

A SECOND THREAD PREQUEL

BEFORE THE THREAD

— THE FIRST FRACTURE —



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— THE FIRST FRACTURE —

A SHORT STORY

BY

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*This short story is a prequel to [The Second Thread](#).
It is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to real persons,
living or dead, is purely coincidental.*

For fans waiting to enter the world of [The Second Thread](#).

PART I

2.17AM

Dr Marcus Hale stared at the equations covering the whiteboard.

Most people would have seen chaos. Symbols layered over symbols. Differential equations intertwining with tensor notation. Entire sections crossed out and rewritten so many times the marker ink had stained the board grey.

But Marcus saw something else.

He saw certainty.

The sleeves of his shirt were rolled unevenly to his elbows, revealing forearms marked with smudges of black ink. His dark hair, once neatly cut, had grown longer than he realised, curling behind his ears and sticking up where restless fingers had repeatedly dragged through it. A week's worth of stubble shadowed his jaw.

His sister would have called him a mess.

She wouldn't have been wrong.

For years, the scientific community had treated the multiverse as little more than an intellectual curiosity. A mathematical possibility. An elegant solution to problems nobody could prove.

Marcus had spent those years trying to disprove it. Now, after this, he wished he hadn't.

He rubbed tired eyes and glanced at the clock mounted above his office door.

2:17 a.m.

Again.

The office bore the scars of months spent chasing answers. Books lay stacked in unstable towers across every available surface. Research papers carpeted the floor around his desk. Empty coffee cups sat abandoned beside half-filled notebooks, their pages crammed with calculations written in increasingly frantic handwriting.

The room smelled faintly of stale coffee, dry-erase marker and rain.

He had spent countless nights here recently, caught up in the cycle of his work, the outside world, even time itself becoming irrelevant. In its place, his research, his discovery, consumed everything.

His office overlooked the university courtyard, now deserted beneath a blanket of rain. Reflections shimmered across the paving stones like fractured mirrors.

A fleeting image, he thought.

Fractured realities.

Fractured possibilities.

Fractured lives.

His phone buzzed somewhere beneath a pile of journals.

He didn't look.

The screen would almost certainly be displaying another missed call from his sister. Maybe a text asking if he'd eaten. Asking if he'd slept. Asking if he was still alive.

Marcus couldn't remember the last time he'd answered. Because every time he tried to explain what he was seeing, the words sounded insane.

Not impossible.

Insane.

The distinction mattered.

His gaze drifted to a framed photograph pushed against the back of a bookshelf. He couldn't recall the last time he'd looked at it properly. The smiling faces captured there belonged to a life that felt increasingly distant, as though it belonged to someone else.

Marcus turned back to the board.

The final line remained unchanged.

The probability that parallel universes existed was no longer theoretical. According to his calculations, it was almost impossible that they didn't.

His pulse quickened.

The problem wasn't proving they existed. The problem was reaching them. Or seeing them. Or somehow finding concrete evidence that one reality sat beside another like pages within an infinite book.

For the first time in months, Marcus realised he wasn't searching for a flaw in the equations anymore.

He was searching for a way through.

PART 2

2.21AM

A knock sounded at the office door.

Marcus didn't move. For several seconds, he simply stared at the final line on the whiteboard, marker still balanced between his fingers.

He was searching for a way through. The thought should have frightened him. But it didn't. Not really.

Beneath the fear was something far more dangerous. Curiosity. The kind that did not ask whether a door should be opened, only whether it could be.

The knock came again.

Sharper this time.

Marcus blinked, as though the sound had reached him from a great distance. He glanced towards the door, then at the clock above it.

2:21 a.m.

Four minutes.

Only four minutes had passed since he had looked at the clock last, yet he felt as though something inside him had shifted permanently. The room was the same. The papers. The books. The abandoned coffee cups. The rain tapping steadily against the window.

But the question had changed.

Not if.

How.

His phone buzzed beneath the journals again.

Marcus ignored it.

Whoever was at the door knocked a third time.

He sighed, capped the marker and crossed the office. His legs felt stiff from sitting too long. Or standing too long. He was no longer entirely sure which. When he opened the door, he expected Rachel.

