Immediate Family

by Glass_Shoe

Summary

This is the story of how Peter Maximoff loses his mother, reconnects with his father, and finds something he didn't know he'd lost in the first place.

Notes

This story begins in 1983 following the events of X-men: Apocalypse. It is mostly film canon-compliant with some comic canon elements, plus some headcanon, like the names of Peter's mother and younger sister, the existence of Peter's stepfather, and whatever else you notice that isn't quite right. That's all me. I own nothing. I'm not making any money. This work is intended for entertainment only, mostly my own. This isn't what I do for a living.
This has been edited by someone who doesn't edit for a living. Please forgive any mistakes.

Peter's inner dialogue is inspired by kvikindi's interpretation of the character in her (I'm assuming her) fic The Building of the House, which you can find here on Ao3 and which you should totally read because it's awesome. So this isn't a sequel to her (again, I'm assuming) work, it's just that I totally borrowed her Peter, sort of. I was also inspired by Evan Peters' portrayal of the character in the movies to write this (I love that weirdo), then I took all of my horrible ideas and put them into one story and now you're reading it. I'm sorry.

The story is complete in rough draft form, although I do enjoy hearing feedback to refine the work as I go, so please feel free. It will be very long, more than ten chapters, probably closer to twenty. You can expect updates on a weekly basis unless I get hit by a bus or find an enormous plot hole somewhere or need time to make the story better. If you do notice any errors don't hesitate to bring them to my attention. Thank you.

Please enjoy.

- Inspired by The Building of the House by kvikindi
Demi-god defeated, Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters blown up and rebuilt, half the world torn all to shreds, general populace more divided than ever on the subject of mutants, which precipitates the formation of the X-Men, Erik Lehnsherr, AKA Magneto, AKA Peter's long lost father, villain turned hero (sort of, because one good act does not an acquitted man make), decides that now is a good time to pick up sticks and leave. Poof. Gone, and Peter Maximoff is actually, surprisingly okay with that, and anytime he feels like he isn't okay with that all he has to do is remember what his mom had to say about the guy and how it all gelled perfectly with what he'd seen in Egypt. Then he's okay. Mostly. Mom hadn't steered him wrong so far. He's lived twenty-six years without his biological father in his life, (if you don't count the hour and a half that it took to break him out of the Pentagon and drive to the airport) and he'll probably live a lot longer if he keeps him at a safe distance, so...

Right, training.

There is soooo much training to be done. As a team the X-Men function about as well as a car with square wheels. Scott is a one-trick pony. He finds a target and just blasts away, regardless of whether or not the thing he's blasting is a priority. Jean's great half the time but the other half she gets stage fright and can't bend a spoon, let alone fling a sentinel across the room. Ororo's attacks are strong and consistent and effective, but they also tend to encompass a wide area and they interfere with what the rest of the team is doing.

Kurt spends most of his time trying not to get struck by lightning.

Peter does damage control.

So at the end of the day the team does function. Jean eventually finds her feet, Scott finds a target, Kurt finds a way to get in and out and do some damage and Peter runs around saving the younger mutants from themselves, because they're getting there but sometimes they need a little nudge (Jean) or a slight shift in their aim (Scott). He doesn't mind. They've actually come pretty far in a surprisingly short amount of time, seeing as Scott's powers only manifested, like, four months ago and the team has been together for about half an hour unless you count Cairo. Peter remembers how awesome it was but also how much it also sucked when his power manifested. His mom had been convinced that he had a brain tumor or something because it took him a while to learn how to slow down his speech enough to make himself understood and he kept running into walls and falling down stairs. So, it's a learning process. Peter gets that, but it is going to be one damn long learning process from the way things are going. Peter can see that Raven is frustrated. Maybe she's never led a team before, or directed a team or whatever because she looks alternately like she wants to tear their heads off or write them off as a lost cause and go recruit some other mutants. She settles for biting Peter's head off. “Stop coddling them,” she says.

There's a problem with that because a) he doesn't know what that means and b) if he stops doing what he's doing the 'danger room' is going to become the 'certain death room' because, seriously, is there even a fail safe switch in here? Instead of voicing those points, though, he says “Sure, what should I do differently?”

She can't think of anything, so she hands him over to Hank for torture.

Sorry, not torture, training.

Peter has never actually trained with his powers before. They manifested when he was twelve and
he’d been using his powers constantly ever since, and when his body wasn’t moving fast his brain was. His powers weren’t like Scott’s, all dangerous and hard to control and pretty much useless unless you wanted to level a forest or blast a hole in a building or toast, like, every marshmallow in a hundred mile radius, and he wasn’t afraid of his powers like Jean was afraid of hers. His speed wasn’t scary, a little unsettling, sure, but not for him. He was just fast. Really fast. How fast?

“Two hundred and twenty miles per hour,” Hank tells him, holding a stop watch, standing outside the mansion in the early morning hours, watching Peter wear a rut into Xavier's perfectly manicured lawn. That's Peter's top sustainable speed: two twenty. He can sprint even faster over short distances but if he tries to hold any speed over two hundred and sixty miles per hour he starts to see spots, and running isn’t all that Peter’s speed is good for. Hank has him do crazy things like listen to records at the highest rpm the record player is capable of and transcribe what he hears. Then he writes an equation on a chalk board and hands Peter a calculus text book to see how long it will take him to learn how to solve it, and they never find out because after Peter gets it wrong twice before getting bored and doodling chicks in bikinis and psychedelic album art all over the board. So at least they know that Peter’s speed does not make him a genius.

Hank is fascinated by Peter's powers, really more than Peter thinks he should be, until he realizes that Hank is a nerd and nerds loved science-y things that can be easily measured and quantified and predicted and so on into infinity and no matter how many times Hank does the math, Peter's numbers don't add up. Logically Hank thinks that Peter shouldn't be able to do half of the stuff that he does, so he keeps looking for a reason and that leads Hank to conclude “powers” plural because apparently super speed is Peter's primary mutation but he has a host of secondary mutations that he’d never given any thought to until Hank points them out, and they aren't all superfluous like his silver hair. His body has adapted to withstand extreme g-forces and to absorb impacts that would seriously damage a normal human (or the average mutant). That En Sabah Nur managed to break his leg is actually impressive to Hank because apparently Peter has very sturdy bones. “Thanks,” Peter tells him. His digestive system is also extremely efficient. His body produces almost no waste, even with the alarming (to other people) amount of junk food Peter inhales. Hank has Peter make a list of everything he eats for a week, which is tedious but insightful, and when the week is done and Peter hands in his homework Hank looks like he might be ill.

Once Hank has crunched the numbers he approaches Peter like he’ s about to tell him that Little Debbie had stopped production and really, he might as well have because what he says is this: “I talked to the professor” -as if that was going to shield him from the fallout of what he's about to say- “and we'd like to see how you perform on a cleaner diet.”

“Okay,” Peter says, dying a little on the inside because of course he'd known where this was all going. It wasn't a big secret that he ate like a goat stuck in a vending machine. Garbage in, garbage out is what his mom used to say back when he'd been a pain-in-the-ass kid who wouldn't eat his vegetables at dinner, even when it was corn, and he'd been like, “yeah, right” and she'd been like, “fine, you win” and thrown up her hands and told him his teeth were all going to fall out by the time he was twenty. But look! His teeth are just fine, thanks. He's never even had a cavity. Strong bones, strong teeth. Good old secondary mutations, according to Hank, at least. But the point is that he's kind of thrown his lot in with the X-Men, and it's a really cool gig. He's living in a freaking mansion for crying out loud, training with other mutants in a super-secret bunker under the school. And they have radical nicknames like “Storm” and “Beast”. Peter is “Quicksilver” because he's quick and his hair is silver and, yes, he knows it's not that original but it was the best he could come up with and it's not as bad as Kurt, who's circus name stuck and now he's named after a type of worm, or Jean who is still just “Jean”. Oh! And he teaches PE! Okay, yeah, that doesn't sound as awesome as being a freaking X-Man but the mini-mutants are way cool. Like, a lot of them come from broken homes or have no homes at all and there are quite a few that are, like, damaged but Peter gets them. Maybe that has something to do with the fact that Peter is basically a large child and shares their love of video
games and junk food and comic books and television, but, well, the point is that he's got a good setup here, so if the professor thinks that eating nothing but chicken breasts and bean sprouts will increase his speed or make him sprout wings or breathe fire then he'll have to bite the bullet.

Peter's high-minded acceptance of the situation lasts about twelve hours because he did not know that a person could go through Twinkie withdrawal.

“It's the sugar that your body is missing, not the particular food. Your system will need some time to adjust.”

“Uh huh,” Peter mumbles, sitting at the island in the kitchen, his pounding head pillowed on his forearms. He'd followed Hank's diet plan to the letter from the moment he woke up, even if black coffee tasted like stomach acid and egg whites and broccoli have no business being on the same plate let alone in Peter's stomach at the same time.

“Hank, I like you, and you're a smart guy and everything, but I would kill you for a Ding Dong right now.”

“No you wouldn't.”

“That's just 'cause my head hurts too much.”

“You're going to be fine, Peter,” Hank says, standing.

He pats Peter on the shoulder as he passes, and Peter groans dramatically. Still, he's a badass X-Man now so even though he's achy and snappish from Twinkie withdrawal he doesn't miss that evening's danger room training. He's actually pretty proud of how well he holds it together during the session. Then the session is over and they're all standing there icing their bruises and getting their notes from the professor and Peter can see Hank out of the corner of his eye kind of... watching him. Peter's not really listening to the professor's words, but he's nodding along dutifully while sweat beads on his forehead. Blah, blah, blah, teamwork, blah, cooperation. Then there's a little pause and Jean lets out one curious, “Peter?” and that's the switch the flips him into hyper-speed and sends him barreling down the hall to the nearest bathroom where he drops to his knees in front of the sparkling white commode and vomits. Nothing much comes up. Dinner was three hours ago and Peter hasn't had anything since, but that doesn't stop his stomach from trying as hard as it can to turn itself inside out. He can't stop dry-heaving even when he hears footsteps and voices and feels Jean laying a cold, wet washcloth on the back of his neck. When he's pretty sure he's done he thanks her, in his head because a) she can read minds and all, and b) he doesn't trust himself to speak without gagging, then he stands up and passes out cold.

He's only out for, like, a second, and he doesn't hit his head on the way down (Jean catches him with her power, thanks again, Jean) but it's enough to give Hank and the Professor minor heart attacks and earn Peter a trip to Hank's lab for a blood panel and a glass of ginger ale.

“Give it to me straight, doc, am I pregnant?” Peter quips while Hank frowns and reads a printout of medical gibberish, mumbling to himself.

It takes a second for Peter's words to filter past Hank's nerd-focus, but when it does he heaves a put-upon sigh.

“What, then? Mutant mono?”

“Your electrolytes are out of balance and you have low blood sugar.”

“Can I have a Twinkie now?”
Hank shakes his head and doesn't look up from the printout. He says, “It also says here that you're an overly dramatic man-child. You're fine. Your body is throwing a temper tantrum because you stopped main-lining Coca-cola. It'll pass.”

Peter had really been hoping for mutant mono. Or mutant flu, or anything that wasn't the sugar shakes. He's hardly ever been sick, probably another by-product of his mutation, and outside of the one time that he managed to over-indulge in alcohol (Peter is not a cheap date) he'd never been sick enough to throw up, so he was actually feeling a little vulnerable, and the closest comparison he had to this feeling was when Apocalypse had snapped his leg like a matchstick, and his dad -Magneto- had just floated there and watched it happen, and, well... it had turned out fine. Everything had been fine. The broken leg had sucked. How could it not? But Magneto had done the thing with the metal and everyone else had done the other things with their powers and Peter had done a lot of cowering and ducking and trying not to be burned alive.

There are goose bumps on Peter's arms.

“Cold?”

“Yeah.”

“Your body is more efficient at dispersing heat than it is retaining it.” Which probably explains why Peter always feels the need to wear a jacket.

Hank fills a hot water bottle and Peter hugs it gratefully to his stomach. He also brings him some kind of pills that he says are an analgesic, “basically mutant Tylenol.”

Cool. It's a placebo, but Peter takes it anyway.

“How long is this going to last?” Peter asks. His legs ache, especially the one that used to be broken and still has metal plates in it.

“I'm not sure, really. A week or two?”

Peter blows a breath out.

“You should feel much better when it's all said and done, though.”

“Looking forward to it.”

Hank is a genius, though, so he's right. Peter bitches and snaps and pukes after every other training session and just generally makes Hank's life miserable but about nine days in he turns a corner. By then he's lost all the baby fat in his cheeks and pretty much everywhere else and Hank has him increase his calorie intake so that he doesn't start to lose muscle mass. He's still a little sulky about his junk food but his endurance is up, he's burning energy more efficiently (he still eats like a horse, just a smaller horse, a pony maybe), and he's even thinking more clearly, so he guesses that's worth the trade off.

The X-Men continue to be astonishingly bad at teamwork... and pretty much everything else. Peter's starting to think that defeating Apocalypse was a fluke, and hey, he's glad they got lucky that time, but it seems like the team is just not shaping up the way that the professor envisioned it. It might have something to do with the fact that more than half of the team aren't old enough to legally drink and it also probably doesn't help that their erstwhile captain, Raven (sorry, Mystique) has been leading a pretty successful solo career for the past twenty years and she seems to be having trouble going back to the drawing board. Meanwhile, Hank never left the drawing board. He's a good teammate but his forte is lab work, which generally takes place outside of a group setting. So, pretty much everybody
comes to the same conclusion at about the same time: they need a leader, not, like, a general, because
the professor and Raven are kind of like the general and lieutenant general of their tiny mutant army,
but they need, like, a captain or a sergeant or something to get them organized when they're on the
ground.

Scott volunteers.

There are some raised eyebrows but Peter's eyebrows are not among them. Peter prefers to avoid
responsibility where he can, so if Scott wants to be in charge, good for him. Peter will just continue
as before unless told otherwise.

It turns out that Scott's favorite command is to tell Peter otherwise.

By now Peter has picked up on the fact that he's not Scott's favorite person. Ninety-five percent of
the time that Scott has a smart remark for someone, that someone is Peter, like he sees Peter as his
competition or something. For his part Peter is willing to cut the kid a lot of slack because of his
brother. Most of the rest of the mansion is still grateful to Peter from pulling them out of an exploding
building but Alex Summers died in the blast without Peter even knowing he was there. He'd never
really bothered explaining to Scott that Alex had probably been charcoal before Peter made it up the
driveway.

Anyway, he writes off Scott's jabs as teenage angst until suddenly Scott is his captain and he's
required to listen to the words coming out of Scott's angsty teenage mouth. For example: Peter gets a
talking to for leaving the rest of the team behind during a maze scenerio while he races to the end and
back. Following that Raven arranges a search-and-destroy with the added complication of total
darkness. That should have made Peter's powers completely useless but didn't because he told Ororo
to summon lightning, and that lit the maze up like it was broad daylight for long enough that Peter
was able to find the target. Jean dismantled the not-a-bomb and Scott got all pissed because Peter
didn't tell him what he was doing and Scott ended up standing in the dark with his thumb up his butt
(not literally) but Peter can't help it. When he waits for Scott's orders they all come so slowly that half
of them are useless before they leave his mouth, and by that Peter means that he knows they're
useless even if Scott doesn't know it yet because Scott can't think as fast as he can.

There's a particularly tense debrief one day following a search-and-rescue scenario (Raven
sometimes has them practice rescuing a mannequin family who are so cracked and burned by now
that they look like victims of a warehouse fire). They rescue the mannequins, who are none the
worse for wear, at least not today, and Scott stalks up to Peter when its over and makes him explain
why he disobeyed literally every one of Scott's commands. Peter does that, and doesn't even take
offense at Scott's tone, but the longer he talks the more the cords on Scott's neck stand out until Scott
thunders, “You didn't stick to the plan!”

Of course, as soon as Hank started the program Peter had known that the plan wasn't gong to work.
He tells Scott this, then says, “Did you want me to stand around and let you fail?”

“Yes!” Scott explodes.

And right about then it strikes Peter that he, not Scott, is the asshole in this situation. Yes, success
matters. Getting to the target matters. Rescuing their maimed mannequin family matters, but Scott is
never going to learn how to do any of that if Peter doesn't get out of his way.

So that's the day that Peter figures out what the word 'coddling' means. Raven will be so proud of
him.

“Alright,” Peter says. “Soooo... do you want to run it again?”
Scott draws in a breath like he's going to launch into a tirade, then he turns his head to the side, like he's listening to something and Peter figures that the professor is talking to him telepathically from the control room. When he turns his attention back to Peter he says, “Alright.” He points a finger at Peter's chest. “Don't go rogue again.”

“Sure thing.”

Peter follows Scott's plan to the letter. They fail the scenario, Kurt sprains his wrist, and they need to buy a new mannequin family. All in all it doesn't go as badly as Peter thought it would. Scott is still upset, of course, but at least he's upset at himself and not Peter and Peter can go off and listen to Pink Floyd in his room while Scott reviews his shortcomings with Raven and the professor.

Peter is lying on his bed with his headphones on. The Thin Ice is playing and Roger Waters has just taken over for David Gilmour on vocals when there's a knock at Peter's door and Jubilee pokes her head in. Peter takes off the headphones. She says, “Hey, Peter, your mom's on the phone for you.”

“Thanks. I'll get it in the hall.”

The mansion has five phones throughout the house that are all on the same line. There's one in the kitchen, the den, the main living room and one in the hall on the second and third floors outside of the bedrooms. The professor has his own private line and a set of phones in his study and bedroom. Plus Hank has his own line for undisclosed reasons that probably have a lot to do with his frequent use of highly combustible materials in his experiments. Hank also has a Ham radio somewhere in the basement and then there's Cerebro and the telepaths, so all in all the mansion is pretty well connected to the outside world.

Peter picks up the phone and says, “Mom?” and hears Jubilee hang up from wherever she picked up the line.

His mom's voice sighs out, “Hi, Honey.” There's a slight tremor in her voice, which is enough to set off alarm bells and flashing lights in Peter's head because Mom is a rock, totally unflappable most of the time. She has Peter for a son after all, so the fact that something's upset her puts him on high alert.

“What's wrong?” he asks, thinking there's been an accident or something has happened to his half-sister Lindy.

What she says is, “I haven't told your sister yet, and I'm not going to for a while, but I need someone to know.”

“Hey, are you sick or something, Mom?” he asks. He tries to keep the fear out of his voice.

“Well... uh...” the tremor in her voice gets worse, like she's on the edge of tears. “Yeah, yeah, I'm sick. I, uh... okay, I didn't think it would be this hard. I'm sorry.”

“Don't be,” he says sympathetically, starting to feel sort of sick himself. “Just tell me what it is, okay?”

“I haven't been feeling very well. I thought it was some stomach bug or something. I went in for some tests and, uh... the results weren't great. My blood work had markers for pancreatic cancer.”

Peter's heart drops into his shoes. “Are they sure?” Peter asks. “Because they could have messed up the test or gotten your results mixed up.”

“They're sure. I had some follow up tests and... my doctor wants me to come in for surgery.”
“Okay, when?”

“It's scheduled for Monday morning at seven.”

“Okay, I'll be there.” Of course he'll be there. This is his mom, and she lives alone now because her smart, beautiful daughter went off to college and her lazy, underachieving son moved out of her basement to fight robots in another basement two states away. Mom divorced Lindy's dad, Frank, thirteen years ago and never remarried. Frank lives with his new wife and their daughter in North Carolina, so he's not coming out to hold mom's hand while she comes out of anesthesia. Besides, Frank is an asshole. Okay, maybe that's not true. Peter just thinks of Frank as an asshole because Mom and Frank divorced when he was a teenager and Peter thought everyone was an asshole when he was a teenager. Plus, Frank is paying Lindy's college tuition and would have even if she didn't have a partial scholarship. So Frank's not really an asshole but he is a dentist and he can't pay Lindy's tuition if he bails on a bunch of root canals, and if anyone is going to hold Mom's hand while she comes out of anesthesia it's going to be Peter or it's going to be Lindy (or both, Mom has two hands) because surgery is scary. Peter knows because after the whole Apocalypse thing he had to have surgery on his leg because it was pulverized. Then it healed too fast and even with Hank's help the doctors didn't really know how to compensate for Peter's mutation when they treated him, so there was a lot of really uncomfortable guesswork involving sedatives that didn't sedate and painkillers that made him think the walls were melting... and pins. Peter has metal pins and plates in his leg. Hank and the doctors were worried (rightly so) that Peter would use his powers during the healing process and a cast wouldn't be enough to hold the bones together. It's going suck if he ever has to go through screening at the airport, which he probably won't because a) commercial air travel is waaaay too slow and b) there's a jet in the basement. So the point is that surgery sucks and being sick sucks and he's not going to leave his mom to go through that alone.

“You have to call Lindy. She'll want to be there, too, or I can tell her if you want.”

“Oh, baby, I'll tell her. It's okay,” she says, like he's the one who should be scared.

“Sure.”

Mom sounds a little steadier when she says, “If you want to be there, I have a pre-op appointment on Friday. The doctor is going to explain the surgery, the risks, and the recovery process. Apparently the recovery period can be pretty long and not very fun.”

“But they can get it all, right?”

“That's what they hope.”

“Okay. Do you want me to call Lindy?” he asks again.

“No, no, baby. I'm so sorry to burden you with this. I wish I didn't have to.”

“No, are you kidding? This is not a burden, at all, so don't think that. I'll be there, okay?”

“Okay.” She sighs. There are tears in her voice. There doesn't seem to be anything else to say. Gossiping about his mom's neighbors or talking about Lindy's college courses seems inappropriate. Mom says, “Well, I don't want to tie up the line...”

“I'll talk to the professor, and I'll make sure to give you a call before I leave.”

“Thank you, Peter.”

Peter feels like time has sped up around him. He sees a kid rush past with a basketball tucked under
one arm, which he isn't supposed to have in the house. A couple of teenage girls are standing at the end of the hall, clutching their notebooks to their chests, talking with their hands. Doors slam and music plays. It's all white noise to him.

He says, "I love you, Mom. It's going to be okay."

"I love you too, baby."

When he sets the phone back in the cradle he's aware that the girls at the end of the hall are watching him. He drifts down the stairs feeling like a log caught in a current, like his body and his mind have forgotten how to talk to each other. He sees Hank in the foyer and asks him if he's seen the professor anywhere.

"Yeah, he's still downstairs. He's talking to Scott." He's frowning. "Is something wrong?" he asks.

Peter tells them that he just got off the phone with his mom and that she's going in for surgery and how it's probably a good idea if he's there.

"Oh," Hank says. "What kind of surgery?" He's not nosy, just interested.

Peter's actually not sure so he tells Hank, "For cancer, uh, pancreatic cancer, she said."

There's a spark of understanding in Hank's eyes, and he probably knows something about the subject because he's Hank and Hank knows something about everything. He looks very empathetic and says, "Wait, I'll go with you."

"No, I got it. It's fine," Peter says, and he walks away before Hank can say anything else.

Like Hank said, the professor is still downstairs. Peter can hear their voices in the danger room as soon as he steps off the elevator, all tinny and echo-y, and it sounds like Raven is in there with them. Peter knows he's not supposed to hear their conversation and he's not trying to eavesdrop, but he hears Raven say, "Some members of your team are going to need a longer leash than others."

The thing about the professor's telepathy is that he tries not to use it, or at least he tries to pretend he's not using it so that people don't get all weirded out that he knows their deepest darkest secrets, except in Peter's case, where the professor has to glean his deepest darkest secrets from other people because Peter's thoughts are too fast and too erratic. Jean fessed up one day that she can usually make more sense out of what's going on in Peter's skull than the professor can, although Xavier is the first to know about it if Peter stubs his toe or if he's got something really important on his mind, so when Peter eases himself into their line of sight and the professor abruptly breaks off his conversation with Scott and Raven to wheel toward Peter he knows he must be projecting pretty loudly.

Scott looks annoyed at the interruption. Raven looks from Peter to the professor and switches to standby mode. Peter feels like he's about to suffocate, and by then Xavier's close enough to reach out and place a reassuring hand on Peter's forearm. The professor says, in a voice that's probably but not definitely too low for Scott and Raven to hear, "It's alright. Go to her. But please don't leave tonight. Get some rest first, do you understand?"

Peter nods. He can't look at the professor's shiny eyes.

"Peter," Xavier says. "Do call when you arrive. Let us know how things go."

"Sure."

Peter wants to say something about not wanting to disappoint the team or leave them in the lurch but
And those are the last words he says to the professor in person for a very long time.

Peter is famous at the mansion for his ability to fall asleep anywhere, anytime at the drop of a hat. As long as there's a semi-horizontal surface on hand, he can be out like a light in seconds, but the night before he leaves the mansion he doesn't sleep at all. Around five-thirty Peter gives it up as a lost cause and shambles downstairs with his mind foggy and his nerves abuzz. Aside from the cooks, Hank and Kurt are the only ones up at that hour. They're drinking coffee at the island in the kitchen, or really, Hank is drinking coffee, which is leaving rings all over a set of blueprints that are spread out on the island. Kurt is perched on a kitchen stool like a gargoyle, looking over Hank's shoulder. His tail is switching back and forth in slow, steady sweeps kind of like a cat's. Once you get past the surface there's definitely more cat than gargoyles about Kurt, right down to his tendency to knock things off shelves, although that's unintentional and has to do with there being far too many things on shelves around the mansion and the fact that Kurt's tail seems to have a mind of its own.

Kurt's wrist is taped and Peter remembers how he hurt it yesterday during the simulation. He can't believe that was only yesterday. Peter's focus has shifted so much that it feels like a year ago.

Hank greets him when Peter appears in the kitchen and drops his duffel bag onto a chair. “Hey, how'd you sleep?”

He wouldn't be asking if the answer wasn't obvious. Peter shrugs, “Not bad.”

“Are you going to stick around for breakfast?” Hank asks. “I doubt you're taking a bus and it's a long way.”

Peter finds that he is, for the first time in his life, not hungry.

“Yeah, maybe some toast.”

Peter said he would call before he left. Mom's always been an early riser but he figures he'll give her until at least six-thirty so she can get some rest, unless she's like Peter and she never went to sleep, but she'd sounded so tired on the phone...

“Are you going somewhere?” Kurt asks.

“Home for a few days. Maybe longer.” He tells Kurt about the surgery and Kurt's not the type to interrupt with questions so he listens until Peter runs out of words and then he says, “I will say a prayer for your mother.”

And he means right now.

It's pretty surprising that the one mutant Peter knows that looks the like some kind of demon straight out of an illustrated edition of Dante's Inferno is the most devout person he's ever met. Peter's never been the religious type and to be totally honest he's not sure he even believes that God exists or which one it is or if it's a bunch of different gods. He just doesn't know. After all, that Apocalypse guy thought he was a god and look how that turned out. Anyway, Kurt's pretty convinced that God exists and that He listens to the prayers of humans and mutants alike so Peter bows his head and lets Kurt clasp his hands and listens to a prayer in German that he doesn't understand and then says “Amen” when he thinks it's appropriate. Hank says it too, because Hank's a respectful guy, even though he's probably not sure about God either. And because Hank's a respectful guy he asks what Peter wants him to tell the students and teachers if they ask where he went.

“The truth, I guess. I mean, I shouldn't be gone for too long. Hopefully everything goes well and she...
bounces back and stuff, but uh... Anyway, I'll try to come back as soon as I can, you know. Just don't let Scott give my suit away, okay?"

"I will hide it from him," Kurt says, and he's probably serious.

Hank looks troubled. He asks, "Peter, I don't want to alarm you but I don't want you to be blindsided either. Pancreatic cancer can be very serious."

Peter knows. It's not like he missed how scared his mom sounded on the phone. Of course it's serious, but Peter's mom is one tough lady. She raised Peter, and she had him back in the days when premarital sex was taboo (not that that stopped anyone) and it was pretty common for girls who had babies out of wedlock to just 'go away' for a while and then come back without a baby like nothing had happened. Peter's mom didn't exactly 'go away' but she did drop out of nursing school and move back in with Grandma, who was still alive at the time, and then she had Peter at one-thirty in the morning in a hospital in Richmond where the nurses were really mean and wouldn't give her anything for the pain until she was screaming and they made comments about how 'maybe this would teach her to keep her knees together', but she had Peter anyway and he was born breathing like a heavy smoker, scrawny and wrinkled like an old man complete with a full head of silver hair and the doctor had looked at him and said he had genetic defects and wouldn't live long and if he did it would be in an institution, and Mom, who had fully intended to give him up for adoption because that was the norm at the time, said she felt so horrible that she took Peter home so at least he would be near family when he died, but the joke was on them because Peter didn't die, not even close. He ate like a champ and slept all the time so Mom got lots of rest and Peter was such a good baby that even Grandma didn't mind looking after him and when Grandma got sick Mom got her Puerto Rican neighbor who had, like, eleven kids, to watch Peter and Mom was able to go back and finish nursing school and get a good job and meet Frank and get married and have Lindy, and when she did she ended up right back there at the same hospital with a different doctor but the same nurses, except the nurses this time were nice and brought her ice chips and fresh pillows and called her 'Mrs. Maximoff' instead of 'Little Missy'. Then Peter and Frank were allowed in to see Mom and the little pink bundle and Peter tore off his baseball cap out of respect and bounced on his heals and said, "Can I hold her? Can I hold her? Can I? Can I?" and the nurses stared and Mom said, "You remember my son..." and the nurses got all quiet and then tried to act like they were glad to see Peter, which Peter didn't care about at all because he had a sister now, which meant he had someone to play with. So the point is that Peter's mom is a tough lady, a fighter, but even knowing that there's a cold little finger of dread poking Peter in the sternum, like there's some part of him that's already sped to the end of the maze and back and just knows.

"Like, how serious?" Peter asks, even though he doesn't want to.

"Well, it depends on how quickly the doctors catch it, but it can spread pretty quickly. I'm sure the doctor will explain more about it but... does she have family nearby?"

"She has me, and she has my sister. Lindy's in college."

"Your, uh, dad's not around?"

Peter's pretty sure that Hank already knows the answer to that question. It's not like that mutant holding tank at Alkali Lake was very big. Hank and Moira would have had to be pretty distracted not to have overheard him when he told Raven that Erik was his dad, but he's going to let that slide for now. "No, I have a step-dad, well, ex-step-dad but he's off with his family and he and Mom have been divorced for, like, a million years, so he's not exactly the guy she calls when the the battery in her car dies, let alone... you know."

"Okay... just... you'll call if you need anything, right?"
Hank is just flat out scaring him with all the innuendo. He probably not trying to, which actually makes it worse. “Sure. I will. Promise.”

Peter's suddenly feeling a little claustrophobic, so he asks Hank and Kurt to pass along his farewells and gives them each and handshake. Then Peter picks up his duffel and speeds out of the house, having forgotten all about his toast.

Peter's not inconsiderate. He did promise to call before he showed up at his mom's house, so he stops at a payphone in the village. He counts seven rings before mom picks up, and tries to listen for hints of weakness or illness in her voice, but she just sounds like his mom, and he can hear the coffee perking in the background and he knows that he'll be there in time to sit down and have a cup with her.

Peter runs full-tilt most of the way there but slows to a walk a few doors down because a few of his mom's neighbors are out. Peter sees Mr. Oberman lying under his Camaro, changing the oil. Mr. Oberman used to have a son, Roy, who was a few years older than Peter, and Roy would pretend not to know Peter while they were at school unless he needed to bum a cigarette. Roy died in Vietnam. Mr. Oberman has another son and a daughter who are both off working in New York, and he has his Camaro, which he uses as an excuse to avoid his wife.

Old Mrs. Szewc is out watering her lawn in her slippers and a quilted, button-up housecoat and the same perma-frown she's been wearing since Peter was nine and she caught him climbing the trees in her back yard to steal cherries.

Peter waves to her and shouts 'hello' with his hands cupped around his mouth because she's, like, eighty and can't see very far and can't hear at all and she just keeps frowning and watering.

Mom's lived in the same house and had the same neighbors since she married Frank. The fact that Peter's a mutant is sort of an open secret in the neighborhood. Everybody knows but nobody talks about it, like the two retired schoolteachers on the corner who have been 'roommates' for twenty-five years.

Mom's seen him coming and by the time he's at the end of the driveway the front door is open and she's leaning against the jamb with her arms wrapped around herself. Peter only saw her a few months ago and she doesn't really look any different, maybe a little thinner, maybe a little more tired around the eyes, but otherwise she's the same. Same Mom. Same smile.

“Peter,” she says, and pulls him into a hug for the whole neighborhood to see, and he doesn't mind at all.

Mom invites him in and pours him coffee and tells him that she called Lindy and Frank. Lindy got her professors' permission to miss class for a couple of days, so she'll be home on Sunday. Frank wants to know how the surgery went as soon as it's done. After Mom shares all of that there's a quiet time while Peter gathers up the courage to ask, “So, how bad is it? Does the doctor know? Is there anything you should be doing?”

She shakes her head for an interminable amount of time and squeezes his hand. The answer to all of his questions is, “I don't know.”

Mom's “I don't know,” is echoed by the doctor who will be doing her surgery when Peter and his Mom sit across from him in his office on Friday morning. The surgeon is is bald, with a salt-and-pepper beard and a firm handshake. There are about eight hundred framed certificates and diplomas on the wall behind him and it strikes Peter as funny that even this guy, who has a diploma for every Twinkie that Peter's eaten in his lifetime, still does not have a solid answer. Peter doesn't laugh,
though, because what this guy does know is enough to make his stomach turn over. What he does know is that the cancer has spread beyond Mom's pancreas. What he doesn't know is how far it's spread. He thinks that it's likely he'll have to remove the entire pancreas and likely some nearby tissue. After a few days in the hospital she can go home, but the doctor says her recovery will take several weeks and she'll need someone there to look after her and Peter just nods, because he's in this for good, whatever it takes, even though he feels like his blood has turned into ice water and his teeth sort of want to chatter so he has to keep his jaw clenched. The doctor isn't done with them, though. Mom will need follow-up tests to see if they got everything, and if they did then she will still need to be on insulin for the rest of her life, but she should have a pretty normal life. If they don't get it all... well, the doctor says, they'll talk about other options. Somehow he makes 'other options' sound both promising and ominous at the same time, like he's whispering 'everything will be fine' as he smothers Peter with a pillow.

It feels so surreal to walk out of that office afterward and get in the car and hear Phil Collins sing You Can't Hurry Love and then get stuck in traffic because there's an accident on the interstate, and Peter feels like someone pulled the rug out from under him (and he imagines it as one of those crazy Persian rugs that the professor has all over the mansion to keep out the chill because those floors can get cold) and Peter's lying on his back staring at a crack in the ceiling that's probably been there for a while but he's never noticed it before and everyone is rushing by him with places to be and stupid, inconsequential bullshit to deal with and they're all, “huh, guy on the floor, alright then” and they go about their business, even though there's a big fucking crack in the ceiling and the roof is about to come down on Peter's head and if Peter feels like this he can only imagine how his mom feels. She's not crying or anything that Peter can see, but her body is all tense, like she's holding something so tight that she's afraid if she lets go she'll never see it again, and he figures out what it is when they pull into the driveway and Peter shuts off the car and Mom lets out a sob that sounds like it has been under pressure. She starts to make a high, keening sound and she puts a shaky hand to her mouth.

Peter allows himself an instant of wide-eyed holy-shit-Mom-is-crying terror before he gathers her into his arms and holds her close and rubs circles on her back.

“I'm sorry,” she says. “I'm so sorry. I'm just scared.”

“Hey, it's okay. You know what? That guy? Your doctor? He seems to really now his stuff. We're going to do everything we can to get you better. I promise.”

Mom gasps in a breath and says, “I'm scared. I don't want to leave you.”

Peter thinks about telling her that she doesn't need to worry about him, but he says instead, “You're not going anywhere,” and he repeats it, like that will make it more true, “You're not going anywhere, not for a long time.”

For three days Peter and his mom return to a living situation that is almost normal, almost what they had when Peter was living with her, except that he makes her breakfast everyday instead of the other way around, even though she doesn't have much of an appetite.

He was always really good about running errands and taking care of the yard and pretty much keeping the place neat and clean. It wasn't like he was ever too busy to do housework and he sort of considered it part of his rent, not that he didn't pay rent. He did, he just paid it in the form of goods and services. He likes to paint himself as a deadbeat and a loser because he knows how it looks to the outside world that a going-on-twenty-seven-year-old man still lives at home with his mom but he did have a job most of the time, and sometimes two or three, it's just that all of Peter's jobs were of the cash-under-the-table, no-degree-required, I-don't-care-how-it-gets-done-just-do-it variety and they never kept him busy enough to keep him from a round or ten of Space Invaders and if Peter really had to sit down and explain the reasons that he'd stayed in his Mom's basement beyond the natural
incubation period for the average American male then he would have to talk about how he'd helped
some strangers rescue a potential presidential assassin from the Pentagon and how the guy he'd
rescued had turned around and tried to kill another president on national television and then how the
presidential assassin (who never really killed any presidents at all, but who has killed a lot of other
people) is his long lost father and Peter turns into a little bit of an agoraphobic for a while because a)
the Feds are probably after him because it's not like nobody saw the little bastard with the silver hair
and jacket at the Pentagon the day of the breakout and b) Peter had, up to that point, been sort of a
little shit, flaunting his powers, thinking he was a badass because he swiped TVs from store
windows and cases of Hostess Cupcakes from the back of delivery trucks but his dad was an actual,
bonafide killer and that realization sort of scares him straight because on the one hand he doesn't
want to turn out like his dad and on the other hand he doesn't want to go somewhere that his dad
can't find him, which is... okay, it's kind of fucked up. He didn't tell his mom about that right away.
He just let her do the overprotective mom thing and bring him breakfast in the basement and he
stopped going to school and decided to help out around the house instead. He helped Lindy with her
homework and picked her up from school when Mom had to work and looked after the house and
eventually started doing odd jobs and waited for his dad to find him and one day Peter looked up
from his Pac-Man arcade game and ten years had passed and his dad's face was on TV again.

So really Peter is back to almost exactly where he was a few months ago except Peter cannot stop his
brain from thinking about his mom's surgery and his resolve not to run to the library and look up
everything he can about pancreatic cancer lasts about five minutes after the library opens on
Saturday morning. He finds two books on the subject and reads them both in ten minutes and then
really wishes he hadn't and then he runs home and tries to find something, anything to take his mind
off of his mom's illness and ends up detailing her car and reorganizing the garage and replacing the
carpet in the den. He's standing in the kitchen wondering whether the tiles on the counter top could
use replacing when his mom comes in and calmly pours herself a vodka tonic. She's always been a
casual day-drinker. He's rarely seen her drunk, but she's drunk now, loose and relaxed, and after
what Peter read he can't say he blames her.

She must notice something disapproving in his body language because she puts her arm around
Peter's shoulders. “I wanted to get this out of the way before Lindy gets here. One last hurrah.”

He hugs her back, and instead of re-tiling the kitchen counter or cleaning the rain gutters he and mom
collapse together on the sofa and watch horrible midday Saturday TV. It's mostly reruns but Peter
hasn't had much time for TV viewing at the mansion, but his brain is so busy digesting ideas like
chemotherapy and radiation and palliative care that he can't absorb any of the plots and he just lets
T.J. Hooker and The Jeffersons wash over him until Mom falls asleep and he extricates himself from
her to start dinner.

Lindy arrives at about four o'clock on Sunday afternoon. Peter and Lindy have always been close.
Even when Lindy was a moody pre-teen child of divorce and hated everybody Peter, lucky Peter,
been the exception, and they would hang out in Peter's basement, which was like a private
retreat, a cooling-down spot when she was mad at Mom over something stupid. Lindy and Peter
would listen to music and talk about movies and he'd let her win at ping-pong and he'd bug her about
boys that she liked. Those times probably saved her from becoming a little hooligan like Peter was.
That and the fact that she didn't have a super power that let her get away with practically anything.
Nah, Lindy's a good kid. Yeah, she smokes cigarettes and cusses to show that she's cool but she's not
Peter. She's going places. She's got plenty of friends and she's smart and she works hard. Sure, when
he tries to give her a pep talk when she's feeling down she always smacks him and tells him to shut
up, but Peter thinks she knows it's true. She can be anything she wants. Anything.

So Lindy comes home and the three of them do their absolute best to pretend that this is just a regular
family get-together, but Peter can't decide who is trying to be strong for who because all three of
them are tense and jittery and too considerate of one another and even though nobody mentions the surgery it's on all of their minds, the thing they dance around.

It's so strange for Peter to think that they're all adults now. Peter and Lindy aren't just Mom's kids anymore. They're responsible. They're taking care of things, which is more than doing the dishes and watering the lawn. No one is coming to sweep up after them if they mess up, so Peter swears to himself that he's not going to mess up.

To be continued...
Chapter Summary

Peter's mom goes in for surgery. The cracks in the foundation start to show.

Chapter Notes

Things start to get real in this chapter. Peter is dealing with his mom's illness and it's cancer and it's not pretty and if it upsets you, you may not want to read it. This chapter is also where the "suicidal thoughts" tag comes in and, yes, the "fluctuating weight" tag as well. Peter is having a very bad time and that's what this whole chapter is about.

Enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The doctor told Mom not to eat for twelve hours before her surgery, so dinner is at six o'clock on Sunday night. It's french bread pizza, which is easy enough to make, but Peter always gets distracted and burns it so his contribution to the meal this time is running back and forth to the store so that everyone can have their favorite toppings.

Mom is the first one to bed on Sunday night. She says she's tired, that the doctor told her to get plenty of rest and not to put any unnecessary stress on herself.

Lindy's going to miss a few days of school, so her professors gave her a ton of makeup assignments. Peter does the dishes in two seconds and then sits down with her at the kitchen table to help with her math homework, just like he used to do when she was still in high school. Peter was never especially good at Algebra, or any school subject really, but he thinks really fast and he can read through an entire textbook in a few minutes and that's generally enough to get by on. Lindy never got below an A-minus on any of the homework that Peter proof-read so he supposes that he must have done something right.

Tonight, though, neither of them can concentrate, and when Peter reviews the answers, they got, like, half of them wrong. Around eleven o'clock Lindy gives it up as a lost cause, packs up her pencils, and goes to bed, arms wrapped around her books, hugging them to her stomach like a shield.

Peter can't sleep. His mind is racing even though his body is still. All of the possible outcomes play out in his head in a loop and his brain just won't shut up, so at two o'clock in the morning he finds himself doing laps around the block at two hundred miles an hour, upsetting the neighborhood dogs until lights start to flicker on in bedroom windows and Peter decides on a quick jaunt to the Potomac, and for a split second he thinks about just running forever, until he's a thousand miles away or until he drops. It's a stupid, selfish thought and he feels disgusted and guilty as soon as it crosses his mind because this is Mom he'd be abandoning. Without Mom there is no Peter, and not just because she's his mom but because she is who she is and she made choices that not a lot of other women in her situation would have made. Her life would have been a lot easier if she'd just let the nurses take him away or aborted him or left him on a doorstep, but she didn't. She raised him and sheltered him and
loved him like he wasn't a hopeless loser and for that he owes her more than he can ever repay, which is maybe why he's never tried.

