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Opening extract from

The Resistance

Written by

Gemma Malley

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For Mark, for always

Chapter One

Overhead lighting, bleak and uncompromising, shone down into the small room like a prison guard's searchlight, picking out every speck of dust, every mark on the cheap carpet, every smudged fingerprint on the window sill. It was a room which, Peter suspected, had been used for many purposes; the ghosts of its former occupants clung to it like cobwebs.

'Tell me how Peter is. Tell me what he's been thinking about lately.'

Peter looked into the eyes of the woman sitting in front of him and sat back in his chair, circling the gold ring around his finger. The ring had been the only thing he'd had with him when he was found as a baby.

The chair was padded, obviously intended to put him at ease, but it wasn't working. He rarely felt comfortable. Anna said it was because he liked to make things difficult for himself, but he wasn't sure. He figured that it just wasn't in his nature to feel too comfortable. Comfort made you lazy. It was the easy option.

'He's been thinking,' he said, smirking to himself as he adopted his counsellor's use of the third person, 'that his life sucks. That it's monotonous and boring and that there is very little point to him.'

His assimilation counsellor frowned; Peter felt adrenaline zip through his body. She was taken in. She looked concerned. It was a rare display of emotion – her face hardly ever expressed anything other than passive interest, however much he'd tried over the past few months. He studied her face. Her skin gave the initial impression of a light tan, but under the harsh overhead light you could see that actually it was covered in bronzing powder, little particles of orangey-brown dust nestling into the ridges around her eyes, around her mouth. She wore turquoise – a jacket and matching skirt. Her neck sagged. But Peter's eyes were drawn to her hair, which somehow didn't work. It was brown, with strands of blonde in it. At least, the hairs *looked* brown and blonde; they were white really, coloured regularly, religiously. Any sign of old age had to be eradicated. It was pathetic, he thought. Appearances were all that counted to people who took Longevity, not what lay beneath.

'Very little point to you? Peter, what do you mean by that?'

Peter rolled his eyes, feigning boredom. 'I mean that, before, I felt like I had a purpose. I knew what I was doing, knew why I was doing it. And now . . .' He trailed off, leaving the sentence hanging in mid-air.

'And now?' his counsellor prompted.

'And now I work in a small laboratory doing meaningless work, I live in a house I loathe, and I barely earn enough money to heat it, let alone buy books for Anna or food for Ben. I got her out of Grange Hall to be free, to enjoy life, and now . . . now I feel like it was all for nothing. I thought I was going to do something with my life, achieve something. But everything . . . it feels like everything was for nothing.'

His counsellor nodded thoughtfully. 'You feel that you're letting Anna down?' she asked.

Peter sighed; even in this contrived conversation he found the idea of letting Anna down hard to contemplate, even though he knew it wasn't true, would never be true.

'Maybe,' he said, shrugging.

'I'm sure she doesn't feel that way. Anna is a very sensible girl. She understands how the world works, Peter.'

Peter raised an eyebrow. Anna had seen her assimilation counsellor for just a few weeks; had been discharged from the programme early. So practised was she at gaining the trust of authority figures that she had managed to convince her counsellor in no time at all that she was no threat, that she would make a good, diligent citizen. It was something that Peter admired and resented in equal measure – she was only good at it because she'd had to be to survive at Grange Hall. Peter, on the other hand, had been unable to resist the odd caustic comment, the odd

misplaced joke; several months later, he was still having to come every week to convince his counsellor that he could 'fit in' to society.

Peter crossed his arms and adopted a different look. A look that would tell her he was lost, that he was weak, that the Authorities had successfully crushed his spirit.

'I just want to provide for her,' he said, forcing himself not to smile at the look of understanding that crossed the counsellor's face.

'It's money that you're worried about?'

'Money, boredom . . .' He sat forward in his chair, placing his chin in his hands.

'And?' She was looking back at him now. 'Peter, you know that our discussions are completely confidential. What is said in this room stays in this room, I can assure you.'

Peter looked at her for a few seconds. He was almost impressed that she could tell such a blatant lie with such warmth in her voice. Maybe he'd underestimated her. 'I've begun to think seriously about my grandfather's offer,' he said in a low, soft voice.

Surprise flickered across her face just briefly, just enough for him to see.

