

Peter Skilling by Alex Irvine

Peter Skilling did not remember falling into a glacial crevasse on the north slope of Mount McKinley, so it came as a surprise to him when he awoke to find what appeared to be a robot sitting next to his bed.

"You're a very lucky man, Peter Skilling," the robot said to him. "A genuinely unique set of circumstances. You might have sustained fatal trauma from your fall, but look! You fell into a subglacial stream, resulting in scrapes and bruises only! And you might have been ground to gel by the glacier but for the earthquake that struck hours after your death and sheared away a portion of the mountain, leaving your body exposed in a depression away from the redirected glacier. Then, too, consider the above-average snowfall that encased your remains and protected you from the depredations of weather and wildlife."

"My remains?" Peter croaked.

Noting the dryness of his throat, the robot moved swiftly to unspool a thin hose from the wall and placed its nipple in Peter's mouth. Reflexively Peter sucked, and his mouth filled with cool water.

"This is the truly amazing chapter in your saga, Mr. Skilling," the robot gushed. "You died so quickly and in such cold water that -- if you'll permit me an inorganic figure of speech -- your autonomic system shorted out. Your brain function is astonishingly well preserved, and we have been able to surgically reconstruct damaged pathways. You were our perfect candidate. Quite a find, if I do say so myself!"

The robot paused. "Do you consider yourself sufficiently apprised of the fortuitous circumstances in which you find yourself?"

Peter hadn't caught much of the robot's effusion, but he gathered that he'd been in an accident on the mountain and survived. That seemed lucky. "I guess," he said.

"Very good," the robot said. It extended a hand, and Peter shook. The robot's hand was warm. "I am called Burkhardt," the robot said. "I wish you all the very best."

It left, and Peter noticed a woman in a white coat who had apparently been waiting near the door while the robot, Burkhardt, had told Peter how lucky he was. She stepped forward and smiled at him. "I'm Dr. McBride," she said. "I hope the steelie didn't overload you. We

have to observe protocols as part of our grant mechanism, and it's easier to have robots take care of them than entrust the process to people."

"OK," Peter said.

"Why don't you sit up?" Dr. McBride suggested. "I think you'll find everything's in working order."

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Peter sat up, surfed a brief wave of dizziness, and discovered that he did feel pretty good. "Yeah," he said. "I feel OK. So why am I in the hospital?"

Dr. McBride looked annoyed. "Yes. I thought maybe Burkhardt had rushed a little. These federal programs, you know. Not that I'm criticizing, it would be much more difficult to address everything on a case-by-case basis when we don't have access to all the intelligence, but it's only natural." Although she still looked in his direction, the doctor was no longer talking to Peter.

He took another drink from the wall nipple. Dr. McBride looked up at him and smiled again, apologetically this time. "I'm sorry, Mr. Skilling," she said. "I haven't answered your question."

Peter raised an eyebrow and sucked at the nipple.

"You see, you died in 2005. We've spent the past several months working you through the rejuvenation process, and I have to say it's gone very well."

The nipple fell out of Peter's mouth and a little water dribbled down his chin. Dr. McBride's smile regained some of its strength.

"There's no way to cushion it," she said. "Although God knows Burkhardt tries. You've been dead for 98 years. And now you have another chance to live."

Her gaze shifted to a monitor by Peter's head. "Mm," she said. "I was afraid of that." Crossing to the monitor, Dr. McBride opened a drawer and removed a shiny instrument.

Peter couldn't breathe. He tried to speak, and a breathy whine came out of his mouth.

"I've going to give you something that will alleviate your shock response," Dr. McBride said. Peter heard a hiss, and then he was gone.

When he woke up, the robot was there again. Peter felt worse than he had the first time he'd opened his eyes in that room. "Don't give me another shot," he said.

"Oh, I don't administer medication," Burkhardt said airily. "Fascinating colloquialism, 'shot' -- bit anachronistic now. We do transdermals now, of course, except when intravenous administration is indicated. But I'm not here to go on about our medical procedures; you're a healthy man; you don't care about this. I do need to apologize for yesterday. It seems I moved a little too quickly for circumstances, and Dr. McBride..." Burkhardt trailed off. "She was terribly inappropriate and unprofessional. To say some of the things she said, given the fragility of your condition... trust me when I say that you won't have to deal with her anymore."

