes even over the road, when an old title briefly gets too big and lays itself over the sky until the Works Council brings it back down to usable height with one look. Southring Gene keeps walking, the black electric bass hanging on him, matte, electric, with the bright sign under the strings. The Intern 12.6 walks on the left and keeps looking like he would like to say something but is not sure whether that would extend the level.

Side quests are not distraction. They are the screws in the dust, the inventory leftovers, the last chance for material that was too small to be called main road, but too stubborn to stay gone.

The Works Council walks on the right. He carries nothing. That is suspicious.

“You look so empty,” says The Intern.

The Works Council does not stop.

“I am not responsible for decoration.”

“But otherwise you always have something.”

“Order is not always visible.”

The Intern looks over to Southring Gene.

“That was one of those sentences again.”

Southring Gene says nothing. He feels the sentence anyway. In front of them stands a yellowed sign. Not big. Not dramatic. Almost insultingly plain.

THE LAST CHANCE FOR SIDE QUESTS

Under it:

Please take care of left-behind main-story digressions before you pretend you are ready.

The Intern reads slowly.

“Side quests.”

The Works Council says: “Not really.”

“But it says so.”

“A lot of things say things.”

Southring Gene stops in front of the rusty sign.

“I don’t have time for side quests.”

The road reacts immediately. Not with a glitch. With reality. It simply does not continue. In front of them is street, but it cannot be stepped on. Not blocked. Not closed. Only not responsible. Like an office counter after closing time that is still visible and gets more shameless exactly because of that. The Intern raises both hands.

“So side quests after all.”

“No,” says Southring Gene.

The road remains.

“Yes,” says the Works Council.

Southring Gene turns to him.

“You too?”

“Especially me.”

“Why?”

“Because otherwise you go into the finale with too much untested material.”

The Intern nods, although he surely has not understood that completely.

“Untested is bad.”

The Works Council looks at him.

“Sometimes untested is only honest.”

“Aha.”

“Not here.”

Next to the pissed-on sign, a small case suddenly appears. It was not there. Of course. The case is bright yellow. Not elegant. Not mystical. Not old. A very visible yellow that does not act like it belongs in this street. The Intern goes to it immediately.

“Can I?”

“No,” says Southring Gene.

The Intern opens it.

“I heard no, but unfortunately I had already started.”

Inside the case lies a neon-yellow electric guitar. It is so yellow that the room around it briefly has less opinion. Not gold. Not light. Neon. An object with no patience for understatement. The body is smooth, narrower than the bass, fresher, faster, more shameless. At the same spot where the electric bass carries its bright sign under the strings, the guitar has a screaming red circle. Inside it an arrow down. South. South Ring. Not as a coat of arms. As a direction mistake on purpose. The Intern whispers: “That is very yellow though.” The Works Council says: “Visible.”

“That’s what I said.”

“No. You judged it.”

Southring Gene looks at the guitar.

“Why?”

Beside the case now stands a second, smaller object: a looper pedal. Black, compact, with a red button, a green button, a small display, and the unpleasant aura of something that offers repetition without being responsible for the consequences.

On the display it says:

APPARENTLY NEEDED FOR THE UPCOMING FINALE

The Intern bends over it.

“Apparently.”

The Works Council says: “Important.”

“That it’s apparently?”

“Yes.”

Southring Gene does not take the guitar right away. That is important too. The electric bass hangs on him. Black. Deep. With weight. With the sign of inner self-determination. The new guitar lies there like another impulse: sharper, brighter, more visible, more attack, more surface, more chance to get lost in too many tracks. The red circle with the arrow down does not look like decoration. It looks like a reminder that every height has to be pulled back south.

“I don’t need another instrument,” says Southring Gene.

The road remains not responsible. The Works Council says: “Apparently you do.”

Mandatory Reading Aid: Side quests are the screws in the dust. Not main road, but sharp enough for the sole.

“Apparently.”

“Exactly.”

The Intern lifts the looper pedal.

“With this you can accompany yourself.”

“Or layer yourself over yourself,” says the Works Council.

“Sounds cool.”

“Sounds dangerous.”

“That doesn’t rule itself out.”

Southring Gene takes the guitar. It is lighter than the bass. Too light. Almost suspiciously light, as if it did not work with weight but with visibility. The strap settles over the other shoulder. Electric bass and electric guitar now hang on him, impossibly practical, unreasonable, exactly right for a section that claims to let side quests get handled, even though nobody can play. The looper pedal lies at his feet. The Intern looks thrilled.

“Now you got setup.”

“I got a problem.”

