

The Edge of the Universe

A short story set in Britain, fifty or sixty years, or so from now.

“On 30th June 1908, the largest explosion the world has ever seen, happened in Tunguska, then part of the Old Russian Empire. There have been theories that it was caused by a meteor airburst, high above the ground. Another theory is that something gained brief access to our world, something from outside our reality. Few eyewitnesses survived the blast, but one villager did give this chilling report.

‘I suddenly saw that directly to the north, over Onkoul’s Tunguska Road, the sky split in two and fire appeared high and wide over the forest. The split in the sky grew larger, and the entire northern side was covered with fire.’

At a later time he added;

‘At that moment I became so hot that I couldn’t bear it, as if my shirt was on fire....’

The witness was able to show the rescue team, evidence of terrible burns.”

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Sir Peter Bailey had a driver; he’d even had a police protection officer assigned to him, since all the strange religious nonsense had begun. He was in his own car though, he liked to get away from the driver and the ministry car as often as he could and he loathed being accompanied by an armed policeman.

‘Dukes Wood Academy – A Specialist Technology Academy.’

Said the sign at the car park entrance. There were a few lines of telephone numbers and the names of the headmistress and her assistant. Peter didn’t like school or university car parks, it was too easy to find yourself boxed in and that usually led to being at the mercy of over keen parents. Nothing threatening, just pushy and all of them wanting to meet the man who’d built the first working fusion reactor on the planet.

“Our son was top in this year’s science exams and would love to work for the ministry.”

On a bad night he could end up with a queue of them. He wasn’t a politician, but he did run a large government project, so telling pushy parent to buggar off, was likely to make the front page of the next morning’s tabloids. ‘The Red Tops,’ as everyone in politics affectionately knew them. Peter had been in the quiet and almost tranquil environment of pure research, busy with CERN and their latest even bigger collider. Then he’d broken the first rule of pure research, he’d discovered something not only practical and useful, but likely to change the world. He hadn’t been completely ostracised by his colleagues but most had started to avoid him.

“British scientist discovers secret to fusion power.” The headlines had screamed.

Peter had spent about two weeks on the phone, pulling in favours and flattering rich philanthropists to raise enough initial finance. A prototype had been produced and it had worked. It worked so well that it had nearly melted itself when he’d let it run flat out. The whole team, all three of them had been tested for radiation and decontaminated by the MOD and that too had made the front pages. “A side road, definitely a side road.” He muttered to himself.

The car park was small and already half full and there was a camper van near the entrance. It was likely to jam up the second the parents came piling out. Dukes Wood was way out in the suburbs, a two hour drive from his home in Hertfordshire. Peter didn’t tend to turn up for school speech days anymore, not since getting the knighthood. His wife knew the headmistress though, went to school with her years back. So he’d agreed to turn up, give a quick talk and hand out a few certificates. They

called it a speech day when he'd been a kid, but he guessed it was now called by some kind of buzzword. Buzzword bingo was one of his pet hates; no one seemed to talk sense any more. Unless every speech had 'Change, Future and Prosperity' in it, at least four times, politicians didn't seem happy.

Peter parked his car near the school side gate and lifted the small booklet off the passenger seat. The programme for the evening, including his five minutes of fame. The press would make an appearance of course; he was still part of the zeitgeist, still worth a mention in the local rag. 'Dukes Wood Academy – Speech Day.' It said on the cover.

Old values, call something what it is. He then realised that Penny Abbott, the headmistress, was probably close to his age and in her late fifties. He turned off his car lights and the outside darkness seemed to rush in. Only about seven thirty, why did they always hold these things in the late autumn, when the nights were dark and chilly? He hesitated as he saw the figure by the gate, but then he recognised the police uniform.

"Good evening sir. I thought you'd be using the front entrance."

"Too easy to get trapped by adoring parents."

The policeman was young and grinned at him.

"Don't blame you sir. Full house tonight, standing room only I've been told."

Through the gate and he was into a play area with huge tubs of some kind of evergreen shrubs. He was early, so he sat on a bench and looked across the playground. There was the mini-bus his wife had helped to find the finance for and the inevitable shed for bicycles. Schools hadn't changed much, even in the forty three years since he'd attended one. No indication of a knighthood then, he'd been just another one of the factory and call centre fodder at the local tech school.

"Sir Peter! Is that you?"

"Yes Penny, just having a quiet moment..... and it's Peter to friends and always will be."

The knighthood meant so much to him, despite him trying to pretend it didn't. His degree, doctorate and eventual professorship had meant a lot to him, as had his various memberships and fellowships. He'd often thought that being invited to give a speech at the Royal Society was the high spot of his life, but the knighthood had topped it all.

"I've got tea ready," said Penny, "Earl Grey and biscuits."

"Ahhh, you know my only vice."

He got up and followed her towards the main building.

"Glad I got a chance to warn you." Said Penny. "We've had calls from a few of the major tabloids. You might get more than just the local papers here tonight."

It was the religious stalkers, though he had no idea who they were. No aggression, no threats, just old guys with clerical collars.

"Hmmm my stalkers are making news." He said.

"Not as bad as five years ago." Said Penny.

"Yes, no reporters hiding in the garden. Well not yet at least."

Five years ago his entire project had been nationalised, or so most of the tabloids thought. His colleagues seemed about fifty-fifty on him selling out or being nationalised. He'd approached a major utility company for further finance and then the men from the government had arrived. Peter had even been wheeled in to see the Energy Minister of the day. A woman then, with a classics degree and no idea about energy. She'd given him the political truth though.

"This is a British invention." She'd told him. "We can't allow it to get into the hands of a company owned abroad and financed by Beijing."

She'd given him a long hard stare.

"Fusion power is ours Mr Bailey and it's staying ours."

His knighthood for services to science had been part of the deal. Had he sold out? Peter thought he probably had a little, but the world would soon have as much clean energy as it needed. Way back in the nineteen fifties someone had said that nuclear generation would provide electricity that was too cheap to meter. That speech was now infamous, but fusion power might just succeed in providing long term, reliable energy that really was too cheap to meter.

Peter had been introduced and a lot of cameras had been pointed at him, mostly by the parents at the back. The paparazzi were there, he recognised a few of the faces, all of them right by the rear doors of the school hall. It was all about the kids though, all of them given the front twenty rows of seats. Penny had told him about two or three really bright students, but he knew that every prize had a story behind it, a mind keen to know more about the universe.