Sometime during its apology, Peter remembered what she'd said to him. "Are you serious that I was dead?" he asked. Having slept on the idea, even if the sleep was drug-induced, made it easier to grapple with.

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Burkhardt cocked its head to one side. "Oh yes, perfectly serious. My function here is to ensure that your assimilation process is maximally efficient. There is significant state interest in making certain that you come to terms with the reality of your surroundings. Yours is truly an exceptional situation. I can certainly sympathize with your feelings of loss and displacement, but do not neglect gratitude. You have benefited from the most advanced and powerful science the world has ever known."

"You can?" Peter asked. "Sympathize?"

"Ha ha," Burkhardt said. "Not in an emotional sense, no. But my simulations of emotional interaction are considered very sophisticated. I belong to the only class of artificial intelligences whose testimony is admissible in court."

Peter could have sworn that it sounded proud. He considered what Burkhardt had said about loss and displacement. Pretty soon he figured he'd feel both, but right then he was letting himself be caught up in the puzzle of how he'd come to be talking to a robot that seemed to have been programmed by a self-help guru. Chicken Soup for the Future Resurrected.

"This is ridiculous," he said. He tossed back the blanket and swung his legs over the side of the bed. The floor felt good under his feet.

"Delightful," Burkhardt said. It actually clapped, or clanked. "Marvelous. You're making tremendous progress."

Peter needed a moment to get blood to his head. Then he stood. He was wearing light blue hospital pajamas, and when he ran his hands over his scalp he found that his hair had been cut. That brought on the first tremor of dislocation; someone had cut his hair. "OK, Burkhardt," he said, forcing himself to focus on what was in front of him. "Where am I?"

"Bremerton, Washington," Burkhardt said.

"You're kidding." Peter had grown up in Kirkland, just across Puget Sound. Ninety-eight years. He wondered what Seattle looked like. A powerful surge of optimism overcame him. He was alive, and Burkhardt was right that he was lucky, especially in that he hadn't had any family left when he'd apparently died. "I died," he said, testing it out. He had no memory of it, and was unaffected by the idea. "So this isn't heaven?"

"My goodness, no. This is still the world of the flesh. You don't seriously think you might be in heaven?"

"No," Peter said. He chuckled. "My idea of heaven wouldn't be a hospital room."

"What would it be?"

Burkhardt's amazing cheer seemed to have gone on hiatus. "Am I supposed to have a theological discussion with a robot?" Peter asked.

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"Part of my assessment must include the state of your beliefs," Burkhardt said. "Given the blessing you've received, it occurred to me that you might be thankful."

"Blessing? What are you, a robot priest?"

"The cutting edge of robotics, if I'm not being too immodest in characterizing myself in such a manner, is conducted in affiliation with the Office of Faith-Based Investigation. We are all products of our upbringing, aren't we? Ha ha. Now please, back to my question: Are you thankful?"

"Sure. But thank the doctors. I've never been much of a religious guy."

"I see," Burkhardt said. "Well. It so happens that this project is centered on the grounds of what was once the naval shipyard here. The primary strength of the American military is now orbitally based, so the facilities here were reconditioned some years ago. There is another similar facility in our Siberian protectorate, but we thought it best to keep you close to home."

Siberian protectorate? Peter let it pass. A lot could happen in 98 years. "OK," he said. "Can I get some clothes? I want to get out and see this brave new world."

Burkhardt's face was a single textured piece of metal, but Peter could have sworn the robot grimaced. "That's an unfortunate choice of words, Peter. We can certainly get you dressed -- in fact there's clothing tailored to you in the closet there -- but we think it's better for you to stay on the grounds for a while."

"What for? Am I sick?"

"I'm reaching my functional parameters here, Peter. You seem to be adapting remarkably well to what must be an enormously wrenching turn of events. Please stay here. Feel free to get dressed. I'm going to hand you off to one of the staff who will get you settled in here."

Burkhardt extended a hand, just as it had the last time, and just as he had the last time, Peter shook. The robot left, and a bubble of fear rose up and broke in Peter's mind.