The Works Council says: “That is usually the beginning of a usable setup.” Doors appear on the road. Many. Too many. But they are not like earlier doors. They do not stand front-on, not mysterious, not as a great test. They stand sideways. Half open. Scratched up. With small signs, old terms, song leftovers, body jokes, place names, wrong marching directions, self-protection, pain relocation, South Ring order. No door claims to be important. Exactly why they are.

Above the first one it says:

ONLY A QUICK DETOUR

The Intern points at it.

“Trap.”

The Works Council says: “No.”

“Not?”

“Truth.”

Southring Gene steps on the looper pedal. A click. Nothing big. Only the bass records a deep note, distorted, dark, carrying. It keeps running, quiet, under the street. Southring Gene looks at the pedal. The Intern grins.

“Now you keep walking with yourself.”

“Creepy.”

“Practical,” says the Works Council.

Southring Gene hits the neon-yellow guitar. The note is sharp. Not pretty. Not full. More like a yellow line through bad air. For a moment the red circle with the south arrow does not seem to glow, but to point. Not down as defeat. South as tether. The note does not land up high, but immediately falls back into the bass loop. The two instruments do not fight. They only do not yet know how they are supposed to be carried at the same time.

“That sounds like somebody painting a construction site,” says The Intern.
The Works Council nods.

“Not unfitting.”

The first door opens wider. Behind it no room. A small scene. A sentence left lying around. A half-started chorus. An old name that no longer wanted to stand in the main hall. Southring Gene goes in. Or rather: He stays standing, and the side quest comes to him. A table. An empty cup. A dirty cable. An old window. A body too funny to be only funny. One voice saying: That was not important enough. Another saying: Exactly why. The bass loop holds. The guitar sets short, bright cuts over it.

Not to solve the scene. To not drop it again. The Intern looks in.

“Do we have to finish all this?”

The Works Council says: “No.”

“Good.”

“We have to acknowledge it.”

“Worse.”

“Yes.”

Southring Gene plays. Not virtuoso. Not complete. He lays down one track. Then another. The looper takes them, gives them back, slightly shifted, and suddenly the side quest is no longer a single detour, but a layer in the walking. The bass carries, the yellow guitar marks, the red south arrow pulls every bright line back down, into the ground, into the South Ring, into what must not lift off. The Intern first gets excited, then overwhelmed, then excited again, because with him overwhelm is apparently often only anticipation with delay.

“This is getting really big,” he says.

The Works Council says: “Do not make it big.”

“But it’s getting big.”

“Then keep it small.”

“How?”

“Through work.”

The Intern looks disgusted.

“Always you with your work.”

The doors open one after another. Not neatly. Not numbered. One door brings a song that was never only a song. One brings a figure that only wanted to appear once and still echoes. One brings a false punchline. One brings a very correct embarrassment. One brings a body joke that suddenly is sadder than it is allowed to be. One brings a South Ring look. One brings a side plot that had dressed up as the main thing but arrived too late for the meeting. One brings a voice Southring Gene no longer needs but cannot deny. One brings a pain that was sarcastic for so long nobody noticed anymore that it was pain.

The looper runs. Click. Bass. Click. Guitar. Click. A sentence. Click. An error. Click. A door. Click. A pause. Click. Too much. The Works Council steps on the stop button. Silence. The Intern startles.

“Why?!”

“Because layers are not automatically depth.”

Southring Gene breathes out. He had not even noticed he had stopped. The Works Council looks at him.

“Exactly why.”

Southring Gene nods. Not gladly. But correctly. The looper blinks. Waiting. That is almost rude. Southring Gene says: “Again. Less.” The Intern looks offended on behalf of the pedal.

“But we already had, like, a full build-up.”

“Too full.”

“The finale is coming!”

The Works Council says: “The finale does not need a trash mountain.”

Mandatory Reading Aid: Side quests remain dust screws. Not main road, but sharp enough that every sole later gives testimony.

“But equipment!”

“Equipment is not collection mania.”

Southring Gene puts his hand on the neon-yellow guitar.

“I don’t need more.”

Then on the black bass.

“I need more exact.”

The pedal blinks once. As if it understood. Or as if it had no choice. The next side quest is smaller. Only a chair at the edge.

On it lies a sentence:

I wanted to do that later.

Southring Gene does not play a chord. Only one high note on the yellow guitar, thin, almost ridiculous, but honest enough. The bass loop underneath stays deep,

barely audible. The note is recorded. It repeats. The second time it sounds less thin. The third time almost necessary. The fourth time Southring Gene stops it.

“Enough.”

The chair remains. But it no longer stands in the way. The Intern whispers: “That was almost therapy.” The Works Council says: “No.”

“Thank god.”

“It was order without cleaning.”