"Lucy Forbes." Said Penny. "Academy Biology prize for the second year running."

He gave her the prize; the complete Chronicles of Narnia boxed set. The students were allowed to pick their own prize from a stack of books bought for that purpose. Always books, proper books printed on paper. Most people now used electronic gadgets to read on, but Penny still insisted that prizes had to be the genuine article.

"Something to last right into their old age." She'd told him over Earl Grey and a biscuit. "A physical book, something on their shelves for life."

There were another twenty prizes and several certificates, but Peter didn't mind. Their eyes all had a sparkle, their minds so sharp. They were the inventors and engineers of the future and he decided then and there, to attend more school speech days. Before he had time to sit down, he was being introduced. It was his time to perform for the public.

"Parents and students." Began Penny. "I'm sure I don't need to introduce Sir Peter Bailey, who runs the Prometheus Project, the first working fusion electricity generating plant in the world."

Huge applause and Peter just hopes he can live up to the eagerness of his audience. His fusion reactor was working, but only at a quarter of the predicted power. Something wasn't right; he'd missed something while scaling up the prototype. He dreaded to think what might happen if the press got hold of that.

"Parents, students and staff of Dukes Wood Academy." He began. "Thank you for inviting me to your speech day; I'm honoured to be here."

He could see broadcast quality cameras being aimed at him from the back, some of his speech would be on the late news; he might even end up on the 24 hour rolling news. Peter just hoped he didn't fluff any lines, they were certain to use that bit, if he did. He'd written about 80% of his speech the rest had been added by the ministry writers. He wasn't a politician, as he constantly told himself, but they insisted that his speeches carried the right political message.

"I'm often asked where the inspiration came from, for the first prototype fusion device." He continued. "It was more perspiration than inspiration, I worked hard on various allied projects and gradually the ideas for the reactor vessel took shape....."

Seven minutes he talked for and he had their full attention. There had been no talk of a question and answer session with Penny, but it was a school speech day, no other act was up next. He bowed during the applause for his speech and then turned towards Penny.

"Do I have time to take a few questions?" He asked.

She was nodding furiously. The kids knew how to do it, dozens of hands came up and they waved them about to get his attention. The parents either ignored him or began bellowing questions from the back.

“Students only I’m afraid !” He shouted. “And we’ll need to hear them, so keep the general chatter down to a dull roar please.”

A few laughs, he’d had worse audiences. There had been a sixth form college in Glasgow a long time ago. They’d hated nuclear power and he’d had to wait two hours for a police escort to his car. Peter scanned the audience and recognised the girl who’d won the Academy prize for Applied Physics. He couldn’t remember her name, but he pointed at her. He was an old hand at this, never call any female a girl and no descriptions of clothing, unless it was complete innocuous. A government minister had once said;

“Yes you, the girl in the tight blue top.”

He’d said it on a live TV debate and it still regularly went viral on social media. Mainly because of the tight top comment, but he’d also been in trouble for the ‘girl,’ description.

“Yes you.” Said Peter. “The young lady who won the Applied Physics prize. Stand up, tell us your name and then ask your question.”

She looked nervous, no one ever wanted to stand and give their name to the world. It mattered though, it broke the ice and gave her ownership of the next minute or so.

“My name is Nilgun Zekai. I’d like to know where the edge of the universe is ?”

It was a regular question that cropped up time and again at his after dinner speeches or university engagements. He’d once written a piece for a popular scientific magazine and ended it with.

“The universe is finite yet boundless and its edges are everywhere.”

It wasn’t original and many would claim it was inaccurate, but it had become a kind of tagline that followed him about like Banquo’s ghost. He had a stock answer that usually went down well.

“The edge is everywhere.” He Said. “It’s here, right next to me.”

He pointed his index finger at a point near his head and ran it right down to the floor, having to go down on one knee to do it. The audience were spellbound, they always were, as if waiting for him to unzip the universe to reveal what was outside of our reality.

“The edge of the universe really is everywhere.” He continued. “If we just had the power to open it up.”

Nilgun was being whispered to by a young guy next to her and then her hand was back up, she looked likely to explode if he didn’t choose her.

“Ok Nilgun, just one follow up question and then I must move on.”

“Could we use the edge of the universe to travel to the stars ?” She asked. “Exiting at one point and re-entering anywhere we chose.”

He was disappointed, it was a plain vanilla question from a girl with a first class brain. He tried to answer it without showing his disappointment.

“There are a lot of ideas about that kind of instantaneous travel, but most of them belong in the realms of science fiction.” He said. “There was the work done by Radley, but most of his research has been discredited.”

His eyes moved along the line of eager students.

“You next !” He said, pointing.

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Several clever questions from the kids and a few daft ones, but Peter had made it through with no gaffs, nothing to appear on the late news and blight his life even further. Penny and her staff were smiling at him; the evening was being officially ended.

"It's quite late and we are in a residential area." Penny said. "Please consider the local residents when you leave."

Out of nowhere the bright lights came on and the reporters were in the hall. At first a scrambling chaos of reporters, sound guys and lights, which quickly formed up in front of him. It was like an invading army, but no one actually died.

"I have a question Sir Peter. Now there has been a fatality, will you finally tell us the truth about the religious fanatics you're involved with?"

He was used to strange questions about his stalkers, but fatality? It threw him and he lost control for a second or so.

"What fatality?" He asked. "I know nothing about this."

"You seriously expect us to believe you're not aware that an intruder in your home was shot and killed earlier this evening?"

They wouldn't believe that he'd left his phone with his PA, but it was the truth. Peter had decided, fairly early on, that he needed a life outside of the ministry. His phone always remained in the office when he went out to evening functions. His wife always had some kind of class to attend. Paula's latest fad was Pilates. Charlotte, the youngest daughter was at university and Emma, who was now twenty two, tended to live with her boyfriend during the week. There was no one at home to need him in an emergency, his life was simply too dull. His brain put the cogs back in the right slots and he was in control of his emotions again.

"No comment."

"The public aren't going to accept that answer."

He turned his back on them and walked towards a very worried looking Penny.

"Have you a phone I could use?" He asked.

He followed her towards the back of the hall. Behind him he could hear the school janitor threatening to call the police and pushing the media out of the building.

"He's really good, ex-army." Said Penny. "He served in Yemen for five years after the invasion."

"I heard it was tough fighting out there." He said.