He closed his eyes and gathered himself. OK. Things would be different. He would have to cope, but it would be like he was an immigrant to another country where people spoke the same language but lived in an entirely different way. Difficult but doable. Peter opened the closet door and found a suit of clothes that wouldn't have looked out of place in church the last time he'd gone to church, which was sometime in the '90s at his college roommate's wedding. It fit perfectly, and so did the shoes. A pair of spats came with the shoes; Peter looked them over, and decided that his willingness to assimilate only went so far.

Alone and awake, he had a chance to really look around the room for the first time. There was no window, no TV -- did people still watch TV? He couldn't imagine they didn't. It would be weird if the hardest thing about blending into the year 2103 was the lack of television.

2103. The number didn't mean anything to Peter. When it came right down to it, he had to

admit that he didn't quite believe it yet. The alternative was that he was hallucinating, but there he was in a room painted pale green with a bed and a monitor and a chair in the corner and a little tube that came out of the wall. Surely he had enough imagination to hallucinate something better than this.

The door opened and an orderly came in with a tray. "Up and around," the orderly said. "Looking good." He was tall and rosy with muscle, hair in a crew cut. Peter's first instinct was that the guy was military.

"I feel OK," he said. The orderly set the tray on his bed and left. Peter removed the cover: baked chicken, muffin, vegetables, a plastic bottle of juice. He sat down and ate, getting progressively hungrier as he demolished the meal, until by the time he was finished he wanted to start all over again.

There was nothing visible that looked like a call button. Peter looked at the monitor, saw that it was tracking his vital signs even though he wasn't connected to it. He hadn't seen any kind of contact patches when he'd changed into the suit, and it wasn't clear how the monitor could get a close reading on him. Was there some kind of camera system that could track all of his vitals? He looked around the room and didn't see one. Then again, Dr. McBride had been talking to someone the day before.

Peter went to the door and tried it. It was locked. He banged on it and it opened almost immediately. The orderly stood in the doorway. "Are you comfortable?" he asked.

"Am I under surveillance in here?" Peter asked.

A disbelieving expression swept across the orderly's face. "Surveillance is routine," he said. "It presupposes nothing about guilt or innocence. Do you need anything?"

"I'd like to get out of this room for a while. Get some fresh air."

"A tour is being arranged, Mr. Skilling. You will be contacted when arrangements are complete." The orderly shut the door.

Peter got mad. He banged on the door again. The orderly opened it. "If you're going to bullshit me," Peter said, "you could at least remove my tray."

"Your language is objectionable," the orderly said, but he came in and took the tray.

Without a clock in the room, he had no way of knowing how much time passed before the

door opened again and three people came in. Make that two people and a robot: Burkhardt stood behind the orderly and a woman Peter hadn't seen before. "Mr. Skilling," she said.

"Are you my new doctor?"

"No. I'm here to take you outside and answer any questions you might have. My name is Melinda. If you'll come this way."

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Peter followed her out into a hallway. Burkhardt and the orderly fell into step behind them. "Your rejuvenation is our first full success," Melinda said as they waited for an elevator. "It really has been a gift both to you and to science."

She fell silent, and Peter figured out that he was supposed to respond. It was beginning to dawn on him that people in 22nd century Bremerton expected certain ritualistic exchanges, and that so far he hadn't made a very good impression. Even Burkhardt had been bothered by the offhand brave-new-world comment, which Peter had meant with Shakespeare in mind instead of Huxley -- but it might be too late to explain that.

The elevator door opened, and the four of them crowded into the car. Peter noticed a crucifix on the wall. "Is this a Catholic hospital?" he asked.

Melinda shook her head. "This is a military research installation. You'll find that one of the things that's changed since your accident is that we have different ideas about the appropriate role of religion in public life."

She'd put strange emphasis on the word "accident." Peter wasn't sure why, but before he could frame a question the elevator door opened and they walked out into a spacious lobby, all glass and steel. Military police stood at a screening checkpoint just inside the front doors, and at least half of the people moving through the lobby wore uniforms. Most of the others wore white coats. "Since when does the military fund research into how to bring people back to life?" Peter asked.

