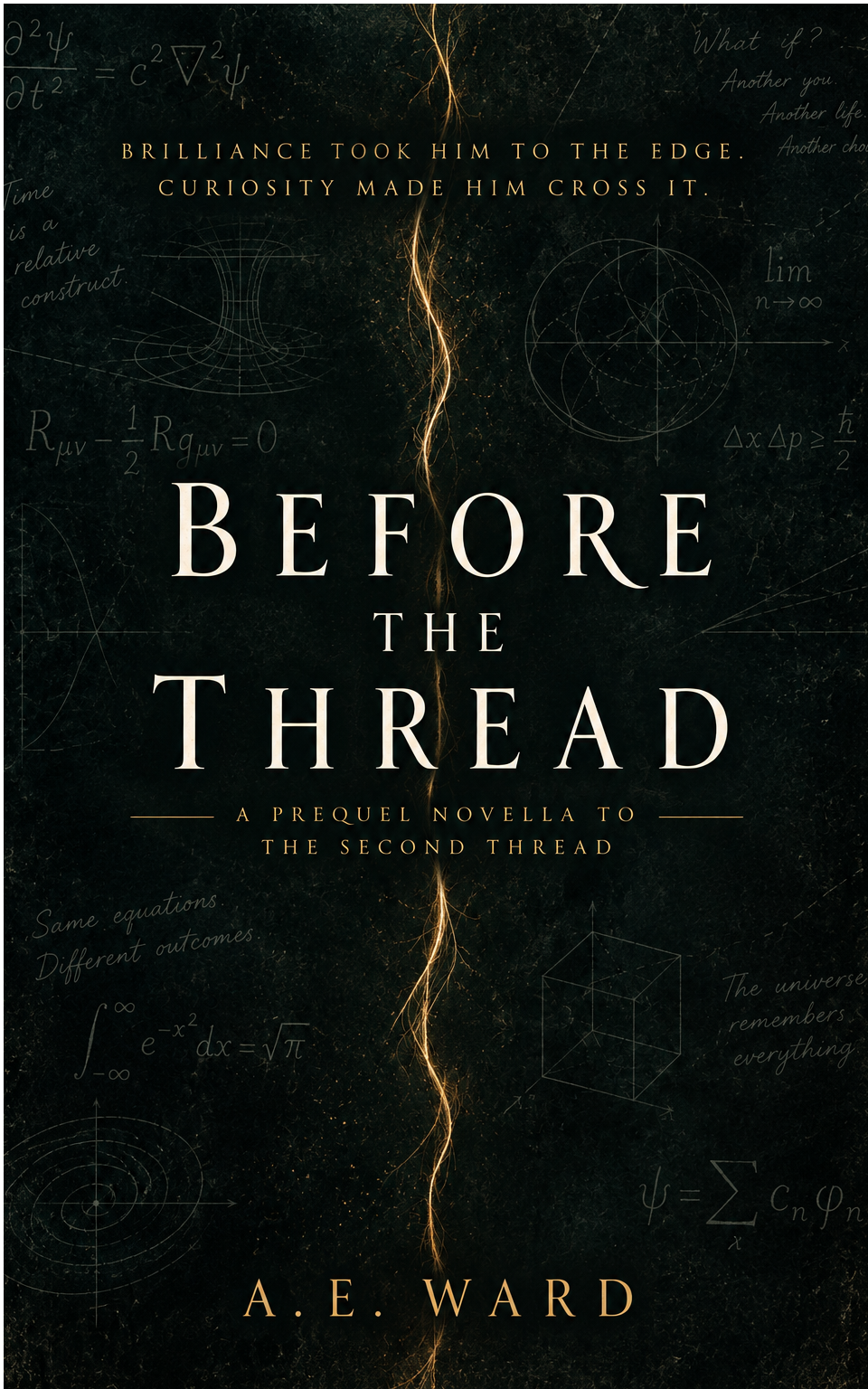




$$\frac{\partial^2 \psi}{\partial t^2} = c^2 \nabla^2 \psi$$

What if?
Another you.
Another life.
Another choice.

