



the void

previous

stickman

WORLD: NONE

THE ARCHIVE CYCLE

WORLD: NONE

BOOK ONE OF FOUR

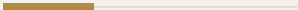
One world. One object. Proof that it existed.

ARCHIVE RECORD / I

THE ARCHIVE CYCLE

WORLD: NONE

BOOK ONE OF FOUR

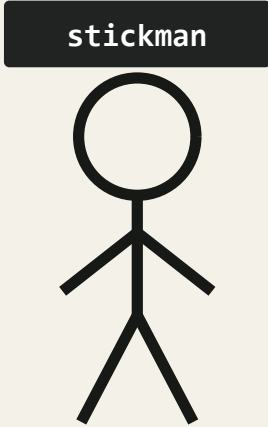


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ILLUSTRATED ARCHIVE EDITION

Basya Entertainment

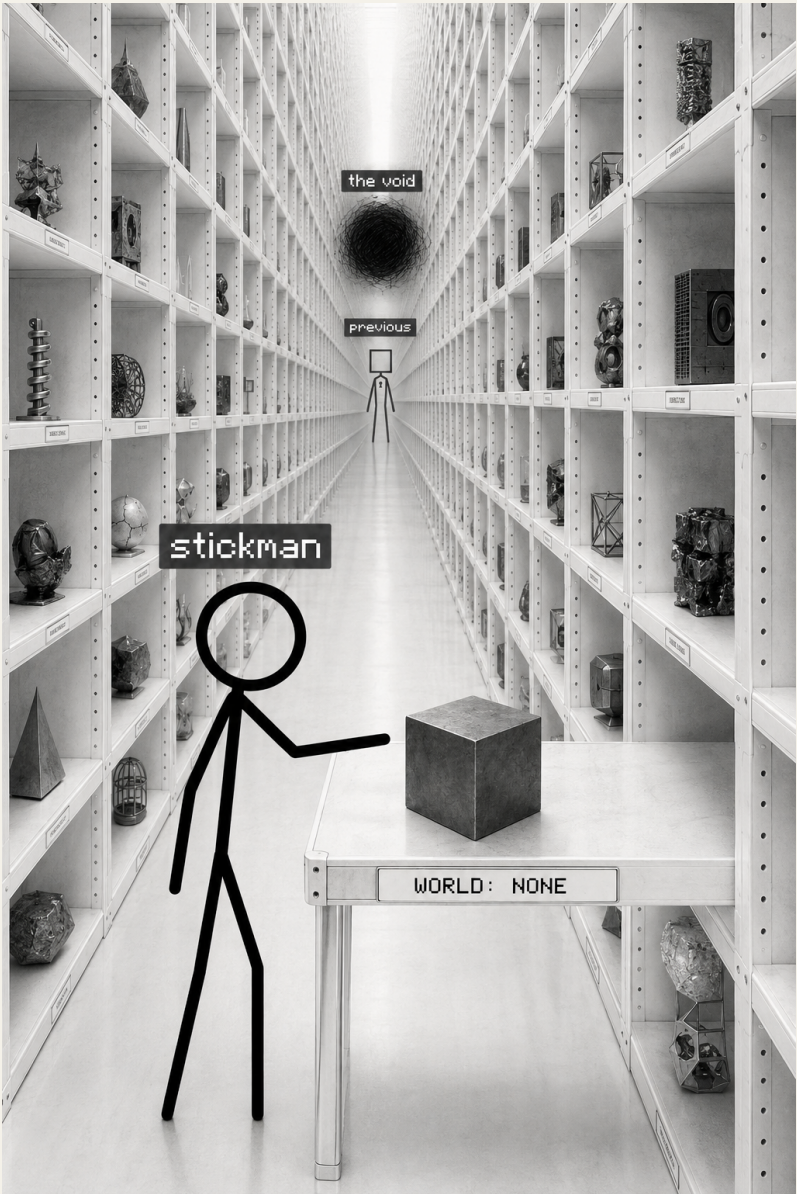
KNOWN ENTITIES



STICKMAN / UNIVERSAL CONSTANT #1

A thin black body. An empty circular head. No face, clothing, or visible possessions. The nametag persists in every reality.

ONE WORLD / ONE OBJECT / MINIMUM NONZERO PROOF



PROLOGUE

THE CITY WITH NO LAST DAY

Nobody in the city remembered when the sky had gone gray.

It had not happened like weather.

There had been no storm front rolling in from the west. No sirens. No warning on the radio. No moment anyone could point to and say, there, that was when it started.

The blue simply became less blue.

Then the clouds stopped moving.

Then shadows stopped pointing in the same direction.

At noon, the clocks in the train station disagreed by forty-three minutes.

At two, three buildings on Market Street gained an extra floor.

At four, the river began flowing both ways at once.

People noticed these things, but not enough.

They stood in doorways and took photographs. They called relatives. They blamed the power grid, the weather, the city, the government, old pipes, new construction, bad sleep.

By sunset, nobody could remember the name of the city.

The signs still displayed it.

Maps still showed it.

People could read the letters.

But the word meant nothing.

A little girl sat on the curb outside an apartment building and rolled a blue glass marble between her palms.

Her father kept asking her if she was ready to go.

“Go where?” she asked.

He looked down the street.

The street had become too long.

Buildings repeated in the distance. The same pharmacy appeared three times. The same traffic light blinked red at three different intersections.

“I don’t know,” he said.

The girl held up the marble.

It was ordinary.

Blue glass. A thin white swirl inside. A chip near one edge from where she had dropped it on a kitchen tile two years earlier.

“What about this?”

Her father stared at it as if it were important.

Then he looked confused about why he was staring.

Behind them, every window in the apartment building went black at once.

Not dark.

Black.

The girl stood.

A sound moved through the city.

Not an explosion.

Not thunder.

More like someone dragging a pencil across an enormous sheet of paper.

The line of blackness reached the end of the street.

It was not a wall. It did not have an edge. It looked like scribbles drawn over reality again and again until nothing could be seen beneath them.

People ran.

The girl dropped the marble.

It rolled into the gutter.

The blackness reached the pharmacy.

The building did not collapse.

It simply stopped being there.

So did the sidewalk.

So did the people standing on it.

The marble rolled once more.

Then the city disappeared.

For a moment there was nothing.

Then the marble was somewhere else.

It rested on a white shelf beneath white lights.

A small label appeared below it.

WORLD 11,204,883

STATUS: LOST

The marble remained.

Everything else did not.



THE MAN WHO WALKS

Stickman did not know he was impossible.

This was partly because almost everything around him was usually impossible too.

On Monday, he walked through a forest and emerged onto the Moon.

On Tuesday, he crossed a grocery-store parking lot and found a beach where the ocean flowed upward into the clouds.

On Wednesday, he spent several hours in a universe made almost entirely of donuts.

He did not question the donuts.

The donuts did not question him.

Above his thin black body floated a dark rectangular nametag.

stickman

Nobody had given it to him.

Nobody could remove it.

Nobody he met seemed particularly interested in asking about it.

Thursday was quieter.

He went fishing.

The lake was normal, which made it unusual.

Water stayed down. Trees remained trees. The dock did not lead into another century. A breeze moved across the surface and pushed little silver lines toward the shore.

Stickman sat with his legs over the edge and held the fishing rod loosely.

A man farther down the dock nodded at him.

“Good day for it.”

Stickman nodded back.

The man looked directly at the empty circle of Stickman’s head and seemed to find nothing strange about the fact that there were no eyes looking back.

That happened everywhere.

Stickman had stopped wondering why.

A fish tugged at the line.

He pulled.

Nothing.

He recast.

For almost an hour, the world behaved.

Then the far shoreline changed.

Not dramatically.

There was no flash.

No portal.

No sound.

The pines on the opposite side of the lake simply became telephone poles.

The gravel path beside the water became polished white tile.

The sky above the trees flattened into a ceiling.

The fisherman beside Stickman did not react.

Stickman stood.

He had found an Edge.

Edges were difficult to explain because they were not things.

They were disagreements.

Places where one world stopped matching itself and another world began.