"He'll get them outside and the building locked, while you make your calls and have a few more biscuits."

Through a door marked 'Staff only – No students beyond this point,' up a short flight of stairs and Penny's office was on their right. It was a decent size and had windows that looked out over their sports field. The Academy might specialise in tech, but they still had a decent rugby team and a thriving interest in cricket. Penny had even tried to get him to umpire a few games.

"They'll soon get fed up and go away." Said Penny. "I'll arrange for something to eat while you make your calls."

She left and it wasn't going to be calls, one was enough. To hell with the ministry, no one ever came over the tanooy on a plane and asked if there was a mechanical engineer on board. This wasn't a problem with Prometheus, this was personal. He'd call Paula and everyone else could wait until he was back in the office. He also doubted if the media would simply go away. The piranha of Fleet Street had tasted blood, they'd dig in for the night. He used Penny's desk phone to call home, hearing his wife's voice answer it.

"Paula, thank God you're ok."

“Oh Peter, I came home to it, a poor old vicar, shot dead by the police.”

Noise that end, a man asking for the phone, demanding to speak to him. Paula is tough though, a lot of people had underestimated her in the past and lived to regret it.

‘We’re personal friends of the prime minister.’ He hears her shouting. ‘Touch me and you’ll be giving out speeding fines next week.’

“Peter they’re barbarians ! I came home to find that young policeman that Emma likes, leaning over an old man in a vicar’s collar. Dead, blood everywhere and the poor policeman was actually crying.” He chuckled, Paula was still the crazy student he’d fallen in love with, the one who’d attend every demo going. He almost felt sorry for the police.

“You’re ok though and the girls ?”

“Yes, yes, I arrived home to it and Emma won’t be home until Sunday. I’ll call Charlotte, just in case the media arrive at her college.”

He can breathe properly again, they’re all safe and twenty year old Charlotte wouldn’t be worried about a few of the paparazzi showing up. She had a lot of her mother in her.

“I might be home really late.” He said. “The media are camped outside.”

“The police saw the note he left for you, the vicar. I had to threaten them with our solicitor to get it back. He claimed to know you darling.”

Crap, he had no idea who the dead vicar was, or if he was even a genuine vicar. The police knew about the contents of the letter and someone had leaked the details to the media.

“There are two pages quoting the book of revelations.” Paula continued. “All crazy stuff, doom and calamity, apocalypse, the antichrist rising. He was nuts Peter.”

“Keep hold of it. If the police get really nasty, take a picture of it before giving it to them.”

Again he could hear her threatening the police. The guys on the scene might be intimidated by her, but the senior people would eventually arrive and the security services would be there soon.

“Use your phone, take a copy Paula.”

“I will darling. They’re looking everywhere, saying it’s for our safety, but really they’re searching. They found your collection of books on the occult and became very excited.”

“Oh Jeez, it’s just a hobby !”

“I told them that. I told the stupid man that I have lots of vampire novels, but I’ve never felt tempted to drink anyone’s blood !”

She made him feel better, she always did. Married since college, two kids and a few marital hiccups along the way. She was still his soul mate though, the woman he wanted to sleep next to for the rest of his life. He had a sudden thought.

“Is the letter signed ?” He asked.

He heard her shuffle the papers about.

“Reverend Michael’s, there’s even a rubber stamp for a diocese I’ve never heard of, but it says near Skipton”

“I have no idea who he is. Penny is back with some food, see you later.”

“Love you.”

“You too.”

A vicar from near Skipton, dead at his house. It was the stuff of a bad TV drama, but it was really happening. Penny was putting a paper plate in front of him and opening several containers of Chinese food.

“Paula would never forgive me,” she said, “if I didn’t look after you.”

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The Chinese meal had been good, as had the instant cappuccino that came out of a packet. Penny had accompanied him down the stairs and the front car park was now full of reporters and their various broadcast vans. Glass was the problem, every wall at the front of the building was made of it. It was like trying to hide in a giant fishbowl.

"It's unbelievable !" Said Penny. "It's like the Academy just declared war on someone."

"This is the most I've seen. I think I just broke some kind of personal record."

He kept back from the windows, but one of them saw him and started pointing. Penny led him to a corridor which was in semi darkness and had no windows overlooking the car park.

"I think you'll need the police to get you out of here." Said Penny. "I hate to be a bad host, but the building should have been closed an hour ago."

"I understand, you need to throw me out. My car is in a side street and if I can get to it without being seen, I can avoid involving the police. Is the side gate still open ?"

"Should be, it's usually left open until the school is empty and the lights turned out."

"One last favour then Penny. If you can fuss about near the front doors, I'll go out of the back of the building and head for my car."

She was grinning at him.

"I haven't had so much fun in years." She said. "I'll create a diversion then. And give my love to Paula."

"Will do."

It was quite dark in the corridor, the janitor had probably switched much of the school over to night lighting. He approached the glass rear door and there were reporters there, one actually shining a torch in his direction. Peter put his hand out and found a door handle, which moved. He opened the door and stepped into the room, only intending to wait there until the reporters moved on. Then he heard the sound of talking coming from somewhere above him.

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Peter walked up the narrow stairs and found himself in a small study. He'd seen the rooms before, when Penny had shown them around, there was even a piano tucked into one corner, so that gifted pupils could practise in peace. The girl and the boy looked about seventeen and they were using the white board to work out a maths problem.

"I'm sorry, didn't mean to disturb you." Said Peter. "I was just hiding from the reporters."

They looked at him and he recognised Nilgun Zekai and her friend. They seemed as shocked at seeing him as he was at finding them.

"We study here." Said the boy.

"Jim, the janitor, tells us when he's about to lock up." Added Nilgun.

Peter assumed they were there to make out and normally he'd have left, but then he saw a drawing they'd put on the table. It was of the famous Radley Coil, that no one had ever succeeded in getting to work.

"I knew you were into Radley." He said.

"Brilliant man, the modern day Tesla." Said Nilgun.

She was young, her eyes still held that brightness that bitter experience would eventually dull. He couldn't burst her bubble and mention that like Tesla, Radley had suffered from a few mental health issues. He'd claimed breakthroughs in physics that no one could replicate. He'd even claimed that his famous Radley Coil could open up the universe.

"Free us from the artificial boundaries of our prison." Was the way he'd put it.