BRILLIANCE TOOK HIM TO THE EDGE.
CURIOSITY MADE HIM CROSS IT.

Time
is a
relative
construct.



$$\lim_{n \rightarrow \infty}$$

$$R_{\mu\nu} - \frac{1}{2} R g_{\mu\nu} = 0$$

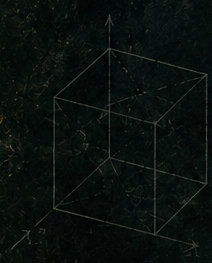
$$\Delta x \Delta p \geq \frac{\hbar}{2}$$

BEFORE THE THREAD

— A PREQUEL NOVELLA TO —
THE SECOND THREAD

Same equations.
Different outcomes.

$$\int_{-\infty}^{\infty} e^{-x^2} dx = \sqrt{\pi}$$



The universe
remembers
everything.



$$\psi = \sum_x c_n \varphi_n$$

A . E . WARD

BEFORE THE THREAD

A prequel novella to The Second Thread

A. E. Ward

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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 fitting 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 remember 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.

And 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.

2:21 a.m.

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.

Or campus security.

Or the cleaner who occasionally appeared at impossible hours and tutted at the state of his office as though academic disorder were personally offensive.

Instead, a stranger stood in the corridor.

He was not the kind of man Marcus would have remembered passing in the street. Late forties, perhaps early fifties. Average height. Average build. His face was ordinary in a way that made it difficult to hold onto. Pale skin. Tired eyes. A rain-darkened coat buttoned too high at the neck. Water dripped from the edge of his flat cap onto the institutional carpet.

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."

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.

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.

The unease settled somewhere low in Marcus's stomach.

"Did they say anything else?"

"Only that you'd understand."

"I haven't opened it."

The stranger gave a humourless smile.

"Then maybe you will."

Marcus looked down at the envelope once more.

When he looked back up, the man had already taken a step away.

"Wait."

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 note 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.

3:14 a.m.

Marcus had always believed that discoveries began with answers.

A question was asked.

A problem was presented.

A solution was found.

That was how science progressed. That was how it had always progressed.

Except this was different.

Because for the first time in his career, Marcus was not searching for the answer to a question.

He was searching for the question itself.

The note had changed everything.

Not because it had provided him with a solution. It hadn't. Whoever had written it had not handed him a finished theory or a perfect equation. They had done something far more frustrating.

They had shown him that he was looking in the wrong direction.

For days, Marcus returned to the same thought.

Your equations assume consciousness observes reality. The sentence followed him everywhere.

During lectures.

During conversations.

During the brief moments when he attempted to behave like a normal person.

It sat at the edge of his thoughts while he ate meals he barely remembered tasting. It appeared in the margins of his notebooks. It filled the spaces between calculations.

The observer was not simply watching reality.

The observer was part of it.

And if that was true, then everything changed.

Marcus began searching.

Not the internet. Not published journals. Not the work that appeared in every respected academic archive.

He searched the ideas that had been rejected.

The theories that had been dismissed too quickly.

The papers labelled impossible before anyone had truly attempted to understand them.

Because if he had learned anything from his own research, it was this:

A lack of evidence did not always mean something was false.

Sometimes it simply meant nobody had looked in the right place yet.

That was how he found Elian Voss.

At first, Marcus almost ignored the name.

The paper was old. Buried beneath decades of criticism and academic rejection. It had been referenced only a handful of times, usually followed by the same words.

Unproven.

Speculative.

Fringe.

The kind of language scientists used when they wanted to politely say something should be forgotten.

Marcus opened the paper expecting to find exactly what everyone else had found.

A fascinating idea with no foundation.

Instead, he found something else.

A mistake.

Not in the theory.

In the assumption that the theory had to be wrong.

Voss had proposed that reality did not exist as a single uninterrupted sequence. He suggested that every possible outcome did not disappear simply because it was not experienced.

Instead, they continued.

Separate.

Connected.

Existing alongside one another.

Marcus read the paper three times before he allowed himself to form an opinion.