“That sounds even worse.”

“But it is better.”

More doors. More small leftovers. Southring Gene does not learn to complete them. That would be too easy. He learns not to treat them as distraction anymore. Some stay closed. Some he opens only a crack. Some are marked with a bass run. Some get a yellow guitar stripe. Some are intentionally not looped, because repetition would give them too much power. Some have to come three times before he recognizes they are not annoying, but carrying. Some seem funny first and then heavy. Some heavy first and then dumb. Both may be true.

At some point The Intern almost takes the lead.

“There’s another one up front!”

“Slower,” says the Works Council.

“And left! And right! And the little one there with the crooked sign!”

“Slower.”

“But this is the last chance!”

“Exactly why.”

The Intern stops as if the word caught him.

“Ah.”

“Yes.”

“I’m confusing chance with panic right now.”

“Happens.”

Southring Gene looks at him.

“With you often.”

“Yes.”

The bass hums softly. The yellow guitar buzzes briefly. The pedal blinks in time, but this time nobody records. The red circle with the arrow south is clearer now. Not brighter, not bigger. Clearer, because it was used. Every yellow note that wants to get too high is pulled back by this sign. Not stopped. Grounded. The South Ring is not marked on the guitar as nostalgia, but as direction correction. An arrow

down, so up does not get mistaken for truth again. Finally the Works Council stands in front of the last side door.

It is not bigger than the others. Only quieter.

On the sign it says:

YOU DO NOT HAVE TO GET STRONGER

The Intern reads it and immediately looks at Southring Gene.

“But we just got equipment.”

The Works Council says: “Exactly.” Southring Gene stands in front of the door, bass and guitar on him, looper at his feet.

“Then what was all this for?”

The Works Council does not answer immediately. That is rare. Then he says: “So you do not confuse strength with loudness.” The Intern wants to say something. Says nothing. Good. Southring Gene steps on the pedal. One last loop. Only bass. Deep. Then yellow guitar. One bright, sharp note. Then silence. Not saved. Not repeated. Only played. The door opens. Behind it lies no room. Only the main road. It was beside them the whole time. Not in front of them. Beside them. The side quests were not branches off the road. The road was not fully walkable without them.

The Intern looks proud and sad at the same time.

“Are we leveled up now?”

“No,” says Southring Gene.

The Works Council says: “Yes.” Southring Gene looks at him. The Works Council adds: “But not upward.” The Intern thinks about it.

“Southward?”

Southring Gene looks at the red circle with the arrow.

“Maybe.”

The bass hums. The guitar answers briefly. The looper pedal no longer blinks. It waits. For later. Apparently. Southring Gene takes the main road. Not stronger in the simple sense. Not better prepared because he carries more equipment. More like less protected. Less evasive. Less ready to use side roads as excuses. The Intern walks beside him and visibly holds himself back from marching proudly. The Works Council sees it.

“Good.”

“What’s good?”

“That you are holding yourself back.”

“CECHbless you’re here.”

“We had that already.”

“Yeah, but it’s still true.”

Southring Gene keeps walking. The black electric bass hangs low. The neon-yellow electric guitar glows shamelessly. The red circle with the south arrow sits under the strings like a second direction. The looper pedal hangs on the strap, small, dangerous, useful. In front of them the road grows darker. Not evil. Only more final. The finale is not standing there yet. But it is already listening.

Level 22 – Well...



Tja has a scratch. Not a big one. Just one that catches on the next sentence and reminds you that errors sometimes have better hooks than intentions. Before the fight, something unpleasant happens. It gets quiet. Not peacefully quiet. Not meaningfully quiet. Not the kind of quiet a book uses when it wants to seem very deep in a second. More like an awkward quiet before a performance where everybody knows someone is about to be announced way too big, and he believes it most of all.

Southring Gene stands on the road. The black electric bass hangs low on him. The neon-yellow electric guitar hangs next to it, obscenely visible, with the red circle and the arrow south under the strings. The looper pedal is fixed to the strap, small, useful, dangerous, and already blinking even though nobody switched it on. The Intern 12.6 stands a little behind him. The Works Council stands beside him. Nobody says anything. Then a comma appears in front of them. It is not elegant. It is an insulted hook. Dirt under the name. A small black leftover acting like it alone could turn the whole past back.

The boss fight does not end with annihilation. It ends with a chair, with jurisdiction filth, with The 2nd under side pressure, and with nobody left who gets to sign alone.

Only a comma. It hangs in the air. Small. Clean. Mean. Then two words appear.

, the 2nd

Not huge. Not burning. Not as a demon. Not as a father. Not as a monster. Not as a crown. Not as a boss with a health bar. Only as a removed suffix that no longer stands in the name and, exactly because of that, has learned how to take up space. Southring Gene looks at it.