He needs to try now.

He gets back to the house just before three. Sleep is a lost cause, so he showers in the downstairs bathroom, dresses in his nicest pair of jeans, and lays awake on the sofa with Rush blaring over the headphones in his ears.

Peter has always been a champion of waiting until the last second to do everything, but he's the first one ready to be out the door at six o'clock, and since it looks like no one else slept either, they arrive at the hospital fifteen minutes early.

Peter's version of hell is a twenty-foot by twenty-foot hospital waiting room. The magazines are old and dog-eared and uninteresting. He reads the same National Geographic article three times and still has no idea what it was about. He can't run, and he doesn't dare pace because he's afraid that he won't be able to keep his speed under control. He feels like he's being stupid but if that's the case then so is Lindy because she brought her homework but she has yet to crack a book. If it were Peter he would say he's just avoiding doing the work, but then if it were Peter he never would have brought his books in the first place.

Lindy's sitting, staring straight ahead. She's wearing her coat, but her arms are folded over her chest like she's cold, and it is pretty cold in here. Peter read somewhere that keeping the temperature low helps control the spread of germs.

Out of the blue Lindy asks, “Do you hate this as much as I do?”

She probably means the waiting, or that Mom's sick at all, but she might be talking about the room and its boring, sterile white walls or the awful rubbing alcohol smell or the furniture or the guy sitting three seats over who won't stop clearing his throat or the Reagan administration for all Peter knows but the answer to all of it is the same, “I hate it even worse.”

“Nuh uh,” she says, not breaking eye contact with the wall.

“Yes huh,” he replies.

And their moment of sibling bonding is complete.

Mom makes it through surgery and Peter and Lindy are allowed into the recovery area to see her while the anesthesia wears off. She struggles out of it over the course of about five minutes, moaning and grimacing until she vomits over the side of the bed, then Peter's behind her, helping her roll onto her left side to keep her airway clear, like Hank showed the team in his version of mutant first aid. Almost immediately Lindy starts to look pale herself and has to sit down on the floor. While Peter is helping Mom some nurses come in and load Lindy into a wheelchair and take her down the hall for a BP check.

After a while the surgeon comes in for a post-op consult and explains that the nausea and vomiting is pretty common, which Peter already knew because he read a book. The nurses tell him that his sister's reaction was pretty normal too, which Peter also knew because Lindy faints at the drop of a hat if the hat has a drop of blood on it. Peter wonders if it's also common for a person to go absolutely insane waiting for the tests that will verify that the surgery got all of the cancer. They won't know for a while, they say. How long is a while? Weeks. Peter debates asking one of the nurses to check his blood pressure, because he's pretty sure it's through the roof.
Peter and Lindy were supposed to call Lindy’s dad as soon as Mom was out of surgery but he doesn’t get a call until late afternoon when Mom is lucid and Lindy isn’t feeling so rocky and everyone has had a chance to get some lunch (Peter inhales three ham and cheese sandwiches and two muffins from the cafeteria and chalks it up to having stayed awake all night and skipped breakfast). Frank’s a little pissed by then because he’s worried and that’s how he shows it and Peter knew this would happen so he made the call himself so that Frank wouldn’t upset Lindy, who was already upset enough. So once Peter has taken the brunt of Frank’s ire he hands the phone over to Lindy so that Frank can verify everything that Peter has said and offer her money if she needs it and ask how her classes are going and promise to do other things that don’t involve him having to leave his new family.

After Lindy hangs up Peter lets her take his place at Mom’s bedside while he makes some phone calls of his own, first to a couple of Mom’s oldest friends to let them know how Mom is doing and when they can visit and then to the school, and Jubilee’s favorite study spot must be right by the phone, because that’s who answers. Peter called during class, so most everyone is occupied, but she promises to pass on the message that his mom is out of surgery and she’s doing okay. Jubilee is nice, but he doesn’t know her very well and she’s never met his mom and neither has anyone else at the mansion, except for Hank and the professor and that was like ten years ago for two seconds, so really there’s no reason for them to be invested in his mom’s welfare at all, except as it pertains to him and he’s not there right now and he won’t be back for a while. The thought makes him feel kind of distant and isolated, like he left the mansion physically four days ago but he’s just now mentally leaving it behind. He ends his conversation with Jubilee by saying something like, “I should let you get back to class,” and she says something and they each say, “Bye” and Peter hangs up feeling hollow inside, bereft.

First thing in the morning a massive floral arrangement is delivered to Mom’s hospital room with a “get well soon” card from “The Staff and Students at Xavier’s School for Gifted Youngsters”, so Peter figures that Jubilee must have relayed his message. Peter is touched, even though he has to rearrange some things so that the flowers will fit on the bedside table and after a day or two it drops petals like a flower girl.

Mom spends four days in the hospital. Peter spends four days being lectured by various doctors, nurses, and specialists. He’s going to be Mom’s primary caregiver so they load him up with pamphlets and fact sheets and meal plans and schedules and prescriptions to take to the pharmacist. They show him how to give her insulin injections and have him practice on an orange, and in between the lessons and the paperwork and just sitting with Mom and reading to her or watching TV he raids the cafeteria and makes the workers there regret their choice of profession. Lindy spells him sometimes and even takes a turn with the orange, but she has to leave on Wednesday, and Peter wonders what she’s going to tell her professors when they see she hasn’t done most of her assignments.

Mom’s best friend drives in from Jersey City on the day that Mom gets released from the hospital. Mom and Peggy go way back, like, she knew Mom from Mom’s pre-Peter days. Peggy used to be a nurse too before she married a podiatrist and had four kids. Now she lives in a big house in Little Silver and she’s tall and loud and funny and bossy and pretty much exactly what Mom does and doesn’t need at this stage in her recovery and even though Peter’s sure she caught wise to his mutation around the time he was born he still doesn’t feel comfortable moving at speed around her so every second with her is so tedious. But she makes Mom smile so Peter puts up with her even when she doesn’t help with the grocery shopping and questions the amount of insulin that Peter is supposed to give his Mom and tries to help with the chores but can’t fold laundry or figure out how to wash dishes because she has a cook and a maid at home and Peter wonders if it wouldn’t have been more helpful if she’d sent the cook and the maid but this is not his house and so he keeps that to himself.
Mom's neighbors are a little more helpful. Mrs. Albert and Mrs. Baird from the next block over show up on Mom's doorstep with get well cards and casseroles. Mrs. Baird's contribution is her famous baked macaroni and cheese and Peter unabashedly eats half of it in a single sitting. Peggy eats the other half over the next two days and leaves the pan in the sink. Peter washes it and brings it back and says thank you and when he does Mrs. Baird's eyes well up and she apologizes and tells him he's such a good boy, like he's a dog or something and Peter leaves her porch with a strange, queasy feeling in the pit of his stomach, which is maybe how a dog would feel if it ate a dead bird.

Peggy leaves a week after Mom's surgery. She has to get back to her kids, she says and Peter's not really sad to see that tail lights of her car receding down the street but he has to admit that it's quieter with her gone, and that isn't necessarily a good thing. Mom spends a lot of time sleeping. Peter spends a lot of time thinking. When Peggy left she seemed to take all of Mom's energy with her, so as soon as the doctor's office opens on Monday he's on the phone and asking when he can expect Mom to start feeling better. He doesn't get an answer but he does get Mom an appointment. Mom gets some tests, then Mom gets to sit across from the doctor at his big wooden desk, holding her purse in her lap with one hand and Peter's hand with the other as the doctor tells her that the surgery didn't get all of the cancer, and that their best options now are to start chemotherapy and radiation in the hopes of prolonging her life. He thinks that she has at most a year.

Peter thinks about how many times this guy has had to sit behind his desk, framed by his diplomas and tell people that they're dying. He decides that it must have been a lot because the guy is very good at it. He isn't condescending. He doesn't use a lot of medical jargon. He even makes it sound sort of hopeful, like there are plans and options and ways for things to be handled and Peter is torn, like he wants to shout the guy down and ask for a second opinion but the sad fact is that he had all the time in the world to make phone calls and check on this guy's credentials and he really is one of the best oncologists on the East coast. Mom's been in the medical field most of her life. She knows what she's about. She didn't pick a quack. So on the one hand he wants to go through the phone book and take Mom to every doctor who will see her but on the other he's seen it coming like a stop sign swimming up out of the dark when he's running along a highway at night. His mutation means he has more time to think, more time to process things that other people miss. He'd heard the evidence in his mom's voice when she told him over the phone. He'd seen it in the frown lines on Hank's face and the seriousness of the surgeon the first time they'd met and the way that Peggy talked about everything but Mom's cancer, like she was trying to take her mind off of it.

Peter is sort of struck dumb by the inevitability of all of this, like, what, did he think Mom was going to live forever? And the truth was that he'd never thought of it at all. He's so used to being the one that gets there before everyone else, the guy who's standing at the finish line eating an ice cream cone while everyone else is still on their blocks, waiting for the starting pistol to fire. He's not used to there being something that he can't do anything to stop, no matter how much time he has.

Peter doesn't remember leaving the doctor's office, or the drive back to Mom's house. He knows there was a lot of crying, and that Mom only did about half of it. He calls the mansion from the phone in the den after Mom goes to lie down. He asks for Hank and while he waits he listens to life in the mansion. There's a TV on somewhere, and it's playing a commercial for Tide. He can hear running footsteps and someone shouting at someone else to slow down.

Hank must have been down in his lab. It takes him about five minutes to pick up. “Hello?”

“Hey,” Peter says. He's slumped in a chair, suddenly exhausted, pinching the bridge of his nose.

It takes Hank a second. “Peter?”

“Yeah.”
Hank's next words are a muffled aside to someone else, “Hey, no, just a minute. Tell him I'll be there in a minute. I'm on a call. It's Peter. No.” To him, “Sorry. I'm here.”

“Sounds like chaos. Did the kids take over the school? You need me to mount a rescue?”

Tragically, Hank was born without a sense of humor so he just says, “Well, you know how crazy this place can get after four in the afternoon.”

Which a) is it that late already? It is. Wow. Four o'clock. He hasn't even thought about what he's making for dinner and b) Now he feels like a heel for calling Hank during the busiest time of the day, when the teachers have their hands full trying to corral all of the little mutants who've been cooped up in classrooms all day and are suddenly free to run amok until dinner. The professor has a pretty strict set of house rules concerning running and horseplay and powers but from about four to six they do about as much good as an umbrella in a hurricane.

“Yeah, sorry. I didn't think. Uhm...”

“No, no. It's fine. Don't worry about it. Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, no. Not really.” Suddenly Pete doesn't know how to ask what he wants to ask. “You know a lot about, like, science and medicine, right?”

“Well, more science than medicine,” which is Hank being modest because Peter's pretty sure that he could have an MD, like, tomorrow if he wanted. “What I do know is mainly confined to genetics. Peter... is this about your mom?”

“Yeah.” He needs to take a moment and he does and Hank waits patiently on the other end of the line, even though he probably has, like, a million things to do. Then Peter realizes that he can't speak without his voice breaking so he lets the silence drag on until Hank asks, “How long did they give her?”

“A year, tops.”

Hank takes in a breath. “I'm sorry.”

“We got the tests back today. I haven't called my sister yet. Before I have to break the news I just wanted to make sure... I don't guess that you have any ideas. I know it's a Hail Mary, but... I don't know, I thought I'd ask. Maybe you've got some crazy device stashed in the basement or there's a mutant out there who's power is curing cancer.”

“Actually,” Hank says slowly. “I have been giving the subject a lot of thought, especially since you told me that your mother was ill. Some mutants have regenerative capabilities, the extent of which varies from person to person. It was my hope that those regenerative properties could be developed into a serum similar to the one I use to control my mutation, and that it could be used to fight diseases or slow the aging process, but my theory didn't hold up in lab trials. The source was just as susceptible to the problems I was trying to cure. So again, I'm sorry. I wish I could help.”

“S'alright. I knew it was a long shot. Thanks for thinking of me, even if it was in a creepy mad scientist way. You gave the lab rats a proper burial, right?”

“I usually incinerate the mice once they've... passed. It's the most sterile option.”

And now Peter is picturing a shelf in Hank's lab, lined with tiny rat urns.

“Maybe you already thought of this, but, like, I heal pretty quick. What if I gave my mom's doctor a
sample of my blood. I mean, no offense, but he probably knows more than you do about cancer. It's, like, what he does for a living. Maybe he can take a look and see if there's something in my blood that can help. Maybe I can give her a transfusion or something, and even if it doesn't work maybe it'll help and it's got to be better than radiation, even if she does have some side effects, like when you used Raven's DNA and you got all blue and furry? I don't know, I think Mom could pull off gray hair.”

“That isn't a good idea.”

“Hey, I'm just trying to consider every option.”

“Peter... I want you to stop and think for a second, because you're not in the best frame of mind right now. You're considering handing over a sample of your DNA -your mutant DNA- to your mother's doctor, a man you've known for a few weeks.”

“Hank, if you think that my mom's oncologist is going to turn around and sell my spit to the government or a foreign power or something, then I'm gonna need to remind you that the government probably already has our DNA. You, me, and Raven were out for, like, six hours before we woke up in that holding pen in Canada. They could have done just about anything to us in that time.”

“You're probably right. But that should make us more cautious, not less. There are still a lot of people out there who think the world would be better off without mutants. If you give away that you're a mutant or you give up a blood sample, you're putting a weapon on the table. And Peter, it probably won't make any difference for your mother at all because the serum that I used in my experiments? It was made from your blood.”

Oh. “Way to bury the lead, furball.”

“I was actually hoping to discuss the results with you in person sometime.”

“Can it wait?”

A pause. “Yeah. I guess it can.”

“I don't want to keep you on the line and I've got phone calls to make and I've got to give my mom her injections and make dinner.”

“Peter, hey, don't hang up. Are you still there?”

“Yeah.”

“How are you? Is there anything you need help with?”

“Could use a cure for cancer...” Peter suggests.

“Well, I'll keep my ear to the ground on that one. But I mean, really. Do you need anything?”

Peter thinks about it for a second.

Mom has a pretty healthy bank account at the moment and she's still technically a nurse, even though she'll probably never return to work, so she has medical benefits through her employer. Also, although Peter has never had an official bank account he still has a wad of cash that he earned from the odd jobs that he used to do, and Frank has offered to help out with any bills that Peter and Lindy can't cover.
Mom's doctor brought up some options as far as long-term care. Things will get bad eventually and even before they do it probably isn't a great idea for Mom to be on her own. Peter has already volunteered himself for the job, and her doctor thought that was best. There are other options, like having a live-in nurse or moving her to a facility, but Mom would hate it and Peter can't stand the thought of her living out her days surrounded by strangers.

There's going to be a lot of paperwork to sort out, but Frank has promised to come and help with that. Frank's no good at the touchy-feely stuff, which is bad in a marriage, but he's great for other things, like wading through reams of legalese and making sure that Peter and Lindy don't get stuck with a bill they don't expect and can't pay somewhere down the line.

Aside from that stuff, all that's left is Mom's daily care, and she has Peter for that. He helps her with her medication and fixes her meals and takes care of the house and does the shopping and makes sure she's comfortable. The doctor has already warned him that Mom will most likely experience side effects from the radiation and chemotherapy, and Peter is doing his best to prepare for that reality, and aside from Lindy and maybe a nurse he doesn't think that he'd trust anyone to help his mom do stuff like get dressed and use the toilet.

So, no. There's nothing that he needs. “Nah, I'm good.”

“Do you want me to send you anything?” Hank asks. Then he has to specify, “From your room? Clothes, books, anything...?”

Peter never brought much from home when he moved into the mansion full time, just some clothes and his favorite albums. He doesn't like driving and there's only so much he can carry when he runs, but he thinks of Tommy and Dark Side of the Moon and The White Album sitting on a shelf collecting dust and what's sadder than that? So he tells Hank to let the kids have the records. “Just make sure they know how to use the player. Position the arm, then press the button to lower it.” Hank vows that Peter's records will remain scratch-free.

He and Hank say a few more words and he only realizes later how quiet it had gotten on the other end of the line, like all of the kids had suddenly decided what a great idea it was to be out of the house and away from Hank's phone conversation, but Peter guesses that's life in a house owned by the world's most powerful psychic.

Lindy comes home that weekend. It's the first time she's been home since the surgery and the first time she's seen Mom since she's heard that Mom has a year to live.

There are a lot of tears.

Mom is starting her treatments on Monday, but Lindy has to be back at school on Monday and it is a long ass drive back to Rhode Island, so she has to be packed and gone by about two on Sunday afternoon if she wants to make it back before curfew, but when it's time for her to go she's dragging her feet.

“Maybe I should just stay with you and Mom.”

“And what? Drop out of school?” Peter asks, half-joking.

Lindy bites her lip, because she knows how Peter feels about her finishing college. It's probably the one thing that Peter and Frank can agree on.

“It doesn't feel right being so far away from Mom when she's sick. I feel bad leaving you to do all the work.”
That might be true, but that's not the reason she wants to stay. He's seen how she's struggling with her school work. It's pretty clear she doesn't enjoy it. She hasn't mentioned anyone from her school by name except for her roommate and her professors in the past six months so he knows she's having trouble making friends, and he thinks maybe that she's not even trying, and he gets it, he really does. This is the first time that she's lived away from home and it was new and exciting at first, but it's all uncharted territory and it's scary and uncomfortable and she's overwhelmed and at some point it's just easier to say “fuck it” and come home and go back to the same routine or worse, just stay here like Peter did instead of going out into the world and making something of herself. And Lindy can go wherever she wants. She's normal. She's welcome everywhere. All of the doors are open. All she has to do is walk through. He tells her all of this and she stares at him like she's seeing him for the first time and Peter knows what she's seeing: her brother, the freak, the guy with the silver hair and the super speed that scares people, that makes them uncomfortable. She sees the reason that he's the obvious choice to stay here and take care of Mom because he has this ability. It's his blessing and his curse because it lets him do things for Mom that no one else can do, but it isolates him from the rest of the world. Lindy's power is that she can join the world. She can change it, make it better. She could be, like, the first female justice of the supreme court.

And this is where Lindy smirks at him and says, “I can be Sandra Day O'Connor?” and, okay, Peter could maybe stand to pick up a newspaper once in a while. But even if Lindy is an insufferable little know-it-all after one semester in college her talents are wasted on leg work, and leg work is Peter's specialty.

“I could quit school and be an actress. I look just like the girl in the Juicy Fruit commercial.”

Peter's never had the patience to sit through commercials so he can't say whether or not that's true but if Lindy had said this before Mom's diagnoses he would have told her she was going to put Mom in an early grave but that's not even kind of funny anymore so he just says, “No.”

Lindy goes back to school.

Peter takes Mom to her treatments, and they are just as bad as the doctor said they would be. There is one very bad day early on where Mom's blood sugar crashes because Peter already gave her her insulin injection and she can't keep anything down, not even juice, so he doesn't bother with the car and barely remembers to slow down once he's in sight of the emergency room. The nurses start her on an IV and she stays the night. Nobody says anything about Peter's power, even though he's pretty sure that an ambulance driver saw him appear out of thin air with his mom in his arms. He thinks about Hank and what he said about being cautious but Peter really could not care less. Even so, he tries not to speed, and even calls a cab when the doctor on duty releases his mom.

Frank comes by just like he promised, and after he's made a perfunctory visit to Mom's bedroom (she's sleeping but he kisses her forehead and then comes back downstairs) he puts on his reading glasses and gets to work on the stacks of papers that Peter has laid out. If he has any problem with Peter getting the house in Mom's will he doesn't say anything. Lindy is getting all of Mom's jewelry and silver and most of her bank account, minus medical expenses, and Peter is starting to get a little apprehensive that the medical expenses will end up draining her account. He brings this up to Frank, who floats the idea of selling the house after everything is said and done, and Peter can't deny that it's probably the best course of action.

Frank stays for dinner. He and Mom don't hate each other, they just can't stand the sight of each other day in and day out. Sharing a meal once a year or so is doable for them, and almost familial. They don't even fight, and after Peter has helped Mom back upstairs and he's just starting on the dishes Frank tells him that he's doing a good job, and that might be the nicest thing that Frank has ever said to him.
When Frank leaves he shakes Peter's hand and it feels sort of like a rite of passage, like he's handing over the keys and now Peter's the man of the house and it's weird because he doesn't really feel any different than he did when he was a kid. If anything he feels less sure of himself than he did then, less prepared to deal with the world. When he was a kid he felt like he could do anything, but now he's watching his life funnel toward a single course of action. He's always been kind of a selfish idiot, and he knows he still has a choice in how he spends the next year, but he doesn't feel like it's any choice at all, and maybe that's what it feels like to grow up.

Mom's treatments really take the stuffing out of her. She's usually sick right after, and Peter's always been good at reading body language so she's never once gone without a bag or a bucket or something to be sick into, and he can get rid of it quickly so she doesn't have to smell it. The treatments make her weak, sometimes too weak to do just about anything, and at first she's so embarrassed that she needs Peter's help to get to the bathroom but she says she'd be more embarrassed to wet the bed and they share a stilted laugh and Peter keeps it in his head that it isn't like she weighs much. Mom was never a big woman to start with but now she's all jutting collar bones and knees and ribs and hollow cheeks even though Peter does his best to fix the kinds of foods she likes, especially when she's in between treatment cycles and her appetite is better.

Mom's hair starts to fall out after the first cycle. It comes out in strands at first, like a shedding dog, then in larger clumps. Peter's hair grows really fast, so his mom always kept an electric hair cutting kit under the sink in the downstairs bathroom. On the day she realizes she can see her scalp through her thinning hair she asks him to bring it and she shaves her own head. Peter helps get the spots she missed and when she's done he sweeps up the hair and takes her shopping for scarves and hats even though she already has a closet full of them.

Mom can walk, but it tires her out and her pace is a slow and shuffling, so Peter carries her most places like a princess, which Mom says makes all of the old ladies in the chemo ward jealous because they can't decide if he's Mom's twenty-five year-old son who's gone prematurely gray or her fifty-five-year-old husband with great skin and she never gives them a straight answer because she's a pro at subterfuge. She lets people make up their own stories to explain away Peter's hair or the way he sometimes talks too fast or always seems to have what Mom needs the second she needs it. The cancer may be taking a toll on her body but not her mind.

On and on they go like this. Mom found out she was sick in January. By February she'd started chemo and by the time April rolled around she and Peter had settled into a routine that they'll probably keep for the rest of her life. Mom's treatment cycles form the bones of their schedule, her medications are the heart and lungs that keep her going and determine when she eats and sleeps. Peter does his best to flesh out the rest of her days with decent meals and visits from her friends and neighbors, card games, music and television and the occasional shopping trip or walk in the park if she's up for it. Mom's never been into knitting or needlepoint or tatting but she does like to read, so Peter's happy to run to the library or pick up magazines for her at the grocery store. When she's having a really bad day, like, so bad she can't think or hold her head up, he reads to her, and when that happens she likes to hear a story she knows because she feels too awful to keep track of a new plot. During those times he picks a book from the shelf in her room and runs the title past her and looks for a nod or a shake of the head. He reads her the romance-y parts from Gone With the Wind and he doesn't even complain, but he's grateful when she asks him to switch over to Peter and Wendy, which was her favorite as a kid and (she's told him a thousand times already) where she got the inspiration for his name (she's also told him before that she wanted to name her daughter Wendy but Frank never liked the name, so Wendy became Lindy). Peter's never been a big reader. He's never had the patience and his mind jumps all over the place so he's surprised when he finds himself actually following the adventures of Peter and the Lost Boys and the Darling children even though he's seen the movie and he's pretty sure he knows how the book will end. Besides, he doesn't remember anything about fairy orgies in the Disney version.
On the whole Peter spends more time with the Lost Boys than he does socializing with people who aren't directly related to him. He's not, like, a hermit or anything. He waves to the neighbors and helps them with their weeding and picks up an extra carton of milk for Mrs. Szewc or quart of oil for Mr. Oberman and talks to his mom's friends about their kids and pets and stuff. He has Lindy if he needs a shoulder to cry on, even though his tears have kind of all dried up and Lindy's two states away, so, yeah, he's not, like, anti-social or anything, it's just that interacting with normal people at their normal speed has always been a little difficult and frustrating so he's never developed anything he'd call a close relationship with anybody outside of the family, and maybe that's part of why he went after Magneto in the first place but then his brain got in the way of his mouth while Magneto was destroying the world and said that, hey, maybe now's not a good time and then it had never seemed like a good time after that, and then he was gone again and Peter can't decide whether or not he made the right choice but he knows that Mom thinks he did just from the super-relieved sigh she made on the phone when he told her, but anyway, yeah, it's kind of a habit of his to avoid extended contact with regular people and regular people also kind of means mutants too because he doesn't really feel like talking to anyone at the mansion either. He misses it, sure, but in a way that's kind of painful to think about and even though he could run back there in, like, a couple hours or less it just feels like this whole other world that he's not a part of anymore, and it's sort of painful to think about, so he just doesn't call or write or anything. The professor called once and they had an awkward conversation and Peter spent most of it wishing he could be off the line and wondering if Xavier could read his mind and deciding that he couldn't unless he was making the phone call from Cerebro and Peter's been in there a couple of times since it was rebuilt and to the best of his knowledge Hank never installed a phone as part of the upgrade. So, Xavier has officially reiterated what Hank said before, that Peter is welcome any time and that he only has to call if he needs anything and so on, but the thing is that all of Xavier's money and all of the powers of the X-men combined can't save his mom, so, no, there's nothing that he needs.

When Mom's asleep or resting, which is a good portion of the time, Peter has too much time to think. This isn't, like, a new thing for him, but it feels worse now because the thoughts that used to scroll across his mind were things like video games and girls and music but now he thinks about cancer drugs and sterile hospital rooms and how it's so wrong that being terminally ill comes with so much paperwork. Like, sorry you're dying but don't forget to turn in your homework. Those are the thoughts that eat away at him day in and day out and at first he tried drowning them out with music but he can't keep his headphones on all day if he wants to be able to hear Mom if she needs him and so he uses Mom's record player a lot but he left a lot of his favorite music at the mansion and the albums that he has bothered to repurchase just aren't doing the trick anymore. It's like this big thing happened and Peter's paradigm has shifted and all of Peter's favorite bands are hitting all the wrong chords, leaving this big space inside of him like an echo chamber for other songs that have become so relevant that it physically hurts. Peter's never been a big Bob Dylan fan but suddenly the man's making a lot of sense and he doesn't want to think about why that is so he keeps himself as busy as he can.

Housework is cathartic. There's just something about a clean room and a manicured lawn that makes him feel like he's having a positive impact. He can't save his mom. She's going to die. He gets that on an intellectual level, even if it doesn't seem like a real thing that is ever going to happen. He knows that Mom isn't going to live forever and her house isn't going to be here forever. There's going to be a different family living here one day, and some other loser son camping out in the basement and maybe another family after that and another until, like, there's a fire or the ground opens up and swallows it, and it's all going to happen whether or not Peter cleans the rain gutters, but it's kind of like his power. He can't stop time, but he can use what he has to make a difference, and that's what he's looking for, just to make a difference. Mom hasn't said anything about her home getting the Bob Vila treatment (he keeps the noise down as much as he can while she's resting) and that's probably because she knows him well enough to realize that he just doesn't like to feel useless. He supposes its...
as good a way to cope with a bad situation as any and better than most so by April he's branched out
to the home improvement side of things and he's learned all about plumbing and masonry and
carpeting and landscaping. He's repaired all of the cracks and filled all of the holes in Mom's drywall.
He's sanded and painted the deck and replaced the railing on the front porch and re-landscaped the
entire back yard. There are days when he makes six or more trips to the home improvement store and
the guys behind the counter look at him like they want to stage an intervention. Finally one of them
asks if he's fixing up a house to sell and yeah, he supposes that he is. After that conversation he feels
so guilty that he hides the bag of knobs and handles (he's been doing some painting in the kitchen
and the new color doesn't work with the old cabinet hardware) in a drawer and forces himself to
watch sitcom reruns and play video games until it's time to make dinner, but slacking doesn't make
him feel any better and after he's made sure that Mom is settled for the night he pulls out the bag and
the toolbox and gets to work. By midnight he's replaced all of the kitchen hardware, washed and
dried the dishes, cleaned the bathrooms, swept and mopped all of the floors, built and destroyed a
house of cards seven times and played twenty rounds of Pac-Man, run twenty laps around the
neighborhood and tossed and turned for an hour.

So, this is a new thing: he can't sleep. He used to sleep all the time, twelve hours a day, just not
necessarily at night. At the mansion he would famously fall asleep on any available surface that
wasn't a) presently on fire or b) covered in broken glass. When Ororo discovered his talent she
compared him to the feral cats that lived all over Cairo because he could go from dead asleep to
climbing the walls at the sound of a pin dropping. Hank had a pretty straightforward explanation:
Peter's mutation burns a lot of energy and his body needs lots of sleep to recharge. Hank used more
and bigger words when he explained it, but that's as much as Peter gleaned. He might or might not
have nodded off while Hank was talking. Now, though, he gets maybe a couple of hours a night no
matter how tired he is, and he wakes up just as wiped as when he went to sleep. It's like he just can't
get his brain to shut off. He usually gives himself one torturous hour of lying flat on his back
twiddling his thumbs before he gives it up as a lost cause and takes a shower. He's stopped sleeping
in his old bed in the basement and instead he's taken over the guest bedroom across from Mom's
room just in case she needs something in the night.

Lindy visits every other weekend because it's a long drive through horrible Friday night traffic and
Peter and Mom both absolutely forbid her from making the trip every weekend. She shows up one
weekend in late April (a weekend that Peggy is not in town and that is in no way a coincidence now
that Peter thinks about it). The first thing Lindy says is “How's Mom?” and the second is, “You look
terrible.”

And he has to break it to her that he and Mom had a talk with her doctor that week, and because the
radiation and chemo aren't working her doctor decided to stop her treatments.

Lindy breaks down right there in the entry way, crumples like a marionette with its strings cut, feet
splayed out on either side of her, head bowed. She buries her face in her hands, then in Peter's
shoulder when he sits in front of her and pulls her into a hug. They stay that way for a while, and
then after ten minutes or so they get up and they go see Mom and there's more hugging and of course
the silver lining is that she won't be nauseous from the treatments anymore and maybe some of her
hair will grow back even though Peter's heard from other cancer patients he's met at the hospital that
it will never be the same and of course Mom is going to get some awesome drugs, like, the newest,
best drugs and she won't be in pain anymore. She doesn't ever have to be in pain again. And the
finality of that thought, it just... hits him, and when he leaves Mom and Lindy alone for a little
mother-daughter time because they need it. Mom and Lindy have always been close, so even though
this is hard for him it's going to be harder for Lindy, who's only had eighteen years with Mom to
Peter's twenty-seven and that's not fair so they should get as much time together as possible.

He goes down to his basement and lies on the bed and thinks about throwing his headphones on for
the first time in weeks but falls asleep instead, even though he isn't really any more tired than usual. He wakes up about four hours later to Lindy shaking his shoulder, looking freaked out, not because there was an emergency with Mom or anything (that's the first thing he asks, then he floors it upstairs anyway to double check) but because she'd been calling his name for a while and he'd been dead to the world. He tells her it's fine. It's fine. He's just wiped. It's a lot to process. And he's been tired and he hasn't been sleeping and his energy is just... off. Like, he's been using his powers around the house and running to the store and back but anything beyond that just sounds exhausting and he knows that he should get out for some more exercise and maybe he'll do that now that Lindy's here for a couple of days because -and this part is embarrassing- he's putting on weight. It's not so bad that his jeans don't button, but still, it's noticeable. He can see it in the softening of his jawline and the way his belly presses against his t-shirts, just slightly, but there it is, no matter how he sucks it in. He's always been on the lanky side, even after he filled out in his early twenties and became more than just a bundle of elbows and knees and collar bones, but this is different, and it's weird because it's not like he's eating a lot or stuffing his face with junk. Some of Hank McCoy's nutrition advice did actually stick, he's just not burning off what he does eat. He's not a narcissist, and he has more important things to worry about, so he's bought a few new t-shirts and tried to ignore it but he can tell that Lindy's noticed. He's wisely kept his mouth shut about Lindy's freshman fifteen so maybe she's just returning the favor. He does take her up on her offer to make dinner tonight, though, and changes into one of his new t-shirts before he heads back upstairs to play Hearts with Mom while the smell of burning salmon wafts up the stairs.

Before she leaves this time Lindy has another brief moment of guilt and regret but it doesn't seem as serious as the first one and Peter guesses that Mom talked to her about how important it was to her for Lindy to stay in school, after all Mom dropped out to have a baby and so she knows exactly how hard it is to get back into the swing of things, and Peter dropped out and never went back. He still doesn't have his GED and he wonders whether he'll ever get back into the swing of things or if he has a swing to get back into at all. He was only at the mansion for a few months and now he's been gone for more than that amount of time and it's not like anybody is breaking down his Mom's door, begging on bended knee for him to come back. He's pretty sure that the professor has found a permanent P.E. teacher by now. Scott's probably overjoyed that Peter's not around and the last time Peter spoke to the professor he mentioned that he was thinking of adding Jubilee to the team once she'd finished her high school courses so it sounds like they've already got a replacement lined up, and if he's being honest with himself he didn't really need replacing in the first place because he and Kurt kind of shared a similar role on the team in that their powers were both good for distraction and retrieval and just generally getting from point A to point B really quickly. The biggest difference between Kurt and Peter is that Kurt apparently doesn't threaten Scott's ego like Peter does. Maybe it's because Kurt's closer in age to Scott or because of his accent or because he doesn't come off as a smug asshole. Whatever. The point is that Peter's not exactly sure what comes next. Well, he is, but after that... well, there's actually going to be a lot of work after that and when he thinks of estates and arrangements and hospital bills he just wants to lay on the couch and not think but when he lays on the couch all he can do is think and that's not helpful. But anyway Lindy's going to finish school and have a life and she's not going to be bogged down with all of the stuff that might distract her from becoming a super badass... whatever she decides to major in. Peter's going to clean up all of the crap. He might not be the sharpest crayon in the box but he can draw a totally inappropriate picture faster than anyone.

Once Peter's started thinking about Lindy's future, though, it's tough not to think about his own and that's when he starts to find excuses not to go back to the mansion. For starters, he's not in the best of shape right now and there is no way that Mystique or Hank are going to go easy on him. It's a weak excuse and he knows it so he comes up with better ones, like how he's not even sure that they'll want him back, even though literally everyone he's spoken to at the mansion since he left has said that they do. Also, he has some pretty stressful memories associated with that place, like the fact that it
exploded and he was kidnapped and his dad, his Nazi-hunting, mass-murdering, possibly psychotic dad (who doesn't know and may never know he's Peter's dad) is still best friends with the guy who runs the place, and that's a Pandora's box he's shelved until he can think about opening it without hearing the wet snap of his leg breaking. And actually none of those are good excuses because he has a lot of good memories associated with Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters (good grief, but the name is not one of them) like playing soccer with the mini-mutants and swapping records with Jubilee and a bunch of other stuff that his brain shies away from because it just hurts too much, like all that stuff happened to someone else and he can't imagine that he was ever that happy.

Avoiding thinking about the school makes him think about alternatives, like he knows that he'll probably have to sell the house and after all of that is settled he'll have enough left over to rent a place. He's done day labor and courier work and, heck, pizza delivery (and his tips were phenomenal, thank you). He's worked with a couple of mutant business owners in the past, like Sam Gregorian, who has a crazy sense of smell and can tell what a person's been eating and knows when someone is scared or lying (he's a trial lawyer). He also has a lot of very white teeth and a Robin Williams level of body hair and reminds Peter of the big bad wolf. Peter met Sam at the police station when he was about fifteen and being harassed over something that he totally did but would never admit to. Sam introduced him to another local mutant, Naughty Nancy Nagahori (not her real name) the “masseuse”. Her mutant power is... not important. She offered Peter a job at her place once when she found out that the vibrating thing he does with his hands is good for more than just shattering glass. Peter didn't take the job but he did run errands for her from time to time, nothing too illegal... probably. Even if neither of them have any work for him now he knows they'll at least point him in the right direction. There's always somebody out there who needs something done asap, but all of those things seem kind of empty, and is that what he's going to do for the rest of his life? Collate legal documents for Sam? Distribute discreet advertisements for Nancy?

Maybe it's the time of day or the lack of sleep or he's just in a bad place and he's spent too much time alone or it's just everything catching up or maybe it's that BOC is playing on the radio and seriously, do people even listen to the lyrics? Like, so many songs are about death and suicide. Being a musician must be fucking depressing or maybe that's why they're musicians because it's like Peter and his home improvement obsession, like there's a lot of stuff inside and if he doesn't re-tile the bathroom then he's just going to implode or break stuff or throw himself off a bridge and he's glad that Bob Dylan writes songs to cope with whatever he's coping with because Bob Dylan writes some seriously good songs, even if Peter could do without the harmonica. So, yeah, lately Peter's been thinking about punching the clock when it's all said and done. It's not the first time he's ever thought about it because he was an angsty teenager once too and he's pretty sure everybody has these kind of thoughts sometimes but it's just that he's never had to think about death as much as he has these past few months so it's kind of front-and-center in his mind, like all the time. It's stupid. He knows that and he'd never do it because he could never do that to Lindy and now that he thinks about it he's not even sure he physically could do it because Hank had him jump off the roof of the mansion once to test the way his body distributed kinetic energy or something and Peter landed fine, on his feet, like a cat, and walked away. Drugs and alcohol don't really affect him in the way that they affect normal people so overdosing is out and blunt force trauma would be a total guessing game and probably just leave him a drooling idiot. He guesses he could suffocate. He does need, like, a lot of air, so if he swam out into the Atlantic far enough he'd probably drown before too long unless he got bored and swam back or just kept going to England or Africa or something, so really, offing himself would be, like, a project and a half, and it would be super selfish of him because he knows his mom would give anything to be able to stick around for another twenty or thirty years, even if she does have to take insulin forever and can't drink alcohol and can't have a Twinkie even if she really, really wants one and here he's thinking of just throwing all that out. So, no, he'll rebuild Mom's house from the foundation up if that's what it takes, but he's not going anywhere, not for a while.
While it's true that no one from the mansion has been knocking down his door begging him to come back he did get a weird phone call late one night, and he knew it must be important because, like, everybody has been super polite about not calling after nine pm so that Mom can get her rest, and it's, like, eleven o'clock and Peter's staring at the ceiling doing his not-sleeping thing when the phone rings and it's Hank, who doesn't bother with pleasantries but asks him right away if he's noticed anything suspicious around the neighborhood, like someone new moving in, cars he doesn't recognize, strangers coming to his door. And no, he hasn't and Hank asks him if he's sure and Peter says, “Lemme check” and does a circuit of the neighborhood and gets back on the line less than a second later with a “Nope, everything's normal,” and Hank's like, “Are you sure?” and Peter's like, “Yeah, I just checked. Do you want me to check again? I have the license plate numbers of everyone in the neighborhood memorized. I can't help it. I'll list them off if you want me to,” and the bastard actually thinks about it! But after a few seconds he says that's alright and he's just checking to see if Peter's safe because Something's Going On with mutants and Peter says that Something's always Going On with mutants. It's all over the news, like, all the time: beatings and kidnappings and riots and people blaming mutants for stuff they didn't do, some of which it turns out they did do, but none of those mutants are Peter and probably none of them are caring for a terminally ill family member at home so Peter's had his fingers in his ears as far as all that stuff is concerned, but he doesn't make unnecessary public appearances either. And why does Hank think anything special might be going on in Peter's neck of the woods? There's an incredibly loaded silence before Hank admits that some pretty sensitive information about Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters was compromised, and Peter's like “That sucks. Compromised how?” and Hank says, “A terrorist group captured someone close to the professor and tortured the information out of him,” and Peter asks, “Are you going to make me pull it out of you one word at a time?” which is followed pretty quickly by the revelation that the tortured mutant was Magneto and that he showed up at the mansion yesterday all bedraggled and apologetic and nigh on incoherent and Peter's stomach does a weird flip floppy thing and tries to climb up into his chest.

Hank says Magneto's going to be okay, like, he's going to make a full recovery. Peter's like, “Oh, good,” like, that's nice, because Peter has absolutely nothing invested in the guy's welfare outside of the fact that he's another mutant that Peter knows and Mutant Solidarity and all that. Hank says that Magneto escaped by using some tinfoil from a sandwich wrapper because of course he did and Peter's weirdly proud of him but at the same time he doesn't want to know how many people were killed just because one terrorist's wife forgot to buy cellophane. The important part of the story, though, is that the terrorists had him for at least a month and Magneto doesn't remember everything that they did to him, like they gave him a lot of drugs and asked him a bunch of questions about the school and all of the mutants and Xavier's been trying to sift through his mind and figure out what the terrorists wanted but it's hard on Erik and he has to take it slow, so in the meantime everybody's on high alert for anything out of the ordinary and good ol' Hank remembered Peter, all by his mutant lonesome out here, and it seemed like a good idea to put him on alert too. Peter says thanks and that he's on alert and reminds Hank that it's really hard for someone to sneak up on him and Hank says that he knows and the conversation ends on a high note and Hank doesn't even ask if Peter's alright, which is good because Peter's tired of lying his way through the answer.

To be continued...

Thank you for reading. Feedback is welcome and appreciated.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, Peter is indeed putting on weight in this fic. That frequently happens when people
are very stressed out. If it weirds you out, just know that it's not the focus of the story, it's just another sign of things going horribly wrong in Peter's life. Hang in there.
Supplementary Notes

Welcome back! This part is a little shorter than the first two because this is where it made sense to cut it off. I hope you enjoy it anyway. There will be more cancer talk and also swearing in this chapter.

Please enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The moment right after Peter hangs up with Hank is about the closest Peter's come to just running back to the school for a quick visit, just, you know, to make sure everything's alright. He doesn't, because he can't leave Mom alone for that long. Even at top speed it would still take him a few hours just to get to New York and he would do what exactly when he got there? Probably collapse on Xavier's doorstep because he hasn't slept right in months and he feels like shit. That's not to say that Mom doesn't have other people who can look after her. She does. Peter has people he can call in an emergency, like Peggy or some of the neighbors or Lindy or Frank, but he won't because a) this isn't an emergency and b) what if Something Happens to Mom, like the big Something. He wouldn't be able to live with himself.