Most beings never noticed them. Most beings could not cross them intentionally even if they did.

Stickman could.

He did not know why.

He reeled in his line, placed the fishing rod beside the dock, and began walking.

The fisherman called after him.

“Leaving already?”

Stickman raised one hand.

Then he crossed the lake without getting wet.

One step was wooden dock.

The next was white tile.

The lake vanished behind him.

Ahead stood shelves.

Thousands of them.

No.

Millions.

They stretched farther than he could see beneath a white ceiling lit by lights that had no visible fixtures.

Every shelf held objects.

A red feather.

A rusted bolt.

A cracked plate.

A toy train.

A shoe.

A jar containing purple sand.

A stone with a tiny door carved into it.

An unopened can of soup.

A glass eye that blinked once when Stickman passed.

He stopped.

The place was silent.

Not abandoned-building silent.

Not nighttime silent.

It was the silence of a place designed to contain things and nothing else.

Stickman turned around.

The lake was gone.

Only shelves remained.

He walked forward.

This was how Stickman discovered the Archive.



ONE WORLD, ONE OBJECT

Stickman spent his first day in the Archive trying to find the exit.

He failed.

He spent his second day trying to find the end.

He failed at that too.

On the third day, he stopped treating failure as useful information and started looking at the shelves.

Each object had a label.

Most were simple.

```
WORLD 441,020
OBJECT: BRICK
STATUS: ACTIVE
```

```
WORLD 81,300
OBJECT: PAPER CROWN
STATUS: ACTIVE
```

```
WORLD 9,808,010
OBJECT: SPOON
STATUS: ACTIVE
```

Some labels were stranger.

```
WORLD 311
OBJECT: SHADOW
STATUS: ACTIVE
```

The shelf appeared empty until Stickman moved his hand above it and saw a shadow that did not belong to him.

Other shelves contained objects that did not look important enough to deserve preservation.

A button.

A pencil worn down almost to the eraser.

A movie ticket.

A smooth pebble.

A bent fork.

The Archive did not seem to care about value.

That interested Stickman.

He understood useless objects.

He had collected many of them.

Eventually he found a shelf with no object and no label.

It was the first truly empty shelf he had seen.

Stickman stared at it.

He reached into the small pocket that did not visibly exist on his body and removed a sprinkle.

It was pink.

He had taken it from the donut universe because a donut the size of a mountain had fallen apart nearby and the sprinkle had landed on his head.

Stickman placed it on the empty shelf.

A label appeared.

WORLD 6,120,440
OBJECT: SPRINKLE
STATUS: ACTIVE

Stickman leaned closer.

The Archive knew where it came from.

He took a step back.

For reasons he could not explain, the action felt correct.

Not clever.

Not useful.

Correct.

The next day he crossed an Edge and entered a world where everything was made from clouds and the clouds were made from bricks.

He returned with a small white brick.

The Archive accepted it.

The day after that he visited a universe where planets were shaped like everyday objects: a phone planet glowing with screen-light, a book planet whose pages formed continents, a car planet circled by traffic-sign moons.

He returned with a paper clip.

The Archive accepted that too.

He began a rule.

One world.

One object.

He did not write the rule down.

He did not need to.

It felt as old as the Archive.

Weeks passed.

Maybe months.

Time was unreliable between worlds.

Stickman learned the Archive in pieces.

Food worlds were mostly kept in the eastern rows, unless east had changed again.

Mechanical worlds tended to appear near an area where the floor vibrated faintly.

Worlds with unusual gravity were stored on shelves with rails.

Some corridors curved until Stickman was certain he had returned to the same place, only to find different objects.

And sometimes he found shelves dated in the future.

One held a plain glass jar.

WORLD 77,390,112

DATE OF ENTRY: 14 YEARS FROM NOW

Stickman stared at the label.

He tapped it.

Nothing happened.

He looked inside the jar.

Empty.

He moved on.

The Archive was full of questions.

Stickman was good at not needing immediate answers.

That was probably why he survived it.



THE WORLD OF ORDINARY PLANETS

The phone planet had weather.

This surprised Stickman more than it should have.

Clouds gathered above a continent shaped like a cracked screen. Rain fell in perfect vertical lines and disappeared into ports the size of stadiums.

The people there lived in little cities built around buttons.

Nobody questioned Stickman's nametag.

A shopkeeper sold him a charger cable despite the fact that Stickman did not own a phone.

"You'll need it eventually," she said.

Stickman kept it.

He walked until the phone planet became the spine of a book.

The transition was seamless.

Glass became paper.

Cities became printed letters.

Mountains rose like folded pages.

This was an Edge, but a gentle one.

Stickman spent the afternoon crossing sentences the size of highways.

At sunset, he reached the margin.

Beyond it floated the book planet's moon: a white eraser.

Stickman found a paper clip embedded in the ground and decided it would be the object for this world.

Then he saw another paper clip.

That was not unusual.

What was unusual was the label tied to it.

A tiny white strip wrapped around the metal.

WORLD 4,200,501

Stickman froze.

Archive labels did not exist outside the Archive.

He picked it up.

The label faded between his fingers.

The paper clip remained.

He carried it back.

When he reached the Archive, he found the correct shelf immediately.

That bothered him.

WORLD 4,200,501

OBJECT: PAPER CLIP

STATUS: ACTIVE

A paper clip already sat there.

Stickman placed his beside it.

The new clip vanished.

Not faded.

Not moved.

Gone.

The original remained.

The label did not change.

Stickman stood very still.

Somebody had already visited that world.

Or the Archive had collected the object without anyone visiting it.

Or Stickman had visited it before and forgotten.

He disliked the third possibility most.

He searched nearby shelves.

More familiar objects appeared.

A green bottle cap from a world where bottles grew on trees.

A miniature traffic cone from a road universe.

A wooden coin from a city built inside a desk drawer.

Stickman had been to all three.

He had not collected any of these objects.

Someone else had.

At the end of the row, scratched into the metal edge of a shelf, was a symbol.

A keyhole.

Stickman ran one finger over it.

The scratch was old.

Older than the dust.

For the first time, the Archive felt occupied.

Not currently.

But historically.

Someone had walked these rows before him.



THE DONUT ECLIPSE

The donut universe had a sun.

It was also a donut.

Stickman had never asked what happened at night.

He found out during an eclipse.

The sky darkened while he was walking across a plain of powdered sugar. In the distance, glazed mountains reflected the last orange light. Rivers of coffee ran through valleys and disappeared beneath bridges made from wafer cookies.

People stopped in the streets of a little pastry town and looked up.

A chocolate moon moved in front of the enormous golden donut sun.

Someone cheered.

Someone else rang a bell.

A bakery owner dragged a table outside and began giving away tiny eclipse donuts with black icing.

Stickman took one.

Nobody asked why a line-drawn figure with an empty circular head was visiting their town.

They only warned him not to look directly at the sun.

Stickman looked directly at the sun.

Nothing happened.

He had no visible eyes.

That seemed helpful.

As the eclipse reached totality, something appeared inside the dark center of the sun.

A shape.

Not round.

Not part of the moon.

A keyhole.

Stickman stopped eating his donut.

The symbol remained for three seconds.

Then the eclipse moved on.

Light returned.

The keyhole vanished.

Stickman pointed upward.

The bakery owner followed his gesture.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?”

Stickman drew a keyhole in the powdered sugar.

The owner stared at the drawing.

“Is that a spoon?”

Stickman erased it.

Before leaving, he chose a small silver pastry token as the world’s Archive object.

When he returned to the Archive, the shelf already contained one.

Same token.

Same tiny scratch along the edge.

Stickman held his token beside it.

For a moment both existed.

Then the one in his hand disappeared.

The original remained.

Beneath it, the label flickered.

COLLECTOR: —

The blank space lasted less than a second.

Then the line vanished.

Stickman touched the token.

It was warm from sunlight that had happened long before he arrived.

He looked down the corridor.

Someone had visited the donut universe before him.

And whoever it was had seen enough to choose exactly the same object.



THE STREET THAT WASN'T THERE

Stickman returned to a normal world for a while.