"National security concerns dictate that most scientific research be conducted in cooperation with the military," Melinda said. "We've taken the lead on this project." She leaned her face down to a screen, and one of the MPs waved her through. The orderly did the same, and Burkhardt held one hand in front of the screen. Peter followed suit. The

screen was blank, glowing a dim green. It didn't respond visibly to his presence, but one of the MPs nodded at him and he followed his escorts outside.

It was a nice day, warm and clear. Peter looked out over the islands in Puget Sound, then turned around to see the Olympic Mountains. He blinked. They weren't quite the right shade of green, and everywhere he looked he saw the savage brown scars of clear-cuts. "What the hell happened there?" he asked.

"We've all had to make sacrifices," Melinda answered. "National parks are a luxury in an age of terror. With the exception of presidential historic sites, they've all been transferred to private ownership."

Peter was furious, but he bit down on the profane comment he'd been about to make. "Speaking of ownership," Melinda said, "I believe these are yours." She reached out with his

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wallet and a small Ziploc baggie with what was left of the last quarter-ounce Peter had bought before he fell into a glacier.

An instinct to caution prickled the back of his neck. "Thanks," he said, and took only the wallet.

"Please, Mr. Skilling," Melinda said. "Blood tests clearly indicated the presence of marijuana in your body, and this bag was found in your right front pocket. It's a little too late to deny things."

Peter shrugged and took the weed. He walked back toward the hospital door and threw it into a trash can. "I doubt it's any good after 98 years anyway."

"I wouldn't know," Melinda said. "Are you angry about something, Mr. Skilling?"

"My goodness, of course he's angry," Burkhardt piped up. "A perfectly rational response to his situation, in fact a clear indication that he is coping in a sane and intelligent manner. I note that you grew angry when you saw the mountains, Peter. Is that because of our conservation practices?"

"Is that what you call it? Looks like a clear-cut to me."

"That's not a current term. 'Maximal extractive intensity and utilization' is the standard

practice at this time. I believe 'clear-cut' is jargon from the environmentalists of your time, am I correct?"

Peter pointed up at the mountains. "No, 'clear-cut' is an accurate description of what's happened up there," he said.

"So would you consider yourself an environmentalist?" Burkhardt asked.

"Yeah, I would. Especially compared to whoever authorized that."

"Whoa there," the orderly said. "All conservation decisions come straight from the top. Show a little respect."

"Were you a member of the Green Party of the United States?" Melinda asked.

"What?"

"It's a simple question, Mr. Skilling. We need to know as much as possible about you to make correct decisions."

"Fine. Yes, I was a Green. Still am, if there's still a party."

"There isn't," Melinda said. She turned to the orderly. "Vince, do you need anything else?"

"We need to get the drug offense squared away," Vince said. "Mr. Skilling, who did you purchase the marijuana from?"

Peter just gaped at him. "The guy I bought from has probably been dead for 60 years, Vince."

"You may address me as Col. Trecker. Answer the question."

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Peter hesitated. He didn't want to rat on anyone, but you couldn't do much harm to a dead guy. Except me, he thought, and if they're going to make a big deal out of this I better cooperate. Especially if they've had this colonel pretending he was an orderly. "His name was Phil Kokoszka. Happy?"

Col. Trecker whipped out a PDA and tapped at it. "Philip J. Kokoszka of Redmond?"

"Yeah, he lived in Redmond." Peter had just been there last week, or 98 years ago by the world's reckoning.

"Was he a Green too?"

"Yeah. I knew him through local meetings. Come on, what's the point? He's dead. So was I."

Jesus."

The curse brought a moment of icy silence.

"Are we all set here?" Melinda asked.

Trecker put away the PDA. "Looks that way. Take him back inside."

"Wait a minute," Peter said. "I'm kind of looking forward to seeing what the world looks like now."

"The brave new world?" Col. Trecker responded. "Maybe some other time. Right now there's business to take care of."

Burkhardt stepped closer to Peter. "Time to go in, Peter," it said. "You really are doing marvelously well. Don't let your initial emotional responses cloud your judgment."