'I see.' She paused. 'I thought you said that you would never have anything to do with him? That anyone who was involved in Longevity production was no relation of yours?'

Her eyes were twinkling slightly; she was playing with him. It was fair enough – he *had* said that. Many

times. He'd meant it too.

'I know.' He dropped his eyes down and allowed his left hand to move over his right, let his fingers trace the flower engraved on his ring, the flower which he believed had drawn him to Anna, had fixed his destiny. It mustn't look as though he was taking this decision lightly. He had to make her think he was conflicted.

'I'm only thinking about it. I just . . .' Peter raised his eyes to meet hers slowly, and didn't look away. 'I just want more. There has to be more, you know? I mean, Anna, she reads books, she writes, she looks after Ben. Me – I've got nothing. Maybe if I worked for my grandfather, maybe if I made some money, maybe . . .'

'Maybe you'd find some meaning?'

'Yeah.'

Peter stood up and walked towards the window. It was covered by a grey, institutional blind that reminded him of Grange Hall. He pushed it aside and looked out at the streets below, which were equally grey. He couldn't see it, but he knew that somewhere in the distance the outline of Pincent Pharma would be dominating the skyline. 'Anyway,' he said, not turning around, 'I figure he owes me.'

'He owes you?'

Peter nodded and returned to his chair. 'He makes Longevity drugs, right?' he said, narrowing his eyes slightly. 'Well, Longevity drugs led to me being a Surplus. They're the reason I've spent most of my life

being hidden and passed around. Which makes my grandfather the reason I had no childhood to speak of. He *owes* me.'

'You still seem angry, Peter.' His counsellor's voice was soft, controlled; she was doing her best to reassure him, but it had the opposite effect. He wondered if she spoke like that at home, off duty, wondered what she sounded like when she was angry or frustrated.

'I was angry,' he said, making his voice catch slightly – a brilliant touch that he would tell Anna about later. 'Really angry. But now . . . Now I'm not. Now . . .'

'Now you're wondering what to do with the rest of your life?'

Peter shrugged. 'I suppose,' he said. 'It's not like I've got many other options. I go for jobs and people look at me like I'm a freak. And I am a freak to them – I'm about a hundred years younger than most of them. At Pincent Pharma I could earn good money. My grandfather said the door was always open. So I thought I'd see if he meant it.'

'I'm sure he did,' his counsellor said. She looked relieved, like she thought she'd 'broken through'. He'd heard her once on the phone before an appointment when she was unaware that he was just outside the door. She'd told someone that she had yet to break through to him, that she was going to try a different tack. He'd been pleased – had seen it as a badge of honour that he was impenetrable, that he

was difficult. 'I think it's a good idea, actually,' she continued, now making some notes. 'So how were you planning to tell him?'

The corners of Peter's mouth edged upwards involuntarily; immediately, he suppressed his smile. 'I already have,' he said quietly. 'I wrote him a letter. He left a message yesterday. Said I should start on Monday.'

His counsellor looked up at him with a start, then turned an impassive smile on him. 'I see,' she said thoughtfully. 'Well, let's see how it goes, shall we?'

Half an hour later, Peter left the Authorities building on Cheapside, and turned left down towards Holborn. The streets were fairly empty – which Peter considered a plus. In the well-ordered pedestrian zone there was only a trickle of shoppers and one or two people walking their dogs or power-walking themselves. Keeping his head down, he shoved his hands firmly in his pockets, a reflex from his days as a Surplus, from his days of hiding, from never knowing who might call the Catchers, never knowing what tomorrow might bring. The few people around narrowed their eyes as he passed, stared at him uncertainly, a mixture of envy and mistrust colouring their cheeks.

As he walked, he saw the usual posters on the sides of buildings, spread across billboards, advertising miracle creams, promoting exercise classes and education courses, cautioning people to conserve energy.

Others warned of population overload, urging people to watch out for 'illegal immigrants, Surpluses and other drains on our precious resources'. Like the Legals weren't the biggest drains of all.

He used to challenge posters like that all the time, used to plunge head first into arguments with anyone who'd listen, anyone who'd take him on, but now he'd learnt to keep his mouth shut. Not because he didn't want to fight any more, but because Pip had suggested that arguing for the sake of it wouldn't achieve much, that drawing attention to himself could do more damage than good – which Peter could sort of see, but it still frustrated him when he let things go, when he didn't fight people more.