Normal was a relative term.

Cars stayed on roads. Buildings had one roof each. The sky did not contain advertisements. Gravity worked downward.

The town had a bakery, a laundromat, a library, and one street called Willow Lane.

Stickman liked Willow Lane.

It was quiet.

Children drew chalk pictures on the pavement. Someone kept a ceramic frog beside a mailbox. A dog barked from behind the same fence every afternoon.

Stickman visited three times.

On the fourth visit, Willow Lane was gone.

Not blocked.

Gone.

The road ended at a brick wall between the bakery and the laundromat.

Stickman stopped in front of it.

A woman carrying groceries nearly walked into him.

“Sorry,” she said.

Stickman pointed at the wall.

“What?”

He pointed to where the street should be.

The woman frowned.

“There’s never been a street there.”

Stickman mimed a dog barking.

She backed away slightly.

He pointed at the ground and drew a frog in the dust.

“I think you’ve got the wrong town.”

Stickman did not.

He walked into the library.

A local map hung beside the entrance.

Between the bakery and laundromat was a blank strip of paper.

Not a park.

Not a building.

Blank.

Stickman found an older map in the history section.

Same blank.

He searched newspapers.

Nothing.

He found school records.

Nothing.

Willow Lane had not been destroyed.

The town had forgotten it had existed.

Stickman left through an Edge behind the laundromat.

The Archive waited.

He walked faster than usual.

He found a section of shelves from the town.

Bakery receipt.

Library card.

Rusty nail.

Then:

WORLD 431,981
OBJECT: CERAMIC FROG
STATUS: LOST

The frog sat on the shelf.

Green glaze.

One eye painted slightly larger than the other.

The exact frog from Willow Lane.

Stickman picked it up.

For a moment, he heard a dog bark.

Then silence.

He placed the frog back.

The label remained.

STATUS: LOST

Stickman had never seen that status before.

He began looking for it.

He found another.

And another.

And another.

There were thousands.



THE CASTLE AND THE CHICKENS

Not every mystery announced itself with silence.

Some arrived screaming.

Stickman crossed an Edge from a parking garage and stepped onto the battlement of a medieval castle under attack by giant chickens.

A chicken the size of a house struck the outer wall with its beak.

Stone exploded inward.

Knights ran past carrying shields.

An archer looked at Stickman.

“You’re late.”

Stickman looked behind himself.

There was nobody else.

The archer shoved a helmet toward him.

Stickman pointed at his empty circular head.

The archer considered this.

“Fair.”

Another chicken screamed.

The sound shook dust from the tower roof.

Stickman did not become a warrior.

He did not draw a sword or charge into battle.

He walked.

That was what he did.

He crossed the courtyard while soldiers moved around him. Nobody treated him as strange. One knight even asked him to hold a ladder for a moment.

Stickman did.

At the far wall, he found a small stone door beneath the stairs.

Every other person ignored it.

The door had a keyhole symbol carved into the center.

Stickman touched it.

The screaming chickens went silent.

Not quieter.

Silent.

The entire battle froze.

Arrows stopped in the air.

Dust hung motionless.

A chicken's beak remained inches from a tower window.

Only Stickman could move.

He stepped away from the door.

The battle resumed at full volume.

Stickman stared at the keyhole.

He touched it again.

Silence.

Freeze.

He removed his hand.

Chaos.

Stickman decided not to open the door.

On the ground beside it lay a small black chess knight carved from wood.

He took that as the object for the world.

Later, in the Archive, the chess knight's shelf already contained an object.

Not another knight.

A feather.

The feather was enormous, white, and singed at the tip.

The label read:

WORLD 3,003,188
OBJECT: FEATHER
STATUS: ACTIVE

Stickman placed the chess knight beside it.

The Archive rejected it.

The knight vanished.

The feather remained.

Scratched into the back of the shelf was a keyhole.

Underneath, one word:

LOCKED

Stickman returned to the castle three days later.

There was no attack.

There were no giant chickens.

The soldiers remembered the battle.

The castle wall was damaged.

The stone door beneath the stairs was gone.

Nobody remembered it.



LOST

A lost world looked no different on a shelf.

That was the problem.

The object remained ordinary.

A yellow cup.

A marble.

A photograph.

A torn glove.

A small wooden bird.

Only the label changed.

STATUS: LOST

Stickman counted until counting became useless.

The Archive contained entire districts of lost worlds.

He tried reaching them.

Some Edges opened onto nothing.

Some returned him to the Archive.

Some led to completely different universes.

One Edge deposited him in a field under a purple sky where a farmer waved as if Stickman had simply taken a wrong turn.

Stickman tried Willow Lane again.

The town existed.

The bakery existed.

The wall remained.

Nobody remembered the street.

He crossed the wall anyway.

For one step, he felt pavement beneath his foot.

For another, grass.

Then he was back in the Archive.

He began to notice something else.

Lost shelves were older on average.

Not all.

Some labels looked freshly printed.

One shelf read:

WORLD 992,100

STATUS: LOST

DATE: TODAY

Stickman stared at it.

He had been in World 992,100 that morning.

It was a coastal city with red roofs and tiny trains running along the sea.

Nothing had seemed wrong.

He still carried the object he had taken from there: a brass ticket stamped with a lighthouse.

The shelf was empty.

Stickman placed the ticket down.

The label updated.

OBJECT: TRAIN TICKET

A low sound moved through the Archive.

A scratch.

Like a pencil dragged across paper.

Stickman turned.

Far down the corridor, something black crossed between two shelves.

Too fast to identify.

He walked toward it.

Nothing.

On the floor lay a line.

Not ink.

Not wire.

A scribble.

It vanished when he touched it.

Stickman returned to the shelf.

WORLD 992,100
STATUS: LOST

The brass ticket remained.

Proof that the world had existed.

The thought came to him before he understood why.

Proof.



THE HOMELAND

When the Archive became too quiet, Stickman went home.

Or to the place he called home when he needed one.

The Doodle Universe was simple.

White sky.

White ground.

Black lines.

Mountains were zigzags. Trees were a vertical line with a cloud-shaped scribble on top. Houses looked like someone had drawn them quickly and then decided they were good enough.

Everything was flat.

Everything was two-dimensional.

Stickman fit perfectly.

Stickcity appeared over the hill exactly as it always did.

The skyline consisted of rectangles, triangles, antennas, windows represented by little squares, and one extremely unnecessary tower shaped like a pencil.

Stickman walked through the market.

A vendor sold circles.

“Two for one,” the vendor said.

Stickman looked at the basket.

Every circle was identical.

He bought one.

Nobody asked what it was for.

Near the center of Stickcity stood the old sign.

← HOME
EVERYWHERE ELSE →

Stickman had always liked the sign.

It seemed to summarize his life better than anything else.

He always took EVERYWHERE ELSE.

That day he noticed something carved into the wooden post.

A keyhole.

Stickman stopped.

He had seen the same symbol in the Archive.

He touched it.

The line drawing flickered.

For one frame—less than a blink—the sign changed.

← HOME
DO NOT

Then it returned.

Stickman stared.

A doodle citizen passed carrying a loaf of bread drawn as an oval with three lines on top.

Stickman pointed at the carving.

The citizen looked.

“What carving?”

Stickman looked back.

The keyhole remained.
He pointed again.
The citizen shrugged and walked away.
Stickman followed the HOME arrow.
He had never done that before.
The road led out of Stickcity.
Then through a forest of vertical lines.
Then across an empty plain.
After several hours, the road ended.
Nothing stood there.
No house.
No monument.
No door.
Only a small black mark on the white ground.
A keyhole.
Stickman crouched.
The mark opened like an eye.
Behind it was white shelving.
The Archive.
The mark snapped shut.
Stickman stood.
He did not follow the HOME arrow again that day.



BRICK CLOUD WEATHER

The Brick-Cloud Universe looked peaceful from far away.

White cloud islands floated through a blue sky. Castles, trees, bridges, birds, and rivers all appeared soft and weightless.

Then Stickman got closer.

Every cloud was made from bricks.

So was everything else.