When they entered the hospital, one of the MPs at the door fell into step, his rifle slung at his hip and pointed in Peter's direction. They didn't go back to the elevator; instead Melinda and Col. Trecker let the party down a curving hall to an open door. They went in, and Peter got a cold chill as he recognized the setup: a desk at the far wall, set on a low dais; two tables facing it; a few chairs arranged in one corner. A courtroom. Burkhardt sat Peter at one of the tables and remained standing behind him. Col. Trecker went to the desk. Melinda sat at the other table.

"You've got to be kidding," Peter said. "The Army is prosecuting me for holding a quarter-ounce of weed a hundred years ago?"

"That's certainly a rosy way of putting it," Burkhardt said. "I'm deeply sorry that the situation is in fact a little more serious than that."

The door opened and shut behind Peter. He started to glance over his shoulder to see who was coming in, but Burkhardt stepped to block his view. "Eyes front, Peter. Let's make the best of things here, shall we?"

Run, Peter thought. But he didn't. He turned back around and looked at Col. Trecker, who had his PDA out again. A display set into the wall came to life, and Trecker took a gavel

from a drawer and rapped it on the desk. "Case of United States Government against Peter Skilling," he said. "Military court convened per the Uniting and Strengthening America Act of

2001. Major Fullerton, your stipulations."

Melinda rose. Working from her own PDA, she began. "Defendant Skilling is known to have fallen into a glacial crevasse while hiking in Alaska during the late summer of the Year of Our Lord 2005." The screen flashed a Seattle Post-Intelligencer article from Aug. 29, 2005: KIRKLAND MAN MISSING ON McKINLEY. The article disappeared, and a video recording appeared. Peter and Melinda --Major Fullerton -- outside the hospital: Fine. Yes, I was a Green. Still am, if there's still a party. "Defendant was at that time, and still claims to be, a member of a terrorist organization, the Green Party of the United States."

"What?" Peter said.

Col. Trecker rapped his gavel. "You will speak only in answer to a direct question. Continue, Major."

"Defendant was at the time of his death under the influence of a Class I controlled substance, cannabis sativa." Peter disappeared from the screen, replaced by a medical report that came and went too fast for him to read it. "The concentrations of intoxicating agents in defendant's blood indicate that his motor functions would have been considerably impaired, and that mountain hiking under this influence would have been criminally reckless according to prevailing legal standards." A list of legal decisions scrolled across the screen.

"Counselor Burkhardt, do you accept these facts as stipulated?" Trecker asked.

"We do, Colonel."

"Since when is the Green Party a terrorist group?" Peter said.

Trecker got up from behind his desk, walked up to Peter's table, and leaned over Peter. "If you speak again without being asked a direct question, I swear on my mother's Bible that I will bang your head on this table until you can count your teeth on one hand. Is that clear? That was a direct question."

Peter's throat had dried shut. He coughed and managed to say, "Clear."

Trecker nodded and went back to his desk. "Major."

"Following from the entered stipulations, and under the Terrorism Penalties Enhancement Act of 2005 and the VICTORY Act of 2005, we accuse the defendant of terrorist acts resulting in death. In addition, we accuse the defendant of making comments pejorative to

the stature and actions of the Commander in Chief, which act to undermine confidence in the United States of America and therefore weaken our efforts to fight global terror."

"Peter Skilling, do you understand the charges against you?"

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"I sure as hell do not," Peter said. "What did I do that was terrorist? Since when is it illegal to make pejorative comments about idiot politicians?"

"Counselor," Trecker said. "Advise the defendant before I have to get up again."

Burkhardt's hand fell heavily on Peter's shoulder. "Peter. You've put yourself in a tricky situation here, and you're only making it worse. Wouldn't you be better off cooperating and not being quite so antagonistic?"

"Are you defending me, Burkhardt?"

"That is my role, yes, and I am very proud to perform it." Burkhardt straightened. "I believe we can count on a more civil atmosphere," he said to Trecker.

The colonel nodded. "How do you answer the charges?"

"Oh, not guilty. In addition, I move for the dismissal of the pejorative-comment and undermining-confidence charges, which are possible only under laws passed during the 2020s. Clearly Peter can't be charged with a crime that didn't exist at the time of his death, and at that time, free-speech law was much less codified than it has since become."

Trecker looked down at his PDA. After a moment's consultation, he said, "Those charges are dismissed."