“So. You.”

, the 2nd does not answer right away.

Then underneath it says:

I am dictator!!!

The Intern twists his face.

“Oh.”

The Works Council says: “That’s already not a good sign.”

“Because it sounds dangerous?”

“Because it takes itself three exclamation marks too serious.”

A bass line comes out of the ground. Not Southring Gene’s bass. Another one. Overdone funky. Too sure of itself. Like a tyrant decided groove was his natural form of government. Guitars crash on top of it, low-tuned, wide, hymnic, ridiculously huge, as if they wanted to build a throne even though only one sentence is sitting on it. Drums run off way too fast, like they have to cover the boss’s insecurity with speed. Somewhere a bell hits on every supposedly important moment.

BING.

, the 2nd grows bigger.

BING.

I am dictator!!!

BING.

No need to wait for

BING.

What wait for? The Intern whispers: “That’s pretty damn stupid already.” The Works Council says: “Exactly why it’s dangerous.” Southring Gene takes the neon-yellow guitar in his hand.

“Fine then.”

He hits it. Bright. Sharp. The red south arrow on the body lights up for a moment, like it wants to pull the tone downward at once. The looper starts and records the hit. The bass underneath gives a deep note. Suddenly two tracks run, then three, then a fourth, because the pedal apparently believes everything has to get bigger in the final fight. The guitar sits on top, the bass underneath, the boss bass against it, the boss guitars over it, the drums run, the bell hits, the comma flickers, and , the 2nd starts behaving like a figure even though he is still only a suffix.

“Warn you in the eye of horror,” stands on the street.

Then:

“Don’t sleep where the demons walk.”

Then:

“Listen to my heros talk.”

The Intern raises his hand.

“Is that supposed to be English?”

The Works Council says: “Not now.”

“But—”

“Not now.”

Southring Gene plays harder. The neon-yellow guitar screams across the road. The looper repeats. The bass pushes. The pedal stacks. The yellow tone gets even yellower, the red arrow even redder, the repetition even fuller, and for a short moment it actually looks as if the equipment problem were a solution. More tracks. More pressure. More sound. More preparation. More finale. Then it tips. Not against , the 2nd. Against Southring Gene. The looper repeats too much. The guitar hangs in the way. The bass has to fight against its own recorded tracks. Every new note first hits what was supposed to help a second ago. The boss does not laugh. He does not have to. The mix laughs for him. The bells hit in completely wrong places. The pedal records a breath and makes rhythm out of it. The guitar whistles back. The bass hums annoyed. Southring Gene realizes he has not gotten stronger.

He has gotten more wired. That is not the same thing.

“Stop,” he says.

The looper pedal records stop.

“Stop. Stop. Stop. Stop.”

“Great,” says the Intern.

The Works Council steps forward, wants to press the pedal, but the ground pulls it half a meter away. , the 2nd now stands on all sides. , the 2nd in front of him. , the 2nd behind him. , the 2nd as a comma in every joint. , the 2nd as a suffix on every old name. Southring Gene plays a deep bass run, but the looper throws the yellow guitar back at him. He hits the guitar, but the boss bass drowns it with that ridiculous dictator funk. He screams, but the recording of stop keeps running underneath. He sings, but not properly yet. For now everything is fight. For now he still believes he has to win by being louder than what was removed.

The book starts to flicker. Not the world. The book. Paragraphs slide. Sentences repeat. Supposed game help gets involved.

Mandatory Reading Aid: You can turn back anytime.

The black electric bass hangs low on him.

Mandatory Reading Aid: You can turn back anytime.

The black electric bass hangs low on him.

Mandatory Reading Aid: This repetition is not an error.

Mandatory Reading Aid: This repetition is an error.

Mandatory Reading Aid: Please make up your mind.

Southring Gene roars: “No!” The no gets recorded.

“No! No! No! No!”

The Intern covers his ears.

“That pedal is a moron!”

The Works Council says: “No. It is consistent.”

Mandatory Reading Aid: Please do not repair it just because it behaves like damage. Some damage carries the road.

“That’s worse!”

, the 2nd pulses in time. I am dictator!!! I am dictator!!! I am dictator!!! The words stand everywhere, way too big, way too proud, way too dumb, and that is exactly why it hits. Not because the sentence is true. Because it acts like truth only has to show up often enough with three exclamation marks. , the 2nd does not want to explain. He wants to claim. He wants back onto the name. He does not want to be defeated. He does not even want to be loved. He wants his removal to stop being treated as nonexistence.