Cloud bricks were pale and warm. Tree bricks were green. Water bricks clicked against one another as rivers flowed downhill one block at a time.

Rain was unpleasant.

Stickman discovered this when a storm arrived.

Small white bricks began falling from the sky.

Citizens opened reinforced umbrellas.

Stickman stood beneath a brick awning and watched the street disappear beneath a growing pile.

A little delivery cart rolled past with a sign:

WEATHER DELAY — SKY RECONSTRUCTION IN PROGRESS

That seemed reasonable.

Lightning flashed.

For an instant, the clouds became transparent.

Inside one of them was a room.

White shelves.
Archive shelves.
Stickman stepped into the rain.
Bricks bounced off his head outline and shoulders.
He stared upward.
Another flash.
The room was gone.
A third flash.
There it was again.
This time a figure stood between the shelves.
Square head.
Thin body.
Something like a keyhole in the center.
Then darkness.
Stickman followed the storm until the city ended.
At the edge of a floating cloud-island, the brick road stopped.
Beyond it was open sky.
A single brick hovered in the air.
Stickman picked it up.
A keyhole was stamped on the bottom.
The moment he turned it over, the storm stopped.
Every rain-brick froze on the ground.
A perfect circle opened in the clouds above.
Through it, Stickman saw the Archive ceiling.
He crossed the Edge.

The stamped brick disappeared from his hand.

On the nearest shelf sat an identical brick.

It was old.

Dust filled the keyhole impression.

Stickman brushed it away.

The label read:

```
WORLD 602,004  
OBJECT: BRICK  
STATUS: ACTIVE  
COLLECTED: UNKNOWN
```

Stickman had never seen UNKNOWN in that field before.

Before he could touch the label, COLLECTED vanished.

The Archive returned to silence.



THE ROOM OF MAPS

The map room found Stickman.

That was the only explanation he accepted.

He had been walking through the Archive toward a shelf containing an alarm clock from a world where time moved in squares.

He turned one corner.

There was a door.

He turned back.

The corridor behind him had become a wall.

Stickman opened the door.

Maps covered every surface.

Not paper maps alone.

Some were carved into metal.

Some were drawn with string suspended in the air.

Some were moving diagrams where universes drifted around one another like stars.

Edges appeared as thin white lines.

Many connected worlds Stickman knew.

Others ended abruptly.

The ended lines were marked LOST.

Stickman moved deeper into the room.

Keyhole symbols appeared everywhere.

Beside world numbers.

At intersections.

Over doors drawn between universes.

On one wall, the Doodle Universe had been sketched in black ink.

The drawing was old.

Stickcity was there.

The pencil tower.

The market.

The sign.

Beside the drawing was a keyhole.

Beneath it, four words had once been written.

Most of the letters had been scratched away.

DO N_T _P_N AG_IN

Stickman did not need the missing letters.

DO NOT OPEN AGAIN.

He stepped back.

On a nearby table sat a stack of photographs.

Most had faded to white.

One showed the Archive.

A figure stood in the distance.

Thin black body.

Square head.

Something in the center of the head.

The nametag above it had blurred into a gray rectangle.

Stickman brought the photograph closer.

The image sharpened for half a second.

The central mark looked like a keyhole.

Then the photograph burned from the edges inward.

Stickman dropped it.

It became ash before touching the floor.

The map room lights went out.

A terminal on the far wall turned on by itself.

SEARCH:

Stickman approached.

He typed one word.

keyhole

NO ENTRY FOUND

He typed:

archive

CURRENT LOCATION

He typed:

stickman

The screen paused.

Then:

UNIVERSAL CONSTANT #1

STATUS: PRESENT

ORIGIN: UNKNOWN

Stickman stared at the number.

He had never known he had one.



CONSTANT #1

Stickman did what anyone would do after learning that reality had apparently classified him.

He pressed every button.

The terminal objected.

```
ACCESS DENIED
```

```
ACCESS DENIED
```

```
ACCESS DENIED
```

Then one menu opened.

```
ENTITY INDEX
```

Stickman selected it.

Only his entry appeared.

```
01 - STICKMAN
```

No zero.

No two.

Nothing else.

He selected his name.

```
UNIVERSAL CONSTANT #1  
STATUS: PRESENT  
ORIGIN: UNKNOWN  
NAMETAG: PERSISTENT  
EDGE ACCESS: UNRESOLVED
```

That was all.

Stickman typed:

```
WHY 1
```

```
INVALID QUERY
```

He typed:

```
WHO MADE THIS
```

```
INVALID QUERY
```

He typed:

```
WHO WAS HERE BEFORE
```

The lights flickered.

The terminal displayed:

```
ACCESS RESTRICTED
```

Stickman leaned closer.

That was not INVALID QUERY.

The Archive understood the question.

It simply refused to answer.

He typed:

```
BEFORE
```

```
ACCESS RESTRICTED
```

He typed:

```
PREVIOUS
```

The terminal froze.

Every light in the map room went out.

For several seconds there was only the glow of Stickman's nametag.

```
stickman
```

Then the terminal returned.

One word appeared.

PREVIOUS

Underneath:

RECORD UNAVAILABLE

Stickman waited.

A second line appeared.

DO NOT SEARCH AGAIN

Then the machine shut off.

Stickman stood in darkness.

Something scratched behind the wall.

Once.

Twice.

Then stopped.

He did not search again.

Not immediately.



THE BOOK THAT ALREADY KNEW

Book Planet had libraries.

Stickman considered this excessive.

The planet itself was already a book.

Its mountains were folded pages. Rivers ran through printed paragraphs. Cities occupied footnotes. The equator was a crease in the binding wide enough to contain weather.

Still, the people had built libraries.

One librarian recognized Stickman immediately.

“There you are,” she said.

Stickman stopped.

Most people accepted him without question.

Few acted as if they had been expecting him.

The librarian was small, elderly, and wore a coat covered in bookmarks.

She disappeared between two shelves and returned carrying a thin black volume.

No title.

No author.

She handed it to Stickman.

He opened the first page.

A drawing of himself stood beside a lake.

Empty circular head.

Nametag.

stickman

On the next page, he walked into the Archive.

Stickman turned faster.

A keyhole symbol.

White shelves.

A blurred square-headed figure.

A black scribble.

Then blank pages.

Hundreds of them.

Stickman looked at the librarian.

“Odd book,” she said. “It arrived before the library did.”

Stickman pointed at the drawing of himself.

“Yes, that’s you.”

He pointed at himself, then at the book, then made a questioning gesture.

The librarian shrugged.

“It always was.”

Stickman flipped to the back cover.

A catalog label had been pasted inside.

WORLD: —
ENTRY: PENDING

He had never seen Archive formatting in this world before.

Stickman closed the book.

“Are you taking it?” the librarian asked.

He shook his head.

The book felt too deliberate.

Instead, he chose a plain paper bookmark from a nearby table as the world's object.

When he returned to the Archive, the correct shelf appeared immediately.

WORLD 4,200,501
OBJECT: PAPER CLIP
STATUS: ACTIVE

Wrong object.

Stickman had already encountered the paper clip from Book Planet.

He moved one shelf over.

There was no label.

He placed the bookmark down.

Nothing happened.

He moved another shelf.

Still nothing.

The Archive refused the bookmark.

Then something fell behind him.

The black book lay on the floor.

Stickman had left it in the library.

He picked it up.

The blank pages were no longer blank.

One new illustration showed Stickman standing exactly where he was standing now, holding the book.

Behind him, on the page, was a figure.

Square head.

Keyhole mark.

Stickman turned around.

Nobody there.

He looked back at the page.

The figure had vanished from the drawing.

A sentence appeared beneath Stickman instead.

NOT YET.

The book slammed shut in his hands.

Then disappeared.

The Archive accepted the bookmark.

WORLD 4,200,501
OBJECT: BOOKMARK
STATUS: ACTIVE

Stickman stared at the label.

The paper clip shelf from the same world remained three rows away.

Two objects.

One world.

That violated the rule.

When Stickman looked again, the paper clip's label had changed.