So he stays, and by early May it's obvious that a year was an optimistic estimate on the part of Mom's oncologist.

Mom feels a little better without all of the chemo and radiation and stuff, and it's nice not to have to drive her to appointments that she dreads and that make her sick after, but she doesn't put back on the weight she lost. She's down to about eighty pounds. Her arms and legs are just bones wrapped in papery flesh but she still likes to sit in front of her vanity and use her eye creams and put on makeup and wrap her head in a scarf. She can't get around much on her own anymore. Peter's new haunt is the medical supply store, where he picks up grab bars and bath accessories and safety rails. He rents an adjustable hospital bed and a wheelchair. At Mom's doctor's suggestion Peter started using a service that sends a nurse out for a few hours in the mornings to check her vitals and make sure she gets her medications and help her in the shower. Monday through Friday they have a nurse who is about Mom's age. Her name is Cathy with a C and she's on the quiet side but she knows her stuff and she has two kids who are in college so this is her second job after she works the graveyard shift at the VA medical center. The weekend nurse is Cindy and she's way younger and doesn't have as much in common with Mom but she's sweet and she loves to help so Mom lets her do her makeup even though she goes heavy on the mascara. On the one hand it takes a little bit of the strain off, having someone else around to take care of the basics and make sure that things are done right, on the other hand Peter feels guilty for being grateful for the help. Peter thinks her doctor recommended it for his sake as much as Mom's because at his Mom's last appointment he pulled Peter aside and...
asked him a couple of (to Peter's mind) really random questions. Then he referred him to the service and also wrote Peter a prescription for Valium. Peter tossed the prescription but kept the referral and now he has a little more time to work on the house, except that he's sort of stopped being interested in crown molding and backsplashes and once the basic housework is done he just... stops... until he hears Mom's voice or the chime of the little bell that he bought her for her bedside table. Then he zips up the stairs to help her to the bathroom or bring her a glass of water or just sit and talk. They have some really good conversations, him and Mom, about stupid things like TV and camping trips and things that happened when it was just the two of them, before Frank came into the picture and before Lindy was born, about the little apartment they used to share and how noisy it was because the downstairs neighbors had a ton of kids and they were always yelling and playing loud Latin music with the windows open and how Mom didn't know how to cook and Peter ate spaghetti and toast practically every day. And they laugh because they thought it was so awful at the time but it was actually great and now it's hilarious. Then they'd play gin like they used to only instead of playing at the rickety two-top in their tiny kitchen with Peter running laps around the table at the end of every turn while Mom tries to hide her cards they play on the overbed table and Peter sits still for the whole game. And when she gets too tired to play anymore he stacks the cards carefully so that they can keep their game going when she wakes and he kisses her on the forehead because he's never sure if they'll finish their game or not, and he's not sure what he'll do when the little bell doesn't ring anymore.

Peter told Hank that he's hard to sneak up on and he meant it, so when Raven shows up on his Mom's front porch out of the blue (literally, because she's in her blond, human disguise) he opens the door for her before her knuckles can hit the wood.

She looks him up and down, “Hey, Slim,” she says. It's half friendly tease and half... something else, something serious. She's good at reading people, sizing up situations. In a way it's a relief that Peter doesn't have to put up a front. She'd see right through it anyway.

Peter lifts one side of his mouth in an expression that's too tired to be a smile and he stands aside to let her into the spotlessly clean living room. If he's too out of shape to be an X-man after all of this is done maybe he can start a cleaning service.

“Long time no see,” Raven says. She stands in the middle of the room and turns. Her thumbs are hooked casually in the back pockets of her jeans and she's standing far enough away that she can take all of him in easily and Peter knows how he must look. He's seen the shadows under his eyes and the lines on his face. Weight-wise he's always hovered around one-sixty-five but he's probably creeping up on one-eighty now and he knows that it shows in his profile. But that's all secondary to the woman lying upstairs in the adjustable hospital bed. Peter's vanity took a back seat a while ago, laid down and went to sleep for what was going to be a long-ass ride.

“Hi, Raven. How're the kids?”

Raven saunters in a slow circle. She commands the room wherever she goes. “They're surviving. They miss you.”

Peter gives her a half of a smile. “Yeah, I miss them too. Sit down, I'll make you some coffee. You can bring me up to speed.”

“Bring you up to speed,” Raven repeats, very deliberately. Then her skin is awash in lizard scales and Peter finds himself staring at himself, right down to the tiny hole in the collar of his t-shirt.

Raven isn't vindictive but she doesn't pull her punches either, so Peter knows what he's seeing is probably accurate, so he makes himself take a long hard look, and yeah, it's bad. It looks like he might have sailed past one-eighty and set a course for one ninety, but what gets him isn't the obvious
stuff, like the extra few pounds or the too-pale skin, it's the fact that he looks so, so tired. He reminds himself of an old stuffed bunny that Lindy used to drag around by the ears when she was little and Mom would threaten 'no dessert' if Lindy didn't let her take the bunny away to wash it but Lindy would kick and scream and turtle up with Mister Ears so that Mom couldn't get him. That's how Peter looks. His shoulders are hunched like he hasn't stood up straight or slept in a month, which is about right, and his eyes are dull and glassy. Raven isn't smirking or mocking him, she's just standing there, bloated and pale like a dead fish, showing him what's what, and when she decides she's made her point her skin ripples and she's back to her petite blonde self, then she steps forward and pulls him into a really unexpected hug. Huh, he never figured Raven for the hugging type. Five minutes ago he would have bet anyone a hundred bucks that he'd get a front kick to the face from Raven before he'd get a hug, but here he is, on the receiving end of possibly the first hug that Raven had ever given anyone. Okay she's probably hugged plenty of people, because this is a good hug, really A plus stuff here. If he was giving out gold stars she would get one. He's just going to keep thinking about how great a hugger Raven is because if he doesn't, he is going to cry like Lindy did when Mister Ears' ears finally came off in her hand.

When they part Peter has to fight down the urge to fold his arms self-consciously over his middle.

"I'll make the coffee," she says, "You sit down."

Peter can't help but mess with her, just a little, setting the coffee filters right under her hand, taking out cups when her back is turned, all without her noticing that he's left the couch. It's Raven, so of course she cottons on right away, but she lets him get away with it, even if he moves too fast for her to see.

"Nice to see you haven't lost your touch."

She brings the cups to the coffee table and sits next to him, close enough that her knee almost touches his.

"How is your mom doing?"

Peter looks down, away, anywhere but at Raven. "She, uh... she's resting."

Raven gives him a minute, which is great because he needs it. For a guy who has all the time in the world he feels for the first time that there just isn't enough of it.

Peter feels like he's talking around a rock that's stuck in his throat when he says, "They decided to stop chemo. The cancer is in her liver and her lungs, so there's not much more to do at this point except make her comfortable."

"I'm so sorry. How can I help?"

Peter shakes his head. "There's a nurse who checks on Mom in the mornings, makes sure she gets her meds. Some of Mom's friends stop by sometimes and sit with her. Otherwise I take care of her."

"What about your sister?"

"She's away at school. She tries to make it home on the weekends but it's a seven hour drive one way and I'd rather she didn't spend every weekend sitting in a car. The semester is over in a few more weeks though, and she'll come for the summer."

"And how are you doing?" she asks.

"Me? I'm good," he smiles. "Never better."
She smiles back, enjoying their private joke.

“How’s Magneto?” Peter asks, staring down at his hands.

He knows Raven's looking at him but he can't look up.

“Resting,” she says, “He was injured when he came to the mansion: a few broken ribs, bruises, a concussion. They drugged him and Hank still isn't sure what all of the drugs were supposed to do, so we've been keeping a close eye on him.”

“Okay,” Peter nods.

“I haven't told him, in case you're wondering.”

“I wasn't really worried that you had.”

“Well, it's nice to be trusted, I guess,” she says.

“So, no new trouble at the mansion, then?” he changes the subject.

“No more than usual, but for the most part we're sticking close to home base. Charles has been spending a lot of time in Cerebro.”

She says it like it should mean something to him.

“Looking for the terrorists?”

“Looking for anything that can help us, looking for trouble. He's looked in on you a few times. He asked me not to tell you. He didn't want you to think he was prying.”

“Oh.”

“I told him where I was going when I left the mansion. I don't have any trouble prying.”

They sit for a while, sipping their coffee in silence until Peter realizes that she's waiting for a confession.

“I can't sleep,” he admits. “I used to sleep all the time at the drop of a hat.”

“I remember.”

“Now it's like... I shut my eyes and they just don't want to stay shut. Every little sound gets to me. I feel like...” he feels like his mom will die while he's sleeping. That's what he's afraid of, and there's no way he's going to admit that out loud. “On edge. I just can't sleep,” he says instead.

He hasn't taken a sip of his coffee. Raven plucks the cup from his hands. “Go to bed, Peter. I'll watch your mother for you.”

“No, Raven, it's not your job.”

“Peter,” she says, shifting into his form. In his voice she says, “She'll never know the difference.”

“But I will,” he says. The eyes staring out of his face are Raven's. “She's my mother. She put up with a lot raising me. A few months of looking after her, a few hours of sleep, that's nothing. I put her through hell when I was a kid. I was such a shitty teenager, just ask Hank. You have no idea how much I owe her. It's my turn to be the grown-up.”
Raven doesn't look convinced at all, but she says, “Okay.”

They talk for a little while after, and Raven asks if he's had any trouble with the locals. Anti-mutant sentiment is on the rise again. Peter knows. He watches the news. He tells Raven not to worry. He's been keeping a low profile and although he's sure the neighbors know about him there hasn't been any kind of trouble. He's been careful to keep on their good side. Even if there were trouble, he can still outrun it.

“Still, it wouldn't hurt to have someone around to watch your back,” she says.

So Peter is not surprised in the least when Hank McCoy pulls up in front of his mom's house four days later in the X-men equivalent of the Mystery Mobile, trying to be stealthy, with Scott Summers riding shotgun. Does the kid even know how to drive?

Peter's helping his mom eat lunch when they show up, or rather, he's trying to convince her to eat, holding out a spoonful of applesauce, so he leaves the applesauce container floating in mid-air, zips downstairs to open the door for them, zips back upstairs to his mom and shouts “It's open!” when they ring the bell.

“Go see your friends, Peter,” his mom coaxes. She rests a skeletal hand on his forearm, making the spoon drop away from her mouth.

“Three bites and I will,” he says, repeating the phrase she used to torture him with as a child, but instead of whining like he did she just looks at him and says, “It all just tastes like ashes.”

Peter's heart clenches.

“One,” he insists. “You can do one, for me, so I don't feel like a failure.”

“You could never be a failure, Peter.”

Still, she takes one bite, and a sip of water.

He kisses her on the forehead before he goes downstairs.

Hank and Scott have found their way into the living room, and they're standing around like confused mannequins, looking at the ceiling, the furniture, looking for him, he realizes, like he's running a haunted house and they expect him to grab their ankles from under a table or something. He doesn't grab any ankles. Instead he zips between them and straightens up in the kitchen a little before dropping back down to normal speed, braced for some awkward conversation.

“Peter,” Hank says. “You leave your door unlocked?”

“No, I unlocked it when you got here.”

Hank's eyes stay politely on Peter's face, because Hank has manners, unlike Scott, who is a little shit and looks him up and down with an expression on his stupid face like he's just caught a whiff of something gross, which isn't possible at all because Peter mopped and wiped down all of the counters this morning and his mom's kitchen smells, if anything, like Pine-sol, thank you very much. Also Peter has showered today. Wait, did he? Pit check. Yes.

“How are you?” Hank asks.

“How are you?”

“Not bad. You?”
“Okay.” Hank has some kind of point to make, Peter can tell, because there's a lot going on in
Hank's head because he's, like, a genius and he has a lot to say, most of which is lost on everybody
but maybe the professor, and that's a big maybe, but anyway it takes the right phrase to really get him
going. Maybe because he's learned not to bore everybody with his nerd babble unless they're really
ready to hear what he has to say. It's like he has to run his words through a dumb-down filter before
they come out of his mouth, and that can take him a while, especially when he's talking to Peter
because he has to run it through the first filter and then figure out a way to keep it brief so that Peter
doesn't leave two sentences into the conversation.

In the pause between Hank's “okay” and whatever else is going to come out of his mouth Peter gets
the coffee going because he has guests, and manners, unlike Scott. So Peter is pretty surprised when
Scott opens his mouth and says, “Lexie scored a goal yesterday.”

Peter's jaw dropped. “What? That's awesome.” Lexie, he couldn't forget her, that tiny little mutant
with the green scaly skin and lizard tongue. “It took me two weeks just to get her from the bench to
the field.”

“Well, the rest was downhill. She's a fast runner, not as fast as some of the bigger kids but she can
turn on a dime.” Scott kind of trails off. “The professor has me filling in for you.”

Filling in. Scott's covering for him until...

“How's that going?” Peter asks.

“Harder than it looks,” Scott admits. He takes a really long second to weigh his next words. The
kid's awkward but he's trying and Peter appreciates that. “They miss you. The team misses you too,
not the soccer team. I mean the X-men. We had to learn to cope without our safety net, which was
you until you left. The professor says it's good for us, but... yeah, it'd be nice to have you back.”

“Thanks,” Peter says, letting him off the hook. “I miss it too.”

It looks like Scott's not done digging his own grave yet because he says, “What I'm saying is that
you're still part of the team, even if you're not around.”

That actually does mean a lot, like Peter has his own safety net. There isn't much they can do at the
moment, and he wouldn't want anyone else taking care of his mom. It's something he has to do
himself, because he's not going to get a do-over. It has to be him, but that doesn't mean it isn't nice
that he has someone he can call if, like, his mom's house burns down or the Russians invade or
something. Well, he does have people he can call, it's just that he can't really picture Peggy doing
much against invading Russians. Or could she? He learned just the other day that Peggy has a black
belt in judo. Maybe he shouldn't underestimate her.

Peter throat is tight. He doesn't trust himself to speak so he nods instead.

There's an awkward pause, the first of many, Peter's sure, because Hank would rather be in front of a
microscope or a chalkboard than standing in someone's living room having a casual conversation and
Scott and Peter have been rubbing each other the wrong way since they met.

“Scott, can you get my case out of the car, please?”

Case? What case? It's nothing but an excuse to give Hank a minute to talk to Peter alone. Peter can
see that, because a) Hank could have just brought his case with him if he knew he was going to need
it and b) if he wanted it right this second, like it had his Chapstick in it and his lips were feeling dry
all of a sudden, then he could have sent Peter and it would already be in his hands, but nope, Scott's
on his way out the door, looking grateful but reluctant like maybe Hank is punishing him for being an irritating little bastard, but maybe not because Scott's actually being nice for once in his life.

"Raven was really worried when she came back from visiting you, and I think she has a point. If you were a normal human I would tell you to go see a doctor."

"Look, it's- " he almost says 'fine', but it's not fine. He holds up his hands in surrender. "I know. I look like shit. It's been a rough few months but if you're here to tell me to lay off the pizza or make me do laps around the National Mall you can save it for later."

"Peter, I know you have a lot to deal with. We didn't come here to upset you."

"Why did you come?" Peter asks, because that ship has sailed. He can feel anger burning in his cheeks. There's no real reason for him to be this emotional, and yet here it is, bubbling to the surface, looking for a target and here's Hank with a bulls eye on his forehead. "And why bring Scott of all people?" Peter says the name like it tastes bad.

Hank pinches the bridge of his nose and mumbles, "The professor's idea. Charles wants him to work on his leadership skills. He thought it would help Scott develop some empathy for his teammates if he could see what you're going through."

"Well, he's seen. He knows I've gone soft. Now he can go back to Westchester and have laugh about it with Jean or something."

"Nobody's laughing." Hank says. "You look terrible. And, yes, you've put on some weight. It's probably not as much as you imagine but it's cause for concern because with your metabolism it shouldn't physically be possible no matter your activity level, which means your body isn't functioning normally. So you're going to roll up your sleeve and you're going to give me a blood sample so that I can help you figure out what's going on."

Mom is dying, that's what's going on, but he just doesn't have it in him to fight his way out of Hank's grip, so he lets himself be dragged over the the sofa and sat down.

Scott's back with the case by then. Peter wonders how much he overheard but he doesn't really care. He just wants to get this over with and go back to watching soaps with his mom.

Of course Hank wants more than a sample. He starts by taking Peter's blood pressure, then checks his heartbeat and makes him take deep breaths, looks in his ears and down his throat. He brought a bathroom scale, and Peter dutifully toes his shoes off and cringes as the needle stops at one hundred eighty seven pounds ("Do not even think of looking, Scott!") then the greedy bastard takes four vials of his blood ("Vampire, are you going to drink it?") and asks him a bunch of questions about how much he's sleeping, how much he's eating, and what kind of foods he's eating, how often he uses his powers and for what, whether he's been drinking alcohol or smoking cigarettes or taking any kind of drugs, even over-the-counter medications ("Wouldn't that show up in my blood work?" "Yes."

"Well, why are you asking?") Hank seems unhappy with most of his answers, except maybe the drug and alcohol questions because he's clean as a whistle in that department. He smoked a cigarette with Lindy when she visited last weekend and he'll probably do it again but Hank is just going to have to be upset about that.

They're on some embarrassing question about Peter's urinary output when Mom rings her bell (thank God) and Peter zips upstairs to see what she needs.

He finds her dressed and sitting on the edge of her bed, her face made up and her scarf wrapped around her head. It's the most effort she's made in weeks, so when she smiles up at him Peter smiles
“Help me downstairs, Peter. I'd like to visit with your friends. I think I'm up for a little socializing.”

She tries to lever herself up off the bed but her arms aren't strong enough. Peter scoops her up like a new bride and cradles her head against his shoulder. Hank and Scott stand up while Peter carries her downstairs and sets her in the recliner. He offers to get her a water or some juice but she says, “Coffee, Dear. I could smell it from upstairs.”

“I'm putting cream in it,” he says, even though he knows she probably won't drink it. She gets cold easily and she likes to have something to warm her hands.

“It's nice to meet you, Mrs. Maximoff,” Scott says.

“Oh, sit down, boys,” she says. “Let me see if I can guess: Hank McCoy- ” she says, pointing “-and Scott Summers. Peter's told me all about you. Where's your girl, Scott? You didn't bring her?”

“Oh,” Scott stutters. “I don't have a... Jean isn't my-”

“Yes, she is,” Hank says, then quickly hides his mouth behind the coffee cup that Peter hands him.

“And wasn't there a girl who could control the weather?”

“Ororo,” Peter volunteers.

“Sometimes she goes by 'Storm'. ”

“And you, Scott, what's your power?”

“Uhm, optic blast.”

“If he takes off his glasses we'll need to rebuild the back of the house, and the neighbor's house, and probably the one across the street,” Peter explains.

Scott looks strangely proud.

“Peter, can you run down to Wegmans and pick up some orange juice?”

“We don't need orange juice.”

“I know, but I want to talk about you and I don't want you around to hear it.”

“I'll be back in eight minutes. And I'm getting apple juice.”

“You'll be back in six minutes, seven if there's a line. Don't try to eavesdrop.”

Peter rolls his eyes but takes off. He even spends an extra fifteen seconds browsing the magazine rack at checkout before heading back. He already had a pretty good idea what his mom wanted to talk to Hank and Scott about but he has it confirmed when he zips back into the house. Mom’s oldest photo album is resting on the coffee table. Scott or Hank must have fetched it for her because it’s normally shelved with the rest of the albums in the family room. The album cover is closed but Peter knows which pictures she’s shown them because Scott looks all sober and serious and kind of like he wants to be sick.

Mom looks a little tired too and Peter guesses that whatever she wanted to say, she’s said it. She sags in his arms, spent, as he trudges up the stairs and lays her down on her bed.
“You were such a tiny baby,” she says out of nowhere, except maybe not because Peter knows that some of his earliest baby pictures were in the back of that album. “I was huge, and when you were born you were so small. You have no idea how uncomfortable I was in the middle of summer, and there was no air conditioning in our building back then.”

Peter smiles. “It's payback time.”

Mom smiles.

“Do you want the TV on?”

“No, I think I'll try to sleep. And Peter?”

“Yeah?”

“I have a few regrets about my life but you are not one of them. Whatever I might say about your father, you're not him. I'm glad that I met him, because he gave me you. I love you, Peter.”

“I love you too, Mom.”

Peter can't show his face downstairs right away because his mother's words hit him a little harder than he expected.

When he does go back downstairs he does it slowly and noisily so that Hank and Scott have time to cut off their conversation and Peter can ask, “So, she told you about him?”

“Yes,” says Hank, and he confesses that he already knew Magneto was Peter's father. He'd overheard Peter's conversation with Raven back when they were stuck in that cell at the Alkali Lake facility (because the cell wasn't that big, come on) and Raven confirmed it for him after, but Hank felt like it would have been rude to comment and also it wasn't like anybody had seen any proof until now. Then they talk about who else knows: Ororo, because Raven told her, and the professor and Jean because they're telepaths and even though they have trouble reading Peter they were able to pick up his secret from the other people who knew. So Raven, Ororo, Jean, Hank, the Professor, Moira (probably), and now Scott. That's where the list dries up. Obviously Jean never told Scott, which is kind of surprising to Peter and makes him like Jean even more and confirms his belief that she is way out of Scott's league.

It takes some coaxing on Peter's part but he eventually pieces together the conversation that his mom had with Hank and Scott and it went a little something like this:

“Peter's father is a dangerous man. Peter isn't scared of him, but I'm scared enough for both of us. I'm worried about what will happen once I'm gone.”

Right about there she must have had Scott fetch the photo album, the one with the black-and-white pictures of her and Erik Lehnsherr sitting in front of a Christmas tree, looking very young and a little drunk because they were young and they were drunk and the picture is crooked because it was taken by Mom's old roommate who was drinking with them in the tiny apartment that she and Mom shared when they were still in nursing school. There are only two pictures and Mom never showed them to Peter until nineteen seventy three when the handsome young guy from the Christmas tree picture was on national television threatening to kill the president.

“Erik doesn't know that Peter is his son,” his Mom had said. “But one day he'll find out, and when he does I'm afraid of what will happen.”

And that was about the time that Hank had tried to make a point about Erik's wife and daughter, the
ones who were killed in Poland, and that Erik seemed to have found peace with them, at least for a while.

His mom had said, “I don't doubt it. But people don't change. Erik is a man who puts his ideals and his goals above the good of any one person, no matter who that is. I don't want Peter to become a pawn in his game. You have to hold onto him. Promise me that you won't let Erik take my son away.”

Peter shakes his head. His mom has been worried about Erik Lehnsherr for a long time, and Peter's already promised that as long as she's alive, he'll never know. She doesn't need to worry.

Peter thinks that his secret might be another reason that the professor sent Scott with Hank. If he wants the kid to lead the X-men one day then Scott will need to know which cards he has in his deck.

“I guess it goes without saying that you should probably keep this to yourselves,” Peter says.

“Do you think you'll ever tell him?” Scott asks.

Peter tries to be cool, even though the question fills him with anxiety when he asks it of himself.

“Not right now.”

They talk for a while, mostly about how things are going at the school. Hank quietly tells Peter that Magneto has left the school on some business of the professor's and either Hank doesn't know any more than that or he just doesn't want to tell Peter, and again, Peter's cool, or he's trying to be, so he lets the subject drop. Eventually Scott fills the silence by updating Peter on all the new students and their powers. Peter gives coaching tips to Scott and receives just three words of advice from Hank, “Get some rest.”

“Sure,” Peter says.

To be continued...

Feedback is welcome and appreciated.

Chapter End Notes

The Raven scene the first thing I wrote in this story, and one of my favorites. It's the moment where we first see an X-man realize how badly Peter needs help, but how powerless she is to help him.
Immediate Family

Chapter Summary

Not all of Peter's guests phone ahead.

Chapter Notes

I am so appreciative for all of your comments and kudos. It makes me look forward to posting each new chapter. Thank you for sticking with me this far.

Warnings for this part: more cancer talk, fake mutant health science, outdated nineteen-eighties nutrition advice, blood.

Enjoy

Peter's mom is pleased as punch when Hank returns a week later with Jean in tow. Mom wants to come downstairs right away and say hi and fuss over Jean's beautiful straight red hair and her amazing powers and tell her what a handsome boy that Scott Summers is while Peter makes a gaggy disgusted face over the coffee that he's stirring. Mom lasts longer than Peter expects, almost an hour before she needs to lie down.

Hank ambushes him as soon as Peter's back downstairs, holding a folder with what Peter assumes are his blood test results, not that they make any sense to Peter.

He basically tells Peter what he already knew, which is that he's under stress. “Your brain is telling your body that there's a threat, and your body is responding by prioritizing alertness and energy storage. It's also keeping you in a depressed mental state so that you can conserve energy but still use your powers when you need to. It's very similar to hormone imbalances experienced by humans during times of prolonged stress, except that your mutation allows you to adapt to your situation in ways that humans can't.”

Hank is keeping a pretty tight lid on his nerdiness but he still sounds fascinated.

“Xavier is going to write a paper on this, isn't he?”

“... he might include my research in one, yes.”

“Uh huh. So... uh...” then Peter proceeds to describe a pretty alarming incident he had a few days ago when he was moving in and out of speed and just... collapsed. He didn't pass out or anything and he'd gotten up right away, all hot-faced and shaking and embarrassed and hoping to God his mom hadn't heard him (she hadn't) but Peter had been pretty sure that Hank would want to know about it.

He's right, of course. Hank is all over that like white on rice and he says, “It brings me to my next
conclusion: you're malnourished.”

“And you need to clean your glasses, Hank.”

“I'm serious. You've been eating less?”

Peter sighs, “Yes.” He's eating like a human now, three meals per day, mostly things like cereal and sandwiches and Cup O’ Noodles because Mom barely eats and he's never had the patience for cooking, especially if it's just for himself. He even takes his coffee black. Sometimes a neighbor still brings over a casserole but he's not a fan anymore, so they sit in his mom's fridge unless Mom wants a bite or two, which she usually doesn't. Before Mom got sick Peter knows he would have starved to death on a diet like this, and that's not an exaggeration. Now it's all he can do to keep the needle on the bathroom scale a hair below one eighty-eight. He'd tried to skip breakfast this morning and he'd gotten so dizzy that he had to down a couple of handfuls of raisins and that seemed to perk him up.

“It's not just the calories, it's the nutrients. Your blood tests results showed deficiencies in Vitamin A, Iron, and Zinc. Now, your body is typically very good at breaking down and deriving nutrients from what you eat, but it's used to a greater volume. I can give you some vitamin injections, but if you don't start getting the nutrients you need, you're going to make yourself very sick and possibly do your body lasting damage. So as much as you might not like the idea, you're going to need to eat more: fresh fruits, vegetables, complex carbohydrates, those kinds of things. Yes, your weight might go up by a few more pounds, but I don't think it will get out of control and in the long run I think it's preferable to the alternative.”

Peter heaves a sigh. He has to be able to function. What else can he do? “I guess I can eat an orange or something.”

Hank and Jean are smiling at him encouragingly. “And Peter, I want you to try to sleep.”

That earns them a head-shake. And once his head starts shaking it doesn't stop, even when Hank says, “I can give you a sedative.”

“You can try,” Peter says. His pulse is racing and his heart is in his throat and he is ready to be five miles away before Hank can so much as glance at his satchel.

“I could give you a sedative,” Jean says.

She's trying to call his bluff but Peter isn't bluffing. “Yeah, you could, but please don't, because I will will fight you every step of the way. I need to stay awake, so please don't, please, please, please.” They're looking at him, sitting very still like he's some sort of wild animal and the slightest move might make him scramble under a hedge or bite their faces off and Peter kind of feels like a wild animal right now, all skittish and wide-eyed like the raccoon that he once surprised in the back yard and okay, maybe he's a little hysterical because he's distantly aware that his head won't stop shaking and his eyes are burning and it's literally all he can do not to bolt. Then Jean is kneeling in front of him and her cool hands are on either side of his face and he feels the tension just kind of drain out of his body, leaving him limp as a cooked noodle. Then she takes his hand and leads him upstairs like a puppy on a leash to the room he's sleeping in. He catches a glimpse of his mom through her cracked door, just her hand resting on top of her quilt, but he can't feel anything about it.

Jean guides him to his unmade bed and presses her hands on his shoulders until he's lying on his back, staring up at the ceiling, his arms at his sides. He stays that way for four hours.

Jean tells him later that she tried to put him to sleep with her power but she couldn't do it. The best she could manage was to put him in a kind of stupor and she thinks she'd tried any harder she would
have given him brain damage. Peter is glad that she didn't try harder. Meanwhile Hank thinks Peter must have some kind of strong mental block and wonders out loud if there's a telepathic component to all mutations, because telepathy among mutants seems to pop up pretty regularly as both a primary and secondary mutation. It's not as common as things like increased strength or acute hearing, but it's more common than prehensile feet. Jean and the professor are the only true telepaths at the school right now, but there are three students that Hank generously classifies as 'empaths', meaning they can't read exact thoughts but they can sense, and in one case taste (yuck), emotions and very strong thoughts.

Peter gets to hear all this when he stumbles down the stairs after his not-nap, feeling groggy and disoriented, to find Hank making stir-fry with some chicken and vegetables that he had Jean pick up while Peter was slack-jawed and drooling on his pillow.

Mom is still worn out from visiting earlier, so Peter brings her plate to her room. Hank dished up a pretty optimistic portion for her and when Peter brings the plate back downstairs half an hour later it's mostly untouched. He wishes he could get away with eating as little as she does but Jean and Hank watch him like a hawk until he cleans his plate. He's the last one finished, and to think he used to be able to polish off an entire pizza and a liter of Coca-Cola in a tenth of a second.

Hank cooked, so Peter tries to take care of the dishes but Jean waves him away. In the living room Hank has a set of syringes set out for him.

“You made dessert,” Peter says without humor. “Please tell me they go in my arm.”

No such luck. Hank and Peter retire to the downstairs bathroom to spare Jean her blushes and Peter the last shreds of his dignity. As Peter is buckling his belt (two notches looser than normal) Hank starts asking questions about the people who come and visit his mom, like, does he know them, and for how long has he known them and how well. The answers are: 'yes', 'at least a few years', and 'pretty well', seeing as most of his mom's visitors are either registered nurses, like her, or family, like Lindy or Lindy's dad, or lifelong neighbors. That's how he figures that things with the terrorist kidnappers must be coming to a head.

“Has there been any trouble up in Westchester?” Peter asks. With about seventy mutants under the roof it's a prime target, and it's not, like, a secret that it's there. The professor doesn't even try to hide his school, he practically takes out ads in the New York Times because he's got hope and faith in humanity, which is cool and all but it's no substitute for firepower, which he also has but doesn't advertise. He figures no one will have the balls to mess with his kids, because if they do they're going to have to figure out how to get around an angry blue ball of fur, a guy who can turn their brains to mush, a chick who can turn that mush to ashes and a guy who can blast those ashes into the next state if he takes off his sunglasses, and that's not even counting Storm and Nightcrawler and Mystique and the sixty or so mutant ankle-biters with their lizard tongues and claws and tails.

“No, it's been quiet.”

“Like, quiet quiet or too quiet?”

“Compared to other places with a high mutant population, too quiet. Charles is sending the kids home early for summer break, but he's having the teachers stick close most of the time.”

Peter feels a stab of panic. “What are you doing here, then? I mean, it's not like I don't appreciate the house call. I totally do and Mom loves you guys and thanks for cooking and for the vitamin shots but jeez, think of the children!”

“Peter, you are a child.”
“Am not.”

“No, you're not,” Hank says, dropping his smile. “But you're one of our own and you're in a bad spot right now. We can help you, so let us help, okay?”

Peter blows out an exasperation breath. Fighting him is more effort than he wants to expend. “Okay, Hank,” he agrees.

It's late, so Hank and Jean stay the night. Jean takes Peter's awesome basement and Hank crashes out in front of the TV in the den watching a Star Trek rerun. It's the one with the awful title where the doctor (also McCoy) finds out that he's dying but then he gets married and he doesn't die after all and there's a happy ending sort of.

Peter's the last one to go to turn in for the night. Hank told him that even if he can't sleep he should spend as much time flat on his back as possible, so he does go to bed though. He even changes into sweatpants and a t-shirt a) because they pass for pajamas and b) aside from one pair of jeans they're the only pants that fit him anymore. At one in the morning he helps his mom to the toilet and back and gets her a glass of water. Neither of them can sleep after that, so Peter turns on the lamp and they play cards until she falls back asleep at about four. After that he shuffles downstairs and makes a cup of tea. He doesn't even like tea, he just wants something to warm his hands while he sits on the porch and watches the sky change colors as the sun rises. At around five he zips over to the store to pick up eggs for breakfast. Somehow the paper boy delivers the news before he gets back, and Peter wonders if he's a mutant too. Maybe he has powers that make him invisible because Peter has literally never seen the kid, but the paper always comes.

Peter reads the entire paper twice, sitting at his mom's bed side, before he hears Hank roll off the couch, but he can't, for the life of him, remember what any of the articles were about.

When he sees Peter the first words out of Hank's mouth are, “Did you sleep at all?”

“Nope.”

Then Peter's in the kitchen scrambling eggs.

Over breakfast Jean tells Peter about a new kid at the school named Domingo. He's from Brazil or Argentina or someplace and he has the power to change how gravity affects him. Basically he can walk on the ceiling and do crazy back flips and stuff but after Scott found him stuck in a tree one morning they had to start tying him to his bed because he has night terrors and keeps floating out the window. It's a horrible story but also kind of awesome. Peter's still smiling about it when Hank says that he wants to take another blood sample with him back to Westchester.

That kind of takes the air out of the room but Peter lets him have it without much complaining. Hank takes Peter's blood pressure too (it's still high) but doesn't make him step on a scale or turn his head and cough or anything but he does ask for a list of phone numbers, locals only, preferably neighbors.

Hank and Jean wait until his mom is awake and she's eaten and made herself presentable before they leave. She tells them to come back soon, gives Jean a kiss on the cheek and tells her that Scott doesn't know how good he has it.

“Scott and I aren't- ”

“Yes, you are,” she says. “And if you're really not, you will be,” she adds with a wink. “Peter, I wish you had a girl. I want to meddle in your love life while I still have time.”

“Annie Lennox is the only girl for me. You know that.”
“Hank, what about you?”

Hank turns an amazing shade of red.

Mom whispers, “He does have a girl. Peter, is she one of the other mutants?”

“I'm not getting involved. You know he's like, your age, right?”

“That makes me want to meet her even more.”

Hank and Jean leave on Thursday. Lindy comes home on Saturday afternoon and sits with Mom practically the whole time she's there, doing her homework with her notes spread out over Mom's legs like a second blanket. She leaves early on Sunday afternoon but says she'll be back next Saturday, or maybe Friday. She doesn't cry until she gets behind the wheel of her car.

Peter eats an orange every day after breakfast, just like he promised, and buys a new pair of jeans.

Monday afternoon Peter finds not only Jean but Ororo and Raven on his mom's doorstep. They've brought their overnight cases. One by one they give him lingering hugs as they cross the threshold and after they're all inside he waves to Mr. Oberman from across the street, who's been polishing the same spot on his Camaro for about three minutes.

The girls have a slumber party with his mom. Okay, it's not a real slumber party. They're super solicitous and they don't excite her too much (probably because Jean can tell exactly when his mom starts feeling rough). There aren't any pillow fights but they do paint each others' nails and talk about boys and other things, and when Mom is resting they visit with Peter and tell him that his hair is getting long and they give him, like, the worst haircut ever. They keep having to cut it shorter and shorter to get the sides to match and what he's left with makes him look like one of Lindy's old Barbie dolls from when she didn't know that their hair doesn't grow back, but Peter's hair will grow back pretty quickly, so he doesn't mind. When the girls are done playing beauty salon they cook and make him eat and sit him down at the couch. Raven and Ororo pin him between them and make him watch The Empire Strikes Back twice in a row. It's his favorite in the trilogy but he falls asleep anyway with his head pillowed against Raven's shoulder and wakes up drooling in her cleavage while Luke is having his hand sliced off by Darth Vader.

The girls stay for two nights, and Peter sleeps for an hour the second night. It's the most he's slept at one time in weeks and he feels... not better, but not as bad. Mom even has some color in her cheeks. When the girls leave she even asks Peter to take her for a stroll around the neighborhood in her wheelchair, but sitting up anymore is hard for her and he only makes it about half a block before she asks him to turn around. As he carries her back up the stairs it hits him that she will never leave this house under her own power again.

On Wednesday afternoon Lindy calls the house, sobbing and hysterical. It takes several tries before he gets it out of her that her car has broken down and the repair shop can't get the parts for a week, which means she can't come see Mom this weekend. Peter calms her down, offers to wire her money if she needs it, asks if she can borrow a car (she's asked) or rent a car (she can't until she turns twenty-one). So he tells her that Mom is doing better, even offers to buy her a plane ticket. Finally she blurts, “I don’t want to be here! I want my mom! I just want my mom!” like she's five years old and she's fallen off her bike and scraped her knee. That's when Peter makes an executive decision, wakes Mom up and hauls her downstairs so that she can talk to Lindy, and hears Mom say, “Then come home, Baby. Forget all of that and just come home,” while he waits in the den with his head in his hands, rocking back and forth until Lindy and Mom are finished talking. When he hears the clatter of the receiver on the cradle he zips out and picks Mom up. “She'll be okay,” Mom assures him. “I talked to her and she'll be okay.”
“Are you okay?”

“Oh, Peter. I'm going to be fine,” and that's the drugs talking. Mom's feeling no pain at all, and Peter's glad about that at least.

Late Saturday night or maybe early Sunday Peter is lying on the couch and Led Zeppelin is spinning quietly on the turntable when he hears a loud crack in the basement. He grabs a knife from the kitchen and zips down the stairs to find two intruders fumbling at each other in the dark. When he flicks on the light at the top of the stairs the intruders become Jean and Kurt, who are dressed for sleep and one or both of them is bleeding all over the carpet.

“What happened?” Peter asks. While he's waiting for an answer he puts the knife away and retrieves the first aid kit from the hall closet and wraps Kurt's thigh in gauze. Kurt isn't bleeding from anywhere else that Peter can see, but he is bleeding a lot from that single wound and his leg isn't doing anything to support him.

Jean doesn't bother with words but grabs Peter's forearm and suddenly it's like there's a movie playing in Peter's head and he realizes she's showing him a memory. She's in her room and there are bright lights outside, loud bangs, gunfire, he/Jean realizes as she reads the terrified minds of the other mutants in the house. She/he tears down the hall, looking for Scott but there are soldiers everywhere, dressed in black with laser sites on their weapons. They're all over the school like ants, overwhelming the students. Jean flings open doors with her powers. The house shakes, and that's her too. Then she's sending books and furniture flying. Soldiers crumple to the ground around her but more come and then more and mutant children are being wrestled to the ground and the soldiers are snapping collars on their necks. Jean reads the minds of the men around her and finds their mission: capture as many as they can. She can't find Scott, but suddenly Kurt is in front of her, shielding her as a gun goes off and he's teleporting her into the trees outside the mansion. When he crumples to the ground she panics because in the dark she can't see where he's hit. She tells him that she knows a safe place, and shows him Peter's basement in her mind. Then they're here and not a second goes by before the lights flick on and Peter is staring up into his own dark eyes at the top of the stairs.

Jean breaks her grip and Peter stumbles back, catching himself on the edge of the bed. He feels a tickling sensation on his upper lip and when he wipes at it his hand comes away bloody.

“I'm sorry,” Jean gasps.

Peter waves his bloody hand at her in a 'no harm no foul' kind of gesture and stops the bleeding with a Kleenex from upstairs.

“I don't know if anyone else got away,” Jean cries. “I couldn't think. Everything happened so fast.”

Kurt's lying on the carpet, gritting his teeth. In between hissing, gasping breaths he says, “I teleported a few of ze kids into ze the woods before I found you.”

“Who?” Jean asks.

“Annie, Jubilee, Esra... Michael -ahh!”

Then Peter's got Kurt's leg propped up on his lap and he's keeping pressure on the wound to stop the bleeding. He doesn't see an exit wound, so the bullet is probably still in there and Peter hopes it's not some crazy new kind of bullet that explodes or has a tracker or something and bullet in the leg? Yeah, that's going to be a problem. Peter knows a few nurses he can call at the very least but he's not sure how much more they can do than him and Peter wishes that he'd payed a little more attention all those times Mom tried to teach him first aid, but even if he had he doesn't think she specifically
covered how to treat bullet wounds.

“Anyone else?”

Kurt shakes his head. “Maybe zey got away.”

“Look, it's going to be okay,” Peter says. “You're safe for now. They couldn't have gotten everybody.” From what Jean showed him it seems like the terrorists were there for the kids and they weren't just out for blood and they had standard weaponry (except for the collars, that's a new one on Peter, even if it's not exactly a weapon), not those crazy military stun guns that would just let them knock everyone out and take their pick, plus the professor and Hank and Raven are all pretty experienced, so while they might have been caught off guard Peter doesn't doubt that they were able to mount some kind of defense.

Jean exhales and it's a small, regretful noise and he knows she's reading his mind. Her mouth is twisted into a frown and she's on the edge of tears. “I should go back. We should have stayed there. We should have fought back. The professor needed my help and I left. I panicked!”

“Jean, Jean, no. Not helpful. You did the best thing you could do. Kurt's injured. He's not going to be taking anyone anywhere right now. Even if I ran you there it would take hours and you'd probably pass out. So it's time to lay low and regroup. What did Mystique tell us? If you're outnumbered or overwhelmed sometimes the best thing you can do is go to ground.” Jean sometimes forgets just how powerful she is and just how much she can do with her powers, so she holds back, and, hey, Peter gets it. It can be kind of tough to come up with a strategy when you have too many options and if she miscalculates then it's bye-bye mansion. Again. And Xavier's going to be blacklisted by every homeowners insurance carrier in the market because there's no way that a multi-million dollar property explodes twice in a year and it's just a coincidence. So maybe Jean was going easy on those gunmen, but regardless, she's more valuable out of the line of fire and scheming than she is running around in the dark in her pajamas with god-like powers but no plan. The first thing they have to do is make sure Kurt doesn't bleed to death on Peter's carpet. Kurt has already bled through the first dressing, so Peter wraps another layer of gauze around the first.

“Jean, keep pressure on this. I'm going to do a little recon.” Peter asks, because he feels the sudden need to follow Hank's advice and take stock of the neighborhood, just to make sure that nobody has crosshairs on his basement or anything crazy.

Nobody does. It's a quiet night or early morning, really and nothing is stirring, not even the yappy toy poodle that lives with its owners on the corner of Oak and Vine. When he gets back he helps Jean move Kurt into a more comfortable position and find him a pillow. Kurt doesn't look so hot, and he's bleeding through the second dressing, but not so fast that Peter thinks the bullet hit an artery. Still, it's not great.