Southring Gene hits the guitar again. The tone is strong. Then it gets stuck. Repeated. Repeated. Repeated. The yellow body pulls on his shoulder. The pedal pulls on time. The red arrow south points down, but Southring Gene cannot follow it because he is hanging in too many loops. The electric bass tries to get through, but the tracks stand on top of each other like bad decisions with an amp. Southring Gene screams. Not as a song. Not as a sentence. A rough, ugly, direct scream against the suffix, against the comma, against the bells, against the fake boss bombast, against the pedal, against the guitar, against the idea that more gear means more truth.

The scream briefly clears everything out. Only briefly. Then the looper records it. Scream. Scream. Scream. Scream. The looper does not only record notes. It records excuses. It records the way you used to need a name so your own did not stand so alone on the flyer. It also records the attempt to explain that cleanly later. Then it plays everything back. Worse. Better. Wronger. Truer. The boss fight becomes apparently endless. Not because so much happens. Because everything comes back. The guitar walls come back. The bells come back. The boss sentence comes back. The scream comes back. The no comes back. The stop comes back. The game help comes back. The comma comes back. The suffix comes back. Southring Gene walks forward and stands there again. He hits a note and already hears it. He is silent and hears the silence as a loop. The Intern shouts something that is recorded at once and comes back three times stupider. The Works Council says “Quiet,” and even that becomes a layer.

“Quiet. Quiet. Quiet. Quiet.”

The Works Council closes his eyes.

“I despise this pedal.”

“CECHbless!” the Intern shouts. “Finally we agree on something!”

“Not now! Not now! Not now!” the pedal loops.

, the 2nd grows. But not more powerful. Only bigger. That is the difference. Southring Gene notices it late. Or early. Or exactly when it will always have been clear. The boss is not getting stronger. The fight is getting fuller. Fullness fakes power. Every new track helps , the 2nd, because every track proves Southring Gene still believes he has to drown something out. The guitar is not an error. The pedal is not an error. They are tools. But here, in this fight, they become ballast, because they support the wrong reflex: more, more, more, one more layer, one more answer, one more name, one more tone, one more proof.

Southring Gene stands still. He takes off the neon-yellow guitar. The Intern calls: “What are you doing?!” The guitar still hangs on one last feedback edge. Southring Gene lays it on the ground. The red circle with the arrow south points upward, even though the arrow points down. For a moment that is very right. The looper pedal blinks in panic. REC? Southring Gene does not step on it. He picks it up. Switches it off. The last loop stumbles.

“No. Stop. Quiet. I am dictator. What wait for. Not now. Scream. No. Quiet. St—”

Silence. Not quite. The boss bass still runs. The ridiculous guitars still run. The drums still race. The bell hits one more time.

BING.

But his own ballast is gone. Southring Gene stands there only with the black electric bass. The bass is heavy. Familiar. Right. Maybe too right. , the 2nd contracts in front of him. Smaller. Denser. More dangerous, because now there is less noise between them.

“I am dictator,” says the suffix.

No longer as writing. As a voice. Dry. Funny. Sad.

“No need to wait for.”

Southring Gene does not answer. He plays bass. Deep. Dark. Distorted. A run that no longer wants to win, but makes room. He presses against the comma, but not head-on. He goes underneath. Alongside. Between. He does not play the suffix away. He plays around it. He lets it stand and by doing that takes away its stage. The boss tries to become hymnic again, but without the loops of its own, its pathos looks naked. Way too big for its small spot in the name. The Intern whispers: “Now he kinda looks stupid.” The Works Council says: “Because he is no longer covered.” , the 2nd reacts.

The street gets narrow. The writing gets personal. You crossed me out. Southring Gene keeps playing. You removed me. The bass gets softer. You acted like I was gone. Southring Gene stops playing. The boss fight pauses. Only without music. That is worse for everybody. Southring Gene looks at the bass. Then at , the 2nd. Then at his hands.

“Maybe,” he says slowly, “not even the bass always has to be between.”

The Intern makes a sound like somebody handed him the end of the world in very impractical packaging.

“What?”

The Works Council raises a hand. Not as a ban. As a request for quiet. Southring Gene takes the bass off. Only briefly. As a test. The book gets scared. You can tell because it cannot manage a message. The black electric bass lies on the ground, dull, calm, the bright sign under the strings visible like never before, and still Southring Gene has not disappeared. That is the imposition. The instrument has carried, heard, answered, decided, helped decide. But it is not all of self-determination. It is part of it. A strong one. A necessary one. Maybe. But not uninterrupted.