"Objection," Major Fullerton said.

"Overruled. Major, you will make your case only on the charge of terrorist acts resulting in death. Proceed."

Hope fluttered weakly in Peter's stomach. Burkhardt had done the job so far. He might be a crazy robot, but Dr. McBride had said he was built to ensure protocols were met; what else would you want in a lawyer?

"Colonel, the government's case is simple. Under the Terrorism Penalties Enhancement Act of 2005, it is a capital offense to commit an act of terrorism that results in a death. The

VICTORY Act of 2005 liberalized the definition of terrorism to include drug possession and distribution if it could be shown that drug money financed terrorist organizations. The defendant has admitted that his supplier was a member of the Green Party of the United States, which was on terrorist watchlists as early as 2003 and officially added to the government's list of terrorist organizations in April of 2005 following the first reelection of President George W. Bush." On the wall screen, Peter watched himself say that Phil Kokoszka was a Green.

"Medical and toxicological reports indicate that the defendant was seriously impaired by marijuana intoxication at the time of his death. Under the provisions of the Terrorism Penalties and VICTORY Acts, his purchase of marijuana was a terrorist act in that it benefited a known terrorist organization. His use of that same marijuana impaired his

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physical coordination to the extent that he suffered a fatal fall on Mount McKinley. It is clear that his terrorist act of purchasing marijuana from the Green Party of the United States led directly to his decease, which makes the Terrorism Penalties Act applicable here and leaves the government no choice but to subject the defendant to the ultimate sanction. The only question is whether or not the defendant is compos mentis, and to answer that issue the government calls Burkhardt."

Before Peter could say anything, Burkhardt slapped a metal hand over his mouth. "Please, Peter. This is all standard. You must realize that things aren't the same as you remember. We're all much safer now."

Letting go of Peter's jaw, Burkhardt stood and walked out in front of the table. Trecker swore it in.

"Do you find the defendant Peter Skilling to be fit for trial?" Major Fullerton asked it.

"Peter has done an exceptional job of adapting to severely trying circumstances," Burkhardt enthused. "I would not have thought it possible for him to be as well-adjusted as he is, but I can find no evidence of deficiency in analytic or emotional responses. What a fine example of the human mind he is."

Numbness was slowly settling over Peter's mind. Now I can't believe this is real, he

thought. No way. I'm still on the mountain, and all of these lunatics are a dying paranoid fantasy.

"Thank you, Burkhardt," Major Fullerton said. "You are excused."

"That was a defense?" Peter muttered when Burkhardt returned to the table.

"Peter, I'm under oath," the robot said. "And I'm very proud of you."

"Anything else, Major?"

Fullerton shook her head. "We rest, sir."

Trecker looked at Burkhardt. "Defense?"

"The defense challenges the toxicology report," Burkhardt practically crowed, "and calls Dr. Felicia McBride."

"Objection," Major Fullerton called. "Dr. McBride's security clearance has been revoked for lack of confidence due to comments made in the defendant's presence. She cannot be counted on to deliver objective testimony."

"Sustained," said Col. Trecker. "Anything else, Burkhardt?"

"This is terribly disappointing," Burkhardt said. "No, Colonel. The defense rests."

Col. Trecker stood. So did Major Fullerton. Burkhardt tapped Peter on the shoulder and Peter rose, feeling stoned again, as if all of this was very distant. "Right," the colonel said. "We defend our homeland against those who would destroy our freedoms and our way of

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life. In that defense it is sometimes necessary to take actions that in other circumstances would be found repugnant. Peter Skilling, you are guilty of terrorist acts resulting in the death of Peter Skilling, and under the Terrorism Penalties Enhancement Act of 2005 you are sentenced to death. Sentence to be carried out immediately. Dr. McBride?"

Peter turned, and this time Burkhardt let him. The robot was whispering close to Peter's ear, something about how resilient and exceptional he was, how astonishing it was that he had so successfully adapted to what must have been a terrible blow, and Dr. McBride was walking up to him with the transdermal in her hand and a look in her eye that told Peter all he needed to know.

"I'm going to give you something, Peter," she said, and he thought, I don't blame you. He

heard a hiss, and then he was gone.