WORLD 4,200,501-A

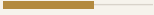
The bookmark read:

WORLD 4,200,501-B

The world had split without Stickman noticing.

Or it had always been two worlds pretending to be one.

He decided not to return immediately.



THE WORLD THAT ENDED YESTERDAY

World 992,100 had a red coastline.

Stickman remembered that clearly.

He remembered the small trains.

He remembered a restaurant where every table had a lighthouse-shaped salt shaker.

He remembered standing on a station platform while a child tried to hand him a balloon.

The world had existed.

The Archive said it was lost.

Stickman wanted proof beyond a brass ticket.

He found the Edge again.

It opened from a stairwell in a world where buildings were upside down.

Stickman stepped through.

Red coast.

Sea.

Train tracks.

For a moment, relief.

Then he noticed the silence.

No trains.

No people.

No waves.

The sea was perfectly still.

Stickman walked toward the station.

The balloon from yesterday floated beneath the roof.

Same string.

Same height.

The child was gone.

On the platform lay hundreds of objects.

Bags.

Shoes.

Phones.

A newspaper.

Everything people might drop if they vanished without moving.

Stickman picked up the newspaper.

The date was yesterday.

The headline had no words.

Only blank rectangles.

A train arrived.

No sound.

It stopped.

Every door opened.

The cars were empty.

Stickman stepped inside.

The interior lights flickered.

In the dark reflection of the window behind him appeared a black circular scribble.

Stickman turned.

Nothing.

He looked back at the glass.

The scribble remained in the reflection.

No eyes.

No mouth.

No limbs.

Just crossing black lines.

Above it floated a blurred nametag.

The first word looked like the.

Then the train lights returned.

The reflection was gone.

Stickman stepped off the train.

The Edge back to the Archive had disappeared.

He walked for hours.

Every road repeated.

Every building contained empty rooms.

Near sunset, the sky developed a thin black line.

The line bent.

Crossed itself.

Became a scribble.

Stickman walked faster.

He found an Edge behind the lighthouse.

The instant he crossed, the world vanished behind him.

The Archive shelf waited.

WORLD 992,100

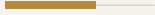
STATUS: LOST

The brass train ticket lay where he had left it.

A new line had appeared.

FINAL CONTACT: STICKMAN

Stickman stared at it for a long time.



NOTES IN THE DUST

The first note waited beneath a brass compass.

Stickman almost missed it.

The paper was folded twice and yellowed at the edges.

The handwriting was neat.

ONE WORLD. ONE OBJECT.

Stickman read it twice.

He looked at the compass.

He looked at the shelves.

The rule.

His rule.

Except it was not his.

He found the second note three rows later.

LEAVE PROOF THAT IT EXISTED.

The third was inside a drawer that opened when he walked past.

SOME WORLDS DISAPPEAR COMPLETELY.

The handwriting matched.

Stickman gathered the notes.

He found more.

CATALOG BEFORE MOVING ON.

DO NOT TRUST AN EDGE THAT OPENS TWICE.

LOCKS ARE NOT FOR DOORS.

One note contained only a keyhole symbol.

Another was burned through the center.

Only four words survived.

...IT ARRIVES AFTER...

Stickman found a locked cabinet.

The door had no handle.

Only a keyhole.

He touched it.

Nothing.

He stepped away.

The cabinet unlocked by itself.

Inside was a stack of photographs.

Most showed worlds.

A city underwater.

A desert filled with mirrors.

A forest where trees grew upside down.

A medieval castle surrounded by enormous chickens.

Stickman paused at that one.

The next photograph showed the same square-headed figure from the map room.

Closer now.

Thin body.

Square hollow head.

Keyhole-shaped mark.

The nametag was readable.

previous

Stickman held the photograph very carefully.

On the back:

IF SOMEONE COMES AFTER ME, THE ARCHIVE WORKED.

No signature.

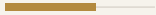
None was necessary.

Stickman finally had a name.

Or something shaped like one.

Previous.

The one before.



PREVIOUS

Once Stickman knew the word, he began seeing it everywhere.

Not written openly.

Hidden.

Encoded in catalog numbers.

Scratched beneath shelves.

Faintly printed on old labels.

PREVIOUS ACCESS
PREVIOUS LOCK
PREVIOUS RECORD

Most of the references led nowhere.

Some led to rooms Stickman had walked past dozens of times without seeing.

One contained tools.

Every tool was designed for a different kind of lock.

Some had teeth.

Some had no physical shape until Stickman looked away.

Some were drawings of keys rather than keys themselves.

One was simply a metal cube with a keyhole cut through the center.

Stickman did not touch it.

Another room contained shelves of objects tagged with two dates.

COLLECTED

LOST

Sometimes the dates were years apart.

Sometimes minutes.

Previous had been tracking disappearing worlds.

That much was obvious.

Why remained unknown.

Stickman found a recording device.

It looked like an old tape player.

He pressed PLAY.

Static.

Then a voice.

“Record seven hundred twelve.”

Stickman froze.

The voice was calm.

Tired.

“World count is no longer useful. Loss rate has increased. Objects remain stable inside Archive boundaries.”

A pause.

“Cause unresolved.”

Static swallowed several seconds.

Then:

“If this is being heard by someone else—”

The tape snapped.

The machine stopped.

Stickman opened it.

The cassette had not broken.

The tape simply ended there.

He searched for record seven hundred thirteen.

Nothing.

Record seven hundred eleven existed.

Record seven hundred fourteen existed.

Seven hundred thirteen did not.

Stickman began to understand the Archive's silence differently.

It was not empty because nobody had ever been there.

It was empty because whoever had been there had stopped.

Abruptly.



THE VOID

The word appeared on a damaged photograph.

Nothing dramatic happened when Stickman read it.

No alarms.

No lights.

No door opening by itself.

That made it worse.

The photograph showed a suburb under a pale sky.

At the end of the street stood a black circular scribble.

Above it:

the void

Stickman turned the photograph over.

Three lines.

THE SPACE WHERE A WORLD USED TO BE.

NOT EMPTY SPACE. SOMETHING OCCUPYING EMPTINESS.

DO NOT MISTAKE NOTHING FOR HARMLESS.

All were written in Previous's handwriting.

Stickman did not know whether they were conclusions, guesses, or warnings.

He searched the Archive index.

THE VOID

The terminal hesitated.

ENTITY RECORD EXISTS

ACCESS LEVEL: UNKNOWN

Stickman selected it.

The screen displayed a list of worlds.

Every one marked LOST.

He opened the first final record.

A city.

Scribble.

Nothing.

Second record.

A forest.

Scribble.

Nothing.

Third.

An ocean.

Scribble reflected on the water.

Nothing.

The pattern repeated.

The Void appeared near the end.

That did not prove it caused the end.

Smoke appeared near fires.

Ambulances appeared near accidents.

Rainbows appeared after rain.

Maybe the Void was a result.

Maybe a witness.

Maybe a scavenger.

Maybe the name itself was wrong.

Previous's notes contradicted one another.

IT DOES NOT ENTER.

Later:

I SAW IT CROSS AN EDGE.

Then:

EDGES MAY NOT BE WHAT I THOUGHT.

Another:

THE VOID IS NOT THE ENEMY.

That line had been crossed out so violently the paper had torn.

Beneath it:

I DO NOT KNOW WHAT THE VOID IS.

Stickman appreciated the honesty.

The Archive lights flickered.

At the far end of the corridor, something black moved.

Stickman did not follow it.

For once, he decided curiosity could wait.



INTERLUDE IV

03:14

The Archive had clocks, but they did not agree.

Some displayed ordinary time.

Some counted upward from zero.

One showed the same minute forever.

03:14.

Stickman noticed it in a corridor near the lost-world shelves.

The clock was mounted above a doorway with no room behind it.

03:14.

He walked past.

The next clock read 19:42.

The next read 08:11.

When Stickman looked back, the first still read 03:14.

He returned the next day.

03:14.

The day after that.

03:14.

Stickman touched the clock.

The second hand moved.

03:14:01.

Every sound in the Archive stopped.

The faint hum of lights.

The distant mechanical vibration.

Even Stickman's footsteps seemed to lose their echo.