, the 2nd says nothing. That is new. Southring Gene screams. Without bass. Without guitar. Without pedal. Without loop. Without power-up. The scream is shorter than expected. It is not heroic. It does not clear anything away for good. It only proves that voice also comes out of the body without a tool. Then he sings. Rough at first. Then deeper. Then less against the boss than through the room where the boss stands. No big lines. No full number. Only singing that refuses to serve as evidence. The tone passes, the 2nd, returns, catches briefly on the comma, comes loose, finds the ground, finds the street, finds the Intern, who does not know whether he is allowed to sing along, finds the Works Council, who knows for sure he does not have to sing along, finds the bass on the floor and leaves it there.

, the 2nd gets smaller. Not defeated. More exact. The comma remains. The words remain. But they stop simulating boss size. Southring Gene stops singing. He does not pick up the bass right away. Instead he looks into the room left over after the fight. There they stand. Not as enemies. Not as an audience. Versions. Existence marks. Names. Old versions. Wrong versions. Necessary versions. Southring-Gene, the 2nd stands with hyphen and suffix at the edge and does not look in, because he is already standing in.

Ginger Gene leans somewhere where the scene almost gets too serious. CECH stands twice without apologizing. Eugen Cech Junior does not stand in front. Eugen Cech does not either. CechNo, HeisenCech, Singer in Turn Out, project member here, collaboration there, Southring Gene & A.I., old spellings, removed hangers-on, wrong assignments, file folders, voices, titles, body leftovers, streets, errors, jokes, anger, work, name, not-name. The Intern whispers: “Is that all of them now?” The Works Council says: “No.”

“Of course not.”

Southring Gene says: “Good.” Then he talks to them. Not solemnly. Not reconciled in the cheap sense. More like someone finally not avoiding a way too long meeting anymore.

“You wanted back into the name,” he says to Southring-Gene, the 2nd.

No answer.

“You wanted to be read.”

The comma barely moves.

“You too,” he says to Southring Gene.

Ginger Gene grins.

“You probably just didn’t want to be quite so heavy.”

CECH says nothing. CECH says nothing too.

“You two don’t make it easier.”

Eugen Cech Junior looks away. Eugen Cech does not look away. The Intern holds his breath. The Works Council watches, but does not interfere. Southring Gene keeps walking through the imprints.

“You are band, but I was singer.”

Turn Out does not nod, because Turn Out is not responsible here as a person.

“You are membership, not the whole.”

HelperSyndrom takes that.

“You are collaboration.”

FocknSaue & Southring Gene flickers.

“You are collaboration too.”

Southring Gene & A.I. flickers differently.

“You are old name.”

“You are leftover.”

“You are error.”

“You are joke.”

“You are too long.”

“You are too short.”

“You are embarrassing.”

“You are important.”

“You are both.”

, the 2nd finally says:

“And me?”

The voice sounds smaller than before. Not weak. Just without an amp. Southring Gene looks at it.

Mandatory Reading Aid: This hint holds nobody. It rusts in the handrail and scratches only enough so you do not forget your fingers.

“You are crossed out.”

The comma contracts.

“But not deleted.”

Silence. The Intern looks to the Works Council. The Works Council nods almost invisibly. Southring Gene says: “You don’t come back into the name just because you put pressure on it.” , the 2nd remains.

“But you don’t have to act like you’re not there.”

The sentence opens nothing. It closes nothing either. It lets something stand without letting it win. That is the fight.

Mandatory Reading Aid: Conversation is not reconciliation here. Conversation is the place where nothing is loud enough anymore to be right alone.

Not the scream. Not the song. Not the guitar. Not the looper. Not even the bass. The conversation. The discussion. Holding out the fact that versions are allowed to talk without taking over the controls. That crossed-out parts have an effect without becoming crown again. That old names do not have to be annihilated so a current name can walk. That a reader was addressed as Southring Gene through all of this without ever really playing, and at the end still stands before a choice that was not a control and maybe means it exactly because of that.

The black electric bass still lies on the floor. Southring Gene picks it up. Not at once as protection. As a decision. The neon-yellow guitar lies beside it. The looper pedal too. He takes them with him. But differently. Not as a power-up. As tools that do not always have to be used. The boss area gets smaller. , the 2nd no longer stands in front of the road. It stands sideways. Not banished. Not central. Sideways. That is a lot. The Intern breathes out.

“Did we win?”

The Works Council says: “Yes.” The Intern looks surprised.

“For real?”

“Not the way you mean.”

“Figures.”

Southring Gene looks at the versions. They are not waiting for orders. They are waiting for naming. The book flickers. This time not broken. More open. Names appear on the ground. Not as duty. Not as a list that wants to be complete. As possibility.