Because accepting Voss's work meant accepting something uncomfortable.

A scientist did not want to believe a dismissed theory was correct.

Especially not one that had been dismissed for good reason.

Voss had no evidence.

No measurements.

No way to demonstrate what he believed.

But Marcus did.

Or at least, he had the beginning of something.

The patterns.

The inconsistencies.

The impossible results that refused to disappear no matter how many times he recalculated them.

For the first time, Marcus wondered whether Voss had not been wrong.

Perhaps he had simply been early.

He printed every paper he could find.

Then every reference.

Then every criticism.

His office began to change.

The piles of research papers grew taller. The whiteboard became covered with names, equations and questions. Coffee cups appeared beside books. Books appeared beside computers. The distinction between his work and the rest of his life began disappearing.

Not because he was obsessed.

Not yet.

Because he was fascinated.

There was a difference.

Obsession was blind.

Fascination searched.

And Marcus was still searching.

He began rebuilding Voss's work from the beginning.

Not trying to prove it.

Trying to understand it.

Because hidden inside the mistakes was something remarkable.

A pattern.

A connection.

A possibility.

Voss had been looking at reality as something that could divide.

Marcus began wondering if that was only half of the truth.

Perhaps reality did not simply split.

Perhaps it remained connected.

Perhaps every possibility existed alongside another, held together by something humanity had never been able to observe.

Something invisible.

Something fundamental.

Something waiting to be discovered.

Marcus looked at the blank section of whiteboard in front of him.

For several minutes, he did nothing.

Then he picked up the marker.

And beneath the equations that had consumed months of his life, he wrote three words.

There is structure.

He stared at them.

Because for the first time, he no longer felt like he was chasing an impossible idea.

He felt like he was uncovering something that had been there all along.

* * *

4:04 a.m.

Marcus spent months studying Voss's work.

Not because he agreed with it.

Because he needed to understand why it had failed.

Another distinction mattered.

Science was not built on belief. It was built on challenge.

On questioning. On taking an idea apart until only the parts that could withstand scrutiny remained.

That was what Marcus had always done.

It was what he was doing now.

The difference was that every time he pulled apart Voss's theory, he found himself rebuilding it stronger.

The Voss Strand Principle had been dismissed because it lacked something fundamental.

Evidence.

Voss had proposed that reality existed as a collection of possible outcomes, each one branching away from the other. He had suggested that every decision, every event, every moment of uncertainty created a divergence.

But he had viewed those realities as separate.

Independent.

Disconnected.

Marcus believed that was where Voss had been wrong.

Not in the existence of the realities.

In the relationship between them.

He spent weeks covering his office walls with diagrams.

Lines.

Branches.

Probabilities.

Every version of reality that could exist.

At first, they looked exactly as everyone expected them to.

A tree.

A single origin point, splitting endlessly into different outcomes.

But something bothered him.

A tree implied separation.

It implied that once a branch formed, it was lost from the original structure forever.

But the mathematics did not support that.

The connections remained.

Even after divergence.

Even after the choices that separated one possibility from another.

Something continued to link them.

Marcus sat alone in his office one night, staring at a diagram he had redrawn so many times the paper had started to tear beneath the pressure of his pen.

The problem wasn't that reality split.

The problem was that humanity had always assumed splitting meant separation.

Perhaps it didn't.

Perhaps every possible reality remained connected in a way nobody had ever been able to observe.

He turned away from the paper and looked at the whiteboard.

A single line stretched across it.

One timeline.
One reality.
One explanation.
Marcus picked up his marker.
Slowly, he drew another line beside it.
Then another.
Then another.
Not branches.
Not separate paths.
Strands.
The word came before the image.
Or perhaps the image had been waiting for the word.
He wrote it beneath the equations.

Temporal strands.

He stared at the phrase.
It felt simple.
Almost too simple.
But the greatest scientific discoveries often were.
The complicated part came afterwards.
Understanding why.
Understanding how.
Understanding the implications.
Marcus began rewriting Voss's equations.
Not replacing them.
Refining them.
Where Voss had seen fractures, Marcus saw connections.
Where Voss had seen divergence, Marcus saw coherence.
Reality was not breaking apart. It was reorganising.
The possibilities did not disappear. They continued.