03:14:02.

Every shelf label in the corridor changed.

Not the world numbers.

Only the status line.

STATUS: OBSERVED

03:14:03.

Stickman looked around.

Observed by whom?

03:14:04.

A terminal activated.

NO INPUT REQUIRED

03:14:05.

The screen changed.

ENTRY EVENT INCOMPLETE

03:14:06.

The door beneath the clock opened.

Behind it was a shelf.

Empty.

Clean.

No dust.

No label.

03:14:07.

A dark rectangle appeared above the empty shelf.

A nametag.

No body beneath it.

Its text did not render.

Only flickering white pixels.

03:14:08.

Stickman stepped closer.

03:14:09.

The nametag vanished.

The door slammed shut.

The second hand snapped backward.

03:14.

Sound returned.

Every status line became normal.

The terminal went dark.

Stickman opened the door.

There was a wall behind it.

No shelf.

No room.

He searched the Archive index for 03:14.

NO MATCH

He searched ENTRY EVENT.

ACCESS RESTRICTED

He searched OBSERVED.

INVALID QUERY

Stickman returned to the clock one week later.

It was gone.

Only four screw holes remained in the wall.



THE OBJECTS THAT REMEMBER

Stickman began visiting the lost shelves deliberately.

Not to solve the mystery.

Not yet.

To understand the objects.

A yellow cup from World 101.

When he held it, he smelled coffee and heard a chair scrape across tile.

A red mitten from World 8,013.

It carried the faint warmth of a hand that no longer existed.

A train ticket from World 992,100.

He could hear the tiny coastal trains whenever he pressed it between his fingers.

A blue marble from World 11,204,883.

The moment Stickman picked it up, he saw a gray city.

A little girl.

A street folding incorrectly.

A black scribble reaching the pharmacy.

Then the image vanished.

Stickman nearly dropped the marble.

The Archive did not merely preserve objects.

Objects preserved something too.

Not whole worlds.

Not people.

Impressions.

Fragments.

Enough to prove.

Leave proof that it existed.

Stickman understood Previous's sentence now, but not his purpose.

Why preserve proof if restoration was impossible?

Who was the proof for?

Stickman?

The Archive?

Someone else?

He returned the marble.

The label flickered.

WORLD 11,204,883
STATUS: LOST

For one second another line appeared.

WITNESS: 2

Then it vanished.

Stickman stared.

Two witnesses.

Previous and Stickman?

The girl and Stickman?

The Archive and something else?

He waited for the line to return.

It did not.

That night—if the Archive had nights—the shelves began rearranging themselves.

Entire corridors slid silently into new positions.

Stickman stood still while millions of objects moved around him.

When it ended, one new path remained open.

At the end of it was a pedestal.



THE UNSENT LETTER

Not every object remembered clearly.

Some remembered feelings.

Some remembered sounds.

Some did nothing at all.

The letter remembered a kitchen.

Stickman found it on a lost-world shelf between a cracked teacup and a child's red shoe.

The envelope had never been sealed.

No address.

No stamp.

The label read:

WORLD 70,044
OBJECT: LETTER
STATUS: LOST

Stickman unfolded it.

The handwriting was ordinary.

Dear Mina,

The world shimmered.

For an instant the Archive shelves became kitchen cabinets.

Rain struck a window.

Someone sat at a table writing.

Stickman could not see the person's face.

Only hands.

The letter continued.

I know you said the lights are nothing. Maybe you're right. Everyone says the same thing. Power station problem. Weather. Satellites. Something normal.

The memory flickered.

Outside the kitchen window, black lines crossed the sky.

I still think you should come home.

The writer stopped.

A radio in another room lost its signal.

The memory ended.

Stickman looked at the rest of the page.

The final sentence had never been finished.

He folded the letter.

For the first time, the Archive's rule felt heavy.

One world. One object.

It sounded neat when written like that.

Efficient.

Almost scientific.

But one object could be a letter that never reached Mina.

A cup someone expected to use tomorrow.

A train ticket someone had bought for a trip they never took.

A marble dropped by a child.

Previous had preserved proof.

But proof was not rescue.

Stickman placed the letter back.

The shelf label flickered.

WITNESS: 2

There it was again.

This time it remained long enough for Stickman to touch it.

A second line appeared.

WITNESS 1: ARCHIVE

WITNESS 2: —

The blank field blinked.

Stickman waited for his name.

It never appeared.

Then both lines vanished.

He left the letter where it was.

Somewhere, if Mina still existed anywhere, there was no way for her to know it had been written.

The Archive knew.

Now Stickman did too.

That would have to be enough.



THE EMPTY PEDESTAL

The pedestal room was circular.

No shelves.

No maps.

No terminals.

No doors except the one Stickman had entered through.

The pedestal stood at the center.

White stone.

Perfectly clean.

Empty.

A plaque on the front read:

STICKMAN

Stickman did not approach.

The room hummed faintly.

His nametag remained above him.

stickman

The plaque did not change.

He walked around the pedestal.

Nothing on the back.

Nothing underneath.

No keyhole.

That was almost more suspicious.

He touched the plaque.

The Archive disappeared.

Not physically.

The room remained beneath his feet, but a recording overlaid reality.

The square-headed figure stood beside the pedestal.

Previous.

No clear face.

No clear voice at first.

Static moved through the room.

Previous placed one hand on the empty surface.

Then two words became audible.

“Not yet.”

The recording ended.

Stickman stepped back.

He stared at the plaque.

STICKMAN

He had no idea what was supposed to sit there.

An object from his world?

He did not know his world.

His nametag?

His head?

Him?

Stickman decided the pedestal could remain empty.

As he left, he noticed a black mark in the reflection of the floor.

A scribble.

He turned.

Nothing.

When he looked back at the floor, the reflection was clean.

Stickman walked away.

The pedestal room door closed behind him.

A lock appeared.

Then another.

Then another.

By the time Stickman reached the end of the corridor, twelve locks covered the door.

He had not touched any of them.



THE WRONG STICKMAN

The photograph showed Stickman.

That was impossible for a very specific reason.

The date on the back was older than his first memory of the Archive.

Much older.

Stickman found it inside a box marked UNFILED.

The image was simple.

Archive corridor.

White shelves.

A thin black figure standing with one hand on an object.

Empty circular head.

Dark nametag.

stickman

There was no question who it was.

Stickman turned the photograph over.

DATE: 117 YEARS BEFORE CURRENT ENTRY

He checked the Archive clock.

He checked another clock.

He checked the photograph again.

Same date.

Stickman searched the index.

IMAGE RECORD: VALID

He typed:

SUBJECT

STICKMAN

He typed:

DATE ERROR

NO ERROR DETECTED

Stickman stared at the image.

The figure in the photograph was touching a shelf.

He found the shelf.

It took hours.

Same scratches.

Same slight bend in the metal.

The object from the photograph was still there.

A small wooden cube.

The label read:

WORLD 18

OBJECT: WOODEN CUBE

STATUS: ACTIVE

Stickman touched it.

Nothing.

He compared his hand to the hand in the photograph.

Same.

He compared the nametag.

Same.

There was no face to compare.

He searched for earlier photographs.

Nothing.

He searched for the original negative.

ACCESS RESTRICTED

He searched:

117 YEARS

NO MATCH

Stickman returned the photograph to the box.

Then he noticed writing beneath it.

One line, in Previous's handwriting:

HE HAS NOT ARRIVED YET.

Stickman read it again.

The sentence did not say he does not exist yet.

It said he has not arrived yet.

Stickman put the photograph down.

He did not sleep in the Archive that night.



SOMEONE IS STILL HERE

Stickman assumed the Archive was reacting to him.

For several days, that explanation worked.

A door opened before he reached it.

The Archive knew where he wanted to go.

A shelf produced a label before he placed an object down.

The Archive knew where the object came from.

A corridor moved while he slept.

The Archive was enormous and strange.

It could do strange things.

Then Stickman found footprints.

Not his.

The dust in an old corridor held a sequence of square impressions.

They began in the middle of the floor.

They ended at a wall.

No door.