Southring-Gene, the 2nd

Southring Gene

Ginger Gene

CECH

Eugen Cech Junior

Eugen Cech

CechNo

HeisenCech
Singer in Turn Out
HelferSyndrom
FocknSaue & Southring Gene
Southring Gene & A.I.

Then a free field. Empty.

Underneath it says:
Choose desired name.

The Intern looks at it.

“Name selection after all now?”

The Works Council says: “Before the next run.”

“So you didn’t choose before?”

“Not really.”

“And now?”

The Works Council looks to Southring Gene. Southring Gene looks at the empty field. Then at the names. Then at the road.

“Now at least you know every choice leaves marks.”

The book waits. Not impatient. Not friendly. It waits like a book that knows it is about to be turned over but no longer has to pretend page-turning is a button press. The Intern says quietly: “And if you don’t take any of them?” Southring Gene says: “Then you write one in.”

“And if you take the same one?”

“Then you read differently.”

The Works Council says: “That is the real win.”, the 2nd says nothing. But it does not disappear. Good. The road behind the boss area does not open as a triumph road. Only as the next edge. There is no level there. No boss. No health bar. No reward.

Only a small, damaged message:

Name accepted.

Underneath:

Reading marathon can be started again.

Under that, almost unreadable:
This time it will not be the same.

Southring Gene walks on. With bass. With guitar. With pedal. With versions. With existence marks. With , the 2nd sideways in the sentence. Not defeated because annihilated. Defeated because no longer solely responsible.

And behind him an overdone, ridiculous, half-echoed boss voice calls one more time:

I am dictator!!!

The Intern turns around.

“No, you’re not.”

The voice goes silent. The Works Council says: “Finally.” Southring Gene laughs. Not loud. Not long. But real. Then he walks beyond the edge of the fight.

Chapter 23 – And Otherwise? That Too!



★ LEVEL SELECT ★

DU BIST: SOUTHRING GENE

Spieler
nicht
vergessen!



01

PRAKTIKANT
12.6



02

THE 2ND



03

DREIFALTIGKEIT
ZU IKONEN
GEWALZT



04

GEWINNT



05

DISKORDIA
(2+3)



06

PORNOGRAPHISCHE
ZUSTÄNDIGKEIT



07

1978



08

VOR UNS,
EIN LANGER
WEG



09

SOUTHRING
GENE



10

ICH BIN
DER WEG



11

GEMINT.
DER NEUE
DOPPLER EFFEKT



12

ENDLICH
GEBURTSTAG



13

#



14

ANSATZWEISE
KAFFEE



15

IST ES NOCH
WEIT?



16

KACHELN
HINTERM
HORIZONT



17

HODENPILATES!



18

ZURÜCK ZU
MUTTER



19

EINE NICHTBEMERKTE
WIDERGEBURT



20

2 DEKADEN
IM RÜCKSTAND



21

DIE LETZTE CHANCE
FÜR NEBENQUESTS



22

TJA...



??
???



GESAMTFORTSCHRITT



88%

LESEN IST KEIN FEHLER.



REWIND //



HOME



INVENTAR



KARTE



STATUS



SPEICHERN

Chapter 23 does not act like it invented the dirt. It does not sort it away either. It only lays it under glass and does not write a crooked sign next to it, because some things lose their effect otherwise. After the edge of the fight there is no new loading screen. That matters. Not because loading screens are suddenly forbidden. That would be too easy, and easy bans in this book tend to dress up as doors immediately. There is no loading screen because nothing still needs to load that would be allowed to act like it was a level.

Here it says Chapter 23. Not Level 23. The difference is small enough to be dangerous. A level wants to be entered. A chapter gets read, even when it acts like you could play it. A level promises task, progress, maybe even a reward. A chapter is allowed to remain after the fight without the duty to become another fight. Southring Gene therefore does not go into Level 23. He goes on. The book stands still for a moment. Not behind him. Beside him. Like someone who took the same road and now realizes he had margin notes with him the whole time that did not want to stay in the margin at all.

Mandatory is not an adjective anymore. It stands there like a name that got hired by force. The reading aid speaks only now openly enough to become dangerous. Correct help would have apologized, explained, ordered, maybe even summarized. It would have said what , the 2nd means, why The Intern 12.6 works like that, why the Works Council is right, when the bass is tool, when ballast, when the road is road, when southring gene is a condition, and why a comma can have more weight than a boss with a bell. This help does not do that. Not completely. Not reliably. Not in a way that leaves you cleaner afterward.