“We've got to take him to a hospital.” He doesn't say any more than that. Jean's probably thinking the same thing. It might make it easier for the bad guys to find them but it's better than letting Kurt die or get an infection.

Peter thinks of Mom, who's still sleeping upstairs (he checked when he did recon a second ago). Mom needs someone to stay with her but Jean and Kurt need his help in a pretty immediate way. He could call an ambulance but that would mean having to explain to the cops why there's a mutant with a gunshot wound in his basement. That's something that would definitely show up on the police blotter in the paper and draw all kinds of unwanted attention. He can drive them directly to the hospital, which will still draw attention but hopefully not as much, and he needs to find someone to watch Mom while he's away because there's no way that he's just going to toss Jean the keys and let her deal with this on her own when she's this upset. Cindy doesn't usually come around until seven
and that's -watch check- five and a half hours from now. Lindy's coming, but not for a few days. Peggy would do it, but she's too far away, so Peter guesses it's time to start making phone calls and ringing doorbells. He opens his mouth to tell Jean but notices that Jean's wearing a far away look like she's listening to something he can't hear.

“Professor,” she breathes. She turns to Peter, “He says not to leave the house. He's sending help, but it will take a few hours.”

Okay, great, but, “Is he close by?”

“He's inside Cerebro. The rest of the X-men are fighting to take back the mansion. Scott is okay,” she says, relieved. “The professor says he'll try to contact me again soon, but we need to stay where we are and be patient.”

Yes, patience. That is exactly what Peter is known for.

“Peter, he says you need to trust him.”

“I trust him,” he says automatically.

“No you don't, but he appreciates you saying so.”

And once Peter really pauses to examine this thoughts he realizes that it's true, he doesn't trust the professor, and now that he thinks about it that seed had been planted way back when he first met the professor, right here in this basement and Xavier had been the least interesting, most condescending person in a trio that included a nightclub bouncer and a rocket scientist. Then he had Peter go to the trouble of breaking a guy out of the Pentagon just so he could punch him in the face... and the guy was Peter's dad, which, granted, Peter hadn't known at the time, but still. Then they'd gone off to Paris, like *au revoir*, and the next thing Peter knows he's sitting there watching the guy Xavier convinced him to free making a speech on TV basically outing all of the mutants and putting humanity on notice, and, hey, maybe some mutants didn't want to be outed. Maybe some mutants just wanted to run around and have fun with the powerless humans and maybe steal stuff that they weren't using anyway but then there's a guy telling them that play time is over and it's Us versus Them except that means Peter's supposed to side with the night club bouncer and the rocket scientist and the asshole in the wrinkled suit over his mom and his sister and Peter's like, 'no thanks, I'll just give back all the shit I stole and lay low for the rest of my life' but then Mystique does her thing and that's great because it maybe sort of convinces the world that not all mutants are dicks, although some of them definitely are, and maybe wholesale slaughter isn't in anybody's best interest. Still, just to be on the safe side Peter had given back all the shit he'd stolen and laid low for the next decade, and maybe he would still be laying low if Magneto hadn't surfaced and maybe he'd also done it because he was crappy at fitting into society anyway, so two birds with one stone and all of that.

So, okay, Xavier maybe didn't make a great first impression on Peter, and it's not like he and Peter have established much of a rapport since then. Xavier has changed a lot since Peter met him and now he's bald and in a wheelchair and polite. None of those things would have described him in seventy-three when he was dashing around with the shaggy hair and beard and the fisticuffs and the name calling and it definitely made Peter question which Xavier was the real one. As a foundation for trust, it's not great. While Peter was at the mansion he'd mostly interacted with the professor indirectly through Hank or Raven, both of whom he actually does trust, and now that he thinks about it he sort of wonders if that was intentional on the professor's part because a) he's psychic and probably picked up on how Peter felt about him and b) Xavier is a busy guy and the world does not revolve around Peter Maximoff. And it wasn't like Peter ever went out of his way to corner the professor so that they could bond over a game of backgammon because being near someone who can read your thoughts (sorry, Jean) is uncomfortable under the best of circumstances even when you're not trying to hide
the fact that you're the guy's best friend's illegitimate son.

Xavier didn't say how long to stay put or what kind of help he's sending, so Peter's along for the ride on this one. Trust him. Okay, let's see where this goes. Jean has that look like she knows more than she's letting on but then again Jean always knows more than she's letting on, it's just that this time she looks guilty, but whatever, she's a kid and she's scared and hiding in a basement, so Peter lets it slide.

He gets Jean some clothes from his sister's closet. Lindy's a little shorter so her pants won't fit Jean but Peter thinks her skirts should be fine. He brings her a sweater too because it's sort of chilly in the basement and they're taking the professor's 'stay put' very literally because a) it's better to be safe than sorry and b) they've finally gotten the bleeding under control and it wouldn't be a good idea to move Kurt.

So Peter makes solo trips up the stairs for the sake of his unexpected house guests and brings down a selection of pain meds from his mom's collection. Mom's doctor doesn't fool around with pain management for his terminal patients. This pill isn't strong enough? Let's try the ten milligram. That one makes her nauseated? Let's add an antiemetic. Peter filled about eight prescriptions until he and the nurses found a combination that Mom could tolerate but now Peter's left with a medicine cabinet full of pills that he probably never would have used unless a gunshot victim happened to show up at the house but sometimes things just work out and now Peter is the candy man, rattling down the basement stairs with six orange bottles with white caps, a glass of water, and a sleeve of saltines.

Peter doesn't know if Kurt is allergic to anything and Kurt doesn't know what an opioid is so Peter crosses his fingers and twists the cap on the mildest prescription he has, thinking that if Kurt has a reaction he can at least dash the kid to the ER and leave Jean here with Mom if he absolutely has to. Within a half hour Kurt's feeling relaxed enough that he actually falls asleep with his leg propped on Jean's lap but he's breathing fine so Peter lets him be. Jean looks beat too, but she also looks determined not to fall asleep, so Peter volunteers to go upstairs to make her some breakfast, even though it's still dark outside. He checks on Mom again and then pops some bread in the toaster and pulls the eggs out of the fridge. He's waiting for the pan to heat up when he notices something moving in the backyard and Peter's eyes go wide because, oh shit, it's Magneto, floating over his Mom's back fence and landing softly in the grass like the world's worst cat burglar.

Oh God. Okay. Well, now Peter knows why Jean looked so guilty and why Xavier asked him to trust him. Mystery solved. Peter gets it. Bullets are metal and that's kind of Magneto's thing and the list of people that Xavier can call upon to dig a bullet out of someone's leg and oh-dark-thirty while the mansion is under siege is probably pretty short but seriously? A little warning wouldn't have gone amiss.

Peter's out of the kitchen and into the backyard in a flash, grabbing Magneto by the back of the head and ushering him downstairs into the basement, careful to shut all of the doors quietly behind him. He leaves Magneto reeling at the edge of the bed in front of a startled Jean and an unconscious Kurt and dashes back upstairs to shut the burner off and grab a jacket for himself because it's cold in the basement and also he might be a little self conscious about his weight.

Magneto's dressed like a civilian, no helmet, no supersuit, just gray slacks and a matching jacket, white shirtsleeves and no tie, five o'clock shadow, like he'd just come home from a day at the office and found ten messages on his answering machine telling him to get down to Virginia asap, only the answering machine was probably his mind and it was only once and it was Charles Xavier sending him out to (presumably) dig a bullet out of somebody's leg, because that went so well when he did it for Xavier (Peter's heard the story).

Peter tries to stay kind of behind Magneto, out of his line of sight while the older man gets his
bearings. While he's there he notices the bruises on Magneto's face and neck, a lot of them, peaking out from under the collar of his shirt and partially covered by his sparse beard. The bruises have all gone to green and yellow now, and he saw the missing fingernails on his hands that look like they're trying to grow back, two on the left and three on the right. Yikes.

Then it strikes him that, holy shit, his dad is in his basement. And, okay, Magneto doesn't know he's Peter's dad and he isn't even here to see Peter. He's here for Kurt and Jean but still, Peter has a moment where his chest tightens and he feels like he might be having a heart attack because this basement is him, and not the smirking, overconfident guy that saves people from exploding mansions, but the dumbass kid that loves video games and progressive rock music and plays the guitar and doesn't own a book without pictures in it except for the Vonnegut novel that he forgot to return to the school library in the ninth grade. Peter tells himself that it doesn't matter, like, at all, but it kind of does because he doesn't want his dad to think he's a total loser, even if Peter is a total loser, standing there all pale and slouchy with his arms wrapped around his middle.

Mom cannot know that he is here. Peter thinks it might actually kill her.

“A little warning next time,” Magneto says.

“Sorry,” says Peter. “Can't have the neighbors talking.”

“Of course not.” Magneto valiantly pushes past the head rush to ask, “How is Nightcrawler?”

Jean answers, “I think we stopped the bleeding. He's resting now. Peter gave him something for the pain but I think the bullet is still in his leg.”

“It is. I can feel it.” Then Magneto looks over his shoulder at Peter and Peter feels himself stiffen involuntarily at the attention. “Do you have a needle and thread? Sutures would be ideal.”

“I'll come up with something.”

Then Peter's upstairs looting the medicine cabinet again. Since his mom and his step dad were both in the medical field, and because they never wanted to draw attention to the fact that Peter, especially in his younger years, kept getting random inexplicable lacerations from cutting corners too close at super speed, he actually does have curved needles and suture thread on hand, which he brings back downstairs along with a bottle of rubbing alcohol.

“Thank you, Peter,” Magneto says when Peter hands over his loot.

“Sure. Thanks for coming.”

“I could hardly refuse, seeing as how it was my carelessness that led to the attack on the school.”

“Yeah... seems like somebody roughed you up pretty good. You, uh, doing okay now?”

“I'm healing,” Magneto says shortly.

And then because Peter can't leave well enough alone he asks, “Soooo, you got here pretty quickly. Were you, like, in the neighborhood or something?”

“I was in Washington, so not far away, lobbying for our cause, so to speak.”

“Oh.” Does everything that comes out of this guy's mouth sound sinister? “Like, how?” He doesn't need to know, but it would be really nice to know that 'lobbying' isn't code for 'yanking out a senator's fillings in the back of a night club'.
“Don't worry. I had Charles' blessing.”

“I wasn't worried.”

Magneto has recovered enough by now to straighten up and make his way around the bed to where Jean and Kurt are fitted together like pieces from two different jigsaw puzzles. “You'll need to hold him steady while I remove the bullet.”

“You've done this before?”

“Yes, mostly on myself.”

Eesh.

“I don't suppose you have any local anesthetic?”

Peter knows they used to, but Frank took all the lidocaine with him when he moved out. “Nope. But, uh...” Peter starts shuffling through the pill bottles that are still stashed in his pockets until he comes up with the one he's looking for and holds it out to Magneto for inspection. “This one's good for breakthrough pain.”

Magneto looks between Peter and the little bottle and Peter has an 'oh shit' moment where he realizes that Mom's name is on the bottle but it's actually probably okay because 'Mary' is a really common name and 'Maximoff' is the name that Mom took from Frank back when the two of them were still married and there's never been enough bad blood between them for her to bother with the paperwork to change it back.

Magneto just says, “Your mother won't miss these?”

Peter feels a little bit like someone is stabbing him in the chest and he answers, “Old prescription. She's on oral morphine now. Doctors don't mess around with palliative care.”

He wonders how much Xavier's told Magneto, and decides that Xavier hasn't told him everything because a) the name on the bottle didn't seem to ring any bells and b) Xavier's not really like that but that doesn't mean Peter's comfortable with people talking about him and his situation and especially his mom behind his back.

Magneto nods and says, “I'm very sorry.”

Peter almost loses it then because Magneto sounds sincere and of course he's sincere. This is a guy who watched, like, just about every member of his immediate family get murdered in front of him. He just doesn't understand what his sincerity means to Peter, but lucky for him Magneto seems to notice he's hit a nerve and rescues him by saying, “Let's start by removing the dressing. Peter, can you hold him around the chest?”

It takes less than a minute for Magneto to pull the bullet out of Kurt's leg. He goes gently at first, holding his hand a few inches from the wound like he's gripping something that Peter can't see, then faster as the bullet gets closer to the surface until Peter sees a glint of metal through the blood and then the bullet is in Magneto's hand and Jean is staunching the blood with a wad of gauze. Peter tries and doesn't totally succeed at muffling Kurt's screams (the kid has fangs after all). There's more blood, more gauze, then Magneto has Jean hold the edges of the bullet hole together while he stitches it shut by moving the needle with his mind, and, while Peter's never been a guy who faints at the sight of blood, by the time the wound is closed he feels a little woozy and his hands are shaking too much to open the prescription bottle. Magneto finally takes it from him. Peter wonders if Jean, with her telekinesis, could have done the same for Kurt but she's looking a little green around the gills and
he remembers that sometimes she has trouble blocking out other peoples' pain and this definitely looks like one of those 'sometimes'.

Peter says, “Yeah, uh, I'm just going to go get breakfast started. I hope everybody likes their eggs scrambled because I always mess them up of I try to make them any other way.”

Before anyone can make any breakfast requests he zips up the stairs and the first thing he does is check on Mom. The sun's just starting to filter in through the blinds and she's stirring but not awake, thank God, because if she was awake she would see right through Peter and know that something's not right because she has, like, Mom Senses even if she is drugged to the gills and she would know that something strange is going on under her roof.

Cooking breakfast takes for-e-ver, and Peter spends most of his time glancing over his shoulder at the top of the basement stairs, paranoid, because although Kurt's out of commission and Jean probably isn't going to leave Kurt, he never specifically told Magneto not to come up and he's afraid that he'll turn around and find the guy standing behind him with a butter knife or something. But nobody comes out of the basement and Peter plates up the eggs and toast and pulls out three glasses and a container of orange juice. Thinking ahead he also loads up a bowl with fruit and snacks and runs everything down to the basement where he's met with pretty much universal appreciation. Jean is starving and Magneto is the kind of guy who will eat what he's given without complaint. Kurt's a little too out of it to have much of an appetite but Peter coaxes him to take a few bites of toast and drink half a glass of orange juice.

“You're not eating?” Magneto asks him out of the blue.

Uh. “There's a nurse who comes at seven. She gives Mom her insulin and I usually make breakfast then and eat when Mom does,” and that's not strictly true because it doesn't matter when Peter eats but shut up, Jean. He doesn't want to eat in from of Magneto because he's embarrassed about his weight. There. Happy?

Jean gives him a look like he is the biggest idiot she's ever met. Scott must get that look all the time.

“Of course,” Magneto says, letting the subject drop. Or not, because then he says, “Charles was concerned that our arrival would prove too much of a burden for you.”

“What? No, of course not. It's fine. I kind of have to stay here most of the time anyway, and it's not like we don't have the room, and you guys aren't exactly eating me out of house and home here because I can make it to the store and back in, like, five minutes and most of that is just me browsing like a normal person so the manager doesn't call the cops and I kind of have a lot of time to kill because I always have a lot of time to kill so a little extra laundry in no biggie. So, no, it's cool. Stay as long as you need. I don't expect Kurt to really go anywhere with his leg like that and he might need antibiotics or something and I'm pretty sure I've got some laying around and even if I don't I can get them pretty easily. I'm not above a little petty theft. It's not like I've ever been caught.” Oh my God, Maximoff, shut up.

After an uncomfortable pause Magneto says, “Are you certain our presence won't upset your mother?”

No.

“She won't even know you're here.”

“We'll stay down here,” Jean says. “We don't know if anyone is still looking for us and the professor said he's going to contact me soon.”
“See? It's fine.”

“So long as you're sure,” Magneto says slowly.

Peter's not, like, at all. He would have no problem telling Mom that Jean and Kurt are here but they didn't exactly come in through the front door and one of them has a bullet hole in his leg and Jean is pretty shaken so now is maybe not the time for a casual visit. And if Peter can help it Mom will never ever know that Magneto was here, like, he'll take this secret to his grave.

Peter is saved from his inability to keep his mouth shut by a knock at the front door. Cindy's five minutes early this morning. Peter zips upstairs to let her in and they go through their normal greetings except that she asks him, “Is that blood? Did you cut yourself?”

“What?” Peter looks at his hand, and it is blood. Some of Kurt's blood got on his sleeve and his right palm and he can't believe he missed that, but Kurt's blood is a slightly different shade than human blood, with more of a purple and less of an orange tint, so he manages to lie and say it's a stain he's testing out for the kitchen cabinets and once she's gone upstairs he takes a look at himself in the bathroom mirror and sees tiny flecks of it on his shirt and a smear on the front of his jacket and thinks that wow, he must be slipping. Peter washes up, tosses his soiled clothes into the washer, and pulls on a fresh shirt. He's not happy with the fit but he also doesn't have another seasonally appropriate jacket to put on so he sighs and writes it off as a lost cause.

Cindy and Cathy have both been on Mom to get enough protein so she asks Peter for a soft-boiled egg this morning and Peter doesn't think she really likes them she just thinks they're pretty and delicate and she likes tapping her spoon against the egg and taking the top off but Peter loves her enough that he makes it for her anyway even though it always turns out too runny because he gets impatient or too hard because he gets distracted and he has to throw away a couple before he gets it right. After he brings Mom's tray up Peter pours himself a bowl of cereal and plows through a couple of unsalted egg whites without tasting them (because they're gross, dude) and his body is complaining that it isn't enough before he's even finished eating and its frustrating and he's pissed so he grabs a banana and tries to peel it at super speed and... nothing happens. Well, something happens: he peels the banana, but when he tries to shift gears it's like he's stuck in first. That's the best analogy he can come up with, and he thinks 'huh, this is new' in a way that understates his terror. He chalks it up to the late night and the excitement and the impromptu basement surgery he just assisted with and eats his banana but he still feels shaky afterward, hungry, like he hasn't eaten at all. He mentally cuts himself off and his stomach growls in protest. “Asshole,” he tells it, “You're not going to do anything with it. You're just going to store it like a... squirrel.”

“Who are you talking to?”

Peter whips around (at speed. Still got it, thanks) and sees Magneto standing at the top of the basement stairs. The old bruises look worse in the daylight and for the first time Peter notices that the ones on his neck look like fingerprints.

“Dude, should you be out of the basement?” Peter asks in a stage whisper.

“Jean seemed to think you might need help with something.”

“What? No. I'm good.”

“If you're sure...”

“Yep, totally sure.”
Magneto looks at him in a way that is unsettling in its intensity and makes Peter want to confess to things that he hasn't even done. He feels a sudden sympathy for the Nazis that Magneto hunted down and murdered, not, like, a ton of sympathy for obvious reasons but a little because this is terrifying. Also, Magneto might be a mind reader because he says, “I frighten you.”

Peter folds his arms and leans casually against the kitchen counter. “Pfft. No.”

“Charles warned me that my presence might be unsettling for you, given our history.”


“I could have intervened with En Sabah Nur. I could have saved you from having your leg broken if I had reacted sooner, but I didn’t.”

Oh, well if that's all...

“Oh. Okay. Done is done, man. It would have been nice, I guess, but I'm not, like, holding a grudge.”

“I can feel them.”

“What?”

“The plates in your leg, the screws holding them to the bone.”

Great, gross, now Peter can too, or he imagines that he can but he knows that he probably really can't. Sure, that part of his leg hurts every once in a while, like, it's more sensitive than the other leg and that spot aches when the weather changes sometimes but most of the time he doesn't even think about it and he really hopes Magneto isn't planning to, like, pull them out or anything. Sure, Peter doesn't think he actually needs them anymore, in fact Hank floated the idea that he could remove the plates but the surgery isn't without risks and Peter's a bleeder, like, his heart beats faster than the average person, even when he's sedated. The surgeon who put the plates in had to be super careful not to nick anything but Peter bled like crazy anyway and got all anemic and people thought he was pale before but wow, he was, like, gray, and he had to have a transfusion and couldn't even get out of bed for a couple of days afterward and that had sucked, but no, Magneto wouldn't just go around ripping metal out of peoples' bodies except that, oh shit, yes he would, but there's no evidence that he wants to take Peter's plates and screws. What would be the point? He didn't murder anyone in a concentration camp and he doesn't know where any Nazi gold is hidden and he thinks if Magneto even started to try to pull the metal out of his leg he'd confess to anything up to and including faking the moon landing if it would get him to stop.

“I'm sorry,” Magneto says.

Huh? Well, that's better than having his plates ripped out.

“I don't know what you want me to say, man. It's fine? I forgive you? It's not like you broke my leg. If you did, I'd expect at least a card or something but you didn't so don't worry about it.”

“I thought perhaps that was the reason you seem so nervous.”

“Honestly I don't even think about it.” Well, he does, but not like... it's more complicated.

“I see,” Magneto says. “well, my apologies for disturbing you.” Magneto turns toward the basement stairs.
Peter should just let him go and he hates himself immediately when he says, “Wait.”

Magneto waits.

“This is so stupid,” Peter says and he has the impulse to handle this in the exact same mature, adult way that he usually does and just speed off somewhere but that impulse lasts about a millisecond because suddenly he's not sure he won't have to walk back or hitch a ride once he's reached the county line.

Magneto doesn't tell him otherwise, or say anything at all.

Peter takes a deep breath, “Look, so, I've been under some stress and my mutation isn't working the way it should and that's why I look like the Pillsbury Doughboy. For some reason my body thinks it needs a spare battery or something and it bugs me, really. Maybe it wouldn't bug me so much if I drank beer or lived on cookie dough but I don't drink and the only reason I eat anymore is so I don't pass out or wind up in the hospital with scurvy or something. So there you go, it's out in the open and it's stupid and it sucks. I don't even like eating. Food doesn't even taste good anymore.”

“That doesn't sound stupid. It sounds very serious.”

Peter shuts his eyes for a second and asks himself why he is such a moron. “The professor already told you.” That's why he wasn't surprised when he saw Peter and there was, like, thirty more pounds of Peter to see.

“Charles told me that you're not a well man. Even if he hadn't I can see that something isn't right.”

“Yeah, well, I've got more important things to worry about right now.”

“As do we all,” Magneto says ominously.

“Yeah, what happened at the mansion...” and Peter leaves that hanging there because it's probably a sore spot for Magneto, like, physically and mentally, since it's something he had a hand in and couldn't stop. “I'm just sorry I can't be more help.”

“You've already done more than your share.”

Peter sighs, “Yeah, but I could be doing more. I wish I'd been there.” It feels like he can never do enough, like there's a hole inside him that he can't fill.

“No doubt you would have been very useful, but you also would have run the risk of being captured.”

“I've never been caught.”

Magneto raises an eyebrow. He says, “Would that I had your gifts. There has been many a time in my life when I could have used them.”

Oh shit. “That reminds me, I really cannot let my mom see you because she knows I was responsible for breaking you out of the Pentagon because I told her what I did when I saw you in your stupid helmet trying to kill Nixon on national television and I'm pretty sure there isn't enough morphine in the world to make her forget about it.” And it's the truth, minus the fact that she'd told him immediately after the broadcast that the guy in the helmet was his father.

“I never thanked you for that.”
“You're welcome. Now will you go back in the basement before someone sees you?” Peter says, glancing nervously at the stairs. Sure, he could hide Magneto in a closet if he needs to, probably, if his powers don't flake.

“You're welcome. Now will you go back in the basement before someone sees you?” Peter says, glancing nervously at the stairs. Sure, he could hide Magneto in a closet if he needs to, probably, if his powers don't flake.

“You're welcome. Now will you go back in the basement before someone sees you?” Peter says, glancing nervously at the stairs. Sure, he could hide Magneto in a closet if he needs to, probably, if his powers don't flake.

“Of course,” he agrees, and he turns away.

Peter's shoulders slump in relief.

“But Peter...”

Oh God, really?

“Charles mentioned that you prefer to handle things on your own, but please don't hesitate to ask for help if you need it.”

“Uh huh. Sure thing,” Peter says dismissively.

Magneto just looks at him with his piercing blue eyes. “No man is an island. I could have spared myself a lot of pain if I had learned that sooner.”

“Oh God, really?

Magneto just looks at him with his piercing blue eyes. “No man is an island. I could have spared myself a lot of pain if I had learned that sooner.”

“Okay, I appreciate that, but it's nothing anybody can help me with.”

“If you say so.”

Peter hears the bell before Magneto does and zips upstairs. Cindy asks him to bring her a towel for Mom. There aren't any in the cupboard and Peter realizes he forgot to fold the laundry. The one he grabs from the dryer is a little wrinkly but at least its clean.

Peter hears the bell before Magneto does and zips upstairs. Cindy asks him to bring her a towel for Mom. There aren't any in the cupboard and Peter realizes he forgot to fold the laundry. The one he grabs from the dryer is a little wrinkly but at least its clean.

Peter. Jean's soft voice in his head is like a gentle rap on a door. She wants him to come down to the basement. When he gets there he finds Kurt tucked into Peter's bed with the covers up to his chin. Only his injured leg is exposed, propped up on pillows. He looks sound asleep. Jean and Magneto are huddled off in a corner with their heads together. Magneto's hand is on Jean's arm, as if he's holding her upright or lending her strength or something. Jean is folded in on herself like she's cold, arms crossed and biting her upper lip.

“The professor contacted me,” she says. “They've secured the mansion.”

She tells him that seven of the kids are missing. Everyone else is in decent shape, mostly cuts and bruises, a few grazes but Kurt was the only one who took a bullet.

Peter sighs. “This is good news, right?” Sure, it's not great, but nobody's died yet, so there's still hope. “Why do you guys look like someone canceled Christmas?”

Magneto says. “Charles has been questioning the surviving terrorists. A select group were given a list of names and descriptions of mutants who were to be taken alive or dead. Charles thinks that it was a secret secondary objective, that someone within the terrorist organization offered to pay them a handsome bonus. The names of Charles and all of the X-men were on that list, including yours. Alive, they wanted you for questioning, to submit you to the same process I endured. Dead... dissection.”

“Tell me nobody got a bonus.”

“No bonuses. Charles now believes that the mutant children are being sold to international interests. He's using Cerebro to track them, but they've been split up. Two of them are in vehicles heading toward the Canadian border, two are heading east in a helicopter. Three are in a truck heading
toward Philadelphia.”

“The professor says that they have a boat waiting for them on the Delaware River.”

Now Peter knows why Jean looks so nervous, not because her name was on the list, but because she needs a favor. There are at least three groups of kidnapped kids, more if they split up again, and the X-men are two down and only have one jet.

“You want me to help,” he says.

Jean looks pained. Magneto says, “You're free to refuse.”

Peter doesn't want to leave his mother but there are three scared little kids out there whose lives are at stake, and it isn't like he'd be leaving for a week, so the choice makes itself.

“What's the plan?” he asks.

“How long would it take you to get to Wilmington?”

He thinks. “About an hour.” Hopefully, if his speed holds, and it will because it has to.

Magneto looks at Jean and says confidently, “Plenty of time.”

Peter feels the tiniest flutter of pride in his chest and he squashes it down.

“The professor wants you to disable the boat. When the terrorists show up, incapacitate them. Mystique and Scott are driving south right now. They'll mop up and bring the kids home. Hank and Ororo are taking the jet to retrieve the other four. The professor will stay behind to protect the mansion and keep an eye on everything from Cerebro.”

Peter takes a deep breath, feeling something between terror and excitement stirring in him, like the first time he tried running over water. “I've got it. No problem. Uh, Jean?”

Jean nods, “I'll stay with your mom. Erik will watch over Kurt.” She smiles shyly. “Thank you, Peter.”

*Are you sure you'll be okay?*

Peter gives her a tight-lipped smile. “Give me the details.”

To be continued...

Thank you for reading.

Feedback is welcome.

Chapter End Notes

Shades of X2 here, with the mansion invasion. Singer & co. reused the exchange between Magneto and Xavier from the end of first X Men film in Apocalypse, so it was an open invitation. Sorry.

For the purposes of this story Kurt can teleport large distances but only if he knows
where he is going (which I assume was the rule in Apocalypse, since Kurt and Mystique made it to New York from Europe very quickly). Also for the purposes of this story I'm using Peter's comic canon top speed from Son of M, which is a little over two hundred miles per hour.
Mission

Chapter Summary

Peter steps out of the house for a bit to run and errand for the X-men.

Chapter Notes

Welcome back. Many thanks to everyone reading and commenting and leaving kudos. It means a lot, so thank you, thank you, thank you.

Please enjoy.

Jean puts her hands on either side of his face and Peter's stomach sinks in dread. Jean shows him an image that the professor took from the mind of one of the terrorists: a location on the water near the waste management facility on the Delaware River where a white, thirty-foot fishing vessel is docked. The words Harbor Queen are painted in block letters on her bow. She shows him the faces of three strange men in dark green camouflage. Peter can't see them perfectly, but he gets the big picture, then she shows him the faces of the three kids he's looking for. He recognizes Bobby the ice kid, and Tilda, the one with the feathers. Peter doesn't know the third kid. He must be new at the school. All of them are huddled together with their hands bound behind their backs and they're wearing ripped up pajamas and identical collars. To keep them from using their powers, Jean explains, and okay, that's horrifying. If Peter's mind hadn't been made up before, after seeing the faces of those trapped kids, it is now.

Once the plan is fixed in his mind (and admittedly it's a pretty sketchy plan, but it's not like he's bad at thinking on his feet) Peter goes upstairs to see Mom and tell her that Jean is here to visit and that he has to go away for a few hours. He says that a couple of kids ran away from the school up in Westchester last night and they've made it all the way to Philadelphia and since Peter's the closest person the professor wants him to go track down the kids before they get into trouble. He feels like a heel, lying to his mom but she's so excited that Jean is here that it kind of takes the edge off.

Then he lets Cindy go a little early and escorts Jean up the basement stairs, giving her a few last-minute instructions about Mom's medications. Once they're out of earshot Peter whispers, “Whatever you do, do not let her see him.”

I won't, Peter, and I don't know why you're whispering.

He doesn't tell her to make sure that his mom doesn't go anywhere while he's gone.

Jean stops him at the top of the stairs. You have no idea how grateful the professor is for your help.

“Well, he'll have to wait until I get back before he decides how grateful he is.”

Peter leaves her at his mother's bedroom door. His heart is pounding against his rib cage. He
remembers what happened in the kitchen with the banana and he's not taking any chances. He stops in the kitchen on his way out and grabs some snacks for the road and tells himself he'll eat again on the way if he has to. There's no way he'll fuck this up if he can help it.

Peter starts off easy and picks up speed as he goes and it feels good to be out in the open air with the wind in his face. He's been running, but shorter distances, and more to ruminate on his problems than confront them so this feels really good in a desperate heart-in-throat kind of way. He keeps to the side roads and runs across open fields where he can, and makes it to the Delaware in about an hour and five. It takes him a little longer than he expects to find the *Harbor Queen* because she isn't tied up exactly where the professor thought, which Peter is grateful for because hanging out near the sewage treatment plant waiting for some kidnappers sounded pretty terrible.

Peter finds the *Harbor Queen* anchored off Delaware City. He doesn't know much about boats except that ones with holes don't float very well, so he keeps things simple. There are two crewmen on board. They're not armed but Peter can't decide if they're in on the whole kidnapping thing or if they're just pawns so he gives them a one-way lift across the river and drops them in a marsh in the middle of a wildlife refuge. He figures it will take them a good few hours to wade their way out and orient themselves and dry off. Meanwhile he uses the boat's fire ax to punch a few holes in the hull at the water line. Then he climbs back up to the roof of Crabby Dick's and drinks a Slurpee and waits for his target to show up and find their boat swamped and their crew missing.

Peter's already eaten everything he brought plus a couple of baskets of fries that he swiped from an order window at a mom & pop diner a few miles up the road and he's starting to wonder when Crabby Dick's is going to open for lunch because crab sounds really good right now. That's when Peter sees an army-style covered truck rolling slowly down Washington Street toward the docks and then he's off the roof and peering through the window of the truck and under the covered top and, yep, it's showtime. Peter takes the weapons first (and there a lot of weapons and things that might be weapons) and dumps them in the river. He takes the passenger next, but he doesn't want to travel far enough that it takes him more than a couple of seconds to get back to the truck for the driver so he tosses him in the river too, and if the guy can't swim, well, he should try not being a terrorist asshole. Peter does the same with the driver and then takes the wheel and pulls the truck off to the side of the road.

The kids are huddled together in the back of the truck and shaking with fear, or rather two of them are shaking, and that's Bobby and Tilda, who, put together, are about the same size as the third kid, who's staring straight ahead all grim and determined like he's facing down a firing squad.

Peter unties their hands and undoes their gags and then takes a look at the collars around their necks. They're heavy, about two inches thick and made of metal and some kind heavy resin or acrylic. There's a clasp in the back and a hinge in the front, so he knows how they come off but the joining is so smooth and the locking mechanism is so secure that he can't open them with his bare hands. He doesn't think he can vibrate them open either. He drops his speed to let the kids know what's going on and that's when the big kid, who's behind him, gets his hands around Peter's throat and holy shit, even powerless this kid is strong. How the hell did those guys get him tied up in the first place? Tranq dart? Baseball bat to the temple?

Tilda shrieks “Peter! It's Peter!” in her bird-like caw. And when the big kid doesn't let go she starts scratching weakly at his eyes. “Let go!”

The big kid lets go and Peter flops away from him, seeing little floating black dots. He holds up his palms in a ‘please don't try to crush my windpipe again’ gesture. He tries to talk and coughs instead and wishes for his Slurpee and eventually gets out, “The professor sent me.”
Tilda and Bobby hug Peter like they never want to let go. The big kid looks at him with wide, puppy-dog eyes. “Peter?” he says finally.

“Yep.”

“I am Peter.”

Oh. Okay then. Kid Peter has a crazy accent, Russian or something.

“Listen, I'm going to try to find a way to get these collars off of you.” It dawns on him. “Hey, Peter, you're strong, can you try...” he mimes pulling the sides of a collar off of his own neck. If he could have, Kid Peter probably would have done it already, but maybe not since he was tied up pretty well. Kid Peter tries and Peter thinks he sees the edges bend a little but still, no dice. Kid Peter is just regular strong.

“Try Bobby’s,” he says, hoping it will make a difference if the collar is on someone else's neck. Nope.

“What's your power?” he asks.

“I am strong.”

Peter doesn't know what he expected.

“I also have...” he mimes something that makes him look like he's putting on suntan lotion.

“He has armor,” Bobby says.

Peter raises his eyebrows and nods in appreciation.

There aren't any tools in the truck aside from a jack and a tire iron. The kids are all still in their pajamas and bare feet, not to mention collars, so they're not exactly dressed for a casual stroll around the city. Peter's trying to think where in the area he saw a hardware store when he sees flashing red and blue lights through the flap of tarp covering the back of the truck and remembers that he parked in the middle of the road. Cops, that's all Peter needs.

Really, that's all Peter needs.

Before the cops can exit their cruiser Peter hops out of the back of the truck, reaches through the cruiser's driver's side window, pops their trunk, and rummages around in their tool kit until he's found what he needs. He grabs Kid Peter first. There's a swampy patch of forest near the river and that's where he dumps Kid Peter and the bolt cutters he stole from the cops, then he's back in the truck where he grabs Tilda and Bobby and deposits them near Kid Peter, who is leaning against a dogwood, retching his guts up. Once Tilda and Bobby get a whiff it's over for them, too.

“Sorry,” Peter says, mostly for Kid Peter's benefit. “You'll be okay in a minute. I don't think we need a conversation with the cops right now.”

“Cops are bad?” Kid Peter asks.

Well... Peter has three puke-covered kids in the woods in bare feet and torn up pajamas and no good way to explain that, so, yeah, at the moment, cops are bad.

“Let's see about the collars,” Peter says, picking up the bolt-cutters. Kid Peter's the sturdiest, so Peter starts with him. Whatever the collars are made of cracks pretty easily. A few of the pieces scratch the
kid's neck up, but he seems more grateful than anything when the collar drops off. He flexes his hands and then, kind of like an automatic garage door, metal-looking plates scale down and cover every inch of the kid's exposed skin from head to toe. Armor. "Cool," Peter says.

Peter doesn't bother with the bolt-cutters for the other two, he just has Kid Peter rip their collars off with his bare hands, jeez. At least this way there's less of a chance of Peter sending the kids back to school with unnecessary cuts on their necks.

“I'm hungry,” Tilda whines as soon as her collar hits the ground.

Peter thinks that's pretty amazing considering that she still smells like vomit, but they are kids and they've had a really rough night, so he takes their orders and proceeds to rob the pants off of the good people of Delaware in search of pancakes and sausages, a bag of oranges, two packs of Twizzlers, a box of Pop-Tarts, and a six-pack of Strawberry Crush. On the way he takes his pick of anything he finds on a clothesline that might fit the kids. Tilda ends up in a fresh nightgown. Kid Peter gets a set of gray sweat pants and a University of Pennsylvania t-shirt, and Bobby gets to be upset with Peter for picking out a pair of jeans that are actually cut for a girl. Peter finds him an AC/DC t-shirt to make up for it.

In the middle of their picnic Peter feels something like Jean's telepathic knocking, and he drops his half-peeled orange in the mud. There's no voice or anything, just a vague suggestion that he should gather up the kids and head towards the nearest road. The kids are rising too, leaving their food behind or forgetting that it's in their hands. "Professor?" Peter asks out loud. No one answers. When they get to the road Raven and Scott are there standing there next to the professor's Lincoln Continental. Bobby dashes right over and hugs Raven around the waist. Kid Peter is a little more shy. Tilda cries and won't let go of Peter when she realizes that he's not coming back with them, which doesn't seem too bad except that she has razor-sharp talons. Peter's arms are dotted with blood by the time he gets her in the back seat with the other kids.

Once the kids are loaded up Raven thanks him and asks about loose ends. Peter tells her what he did to the boat, her crew, and the armed men in the truck. He can see where the truck was parked and it's gone now. He thinks maybe the cops had it towed. The bolt-cutters are still in the woods but he figures he can run back and toss them in the water. He also mentions that he may have stolen some clothing and food but she shrugs all of that off.

“Did anyone see you?"

Peter smirks but Raven looks serious. "I was speeding most of the time."

“Did anyone see you change speeds?"

Peter can't be one hundred percent sure. He did a lot of moving around in broad daylight, which really couldn't be helped, and somebody may have looked out their window at exactly the right time to see him change speeds or watch some sweats vanish from a clothesline, but is there anyone that he can point to specifically and say 'he saw me' then the answer is 'no'.

There's something she's not saying. "Did I screw up?" he asks. "Are the other kids okay? Did Hank and Ororo get to them?"

“They're working on it, but we'll let you know.”

“What is it?"

Scott speaks up, "We're just making sure that no one can tie you to the kidnappings. The professor
wants you kept out of this as much as possible.”

That's thoughtful, Peter supposes. “Hey, done, but you know, I'm glad I could help. Hey, if you want I can go fetch the guys I dropped in the swamp or try to fish out the ones I tossed in the river. They probably made it to land by now.”

“The crew aren't important,” Raven says. “Charles thinks they had nothing to do with the kidnapping, and don't worry about the two in the river.”

“What does that mean?”

Raven shakes her head. “It's taken care of.”

“Did they drown?” he asks, already knowing the answer.

Raven and Scott exchange a look that (to Peter) lasts an eternity.

Scott says, “The professor's been trying to keep tabs on all of the kidnappers. He knows one of them made it to shore in New Jersey. He thinks the other one drowned.”

Raven smacks his arm, “You did what you had to, Peter. These were not innocent men.”

“Yeah, I get that. Ow.”

“They're the same guys who shot Kurt and kidnapped and tortured your dad,” Scott says, and it is absolutely the wrong thing to say and Scott knows it right away because he's looking at Peter's face.

Peter is seething. “I'm not Magneto,” he says. He hears his mom's voice in his head, *Violence doesn't excuse violence*. She used to say that all the time when Peter was a kid. He would get into playground scraps because of his weird hair or whatever. Kids didn't need an excuse to be jerks, but it gave Peter an excuse to be a jerk back, so he got into lots of fights before his power manifested and he remembers that it always upset his mom and that she would fix herself a drink and clean out his scrapes and tell him that violence didn't excuse violence. The older he got the more upset it made her because along the way she'd given him the impression that his dad had been a violent asshole and that she didn't want Peter to be a violent asshole, which Peter totally got, especially if he used to hit her, and maybe that was why he wasn't around, and Mom would cry and Peter would cry and then he would promise that he was never going to be a violent asshole like his dad, and then he'd go back to school and get into another fight and on and on until his powers manifested and there were no more fights worth getting into.

“Big picture,” Raven says. “We still have kids out there. Scott and I need to get back and help Charles. Can Kurt stay with you until he's well enough to travel?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“How's Jean?” Scott asks quietly.

“Worried about you, jackass, so don't do anything stupid. She's the only thing keeping Mom and Magneto from meeting accidentally.”

“Charles is sorry for that, by the way,” Raven tells him.

Peter shrugs it off. “Rock and hard place. I get it.”

Raven looks at him like she doesn't think that's the case at all, but she lets it go and she thanks him
again and tells him to get home. She wants him as far away from this mess as possible. Then Peter has an hour-long run to mull over all that he did in Delaware City and wonder if he could have done things differently.

Scratch that. He has two hours because he has to drop out of speed at least ten times to catch his breath. The adrenaline surge from earlier has faded, leaving him shaky and weak. He's burned through the extra calories that he picked up along the way. He didn't bring any cash and he doesn't want to risk getting caught shoplifting if his powers decide to flake on him, so he does the best he can, using the intermittent bursts of speed that are left to him to make it back to Mom's house and collapse under the lemon tree in her back yard, except that he doesn't so much collapse as take a knee... then another knee... then put his forehead on the ground and breathe like, well, like he's run a couple of hundred miles... and maybe walked a few of them.

There's a hand on his shoulder and Peter is impressed that someone was able to just walk up to him and surprise him and he thinks that maybe he should react but he's just too tired. “Peter,” Magneto says.

“Hey,” he manages. “D'Jean send you?”

“She didn't have to,” he says. “I can feel the metal plates in your leg.”

Plates. What are plates?

“Were you successful?”

Peter thinks of Bobby and Tilda and Kid Peter in their stolen clothes. He thinks of the two sailors in the swamp and the boat at the bottom of the Delaware River. He thinks about the two kidnappers he dumped in the river and wonders which one they don't have to worry about anymore. Was it the driver or the passenger? They'd both looked like ex-military, with their crew cuts and their crazy huge biceps and their big black boots and their lean, weather-worn faces that he could barely tell apart.

Maybe when he tossed them in the river one of them came down on a rock.

Doesn't matter now.

“Yeah.”

“Can you stand?”

“Sure,” he says. But he can't. He doesn't think that he could even if Magneto held a knife to his throat. So instead of getting up he says, “Oh, you mean now?”