Instead, a stranger stood in the corridor. For a moment, neither of them spoke. Then the stranger cleared his throat.

"Dr Marcus Hale?"

Marcus's hand tightened around the edge of the door.

"Yes."

The man looked relieved. Not pleased. Relieved. As though he had worried, until that exact second, that he might have come to the wrong place.

"Sorry to bother you so late."

Marcus glanced past him towards the empty corridor.

"Are you lost?"

"No." The man reached inside his coat. "I've got something for you."

Every instinct Marcus possessed, academic and otherwise, told him not to take it. He did anyway.

The envelope was plain white. No stamp. No address. No university crest. His name had been written across the front in neat black ink.

Dr Hale.

Not Professor.

Not Marcus.

Dr Hale.

Marcus looked from the envelope to the man.

"Who gave you this?"

The stranger shifted awkwardly.

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"No."

"But you came to my office at half past two in the morning to deliver it."

"Quarter past, actually," the stranger corrected.

Marcus stared at him.

The man gave a small, apologetic shrug.

"I was told not to be late. They said you'd be here."

The corridor seemed suddenly quieter.

"They knew I would be here, at this time of night?" Marcus quizzed.

"Not just time. Specifically today. They made sure I had that absolutely right."

Rain ticked faintly against the windows at the far end of the building. Somewhere below them, pipes groaned inside the old walls.

Marcus looked again at the envelope.

"Who told you?"

"I couldn't say."

"Couldn't or won't?"

"Couldn't." The man sounded almost embarrassed. "Honestly."

Marcus studied him carefully. The stranger's discomfort appeared genuine. His shoulders were hunched, his eyes restless, his fingers worrying at the brim of his cap. He did not look like a man enjoying a prank.

"Someone paid me," he said.

"Paid you?"

"A hundred pounds."

Marcus almost laughed.

"To deliver an envelope?"

"To deliver that envelope to Dr Marcus Hale in the physics department. Put it directly into your hands. Those were the instructions."

"From who?"

The man opened his mouth.

Then swiftly closed it.

His brow furrowed.

For the first time, something like unease crossed his face.

"I don't remember."

Marcus felt the muscles in his jaw tighten.

"You don't remember who paid you a hundred pounds?"

"I know how that sounds."

"Do you?"

The man flushed slightly.

"It was cash. In an envelope. Same as yours. There was a note inside with your name and where to find you."

"And the person who gave it to you?"

The stranger swallowed.

"I remember being given it."

"But not by whom."

"No."

Marcus waited.

The man looked away down the corridor, as though hoping the answer might appear somewhere beneath the strip lighting.

"I know there was someone there," he said quietly. "I know I spoke to them. I remember putting the money in my pocket. I remember thinking it was strange. But their face..."

He pressed two fingers to his temple.

"It's gone."

Marcus said nothing. There were sensible explanations. Fatigue. Poor attention. Alcohol. Drugs. Stress. A man accepting cash from a stranger might easily remember the money more clearly than the person handing it over. Memory was unreliable at the best of times, and this was far from the best of times.

Still.

Marcus looked down at the envelope once more.

The stranger paused.

"If you remember anything, anything at all, I need you to contact me."

Marcus turned, grabbed a notebook from the nearest pile and tore out a page. He scribbled his university email address across it, hesitated, then added his office number. The man accepted the paper with the careful politeness of someone who wanted very much for an interaction to end.

"I doubt I will," he said.

"Try."

"I am trying."

For a second, there was no awkwardness in his voice. Only fear.

Then he pulled his coat tighter around himself and walked towards the stairwell.

Marcus watched him go. The man's footsteps faded. A door opened somewhere below. Then closed.

Marcus remained in the corridor long after the sound disappeared, the unopened envelope held between his fingers.

Only when the automatic lights flickered above him did he step back inside and shut the office door.

He locked it.

He did not know why.

The room seemed different now. The same disorder. The same towers of books. The same papers spread across the floor. The same whiteboard dense with equations and crossed-out certainties.

But different.

As though something had entered with him.

Marcus placed the envelope on his desk. For a full minute, he simply looked at it.