No one could get any of his inventions to work and Radley was eventually admitted to an asylum. Officially he'd died from some kind of communicable disease, but there were rumours of suicide. That didn't stop Radley becoming a cult figure; pictures of his coil were still to be found in many college rooms. It was even used in the 12th X-Files movie, the one with Scully and Mulder's part alien great grandchildren. Peter looked at the drawing and realised something had been added to the famous figure of eight coil.

"You've altered it, added a 7th super conductor circuit." He said.

"It was too polarised." Said the boy.

"We could only get it to work once we put the extra circuit in and pushed the main coils out of phase a little." Added Nilgun.

He liked the way they spoke as a pair, though he still had no idea of the boy's name. Then he realised what she'd just said.

"No one has ever got it to work." Said Peter.

She was looking at her shoes, almost as though he'd just accused her of stealing.

"We did, though we had some weird side effects, so we turned it off."

The boy talking again.

"I don't remember your name from the prize giving. You are ?"

"Bobby never gets prizes," said Nilgun, "he upsets the wrong people."

Bobby was holding his hand out to be shaken.

"I'm Robert Simpkins sir."

Peter shook his hand then shook Nilgun's, he was beginning to like the strange couple of kids.

"Do you have your modified coil here ?"

Bobby was just shaking his head.

"It's in his garden shed, still linked to the three phase." Said Nilgun.

Three phase, who had three phase power in their garden shed ? Peter looked at the drawing and the maths on the white board and he had his one and only Eureka moment of his entire life, so far. Peter Bailey had achieved everything by good old fashioned hard work, he was a government poster boy for what could be achieved by rolling your sleeves up and getting stuck in. Now he looked at the maths and knew he'd found the solution to his problem with Prometheus. The coils in the fusion vessel were polarised, highly polarised. They needed to generate a magnetic force strong enough to keep the fusion components away from the vessel sides and well away from the outside world. Safety was paramount, there could be no more Hinkley style disasters.

"This is brilliant !" He shouted.

The kids looked happy, thinking he was talking about their version of the Radley Coil. Peter knew he'd over cooked the polarity on Prometheus, the field was stifling the fusion reaction. Instead of just keeping the mini sun inside the vessel, the magnetic field was strangling it, keeping it at a quarter of its potential. He needed to do what the kids had done, knock it out of phase a little. He waved their drawing about, almost wanting to dance for joy.

"Can I keep your drawing ?" He asked. "I will return it to you."

"You can have it." Said Bobby.

"We have copies." Added Nilgun.

"Thank you."

Peter had his wallet out, finding two of his cards he only gave to important people. The cards had his phone number on and an email address that went straight to his computer at the ministry.

“You must email me..... And come and visit Prometheus. Bring your parents of course and your brothers and sisters.”

Their faces dropped a little, no seventeen year old wants to bring their parents to anything. It was the proper way to do it though.

“Call soon, you’ve been incredibly helpful.” Peter enthused.

“Do you want to know about the strange effects ?” Asked Bobby.

“Bobby has six fingers.” Added Nilgun.

Jeez kids could be random at the weirdest of times.

“Bring your Radley Coil with you. We can talk about it when you arrive.”

Peter made sure they had his cards put safely in their pockets, when the door downstairs creaked open. Footsteps on the stairs and Jim the school janitor appeared.

“Come on kids, locking up time..... Oh I’m sorry sir, thought you’d gone.”

“Just going.” Said Peter. “Hiding from the press and being very impressed with the work of these students.”

Jim was chuckling.

“Oh they’re bright enough sir, but watch them. They’ll be telling you all sorts of weird stories and expecting you to believe it.”

Peter went downstairs and the reporters were still waiting outside of the back door. Jim wandered off to do whatever he needed to do and Peter was almost resigned to running the gauntlet with the reporters.

“We can get you out another way.” Said Bobby.

“Smelly, but a way they won’t expect.” Added Nilgun.

Peter said something he hoped he wouldn’t regret later.

“Thank you, but this stays as our little secret.”

Two heads were nodding at him. Through doors and along darkened corridors they took him, until they were in a huge cupboard with three large bins. It was smelly, but he now understood their plan. Bobby used the a blade on a Swiss Army knife on the doors, the one everyone claims is for taking stones out of horses hooves. It opened the door in about ten seconds and Peter was out into the night air and waving at the kids.

“Email me.” He called.

There were no reporters anywhere near, but he had to climb over the wire fence that ran round the school grounds. It was only about four feet high and purely there to mark the boundary. Peter was over it and into the darkness of the side street, before anyone saw him.

“Sir Peter.”

He wasn’t scared of the man stood beside his car; he’d almost expected him to be there. About seventy, clerical collar, he fitted the pattern of his stalkers. Peter approached close enough to talk without raising his voice.

“What do you people want ?” He asked. “You do realise one of your people has died ?”

“My people Sir Peter ?! We’re all God’s people, everyone is my people.”

His voice was calm and he sounded like a typical vicar, the kind he’d heard perform several marriages and far too many funerals. The problem with reaching sixty, was having to attend so many friends’ funerals.

“I’m here, listening to you.” Said Peter. “What do you want from me ?”

The man in the clerical collar handed him two sheets of A4 paper. Even in just the poor light from a street lamp, he could see it was the same madman’s collage of ancient and modern religions, that

his wife had described. Peter had studied some of it, purely as a personal hobby. It was all there, every prophecy about the great apocalypse. Huge Sumerian characters, next to lines of Latin. Even a few lines in English, talking about the great beast emerging from a sea of some kind. Peter found it hard to believe that the man in front of him believed in it all.

“This is crazy.” He said. “It tells me nothing. I’ll ask for a last time, what do you want from me ?”

“It wants to enter our world again Peter. You must turn off your machine and destroy it, burn the designs and never build another.”

“My fusion reactor will help millions.” He replied. “Electricity for the whole of Africa, for the very first time. Green power, sustainable power on demand.”

For the first time Peter saw a negative emotion on the man’s face, he was sneering at him.

“Save your sales pitch for others. The children are unwittingly drawing you into this Peter, they have been touched by it, touched by him ! Turn off your machine Peter, or there will be no Africa to use your electricity.”

Peter opened his car door and the man made no attempt to stop him. He looked like everyone’s favourite vicar, kind and harmless.

“Your colleague who died claimed to know me.” Said Peter. “Yet I can’t remember ever meeting him.”

The vicar knelt in the middle of the road and brought his hands together, as if in prayer.