Magneto doesn't hold a knife to his throat but he does go back inside the house for a minute and bring Peter a glass of apple juice. Peter downs it in two swallows and asks for another. Magneto brings the bottle. It isn't enough, not by a long shot, but it makes the black edges recede a little bit from Peter's vision and helps his brain work well enough that he remembers what metal plates are and that he has them in his body because En Sabah Nur snapped his leg while the guy with the empty apple juice bottle watched, not that Peter isn't grateful for the apple juice.

“Can you stand now?” Magneto asks when he's finished

He can't but he's not going to say that. He plants a hand on the grass and another hand on the trunk of the lemon tree and pushes himself to his feet. It makes his vision swim and he has to hang onto the tree for dear life and he thinks that if a lemon or ten dropped down on his head right now it would
serve him right.

Magneto keeps his distance, but when Peter tries to walk toward the back door and his knees buckle and the old man is still fast enough to catch him and loop one of Peter's arms around his shoulders.

This is the first time that his dad has voluntarily laid a hand on him.

Magneto is strong but Peter still doubts he could carry him alone, so Peter does his best to keep his legs under himself as they stagger through the back door and into the house, where Magneto lowers him onto the couch.

Peter looks up at Magneto and sees his father and says, “I killed a guy.”

Magneto looks at him soberly. “You killed a man?” he asks, apparently for clarification. Maybe Peter was mumbling.

“Accident,” Peter explains. “I threw him in the river. I didn't mean for him to drown.”

“Civilian?”

“One of the kidnappers.”

Peter kind of expects him to say something like 'good' or make a speech about collateral damage but instead he asks, “Are you alright?”

“I'm great,” he says hollowly.

Jean comes down the stairs and Peter looks at her with a question in his eyes.

“She's resting.”

Peter mouths, good and out loud, “Scott says 'hi'. “ Then he closes his eyes and tilts to the right in slow motion only to have somebody catch him and drag him roughly upright.

“He needs to eat,” Jean says. “Peter, stay awake.”

He can do that. It takes some cajoling and a few slaps to the face but Peter manages to stay conscious long enough to down a few more glasses of juice (orange, since they're out of apple) and a few handfuls of trail mix. After that his hands are steady enough to hold a sandwich that Magneto fixes him. The thought of eating it makes him absolutely exhausted and he observes, “This is the most meat I've ever seen on a sandwich.”

“Aren't there any good Jewish delis in the D.C. area?” Magneto asks.

There probably are, but Peter's never been a fan of dine-in restaurants. He's always been a fast-food kind of guy, at first because that's all his mom could afford by way of dining out and even then it was a super special treat and then later because his caloric needs were so high that it was literal torture for him to sit in a booth at a restaurant and wait to order and then wait for the food to come and then sit and eat at a snail's pace like all of the other diners, and even though he tried his hardest he always finished first anyway and there would be an extra basket or two of fries just sitting on the table all of a sudden. Food was what drove him to life of crime in the first place, that and the fact that he was an asshole teenager who wanted all of the things that his parents would never buy for him. Mostly he was just so hungry all of the time, growing like a weed, and with his crazy fast metabolism as the icing on the cake Peter could easily have eaten his mom and Frank out of house and home, and Peter thinks they kind of knew that which was why Frank turned a blind eye and Mom opted to just whip
out her checkbook for the cops any time he got caught.

Peter's gotten better at playing human over the years, though. His body became more efficient, so he didn't need quite as many calories to keep from passing out, and he got better at pretending to eat like a normal person, which usually just meant hiding snacks all over the place and eating before meal times, then again after meal times. He'd been doing it automatically at the mansion when he first arrived, at least until Hank had started making him keep a food diary. Once it was out in the open how much food he needed to function there just wasn't any point in pretending anymore.

Now, though... now he could probably sit at a table in a restaurant with his dad and eat a sandwich with a pickle on the side and have a nice conversation about the places they've been and the people they've murdered and Peter's end of the conversation is admittedly going to be a lot shorter, but, hey, at least they have something in common now.

Peter finishes the sandwich, crusts and all, and it sits in his stomach like a rock, like his body is too spent to know what to do with it.

"Feeling better?" Magneto asks, taking away his plate.

No.

"Yeah."

He thinks he should go upstairs and check on Mom, but now he's shaking with cold instead of low blood sugar, so he wraps his arms around himself and curls up on the sofa, shoes and all.

Jean pulls an afghan over him. He doesn't remember shutting his eyes.

Peter wakes from a dreamless sleep with a start and stands up so quickly that he startles Jean, who jumps and lets go of the tray that she was about to carry up the stairs. Peter's speed is working, at least for the moment, so he grabs the tray in mid-air and sets everything neatly back in its place before Jean can react.

"Peter!" Jean gasps.

"Sorry. Did I miss anything?"

Jean's hand is over her heart. She's shaking her head. "Not much. You've been asleep for about three hours. You haven't moved a muscle," she sounds a little scared, and Peter can't blame her after what happened at the mansion. "How do you feel?"

"Better, rested," he answers even though his eyelids are still heavy but the rest of him feels like a jittery mess. He knows it's pointless to lie to her, but she's not going to call him out on it. "Thanks for, uh, for before."

"We've been awful guests. I'm so sorry for bringing you into this."

"I'm glad you did though," he says, and he means it. He wants to help. He wants to be a force for good in the world, as cliché as it sounds and maybe it's because he feels like he has a lot to make up for because he was such a dirtbag as a teenager or because of who his father is and it's like he's trying to fill a hole the size of the Grand Canyon with a teaspoon and yeah, he knows he can't save everybody and that shit is going to happen and that sometimes people are going to die and he just had that point driven home but he has to try.

His stomach growls like a traitorous bastard.
“I'm not the best cook, but I made grilled cheese and tomato soup,” Jean says.

You know, who ever actually says that they're good in the kitchen? Probably the professor. He seems like that kind of guy. Peter bets he makes a killer Eggs Benedict.

“How's Kurt?”

“Asleep. Erik is watching him.”

“Any news about the other kids?”

“Nothing yet, I'm sorry.”

Peter feels sort of sick over that. He hadn't even asked the names of the other four, which was kind of maybe on purpose because he didn't want to have to picture little Lexie, or one of the other kids bound and scared and wearing one of those collars.

“I can tell you if you want,” Jean volunteers.

“Just tell me when they're safe.”

Jean looks at him with a pained expression. “Peter, eat something. I know you're starving.”

Peter promises that he will, but after he talks to his mom. He makes Jean surrender her tray and he takes it up himself.

Mom is reading a magazine when he enters. It's all glossy ads for lipstick and perfume and other girl stuff that he knows the uses for even though he wishes he didn't.

She lays her magazine across her lap and says, “You look like someone died.”

Peter freezes, but only for the briefest fraction of a second, and if Peter were facing anyone but his mom, they would never have noticed.

“Oh, Peter,” she says.

He tells her, not all of it and not in detail. He doesn't mention the boat or the crew but he does tell her about rescuing the kids and throwing the kidnappers in the river. Then he tells her that one of them never made it to shore. And there's a darker side to all of this, because Peter's figured out that he's not worried about the kidnapper that he accidentally killed or the guy's family or girlfriend whoever might be waiting at home for him. Peter's worried about himself. He's worried about what this makes him, and that's all kinds of wrong and he knows it but there it is and he needs his mom's reassurance that he's not evil, and she gives it to him.

“You're not him,” she says. “You could never be.”

Maybe she's just telling him what he wants to hear, but he doesn't care. Even if Mom is lying through her teeth, he trusts her. If she says he's a good man, then he believes it.

Mom eats most of the soup but only takes a single bite of the grilled cheese sandwich. He helps her to the bathroom and then back to bed and gets her a glass of water.

“Peter,” she says, out of nowhere. “Do you think I don't know when something's going on in my own house?”

It's rhetorical. Peter keeps his mouth shut... barely.
"Jean's a sweet girl but she's a terrible liar. I know that she isn't the only one here. I hear voices downstairs."

"You got me," Peter admits, "It's nothing you need to worry about. There was some trouble up at the school so Jean and Kurt came to me for help. Kurt's a teleporter. That's how they got here."

Mom is quiet for a minute, thoughtful, like she's deciding which card to play.

"And why is your father in the house?"

Gin.

He could lie or deny it or pretend he has somewhere very important to be right now, but it will just make it worse.

"I haven't told him anything."

She sighs, and there's so much meaning packed into that one sigh, that she doesn't approve but she can't stop him and she hopes he isn't going to do something stupid and get himself killed and that she feels helpless and knows that she has to accept the situation but she'll be damned if she isn't going to make it known that she's very disappointed and tired, so tired.

Peter feels guilty.

"Do you know what you're setting yourself up for?" she asks.

"He's just here to help," he says. And he knows how crazy that sounds, like he let the big bad wolf in because the wolf said he can make a mean ham sandwich, which is totally true except the wolf keeps kosher so it's a turkey sandwich instead.

"This has been so hard on you," Mom says. "Don't think I haven't noticed. I worry."

"There's nothing to worry about. I can take care of myself."

"Yes, well, I think I'll go ahead and worry anyway," she says.

She reaches her frail hands toward him. He lifts her into a hug and she cries into his shoulder for a long time, not sobs, just small sniffles or he'd never know that she was crying at all.

The house seems too quiet when Peter comes downstairs, like it's holding its breath. Jean and Magneto are nowhere to be seen, but there's a bowl of soup and two sandwiches for him at the table. The food is cold but Peter eats it anyway because he promised.

Jean, Kurt, and Magneto spend three more days hiding out with Peter and his mom. Peter spends those three days trying to ignore the way that Magneto's eyes occasionally follow him when they're in the same room, like he's trying to figure out how to take the plates out of Peter's leg without him noticing. It's uncomfortable but it's not too much of an issue because all three of Peter's mutant guests pretty much stick to the basement because the professor, in his psychic talks with Jean, has been adamant that they stay where they are and remain as inconspicuous as possible, and hey, it's a cool basement. It has a dining area and a couch and a full bathroom and a TV and video games and an air hockey table and a guitar although he doesn't think anybody plays. Peter's strummed out *Hotel California* for them but he doesn't have a great singing voice. Still, who wants to be cooped up in one room with two other people dawn to dusk? Peter brings them books and magazines and puzzles
and cards and even digs up an old Parcheesi board game that's only missing one piece (Peter's reputation as a notorious cheat is well-earned, so Mom never kept many games around) but he's also pretty understanding if they need to sneak upstairs every once in a while for some light and air and a few laps around the back yard. Still, when Peter decides that the downstairs bathroom needs updating and Magneto offers to help him replace the vanity Peter makes big 'no thank you' gestures with his hands, picturing the old vanity ripping itself out of the wall and floating out to the curb and Jean gives him that 'stupidest man alive look' over the top of one of Mom's discarded magazines and Peter relents.

“No powers outside of the basement,” Peter says. “You can look at paint chips. I'm partially color-blind anyway.”

“So am I.”

Well... damn.

He lets Magneto help him replace the vanity, although he mostly gives him jobs like minding the breakers and the water shut-off valve so that Peter doesn't electrocute himself or flood the bathroom and in spite of Peter's 'no powers' rule he lets Magneto tighten the bolts that are in hard-to-reach places. By himself the job would have taken Peter a few minutes at most. With Magneto's help it takes about half an hour.

When they're done Magneto is frowning. “You're taxing yourself unnecessarily. You should get some rest.”

Yes, his body answers, *that would be awesome*. He wants to sleep for a year. He thinks he could collapse on the linoleum and be totally comfortable there. Instead he shakes his head, maybe too vigorously and says, “I will, just not right now.”

Magneto doesn't bother him about it, just looks at him for an interminable moment with something that looks uncomfortably like pity, and nods.

Kurt runs a low-grade fever for a few hours late Monday night, but by the time he wakes on Tuesday the fever has broken and his wound looks clean. He's still in a lot of pain so Peter gives him the standard opioid lecture along with his pills and makes sure that he and Jean both understand that Kurt's going to have a few really rough nights if he switches straight from oxycodone to Tylenol. The narcotics take care of the pain but they also make him too dizzy to stay upright for long, so Kurt isn't well enough to teleport but he still insists on making one trip upstairs to see Mom, so while Kurt is limping his way up the stairs Peter dashes in ahead of him to preface the situation with, “Okay, three things: he's blue, he has a tail, and he's *very religious*.” Then he lets Kurt limp into the room and thank her for letting them stay in her house and apologize for being a bother. He says some really nice things about Peter that Peter tunes out and then he asks her permission to say a prayer and as far as he knows Mom's never been very religious. She used to take him to church when he was younger, but he doesn't remember it very well, or he does, but he doesn't want to think about it, so Peter is surprised that when Kurt prays in Latin she follows along with every word. Peter thinks it's strange that after twenty-seven years of living under the same roof, and especially after all they've been through in these past months there are still things he doesn't know about his mom.

To be continued...

Thank you for reading. Feedback is welcome and appreciated.
Crabby Dick's is a real place. I don't know if it was there in 1984, but it's there now.
Gone

Chapter Summary

Peter reveals a part of his past to Magneto. Later, Peter's powers finally fail him.

Chapter Notes

Here we are again. Thank you so much for your comments and kudos. I truly appreciate each and every one.

There will be some violence and language in this chapter.

Please enjoy.

The kids get rescued, all of them.

Hank and Ororo are pretty quick to scoop up the two that were headed to Chicago. The last two take a little more work to locate. The professor does some field work for a change, and Peter and his mutant mushrooms don't hear about it until it's all said and done, which sort of pisses Magneto off, but Peter thinks that was kind of the point, not necessarily to piss Magneto off, but to keep him away from the rescue because the last two kids were taken back to the facility where Magneto had been held, which meant either a) torture or b) dissection, but since the professor and Hank and Mystique got there in time (go Team Geriatric Mutants!) it meant none of the above and it also meant no revenge since Magneto was not invited to the party. Of course when Magneto finds out that he's been intentionally left off of the guest list his jaw gets all tense and the pipes start to rattle in the walls and Peter has to get assertive and tell him to knock it off because “Pipe leaks can take months to notice and by then there's mold and I have to take down a wall and replace flooring and dammit, some of us have to live in the rubble when you're done, Captain Chaos, we can't all just float off into the sunset and leave the plumbing to someone else!” which is a really stupid rant because, aside from the fact that it's insensitive and juvenile, a) Magneto had, in fact, done a lot of plumbing work when he helped rebuild the mansion, far more than Peter had, and b) did Peter really think he was still going to be living here in a few months?

But once the words are out they're out and Peter is standing there breathing hard and his head is pounding and he's tired and he's hungry and he's trying as hard as he can to hold it together, to hold this house together, her house, and yes, he knows it's a metaphor and this asshole is going to throw a temper tantrum and knock it down like a little kid kicking over a pillow fort because the other kids didn't invite him to their sleepover (probably because he does shit like this). That's when Peter feels something inside of him snap like an old rubber band that's been stretched too far and the anger leaves him in a rush. He's watching Magneto, who's watching him, so Peter catches the shift in the man's expression that takes him from righteous anger to genuine surprise. Then Peter sits down hard on the second step of the basement stairs and tries to ignore the way his belly shakes when he does. He leans forward, elbows on knees, head in hands, pulling his hair back from his face so hard that it makes the skin on his forehead hurt. He's not dizzy. He isn't sick. He's not mad or scared or
frustrated. He's just... done.

Everything is very quiet in the basement, quiet like the moment after one of the mutant kids breaks a lamp in the living room because they were horsing around and everybody freezes for a second before running for the hills only Peter is the lamp and the lamp was kind of on its last legs anyway and it was an accident and maybe it will still work if you tilt it just right or jiggle the cord. Also, nobody runs, especially Peter, who's usually the first one out the door, or at least he was when he was a kid and he'd been doing the horsing around but now he's the boring adult who comes in with the broom and dustpan to sweep up before Xavier sees or somebody cuts their foot, only there's no dustpan and nothing to sweep up and Peter knows he isn't really a lamp, he's just a man who needs for everything to hold still for a while because he's run an awful long way and he can't keep up this pace anymore.

Eventually Jean comes forward, slowly and warily. She doesn't say anything, doesn't try to touch his mind, just sits on the step beside him and wraps an arm around his shoulders. Eventually Kurt limps over and squeezes in on his other side. The step isn't really big enough for three people but Kurt's thin and he makes it work.

“Sorry,” Peter says. “Sorry.” His voice even sounds empty to his own ears.

“Don't be sorry,” Jean says. “It's okay.”

But it's not okay and Peter thinks that everybody in the basement knows it.

“I don't know what to do,” Jean says. Her voice is strained. She's crying and it's Peter's tears she is shedding, looking up at Magneto and saying, “I feel so helpless,” while Peter's eyes stay fixed on the bottom step and Magneto says nothing because sometimes there just isn't anything that can be said or done and Peter knows that this is definitely one of those times.

They sit like that, together, very still, for a long time.

Eventually the bell rings and breaks the spell. Peter's muscles clench like he's been kicked. Jean's arm around him tenses.

“Whatever it is, I'll take care of it,” Jean says, drying her eyes with her palms.

Almost, he tells her no. But he knows Jean, and he knows she'll call him if there's something is wrong, so he gives her a tiny, stiff nod.

Jean stands up and Peter shivers at the loss of warmth on that side.

“Peter,” Magneto says, now that the spell is broken, “I apologize. I should not have reacted the way that I did.”

Peter says nothing. Magneto turns to Kurt, “I'll call Charles. Perhaps there is something he can do to help.”

“Don't,” Peter says. Then, “please.” So Magneto doesn't move. It takes Peter a while to speak again. “I don't want him” -knowing about this, thinking Peter can't handle himself and he needs a band of superheroes to swoop in and help him change Mom's sheets and cook breakfast- “messing around in my head.”

“No one will go inside your head without your permission, I promise.”

Peter takes a deep breath. He doesn't look up. He shakes his head, “I still don't want to talk to him.”
Magneto must make some kind of sign or motion because Kurt gets up, slowly, either because of his injury or because he's reluctant to leave the two of them alone.

The door at the top of the basement stairs closes. Magneto sits down in the space that Jean vacated. Peter tenses. “This is really more Charles' arena than mine,” Magneto says, “But would you care to talk?”

No. He would not. At all. But instead Peter says, “After you.”

“What do you want to know?”

“Surprise me, man,” Peter says with a bitter laugh.

There's a long, awkward pause while Magneto composes himself, distills... whatever... down to something that he thinks Peter will understand. “For years, decades, I have tried to master my anger. It has cost me... quite a lot. Each time I feel I have succeeded, I find instead that it has mastered me.”

“That sounds rough,” says Peter, “I'm sorry about... I don't know, everything, I guess.”

Magneto is shaking his head, “You've done nothing wrong. What on earth do you have to be sorry about?”

“Dude, your life has been way harder than mine. Getting upset over some pipes is pretty stupid.”

“It's not the pipes, Peter,” Magneto says, “You know that.”

He does. But, oh, man, does he ever want it to be about the stupid pipes.

“Tell me about the... anger thing. Does it make you stronger or something?”

“For most of my life I believed that anger was the key to my power. Nazis killed my mother in front of me. They were trying to force me to use my power, and it worked.”

Peter had known that, sort of. He'd never had it from the horse's mouth, but he's heard Raven and Xavier drop little pieces of the story before and he's always listened carefully. It's kind of terrible having it confirmed, though, like it was never real before, and it's made even more horrible by the realization that it was Peter's grandmother who died so horribly and he imagines it being his mom and it makes it a lot easier to get a grip on why Magneto is who he is and Peter really, really wonders if he would have turned out the same way if everyone he'd ever loved had been murdered by Nazis.

“Anger and pain formed the foundation of my abilities,” Magneto says. “I used to feel that the two were inseparable. Then I met Charles Xavier. He was the first person to ever suggest to me that it might not be the case. Charles and I have our differences, but I truly believe he can help you if you'll agree to talk to him.”

Yeah. No. Peter doesn't want help, not from Xavier.

“Do you know how I got it? My power?” Peter hears himself ask.

It's not what Magneto expected to hear, which is fine, because it's not what Peter expected himself to say. It just slipped out. “No, I don't.”

“I was twelve. Me and my step-dad were in the backyard. He was trying to teach me how to throw a fastball. I know, right? The irony. Well, I hear a noise coming from the street out front, and it's my mom, screaming. She'd just come back from the store and she took my sister with her. Lindy was,
like, three years old. So Mom was unloading the station wagon and one of the grocery bags tipped over and a couple of cans fell out and rolled in the street, and you know how three-year-olds love to help.” Magneto looks stricken even though Peter can tell he's trying really hard not to look stricken and Peter didn't mean to hit a nerve and thinks Magneto's probably remembering his own daughter, so he hurries up with his story, “Anyway, Mom screams, I hear tires on the pavement, and that's when everything stops. I look over at my step-dad and he's frozen, but not, like, totally frozen. He's walking but it's like he's moving through molasses, but slower. I walk out front. Mom had a bag of groceries in her hands and she had dropped them but they hadn't hit the ground yet. They were just hanging in the middle of the air. There were oranges kind of floating out of the top of the bag. And then I saw Lindy, and the car. She had two cans in her arm and she was bending over, reaching out to get a third one, and the bumper of the car was about an inch from her head. So I ran over and picked her up and put her down next to Mom.”

“You saved your sister.”

“Yeah,” Peter sighs.

“Your first act as a mutant,” Erik marvels. “You should be proud.”

Peter shakes his head. “It was easy. Everything is easy. Well, it isn't -wasn't- especially not at first because after I put Lindy down I stood there in the driveway, just, you know, waiting for the world to speed back up again, but after a while I realized that it wasn't going to, and I was stuck like this.”

Magneto is quiet for a moment, taking in his meaning. Peter can tell he gets it when he says, “For a child that must have been terrifying.”

“Yeah,” it was pretty much just like the professor always tells the new kids: that mutant powers never seem like a gift at first. “I had to learn to move in slow motion and talk in slow motion so that everyone else could understand me and so I didn't freak people out, but it was either that or go insane.” Peter gives a humorless chuckle. “I still freak people out.”

Magneto doesn't laugh. “I can imagine how isolated that must make you feel.”

“You have no idea. Hank told me not to use my powers, but I'm always using my powers. I don't have an off switch. I can get tired, physically, like, tired enough not to be able to move quickly, especially with everything that's going on, but even if I'm totally beat I still- ” he points to his head, “I can't slow down up here. I watch the world go by and it's all in snail-vision. I can't-” Peter cuts himself off. There's so much that he can do that he knows it's stupid to dwell on what he can't do, except that what he can't do is the most important thing. “I can't save her.” Peter hates the way his voice wavers when he says it, but his mom is the one person who understood him, who accepted her weird kid with the silver hair who talked too fast and couldn't relate to other people, even other mutants, on a normal level, who made everyone uncomfortable except for her because she loved him, absolutely and unconditionally. “All that I can do is watch her die, slowly.”

Magneto says, “It sounds like torture.”

That, coming from an expert. Peter nods.

“I'm sorry.”

“I'm failing,” Peter says, and he means it in a really all-encompassing kind of way, like he's failing on every level. He's failing his mother because he can't save her. His powers are failing so he's failing the X-men. He isn't even one of them anymore. He's out of shape and exhausted so he's failing himself.
A frown creases Magneto's forehead. It's very brief expression and he wipes it away as soon as it appears and no one besides Peter would have caught it. Peter's better than a lie-detector.

His father is disgusted with him, and that realization is like a slap in the face after tripping over a coffee table in the dark. Peter jolts upright and he's across the room before Magneto can react, arms folded defensively in front of him. He's still tired. He still hurts everywhere, but he feels like he's been zapped with a live wire, jittery energy running all through him.

“Okay, good talk. Thanks for listening. So, the kids are all safe now. Kurt's healing up. The professor managed to keep you side-tracked long enough to keep you from making a bunch of terrorist widows and orphans, so I guess you guys will be going back to the mansion pretty soon, or, you know, back to whatever it was you were doing in Washington, lobbying for mutant rights or whatever.”

Magneto holds up his hands in a 'calm down' gesture but Peter doesn't really think he needs to calm down. Calm is for after the storm, or before, and Peter's pretty sure this is the middle part of the storm, with waves crashing and tree branches flying through the air and gale-force winds strong enough to flip cars and peel the siding off of houses and Peter feels the need to be up and moving, battening down the hatches or tying down the patio furniture or whatever, nailing boards over the windows.

“Peter, I don't think it's a good idea for you to be alone just now.”

Peter huffs out a laugh but it comes out more like an hysterical sob. “Man, haven't you been listening? I've been alone since nineteen-sixty-nine.”

“Peter,” says Jean. “You're not alone.”

She's standing at the top of the basement stairs. Kurt is next to her, leaning on the door frame, standing on his good leg, and God, Peter must be slipping because he hadn't seen her open the door. She's Jean but not Jean, and Peter knows before she opens her mouth again that those are Xavier's words she's saying. She's holding herself like Xavier does, shoulders back, good posture to compensate for the wheelchair, a steady, penetrating gaze, like he's practicing for a staring competition. Peter looks in her eyes and he can almost see the professor standing there instead of Jean even though he knows Xavier is hundreds of miles away.

“You can't imagine how grateful we are for all you've done, or how sorry I am that we've put you in such a difficult position. I would never have asked so much of you if I thought that there were better alternatives. I make no excuses and I don't expect your forgiveness, but please, let me help.”

Magneto's looking at her and Peter can tell he knows what's going on too and that figures because he's probably seen Xavier do some pretty crazy mind tricks in all the years they've known each other. Peter can see the moment that Kurt catches on and then he's looking at Peter with expectant eyes but Peter isn't sure what they expect.

“There's nothing you can do,” he says. “Really. I appreciate the sentiment, but you guys have places to be and important stuff to do. Look, I do have people, alright? I have a nurse who comes every morning to help out. My sister will be here tomorrow and she's staying for the duration, if you know what I mean, and let's face it, guys, the duration isn't going to be much longer and I'm pretty sure I can hold it together for as long as it takes because... I have to, right? There are just some things I can't delegate.”

If Peter's reply takes the wind out of Xavier's sails he can't tell. Xavier's too cultured and too practiced to ever let that show. He taps Jean's temple and says, with Jean's voice, “May I?”
“You want to look in my head?” Peter asks. “You're going to be disappointed. It's all prog rock lyrics and tits.”

“I'm sure I've seen worse.”

Peter doesn't want to do this. He wants so badly not to do this that he's shaking where he stands, ready to run but no idea where to go. He feels like he's trapped in a snow globe and however far he runs he ends up right back where he started.

“Please,” Xavier asks. “It will be alright. I promise.”

Peter looks from Jean to Kurt to Magneto. They all seem on board with this. He thinks about his mom and everything she still needs from him. “Okay,” Peter says finally. The word causes him physical pain. “Okay.”

The professor puts two fingers to Jean's temple and the introduction feedback from Magic Carpet Ride fills the basement like someone's flipped the stereo on and by the time John Kay's vocals come in Peter's not in the basement anymore. He's flying across the open desert of the southwest. Not flying, no. Running, but he might as well be flying. There are no cities, no trees, no obstacles and he can see for miles. It's a place that's finally big enough for him to move like he was meant to move. He's not alone. He promised Lindy that he'd take her to California as a high school graduation present and here she is, in his arms, wearing pink goggles and matching gloves and a windbreaker he got for her just for the trip, with her ear pressed against his chest, comfortable enough and confident enough in him that she's fallen asleep. And on he runs, through his own personal paradise, with the morning sun warming his shoulders, headed for the West coast.

Peter opens his eyes without realizing he'd closed them, and no time has passed. He's standing where he was. Jean and Kurt are still at the top of the stairs. Magneto is across the room, balanced evenly on both feet like he's ready to fight or flee.

Xavier has left Jean and he's in Peter's head. Thank you for that memory, he hears. The professor reinforces his thanks with a wave of gratitude that's tinged with a small amount of envy for the gift Peter takes for granted. You are a remarkable person, a remarkable mutant. Nothing can change that so long as you live. Be well, Peter. Peter feels something, and it's like the feeling he gets from hearing good news, like the psychic equivalent of a warm hug. Then the professor eases his consciousness away from Peter, like a parent setting a child on his feet, and Peter feels different, not better exactly. His head still hurts, and he's tired and hungry, but he feels... calm, stable, like he was a failing dam holding back a storm-swollen lake and someone has come along and patched his holes and shored him up with sandbags.

“Peter?” Magneto asks uncertainly.

“Wasn't so bad,” Peter says. “I think he went easy on me.” Then he feels a tickling sensation on his upper lip and knows without raising a hand to his face that his nose is bleeding again. He zips to the bathroom and grabs some tissue. The same thing happened when Jean messed around in his head except this time there's more blood and it takes longer to stop, but it does stop eventually, so, “It's fine,” he tells Jean, who's lingering in the bathroom door, but she doesn't look like she believes him.

He leaves the basement without saying anything else.

Peter spends most of the rest of the day with his mother, talking with her or watching television when she's awake and sitting quietly beside her while she sleeps. Eventually Jean (and it really is just Jean this time) ventures upstairs and stands quietly in the doorway. She whispers, “How are you feeling?”
He gives her a look because they both know she doesn't need to ask.

She says, “We'll be leaving tomorrow. I spoke with the professor and he thinks it's time. We're imposing. We're putting you and your family at risk. He knows that having Erik here hasn't been easy for you. We don't want to cause any more trouble.”

Peter shrugs, feeling both relieved and disappointed. “I figured you would.” The kids are all safe. Magneto's been kept distracted long enough to keep him from exacting brutal revenge. Kurt's leg is healing up, and Peter wasn't kidding when he said their time would be better spent elsewhere. Peter's is the only time that wouldn't. This is his mission.

“We care about you, Peter,” says Jean. “Don't forget that.”

“I won't,” he says.

“Try to rest tonight.” She's given up asking him to sleep.

“Sure,” he says, and he does try. Since his and the professor's little psychic road trip Peter's felt more steady, more clear-headed, but his mind still won't shut down, won't let him rest, so when Kurt limps up from the basement at two o'clock in the morning Peter's at the dining room table polishing the silver. Mom has a crazy amount of silver. She was an only child and (as far as Peter knows) an only grandchild, so she inherited a ton of the stuff: platters, candlesticks, a tea set, some kind of bowl thing, and piles and piles of utensils and it's all tarnished as hell. She kept most of it stacked in the back of a closet and only busted out the knives and forks around Thanksgiving and sometimes Christmas if she felt like it. The effort was always wasted on Peter, who would just as happily eat with a plastic spork or his fingers, and there isn't a great reason for him to be doing this now except that he knows it's something Mom would appreciate and it's something to do.

“How's the leg?” Peter asks as soon as he knows for sure it's Kurt.


“I can get you something for it,” Peter offers.

“Perhaps just somesing to take ze edge off.” Kurt approaches the table and eases himself down into a chair. There's a glass of water and two extra strength Tylenol on the table in front of him by the time he sits down. Kurt swallows the pills and looks out over the table, which is covered end-to-end with silver. “He said zat he could feel ze metal. He vondered vat you vere doing.”

Peter doesn't have to ask who he's talking about. “Did I wake him up?” he wonders. He doesn't really know how Magneto's power works. Like, can he sense all of the metal in the house? What does that even feel like? He guesses it would be pretty annoying to be sensitive to something and have somebody else constantly moving that something around, like Magneto would never be able to live near busy train tracks for reasons beyond the obvious ones.

“He does not sleep vell.”

And Kurt would know. He's basically nocturnal and he's been sharing the basement with Magneto for days.

“And Kurt would know. He's basically nocturnal and he's been sharing the basement with Magneto for days.

“Do you know what the deal is with that guy?” Peter asks. Not that he thinks Kurt knows the truth, or needs to. He's more just curious what will come out.

Kurt looks at him and then at the basement door, confused. “I'm sorry. Perhaps I'm losing somesing in translation.”
“Never mind. Not important,” Peter says, getting back to work. The tea set is decorated with a lot of intricate nonsense, scrolls and etchings, initials of whoever they were made for that his mom doesn't even recognize, all blue and brown and gross-looking until Peter gets in there with the silver polish. “Just, you know, what's he up to? Is he like, okay, after what happened?”

Kurt is frowning. “He is a deeply vounded man, Peter.” He says it like he's explaining it to a child, not in, like a condescending way, but just like he's explaining it to someone who has no foundation of experience to draw from, which Peter supposes is pretty accurate in his case. Peter's led an unchallenged life all in all. Sure, he's had his struggles but he's never been captured and tortured, never been forced to betray his friends or fight other mutants against his will, never even lost a close friend or family member before, unless you count Grandma, and he doesn't because he was really too young to remember that. “He vants to repent for all zat he has done, for ze hurt he has caused, but he fears it may be too late.”

“How do you know all that. Did he tell you?”

“He prays,” Kurt says. “He prays in Hebrew. I don't know ze words, but I understand ze intention.”

“Oh,” Peter says. He feels like his mind has thrown up a wall and packed all of the Magneto-related stuff behind it and put yellow police tape across it until he's in a better position to deal with all of the stuff that's not Mom, the other half of him, the guy who's busy not sleeping in his basement because he's sorry for a bunch of shit that Peter doesn't understand the half of. He kind of wonders if that's Xavier's doing or just his own brain protecting him from another breakdown.

“He is not beyond hope. Men who are beyond hope no longer pray.”

“Hm.”

Maybe Kurt can tell that he's making Peter uncomfortable. He asks, “Jean has told you zat we are leaving?”

Peter nods.

“Sank you for all zat you have done. I am sorry to be such a burden.”

“I'm glad I could help,” Peter says. “I wish I could do more.” He realizes how true it is when he says it out loud. His power is a really good power to have if you're in the business of... well, just about anything, really. He could have been a cop or a firefighter no problem, except that he hates cops and isn't sure that the fire department hires mutants with criminal records.

“If you should need anysing, all you have to do is call. I know where zis place is now, so I can come back very quickly, just don't move any furniture around, please.” Kurt smiles a small smile. “I wouldn't vant to end up stuck in a book shelf.”

“Done,” Peter says. “The air hockey table stays where it is;”

The smile fades from Kurt's blue face. “Ze professor says zat he vill use Cerebro to check on you from time to time.”

He's been doing that anyway, hasn't he? And it's not like Peter can stop him. “Fine. Whatever.”

“I know zat you are not vell, my friend, but I hope zat in time you vill be.”

Peter looks at him. Friend. Are they friends? Peter's not sure that he's had any friends since was twelve and he stepped out of sync with the rest of the world.
When Peter doesn't reply Kurt forges ahead, “Your mother is a remarkable woman. I never knew my mother. I was raised by circus performers, but zey were family to me. Ve did not always get along. Sometimes ve fought. Sometimes ve even hated each other, but when things were hard ve vere zere for each other. I vas their son, their brother, because zey chose me. Ze X-men are your family too, Peter. I know you sink zat you are alone, but zat is not true. Ve chose you. Perhaps in time you vill choose us.”

Kurt gives Peter a moment to reply, and when Peter doesn't he leaves quietly for the sanctuary of the basement.

Peter's always thought of his isolation as... well, not as isolation really, more like the world is an aquarium and he's the only one with a ticket and every other living thing is on the other side of the glass. It's not a perfect analogy, but it kind of works, like, they're swimming and he's walking (or running) and he never really stopped to consider how the fish might feel about him, and Peter knows, logically, that he could go down to the basement right now and wake Jean or even Magneto and ask to talk or play Parcheesi or whatever and they wouldn't turn him down but he knows just as certainly that he's not going to do that, because he'd have to put on a wet suit and strap on an oxygen tank and flippers and then climb in the tank and speak fish to them all slow like, blub, blub, blub, and it's just too much to deal with and he doesn't know what he'd get out of it anyway, and how can he explain to the fish that the one fish who gets it, who knows he's not a fish, who looks at him and understands, is dying, and when she does and he doesn't have that fish connection, that intermediary, he's going to be even less of a fish than he already is.

Peter finishes the silver and packs it all neatly away. He doesn't feel like running. He doesn't feel like eating. Mostly he sits near his mom or lies awake in the bedroom across the hall. In the morning he brings breakfast down to the basement, and his guests are as packed as they can get. Jean promises to return the clothes she borrowed from Lindy's closet once she's back at the mansion but Peter tells her not to bother. Lindy has way too many clothes and she isn't going to miss them and besides, Peter isn't the only one who's filled out in the last few months. He's pretty sure they won't fit Lindy anymore and she can probably do without the reminder.

Mom isn't awake, but Jean comes upstairs and kisses her on the forehead, then the two of them go down to the basement, where Kurt is waiting to teleport her and Magneto back to the mansion. He starts to give Kurt another lecture about the pills and then tells him, “You know what? Just give them to Hank as soon as you get there. It's better if you don't have to think about it and you don't want to have them out where the kids can get to.” Kurt nods stoically and then surprises Peter with a goodbye hug.

Peter turns to Magneto, and he'll be damned if he's going to let the old man lead the conversation. “Not going back to Washington?” Peter asks.

“I think that the time for lobbying is done. I want to go where I can be of more direct assistance. I will spend some time at the school. While we've been here Jean and I have been working together to improve her telekinesis. Charles has suggested that we continue our lessons.” Magneto glances at her fondly. “She has a brilliant mind. With her gifts I think she will go far.”

Jean smiles a small, humble smile. Peter thinks he should be jealous or something but no, he's happy for her, and for Magneto too, that they've formed some kind of bond. They deserve it. Peter knows how hard it's been for Jean to make connections too.

Magneto lays a firm hand on Peter's shoulder where it meets his neck, like he's going to give Peter a Vulcan neck pinch or something but instead he just squeezes and says, “Take care of yourself, Peter.”
Then the three of them clasp hands and in a swirl of blue smoke and a whiff of brimstone, they're gone.

Lindy arrives at about six that evening. Peter has dinner on the table for her when she pulls up in her newly repaired Rabbit. She goes straight to Mom and gets her hugs in before Mom shoos her downstairs to eat. Peter made her chicken and pasta with the sauce on the side, the way she likes it. There's only one place setting.

“Did you eat already?” she asks.

“No,” he says. “I'm not hungry.”

They've never really talked about Peter's mutation. It was just part of him and she accepted that. Lindy probably can't even remember a time when he didn't have his powers. She never thought it was weird if he ate three pizzas by himself or slept around the clock after running to Disney World and back just to get her a set of Mickey Mouse ears. She's always trusted him to know his body's limits.

“Are you going to be okay?” she asks.

He says, “Yeah, of course,” because she needs the answer to be 'yes'.

Lindy brought all of her school work and it sits untouched on the desk in her room. Instead they fall into a pattern where one of them is usually sitting with Mom, who's in too much pain not to be drugged constantly, and the drugs make her dizzy and tired, so mostly she sleeps.

Peter still runs to the grocery store and back, but he mostly gives up using his speed. Lindy seems to understand. She's given up a lot of her favorite activities, but they're trying, going through the motions, and waiting, just waiting.

Someone from the mansion calls the house every day. Usually it's Hank or Raven or Jean. Jean doesn't talk about the time she and Kurt and Magneto spent hiding out with him and Peter's little meltdown except to thank him again and apologize for being a pain. Peter doesn't lie to Hank about his health but he doesn't volunteer any information either. He doesn't want the blue furry guy coming down to stick another needle in his arm, so whatever gets him out of that is what he's going to do. Raven is the only one who doesn't pretend that the school is just a school and Peter can get her to talk to him about training and missions and the X-men because she knows that Peter is an adult (thank you) who knows that the world goes on without him but it's nice to be kept in the loop, you know? And they are pretty busy. They're flying out on the jet a couple of times a week at least. There have been a few more mutant kidnappings, nothing on the scale of the mansion invasion but the professor thinks they're related, like the kidnappings are being orchestrated by splinter cells of the same organization. Once it's even Magneto on the other end of the line and Peter asks how the private lessons with Jean are going and doesn't miss how cagey Magneto is with his answers, like he knows she can hear him, because of course she can, or like he doesn't want to say it's not going well.

The professor calls once too and Peter tries to talk about Jean but Xavier expertly turns all of his questions aside and Peter gets bored with being handled and he doesn't want another nosebleed so after a while he just hangs up. He gets bored with most phone conversations. He's always preferred to talk in person because he can take in body language and subtle looks and things like that. He does enjoy talking to Ororo and Kurt when they call, mostly because he tells them outright that everything is the same in his neck of the woods so don't bother asking and he just has them talk about their lives and their childhoods, because growing up in a circus or as a thief in Cairo? That is interesting, and it makes the conversation flow a lot more freely than if they have to dance around the subject of Peter's mother and apologize every five seconds for whatever it is that they think they need to apologize for.
Peter thinks it's weird that Scott hasn't called, not that he wants him to, he's just curious. Scott may not be his favorite person but that doesn't mean he wants to see him dead in a ditch or ridden out of town on a rail. Eventually he does get around to asking what's up with old One Eye, why the radio silence from El Capitan? Nothing's wrong with him, turns out, and nobody has a good reason why he hasn't called, so Peter shrugs it off. The next day it's Scott on the other end of the line and Peter is so very sorry he asked because Scott is incredibly awkward when he's not being a dick but Peter can't bring himself to hang up on the kid because Scott is trying but more importantly he asked for this, so he endures Scott verbally tripping over his own feet and thanks him for the call and then has to lay down on the couch for a while and listen to Cat Stevens until his stomach stops hurting.

About a week after Lindy comes home Peter starts forcing himself to be outside more. It's mostly Hank's idea. The weather is warm and Hank thinks some fresh air and sunshine will improve his mood. “Is this because I hung up on the professor?” Peter asks.

“No. Did you hang up on him?”

“Maybe.”

Hank sighs and Peter can picture him pinching the bridge of his nose. “Do some gardening, Peter.”

Peter does some gardening, but there's only so much planting and mowing and weeding he can do in the back yard. He's been staying out of the front because he can't really use his powers as freely, but eventually it's either that or build a gazebo. Peter does most of the work in the early mornings, that way there's less of a chance he'll be spotted using his powers, although he tries really hard not to use them, and it's still cool enough that he can get away with wearing a jacket. That's how he finally meets the kid who delivers the papers. He's a tow-headed boy, probably eleven years old or so, and he comes by on a bike, flinging rolled-up papers like a pro and the papers even make it onto the porch most of the time. Peter wonders how he ever missed this kid because, yeah, he's efficient and he comes by pretty early but there's nothing special about him, well, nothing mutant-y anyway. Peter's honestly kind of disappointed.

Peggy swings by to visit Mom. She hugs Lindy and kisses Peter on both cheeks and then does her best not to wear Mom out and doesn't totally fail, which is something, but she leaves crying. Lindy says, in a really detached way, that she's never seen Peggy cry before. Peter numbly agrees and they don't talk about it anymore.