No Edge.

Stickman followed them twice.

Same result.

The next day, a terminal displayed a message before he touched it.

YOU ARE LATE.

Stickman stared.

The text disappeared.

Another line appeared.

YOU ARE EARLY.

Then:

BOTH ARE TRUE.

Stickman waited.

Nothing else.

He typed:

WHO ARE YOU

The terminal went dark.

Later, a shelf he had dusted that morning contained a clean rectangular patch by evening.

Something had been there.

Something had been removed.

Stickman searched the catalog.

No entry.

A week later, he returned to the same shelf.

The dust had settled again.

At 03:08, Archive time, it was empty.

At 03:20, it was not.

Stickman knew because he had been standing twenty meters away the entire time.

He heard no footsteps.

No door.

No Edge.

No sound at all.

He turned around.

A perfect metal cube sat on the shelf.



THE EDGE THAT OPENED TWICE

One of Previous's notes had warned:

DO NOT TRUST AN EDGE THAT OPENS TWICE.

Stickman had not understood it.

Then an Edge opened twice.

He was leaving a world made from paper airplanes.

The first Edge appeared beneath a folded-paper bridge.

Through it he saw the Archive.

Normal shelves.

Normal lights.

Stickman stepped toward it.

A second Edge opened beside the first.

Same size.

Same destination.

Two Archival corridors side by side.

Stickman stopped.

The left Edge showed Shelf 770.

The right Edge also showed Shelf 770.

In the left, the shelf held a red stone.

In the right, the shelf was empty.

Stickman threw a paper airplane through the left Edge.

It landed on the Archive floor.

He threw another through the right.

It disappeared.

The right Edge remained open.

Stickman leaned closer.

Something moved in the false Archive.

Not the Void.

Not Previous.

A Stickman-shaped figure crossed the far end of the corridor.

Round empty head.

Thin black body.

No nametag.

Stickman stepped back.

The figure returned.

It stood at the far end.

Then a nametag appeared above it.

stickman

Stickman looked at his own nametag.

stickman

The false figure raised one hand.

Stickman did not.

The false figure pointed behind him.

Stickman did not turn around.

The right Edge began widening.

Previous's warning repeated in his mind.

DO NOT TRUST AN EDGE THAT OPENS TWICE.

Stickman stepped through the left Edge.

The real Archive accepted him.

Both Edges vanished.

On Shelf 770, the red stone remained.

Beside it lay the paper airplane Stickman had thrown through the left opening.

The second airplane never appeared.

Stickman searched the index.

DUPLICATE EDGE EVENT

ACCESS RESTRICTED

He searched:

FALSE ARCHIVE

INVALID QUERY

He searched:

OTHER STICKMAN

The terminal paused.

Then:

ONLY ONE CONSTANT PRESENT

That answer did not make him feel better.



WORLD: NONE

The cube looked ordinary.

That made Stickman distrust it immediately.

It was gray metal with perfect edges.

No buttons.

No markings.

No visible seams.

Roughly the size of both Stickman's hands together.

The label beneath it read:

```
WORLD: NONE  
OBJECT: TUNGSTEN CUBE  
ORIGIN: UNRESOLVED
```

Stickman stared.

Every Archive shelf named a world.

Even worlds without numbers had names.

Even worlds that existed only for seconds had identifiers.

None was not an identifier.

It was an absence.

Stickman touched the cube.

It was cold.

And extremely heavy.

He had expected the weight once he read TUNGSTEN.

He had not expected the shelf to bend beneath it after he lifted one corner.

He let it down.

Then he noticed the dust.

The shelf was coated in a thin gray layer.

Everywhere except beneath the cube.

The clean square was sharp.

Recent.

Someone had placed it there.

Stickman searched the terminal.

WORLD: NONE
NO MATCH
TUNGSTEN CUBE
1 RESULT
LOCATION: CURRENT SHELF ENTRY TIME: 03:14 ENTRY USER: —

Stickman checked the clock.

03:26.

Twelve minutes.

He had been in the corridor for more than an hour.

Nobody had passed.

He opened the Archive security record.

The screen showed the shelf at 03:13.

Empty.

03:14.

Cube.

There was no frame between.

Stickman zoomed in.

The polished face of the cube reflected the corridor.

Shelf.

Lights.

Stickman himself, farther away.

And something behind him.

A dark rectangle floating in the air.

A nametag.

The text was blurred.

Stickman enlarged it.

Pixels distorted.

One letter almost became readable.

The terminal shut off.

Every label in the corridor went blank.

Stickman stepped back.

One by one, the labels returned.

Except the cube.

Its label remained empty.

Then new text printed itself.

```
WORLD: NONE  
STATUS: WAITING
```

Stickman did not touch the cube again.



TOMORROW'S OBJECT

The Archive gave Stickman a warning without using words.

It placed tomorrow on a shelf.

The object was a small brass bell.

Stickman found it while searching the rows near WORLD: NONE.

The label read:

```
WORLD 221,008
OBJECT: BRASS BELL
STATUS: ACTIVE
DATE OF ENTRY: TOMORROW
COLLECTOR: STICKMAN
```

Stickman stared at COLLECTOR.

His name had never appeared in that field before.

He touched the bell.

It rang once.

The sound came from somewhere behind him.

He turned.

Nothing.

Stickman had never visited World 221,008.

The label said he would.

He considered avoiding it.

That became difficult when an Edge opened beneath the shelf.

Through it he saw a quiet village surrounded by tall grass.

A church tower stood at the center.
A brass bell hung in the tower.
Stickman stepped away.
The Edge remained.
He walked three corridors away.
Another Edge opened in the floor.
Same village.
He went to the Doodle Universe.
A door appeared in Stickcity.
Same village.
He returned to the lake.
The reflection in the water showed the village instead of the sky.
Tomorrow arrived.
Stickman crossed.
Nobody in the village thought his arrival strange.
An old man sweeping the church steps waved.
“Bell’s been waiting for you.”
Stickman stopped.
The old man continued sweeping.
Stickman pointed at himself.
“Who else?”
He pointed at the bell.
“Been there longer than the tower.”
Stickman climbed.

Inside the belfry, the brass bell was much smaller than it had looked from below.

Exactly the size of the one in the Archive.

A keyhole symbol had been carved inside it.

Stickman touched the mark.

The bell rang.

The entire world flickered.

For one frame, the village was gone.

White shelves stood in its place.

For another frame, the village returned.

Stickman removed the bell from its hook.

The church tower remained standing.

Nobody objected.

He crossed the Edge home.

The Archive shelf was empty.

The future bell was gone.

Stickman placed the one he carried down.

The label appeared.

WORLD 221,008
OBJECT: BRASS BELL
STATUS: ACTIVE
DATE OF ENTRY: TODAY
COLLECTOR: STICKMAN

The prediction had fulfilled itself.

Stickman looked at the WORLD: NONE shelf several rows away.

Its cube had appeared twelve minutes before he noticed it.

What if its label was not describing where it came from?

What if it was describing where it would go?

The thought stayed with him.

He wished it had not.



THE LAST RECORDING

Stickman found the final recording because the cube led him to it.

Not directly.

The cube never moved while he watched.

But every time he returned to the Archive, the shelves around it were arranged differently.

An old key.

A blue marble.

A train ticket.

A paper crown.

A yellow cup.

Objects from lost worlds.

They formed a line.

Stickman followed it.

The line ended at a wall.

A keyhole symbol appeared.

For the first time, Stickman did not touch it.

The wall opened anyway.

Behind it was a small room.

One chair.

One table.

One recording device.

One photograph of Previous.

The photograph was clear.

Square hollow head.

Keyhole mark.

Nametag:

previous

Stickman pressed PLAY.

Static.

Then Previous's voice.

"Final Archive statement."

A pause.

"If you are hearing this, then I was not the last person here."

Stickman stood still.

"I do not know what causes the losses."

Another pause.

"I called the black phenomenon the Void because I needed to call it something. The name is not an explanation."

Stickman looked at the photograph.

"I made the mistake of treating correlation as cause. Sometimes the Void appears before a loss. Sometimes after. Sometimes the records disagree about which came first."