“We all know you Peter Bailey.” He said. “You are the end, the Omega. You are the destroyer of worlds.”

He then began to pray, loudly and with fervour. Afraid that the noise would bring the reporters in their direction, Peter got in his car and drove away. It was all insane, him the end of all things ! He’d even stopped reading about ancient religions because he’d come to the conclusion that it was all meaningless nonsense. He looked in his rear view mirror and the vicar was still there, raising his hands to heaven and offering up prayers.

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The next few days were ordinary, apart from one very quick interview by a respectful policeman. Peter did know the prime minister rather well and Prometheus was providing jobs in a part of the country that badly needed them. The cynic in him thought he was being left alone because his fusion reactor was likely to earn a lot of people, huge sums of money.

“It’ll mean a complete shut down for weeks, maybe months. The cooling down time alone is over a week.” Said McGregor.

John McGregor the man who’d turned his prototype and a few plans into a plant that covered several acres of North East England. John had been building fission reactors for the military and he’d been given to Project Prometheus as Chief Engineer. John was a genius and Peter was a little in awe of him. They were both looking at Peter’s hastily drawn alterations to the most important part of the fusion reactor. The magnetic coils which stopped the miniature sun escaping into the world and destroying several picturesque local tourist towns. Peter was rather fond of Staithes and didn’t want to see the village reduced to a cinder.

“I ran the maths through our computers and CERN’s, it’ll work John.” He said. “Shut her down and install the extra out of phase coils.”

“You’re the boss.”

“Don’t worry John, I haven’t become reckless in my old age. We’ll run her up slowly, five percent a day and then only to 75%. Full power can wait until we’re sure we got all the bugs out of her.”

Why was the reactor a she in his mind ? He wasn't sure, but he was one of those people who named cars and motor bikes, even his lawn mower was called Ethel. McGregor looked happier and went off to give the crew some good news. Overtime for all, a major refit and probably temporary work for another hundred semi-skilled workers. Peter had already told the ministry about exceeding his budget by several millions and they'd been quite relaxed about it. The reactor worked, there had been a picture of it on the front page of every newspaper on the planet.

Peter's emails were forwarded to the Yorkshire plant automatically, to a secure terminal of course. He saw the neat and very polite email from Nilgun Zekai.

'Sir Peter,

Bobby doesn't email, but his parents are coming with him to see Prometheus.

My dad will be busy, he runs several restaurants, but my Mum would like to come

Christmas is coming up and then winter. Perhaps we could arrange a weekend in March ?

Bobby says Hi

We will bring our Radley coil with us

Nilgun,'

So, even the young didn't fancy winter on the barren moors of Yorkshire. Peter smiled at the terminal and typed in a reply that told Nilgun he hadn't forgotten them and he'd get the ministry PR people to contact her well before Christmas. She'd attached a PDF file of the circuits they'd added to the Radley coil and they looked like a cut down version of the new coils he was about to add to Prometheus.

"The children are unwittingly drawing you into this Peter, they have been touched by it, touched by him !"

He remembered what the elderly vicar had told him and couldn't help shuddering. It was a happy coincidence though, serendipity that he'd stepped into their study and met the kids. He could just as easily have braved the reporters and never met them again. He typed a new message to Nilgun with just one line.

"Has Bobby always had six fingers ?"

No madness ! He was letting all that religious crap affect him. Peter deleted the message before sending it and wiped it from the dustbin. He was an intelligent man born in the 21st Century, he wasn't going to turn medieval over a few crazy ex vicars. That's who his stalkers were, ex clerics of various versions of Christianity. The police hadn't told him much, but they had rounded a few up and given them a good telling off. They'd been released though, there was no public interest in locking up harmless retired clerics.

"None have actually threatened you Sir Peter." The young policeman had told him.

Not that he wanted them jailed, he just thought the police were taking it all a bit too casually. They weren't jihadis with dirty bombs, but the retired clerics scared Peter for some reason. All that organisation and religious fervour was likely to lead to more than just giving him crazy letters. The phone on the desk rang, the front gate saying his car was ready to take him back to London.

Peter left, but only after sending an email to his PR people, telling them to treat Nilgun and Bobby like royalty and giving details of the weekend he'd promised them. March, the reactor would be up to 75% by then, a perfect time for them to visit.

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The first self-immolation had taken place on Christmas Eve. No one was at work; the kids were all home and talking to their friends on the net. The whole nation saw an eighty year old Anglican vicar, burn himself to death on the steps on Westminster Abbey. The authorities became angry with the

Net providers, for about the eighth time that year, but the images from the security cameras went viral.

Peter found it impossible not to watch it through several times, it had been a message to him and about him. The vicar was long retired and no security guy would have given the harmless old man a second glance. He'd unfolded a pillow case and laid it in the steps.

'Sir Peter must be stopped,' was written on it, 'his machine is the work of Lucifer. He is the end, the Omega, the destroyer of worlds.'

He'd then calmly lowered himself onto the steps and emptied half a gallon of petrol over his head. You could see a security guy running towards him then, but he wasn't quick enough to stop the cleric flicking a disposable lighter. How quickly had he died ? How bad was the pain ? Peter asked himself those questions, he never had the courage to ask anyone else.

"He looked so serene, right to the end." He'd told Paula.

"Don't dwell on it Peter, he was just a crazy old man !"

He couldn't help brooding on it, the cleric had looked so serene, so happy, right up the point when the intensity of the flames hid his face. No screams, no shouts, he hadn't said a word. The ministry had put it down to the actions of a lone and very disturbed individual.

'Ronald Fisher, retired Anglican clergyman with a history of mental problems.'

Or so the press said, thereby instructing the public to write him off as just another nutter. Peter wanted to know more, but just found every enquiry to the police led nowhere. He hired a private investigator and that quickly meant being wheeled in for a chat with the minister. A man this one, with a history degree and no idea about energy. Previously he'd run the department that regulated bingo and football players salaries. For some reason the government had the idea that experience made him ideally suited to run the energy department. There had been the usual small talk about their wives, kids and of course, the awfully wet winter.

"You're not going a little weird on us are you Peter ?" He'd asked him.

"In what way minister ?"

He was passed a glass of decent brandy, a sign that he might be a slight embarrassment, but he was still in the sandbox with the big boys.

"Asking lots of questions about this loony vicar. He's gone Peter, had a long history of mental problems anyway."