After Mom has eaten and taken her meds and is fast asleep Peter asks Lindy if she brought her cigarettes. Of course she did. She goes upstairs to get them while Peter starts in on the dishes from dinner. He's elbow-deep in soapy water, trying to scrub the baked-on cheese off the sides of a casserole dish, doing it mostly by feel and staring out into the darkness of the back yard when he sees a small burst of light out of the corner of his eye. It looks like it came from the roof of the house behind Mom's and Peter tries to remember who lives there. Is it still the Bensons? No, they moved away in nineteen-eighty. Nope. He's got no clue, but he knows they're shitty gardeners and have an asshole tabby who yowls a lot and sprays everything. He keeps watching, waiting for it to happen again so he can tell what it is, like maybe there's a burglar or someone's setting off fireworks or-it's a gun. That was gunfire. It was a single shot, with a silencer, and Peter is the target. There's nothing in between him and a bullet but a single pane of glass and his speed, which is... gone. It's gone. Oh God. Oh God. Oh shit. It's gone. He feels like he's trying to move through frozen molasses. His feet are stuck to the ground. He's moving, but it's slow motion, like the humans, like the rest of the mutants, like the fish in the aquarium.

Peter watches the bullet pierce the glass, sees the cracks spider-web out from the point of impact, across his reflection, and Peter can't even move fast enough to look startled. Once the metal tip is
through the glass he can see that it comes to a very sharp point, and that it's long, more dart than bullet. In fact it almost looks like a mini-syringe, an Peter supposes that it's sort of a relief that he's about to be tranquilized instead of murdered but it's still not ideal.

Peter watches the dart travel toward him, thinking of all of the things he used to be able to do in the time it took the dart to travel from the gun to his chest. He could have washed all of the dishes and swept the entire house. He could have run around the block ten times. He could have climbed up to not-the-Bensons roof and given the gunman the wedgy of his life, but instead he's here, watching as his body betrays him in the worst possible way at the worst possible time. All hope isn't lost, though. Even if he doesn't regain his speed before the dart hits him he still has time before the tranquilizer starts to take effect, and hopefully his body isn't so damaged that it can't burn through the tranquilizer as quickly as it burns through other kinds of medication, except right now he can't seem to burn through two thousand calories per day, so maybe that's too much to hope for.

Lindy. Lindy is upstairs, unguarded. Lindy and Mom.

That's the thought that flips the switch, and Peter's body starts to catch up to his mind. The dart is less than an inch from his chest, too close for him to sidestep. He starts to move back and raise a hand up to catch it at the same time but already knows that he's not going to make it. The only thing he can do is look down quickly enough to watch the tip of the dart go through his t-shirt and then pierce his skin, burying itself about half an inch into his flesh. He pulls it out as quickly as he can, before it's had a chance to deliver its full payload. Immediately he feels a prick in his lower back and another in his shoulder. The shattered glass is still in the frame of the window and he turns to run, reaching for the darts in his back at he goes, thinking that if he leads his attackers away from the house they won't hurt his family. He brushes off the dart in his shoulder but it takes him a few tries to get the one in his back. By then the rapid beating of his heart is already circulating the sedative through his body, which is good and bad, because although he knows he'll burn through it quickly that also means that it's going to affect him quickly.

He makes it out onto the front lawn before the evening-cool grass rises up and smacks him in the face. He doesn't lose consciousness, but he's feels boneless and limp. He feels the vibration of feet through the ground. Somebody is running toward him, and whoever they are they don't waste any time talking or gloating or checking for a pulse. Peter feels something smooth and hard being slid underneath his throat and even drugged he knows what it is: a collar. He's being collared like Xavier's kids, like Kid Peter and Bobby and Tilda, and his attackers aren't gentle about it. They pinch the skin of Peter's neck closing the clasp and it hurts like a son of a bitch and he wants to shout but can't because his tongue won't work and the rest of the world has suddenly sped up and caught him. He can tell the difference even through the sedative haze. This is what it's like to be cut off from his power. It's terrifying, more terrifying than when his powers had manifested and the world had slowed to a crawl. It's like riding a bike with no brakes down a steep hill in the dark.

Peter is being hauled to his feet by his upper arms and the motion is so jarring that he would have thrown up if there had been anything in his stomach. Everything is happening so fast! Lindy is out of the house and screaming at the top of her lungs, some incomprehensible nonsense like a record being played at five hundred RPM and loud enough to wake the dead. Instead she wakes the neighbors. Peter hears doors slamming open and sees one of his attackers peel off and shove Lindy to the ground and put the barrel of his rifle in the back of her neck. Peter does shout then, a wordless, angry, horrified cry. The man with the gun looks at him and then turns back to Lindy and growls something, a warning to stay on the ground maybe, which he punctuates with a firm tap with the business end of the gun on the back of her head that makes Peter's stomach clench. Lindy whines into the grass but stays down.

Peter's limbs aren't working. His head hangs and he knows he's slung between two sturdy guys with
rock-hard arms, dressed in black and wearing ski masks. The third guy is playing catch-up after threatening Lindy. He can't tell exactly what is happening but he can hear the man trailing behind shouting warnings and he knows that his rifle is at the ready. Peter's a burden for two grown men and that means they can't raise their weapons and it's up to the one guy in the back to threaten every neighbor who sticks their head out to see what all the noise is about. Peter can't imagine that this operation is going as smoothly as they'd hoped.

Good.

Fuckers.

Peter's furious but at the same time he's numb with terror, helpless, drained of his power, collared, and drugged, and slow.

There's more shouting and gesturing. Peter swings his head around to look down the street. Neighbors are dropping to their hands and knees or covering their heads, ducking behind hedges or hiding in doorways. An unmarked white cargo van screeches to a halt in the middle of the street, blocking Peter's view of the Obermans' driveway and Mr. Oberman's shiny Camaro. The man holding Peter's left arm slides the door open and climbs in first. There are only two seats: one for a driver and one for a passenger and the rest of the van is covered in black non-slip floor mats, meant for cargo, and that's what Peter is now. Only the driver's seat is occupied. The driver is talking into a big black brick with an antenna, saying something in some kind of military-sounding code along with some numbers that might be coordinates or the time and date or Jenny's phone number for all Peter knows because he's talking too fast.

Peter's assailants drag him into the van and drop him on his side. The third man tucks Peters legs inside, bending his knees toward his chest and the van is moving even before he slams the door shut again.

This is a really bad situation, Peter thinks, and that's the only thought his sluggish brain has time for because about a second later something very large and very heavy and very metal slams into the side of the van. There's a long, sickening moment of everything moving unexpectedly in the wrong direction and if Peter weren't so drugged he would have been way more surprised. His assailants lurch off their feet and smack noisily into the driver's side of the van at the initial impact. There's a screaming of rubber and metal as the van slides in a direction that it's parts aren't meant to go before it strikes the curb and pitches violently to the right, balancing on two wheels before settling with a bone-jarring crash and rocking motion that flings Peter's three attackers onto the bed of the cargo van alongside and on top of Peter and probably makes the driver very grateful for his seat belt.

Someone is groaning and it isn't Peter, who can't even tell his lips to move. Meanwhile one of the men lurches to his feet unsteadily and shouts something monosyllabic like “Go!” or “Move!” while he's hanging onto the driver's seat with one hand and the passenger's seat with the other. The driver is frantically and unsuccessfully trying to get the engine to turn over and it isn't cooperating. Then suddenly it is, albeit with a terrible rattling sound. There's a screeching of tires and the revving of a very loud engine and Peter can't even brace himself for the next impact when it caves in the driver's door and sets the driver screaming.

There's no restarting the van after that, and Peter can barely think over the sound of the driver's agonized cries. The other two armed men get to their feet, one of them limping. Two of them argue, but it's not in any language that Peter knows, or maybe it is and he just hit his head or they're talking too fast. The one who isn't too busy screaming or arguing, the one who knocked Lindy down, looks down at Peter with a hatred like nothing Peter's ever seen and then kicks Peter viciously in the ribs, and Peter can't even move to defend himself. After that Peter is too busy gagging around the pain to
catch most of the action. He knows the driver is being extracted from his seat by the vicious fucker with the boots while the other two burst simultaneously from the sliding door and the passenger side door with guns drawn to cover their retreat.

Then they're gone, and things are quiet, or at least way more quiet.

Peter has time to take a few more very painful, very shallow breaths before he hears a sound more welcome than the intro to *Smoke on the Water* and that's Lindy calling his name in a small, wavering voice that gets louder as she edges toward the open door of the van. It's such a relief to hear that Peter lifts his head and makes a noise in response, more like a strong exhale than an answer but it's enough to turn her uncertain footsteps into a jog until she's leaning over him with her long hair in his face saying something that's probably, “Oh my God oh my God oh God, Peter,” with her shaking hands running over his face and fixating on the collar which she tries to separate with her bare hands.

Peter manages to press himself halfway up but his body and his head wants no part of it and he sinks back down. Lindy is trying to help but she's in a bad position and her hands are shaking and she's whimpering and jibbering nonsense and Peter catches her hand and holds it, just holds it, and that seems to help anchor them both.

To be continued...

Thank you for reading. Feedback is welcome and appreciated.
Help

Chapter Summary

Peter finds out who saved him and has a conversation with Charles Xavier.

Chapter Notes

Welcome back and thank you again for all of the wonderful feedback. You are amazing.

There is some swearing and some smoking in this chapter. Nothing too crazy.

Pleas enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Things continue to happen too quickly for Peter to keep up with, probably because of the sedative but also because his powers are gone. It seems like no time has passed when Peter hears sirens and sees the van surrounded by people. Peter's lying on his side, where he came to rest after the second impact. His cheek is pressed against the black rubber mat and there's a paramedic crouching in front of him, shining a light in his eyes and asking Peter questions that he can't understand. Lindy's right there too, standing her ground no matter how they try to brush her aside. She's arguing with the paramedics and shaking off any hands that try to restrain her or push her back and Peter's unbelievably proud of her. He watches her turn her head frantically to the right and left, then she disappears for a minute and comes back with a police officer in tow. She's pointing at Peter and the collar and Peter wants to kiss her because Lindy's the only one who understands that this thing isn't a bizarre fashion statement and he needs it off now.

The officer exchanges doubtful glances with his partner and words with one of the paramedics and then leans down to talk into his radio and all the while Peter lies there like a dishrag, trying as hard as he can to make sense of a world that's suddenly running laps around him. The paramedics are getting ready to put him on a backboard when another officer appears with bolt cutters. He hands them through the press of bodies and then the paramedics are holding him still and pulling the collar as far away from his neck as possible which sucks because the clasp is still pinching a decent amount of skin on his neck. The jaws of the bolt cutters bite down with a jarring but satisfying crack and Peter knows the instant that the collar breaks because everything screeches to a halt. He feels the scrape of the newly sharp edges against his neck, the place where the collar is still pinching his skin so hard that the area has gone numb, and he feels the sedative leaving his system as his heart rate picks up and the world around him grinds to a near-dead stop, leaving Peter with all the time in the world to consider what just happened and what almost happened and what it means for him and for Lindy and for Mom while the humans slowly and tediously remove the broken collar from around his neck.

Peter feels sick, weak with relief and the loss of adrenaline. His ribs hurt. His neck hurts. He feels like he's been picked up and shaken violently and then thrown back down. They almost had him. Almost. He doesn't want to think about what they would have done to him or that he might never have seen his mother or sister again, that he might have ended up caged and tortured or splayed on
an operating table with his guts open to the air so that some mad scientist in a foreign country could learn the secret of super speed. There's no point in dwelling, he tells himself. His powers are back. He's back. He's safe. Somebody saved him, and Peter imagines Magneto hurling cars through the air and he looks for his dad over the heads of the humans but even as he's doing it Peter knows he's not there.

Without the collar Peter is feeling enough like himself to be difficult. He sits up and tries to shrug off the paramedics but they don't make it easy. Peter is the king of evasion but these guys are pretty good too and Peter appreciates that enough that he lets them take is blood pressure and drape a blanket over his shoulders and ask him some questions and slap a bandage on his bleeding neck. Peter manages to hide his bruised ribs from them by just flat out lying when they ask if he's hurt anywhere else. They tell him that his vitals are out of whack and that they want to take him to the hospital to get him checked over but Peter tells them, loud and clear, “I'm a mutant. They're not going to be normal.” And now all eyes are on him, like he's the lone Beatles fan at a Stones concert. That's the cue for the paramedics to melt away and make way for Richmond's finest. Now is also the time for Peter to seriously regret his misspent youth because he knows the cops' faces almost as well as he knows his own face in a mirror, but in a bad I-fucked-with-these-guys-way-too-many-times-for-them-to-ever-believe-that-this-isn't-my-fault kind of way.

Peter's still sitting in the van, legs hanging over the edge of the door. He sags against the door frame and greets them a half-smile. “Officer Cobb, Officer Dispensa. Sorry, Sergeant Dispensa. Wow. Congratulations.”

“Maximoff,” Dispensa says in a flat, unemotional do-you-know-how-fast-you-were-going voice and for once Peter hasn't broken any speed limits but good Goddamned luck trying to get this guy to believe him. Peter smiles a wry half-smile through the pain. He says, “I bet somebody at the station owes you twenty bucks.”

Cobb is the one who answers. “For betting he'd never make Sergeant or for not believing us when we said you had super powers?”

When Cobb and Dispensa did their good cop/bad cop routine Cobb was always the good cop. Looks like they haven't changed up their routine. Dispensa (the bad cop) is still wearing his mirror sunglasses even though it's dark outside.

Dispensa crouches in front of Peter, close enough that Peter can smell his aftershave, and Peter notes that he's still using the same one that he was wearing ten years ago when Cobb and Dispensa would come around and hassle his mom about this or that, mostly thefts, sometimes a little vandalism, sometimes a lot of vandalism, like when Peter spray painted the second level of the Coliseum to resemble a Frisbee. It took him all night and it didn't really look like a Frisbee when he was done and his head was pounding from inhaling the fumes from about eight hundred cans of spray paint and he had to talk to Cobb and Dispensa like that and only got them to go away because he looked like he was going to throw up on Cobb's shoes. Anyway, it's just like old times again, with his favorite officers hovering and him sitting there trying to act like he hasn't done anything, except this time without the smugness because he really hasn't done anything, except maybe exist and all he has to do is tell them the truth and maybe they'll believe him or maybe they'll think he's wrapped up in some kind of organized crime ring or something and it doesn't matter if they do because he's not spending Mom's last days incarcerated. Over the cops' shoulders he sees Lindy and knows she's thinking the same thing. She'll go full spider-monkey on the next person who tries to take Peter away.

“You don't look so hot,” Dispensa says.
“Been a rough night.” It's not cold outside but Peter's teeth are chattering. He pulls his blanket closer around his shoulders.

“You want to tell me about it?” he asks, and it's the official 'tell me about it'. Dispensa's got his clicky-top pen out and ready.

Peter looks around. It's dark out but Mom's house is illuminated by flashing red and blue lights. Peter can hear the distant murmur of voices, like it's the Fourth of July and all of the neighbors are out on their porches to watch the fireworks.

“Not really,” Peter says. “Can I go now? I mean, unless you guys are planning on taking me downtown and booking me in for, I don't know, whatever the last thing was that I did.”

Dispensa and Cobb exchange a look. Dispensa says, “The statute of limitations on petty larceny is five years... unless there's something you want to tell us.”

Peter thinks of a cell with a glass ceiling in the sub-basement of the Pentagon and an asshole in a suit jacket punching his dad in the face, but he doubts there's a statute of limitations on jail-breaking or treason or however that particular act might be categorized. It was really more of a federal crime anyway.

“Nope.”

“Listen,” Dispensa says gently, “It looks like you've been through a lot and you're shaken up right now. I just want to get your side of the story so we can do our jobs and maybe catch the guys who did this.”

Wow, Peter really must look like shit because this is the most congenial Dispensa's ever been with him.

“Would you believe I was in the kitchen minding my own business when somebody shot me with a tranquilizer dart through a window?”

They would, apparently, because his story fits with Lindy's and the neighbors' and it's a pretty short story and they don't bug Peter for too many details. Dispensa and Cobb know about the mutant kidnappings that have been happening all over the country but this is the first one they've responded to personally, which may or may not be good news because a lot of mutants aren't as flashy with their powers as Peter was. Peter points out that Dispensa and Cobb might have responded to one already without knowing it. Peter doesn't volunteer any information about the invasion at the school or his involvement in rescuing the kidnapped children. It's all said and done and out of their jurisdiction anyway and what would they learn by him telling? Not much.

While they're talking Peter looks past Dispensa and sees Lindy standing on the lawn, staring at him with wide, wet eyes, hugging herself like she's cold too and he motions her over. She sits down beside him and he drapes his blanket over her shoulders. Dispensa tells Peter not to go anywhere while he and Cobb and a gaggle of other officers put their heads together and compare notes and talk on the radio and do other police-y things like leave Mom's front door wide open while they go in and out, collecting evidence and taking pictures. Peter would have been freaking out about that if Lindy hadn't told him that Mrs. Szewc is upstairs watching Mom.

“We owe Mr. Oberman, like, sooo much,” Lindy says. When Peter looks at her blankly she explains, “He rammed the van with his Camaro.”

“Holy shit, really? Is he okay?”
“I think so. His car’s not.”

“Why would he do that?” Peter wonders out loud.

Lindy looks at him like he’s got brain damage. “Roy?” she asks.

“Roy,” Peter repeats, staring at her blankly.

“Roy, the Obermans’ son.”

Yeah, he knows who Roy is -or was- he just doesn't know what he's got to do with this.

Lindy's eyes are wide and her voice is fast and shaky with adrenaline. “Remember when you were in high school and Mrs. Oberman came around looking for him. He'd been missing all weekend and they’d called the cops and everything. You found him at a party in D.C. and brought him to the ER because he had alcohol poisoning. He almost died.”

Roy did die, just not until two years later, in the war.

Wow, he'd forgotten all about that. Lindy must have been in Kindergarten at the time. He's not sure how she remembers.

“Your clothes had puke all over them. Your hamper smelled like Mom's liquor cabinet.”

Lindy doesn't drink.

“I forgot all about that,” Peter says.

“Mrs. Oberman talks about it every time I see her,” Lindy says. “I was screaming for help. Mr. Oberman came running out of his garage. He didn't even hesitate. He just hopped in and floored it. It was badass.”

Peter is still digesting that piece of information when Dispensa returns with his clip board and a couple of evidence bags. Peter sees the tranquilizer darts in one and the broken control collar in the other. He can't take his eyes off the collar. Just the sight of it makes him feel... not right.

“Do you know what this is?” Dispensa asks, holding up the plastic bag with the collar in it.

*An evidence bag*, Peter thinks, because there is still a dumbass teenager inside of him who wants to mouth off to the cops and steal their guns and crank up the volume on their radios. He doesn't say that though. Instead he heaves a sigh. “Control collar. It takes away my power, dampens it, whatever.”

“What's your power?” Cobb asks, and he sounds like he's been waiting years to ask that question. Cobb was a wide-eyed rookie when Peter was a juvenile delinquent, and there's probably only five years age difference between them, if that. Dispensa gives Cobb the surly side-eye and Peter can see that the dynamic between them hasn't changed much in ten years.

Before Dispensa can finish glaring at his partner Peter reaches out and takes his clipboard, flips over the police report and writes out the lyrics to Pink Floyd's *Time* and even draws a little prism at the top.

“Speed,” he says, handing the clipboard back, and while Dispensa and Cobb are busy trying not to look impressed Peter's busy trying not to let on how hard that was. He has to hold his right arm close to his chest so he doesn't piss off his ribs. “No more tricks tonight,” he says.
Dispensa says, “Let's get you a ride to the hospital.”

Peter shakes his head. “It's fine. I'm a fast healer.”

Dispensa doesn't seem reassured. “Is there somewhere important you need to be, Maximoff?”

Yes.

He looks down because there are suddenly tears standing in his eyes and he says, “Mom's been sick. I've been taking care of her.” He means to say more but his throat has closed up. Lindy puts an arm around his shoulder.

There's a sympathetic pause, because the cops get it. Cobb says. “How are you two holding up?”

“Getting by,” Peter says.

“I'm very sorry,” Dispensa says. Peter doesn't turn to look at Cobb but Peter's sure he's nodding.

“Yeah... sorry I was such a shit as a kid, by the way.”

Cobb says, “That thing with the Coliseum was impressive. Was that just you?”

“Nice try, Cobb. I'm not admitting anything.”

“Okay, I think we have everything that we need.” Dispensa gives him a card with a case number. “We'll be in touch. If you think of anything, give me a call. Seriously. I wrote my work number and my home number on the back.”

“Thanks,” Peter says. Dispensa tries to give him a hand up but Peter wobbles to his feet with the help of the door frame. Lindy slips under his arm and he thinks she's using him for warmth as much as he's using her for support.

The street outside Mom's house looks like a scene out of a movie. The cops have cordoned off the street at either end and there's a crowd gathered at the edge of the yellow crime scene tape, mostly neighbors and looky-loos, a couple of people who were probably out walking their dogs. Cobb and Dispensa are far from the only officers out this evening. Peter counts six police cruisers, a fire truck, and an ambulance. There's a news van parked just past the tape and a camera crew with its lens trained on Mom's front lawn and Peter can't even bring himself to be mad about the camera that's following him and his sister every step of the way into their house because as soon as he moved away from the van he saw Mr. Oberman's Camaro, or what's left of it.

Mr. Oberman's baby, his prized possession, his fourth child, his second wife is joined at the fender to the front left quarter panel of the kidnappers' van. The back windshield is shattered and Peter really hopes that there wasn't anything important in the trunk. Mr. Oberman himself is standing across the street between two police officers, talking and gesturing while one of the officers scribbles furiously on her clipboard and Mrs. Oberman stands on the curb with a sweater thrown over her nightgown looking less than devastated by the car's demise.

Peter's brain may not have been firing on all cylinders at the time but he remembers two impacts. Mr. Oberman rammed the van twice. He probably saved Peter's life, and made one hell of a noble sacrifice doing it.

Dispensa tells them that they're going to leave a squad car overnight to keep an eye out for trouble. He says, “I'd tell you to spend a few nights elsewhere, just to be on the safe side, but under the circumstances...” Yeah. Mom can't be moved. Peter's not going anywhere.
Dispensa and Cobb make sure that Peter and Lindy make it all the way into the house before they leave. When the door shuts behind them all Peter wants to do is curl up on the sofa and hug his knees to his chest. “Can you go check on Mom?” he asks Lindy. He hopes that Mom slept through all of that, and if she didn't and she's awake he doesn't want her to see the grass stains and the bandage on his neck and worry.

She goes, and Peter checks out the mess in the kitchen. The linoleum is covered with boot prints and broken glass. The cops and the kidnappers tracked mud and grass all over the carpet and he knows it's not going to take him more than a few seconds to clean but he just does not feel like dealing with it right now, and Lindy gives him the perfect excuse not to when she comes bounding down the stairs telling him that Mom's awake and she's calling for Peter.

Mrs. Szewc from next door is sitting in a chair by Mom's bed, holding her hand and speaking to her in a low, soothing voice. Her hair is in curlers and she's wearing her quilted house coat, the one he always sees her in when she's gardening. She pats Peter on the arm as she passes by him on the way out the door. Mom is bolstered in her bed with three pillows, which is as close to sitting up as she can get. She eyes go wide when she sees Peter and she holds her bony arms out to him like a child wanting to be picked up. He sits on the bed and lets her pull him into a surprisingly tight embrace.

“Oh my God, Peter,” she sobs into his shoulder. “My boy...”

“Hey, no, it's okay,” he says and doesn't flinch when she accidentally brushes his bruised ribs and kisses her cheek and tries to answer her questions. The cops came and for once she doesn't have to get out her checkbook because Peter didn't do anything. He swears. He's going to be fine. He's okay. He's okay...

It takes less time than he expects to lull her back to sleep, then he sits there for a while just watching the tiny movement of the blankets over her chest as she breathes. Eventually Lindy comes upstairs and sits down on the opposite side of the bed. His sister's eyes are red and her shirt has grass-stains from where the kidnapper pushed her down.

“Are you okay?” he asks her. “Did they hurt you?”

“Oh my God, Peter, are you serious?” she whispers harshly. “Mom is sick and you're bleeding from your throat and you're asking if I'm okay? I'm a measly human but nobody tried to kidnap me oh my God- ” she says, like the full weight of it all is hitting her. She puts her shaking hands over her mouth. When she can breathe again she says shakily, “I thought it was the cops at first, like, the SWAT team or something, you know, when they had you out on the lawn? And I was so pissed for a second because I thought you'd done something to deserve it and I couldn't think why you would do something stupid when you were supposed to be here taking care Mom. Then they turned on me and I knew it wasn't the cops. Why did they want you?”

“I don't know,” Peter says distantly, and he doesn't, not for sure. Maybe they were going to interrogate him or dissect him or sell him to some corrupt military organization or, whatever, it doesn't matter. He can tell that answer doesn't satisfy but she lets it go anyway.

“Jesus, Peter, we're going to be on the news. I don't want to be on the news.”

“They'll blur your face.”

“Can they blur my ass?”

“You're worried about your ass?” he says, thrusting his head back in a way that he knows gives him a double chin.
“You're a guy. Nobody cares what your ass looks like.”

That gets Peter to smile a little.

“Mom saw some of what happened. She said she woke up when the window broke. She was so freaked out. She was always so scared that you were just going to disappear one day and she'd never see you again, but that was mostly her being worried that you'd just run off a cliff because you weren't paying attention. Then she saw the news and all of the stuff that was happening with mutants and she was so worried that you'd get caught up in it. This was, like, her worst nightmare come true.”

Peter doesn't say anything.

“You told everybody you were a mutant,” Lindy says accusingly. “You said it out loud in front of the whole neighborhood. Why would you do that?”

“You seriously think the neighbors and the cops never figured it out? They weren't even surprised.”

“Doesn't mean you should talk about it,” she says.

“Or what? Someone might try to kidnap me?”

Lindy looks stricken and her lip starts to tremble. She reaches across the bed and hits him on the arm, hard. “Not. Funny. Asshole.” Three words, three punches, but after she's done they hug and make up.

“Are the cops still out there?” he asks. He can still see the reflection of flashing red and blue lights out of Mom's bedroom window so maybe it's a stupid question.

“Fuck them. They didn't even sweep up the glass.”

“Cussing doesn't make you cool, you know,” he says.

“Does too,” she says. “I'm going to sleep in here tonight. I don't want Mom to be alone.”

“God, how can you be tired right now?”

“How can you not be tired?” she asks, yawning.

“Hell if I know,” Peter says, but he is tired. He's forgotten what it's like not to feel tired. “Still got those cigarettes?”

She does. They're a little squashed from being carried around in an overstuffed backpack but otherwise fine. He palms them and heads downstairs. Mrs. Szewc is still in the house and it looks like she's swept up the kitchen while he was upstairs. The boot prints are still there but the glass is gone (although Peter's still going to wear shoes in the house until he can bust out the vacuum). She's sitting on the sofa but when she sees him she stands up and shuffles over, slippers scraping the linoleum, and puts her hands on his upper arms, giving him a scrutinizing look before pulling him into a hug. He only flinches a little when she puts pressure on his ribs. Then Mrs. Szewc's skin ripples under his hands and it's suddenly Mystique staring back at him with her yellow cat eyes and he isn't even surprised. The real Mrs. Szewc probably slept through the whole thing.

Peter gives Raven a flat, close-lipped smile.

“Dammit, Peter,” she says, brushing the bandage on his neck with her fingers. “Give me a heart
attack, why don't you? The phones at the school have been ringing off the hook. Can't stay out of trouble in your own kitchen, huh?"

He sighs out a breath that he feels like he's been holding all night. “Guess not.”

“The back yard looks great, by the way. You, on the other hand...”

“Yeah, you don't need to show me,” he says. “Thanks for coming,” and he means it. “Where's the professor hiding?”

“Basement,” she says. “Hank and I have been keeping in touch with your neighbors. The phones started ringing about half an hour ago.” So she hadn't been fooling around when she'd asked for their contact information. “Kurt brought Charles and me. He says thanks for not moving the furniture.”

“Tell him 'you're welcome'. ”

“You can tell him yourself. He can't go back right away. The distance is too taxing for him. Charles and I have been doing damage control since we got here. He pointed the cops in the right direction. They got your guys and they're holding them for the FBI, but I think Moira is going to have some questions for them too.”

Peter knows he should feel relieved but he's too numb to feel anything at all. “Am I going to be looking at a lineup in the morning?” he asks.

Raven looks at him like he's a very slow child, but also her favorite, “No lineup. The cops are going to leave you alone. The media is going to leave you alone.”

“There's a van on my lawn.”

“Not for long,” she says. “Charles wants to talk to you if you're up for it.”

“If I'm not?” he asks.

“Then he wants to talk to you tomorrow. We haven't figured out how the terrorists found you. Erik didn't know you were here when they interrogated him so he couldn't have told them, that means that either they tracked Jean and Kurt or Erik here or someone you know gave you up, maybe another mutant.”

Peter's stomach drops. “Shit.”

“What?”

“I need to make a couple of phone calls.”

He grabs his address book from the den and calls Sam and Nancy while Raven heads down to the basement to collect Kurt and the professor. It's after business hours even for Nancy so he tries their home number. Nancy answers the phone in Cantonese even though her surname is Japanese because, again, it's not her real name, and she's used to her family calling at weird times during the night. She yells at him for a while, well, it's not yelling, that's just how she talks, but eventually he gets his story across and warns her to keep an eye out for strange men in cargo vans with masks and he can't help it that his voice is shaking and he lights up one of Lindy's cigarettes on the stove while she talks (yells) and gives her the excuse that he needs to call Sam as a way to hang up. He calls Sam and there's a lot less yelling and after he manages to tell Sam that he almost got his ass kidnapped by mutant poachers Sam is wide awake and ready to file a lawsuit then and there if Peter has names for him but Peter doesn't and he doesn't care about that stuff he just wants Sam to watch out for himself
and Sam says not to worry, he can smell trouble and Peter doesn't doubt that and then Sam asks Peter how they caught him (“I thought you were faster than a speeding bullet. What happened?”) and Peter just says that they caught him off guard and he doesn't go into the reasons but Sam is super well-informed and always has been and asks how his mother is and Peter's like ‘… Okay’ and Sam lets it drop and tells Peter to give him a call if he catches wind of anything and Sam will do the same.

By the time he hangs up Raven is leaning on the counter behind him and Peter's hands will not. Stop. Shaking.

“How did they catch you, Peter?” she asks.

Peter stalls by taking a puff on his cigarette. “Sorry about the smoke. I'd open a window, but...” he gestures to the missing pane of glass. He already knows just from looking that he doesn't have a board big enough to cover it. He's going to have to wait until the hardware store opens tomorrow and by then he might as well just replace the window himself.

“It's fine,” she says. “Answer my question. I thought nobody could sneak up on you.”

“I saw it coming,” he tells her. “I just couldn't do anything about it.” Then he admits that his powers crapped out on him at the worst possible time.

“Has that happened before?”

“A few times.”

“Did you tell anyone?”

He shrugs. “It didn't seem like a big deal. It wasn't happening all the time. They always came back.” He didn't want to look weak. He didn't want to be a burden. He didn't want the X-Men to think he couldn't handle himself, except he couldn't, and it's embarrassing, his... performance issues, and he has enough to be embarrassed about.

Raven would have every right to give it to him with both barrels but she just looks at him and shakes her head and says, “Peter, jeez,” she says, “When did you start assuming that everyone you know is going to hang you out to dry?”

She does not, thankfully, mention Magneto, but she does give him a long, searching look that makes him feel like she's got a theory or two.

“We'll talk later,” she threatens. “Come on.” Peter takes out a teacup to use as an ashtray and follows her into the dining room where the professor is waiting for them with Kurt standing behind his chair like some kind of abused, apologetic manservant.

“Apologies for ze intrusion.” Kurt says. “I feel like a cat burglar, breaking into your basement in ze dead of night.”

Peter shrugs. “S'okay. Welcome back.”

“Peter,” the professor says. He leans forward and traps Peter's hand in his own. “It's good to see you again. How are you feeling?”

“Tired of the question.”

“I understand.” Peter doesn't miss anything, so he doesn't miss how the professor's eyes track him as Peter lets go of his hand and moves to the other side of the table. It makes sense. The professor hasn't
seen Peter in person since he left the mansion and Peter knows he's changed, or maybe staring at him helps the professor read his mind. He's not sure, but it makes him uncomfortable. He looks away and says, “I don't know who gave me up but it wasn't the local mutants.” Peter pulls another cigarette from Lindy's pack and lights it off of the old one and holds it between his trembling fingers. “Still coming down from the adrenaline rush,” he explains. He can't look any of them in the eye. “Who knows, I might actually sleep tonight.” Under the table his leg won't stop jiggling. “Did you, uh, do something for my mom?” Peter points to his head.

Xavier looks guilty. He says, “I reminded her of a pleasant time in her life. I did the same for your sister, to help them sleep.”

“Thanks,” Peter says.

The professor takes a break from observing him silently to ask, “May I trouble you for a smoke?”

Peter raises an eyebrow, but lights one and hands it to him. The professor inhales deeply, like an old pro, and holds onto the smoke before exhaling. “It's been ages,” he says in appreciation. “Thank you, Peter.”

“No problem,” Peter says. Are they bonding now? Is that what's going on? “So, you caught the guys, huh? That's good. Or helped catch them, whatever. Are you any closer to getting all of them?”

“It's turning out to be quite the process, but that isn't something that I want you to be concerned about.”

Of course not.

The professor probably gave Raven and Kurt some kind of telepathic signal because they both seem to have just melted away, leaving Peter and the professor alone at the table.

“Sure,” Peter says. He's smoking too fast, and it's giving him a stomach ache. The fact that the professor's here paints Mr. Obermen's noble sacrifice in a new light. “Thanks for, you know, showing up and all. I think you owe Mr. Oberman a new car.”

“I doubt that the love of his life can be so easily replaced,” the professor says. “But I didn't make him do that. We came as soon as we could, but by the time we arrived your attackers were already half a mile away. Whatever your neighbor did, he did it for your sake, not because anyone influenced him. You're more well-liked than you give yourself credit for.”

“Well, shit, I owe him a new car then.”

“Peter, would you like to know what he was thinking, after?”

“Not really, no.”

“He was thinking-”

Jeezus, this guy.

“-that he had no regrets about doing what he did.”

“Are you sure that wasn't his wife? She always hated that car.”

“I'm saying that you undervalue yourself.”

“No, I don't,” Peter says firmly. The rest comes out in a tumbling rush like an avalanche, fast and
intense and frightening, driven by Peter's dwindling adrenaline supply. “Big picture: I know that the lives of three mutant kids are more valuable than mine, otherwise you wouldn't have asked me to go on that rescue mission when I wasn't in the best position to go. And I get that. I agree. I would have made the same call. It's just math. I mean, you're pretty smart and Hank's a genius but I have a lot of time to think things through, and I mean a lot of time, so I get there eventually. I know that you didn't send Magneto over to mess with my head. You sent him over because Kurt needed help and Jean needed a steadier hand than mine and you needed Magneto distracted while you dealt with the kidnappers and that's fine. I get it. Maybe I wasn't super comfortable with the arrangement but I understand why you did it. And I also get why you didn't just brainwash the media and the cops into walking away from the scene as soon as you got here. Mutantkind can't buy publicity this good. Terrorists attack the home of a house-bound mutant caring for his terminally ill mother? Mutant saved by human neighbor? That's prime-time TV news gold and a win for mutants everywhere. It's the headline that you can point to over coffee with Magneto and say 'See! Mutants and humans can coexist. It's possible,' and Magneto will shrug and call you a fool because he's old and he uses words like that and then he'll let you do whatever you want because you might have a different way of playing chess than Magneto, but it's not any less ruthless. You still know when to sacrifice a pawn. And me? I make a great pawn because I already agree with you. We want the same thing.”

There's an excruciating silence after that. Xavier is speechless for so long in fact that Peter sneaks a glance at him out of the corner of his eye and sees that he's struck some kind of chord that he didn't even mean to strike. He looks like Peter probably looked when Raven did her mirror thing for him, like Peter's shown the professor a side of himself that he didn't know existed, or maybe he knows but he just doesn't like to admit that it's there.

“Oh, Peter,” Xavier says.

“Sorry,” Peter says. If he didn't like being used, if he wasn't actively looking for some kind of approval that he could never seem to find, he wouldn't put himself in these kinds of positions. “I told you, it's fine.”

Xavier sighs. “My dear boy, it is not. I have been careless and shortsighted where you and your family were concerned.”

Peter shakes his head and takes another drag of his cigarette. “I could have said 'no'."

“But you wouldn't have, and I knew that. I should never have asked.”

“You made the right choice,” Peter dismisses him. He's talking fast, wired and tired and too agitated to adjust properly to normal time. “That's the hard part about being a leader, you have to know when to make sacrifices. I'm sure you've said that to Scott. That's why I'd make a terrible leader. I want to save everybody, even when I know that I can't.”

And that's the moment that Raven appears at Peter's elbow with an ice pack. When Peter waves her away she snaps, “Don't be a martyr,” and presses the pack under Peter's arm against his injured side. He shivers as the cold seeps through his t-shirt and keeps his cigarette clenched between his teeth so they don't chatter. He finds that he doesn't want to make eye contact with the professor. He says, “I'm not trying to be an asshole, really. I just come off that way.”

“After all you've been though I quite understand,” the professor says. “You're wrong about one thing, however. I never intended to let those reporters air any pictures of you or your family. When those cameramen review the footage they obtained tonight they will discover that none of them remembered to press 'record',” Xavier gives him a humble smile. “Sometimes the simplest methods are the best. Even with my powers there is only so much that I can do at one time. I'm afraid my main focus when I arrived was on apprehending the men who tried to kidnap you.”
Peter squeezes his eyes shut. “Sorry. I assumed- shit.”

“It's quite alright. I understand your logic. It's my own fault. In the future I'll work towards providing you with reasons to give me the benefit of the doubt.”

“Are the cops going to forget to file their paperwork? Did you have them doodling curlicues on their reports?” Peter asks.

“No. I felt that it was best to have this incident on record. Very few mutant kidnappings have been successfully averted, and many have gone completely unrecognized for what they are. In this case I feel that dissemination is more important than anonymity.”

“Did you at least have them forget to put the evidence in the trunk? Hank might want a look at the control collar.”

“He has several, in fact, taken from the children we rescued, but Raven did collect one of the tranquilizer darts before the police could find it. Hank will want a look. If they have something that can incapacitate even you, we'd like to know what it is.”

“I don't think it was anything special,” Peter says, “It took three shots to get the collar on me.”

Xavier is nodding. “Hank has a working collar back at the school. I've tried in on myself and I found it to be quite... effective.”

That's one way of putting it.

“Peter?”

Peter looks up. The professor's eyes are shining. “Please forgive me.”

Peter doesn't really know what he's supposed to be forgiving, but he says, “Sure,” anyway.

Peter's smoked his second cigarette down to the filter. He stubs it out in the teacup and lights up a third, fully intending to self-indulgently smoke the whole pack and regret his decision later when Raven plucks the cigarette from his lips and puts it out in the teacup in quick, decisive movements, wearing her 'done with this shit' face.

“Up,” she says. “Shower. Sleep. You smell like an ash tray,” which is how she approaches the kids at the mansion who've stayed up too late minus the ashtray part because there aren't many smokers in the eighteen-and-under set. Xavier smirks and Raven says, “You too, Charles.”

Peter reluctantly gets up to follow her but he leaves the pack of cigarettes and a book of matches at Xavier's elbow. Xavier mouths, “Thank you,” at him.

Raven hauls Peter into the downstairs bathroom and tosses a towel in after him but not a change of clothes, so he has to speed through the house with his towel clutched around his hips to grab boxers, jeans, and a t-shirt, then go back to the bathroom and change where no one can see, but at least his speed is working... for now. He's used to the sight of himself in the foggy bathroom mirror: pale and doughy, but the boot print is new, rendered in bright purple and red bruises that wrap around his right side. He feels shivery and sick and tells himself that he just smoked too much too fast. He can still taste the smoke on his tongue and feel it in the back of his throat. Between that and the adrenaline crash he's going to hate tomorrow when it comes.

When he leaves the bathroom Raven is waiting for him, this time in her blond disguise, wearing a nightshirt that is definitely not Lindy's, so it must be a part of her.
“We're staying the night,” she informs him. “Kurt and Charles will keep watch, or did you think we were going to leave you unguarded after what happened tonight?”

“Uh,” Peter says.

“Come on.” She leads him quietly upstairs to the room he's been using while Mom's been ill.

Peter makes her wait while he checks on Mom and Lindy. Lindy's made herself a little nest on the floor next to Mom's bed. Mom is sleeping soundly. He plants a kiss on Mom's forehead and turns to see Raven watching him from the doorway. When they move off into the hall Raven says, “She loves you, you know? A lot,” sounding like there's some other point she wants to make but can't.

“She's my mom. I think that's a requirement.”

“Not always.”

There are enough runaways and abandoned kids at the school that Peter sees her point. There are kids whose parents never want to see them again, and who said it to their faces, called them monsters and threw things. He knows for a fact that Jean's parents are scared of her. They came to the mansion to visit once, at the professor's insistence, and they spent most of that time trying not to be in the same room with her. Hell, the whole school is scared of Jean. Peter's not, because there just isn't much that scares him, and Scott isn't, because Scott's too stupid to be afraid. But how hard has that got to be, being a freak among freaks? So yeah, Peter's been lucky.

Peter's planning on lying awake all night, faking sleep like he usually does when there's anyone besides just him and Mom in the house, so he's surprised when Raven enters the bedroom after him and shuts the door behind her. Peter wisely does not assume that this is a come-on because a) her telepathic brother is downstairs somewhere and b) it's Raven, who walks around naked for the hell of it.

But...

“Uh, I can sleep somewhere else if you want this room,” he says.

“You're staying here, and if you can't sleep, then you'd better lie as still as you can and try not to wake me. I've been up since four. I did about five hours of PT today and I'm a light sleeper,” and with that she flips down the covers and climbs into bed, totally ignoring his discomfort. Peter stands stupidly on the other side of the bed until Raven says, “I'm tired. You're tired. Get over here and lay down. Now.”

Reluctantly Peter joins her under the covers. “Okay, just so we're clear, I'm going to try my best not to lay a finger on you.”

“What, are you scared of what Hank or Charles would do to you?”

“No, but I think you might strangle me with your ankles in my sleep.”

“Go to sleep, Peter,” she says, then throws an arm across his chest. She makes a disgusted sound. “Roll over, your breath still smells like smoke.”

“Hey, I brushed,” Peter says, rolling onto his left side.

“Brush longer next time,” she mumbles.