Then he noticed the ink.

It was not smudged. Not exactly. But there was a shine to it, a faint wetness catching the desk lamp when he tilted the paper towards the light.

Fresh.

Too fresh.

Marcus touched the edge of one letter. A small mark came away on his fingertip.

He stared at the black ink staining his skin.

The sensible part of his mind supplied an answer immediately. The envelope had been written shortly before delivery. That was all. Nothing unusual. Nothing impossible.

Not impossible.

Insane.

The distinction mattered.

He slid a finger beneath the flap and opened it carefully. Inside was a single sheet of paper.

Plain. White. Expensive, he realised. Heavier than ordinary printer paper. Smooth beneath his thumb. It had been folded once, perfectly, though there was no crease deep enough to suggest it had spent long inside the envelope.

Marcus unfolded it.

There was no greeting. No signature. No explanation.
Only one handwritten sentence.

Your equations assume consciousness observes reality.

Below it, someone had copied one of his own equations.
Not something from a published paper.

Not something from a lecture.

Something from the whiteboard.

Marcus stopped breathing. He turned slowly towards the board, then back to the page.

The copied line was identical. Every symbol. Every term. Every correction. Even the slight mark where he had rewritten the same variable three times because the first two versions hadn't felt right.

Whoever had written this had seen the board.

Marcus looked towards the locked door.

Then at the window.

Then back at the paper.

One symbol had been crossed out. Beside it, in the same neat black handwriting, someone had written a replacement.

Marcus frowned.

"No."

The word sounded too loud in the empty room.

He set the paper on his desk and reached for the marker.

"No, because then the observer function collapses before—"

He stopped.

His eyes moved back to the note.

Then to the board.

Then to the note again.

No.

It didn't collapse before.

Not if the assumption was wrong.

Marcus took one step towards the board.

Then another.

The room narrowed around the equation. The coffee cups, the rain, the stale air, the locked door, the stranger with the vanishing memory—all of it receded.

There was only the symbol.

The wrong symbol.

His symbol.

Marcus erased it from the board.

For a moment, the space it left behind looked obscene.

Then he wrote the replacement. The effect was immediate.

Not dramatic.

Not complete.

But undeniable.

A term that had always resisted simplification began to resolve. A contradiction that had forced him in circles for weeks loosened. The equation did not become an answer.

It became a direction.

Marcus stepped back. His pulse beat hard in his throat. Whoever had written this had not solved his mathematics. They had corrected his thinking.

His phone buzzed again. This time, he flinched.

The sound dragged him back into the office, into his body, into the room that suddenly felt much too small. He crossed to the desk and dug beneath the journals until he found it.

Rachel.

Again.

A text this time.

Are you alive?

Marcus stared at the screen. For one absurd second, he nearly replied. Then his gaze moved back to the note.

To the equation.

To the impossible knowledge contained in a single altered symbol.

He set the phone down without answering.

The rain had intensified beyond the window. It lashed against the glass now, blurring the courtyard lights until they bled into one another.

Pages within an infinite book.

Realities beside realities.

Perhaps, Marcus thought, pages could touch.

Perhaps something could press through.

Not enough to enter.

Not yet.

But enough to leave a mark.

He looked at the note again. There was one final line at the bottom he had not noticed before. Smaller than the rest. So faint he almost missed it.

Find the bleed.

Marcus read the words once.

Then again.

His hand tightened around the marker.

For the first time since the calculations had begun to make sense, he felt something colder than curiosity.

He felt watched.

Slowly, Marcus turned back to the board.

He erased an entire section.

Then another.

Then he began again.

Not searching for proof. Not anymore.

Proof was passive. Proof waited to be discovered.

What Marcus needed now was evidence.

Something measurable.

Something repeatable.

Something no colleague, no sceptic, no peer-reviewed journal could dismiss as exhaustion, coincidence or mathematical indulgence.

Somewhere, if the nose was right, reality had thinned.

Somewhere, two pages had pressed close enough for something to bleed through.

Marcus uncapped a fresh marker.

His hand did not shake. Not quite.

By dawn, he knew where to look.

TO BE CONTINUED