Still, he told himself regularly, they'd see eventually. When the Underground triumphed, they'd all see. Cheered by this thought, Peter jumped on a tram heading for Oxford Street. As it reached Tottenham Court Road, he slipped off, then walked quickly down towards Cambridge Circus, turning right into Old Compton Street. From there he continued west into the underbelly of Soho, where small, darkened shops furtively sold their illicit wares – baby clothes, illegal drugs, disallowed foods, black market energy vouchers.

He looked at his watch – he was ten minutes early, but that was better than being late. Looking around cautiously, he entered an empty shop, walked past the builders who were busy refitting the place, down the stairs, and out through the back. From there,

he walked down a narrow, dirty pathway towards a shabby wooden door and knocked quietly, four times.

Moments later, he sensed movement behind the door and it opened very slightly to reveal a man with a beard and a mop of untamed hair. He looked like a vagrant, and looked Peter up and down suspiciously.

'Cold for this time of year, isn't it?' he said gruffly.

'I find that exercise warms me up,' Peter replied. The man hesitated for a few moments, then pulled the door open, quickly bustling him in. The usual thrill Peter got from being part of something so covert, so important, darted through him like an electrical current. He didn't recognise the man on the door; he rarely saw the same guard twice. In fact, when he visited the Underground's headquarters he always found himself thinking he knew very little about the other members or how it was run. He was given directions and he followed them; his questions were met with wry smiles, evasive propaganda, or blank stares. It was for his protection, Pip told him. For everyone's protection.

'I'm here to see Pip,' Peter said, feeling himself straighten up, as if to impose himself more on his surroundings, which were familiar, yet alien. Every six months or so, the Underground's headquarters moved, leaving no trace of its activities. Peter had been to this building twice before, and each time it felt different, as if walls and doors had been moved around. What remained constant was the smell. The places the

Underground chose were always dirty, messy, half-derelict, easy to abandon.

To the left of the entrance were some stairs going down. A woman was coming up them, clutching her left arm. As she passed by Peter to get to the door, their eyes met with a flicker of recognition. Peter didn't know the woman, but he knew why she was here, knew that the top of her left arm would be bloody and painful where her contraceptive implant had been wrenched out by one of the Underground's doctors, knew that she was embarking on one of the most dangerous activities any human could take part in: the quest to become pregnant, to create new life.

The woman slipped out and Peter looked at the guard on the door, who said nothing, but motioned along the corridor behind him. At the end was a small room with a dim light.

Pip was waiting for him, sitting at a low table, his tall athletic frame hunched over it uncomfortably as if deep in thought. The founding father of the Underground, Pip was, to Peter, the nearest thing he'd known to a father – closer to him even than Anna's father had been. Pip had been there from the beginning, guiding him, helping him. Later, Peter had discovered that he wasn't the only one. Pip guided and led everyone in the Underground; everyone was equally in thrall to his hypnotic eyes, his unspoken power. Pip wasn't the Underground's official leader; it didn't have one, because Pip refused to let the structures and hierarchies of the hated Authorities

infiltrate his 'group'. But he was the leader really; everyone deferred to his judgement and no decision was made without consulting him. He'd begun the fight against Longevity years ago all on his own, Mr Covey, Anna's father, had told Peter, writing leaflets, helping the parents of Surpluses, gradually attracting supporters until the Underground stretched the length and breadth of the country. Now the Underground had a massive network of similar groups abroad and had become so powerful that the Authorities had set up a dedicated department to fight them. All because of Pip.

But Pip would never talk about it. He didn't look much like a powerful leader either. He didn't seem to pay much attention to his appearance; his hair changed regularly to ensure he could blend in, to make sure he wasn't noticed, wasn't captured, but most of the time it was pretty unkempt. And he always insisted on meeting in shabby, run-down places – like this one: plain walls covered with peeling paint, a window greased to prevent anyone from seeing in, a solitary bulb doing its best to provide enough light, a table that wobbled every time he leant on it.

The Authorities had put a high price on Pip's head, published his picture on every street corner, on every news feed. But they still hadn't caught him. People said he was far too clever, that he was too well protected, but Peter suspected it was more than that. It was just the way Pip was. You wanted to help him.