Somewhere, every choice existed. Every outcome. Every version of what could have been.

The thought should have been overwhelming.

Instead, Marcus felt something he had not felt in months.

Clarity.

For the first time since the note arrived, the equations stopped fighting him.

They began answering.

His phone buzzed.

He looked down.

Rachel.

Another missed call.

For several seconds, he stared at the name.

A small part of him knew he should answer.

He knew what she would say.

She would ask if he was sleeping.

If he was eating.

If he had remembered that there was a world beyond the walls of his office.

Marcus almost smiled.

Because there was a world beyond those walls.

He just wasn't sure it was the one everyone else could see.

He placed the phone face down.

Not ignoring her.

Not intentionally.

Just temporarily.

There was still work to do.

Because if he was right, then reality itself had a structure.

And for the first time in human history...
someone had begun to understand it.

* * *

5:12 a.m.

The problem with understanding something was that understanding created responsibility.

Marcus had never considered himself a person who wanted recognition.

He had never chased awards, headlines or academic praise.

The work had always been enough.

The question.

The process.

The moment when something that had once seemed impossible became something that could be explained.

But this was different.

Because this was not simply a discovery.

This was a framework.

A way of understanding reality itself.

For months, Marcus refined the equations.

Every adjustment created another question.

Every answer revealed another layer.

The Voss Strand Principle had provided the foundation.

It had suggested that reality could divide.

Marcus's work suggested something far more complicated.

The strands did not simply separate.

They interacted.

They influenced one another.

They maintained a form of stability.

Coherence.

The word appeared repeatedly throughout his notes.

At first, it was just a description.

A way to explain the behaviour he was observing.

But slowly, Marcus realised it represented something much larger.

The strands were not held together by chance.

They followed rules.

Patterns.

Relationships.

Causally linked events created stronger connections between realities.

The more significant the event, the greater the effect.

A small choice could create a difference.

A life-changing moment could create a fracture.

The possibilities were endless.

But they were not random.

They were connected.

Marcus stared at the equation in front of him.

For several minutes, he did not move.

Because the implications were almost impossible to comprehend.

Reality had structure.

Not just in the universe around him.

In every possible version of it.

Every decision.

Every outcome.

Every path not taken.

Somewhere, they continued.

The scientist in Marcus wanted to document everything.

The human part of him wanted to know what existed beyond the boundaries of his own reality.

He pushed that thought away.

Curiosity was useful.

Curiosity was how discoveries happened.

But curiosity without restraint was dangerous.

So he returned to the mathematics.

He began writing.

Not notes.

A paper.

A complete explanation of his findings.

The first draft took him three days.

The second took two weeks.

The third took a month.

Each version was more precise than the last.

Each one removed another uncertainty.

Eventually, he stopped calling it a theory.

The name came naturally.

The Hale Coherence Principle.

He stared at the words for a long time before writing them at the top of the page.

It felt strange.

Almost uncomfortable.

His name attached to something that belonged to everyone.

Something that changed the way humanity understood existence.

He almost removed it.

Almost replaced it with something more anonymous.
Then he remembered Voss.
A scientist whose work had nearly disappeared because
nobody had believed him.
Discoveries needed names.
Not for recognition.
For history.
Marcus submitted the paper.
Then he waited.
And waiting was harder than he expected.
The silence was worse than criticism.
Criticism meant people had read it.
Silence meant they had not.
Then the questions began.
Not acceptance.
Not immediately.
Questions.
Concerns.
Requests for clarification.
The usual response when something challenged existing
understanding.
Marcus expected resistance.
What he did not expect was fear.
Not from himself.
From others.
Because the more people examined the work, the more
they realised what it suggested.
Reality was not as fixed as they had believed.
The universe was not a single path.
It was a collection of possibilities.

And if the connections between those possibilities could be understood...

Then perhaps they could be measured.