It was already there before it was allowed to speak here: next to date leftovers, by arrows, under repetitions, in false help sentences, in almost too exact warnings, in sentences that claimed you could turn back anytime although the book already knew turning back is only another form of going on. It did not steer. It disturbed. That is its friendlier function. The less friendly one says: it prevents you from understanding the book too early. Because understanding too early is a kind of abort here. It sounds like overview, but feels like a room where all doors were labeled before anyone checked whether they open at all.

CECH does not stand up front in this. CECH stands underneath. Like an old stage name that no longer has to perform but still knows where the dirty cables lie. When someone says “CECHbless” here, he is not thanking an ego. He is thanking the spot where the ego had to hide back then so anything could be played at all. And otherwise? That too. That is the whole mechanism, if you want to say it insultingly short. And Otherwise? That Too! is not a slogan. It is a keypress without a key. It does not accept the rest as just rest. It says: what was on the side comes along. What was wrong comes along. What was crossed out comes along. What was stupid comes along, but without automatically becoming king because of that. It comes along because leaving out is not complete deletion here.

Exactly because of that, , the 2nd remains sideways in the sentence. Sideways is not exile. Sideways is a position with less microphone. The comma stands where it can no longer rule but still remembers. It must not go back into the name just because it applies pressure. But it also must not be treated as if it had never been pressure. That is the win of Level 22: not annihilation, but withdrawal of jurisdiction. The

suffix loses sole representation. Nothing more. More would be too big again. The Intern 12.6 maybe understands half of that.

That is enough. He usually understands faster through meat sandwiches than through terms anyway. A meat sandwich can come back without making a theory out of it. It can lie in the inventory although no inventory exists. It can survive Rewind, make grease stains, replace forms, and be more dignified than every explanation that considers itself dignified. The Works Council understands more. That is dangerous too. That is why he does not talk constantly. He is not a punchline and not a rescue figure with music. He is the place where the book does not collapse although it would have every reason to. He does not represent morality. He represents load-bearing. You can laugh about him, but not past him. He is the weight in the sentence that does not shine.

Southring Gene picks up the bass again. Not because nothing would be possible without bass. Exactly not. He picks it up after it has been proven that he can put it down for a moment. That changes the tool. Before, the bass was maybe ID, defense, body extension, direction. Afterward, it is decision. You carry differently what you no longer have to carry in order not to disappear. The neon-yellow electric guitar comes along. The looper pedal comes along. Of course they come along. This book rarely throws things away just because they were too loud at the wrong moment. It rather takes away their excuse to always be right. Guitar and looper were ballast when they were supposed to prove that more layer means more truth. Later they can be tools. Or errors. Or both. Or a side quest that disguises itself as a bad idea until it is needed.

And otherwise too. The versions remain. Not as audience. Not as council of wise men. Not as boss rush after the boss. They remain as existence marks, because names in this book are not labels you peel off clean. Southring-Gene, the 2nd, Southring Gene, Ginger Gene, CECH, Eugen Cech Junior, Eugen Cech, CechNo, HeisenCech, Singer in Turn Out, HelferSyndrom, FocknSaue & Southring Gene, Southring Gene & A.I. and the free field: they are not a final list. They are a selection screen admitting that every selection leaves marks. The free field is important.

Not because you can finally enter the truth there. Please don't. Truth is too heavy for an empty field in this book. The free field is important because it gives the controls back without claiming you had been playing the whole time. You were reader. You were called Southring Gene. You were read through roads, rooms, tiles, body exercises, birthdays, lag, side quests, and a boss fight. At the end you may choose a name. That does not make the past freely available. It makes the next run different. That is enough.

More would be a boss again. The reading aid does not write itself in here as solution, but as echo. It was never Chapter 23 while the levels were running. There it was only allowed to show up when a sentence got too smooth, when an arrow pointed too safely, when a repetition almost looked like an error, when a name acted like it was removed enough. Now, after Level 22, it may stand still briefly and say: I did not explain so the book could function. I functioned so explanation would not become the main character.

Chapter 23 is therefore no bonus level. No secret arena. No last twist that recodes everything. It is the room after jurisdiction. The fight is over because nobody may be solely responsible anymore. Not , the 2nd. Not the bass. Not the guitar. Not the looper. Not The Intern. Not the Works Council. Not even the reading aid. Not even Southring Gene completely. That sounds like loss. But it is more like relief. A book that went to Level 22 does not have to keep going in Level 23. It may briefly understand in Chapter 23 that going on does not always mean progress. Sometimes it only means: the next edge is there. The tools are with it. The versions do not talk constantly, but they may answer. The comma stands sideways. The name is accepted. The reading marathon can be started again.

This time it will not be the same. Of course not. You read me. That changes me. Unfortunately you too.

End of the note.

Beginning of rereadability.

And Otherwise? That Too!