You wanted him to like you, to respect you. Quite simply, he made you want to do everything you could to please him; it was why the Underground had never suffered from internal feuding, why people were joining all the time. Legend had it that a Catcher once discovered Pip in a disused warehouse, that hours later, instead of capturing him and claiming his reward, the Catcher was swearing allegiance to the Underground, that he was now one of its most valued soldiers. It didn't surprise Peter in the slightest.

'Good to see you, Peter,' Pip said softly, without looking up.

Peter smiled, immediately relaxing. 'Yeah, you too.'

Pip motioned for him to sit down, offered him a drink of water, then looked at Peter seriously. 'Things are getting more dangerous,' he said in a low voice. 'We carried out an attack on a couple of Longevity shipments recently and the Authorities are upping surveillance. We're going to have to be careful.'

'I'm always careful,' Peter said, a hint of defensiveness in his voice.

'I know you are. I mean all of us. The whole movement. There are spies everywhere.' He looked up briefly, and Peter was struck as always by his eyes, whirlpools of dark blue water that drew you in, inspired trust, made you want to do anything to make them shine with pride.

'You can count on me,' he said quietly.

'You're still starting on Monday?'

'Yes.' Peter nodded for added emphasis.

'And your counsellor?' The counsellor had worried Pip initially. He saw her as an agent of the Authorities, there to spy on Peter and wheedle information out of him; he worried about every word Peter uttered in her company. Until now, that was. Now she'd become a tool, a communication device.

'I told her I'm bored and frustrated and that I want more money,' Peter said, a note of pride in his voice.

'She didn't suspect anything?'

Peter grinned. 'Of course not. Anyway, I *am* bored and frustrated.' He raised an eyebrow at Pip, but Pip didn't smile; instead, he regarded Peter cautiously.

'Peter, are you sure you want to do this? Really sure?'

Peter rolled his eyes. 'Yes, I'm sure.'

'But you say you're frustrated?'

Peter sighed. He'd learnt long ago that Pip absorbed and analysed every word and gesture, intuited every emotion. Peter knew that this was how Pip held sway over people, but it was still annoying sometimes. 'Frustrated because the Authorities moved us to a hideous box house in the suburbs. Frustrated because they watch our every move and I still haven't taken Anna to the countryside because I can't get a permit to travel. Frustrated because there're old people everywhere and they stare at us like we don't belong here. That's all. I won't let it get in the way. I promise.'

Pip regarded Peter thoughtfully, then he stood up

and walked calmly around to the back of his chair. 'You mustn't let your emotions get the better of you. There is a great deal to be angry about, but anger doesn't change things.'

'I know. Action changes things.'

'Action, but also strength of will, Peter.'

Peter nodded seriously. 'I know. I'm strong, Pip. Come on, I've proved that, haven't I?'

'Of course you have,' Pip said, his voice warmer suddenly. 'Peter, you have proved yourself a thousand times. But you're going to be on your own, with the whole weight of Pincent Pharma's machine against you and I need to know that you're prepared. You must realise that this isn't just a job, Peter. It's a battle. A battle of nature and science, good and evil. People get seduced by Longevity, and your grandfather will do everything in his power to win you over. You have to go into this with your eyes open.'

'My eyes *are* open,' Peter said, his eyes shining. 'I hate Richard Pincent. I hate everything he stands for. Longevity is responsible for everything bad in my life. Anna's life, too. I want to destroy it as much as you do.'

'I know you do.' Pip sat down again, and his eyes softened. 'And how is Anna? Is she OK with what you're doing?'

At the mention of Anna's name, Peter felt a warm glow surround him. 'She's fine. And she's as keen as I am to fight Longevity. You know that.'

'Of course I do,' Pip smiled. 'Well then, on Monday

morning you will report at Pincent Pharma as your grandfather requested.'

'As Richard Pincent told me,' Peter interrupted, his voice low.

'As Richard Pincent told you,' Pip corrected himself.

'And then what do I do?' Peter asked excitedly. 'Do I blow it up? Do I smash the machinery?'

Pip raised an eyebrow, his eyes twinkling. 'You keep a low profile and you take note of everything. And you learn, Peter.'

'That's it?' Peter's face fell slightly.