Peter decided to be a little annoying. Nothing major, just a small dig at someone who was being a little pompous.

"Genuine history of mental illness, or a politically convenient history ?" He asked.

The minister would never make a good poker player, he blushed a bright scarlet.

"For God sake Peter, why the obsession with a dead clergyman ?"

"That dead clergyman left a suicide note with my name on it !"

The anger was gone now, the ex-bingo minister was leaning back in his chair and smiling at him.

"Everyone is pleased." He said. "I spoke to the prime minister last night and he thinks you're due a little bonus and a holiday, once the Yorkshire plant is hooked up to the grid. Just concentrate on the job at hand."

He was passing a folded up piece of paper across the desk. Peter picked it up and unfolded it.

"You've earned every penny of it Peter and more. Build the plants in Wales and Scotland and the British Isles will be self-sufficient for energy, forever."

There was more waffle about the government looking after the tax implications and that he needn't bother declaring the amount. The amount though, it was so large that he couldn't take his eyes off

it. Enough to house the next dozen generations of Bailey's and put them through college. Peter had never really been in it for the money, as long as he had enough to live comfortably and look after his daughters. This though was colossal, enough cash to do whatever he wanted, go anywhere, do anything. He could even retire at sixty five, rather than the official seventy five. The minister was smiling at him, knowing he'd been bought. Everyone has their price and the government had found Peter's.

"No more nonsense Peter, it's..... undignified. Get Yorkshire powering homes, have three months in the sun somewhere and then do it all again in Wales."

"Yes, yes of course. Thank you."

"No more private investigators Peter, ok ?"

"No, no more."

"Splendid."

~ ~

The second immolation was on the 23rd January. Religious scholars the world over were asked if there was a significance to the date, but it seemed that was the first date that the Bishop could book an economy fare from Nairobi to London. A genuine serving Bishop, from one of the breakaway African sects. He'd chosen to fly all the way from Nairobi, to burn himself to death on the steps of St Pauls Cathedral. A linen smock instead of a pillow case and slightly different wording. The meaning was the same though, Peter was Omega, the destroyer of worlds. Peter had to be stopped ! It worried the police and it worried Paula. When Charlotte phoned him in tears he decided to be a good government employee. Peter phoned the minister and asked for his family to be protected by the state.

"Yes of course Peter, round the clock armed officers. Bloody good chaps, the same ones who look after visiting heads of state."

"Thank you minister."

"Don't worry Peter. The police dropped the ball on this one, but they've been read the riot act by the PM."

The media was full of pictures of the police stopping old men in clerical collars, sometimes old men in normal street clothes. It was bizarre and pointless and the tabloids used it to make the government look useless. Hundreds of retired clergy were questioned, many having their homes searched. The police had a spot of good luck and found kiddie porn on the computer of an elderly church warden in Leeds. They used it as justification for a lot more general harassment of the clergy.

"Your generation have gone bonkers."

Charlotte told him one evening. Sadly, he was inclined to agree with her.

~ ~

The third and final death was right outside his house, at 4am on the 20th February. Again the date seemed governed by the travel plans of the Greek Orthodox Priest. All the way from Athens to die on a damp street in Hertfordshire ! It was madness, pure madness. Luckily neither of the girls were home, but he and Paula had seen the fire about twenty yards away from their house. Only the length of their garden saved them from seeing the horror in full detail.

"This is insanity." Paula had said. "Why don't the police stop them."

He'd just held her, but the public were also asking the same question. It was impossible though, unless the government wanted to start locking up all men over sixty. Filling up a gallon can of fuel at a garage was likely to get you questioned and shops had stopped stocking lighter fuel. Church attendance was decreasing, as if people felt tainted by contact with the clergy. Peter actually coped

with it quite well, simply burying himself in the data Prometheus was now spewing out. The minister invited him to come in for an informal meeting, probably to make sure he was still behaving himself. "On the plus side, the only people they're harming are themselves." Said the minister.

It was a point of view that was doing the round of the tabloids and it sickened Peter. He still smiled though, his bonus had arrived in a special bank account already.

"You have enough guards ? You feel safe and your family ?"

"Yes minister, round the clock. Charlotte has even taken a shine to one of them."

They exchanged a smile, they both had daughters of about the same age. The minister poured two glasses of single malt and relaxed back in his chair.

"I noticed you're giving two families the VIP tour in a few weeks."

"Yes, two bright students from an academy I visited. Their knowledge is astounding for seventeen year olds." Answered Peter. "Is there a problem ?"

"No, not at all. The PM was saying that we need more of that kind of thing. We may be worrying about these deaths, but you're still seen as a hero to 90% of the public."

Peter just knew that someone in the government had commissioned a poll, maybe even a focus group. Peter wasn't a politician, but his future still relied on a continuing high public approval percentage.

"Good, they're good kids." Said Peter. "They deserve the full tour of Prometheus."

"Once the dust settles a little, the PM wants you to do more academy visits, get out there and mix with the public. You know the sort of thing. Show them that science is accessible."

~ ~

The 22nd March and the two families were in official cars by 5am and on their way north. No moans about early starts, they'd all agreed to be ready before dawn. Peter had received a nod from one of the guards at the Yorkshire plant.

"Did they worry about the armed guards ?" Asked Peter.

"No, the pickup team said they're all excited about coming here."

An hour in the cars and then a helicopter ride and they'd be at Prometheus well before lunch. Perfect. Peter put them out of his mind and looked at the graphs McGregor had strewn over his desk.

"Perfect, everything better than we could have hoped for." Said McGregor.

"But..... I am assuming there is a but ?"

"We're still getting reports of vibrations from the night staff."

Peter knew it wasn't the staff getting night jitters, it was just that things were quieter once the army of semi-skilled workers clocked off. Less people hitting things with hammers and using rivet guns.

"We've been at 75% for a while now." Said Peter. "How bad is the vibration ?"

"I came in for a few nights and you can feel it in your fingertips if you touch the control room walls."

Said McGregor. "And if you get in the gaps under the fusion vessel, you can hear something."

Peter looked at his unflappable engineer and started laughing.

"Not moaning and chains clanking I hope John ?"

"Yeah right ! It's like when you hold a sea shell to your ear, but much fainter."

Peter looked at the graphs and their computers were saying everything was perfect, A1, working well beyond expectations.

"Can you run it through the CERN computers ?" Asked McGregor.