There's a few minutes of settling and trying to get comfortable, and then Raven is out and Peter is
alone with his thoughts... probably. Peter's never asked the professor exactly how well he can read Peter's mind but he knows he isn't a blank slate. Still, even knowing that his exact thoughts are safe from prying Peter doesn't like the idea of someone in his head, especially now when Peter's mind is an open wound and everything is jumbled and complicated and saturated with emotion and soaked in adrenaline.

Peter doesn't remember closing his eyes but an instant later he wakes up to daylight pouring through the blinds that he forgot to shut last night (this morning?) and he feels a sharp jolt of panic. He slept, for, like, hours, or maybe not slept so much as passed out because he feels like he's been run over by a bus. He's sore all over: his neck, his back, and every other muscle in his body. Raven is still lying next to him, but either she wasn't kidding about being a light sleeper or she's been up for a while, watching him. Her yellow eyes are open and she's naked and blue again. She sees the question in his eyes and says, “I usually shift back when I go to sleep.” Her skin ripples and she's blond and clothed again. “Staying in disguise is like keeping a muscle flexed.”

“Huh,” Peter says.

“Go easy,” she warns. “I don't think you moved a muscle last night. Trust me, I would have known. You were exhausted.”

He's still exhausted but he doesn't say that. Instead he levers himself up and tries not to make a pained expression. He fails miserably.

“You were in a car accident, Peter,” she reminds him. “You're going to be stiff.”

“Yeah,” he agrees. He and Hank have studied, in detail, how well his body absorbs shocks, so this is new, but he was wearing the collar during the accident (which wasn't really an accident but that's just semantics). He didn't have his powers.

Suddenly he feels like the temperature in the room just dropped twenty degrees. His mind goes blank.

“Peter?” Raven asks. “Are you okay?”

He must have held still for too long. Raven's 'are you okay?'s are different from other peoples' 'are you okay?'s. Raven doesn't ask, 'are you okay?' to be polite. She's looking for a status report. She's asking 'are you okay?' but really she's asking, 'Are you bleeding internally?' or 'Can you hold your guts in long enough to make it to the drop zone?' Peter's a realist but so is Raven. They're mutants. None of them are okay.

“Yeah, I'm good,” Peter answers, because he's decided that he is, because he has to be, because his mom needs him to be, and so does Lindy. So, on your feet Maximoff! Today is another day!

Peter goes to check on his mom first thing. She's still asleep and so is Lindy. The green numbers on the digital clock on her nightstand read ten past six, so he didn't sleep as much as he thought. It's almost summer, so the sun is up earlier.

“Are you okay if I shower?” Raven asks.

Peter nods dazedly. He can't really process what happened to him yesterday. He feels detached, like it happened to someone else, except for the deep scars on his lawn where the van came to rest and the tire tracks where the tow truck pulled it free. There's a patrol car parked out front. Peter doesn't recognize the officers but he waves to them from the front porch anyway.

Xavier and Kurt found the Parcheesi set and they're playing at the kitchen table. Kurt is using the
blue tokens. Peter wonders what would happen if Kurt, Raven, and Hank were playing. He decides that Kurt would still have the blue tokens.

“Good morning,” the professor says. “You look a bit better. How are you feeling?”

“Sore,” he says. “Otherwise not too bad. You?”

The professor's sitting up straight but he looks pale and there are dark circles under his eyes. “I'm afraid it's been a while since I had to pull an all-nighter.”

Peter glances over at Kurt, who's yawning but otherwise he seems fine. It's probably only an hour or two past his bed time.

“Thank you for the cigarettes,” the professor says. “Don't tell Hank.”

“I won't if you won't,” Peter says.

The professor motions him over and Peter drops gratefully into a chair with a groan and it's all he can do not to put his head on his arms.

“You'll find things quite peaceful in your neighborhood this morning,” the professor says. “I hope you'll forgive me but Kurt and I won't be staying for breakfast. It bothers me that we still don't know why you were targeted and I would like to use Cerebro to investigate the situation more thoroughly. You know a mutant or two in town, I take it? I can start there while I'm waiting to hear from Moira.”

Peter gives him all the info he has for Sam and Nancy. He says, “I called them last night and they seemed okay. Couldn't hurt to follow up, though.”

“I'll take care of it,” the professor says. He wants to leave Raven here to watch over him. He's pretty clever with the wording but Peter gets that she's his bodyguard. He wants to send Hank too but Peter draws the line at Raven. The professor reminds him, “Those men wanted you badly enough to risk shooting you through a closed window, which they knew someone would hear. They failed but there may be others out there who are willing to try.”

Peter points out that they could have gotten desperate or bored waiting for an opening, or maybe the price on Peter's head was just that tempting, and that's an idea that's equal parts flattering and nauseating.

Right about then Raven walks in, towel-drying her short red hair. To Xavier she says, “Peter's house, Peter's rules. We're not at the mansion, Charles. Let him make his own bed.”

The professor sighs a very put-upon sigh and probably has a psychic conversation with Raven over Peter's head that Peter doesn't even care about. Xavier keeps his eyes trained on her as Kurt slings one of the professor's arms over his shoulder, pulling him to his useless feet for the trip back, and with a swirl of blue smoke, he and Kurt are gone.

To be continued...

Thank you for reading. Feedback is welcome and appreciated.
While this chapter is much less action-oriented there are a few exchanges that I really enjoyed writing, like the dialogue between Peter and the cops and Peter's conversation with the professor. Xavier does care about Peter and what he's going through, but he isn't perfect and he has a whole school full of mutants to look after. He's also a little on the arrogant side and I wanted that to come through.
Mary

Chapter Summary

Peter asks Magneto for a favor. Magneto discovers the family secret.

Chapter Notes

Welcome back! Thank you for all of your wonderful comments and support.

I hope that you will find this chapter as satisfying to read as it was to write.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Raven makes herself at home. Peter tries to start breakfast but Raven pushes him out of the kitchen, “Go sit with your mom or read a book or listen to some music. Your job today is to keep the couch warm. I'll call somebody about the window. You're not fixing it.” Then she adds, “Don't worry, when you get back to the school I'll make sure to put you on bathroom duty otherwise the kids will think I've gone soft.”

Lindy is still asleep on the floor of Mom's room when Cathy shows up for her shift so Peter carries her to her bedroom so that Cathy doesn't have to step over her while she does her job. His back and his ribs aren't happy with him but he tells them to suck it up. Lindy wakes up a little but then goes back to sleep as soon as he sets her down.

Cathy is circumspect but Peter can tell she's noted the deep scars on the lawn and the no-so-subtle police presence. Peter gives her a very vague, toned-down version of the story, figuring that Mom will probably fill her in. He finishes off with, “I totally understand if you don't feel safe coming back to work here.”

Cathy gives him a hug. “Honey, I'm not going to leave you in the lurch now.”

Peter can't stop his eyes from tearing up.

Raven is a terrible cook, and she and Lindy bond over that when Lindy wakes up. Peter honestly can't remember if they've ever met before but they sure act like it.

“She visited me at school,” Lindy explains. “I was failing French and she came by to help me on the weekends.”

Raven says, “Don't look so shocked, Peter. Her school isn't that far from Westchester. Not everybody turns down help when it's offered.”

She sets a plate of runny eggs and burned toast in front of him. Peter looks at it in dismay and Raven notices. “Hey, I can make you something else but Hank says that you need to eat,” she tells him.

“I know,” he says. But it's not the eggs. It's him. This is what his mom must have meant when she said that everything tasted like ashes, because food doesn't look like food anymore, and the smells
are all nauseating.

He eats his eggs anyway.

The phone rings when he's scraping the remainder of his breakfast into the kitchen garbage. Raven reaches for it but nobody answers a phone faster than Peter Maximoff.

"Hello?"

"Peter," it's the professor, and he doesn't waste time, which Peter appreciates, "I've looked in on the two mutants you described. They both appear to be fine. Aside from yourself and Raven they're the only mutants currently residing in the Richmond area, so I'm afraid that still leaves us with the question of how you were found."

"Well, I was never exactly shy about using my powers before the thing with the stadium and Nixon. You know that."

"I do recall."

"So, yeah, they could have just heard through the grapevine. Maybe I was always on their radar and they thought now was a good time to act. I guess my past came back to haunt me."

"If arrogance is the heady wine of youth, then humility must be its eternal hangover."

Yeah, well, Peter's feeling pretty fucking hungover.

"Peter, there is a question that I'd like to ask you for purely clinical reasons. Ms. Nagahori-"

"I know."

"-is a brothel-keeper."

"Yep, still with you."

"Have you ever...?"

"Oh my God. Once. I was sixteen. Did Hank put you up to this?"

It only gets more awkward from there because, "She mentioned that you worked for her-"

"I ran errands and handled some of her advertising. I'm hanging up now."

After he hangs up with (on) Xavier he goes outside over Raven's protests.

Mr. Oberman is out sweeping up the rest of the debris from the crash. He's pulled the Camaro back into the driveway but it looks like that might be its final stop before the salvage yard. The bumper is completely ripped off and lying next to the car. The trunk is not a trunk anymore, the back windshield is smashed, and the back seat is full of glass.

Peter crosses the street at normal human speed, hands in his pockets, contrite, because he really is sorry that his attempted kidnapping cost Mr. Oberman his pride and joy. He stops at the end of the driveway, unsure of his welcome and he opens his mouth his brain decides that this is as good a time as any to get him into a massive amount of trouble. He says, "I think I might know someone who can fix it," and Mr. Oberman asks who and Peter says, "He's a mutant, if that matters. Metal is kind of his specialty." And he immediately thinks to himself, Oh my God, Maximoff, what are you doing? But then it's too late. The offer is on the table and Mr. Oberman tells him to send his friend by and Peter
tells him he'll give him a call and that Mr. Oberman probably saved his life the other night and, just, thanks, is all he wants to say. He doesn't know how he can make it up to him and Mr. Oberman says that he's glad Peter's okay and if his friend can at least get the frame straightened out it would be more than he could hope for and Peter's pretty sure Magneto can do that (even if his forte is more along the lines of demolition than repair).

Peter goes back in the house to make that phone call that he promised, kicking himself the whole time because, really, what was he thinking?

He picks up the phone. In the kitchen Raven is drying dishes. He doesn't see Lindy, so he assumes she's upstairs with Mom. He says, “Feel free to stop me any time.”

She raises an eyebrow and keeps drying.

Peter dials the mansion and Jubilee picks up and she is so excited to hear from him. “I'm on the team!” she squeals. “I'm an X-Man! I love it. Hank made me the coolest outfit ever! Are you okay? We miss you, Peter. I want to see you. I heard you put on some weight. I'm sorry, that's my Chinese grandmother talking. She obsesses about everyone's weight: mine, my mother's, my dad's, my sister's. If anyone goes up or down by, like, an ounce, she can tell, but Jean says it doesn't look bad on you. I'm sorry, again, I'm just so excited. Did you need to talk to the professor or Hank or somebody?”

Peter is too distracted by the idea of the conversation that he's about to have to worry that the girls have been talking about his weight. He's starting to chicken out. He tells himself that he doesn't have to do this but then he thinks of Mr. Oberman's prized possession just sitting in the driveway all crushed up like a ball of aluminum foil because of Peter and Peter bites the bullet and asks for Magneto. He's watching Raven out of the corner of his eye and half-expecting some kind of reaction from Jubilee because at this point who doesn't know that there's some kind of crazy secret surrounding Peter's relationship with the Master of Magnetism? Well, Jubilee apparently, because she just says, “Okay! Nice to talk to you!” and leaves the line for a minute to go get him.

Magneto comes on the line with, “Peter?” and there's a note of confusion in his voice.

Peter feels a rush of something like excitement when he hears his dad's voice, but he tamps it down. “Hi.”

“Is something wrong? How is your mother?”

“She's okay. Uh, listen, are you busy right now? Well, not right now, but do you have, like, a day or two free this week? I kind of need a favor.”

“What kind of favor?” he asks suspiciously.

Peter explains about the Camaro and how it died for Peter's sins and that he knows that the job is below Magneto's pay grade but, hey, he's talking to a guy who used his super speed to deliver pizzas at one point in his life so maybe Magneto can stoop so low as to unbend a car frame for his mom's neighbor who didn't have to risk life and limb to save her mutant son but did anyway.

After Peter hangs up with Magneto Raven asks, “What did he say?”

“He said he'd do it.”

“I'm impressed. That couldn't have been easy.”

Peter doesn't want to know who she's talking about. He asks, “Do you think it's a bad idea?”
“I don’t think you need to keep him at arms length. He knows he makes you uncomfortable. He still thinks you’re scared of him.”

“That is not the case at all.” But on the other hand Magneto is probably used to people being afraid of him, so it’s a safe assumption for him to make.

“Maybe not the way you’re thinking,” she says. “It’s a big deal. I get it, but I also know it would mean a lot to him if you told him the truth.”

“It’s not really a good time,” Peter tells her, suddenly too tired for this conversation.

“Sure,” Raven says, “But it’s never going to be a good time. I’m just saying that I don’t think you have as much to be scared of as you think.”

After that Peter stays silent long enough that she drops the subject.

Peter's errand isn't urgent so Magneto plans to give Kurt a break and drive down the next day in one of the professor's sports cars instead. Peter sends Lindy off to the movies with one of her friends who stayed in-state for college. It doesn't take much for Peter to convince her that she needs a little break, but he did it for mostly selfish reasons because Lindy knows. Mom never outright told her but she's seen the photo album and she was smart enough and motivated enough to figure it out, so a) Peter's not taking any chances that Lindy is going to let something slip and b) he's not sure how much he wants Lindy to have anything to do with Magneto. So Lindy is off eating popcorn and watching Sixteen Candles with plans to hang out at Diane's place after when Magneto shows up on Peter's doorstep with Jean in tow.

“I thought this would be a good opportunity to test her abilities,” Magneto says once they've gone through the motions of asking about how Peter and his mother are doing. He's being way too nice. “I hope you don't mind.”

Peter doesn't, but he wonders if that's the only reason she's here, and when they walk across the street to the Obermans' Peter notices that the police cruiser has vanished, which makes sense because Magneto's probably not too fond of cops.

Mr. Oberman asks where their tools are and Magneto just replies, “We don't need tools.” Then he asks if Mr. Oberman has a photograph of what the car used to look like.

“Are you kidding?” says Mr. Oberman.

He's got a whole album.

Mr. Oberman moves the car into the garage where they can work without anybody seeing. Magneto unbends the frame and straightens the back axle first, then he has to look at the Chilton manual for reference. Once he's done all that he can do with the metal he hands the project over to Jean, who asks for all of the pieces that she can tell are missing. Peter doesn't know what she's going to do with a pile of broken glass but apparently Jean does because when she starts doing her thing Peter watches in amazement as all of the little pieces fit themselves together seamlessly in midair, little glittering sparks floating in from the sidewalk and the gutter and the driveway to complete the windshield, which she slides effortlessly into the empty window frame. She does the same with the brake lights and the paint, which is all pretty amazing to Peter because he doesn't really understand how her telekinesis works, like, if he taps the back window is it going to fall in or did she melt it together? Peter has time to check, so he does, and it's not hot.

“I bonded it together on a molecular level,” she explains.
Peter doesn't miss the glint of flames in her eyes or the flicker of apprehension on Magneto's face. He'd been acting as her mentor when they started, but now it looks like the student has become the master and he's not too comfortable with it.

Peter invites them over for a very awkward lunch afterward and makes them sandwiches before Raven can and watches Magneto watch Jean over the rim of his glass like she's going to spontaneously burst into flame and, hey, he was in Cairo, same as Peter, and it's not an invalid concern. Then Peter hears the chime of his mom's bell from upstairs.

“Peter,” she says, when he goes to her.

“Yeah, Mom?”

And he already knows what she's going to say. He can't decide if he was careless on purpose or if he's just that thoughtless bringing Magneto back to the house.

“I know he's here.”

“Mom-”

“I want to see him.”

Did he hear that right?

“What? No. Listen, I'm sorry. I know it was wrong to bring him here. I shouldn't have done it. I'll ask him to leave.”

“I want to see him, Peter, and if you don't bring him up, I know that Raven or Jean will.”

Mom gives him the big eyes and Peter slouches downstairs with his hands in his in his pockets. He sees Jean watching him with knowing eyes and maybe a little fear and he's not sure who it's for.

“Mom wants to see you,” he says.

Magneto looks at Jean, then at Raven, then at Peter, and realizes that Peter is talking to him. If he's surprised he covers it up well. Magneto isn't finished with his sandwich, but he leaves it on the plate, wipes his hands on a napkin and follows Peter upstairs.

Peter enters the bedroom first, and tries to see it with a stranger's eyes: the hospital bed, the walker, the rows of little orange prescription bottles lined up on the nightstand next to the pitcher of water and the plastic cup, and Peter's mother, who is a skeleton wrapped in paper-thin skin, who smiles mildly when Magneto crosses the threshold.

“Mrs. Maximoff,” he says, soft and polite.

“Mary,” she corrects him. For all that she's medicated to the gills her stare is piercing.

An uncertain pause, “Mary,” he says. Peter can tell that Mom's trying to throw him off balance, and it's working. “I'm sorry if we've disturbed you.”

He doesn't recognize her. Peter didn't expect him to, and Mom probably didn't either. He hasn't seen her in almost thirty years and she probably never meant much to him anyway.

“Erik Lehnsherr,” she says.

“Yes.”
“How long have you known my son?”

“We met briefly about ten years ago.”

“When he broke you out of the Pentagon.”

“Yes,” he admits. “I understand if you want me to leave.”

Mom shakes her head. “I don't want you to leave.”

“Mom,” Peter begins. He's not sure what he's going to follow up with. Don't? She's dying. She's going to do whatever she wants and she's entitled to and she knows it.

“Erik,” she says, like she's addressing an old friend, and he guesses she kind of is, “Do you remember a little diner on Broad Street in Richmond? It would have been close to thirty years ago. It was next to a deli and it was open all night. There were a couple of girls who used to come in after their shifts at the hospital and order one sandwich to split between them. When they had a little extra cash they would order milkshakes. One of them always had chocolate and the other had strawberry. Do you remember them?”

Magneto is frowning. “I'm afraid I don't.”

“Good,” says Mom with the hint of a smile, “Those girls were tramps and they never left me a tip. They had their eyes on you and I always wondered if you noticed them.”

Peter can see on Magneto's face that probably thinks that Mom is high on pain meds or the cancer has spread to her brain or something and yeah, she probably is high on pain meds, but that's the only way she can function but the cancer definitely hasn't spread to her brain. He's heard this story before. Her memory is clear as crystal.

“I was a waitress at that diner,” Mom continues, “I worked nights to help pay my way through nursing school. Maybe you don't remember the diner but I remember the boy who worked at the deli next door. He would make our meat and cheese deliveries. His English wasn't very good. One day he came in to make his delivery with his sleeve pulled down even though it was the middle of August, to hide the fact that it was wrapped in a bloody towel. I tried to ask him what had happened but he couldn't tell me, so after my shift I dragged him back to my apartment and sewed up his arm for him. On the same arm he had a tattoo in blue ink. Do you want me to tell you what the tattoo said?”

Magneto doesn't say anything. Peter has found a spot in the room as far as he can physically get from him, and he tries to stay absolutely still, arms folded protectively over his chest.

“It was a set of numbers,” Mom says.

There's some kind of emotion playing across Magneto's face now, and it's like rage or sadness or confusion or a mix of all of those. It's like he's holding something back, and it's a dark, terrible something.

“Two-one-four-seven-eight-two,” Mom says. “He worked at the deli for about six months. During my lunch break I used to help him with his English. I even invited him over to my apartment to study.”

Magneto says. “I remember.”

“Good,” Mom says, and it's almost a whisper. “Do you remember why he left?”
“Yes,” Magneto says. His eyes are shining like he's close to tears. Peter has to look away. “He'd been asking questions about the wrong people. Some men came, and they killed the husband and wife who owned the deli. Then they went to the diner and took the cook and the waitress and locked them in the walk-in freezer and asked them where the boy was. Then the boy came, and he killed the men.”

“Yes, he killed the men... and the cook, because the cook told the men where to find him,” Mom says. “The only reason I didn't tell those men where to find you was because I didn't know.”

“I never knew what happened to the waitress.”

“She quit the diner. She quit school. She moved back in with her mother,” Mom tells him. “Seven months later she had a baby.”

Peter squeezes his eyes shut but he knows that Magneto is looking at him.

“There wasn't anyone before you and no one for a long time after. He's yours, Erik.”

Magneto is silent, and for some reason that's more horrible than anything that he could have said.

“I never tried to find you,” Mom says. “I never wanted you to be a part of his life. Ever. Do you understand me?”

“Mary, I-”

“Do you?”

“I do.”

“I see the news. I know what's happening out in the world between humans and mutants. I'm not going to be around very much longer.” There are tears in her voice but Peter still can't make himself look. “They tried to take my son.”

“Mom...” Peter starts to say. He wants to tell her it's alright. He's fine and it all turned out fine and he can protect himself, because for the most part its true, but he doesn't think that Mom is interested in ‘for the most part’.

“There's nothing in the world I wouldn't do to protect my children,” Mom says. Her voice has lost all of its frailty and is filled with strength and determination, like she's drawing it from somewhere, like a secret reserve of adrenaline that they talk about on That's Incredible, the kind that gives a regular old human super strength enough to pick up a car to save a child. “We all say we have lines we won't cross, but that's only because we haven't been pushed hard enough.”

“Mary,” he says, and then he doesn't say anymore. He crosses the room toward Mom's bed. When he reaches his hand toward Mom's it's an effort for Peter not to close the distance and slap it away but he doesn't do it. Magneto takes her hand in one of his and closes his other hand over the top of it. “I'm so sorry. I can't ever make it up to you.”

“You can make it up to him,” Mom says. Her head lolls toward Peter. “Peter, I want to talk to your father alone.”

Peter feels something blooming in his chest, like a fire crackling to life, less a happy fire for toasting marshmallows and more of a grease fire spewing black smoke or an acrid wildfire that will destroy thousands of acres of wildlife habitat and put a serious dent in the forestry service's annual budget.
He gives Mom's other hand a squeeze as he passes the bed and brushes past Magneto without a word or a glance because he doesn't think he can take his father's rejection but he doesn't want his acceptance either.

Downstairs Jean and Raven are standing side-by-side in the kitchen, watching the stairs. Raven's arms are folded and Jean's hands are cupped over her mouth. Jean comes to him and pulls him into a hug. At first he clings to her like he's drowning, and then as he realizes what he's doing he makes himself ease back and pull away.

He can't even look at Raven.

Peter's Walkman is on the entertainment center with his headphones coiled on top. He scoops them up and he's out the door.

He runs a few dozen laps around the neighborhood, wading through the quagmire of all the things he's feeling, sorting his thoughts into piles labeled 'anger' and 'regret' and 'frustration' and a big, big pile labeled 'confusion'.

Peter comes back to the house, tired after about twenty minutes. It's the most running he's done since the Delaware errand and his legs are burning because he's pathetically out of shape. He used to love running. Running was life, but now he dreads it like he dreads eating. He hates his body and he hates himself and he's mad at his mom for taking this choice away from him and he's mad at himself for being mad at his mom. He dreads the situation he's about to walk in on, because either Magneto will be gone and Peter's humiliation will be complete or Magneto will still be there and Peter will have to deal with that instead.

Magneto is there. He's sitting on the couch, sandwiched between Raven and Jean. Peter has a chance to soak in the tableau before they notice him. Raven and Jean are both turned so that their knees are facing Magneto. Raven's hand is on Magneto's shoulder, squeezing. Jean's eyes are unfocused, the way she looks sometimes when she's using her powers, and he knows that she's probably been tracking him with her mind.

Peter closes the front door very softly and enters the room like an ordinary person.

Magneto comes to his feet and Peter watches as his father takes him in for the first time as his son and Peter can't help but wilt under the scrutiny. He already knows how he looks and he's ashamed, so he's looking for the disappointment on his father's face that he knows should be there, and it's worse when he doesn't find it.

Peter clears his throat. “Is she sleeping?”

“Yes,” Magneto or Erik or his dad answers.

Peter nods because speaking is hard, but not so hard that he can't say, “Thanks for coming down and fixing the car.”

Those weren't the words that Magneto expected to come out of Peter's mouth. Peter sees the hope in his eyes die a little bit. “May we talk?” Magneto ventures.

“It's not a good time.”

“You asked me to come,” Magneto reminds him calmly.

“Yeah. Now I'm asking you to leave.”
He doesn't leave, but Jean and Raven do. They abandon him like rats off a sinking ship and scurry off into the dining room, leaving Peter and his dad alone to talk, but Peter doesn't feel like talking so Magneto starts the ball rolling, “If you wanted nothing to do with me then I wouldn't be here. You came to the school looking for me. You came to Cairo looking for me.”

Peter's shaking and he isn't even sure why, if it's anger or some kind of kinetic bullshit that Hank would understand, energy he's built up that's just waiting to be released. He says, “I know, I know, but I'm not ready, okay? And if we do this right now I'm just going to say going to say a bunch of stuff that we're both going to regret.”

Magneto takes that one on the chin. He says, “I deserve your anger, and so much more.”

You know what? Fine. Magneto wants it, he can have it: “Mom told me who you were about ten years ago, after the White House thing? You remember, you were there, and after that I spent a lot of time hating you and tearing you down in my mind and telling myself that you weren't so great and that I wasn't afraid of you and because I was a stupid teenager I had some big ideas about how I was gonna find you and tell you off and maybe get in a couple of good punches before you could bean me with a tire iron. Kid stuff, you know? But then you just, like, vanished. Poof, gone, and by the time you popped up next to the scary blue dude with the hoses sticking out of his head I didn't really know what I wanted from you anymore, and there was all that business with your family...”

Magneto's face goes dangerously blank and Peter's diatribe stalls but he forces himself to pick it back up and say, “Look, I didn't know what to expect, but I had to find out for myself, and I remember standing outside that magnetic field and thinking, wow, Mom was right, you are one dangerous motherfucker, literally. Whatever it is that you are, whatever drives you to do the things you do, I can't change that, and as far as why I would want to have anything to do with you, I don't know, in a crazy way your opinion matters to me because you are the guy that fucked my mom and that makes us something more than nothing and yeah, it probably reflects badly on me that I'm looking for approval from a mass murderer.”

Magneto spends a moment taking all of that in, then he says, “I can't change the past. I wish every day that I could. I became what I am because my family was taken from me, then my family was taken from me because of what I became. All that I can do now is try to protect what I have left.”

The sound that Peter makes then comes from someplace that is deeper than his gut. It's like a cross between a moan and a scream and it vocalizes every frustration that Peter has had in the past six months if not his whole life. He shouts, “You're not my dad! You're not part of this family! You're just the guy that slept with my mom and killed her boss and left her with a kid to raise, a kid she didn't want, a kid that ruined her life.”

Peter knows that he sounds hysterical and he's acting hysterical and he's expressing thoughts that aren't thoughts so much as feelings but Magneto is calm and collected, like Peter's a barking dog tucked away safely on the other side of a fence. He says, determined, “If I'd known you existed, nothing would have kept me from you.”

That is, all at once, the best and worst answer Peter could have hoped for.

“Even Mom?” he asks.

Magneto doesn't have an answer right away. Oh, he comes up with one pretty quick but it's not the one that was on the tip of his tongue and Peter knows it down to the soles of his feet. “I would have respected her wishes,” he says. “She asked me to watch over you. She asked me to protect you.”

Peter shakes his head. “I don't need your protection.” It's not a lie, he tells himself. He has Raven and Jean and some kick-ass neighbors. He's got the cops and Lindy. He has Xavier looking over his
shoulder, even though he kind of wishes he didn't. He has himself. He's not totally useless, not yet, and while it would be a relief not to be the adult in the room for just one day, he doesn't need anything from Magneto that he can't get somewhere else. He doesn't. He doesn't. He doesn't, and he'll refuse the man's help with his dying breath.

“Peter, I'm sorry.”

Those are the words that actually mean something to Peter, not promises to help or crap about wanting to be there. Magneto has a lot to be sorry for. So does Peter. He's not an innocent in all of this. He's done plenty wrong. He's broken laws. He killed a man. He invited a mass murderer into his mom's house and made him lunch. But Peter is not Magneto. He won't let himself be his father.

“Me too,” Peter says. Then he closes his eyes so he can't see how Magneto takes those words because honestly Peter isn't all that sure how he meant them. “I can't do this right now. I'm not ready. I don't know if I'll ever be ready but I can't do this right now, please.” his voice cracks on the last word and he drops his voice down to a whisper. “Please, just go.”

Magneto opens his mouth to say something else but Jean interrupts. She's made it all the way into the living room without Peter noticing and Raven is right behind her. “Erik, don't,” she says.

“This isn't the time,” Raven tells him, putting a hand on his elbow, and he looks like he's going to shake her off but then he looks at Jean like she's speaking to him and he calms down and lets himself be corralled by the girls. He spends a few breaths marshaling himself. Then he looks up at Peter with this crazy expression like he doesn't know how to feel something if that something isn't anger or pain. Finally he nods like his neck has rusted and his eyes are shining like he wants to cry and Peter can't look anymore.

“Alright,” Magneto says. “I'll go.” And Peter watches as whatever else he might want to say withers and dies before it reaches his mouth.

He goes, out the front door and down the driveway and straight to Professor Xavier's nineteen sixty-six Shelby Cobra, leaving Jean to catch up. Peter watches him the whole way, even though he doesn't want to, and finds he can breathe better once the man is gone.

“What'd you say to him?” he asks Jean.

“I just told him not to push you,” Jean says. “I know you don't hate him.”

She's right. He doesn't tell her that. Wouldn't want her to think she knows everything. “Thank you.”

“I can stay if you want,” she offers.

“No, thanks. I think he might need someone to talk to. Just, you know, make sure he doesn't wreck the car or level the White House on the way back.”

“Okay.” She kisses him on the cheek before she goes to the car and hops in the passenger seat. Peter stands in the window and watches them pull away from the curb and drive away.

Peter says to Raven, “You probably think I'm awful.”

“No, Peter,” she says, and puts an arm around his shoulders and squeezes. “No one could ever think that about you.”

Eventually Peter makes his way upstairs to sit by Mom's bedside until she wakes up. It takes her a while, but Peter's too exhausted to move anyway. When she opens her eyes he asks, “Why now?”
She says, “Because I'm scared.”

Peter's scared too, so they both have a good cry.

“I heard what you said,” Mom tells him. “You didn't ruin my life. You just gave me a different one.”

Peter doesn't ask what she and Magneto talked about. He tells himself he doesn't want to know, but he thinks that maybe he's in some kind of denial, like if he doesn't talk about it it didn't happen and he doesn't have to deal with it.

To be continued...

Feedback is welcome and appreciated.

Chapter End Notes

*This is a quote from romance novelist Helen Van Slyke. I liked it, so I decided that Charles secretly loves romance novels.

I'm not sure when Erik left Auschwitz, so for the purposes of this story he was still a young man, teens perhaps. Mary's story is obviously my own creation and not canon at all.

There is an alternate version to this chapter, written from Erik's POV, wherein a different character makes the big reveal. Early in the writing process I wanted to include chapters from Erik's POV but I was worried that it would make the story more of an action piece than a family drama, so although I really liked that first draft, I decided to keep the story simple by staying with Peter the entire time. I might add it in as a bonus chapter at the end of the story, though.
The inevitable finally happens.

Welcome back. Thank you so much for reading and for your continued support and encouragement. It get so excited every time I see that I have a new comment or a new kudos. You are all kind and amazing.

Please enjoy.

Mom has a pretty good night. Lindy is back from Diane's by seven-thirty. Peter and Raven have dinner on the table by the time Peter hears the Rabbit pull into the driveway. If Lindy senses that anything weird happened while she was gone she doesn't let on. As they're finishing dinner the phone rings and it's Jean. The Shelby made it back to the mansion in one piece. She doesn't say what she and Magneto talked about or whether they talked at all on the long drive back, but she does mention that the professor was waiting for Magneto in the library with a bottle of Napoléon brandy when they arrived.

“How's that going?”

“I'm trying not to spy, but the pipes aren't rattling and no one's fillings hurt so I'd say it's going okay.”

“Is he mad?”

“No, he's not mad. Maybe a little. Not at you.”

“Okay.”

“Is there anything I can tell him for you?”

“I'll let you know.”

Raven insists on doing dishes while Peter and Lindy spend time with their mother. They play cards sitting in chairs on either side of the bed with Mom propped up with about eight pillows. The game only lasts a few turns and then Mom can't concentrate anymore. After that Peter and Lindy stay up and watch 20/20 on the TV in Mom's room. There's an investigative segment on mutant criminals and how they're restrained and held. One mutant draws his power from the sun, so he has to be held in total darkness. Another guy can't be allowed outdoors because his hands are claws and no fence can hold him and he's not even violent. He's in prison for money laundering or embezzlement or some bullshit. There's some debate about the humaneness of it all and a lot of outrage at the expense to the taxpayers. Peter lets it wash over him because it's just so much noise but Lindy changes the
channel about five minutes into the segment. “I hate hearing about that kind of stuff,” she says. Instead they flip over to ABC’s nighttime movie and watch the rest of *The Jerk*. Peter likes Steve Martin. He’s got good hair.

Lindy falls asleep at eleven with her head pillowed on her arms on Mom's bed and wakes up an hour later, rubbing her neck. After she wanders off to her own room it’s just Peter, who feels oddly calm and relieved because of the thing with Magneto, like he’s just glad to have it over with, and he can relax a little.

Raven looks in on him at around midnight but Peter waves her away. He falls asleep in his chair at about one and wakes up before the crack of dawn to his mom stroking his hair. The lamp on the bedside table is on. Cathy isn't due for another hour. It's been about ten hours since Mom's last dose of pain medication but she looks relaxed, like she does when the morphine has just kicked in and she's close to sleep. She puts a hand on the side of his face.

“I had a good dream,” she says.

“What was it about?”

She shakes her head. “I don't remember. It was just good.”

“Are you hungry?”

“No. Thank you. I think I might try to rest until Cathy gets here.”

“Okay, Mom,” he says, and he kisses her on the forehead, like he does every time he leaves her room, and he’s not even sure when that became a habit.

Her copy of *Peter and Wendy* is open, face-down on her covers, like she was reading before Peter woke up. She hasn't needed him to read for her since she stopped chemo, and Peter kind of misses it. He only got about halfway through the book.

Peter makes himself a cup of coffee and goes outside to drink it on the front porch. The cool pre-dawn air does more to wake him up than the coffee. That, and the sound of running footsteps. Peter walks to the end of the driveway in time to collect his paper before the kid can fling it at his door.

“What happened to your bike?”

“Flat tire,” the kids says, out of breath.

“Bummer.”

“Only for today. May dad said he'd help me fix it when he gets off work.”

“Rad. You're one stealthy kid.”

“Huh?”

“I've lived here for years and I never even saw you until, like, a couple weeks ago.”

The kid shrugs, jogging away, “Wasn't me. This is my second route. I picked it up last month.”

“What happened to the last kid?”

“Don't know!” the kid calls over his shoulder.
Peter stares after him. He tells himself that it doesn't necessarily mean anything. Kids quit their paper routes for all kinds of reasons. Maybe the old paper boy went on vacation or maybe his family moved. Maybe he finally saved up enough to buy a skateboard or an Atari 2600 or some Nikes or whatever it is that kids save their money for these days. Maybe he turned sixteen and got a job at McDonalds. Except that's not what happened and Peter knows it in his gut because he never saw the kid, Peter, the guy who has enough time to notice everything and everyone. So either the kid is a ghost or he's an alien or he's a mutant, and suddenly he's gone.

Peter's forgotten about the newspaper in his hand when he goes inside and only notices it when he goes pick up the phone and can't because between it and the coffee mug his hands are still full. He dials the school, getting more and more nervous that it's going to be Magneto on the other end of the line which is stupid because it's not going to change what he has to say which is, “It was the newsboy.”

“Vhat?” Kurt asks.

“It was the newsboy,” Peter says. “That's who gave me up. He was a mutant.”

It takes Kurt a second to digest. “Are you s- ”

“It's me, Kurt. I'm sure. I think they got him.”

“Hold on. Let me get ze professor.”

Kurt puts the professor on the line and Peter repeats his suspicion, which isn't a suspicion at all once he's done because, “During their interrogation the men who abducted you confessed to abducting a ten-year-old boy from the same city a few weeks earlier. They received your name and location and a description of your powers shortly after.”

“They interrogated him.”

“Someone did. We couldn't establish an identity for the boy. His disappearance was never reported. He may have been an orphan or a runaway or perhaps his parents were afraid to admit their son was a mutant so they said nothing. Either way we couldn't find a connection between the two of you. Now we have it, which is good. It closes one loop.”

“Yeah, but that kid's still out there somewhere. Hopefully, I mean. Best case scenario.”

“Yes. With a little more information perhaps I can try to use Cerebro to track him.”

Peter's got nothing, nada, zilch. “I think his power may have been invisibility or telepathy or something. Whatever it was, he sure didn't like to be seen. Hang on- ”

Peter zips upstairs to wake Raven. She's on her feet in one smooth movement, not quite awake but ready for anything.

“Are you up for a field trip?” he asks.

The newspaper office isn't going to give out information about a former employee -a minor former employee- to some random stranger, but infiltration is kind of Raven's forté. It's Peter's too, but he's not up for it and he knows it. The last thing he needs is to be jailed for breaking and entering if his powers give out on him at the wrong moment.

After talking to Xavier Raven agrees to go. “It shouldn't take long, maybe a couple of hours,” she says.
“Thanks, Raven.”

“You'll be okay?”

“I think I can handle breakfast. The worst that can happen is I burn the toast.”

He tosses her the keys to Mom's car and gives her a wave as she backs down the driveway.

Once she's out of sight Peter starts to look around for an outlet for his nervous energy. Lindy and Mom are both sound asleep so he takes himself back outside for some early morning gardening before the sun is fully up. Peter's skin burns like a sonofabitch and Hank's never figured out whether his pasty white skin is part of his mutation or just crappy genetics. Lindy tans like a farmer.

Peter's ticked through about half of his chores for the day and he's out back watering the lawn when Cathy arrives. She has a key so she lets herself in and waves to Peter as she goes upstairs. He shuts off the hose and goes into the kitchen, starts pulling down bowls and mugs and measuring more ground coffee into a filter. He's just taken the cereal out of the cabinet when Cathy comes back down the stairs.

Peter's heard from other mutants and humans how some things seem to happen in slow motion, usually bad things. For Peter, everything happens in slow motion, so he has a lot of time to process Cathy's carefully neutral expression, her formal body language, and her measured pace, the way that she stops on the other side of the counter, keeping a barrier between them.

“Peter, your mother has passed.”

Peter stands frozen in place, like he can stop time if he stops himself.

“I'm very sorry for your loss.”

Peter is still frozen. He's holding a box of Cheerios in one hand, like he's afraid if he sets it on the counter he'll speed up time or something and he thinks about Superman and how Christopher Reeve flew around the earth so fast that it reversed time and brought Margot Kidder back to life and he wonders if he could run that fast, fast enough to go back in time, maybe not to save Mom because time travel doesn't cure cancer but maybe just far enough that he could stay with her or wake up Lindy or say something to her so that his last words to his mom weren't “Okay, Mom,” like she was nagging him to clean his room.

“She was awake this morning,” he says. “I just talked to her.” She'd been breathing when he went upstairs, hadn't she?

“I think she may have passed just before I arrived. I'm so sorry.”

“Oh,” he says.

“When you're ready I'll make the necessary phone calls,” she says. “Take all the time you need.”

Peter nods, then he makes his way up to Mom's room because he has to know for sure before he wakes Lindy.

Mom doesn't look any different. She just looks like she's sleeping, but she's very still. The lines on her face are more relaxed than usual. It makes her look younger. Then Peter remembers that she's only forty-seven.

A strange feeling washes over Peter, like he's been holding something heavy for a very long time and
suddenly that something is gone, and his shoulders slump and his knees go weak and he knows what this is. It's relief. He's relieved that Mom is dead, and he wonders what kind of a monster that makes him and if maybe he's more like his dad than he thought.

A tiny presence stirs in the back of Peter's mind. Peter imagines Jean sitting in a distant corner of a huge library. She raises her head with a whispered, Peter, that he ignores.

Lindy's curled up on her side when Peter eases her door open. Her covers are tangled around her legs like she had trouble getting to sleep last night, and that's probably why she hasn't woken up this morning. He shakes her shoulder and she comes awake pretty quickly and when she looks at him he doesn't have to say anything. Lindy scrambles out of bed and throws a pink robe over her nightshirt but doesn't tie it.

She's out of the room and down the hall faster than Peter can keep up. Peter finds her standing at the foot of Mom's bed, hugging herself. Her face crumples and she starts to make a high-pitched noise, a helpless keening like the noise she used to make when she was little and some asshole kid pushed her on the playground or stole her Barbies. Whatever it was, whatever made her so upset, Peter would always fix it, but he can't fix this. All he can do is pull his baby sister into a hug and let her cry.

Some time passes, maybe an hour, maybe twenty minutes. He talks to Cathy. Two men from the funeral home come to take Mom away. They're quick and professional. Lindy can't watch. She sits on the sofa with her knees tucked up to her chest. Peter watches everything so that it's burned into his memory, Mom's last moments in this, her house. Cathy stays to help guide Peter and Lindy through the paperwork, which is great because suddenly Peter can't read or understand basic spoken English. Peter is signing the last page on the funeral director's clipboard when Raven returns. At first she keeps a respectful distance, but when the men from the funeral home leave Lindy goes, sobbing, to Raven like a kindergartner and collapses against her with her head on Raven's chest.

The neighbors have seen the hearse outside by this time and a few of them come over to see if there's anything that Peter and Lindy need. Mrs. Baird brings lunch. Peter notices that there are flowers in a vase on the dining room table. They look like they came from Mrs. Szewc's garden but he has no idea how they got there. The phone rings and it's the professor, so either he's been keeping an eye on Peter or the neighbors are still reporting to the mansion. Xavier gives him some 'sorry for your loss' speech that Peter doesn't really pay attention to because he's already thinking about what he has to do next and he's nodding and rubbing the bridge of his nose and finally Raven grabs the phone from him and says into the handset, “Calvin James. Four foot two. Brown hair, blue eyes. Port wine birth mark on his left cheek. Thank you for calling. Don't tie up the line, Charles.” Then she hangs up.

Lindy calls Frank first, since he's her dad. He says he'll cancel his appointments and be there in a few hours. After they hang up Raven takes Lindy upstairs to shower and change and probably cry some more. Peter calls Mom's doctor, then he calls Cindy to let her know she doesn't have to come this weekend, then he goes down the list that Mom made a few weeks ago that includes Peggy and Mom's other close friends. That's the exhausting part because he has to listen to all of them process their grief in different ways and then they all tell him that they're sorry and he has to thank them for their concern and tell them “no” when they ask if there's anything they can do and hang up and go to the next name on the list and somewhere between setting the receiver down and crossing a name off the list and picking the receiver back up the phone rings.