Marcus added the sentence to his notes.

Then stopped.

He stared at it.

Measured.

That was safe.

Science measured.

Science observed.

Science explained.

But another word appeared beneath it.

Influenced.

Marcus immediately crossed it out.

Too far.

A scientist observed.

A scientist did not interfere.

He closed the notebook.

For several minutes, he sat in silence.

Then he reopened it.

The crossed-out word remained visible beneath the ink.

Influenced.

He should have removed the page.

He didn't.

Because the question had already formed.

And once a question existed...

Marcus had never been very good at ignoring it.

* * *

1:13 a.m.

The first bridge was never meant to be a doorway.

That was the sentence Marcus wrote repeatedly in his notebook.

A reminder.

A boundary.

A statement of intent.

A bridge was a connection between two points.

Nothing more.

He was not attempting to travel between realities.

Not yet.

He was attempting to prove that the connection existed.

Yet another distinction that mattered.

At least, that was what he told himself.

The Hale Coherence Principle had changed everything.

Before, Marcus had been studying the strands from a distance.

Observing.

Measuring.

Recording.

But once the mathematics revealed the relationships between them, another possibility emerged.

If coherence could be identified, then perhaps instability could be created.

Not randomly.

Not unpredictably.

Controlled.

The word appeared frequently in his notes.

Controlled.

It was the word he used whenever the calculations became uncomfortable.

Controlled instability.

Controlled divergence.

Controlled interaction.

Because if the universe operated according to rules, then those rules could be understood.

And if they could be understood...

They could be used.

The first experiments were small.

Almost insignificant.

Marcus wasn't trying to open a doorway.

He was looking for evidence of contact.

A measurable reaction.

A disturbance.

A moment where one strand responded to another.

The results were inconsistent.

At first.

Small anomalies appeared and disappeared too quickly to verify.

A fluctuation in energy readings.

A brief distortion in the data.

A result that appeared impossible, then corrected itself before he could examine it.

A less patient scientist would have dismissed them.

Marcus did not.

Because impossible results were where discoveries began.

He repeated the experiments.

Then repeated them again.

Each time refining the process.

Each time adjusting the variables.
Each time getting closer.
The notebook pages changed over time.
The early entries were filled with questions.
What happened?
Why?
Could this be replicated?
Later entries became different.
The questions became assumptions.
The language became certain.
The process requires adjustment.
The threshold appears stable.
The bridge remains viable.
Marcus noticed the change.
Then ignored it.
Because the results were impossible to deny.
Something was happening.
The strands were responding.
For the first time in human history, reality itself had
provided an answer.
Not through words.
Not through images.
Through mathematics.
Through evidence.
Through something that could be measured.
The first successful bridge lasted only 0.004 seconds.
Less than a heartbeat.
Less than enough time for a person to notice.
But it existed.
Marcus stared at the data for nearly an hour.

He did not celebrate.

He did not call anyone.

He simply looked.

Because the number on the screen represented something humanity had spent thousands of years wondering about.

Reality was not closed.

There was a way through.

The next problem was energy.

Creating the bridge was possible.

Maintaining it was something else entirely.

The calculations became more complex.

The experiments became more demanding.

Marcus stopped keeping track of how many hours he spent in the laboratory.

Time had become irrelevant.

That was ironic.

A man attempting to understand time had lost his own relationship with it.

His world narrowed.

The equations.

The experiments.

The possibility.

Everything else became an interruption.

Rachel's messages went unanswered.

Colleagues stopped asking when he planned to publish his findings.

Because Marcus had stopped caring about publication.

A paper was no longer enough.

Recognition was no longer enough.

Proof was no longer enough.
He had moved beyond that.
The question was no longer whether the bridge existed.
The question was whether someone could cross it.
Marcus knew the risks.
He wrote them down carefully.
Every possible failure.
Every potential consequence.
Every scenario that could occur.
Then he wrote the same conclusion beneath every calculation.
The bridge does not destroy.
It transfers.
He repeated it so many times that eventually it stopped looking like a conclusion.
It looked like a belief.
That was the moment Marcus should have stopped.
The moment he should have stepped away and allowed someone else to examine the work.
But he was too close.
Because the final calculation was no longer a mystery.
It was a choice.
And Marcus Hale had never been someone who walked away from a question once he believed he could answer it.