"I'd love to and ask the Americans to run our data. But the ministry are now paranoid about keeping fusion British. I'm not allowed to tell anyone about our work."

“They’ll find out anyway.” Said McGregor. “We have engineers from all over the globe.”

Peter got up and poured them both coffee, wishing it was late enough to add a dash of something to it.

“Of course John, ten years, maybe twenty and the Chinese and Americans will be building their own fusion plants, but don’t mention that to the ministry !”

Peter looked again at the graphs, something had to be done. They were currently supplying the UK with a fifth of its electricity needs, but that had to go up to a third. Prometheus had to run at 100%, it was why they’d spent all the billions to build it.

“You must have a few keen young engineers, looking to make a name for themselves ?” Asked Peter.

“A few ! I’ve dozens of them, all after my job.”

Peter chuckled, his idea was a longshot, but it just might work.

“Offer a daft prize to whoever finds the cause of the vibration.” He said. “A crate of scotch or something. Get them in here at nights and give them the run of the place.”

“They’ll need supervision Peter, or they’ll try and dismantle the fusion vessel.”

They both laughed.

“Set parameters, but get them in John, they just might find a cure to our problem.”

~ ~

The families had arrived, but there had been a slight problem with their baggage. Peter had seen a few Radley Coils and most were a foot to eighteen inches long. The students had one that filled a large cricket bag and because of the extra circuits, it looked a bit gnarly. That was the word the female guard on the helipad had used.

“It looks a bit gnarly Sir Peter, could you check it over, please ?”

Peter had introduced himself and then dug around in the cricket bag, examining the Radley coil that Nilgun and Bobby had created. It was heavy, he wondered how two seventeen years old managed to carry it about.

“This.” Said Peter to the guard. “Is a piece of science history. The Radley Coil, they even had one in an X-Files movie.”

Some of the security people saw it as their job to stop the crazy boffins from doing something daft. The woman on duty was different, she was a tech nerd.

“Wow, cool.” She’d said.

She’d even helped to carry the cricket bag up to his office. The parents had been sent to have the official tour of the plant and Peter was left with two very excited students.

“May I ?” Peter Asked, pointing at the bag.

“Yes, of course.” Said Nilgun.

It was heavy, she had to help him get it out of the bag and onto the table. The circuit boards looked almost professional, very little sign of patching. He doubted if he could have made anything as good at seventeen.

“What were the problems you had with it ?” He asked.

“Bad vibration when we tried to step up the voltage.” Said Bobby.

“Weird noises too, like it was trying to tears itself apart.” Added Nilgun. “But there was never any damage when we examined it. In the end we stopped powering it up.”

Vibrations and strange noises, it was beginning to sound all too familiar. Peter did have a small army of eager engineers to debug Prometheus though, many with a master’s degree or two. Peter looked at the way they’d positioned the extra circuits, it was so precise, the kids were far better than most he’d met.

“And Bobby had grown an extra finger.” Said Nilgun.

He felt the blood drain from his face as he remembered all the prophecies of doomsday on the letter from the cleric who’d died at his house. Could it really be happening ? Then he noticed Bobby punching Nilgun on the arm and laughing.

“Had you there.” Said Bobby.

“Sorry.” Said Nilgun. “But we just couldn’t resist.”

Peter had to laugh, more out of relief than amusement. Bobby was holding up his right hand, showing them his extra finger.

“Should have been cut off when I was born.” Said Bobby, “My mum is a freak though, likes everything to be as nature intended.”

“Hated it when he was a kid.” Added Nilgun.

“Now I think it’s pretty cool.” Said Bobby.

Peter went to the fridge in his room and brought out some tins of fizzy drink and several tubs of ice cream. The students thought that was pretty cool too.

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Peter was out in the turbines halls with McGregor, when the first alarm went off. The fusion vessel was the latest bleeding edge of technology, but all it did was heat water to make steam. The steam fed several large halls, filled with turbine generators. That was part of the appeal of nuclear generation, most of the tech was old and cheap to build. Plus there were plenty of engineers who knew steam generation and could build turbine halls.

It was noisy in Turbine Hall E, but Peter saw a red light flash on the diagnostics panel on the wall.

“She’s up to 76%.” Shouted McGregor.

He had to shout, two dozen whirring turbines made normal speech impossible.

“Could just be a calibration error on a sensor.” Peter answered.

They shrugged at each other, it was just an extra 1%, no big deal.

Fifteen minutes later they were in Turbine Hall B and a siren began to go off. They ran to the nearest wall panel and found that a dozen sub systems were showing errors and the main turbine steam was about to vent. McGregor was pointing at the fusion vessel output. Prometheus was at 82% and rising.

“That’s impossible !” Shouted McGregor.

At that moment the computer decided the main steam pressure was dangerously high and opened the vents. It was like a billion whistling kettles boiling at the same time. Clouds of vapour filled their view from the windows and the noise was truly deafening. Peter started running towards the main control room, McGregor close behind him. They were both too old to run and unfit, but they sprinted out of the turbine halls and along familiar corridors. Everywhere they met worried looking employees, but Peter had no answers for them.

It was impossible, they weren’t giving Prometheus enough fusion material to run that fast. They passed another display panel. 92% and still climbing, nothing was built to handle that. Slow up and slow down, give the feedback systems time to balance out the magnetic fields. For the first time he admitted it to himself, Prometheus might blow apart. They ran into the control room and Prometheus was at 96% and running hotter than the surface of the sun. The temperature was enough for Peter to make his decision, the fusion vessel was up to 6,500 Celsius. The computer was trying its best, but it couldn’t vent the coolant and that was hot enough to begin distorting its pipework.

Peter walked to centre of the control room and hit the big red alarm button. He picked up the microphone and pressed the button.

“Evacuate the plant this instant, now !” He screamed. “This is not a drill or a test. Prometheus is approaching a critical reaction. Leave by any means possible and get as far away as you can, as quickly as you can.”

The duty engineer was young; she couldn't have been older than her mid-twenties. He smiled at her and handed her the microphone.

“Repeat what I just said about ten times and then leave.” He said, “Will you do that for me ?”

“Yes Sir Peter.”

He looked round the control room and it was full of scared people and none of them were running.

The security guard from the front gate was there, he thought her name was Anne.

“Go, all of you !” Shouted Peter. “The computer will do its best. You all need to run for your cars, any way out of here.”

They were moving, but not fast enough.

“Come on..... Fuck off people !”