'That's a great deal,' Pip said. Then he leant closer. 'Peter, we have people in many places – in every Authorities department, in Longevity distribution companies, in prisons. But we've never had anyone at the heart of Pincent Pharma. No one with access to the information we need. Your eyes and ears are going to be your tools, Peter. Through you we can get to God himself.'

'God doesn't exist,' Peter said in a low voice. 'Everyone knows that.'

'No, he doesn't,' Pip agreed. 'But your grandfather is doing his best to become the most fearsome deity that the world has ever known. A deity that feeds on nothing but power and greed. A deity that must be stopped, for all our sakes.'

'So I just look and learn,' Peter said. 'OK. But is there anything I'm looking for? Anything specific? Do you need the formula of the drugs?'

'So we can make more?' Pip smiled and Peter felt himself go red. Pip's face turned more serious. 'I'm sorry, Peter, I shouldn't have laughed. It was a good question. So no, it isn't the formula we want. We want to . . .' His voice trailed off, as though he didn't want to finish the sentence.

'Want to what?' Peter demanded.

'The source of some of the new drugs coming out of Pincent Pharma,' Pip said thoughtfully. 'We're not sure what it is. We have our suspicions, but . . .'

'But what?'

Pip sighed. 'Peter, something tells me there're things going on inside the walls of Pincent Pharma, bad things behind the clean, professional facade. But whatever they are, they're well hidden.'

'What sort of bad things?' Peter asked.

'That,' Pip said, smiling again, 'is what you'll need to find out.' He stood up suddenly, his muscles tautening visibly as he moved. 'I'll be in touch, Peter.'

Peter nodded, stood up and turned to leave. Then he stopped. 'We are going to do it, aren't we?' he said softly. 'We are going to win?'

Pip put his hand on Peter's shoulder. 'Eventually, Peter. But I imagine there will be a few battles first.'

Peter looked up at him for a few seconds, then took a deep breath. 'You can count on me, Pip. I'll find out what's going on.'

'Good,' Pip said, his voice matter-of-fact now. He pulled out a file and handed it to Peter. 'Take this. Read it. Absorb it. Then get rid of it. And Peter?'

'What?'

'Good luck. Take care. And take care of Anna and Ben, won't you?'

'Of course.'

Peter left the room, making his way back along the corridor, past the gruff guard, through the passageway to the shop, then out into the road. He walked back along Old Compton Street, down towards Piccadilly, then jumped on a tram heading north towards Tottenham Court Road and, after that, another one heading south again. Eventually, he arrived at Waterloo Station to get his train home. Keep them guessing, he thought to himself. If the Authorities were watching him, and he was pretty sure they were, then he wanted at least to make their job more difficult.

He got off the train at Surbiton and looked around in disdain. A few months ago, he and Anna had been living in Bloomsbury, in the house that Anna's parents had lived happily in for years. It had been a lovely house – big and rambling, sunny and warm, a place as different from Grange Hall as it was possible to be. But soon after he and Anna became Legal, the letters started to arrive, then the official visitors, all saying the same thing: that the house was too big for them, that they would be better off in a 'more efficient space'. They'd resisted, at first – after all, the house was theirs, inherited from Anna's parents. But gradually, the visits had become more regular, the letters

more threatening until even Pip had shrugged sadly and told them that the move was probably inevitable, unless they wanted to antagonise the Authorities, that this fight was probably one that wasn't worth fighting. And so they had been moved to a box in the suburbs, where two shopping centres had replaced the high street, and the residents saw them as intruders.

Of course, the Authorities hadn't publicised his and Anna's escape to freedom; they didn't want people knowing that they'd outwitted the Catchers, that they'd got out of a Surplus Hall alive. Nor had the Authorities said much about the death of Anna's parents, or the murder of Peter's father. They'd done their best to brush the stories under the carpet, to lose them in a mass of red tape. But stories like that didn't die very easily. Word had got out, newspapers had printed photographs of him and Anna with headlines questioning the effectiveness of the Catchers, asking whether the 'Life for a Life' policy should be revisited. No one wanted any additional burdens on the world's meagre resources and that was all he and Anna represented to most people. So neighbours avoided them, shop assistants regarded them warily and passers-by either stared at them curiously or pretended they didn't exist. Not that Peter cared. He knew he had as much right to be there as anyone else. More right.