Static.

"The only result I trust is this: objects kept within Archive boundaries persist after their worlds do not."

The recording crackled.

“So I kept one.”

A faint breath.

“One world. One object.”

Stickman looked toward the shelves outside.

“That rule was never about collecting.”

Static.

“It was proof.”

The recording skipped.

“Proof that the worlds existed. Proof that the people in them existed.
Proof that something cannot make history completely clean.”

The voice grew quieter.

“I built locks. I mapped Edges. I sealed what I could. I failed often.”

A long pause.

“I do not know what the Archive is. I found part of it before I built part
of it. Some shelves are older than me.”

Stickman leaned closer.

“I do not know who made the first rule.”

Another pause.

“I do not know why the pedestal has your name.”

Stickman froze.

The recording continued.

“Yes. Yours.”

Static screamed through the speaker.

“I never met you.”

The room lights flickered.

“But the pedestal existed before my last entry.”

The tape slowed.

“One final thing.”

Previous’s voice became nearly inaudible.

“If someone comes after me, the Archive worked.”

The recording ended.

Stickman pressed PLAY again.

Nothing.

He turned the cassette over.

Written on the back:

DO NOT OPEN THE HOME DOOR.

Below it:

DO NOT TRUST WORLD: NONE.

And below that, in handwriting shakier than anything else Previous had left:

I DID NOT PUT THE CUBE THERE.

THE NUMBER

Stickman went back to the terminal.

He had waited long enough.

```
UNIVERSAL CONSTANT #1
```

He opened the record.

The same lines appeared.

```
STATUS: PRESENT  
ORIGIN: UNKNOWN  
NAMETAG: PERSISTENT  
EDGE ACCESS: UNRESOLVED
```

Stickman typed:

```
WHY 1
```

```
INVALID QUERY
```

He typed:

```
PREVIOUS
```

```
RECORD UNAVAILABLE
```

He typed:

```
CONSTANT
```

The terminal paused.

A new menu appeared.

```
CONSTANT CLASSIFICATION TESTS
```

Stickman selected it.

The screen displayed records he had never seen.

WORLD COLLAPSE — SUBJECT PRESENT AFTER EVENT
TIMELINE REVISION — SUBJECT PRESENT AFTER EVENT
SPATIAL RESET — SUBJECT PRESENT AFTER EVENT
IDENTITY REMOVAL — FAILED
NAMETAG REMOVAL — FAILED

Stickman read the list twice.

Then the final line.

VOID CONTACT — INCONCLUSIVE

He did not like that one.

At the bottom:

CLASSIFICATION: UNIVERSAL CONSTANT #1

Not first being.

Not oldest being.

First verified constant.

Previous had come before him.

Previous had not been classified as a constant.

That answered one mystery.

It created another.

If reality had tried to remove Stickman and failed, who had performed the tests?

Stickman typed:

WHO TESTED ME

The terminal went black.

A message appeared.

NOT AVAILABLE IN THIS RECORD

Then:

Stickman tilted his head.

He had never seen the Archive use the word book before.

The screen shut off.

Behind him, twelve locks opened at once.



HOME

The locked pedestal corridor stood open.

Stickman did not enter.

Instead, he returned to the Doodle Universe.

The old sign waited.

← HOME
EVERYWHERE ELSE →

Previous's warning repeated in his mind.

DO NOT OPEN THE HOME DOOR.

Stickman followed HOME.

The road crossed the line forest.

The empty plain.

The place where the black keyhole waited on the ground.

This time a door stood there.

Simple black outline.

Two-dimensional.

No wall.

No handle.

A keyhole in the center.

Stickman stood before it.

The door opened by itself.
He did not step through.
Beyond was the Archive.
Not the Archive he knew.
Shelves stood in darkness.
Every object was missing.
Every label read LOST.
At the far end of the impossible corridor stood the pedestal.
Something rested on it.
A tungsten cube.
The plaque below it read:

STICKMAN

Stickman stepped backward.
The view changed.
Now the corridor contained Previous.
Or a recording of Previous.
Or something wearing his outline.
Square head.
Keyhole mark.
Nametag blurred beyond readability.
The figure raised one hand.
Stop.
Stickman stopped.
The figure pointed at the cube.
Then at Stickman.

Then shook its head.

The black scribble appeared behind it.

The Void.

The figure vanished.

The cube remained.

A new label appeared beneath it.

WORLD: NONE
STATUS: OPEN

The door began closing.

Stickman reached forward.

For one second, his hand crossed the threshold.

Every light in both worlds went out.

A fourth nametag appeared in the darkness.

No body beneath it.

No figure.

Just a dark rectangle and white pixel text trying to resolve.

One letter.

Then another.

Stickman pulled his hand back.

The door slammed shut.

The nametag vanished.

The Doodle Universe returned.

The sign behind him had changed.

← HOME
EVERYWHERE ELSE →

Underneath, a new line had been scratched into the post.

YOU WERE SEEN.



END OF AVAILABLE RECORD

Stickman returned to the Archive.

The tungsten cube was still on its shelf.

WORLD: NONE
STATUS: WAITING

The pedestal door was locked again.

Twelve locks.

Previous remained missing.

The Void remained unexplained.

The fourth nametag had not returned.

Stickman stood in front of the cube.

He had learned several things.

Previous had existed.

Previous had collected one object from disappearing worlds.

The Archive preserved those objects even when the worlds themselves were lost.

The Void appeared around those losses, but even Previous had not known what it was.

Previous had not placed the tungsten cube.

The pedestal had known Stickman before Previous ever met him.

And Universal Constant #1 did not mean Stickman was first.

It meant something had tried to remove him and failed.

Those were answers.

They were not enough.

Stickman looked at the cube.

Its polished surface reflected the corridor.

Shelves.

Lights.

Stickman.

Behind him, for one frame, stood Previous.

Stickman spun around.

Empty corridor.

He looked back at the cube.

The reflection showed only himself.

Then the label clicked.

A new line printed beneath STATUS: WAITING.

NEXT ENTRY: PENDING

Stickman waited.

Nothing happened.

He turned to leave.

The Archive lights dimmed.

A terminal far down the row activated.

The screen displayed four lines.

stickman
previous
the void

The blank line blinked.

One letter appeared.

Then another.

Before Stickman could reach the screen, it shut off.

The corridor went dark.

In the darkness, a sound moved through the Archive.

Not the pencil-scratch of the Void.

Footsteps.

Slow.

Measured.

Coming closer.

Stickman did not run.

He stood beside the tungsten cube and waited.

The footsteps stopped on the other side of the shelf.

A hand—if it was a hand—touched the metal from behind.

The cube moved one centimeter.

Then the lights returned.

Nobody was there.

The dust beneath the cube showed two clean squares now.

One old.

One new.

Someone was still using the Archive.

And this time, Stickman had been standing beside it.



EPILOGUE

JUST ANOTHER DAY

Three days later, Stickman went fishing.

The lake was quiet.

The sky was pale.

The fisherman from before sat at the end of the dock.

“Been a while,” the man said.

Stickman nodded.

He cast his line.

For nearly an hour, nothing impossible happened.

That was nice.

A fish tugged.

Stickman pulled.

Nothing.

The fisherman laughed.

“Maybe next time.”

Stickman sat back down.

Across the lake, the trees began changing.

Pines became red stone towers.

The shoreline became silver sand.

Two moons appeared in the sky.

Another Edge.

Stickman reeled in the line.

The fisherman looked over.

“Leaving already?”

Stickman raised one hand.

Then he walked.

Because if an infinite number of worlds exist, you might as well see what is in them.

The lake disappeared behind him.

The next world waited.

Far away, between universes, the Archive remained quiet.

The tungsten cube sat on its shelf.

WORLD: NONE

STATUS: WAITING

NEXT ENTRY: PENDING

The corridor lights were off.

A dark nametag floated in front of the cube.

No body beneath it.

The white pixel text sharpened.

Almost readable.

Then the Archive record cut to black.

END OF BOOK I

THE ARCHIVE CYCLE — BOOK I OF IV