They ran and he ran with them. McGregor ran towards the East Car Park, but Peter made for the front doors. He had to rest though, sixty was far too old to suddenly take up sprinting. The guard waited with him, she looked very scared.

“Anne isn't it ?” He asked.

“Yes.”

“Don't worry Anne, it'll be a while yet before she breaks apart, we have time.”

Peter gave himself a full minute to get his breath back and then they passed another display panel. Prometheus was up to 100% and the vessel was running at 7,500 Celsius. It was impossible, but she was going to explode and explode far sooner than he'd hoped.

“Can you find out if the families were evacuated ?” He asked.

She was younger than him, she could use her radio and run at the same time. Then she was holding his arm and stopping.

“The parents left, they bundled them onto the helicopter, even though they didn't want to leave.”

She said. “The kids weren't with them. They were last seen in the containment building, right next to the fusion vessel.”

Peter knew what he had to do, there wasn't any inner turmoil. He'd invited them, he had to do his best to get them out in one piece.

“I can't ask you to come with me, but I've got to.....”

She put her fingers over his mouth and began running towards where all the sirens and warning buzzers were telling them to avoid. She ran towards the heart of Prometheus, the fusion vessel containment building. Peter did his best to keep up with her.

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They were still quite some distance from the containment building, when the vibrations began. Extreme, more like ground tremors, but accompanied by a shrieking sound. The sound of metal being twisted and torn apart. In a way Anne was less affected by it than him, she had no idea what the sound meant. Peter knew it was likely to be the cooling pipes being destroyed.

“No, this way.” He called. “The side door, I have a key.”

Anne never made it to the side door. He'd hardly known her, barely remembered her name, but she'd shown courage by staying with him. She was ahead of him, running far faster than he could. A

severe tremor brought down the walkway roof and Anne was almost cut in half by the pieces of metal roofing.

“Anne !”

She moved slightly her face turning towards him and then she was completely still. Peter just looked at her for a while, not quite believing what he’d just witnessed. It wasn’t fair, she was a hero, the hero was rewarded, not killed. The movies were never like this, it just wasn’t right, it messed with his view of a logical universe. He had to walk on the rubble, trying not to step on her body.

“Sorry.” He muttered.

He didn’t need his keys, the side door had been blown off its hinges and lay a good ten feet away. Steam was pouring through the door, so he ran again, back towards the main entrance for Prometheus. Dead bodies now, quite a few of them, some hideously burned by super-heated steam. In amongst it all a wall panel that by some miracle is still working.

Output 100% Vessel temperature 10,500 Celsius.

He knew there were scenarios where Prometheus would just melt. There’d be massive local irradiation, but no huge explosion. The temperature was huge though, well beyond design tolerances and then there was the unavoidable fact that someone had given his creation more fusion material. Peter was certain Prometheus had been deliberately sabotaged and they’d won, she was going to explode and take a good chunk of Yorkshire with her.

There was no escape now, no real point in finding the kids. In a few minutes they’d all be blown to atoms, but he felt compelled to find them, if he could. A last friendly face, a grown up to comfort them. The automatic glass doors had jammed, so he used a fire extinguisher to smash them.

“Nilgun ! Bobby !” He shouted.

A main power cable must have broken, the containment building was on emergency lighting and there were no alarms blaring at him. A few stairs covered in rubble and Peter is finding it harder to negotiate such obstacles. His knees are hurting and his hips, he’s been running for too long and too far for a man his age. After the stairs the fusion vessel is on his left and it looks deceptively normal. The magnetic fields are failing though; he was almost certainly receiving a lethal dose of radiation. Gamma, X-rays, it would all be escaping. Forces that mankind was never meant to be up close to, would be ready to bring death and destruction to Northern England.

Radiation didn’t kill instantly though, he’d survive long enough to find the kids, he had to. There was a small control room, where Prometheus could be controlled from if the main control room failed. He heard laughter coming from inside, happy laughter.

“Nilgun, Bobby ! Are you safe ? It’s me Peter !”

They had their Radley Coil on the floor by the wall and it was working. He had no idea how they’d done it, but they’d been given the run of place all afternoon. A large cable was delivering power to their coil, power directly from the emergency supply.

“It works Sir Peter.” Said Nilgun. “See it works.”

“He’s nearly here.” Added Bobby.

They looked so happy and normal, two students thrilled that their science project was working. Peter knew the Radley Coil was working, a hole in the world was forming in front of it.

“I came to be with you.” He said.

It sounded so stupid, so lame. It was now obvious that they, the kids, had set Prometheus to run flat out. They were responsible for it all, yet they just stood there, smiling at him.

“He knew you’d come.” Said Bobby.

Fifty feet high, maybe higher, the hole where the universe was unzipping. Peter had to walk closer to it, to pull out the cable supplying power to their device. The gap widened and it was dark out there, in whatever it was that lay outside of our universe. Something had to be shielding them though; no one could survive being exposed to nothing, the void, the wastes between worlds.

“Don’t Peter, please.” Said Nilgun.

He had his hand on the plug, one little pull and their Radley Coil would stop. Not that everything would return to normal, they were still all going to die when Prometheus blew her top. The fat lady was crossing the stage and getting ready to sing.

Something was there, he could see shapes in the void. Peter felt millions of years of human race memory, hit him like a hammer. His senses recoiled, he even involuntarily emptied his bladder into his trousers. He knew the shapes in the darkness, mankind had known them for a very long time.

“It can’t be.” He muttered.

Something else there now, the others are moving to one side, allowing it to get to the gap, the entry point into our universe. Large, huge, monstrous, it pushed a little of itself into the control room. An arm, or a leg, those terms seem meaningless to something that exists outside of our reality. And then the voice in his head, speaking in English.

“Peter, I was waiting for you.”

Peter took his hand away from the power cable, it was too late now, he’d crossed over, there was no slamming the door now.

“Who..... who are you ?” Peter asked.

Laughter now, but not unkind. The kids are actually dancing round each other, happy that it is here, that he is here.

“You know who I am Peter. Serve me and I’ll reward you well, I know you like rewards. Whole worlds can be yours to rule, all the secrets on the multiverse will be yours to know.”

Peter looked at the edge of the universe, looked at the dark void beyond and knew what he really wanted, probably had wanted since he’d picked up his first physics text book.

“Will you serve me Peter ?”

“Yes, yes I will.”

~ ~

~ The End ~

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