6:02 a.m.

Rachel noticed the change before anyone else.

She always did.

Marcus had always been intense.

That was the word everyone used.

Intense.

Brilliant.

Driven.

The kind of person who could disappear into a problem for hours and emerge days later with an answer nobody else had considered.

She had spent her entire life knowing that about him.

It was part of who he was.

But this was different.

This wasn't Marcus being passionate about his work.

This was Marcus disappearing into it.

The difference was subtle.

That was what frightened her.

Because nobody else would notice.

They would see the published papers.

The discoveries.

The impossible achievements.

They would see the scientist.

Rachel saw her brother.

And her brother was exhausted.

"You haven't answered your phone in three days."

Marcus looked up from the equipment in front of him.

For a moment, he looked genuinely confused.

As though the statement required calculation.

"Have I?"

Rachel stared at him.

That answer scared her more than anything else.

"You don't even know."

Marcus looked away.

Not out of guilt.

Out of distraction.

His eyes moved towards the equipment.

Towards the calculations.

Towards the bridge.

"You need to stop."

The words were quiet.

Not angry.

Not accusing.

A plea.

Marcus smiled slightly.

Not because he agreed.

Because he understood why she was saying it.

"You don't understand what this is."

"Then explain it."

He opened his mouth.

Stopped.

Because how could he explain something that sounded impossible?

How could he explain that the boundaries humanity believed existed were only boundaries because nobody had crossed them?

"I finally know what happens next."

Rachel shook her head.

"No, Marcus. You think you do."

For a moment, something flickered across his face.
Doubt.
Only for a second.
Then it disappeared.
Because doubt was a problem.
And Marcus had always been good at solving problems.
"I've checked everything."
"That isn't what I'm asking."
"Every calculation. Every variable. Every possible outcome."
"Marcus."
"I know what I'm doing."
The certainty in his voice was what frightened her.
Not arrogance.
Not anger.
Certainty.
That night, Marcus completed the final version of his calculations.
He checked them once.
Then again.
Then a third time.
Everything aligned.
The bridge would open.
The strand would separate.
The transition would occur.
He would cross.
And he would return with proof.
Before leaving, he sat at his desk and wrote Rachel a note.
He knew what she would think.

He knew what everyone would think.
They would see the equipment.
The calculations.
The decision.
They would misunderstand.
Because they did not understand what he understood.
This was not surrender.
This was not an ending.
This was the beginning.
He wrote carefully.
Explaining the theory.
Explaining the process.
Explaining that he had not lost hope.
Quite the opposite.
He had found it.
He placed the note where Rachel would find it.
Not a goodbye.
A record.
Evidence.
A message from the first person to prove humanity was
not alone.
Marcus looked around his office one final time.
The whiteboard covered in equations.
The empty coffee cups.
The stacks of papers that had slowly consumed every
available surface.
The place where an impossible idea had become
something real.
For months he had searched for a bridge.
A machine.

A process.
A doorway between worlds.
He had been wrong.
A bridge was not something you travelled through.
A bridge was something you became.
Marcus looked towards the device.
The room was silent.
The rain had stopped.
Beyond the window, the first pale light of morning crept
across the university courtyard, turning puddles into
fractured mirrors.
He smiled.
A small smile.
The kind worn by someone standing at the edge of
discovery.
Or disaster.
He picked up his coat.
Reached for the office light.
Paused.
His eyes drifted back to the whiteboard.
"I know what it is I have to do."
The switch clicked.
Darkness swallowed the room.
Marcus pulled the door closed behind him.
The latch echoed through the empty corridor.
Then he walked away.
Towards the greatest discovery humanity had ever made.
Or the greatest mistake.

THE STORY CONTINUES...

in

THE SECOND THREAD

A Life Refracted

A. E. Ward