Thrusting his hands in his pockets, he walked through the Amenities Park, where various outdoors exercise classes seemed to take place at every hour of the day. There were people running, jogging, touching

their toes, stretching their muscles – a grand exhibition of strength, of energy, of life. Or, rather, fear of dying, Peter thought cynically.

It wasn't just death that people feared, either; it was ageing, decay. Legs and arms could be replaced; key organs could be regrown. But those little lines around the mouth, that lethargy in the morning that started to last all day, the feeling of having seen it all before – these were things that had to be fought. Peter had read all about it in *The New Times* and the lifestyle supplement of *Staying Young*, usually whilst waiting for appointments with his assimilation counsellor. The scientists had done their bit, the journalists would write; it was up to individuals to maximise the potential of Longevity – to live their lives to the full, to maintain a youthful energy and enthusiasm.

Or they could bow out gracefully and leave youth to the young, Peter thought. They could take a long hard look at themselves – at their endless, boring lives – and ask whether death might not be such a bad idea after all. People might think they had learnt to delay the inevitable, but underneath the veneer of Longevity, if they were honest about it, they would see that the rot had still set in. Like an apple that looks fresh but reveals maggots inside, people could not ignore for ever the fact that they were all past their sell-by date.

He turned on to his street, the ugly and monotonous row of identical houses. And yet, as he approached Number 16, he still felt the familiar

feeling of a weight being lifted, a sense of a gap in the clouds that seemed to dog his every move. It was home. Not the bricks and mortar – the house was, in Peter's opinion, a monstrosity, a soulless building with small, oppressive rooms and low ceilings; but what lived within it meant everything to him. As he approached the house, he could see Anna through the window, sitting on the sofa reading, knees bent under her.

Before his key had entered the lock, he heard her jump up and come running to the door. She pulled it open and smiled up at him.

'You're home!' The smile was short-lived; immediately it was replaced by a frown. 'And you're late. You said you'd be home an hour ago.'

'Yeah, sorry about that . . .' His eyes were shining, but he kept his voice low out of habit; the Underground had swept the house for bugs but Pip had admitted that they couldn't be a hundred per cent sure the house was secure. 'Is Ben asleep?'

He kissed Anna gently on her nose, which she wrinkled.

'Dead to the world,' she confirmed. 'So?'

Peter walked into the sitting room, flopping down on the same sofa Anna had been on just a few moments before. He could feel her warmth on the cushions. Before he'd met Anna, he'd thought he'd known what love was, thought he'd understood about friendship, romance, all of it, but he hadn't – not at all. Until he'd held Anna in his arms, until he'd

let her see his soul, until he'd heard her cry gently when he made love to her for the first time, he'd known nothing. And now, sometimes, when it was just the two of them, when he smelt her hair, caught her eye, he felt as though he knew all there was to know about everything, as though they knew the secret of life. A secret far more powerful than Longevity, far more long-lasting.

'So what?' he teased.

Anna pretended to punch him. 'How did it go?' she mouthed silently, taking his hand, her eyes alert.

'It was fine,' he whispered. Then, winking, he pulled himself off the sofa, wandered into the kitchen and flicked on the kettle. An electronic voice immediately piped up: 'How much hot water do you really need? Remember, less water, less waste.'

'Fine?' Anna whispered, following him. 'What does that mean? You are so annoying sometimes.'

'Me or the kettle?'

'You're both as bad as each other,' Anna replied out loud, raising her eyebrows.

Peter grabbed her, pulled her in towards him and kissed her. 'It was fine,' he murmured in her ear. 'She bought the story, hook, line and sinker. And then I saw Pip and everything's set.'

Anna smiled, her expression at once excited and apprehensive. Then she pulled away, took out two mugs and put tea bags in them. 'So you must be looking forward to starting at Pincent Pharma on Monday,' she said out loud. She was still smiling, but

Peter could see a hint of tension in her eyes, of worry.

'Certainly am,' he confirmed. Then he grabbed her again, this time more playfully. 'And by Tuesday, I'll have been fired and I'll have to get a job as an aerobics instructor,' he whispered.

'No, you won't! You can't. You've got to destroy it, Peter, you've got to,' Anna whispered back, pulling away and looking at him wide-eyed, evidently not entirely sure whether he was joking or not. Which was perfectly understandable; Peter wasn't sure either.