“Peter,” Hank says, sounding relieved. “I've been trying to get a hold of you but the line's been busy.”

“Yeah, I've been on the phone,” Peter says, wondering why he's explaining it. Hank knows how
phones work. “Sorry.”

“How are you doing?”

“Mom passed away this morning.”

“I heard. I'm sorry.”

“Thanks. Hey, uh, did you find the kid?” Peter asks. It feels good to shift gears.

“Not yet. If it's good news I'll let you know.”

And if it isn't? But Peter just says, “Sure, that'd be nice.”

“Peter, listen I'll make this quick. Physically, how do you feel? Are you having any symptoms? Fever? Lethargy? Dizziness?”

“I'm pretty tired, Hank,” and Peter doesn't just mean physically. He's spent. He feels raw, like someone's scoured him with a Brillo pad inside and out. His eyes itch. His voice is a croak.

“Have you slept at all?”

“Like, four hours last night.” Peter thinks that's pretty good, all things considered, but Hank doesn't seem to share his opinion.

“Okay, do yourself a favor and try to get as much rest as you can, okay?”

“Sure, Hank,” Peter says, because it's easier not to argue.

“Is Raven there?”

“Yeah, she's upstairs.”

“Can you put her on?”

“Why?”

“Just- ” Hank sighs. “Can you get her, please?”

“Hank, just tell me. It's fine. I won't freak out.”

“I think you might be in for a rough few days.”

“Oh my God. You don't say.”

“I think it's likely that you mother's death will have a big impact on you physically. You've been under a lot of stress and that has been affecting your hormone levels. I have a couple of theories on how a... sudden change will affect you but I don't know exactly how it's going to play out. I'd feel a lot better if I knew there was someone there to monitor you.”

“Hank, my stress levels are pretty much right where they've been. If you could see the list of shit I still have to get through you'd understand where I'm coming from.”

“Alright, can you get some rest? Have you eaten anything today?”

“I've been busy.”
“I understand. Is it alright if I come by and check up on you?”

“Hank, I don't think I have any blood left. You got it all.”

“Funny. If I drive I can be there by six o'clock.”

“What? No jet?”

There's a strange pause.

“Kidding,” Peter says. He wipes a hand across his face. “You don't need to drop what you're doing. I'll get by. You can come down for the funeral.”

“Yeah, I'd kind of like to take a look at you sooner.”

“What would you say if I just said 'no'?"

“I'd say I'm coming anyway.”

Peter sighs. “I've got things to do, Hank. I'll see you when I see you.”

“Peter?”

“Yeah.”

“Have you tried using your powers since this morning?”

He has to think. He used his speed when he was pulling weeds, but he hasn't since Cathy told him Mom had passed. “No.”

“Can you try?”

Peter sets his pencil in the air. It falls to the table with a clatter before he can catch it.

“I gotta go,” Peter says, and he hangs up.

Peter finishes his calls and crosses the last two names off of his list and tries the pencil thing again about two dozen times. He only catches it about half of the time, and sometimes just barely. His powers are like a scab that he can't stop picking at. They're there. They're not there. He doesn't need Hank to tell him that that's not good.

Peter goes to get up, then has to sit back down, because he's dizzy and his face feels hot and he remembers that he hasn't eaten today.

He gets up slowly, holding onto the edge of the table, and he's still dizzy. He holds the back of his chair and goes to transfer to the kitchen counter but misses and pitches forward, clipping his forehead on the corner as he falls.

What does two hundred pounds of hammered shit sound like when it hits the floor? Well, he's not sure but apparently it's pretty fucking loud because Raven and Lindy come tearing down the stairs. Lindy's in a towel with her hair dripping and she sees Peter lying face-down on the floor and starts screaming his name.

What follows is a chaotic minute or two of Peter lying dazed and bleeding on the floor while Lindy and Raven try to turn him over and Lindy's hair drips all over him. By the time Peter comes fully around he's sitting up with his back against the kitchen cabinets, holding a dish towel to his forehead.
He's not sure how he got there but Raven is holding up bunny ears for him to count and he can hear Lindy talking to someone on the phone. It takes Peter a second to register that she must have freaked out and called nine-one-one. There's been way too much freaking out already and Peter doesn't want to scare Lindy any more so he motions for Lindy to hand him the phone and he talks to the operator himself and avoids an ambulance ride by answering some questions and promising to have someone drive him to the ER within twelve hours. “Now,” Raven insists.

Lindy’s shaking and holding herself and her teeth are chattering but she goes and gets dressed and pulls her wet hair back into a tangled bun. When she's done that she and Raven pull Peter to his feet and Peter sees stars for a while but tries not to let on. They walk him out the door and shove him into the back seat of the Rabbit. Lindy takes shotgun and Raven drives recklessly all the way to the hospital, where she parks like an asshole, taking up two spots with Lindy's tiny car.

Peter and his bloody dish towel spend thirty minutes sitting in the hospital waiting room sandwiched between Lindy and a guy in dusty jeans and a t-shirt who looks like he fell off of a roof and landed in some rose bushes. “Nope, just regular bushes,” he tells Peter. He's got an ice pack on his wrist but he looks like he's going to need a cast and a bath in hydrogen peroxide.

Raven leaves them there to infiltrate the place and grease the gears, although Peter tells her not to. With or without her interference the gash on Peter’s forehead has pretty much stopped bleeding by the time the nurse calls Peter back. She takes his blood pressure, asks him if it's normally this high,has him step on a scale, which seems cruel and unusual but she assures him is normal because if the doctor prescribes him any medications blah blah blah. The weights balance at one-ninety-five and Peter takes a very, very small measure of comfort in the fact that he hasn't actually cracked two hundred. Then he sits for an unbearable amount of time on a gurney in a little cubicle with no magazines and he doesn't dare try to use his power to dash out into the waiting room to grab some, mostly for fear that Raven could be lurking anywhere. Eventually the doctor comes in and shines a light in his eyes, checks his balance and shows him a tongue depressor and then hides it behind his back and makes Peter tell him what he has in his hand. (“That's the worlds worst magic trick, man.”) Then he asks Peter if he feels drowsy, which, for some reason, makes Peter yawn, or if Peter's head hurts (“Yeah, there's a gash in it.”) The doc tells Peter that he's not worried about a concussion at the moment but he's pretty interested in the reason that Peter fainted in the first place.

“I haven't been sleeping, haven't been eating right. I've been, uh... taking care of my mom. She passed this morning and, uh...” his eyes are watering but he's not going to let the tears fall. He sniffs. “It all just kind of... caught up with me.”

The doctor nods sympathetically. “I'm sorry.”

“Thanks,” Peter manages, so tired of exchanges like this.

Peter gets twelve hideous black stitches and walks out of the ER with orders to drink plenty of fluids and get some rest and follow up with his doctor if he has any new symptoms. He also gets a prescription for a sedative and a referral to a grief counselor. He shoves both of the papers in his jacket pocket and forgets about them immediately.

Peter can't even wear his goggles at his forehead now because they catch on his stitches, and that's sort of irritating. He has to sling them around his throat like a necklace, not that he's even thinking of moving at speed as he trudges through the waiting room and collects Lindy. It's not that he didn't want her in the exam room with him it's that Lindy's sort of scared of doctors and medical stuff and blood and what's Raven going to do if both of them faint?

On the way home Raven miraculously becomes the safest driver that Peter has ever met. She obeys the speed limit. She always uses her turn signal. She slows down for speed bumps. She lets little old
ladies cross in front of the car, even when there's no cross walk and the old lady is jaywalking and there is probably some family somewhere all worried because they left the back gate open and grandma wandered out again. This is what Peter thinks about on the interminable drive home from the hospital so that he doesn't have to think about walking into an empty house when he gets home, except that they don't come home to an empty house because Frank's Chevy Caprice is parked in the driveway and Peter has a thought that he almost never has: that was fast.

The adrenaline from their frantic trip to the ER has worn off and Peter has to take a second to lean against the car after he gets out. He knows that Frank's already inside. He has his own key. Mom made sure he got a spare when she was diagnosed, so Peter's sure he's inside getting settled, reading a magazine, watching football. Peter's going to change the locks.

Raven leads the way up the steps and Lindy brings up the rear. Peter is sandwiched between them in a way that makes him feel like he's being protected.

They find Frank in the living room, but he isn't watching football, instead he's at the kitchen table leafing through the list of names and reading over Peter's copy of the funeral home's paperwork.

“There you are,” he says, standing.

Lindy steps around Raven and Peter and goes to hug her dad. Peter shuffles awkwardly into the room. Frank whispers that he's sorry into Lindy's hair, then he looks up and sighs out, “Jesus, Peter,” because he hasn't seen Peter in months and those months have been a lot kinder to Frank than they have to Peter. Frank even has a tan. Peter wonders if he's playing tennis again.

“What happened?”

Peter thinks he probably means the stitches, which are pretty fucking painful and pretty fucking obvious. “I hit my head. Lindy and Raven took me to go get stitches. I'm fine. How was the drive?”

Frank's eyes flick over to Raven, then back to Peter. There's a weird little silence before Frank asks, “Are you concussed?”

“Nope,” Peter says. He tries to step around the living room couch but the couch doesn't get out of the way of his foot so he stumbles and barely catches himself, then Frank is across the room and he's got Peter by the elbow and he guides Peter around the couch. Peter sits heavily, rests his elbows on his knees and lets his spinning head drop into his hands. His left palm is pulling on his stitches but he just cannot seem to care. He's aware of Lindy sitting next to him, rubbing the back of his neck while Raven fetches him a glass of water from the tap and sets it on the coffee table in front of him.

Frank is crouching in front of Peter and he's saying, “Peter, I'm so sorry about your mother.”

This is a side of Frank that Peter has only rarely seen and he doesn't like it because it messes with Peter's world view and his long-held opinion that Frank is a dick. Tears well in his eyes but Peter sits up straight and blinks them back and says, “Yeah. Uhm, okay. You know what I just remembered? I need to call someone to come and pick up the medical equipment.”

“I'll do that.”

“I have to bring a dress and shoes to the funeral parlor, for Mom.”

“I've got it,” Raven says, and Frank asks, “What else?”

Peer closes his eyes, thinking, “I still need to send out the funeral announcements and put an obituary in the paper. Mom wanted Pastor Holloway to do her eulogy so I need to call the church. I have a
suit but it needs to be dry-cleaned or maybe I need to get a new one because I'm not sure the old one will fit.”

“Okay, it's fine,” Frank nods. “We'll figure something out. But first I think it's time you got some rest.”

Peter's already shaking his head before Frank finishes.

“I'm not asking. I'm telling. You need to get some things off your plate.”

Peter makes a broken sound that's supposed to be a laugh but isn't and says, “If that's a fat joke I totally understand and it's hilarious, but also? Not helpful.”

“Hey, look at me,” Frank puts a hand under his chin. “You were there for your mother when she needed you most. You took care of her. You did everything for her. Now you need to take a break, because you can't keep going like this. Even you have limits.”

Maybe Frank feels Peter's jaw tighten or maybe it's that he won't look him in the eye or maybe he just knows him too well because he gives Peter a little insistent shake.

“Go to bed, Peter. Now.”

Suddenly it's like Peter's nine years old again and he's driving Frank and his Mom nuts running laps around the living room, making the plates in the china hutch rattle against each other and what do you know? The old man's still got it. Peter stands up and makes his slow and steady way down the stairs into the basement, where he flops down onto the covers and falls asleep as soon as his head hits the pillow.

To be continued...

Thank you for reading. Feedback is welcome and appreciated :-)

Chapter End Notes

Well, the "character death" tag has come into play. I chose to have it happen off-page because it emphasizes that no matter how fast Peter is, he can't catch everything and he can't be in two places at once.

Erik is noticeably absent from this chapter, but I like to imagine, just for myself, that Erik was standing next to Hank when Peter spoke to Hank on the phone.

Thank you again for reading.
Peter reconnects with his father and lays his mother to rest.

Welcome back and thank you for reading and for all of your wonderful feedback. I'm very excited to see what you think of this next chapter. It was one of the hardest to write, but I hope I hit the mark.

This chapter will conclude the first act of this story. There is an interlude, which I debated making its own chapter, but it's very short, so I decided against it. So, here it is.

Please enjoy.

Peter stays asleep for four days.

Hank tells him later that he was technically in a coma for a good portion of it, but that was something he never shared with Frank or Lindy or, yes, Magneto.

So, Magneto drove down with Hank, and Peter can't help but think that it must have been the longest and most awkward road trip for both of them for several reasons and he bets they didn't stop for burgers... or traffic signals.

After about three days of lying in bed, totally unresponsive, Peter starts to fade in gradually, waking up for a few moments at a time, groggy and cotton-mouthed and so exhausted that he falls back asleep before he can seriously consider talking or getting up. The first time he wakes up Magneto is sitting in a chair at his bedside with his fingers laced together and his elbows on his knees, mumbling something that Peter can't understand. At first Peter thinks he can't understand because he's just so out of it but as he becomes a little more aware he realizes that the words are Hebrew and Magneto is praying. Peter isn't sure how he feels about that, except tired, but it would be rude to interrupt, so Peter lies perfectly still and lets the foreign syllables wash over him like waves. Magneto finishes with an “Amen”, and looks up and notices Peter looking at him with heavy-lidded eyes but he doesn't say anything else.

Peter goes back to sleep.

Waking up is easy. Staying awake is like trying to swim while wearing cement shoes. The second time Peter wakes up he tries to get his point across to Lindy but it comes out as incoherent moaning and all it does is make her eyes all big and worried and that's not what he's going for. The third time Peter wakes up he tries to hold onto consciousness by shoving himself into a sitting position against the headboard and biting the inside of his cheek so hard that he tastes blood. He falls asleep anyway but it isn't for long and he wakes up in the same position but with his chin dipping toward his chest...
and Hank shaking him gently.

Peter reaches out and grabs his arm like it's a life preserver and mumbles, “Mm awake. I'm awake,” like Hank needs convincing. Then he asks the question that made him fight so hard to get here. “Did I miss it?”

It takes Hank a second, probably because Peter sounds like a chain-smoker trying to talk around a mouth full of sand, but then he understands. “The funeral is tomorrow,” he says.

Relief floods him. Peter lets his hand drop away from Hank's arm and Hank starts to fill him in on how long he's been asleep and what's been happening. Frank and Magneto have been working together to take care of all the arrangements that Peter started but couldn't finish. Peter asks how that's been going and the answer is, “Surprisingly well.” Hank's even caught them up late one night talking over a bottle of whiskey, and there's more to that story but Hank isn't telling.

“The bottle with the red label?” Peter asks.

“I think so.”

“Did they at least share?”

Hank says, “I'm not much of a drinker,” which means that they didn't.

Mom usually preferred mixed drinks: vodka tonics, Manhattans, or that one with the cherry in it, but she kept a bottle of the expensive stuff in the cabinet above the fridge for special occasions or for when she and Frank had to tolerate each other. Peter hopes Frank appreciated it.

Peter has Frank to thank for the fact that he hasn't been hauled off to a hospital or hooked up to an IV because Frank was around for Peter's teenage growth spurts plus the one time that Peter caught, like, the worst flu imaginable, all of which resulted in him sleeping for days at a time with no apparent ill effects. Still, this is the longest stretch Peter's ever slept before and he feels like he could go right back to sleep for another week or two and the extra weight he's been carrying makes a lot more sense now.

Peter's suddenly, uncomfortably aware that he's dressed in sweatpants and not the jeans and t-shirt he remembers wearing to the hospital, which means he slept through someone, or more likely a couple of someones, manhandling him into fresh clothes. Peter's mortified no matter who did the honors but he's especially mortified if one of those someones was his father.

“Dude, I need a shower,” Peter says.

“Easy,” Hank cautions as Peter starts to untangle himself from his sheets. “Your blood pressure has dropped. You're going to be dizzy when you stand up.”

“Kay,” Peter mumbles as he scramble-flops to the other side of the bed and gets his feet on the floor and his body upright, more or less, as the black dots crowding his vision remind him that Hank knows his shit.

Hank tries to help but Peter waves him away in favor of crabbing along the wall toward the bathroom where he has to sit on the closed toilet lid for like, a while, cradling his spinning head. He sits there so long that Hank eventually nudges the door open and sets some clean boxers and a t-shirt and sweat pants next to the sink.

“Peter?”
“Give me a minute, okay?”

“I'll be out here if you need anything.”

Right about then Peter panics because his brain has caught up to his body and he's remembering that Mom is really dead and he feels like a cooked noodle and he doesn't actually know how he's going to make it through tomorrow or if he can even stand long enough to shower, which is supposed to be why he came in here in the first place and he's just struck dumb by his own helplessness. He's sitting on a toilet in a basement, drained and weak and smelling like an old gym sock and trying to cry with his mouth open so that he doesn't make too much noise.

Hank gives him a long time, way longer than Peter would have expected, but he does finally knock at the door and say, “It's just me, okay?”

Then Hank's through the door and he doesn't look at all surprised by what he sees. Peter manages to straighten up a little, but he can't get his elbows off his knees and his hands are shaking.

“I don't think your body wants to be up yet,” he says, and Peter could have told him that. “But if it's going to be then you need to give it something.” He's holding out a glass of apple juice with a straw in it, and Peter is stupidly grateful for the straw because he doesn't think his hands are strong enough to hold the glass to his lips without dropping it. He drains the glass, surprised because he hadn't even felt thirsty.

“Thanks,” Peter says.

“Do you think you could try to eat?”

“Shower first,” Peter mumbles.

“Can you manage?” Hank asks doubtfully.

Then Peter pictures Hank in swim trunks and goggles and a t-shirt, helping him and says. “Dude... just... please no.”

Hank ducks out of the room and tells him to call if he needs anything. Peter vows to himself never to need anything that badly, but he does appreciate it.

Eventually Peter hauls himself into the shower and stands under the spray until he's lobster-red and even more light-headed. Then he remembers that soap exists and somehow manages use it. The bathroom mirror is steamed up, and Peter doesn't care to know what he looks like. He knows just by looking down that he didn't sleep off thirty pounds, maybe two or three at most, but he's also aware that he has a good quarter-inch of patchy stubble on his jawline, which doesn't quite make him Rip Van Winkle but is more beard than he's had in his entire life. It's not until he goes searching that he realizes all of his razor blades are missing.

“Hank?” he tries.

He gets an immediate, “Yeah?”

“Uh, razor? Do you have one?”

A pause. “Just a minute.”

Hank gets him an electric shaver, probably Frank's. He doesn't even know if Hank can grow a beard, when he's not, you know, blue.
Peter comes leaves the bathroom clean and dressed and feeling like he could fall face-down on the floor -any floor- and be unconscious in seconds.

Frank is waiting for him. He's sitting patiently on the sofa, reading the paper with his left ankle resting on top of his right knee, cool and casual. There's a sandwich on the table, and Peter knows right away that it's not one of Frank's creations.

Peter ignores the sandwich, staggers back to bed, sits on the mattress, and then can't stop himself from laying down. Someone changed the sheets while he was in the bathroom. They feel blissfully cool against his skin.

“Did you flush all of Mom's meds too?” Peter asks with his eyes closed.

He hears the snap of the paper being folded in half with practiced efficiency, hears Frank get up and knows that the paper is tucked under his left arm near his elbow. “Better safe than sorry,” he says, “How are you feeling, kid?”

“Ohay,” Peter lies. Really it's only half a lie because at least he's clean now. “How is Lindy?” Peter asks.

“Hurting, but I know she'll feel a lot better once you're back on your feet.”

“Did you call the paper and the, uh, church and stuff?”

“Everything's been dealt with for now. There are still a few pieces of paper that need your signature, but they can wait.”

That's a relief. Peter knows he should go upstairs and look everything over. The pastor would have sent over a copy of the eulogy by now, and he's still got to figure out something to wear, and check on Lindy, and make sure Frank didn't forget anything. Frank's never been good with details. That was always Mom's deal...

“I know you'll probably tell me to go to Hell but I'm just going to throw this out there,” Frank says. “You don't have to go to the funeral. You ran yourself ragged taking care of your mother and now it's caught up with you. There's no shame in that. Mary would understand.”

“I'd never be able to live with myself,” Peter says. “I'll make it,” and as soon as he says that he feels his body go, *Fuck, really? Alright, here we go...* and his exhaustion recedes from an all-consuming smokescreen to a nagging itch behind his eyes. “On the other hand my suit might not make it...”

“Lindy already took your suit to the dry-cleaners to have it altered. You can wear one of my shirts. I think it's safe to say I've got a few pounds on you. You can wear the jacket unbuttoned.” Frank shrugs. “You filled out some. It's not the end of the world, and Dr. McCoy thinks things will even out once you get caught up on your rest.”

Peter's eyes stray to that fucking sandwich on the table, the sandwich that he isn't going to eat. Frank sees where his eyes have gone and he moves the plate to Peter's nightstand.

Peter scoots away from it like it's going to bite him. Frank notices. “Erik...” Frank says, leaning on the name, “...helped with some of the arrangements. He wanted to know if there was anything he could do, so I put him to work. It turns out he wasn't just asking to be polite.”

Peter doesn't say anything.

“So, your dad's back in the picture,” Frank says casually.
“You knew who he was?”

“I’ve known for a long time, even before all of that nonsense with the President. I recognized him when he showed up.”

“How did that go?” Peter asks with trepidation, while thinking, Frank knew? but Peter supposes it does make sense. Frank was married to Mom for a long time and they probably talked about a lot of things that never got back to Peter. He imagines that the past few days must have been pretty tense for him, but then again Frank survived World War II as a combat medic. He was at Bastogne, for crying out loud. Maybe sharing a house with three mutants who have all tried to kill one another at some point in the last twenty years is a walk in the park comparatively speaking.

“We agreed that we could set aside our differences long enough to take care of more important things.”

“Hank said you guys talked,” Peter says.

Frank admits, “We did. Your father's an intelligent man, and a dangerous one. I do understand that. I don't condone what he's done and I don't agree with his methods but I believe that he has a point. I know that your mother never agreed with him but your mother didn't see the things I saw during the war. The world has a lot of problems. Mutants make a very convenient scapegoat, and there are far fewer of you than there are of us.”

It's so strange to hear Frank draw that line when he knows Frank doesn't have a problem with mutants, maybe specific mutants, but not Peter, never Peter, not after Peter saved Lindy from being flattened by a car. Peter's never thought about mutants and humans in an 'us versus them' kind of way because everyone he was closest to growing up is human. But he gets that not everyone sees things the way he does. For example: Erik Lehnsherr.

“Lindy told me what they did to you, how they came for you. That is terrifying, Peter. That is the thing that keeps every parent awake at one-thirty in the morning, the fear that your child will be there one minute and gone the next, and your father has lived through that already.”

Frank's talking about Erik's other family, his Polish wife and their little girl. Peter might biologically be Erik's son but he will never be able to replace what Erik's lost.

“You can stop calling him my father.”

“You're his only living relative. Did you know that?”

“I had an idea,” Peter confesses.

“He wanted to know more about you so I showed him some pictures of you when you were a kid, and do you know what happened?”

Peter doesn't want to hear this. “No.”

“He cried. There he was, this man who's hunted Nazis all over the world, this ruthless mass murderer who tried to kill the president on national television, getting all misty-eyed over a photograph of a two-year-old with birthday cake in his hair.”

It's ridiculous. Peter feels his cheeks get all hot with embarrassment because he doesn't want to picture Erik Lehnsherr the way that Frank is describing him. He never really let himself assume that he, or just the idea of him, would mean something to Erik. He doesn't know if he wants to mean something to Erik, even if Erik does mean something to him, he's just not sure what yet.
“He asked to talk to you, if you're feeling up to it. He made you a peace offering.” Frank tilts his head toward the sandwich on the nightstand, sitting there on a plate from Mom's kitchen, little flowers printed in a pattern around the edge.

Peter shifts uncomfortably. “Are the two of you pals now?”

Frank gives him the 'don't be an asshole' stare-down. “No, the two of us aren't 'pals'. I said that I shared one of his opinions, not that I wanted to be tennis partners. You're a grown man. Who you decide to let into or shut out of your life is your business, and believe me, I completely understand your reasons either way, but you have to ask yourself what you can live with, and if you're not up for this I'll tell him to take a hike.”

“The mass murderer? You'll tell him to take a hike? Jesus, Frank. With balls that big how do you find pants that fit?” But Peter's proud of him. Frank's always been kind of a hard-ass alpha male type and this seems exactly like the kind of thing that he'd do. Peter hated his man-of-the-house bullshit when Frank was married to Mom, but now Peter's a little grateful because he's definitely not up to being the man of the house right now. He doesn't know what he's up for right now, except more sleep, but there's a kind of messy, nervous energy running through his body, something that's not excitement and not terror but a heady mix of the two. Peter thinks about the decision that Mom made, to tell Erik, and he thinks about what Frank said, about figuring out what he could live with and if he shuts this door he wonders if it will ever open again.

“Okay,” Peter sighs. He's looking down, fiddling with a fraying edge of the blanket. “Tell him it's okay,” he says, but adds quickly, “I might be asleep...” and he's not faking the drowsiness in his voice but he's also aware that he's leaving himself an out, which he feels bad about but at this point it's just self-preservation.

“Okay,” Frank says. The mattress adjusts itself when he gets up. Peter slides down to lie on his side and bunches the covers at his waist like a shield. He closes his eyes and hears the creak of the wooden stairs as Frank ascends. It's like a lullaby.

“Peter?”

Peter sucks in a breath because Erik Lehnsherr is suddenly standing over him like he's the one with the power of super speed and Peter catches that very brief moment when Erik thinks Peter's asleep and his expression is genuine and curious and maybe a little worried before he knows for sure that Peter's awake because his body tenses and his guard comes up and his expression hardens into a mask of control. Peter's dad goes away and the man leaning over his sickbed is Magneto and Magneto asks, “How are you feeling?”

Peter answers, “Like a jackass.”

For some reason that does the trick and a little bit of Erik Lehnsherr peaks through. He says, stiffly, “I'm very sorry for your loss.”

Peter swallows. “Thanks,” he says, trying really hard not to think of his loss because he would really like to not break down in tears right now. “Sorry I was such a dick last time you were here.”

“You have nothing to apologize for.” Erik looks a little relieved, probably because Peter hasn't lashed out or tried to run away, not that Peter thinks he could if he tried, and not that he's thought of trying.

“I'm surprised you came back.”
“I almost didn’t,” Magneto confesses.

Hearing that is like a sucker punch in the gut. Peter tries to hide how much it hurts.

Magneto continues, and he might as well be reading from a folded up sheet of notebook paper that he just pulled out of his pocket for how rehearsed his speech sounds. He's looking at Peter with the eyes of a kid on Christmas morning and Peter is the pair of ugly socks he just unwrapped. Or in Erik's case Hanukkah night. Nights. Eight of them. Peter read about it. Not like he speaks Hebrew or anything but he did pick up a book or two after finding out his dad was Jewish. Not big ones. They had pictures. Anyway, Erik's giving him the ugly sock look and Peter's lying there, sinking into the mattress a little more with every word while Erik says, “You've done nothing wrong.” But it sure doesn't feel that way. Peter thinks the thing he did wrong was exist, and he can't really take that one back. “I deserve everything you've said to me and more. I look at you and I see the mistakes I've made, and the mistakes I might still make. I sense the plates in your leg from the injury I could have prevented. I see the laceration on your head and the bruises on your neck that wouldn't be there if I had protected you. I see you lying there exhausted from a burden I should have been there to help you bear. I've given you nothing but pain and grief,” and on and on he goes with things like “everything I touch turns to ash,” and something, something death and destruction until Peter's head is swimming and his stomach hurts and he's like, “Stop, stop, please, God, just stop.”

Erik stops.

“I can't do this,” Peter says. He hates to sound like a broken record but, really, he can't do this. “I don't want anything from you, okay? You're off the hook. If you want to hit the road and never see me again, it's fine. Go. You don't have to make excuses. Hi. I was there, not for all of it but I'd like to think I've seen you at your worst and I know you've got problems with a capital P and if you don't want to have anything to do with me that's fine. I barely want anything to do with me right now.” While he's been talking Erik's brows have slowly drawn together into... not quite an angry scowl but something close to it. He looks like he wants to interrupt but Peter's talking too fast. “Maybe you're never going to own a World Greatest Dad mug but I'm not anybody's idea of a perfect son. I'm an asshole and a slacker and I talk too much and I make people uncomfortable and I'm obnoxious and I listen to music way too loud, just ask Frank, and right now I feel like I'm glued to the mattress and I look like ten pounds of shit in a five pound sack.” Peter's breathing hard when he finishes and his head hurts. He squeezes his eyes shut.

“Peter?” Erik asks.

“Yeah?”

“I... Charles suggested... ” Magneto's at a loss for words. This is something new. “I was only trying to take responsibility for my actions. I was only trying to apologize.”

“Your apology sucks. Don't ever do it again. Can we just, you know, talk? Like normal people, or normal mutants or whatever? My head is splitting.”

Peter shuts his eyes for a minute and then starts and nearly jumps out of his skin when he feels Erik's palm on his forehead.

“No fever.”

That rules out one of, like, a billion reasons that Peter would have a pounding headache right now. “Yeah, I probably slept funny. Stiff neck. Crappy posture. Stress. Blow to the head. Some guy who won't shut up about what an asshole he is. Whatever. I've pretty much had a headache constantly for the past six months. Sometimes it's better. Sometimes its worse. The stitches don't help. Hey, what
are you doing?”

Erik is prodding the area around Peter's stitches, pulling at the skin to see if it's holding together.

“I can take them out. I just need to find a pen knife or a razor blade.”

“Yeah, well, you'll have to ask Frank where he hid them.”

“No, I won't.”

Oh, yeah, right.

Erik is gone maybe two minutes and Peter spends all of that time irrationally afraid that he's never going to see the man again or that he's going to fall back asleep and sleep through the funeral and wake up an old, old man or something so he bites the inside of his cheek to stay awake until Erik comes back.

“Did you help Frank find all of the drugs too?” Because of course he helped with the razor blades.

“Yes,” Erik admits, settling back into his chair.

“Would it help if I told you I'm not going to kill myself?”

“It would.”

“I wouldn't do that.”

“You haven't been in the most stable frame of mind recently. We felt it was best to take precautions.”

“I wouldn't do that,” he repeats. Yeah, he'd toyed with the idea, just toyed with it, but no, just... no. He's so alarmed by the thought that he can't even keep his mind on it for very long. It slides away from him like he's trying to hang onto a greased rope. He kind of expects Erik not to let the subject go but he does with an, “Alright then. Shall we begin?” Erik brought a pen knife down (Peter guesses he's going to be using an electric shaver for a while) and he levitates it rather than holding the knife. “It's steadier this way,” Erik explains.

“Okay,” Peter says, and then he holds very, very still. Also he shuts his eyes.

“I won't cut you. You'll barely feel it,” Erik assures him calmly.

He's right, of course. As Peter's lying there he reflects that Erik has had probably forty years or something to practice, and he thinks about Cairo and how freaked Scott and Jean were about having to use their powers, Scott especially, and at the time Peter had been... well, he'd been pretty focused on getting to Magneto but in the rare moments when he hadn't been obsessing about his long lost father he'd been maybe a little smug about his own proficiency. Now that the last few months have really sucked away his chutzpah and he wonders how Scott is doing, whether he's finally found the confidence he's been looking for.

“Did the professor ever find the kid? The newsboy?”

When Erik pauses his cutting to pluck a stitch out with his fingers. “Hold still,” Erik says, using the excuse of beginning to cut again to buy himself a moment. “Not yet, but Charles continues to hold out hope.”

Peter's stomach sinks. “I should have figured it out sooner. I just... I forgot all about him.”
Erik pauses his cutting. “You can’t be responsible for everyone, Peter.”

“I know that.”

“You seem to take responsibility for quite a lot.”

Well, maybe he’s trying to make up for his mass-murdering father, and if that’s the case he’s got a long way to go.

“Your mother thought that you blamed yourself unfairly for things beyond your control.”

That’s close to the mark, also just the mention of Peter’s mom flips some switch inside him and just like that Peter’s eyes are tearing up and his cheeks are burning and his stupid, stupid skin is too fair to hide it. Even in the dim light of the basement he knows that Erik can see.

Erik leans back, alarmed, and the knife floats away. Peter turns away from Erik and lets the tears fall on his pillow and tries to keep things quiet. It takes him a minute but eventually he has enough wind to say, “It just comes out of nowhere. Fuck. Sorry,” he sniffs.

“It’s quite alright.”

“It sucks.”

“It’s grief.” And, God, Erik would know, wouldn’t he?

Peter lets out a shaky breath, “It gets better, right?”

“No,” Erik says. “But you grow used to it.”

Peter wills Erik not to touch him because Peter is afraid he’s either going to slap him away or latch onto him like a baby monkey. Maybe Erik’s just as unsure or maybe he’s thinking of all the things he’s had to grow used to because he just sits there, a grim, solid statue. After a while he says, “I misspoke earlier.”

Peter doesn’t think he can speak without sounding all stuffed up so he just grunts.

“I believe I gave you the impression that I was trying to excuse myself from being... from being your father,” Erik stammers. “That isn’t the case. You’ve grown into a fine man, no matter how you disparage yourself. I’m aware that you don’t need a father the way that a child would, but I do want to protect you. The truth is that I’m frightened. Having you in my life means that once again I have something to lose, and that is more terrifying than having nothing at all.” Erik marvels, “After all that’s happened, after all I’ve done, I can’t understand why I continue to receive such blessings.”

Peter can hear tears in Erik’s voice. It means a lot to him that Erik thinks he’s a good thing and Peter thinks it’s like they’ve found themselves on the opposite side of the question, ‘why do bad things happen to good people?’ except maybe Erik’s not a bad guy. Maybe there are no bad guys, just people doing things for their own reasons and they seem like good reasons at the time, like that guy Peter accidentally drowned in the Delaware River. Maybe he was just trying to make some money, send his kid to college or something, and then some mutant comes along and suddenly he’s regretting the fact that he never took swimming lessons, and Peter absolutely feels like a bad guy for doing what he did but he never set out to kill anybody, and he definitely would have made a different choice if he’d known how that was going to turn out but he can’t take it back and he knows deep down he’s not bad, he just did what he thought was right at the time. He wouldn’t hurt anyone on purpose and maybe Magneto -Erik- wouldn’t hurt anyone on purpose either if his family hadn’t been murdered and he hadn’t been groomed by Nazis to be a living weapon and Peter can see he’s trying to change, trying to make sandwiches, not war, but that’s got to be an uphill battle, undoing however-
the-hell-many years of conditioning that led him to believe that impaling things and people with metal was the best possible solution for all of life's problems.

Erik called him a 'blessing'. It reminds Peter of something. “The prayer was nice.”

Erik looks surprised. “I wasn't sure you heard.”

“I did,” Peter says. “What do the words mean?”

“It's called the Mi Shebeirach. It's a prayer for healing.”

“Oh,” Peter says. He'd been hoping for more, like, to know what words his dad was speaking over him, but he guesses that would be asking Erik to open a part of himself he's not ready to share.

Peter reaches a hand up to his forehead. It feel's like Erik's gotten about half of the stitches and the skin seems to be holding together.

“You're going to have a scar,” Erik observes. “But it should fade with time.”

“I'm totally going to lie about where I got it.”

Erik smiles... a little. Maybe it's not a smile, but it's not a frown.

Peter wipes his hands across his eyes. He can barely keep them open but he doesn't want to close them while his dad is still there. Any port in a storm, right? “I don't know how I'm going to make it through tomorrow,” Peter says. “I don't suppose you have a prayer for that?”

“I do, but I think I know someone who can help. Jean and Charles will be here for the funeral tomorrow. Scott is coming with them, with your permission or course.”

Peter doesn't give a shit where Scott goes, but he is worried about what's going to happen if the professor messes with his head.

“He won't harm you,” Erik says. He adds quietly, “I wouldn't allow that.”

Peter wonders what he and Erik are to each other. Technically they're father and son but Peter doesn't know if he'll ever want to call Erik 'Dad'.

“Not that I mind who shows up. Everybody's welcome, sure, but who's minding the store?” Peter asks.

“Kurt and Ororo are there, and Raven has gone back to the school. She asked me to pass along her regrets.”

“Are you coming?” Peter asks. He can't imagine Erik's been to a lot of formal gatherings, so maybe a funeral is a good place for him to start. He'll have to work his way up to birthday parties.

“With your permission. I would like to pay my respects.”

Ugh, so formal. “Yeah, it's fine,” Peter shrugs.

Maybe it's not the express invitation that Erik was looking for, but he nods like maybe it's what he thinks he deserves, and it hangs between them in silence as Erik picks out the rest of Peter's stitches. It gets harder and harder for Peter to hold up his end of the conversation. He doesn't remember what they talk about but he remembers his dad's thumb on the edge of his scar, brushing away bits of broken stitches, and fingers in his hair, and the sound of a song to which he doesn't know the words.
Interlude

Peter has a dream that he wakes up at exactly eight in the morning, like there's an alarm clock in his head. His head is light and it feels like it's going to float off his shoulders when he swings his legs over the side of the bed. He finds his way to the bathroom, moving slow like the air in the room has turned to water, floating more than walking. He finds a black suit and tie hanging from a hook on the back of the door, and after he showers, he puts it on. He combs his hair. He finds black socks and polished shoes in his closet. At eight-thirty he climbs the stairs to the living room. Frank and Lindy are in the kitchen, talking softly. They look up when they see him. Lindy smiles and pulls him into a hug, but he can't smile back. Hank is there too, along with Scott and Jean. Jean's presence is soothing to him. She hooks her arm through his and suddenly Peter doesn't feel so lost. It doesn't even occur to him to ask why everyone is wearing black.

Frank and Lindy grab their keys and everyone heads out the door at eight-forty-five. Peter notices a few things that are out of the ordinary, like how his goggles are missing, and how everyone seems so quiet, then Jean sets her other hand on his arm and he forgets all about them.

They drive to church, the one Mom used to take him to as a kid, the one he still thinks about as the church, where he played one of the wise men in the Christmas pageant for two years in a row along with Craig Howard and Tommy Hinkle, before Tommy Hinkle's mom called Peter a bastard and Peter said he didn't want to go anymore.

There's no pageant now, just a bier with a casket covered in flowers and inside it a wax doll that looks like his mom. She's beautiful. She always was. Maybe that's why the other moms at the church hated her so much, not because of her weird kid.

Peter sits in the front pew with his sister on one side and Jean on the other. Scott and Hank are a few rows behind them. Peter knows the church is filling up because he can hear people filtering in one at a time or in small groups over the sound of the organ playing.

Peter doesn't recognize the pastor who comes to the pulpit to talk about his mom. He must have joined the church after Peter left. He does seem to have known his mom though, which is strange because he didn't think she went to church anymore. When the pastor is finished speaking Lindy gets up and unfolds a piece of paper on the pulpit. Then she says a lot of really nice things about Mom, even though she's in tears almost as soon as she starts. Peter's holding a crumpled tissue in his own fist, but Jean doesn't let him dwell on that too much. When Lindy is done Peter wraps his right arm around her shoulders and pulls her close so she can sob into his lapel.

Three or four of Mom's colleagues and friends get up to say a few words, and when that's done the pastor asks for the family to come up to the front of the church so that the gathered can pay their respects. Peter and Lindy stand by the casket, and Peter starts to feel very strange without Jean's arm in his, like he's trying to sleep but someone has taken away his blanket and he's cold without it.

Now that he's standing at the front of the church he can see that Mom drew a packed house. That's what happens when young people die. He recognizes kids from Lindy's high school and their parents, nurses and doctors from the hospital where mom used to work, patients that Peter recognizes from the chemo ward, old family friends and neighbors. The Obermans are there, sitting beside Mrs. Szewc and just in front of Mr. and Mrs. Baird.

There are other faces that Peter recognizes right away, including Charles Xavier. “I know how difficult this has been for you, Peter, and what a comfort you were to your mother in her final days. We are here for you, all of us.” Peter nods. He understands the words but they don't really mean
much to him.

The next person in the receiving line is Erik Lehnsherr. He clasps Peter's hand in both of his. Maybe Erik says something and maybe he doesn't. Peter's busy staring down at Erik's hands, which are strong and warm, folded around Peter's hand like he doesn't want to let it go, but he also can't hold it forever.

After all of the mourners have filed past, Jean collects Peter on her arm and they leave the church for the cemetery.

Mom's plot is all on its own under a big pine tree, manicured grass all around. Mom was an only child and her father died a long time ago in a place far from here, and her mother wanted to be buried alongside him, so for now, Mom's alone.

Peter, Frank, and Hank act as pallbearers and share one side of the casket. Eric Lehnsherr, Mr. Oberman, and Mr. Baird take the other side. Peter thinks that this should mean something to him but he can't decide what.

There are more words at the graveside. Peter feels himself growing weary as the service drags on, and it's the kind of tiredness that involves more than his body, like his nerves are rubbed raw from feeling too much, but as long as Jean holds on to his arm he feels like he can keep going, through a prayer he knows by heart.

After the burial some of the guests return to Mom's house, which is now Peter's house, for a subdued reception. Peter sits on the sofa in his living room while guests file past, talking in hushed voices. The bottle with the red label is out of the cabinet and making its way around the room. Someone sets a fresh glass of it on the coffee table in front of Peter. There are two cubes of ice floating in the amber spirits, then there are none and the liquid in the glass is clear on the surface and the glass itself is sitting in a pool of condensation. Peter feels confused and wonders where the time has gone.

The dream ends where it began. He's sitting on the edge of his bed, pulling off his tie and jacket. Jean's helping him with his shoes. He's so tired but he has a question for her, and it's important, “When am I going to wake up?”

“When you're ready.”

He curls up on the bed, knees to his chest, and falls asleep.

To be continued...

Thank you for reading. Feedback, as always, is welcome.

Chapter End Notes

This concludes the first act of the story. What follows will be a lot of angst, a lot of healing, a lot of relapsing, and a lot of Peter trying to piece his world back together without his mother in it. Also, a twist. I really hope that you will join me on that journey.

Fun fact: the siege of Bastogne, in which Frank fought, is depicted in the HBO mini-series Band of Brothers. Both Michael Fassbender (Magneto) and James McAvoy (Professor X) had small roles in the series.
Thank you again for reading.
Return

Chapter Summary

Erik moves on. Peter returns to the life he left behind.

Chapter Notes

Thank you for joining me again this week and for the kudos and glowing feedback. I continue, week after week, to be very grateful for your encouragement. It makes me eager to post. So thank you, thank you, thank you.

That said, try not to hate me too much for this next chapter.

Enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Peter finds out later that everything he thought he dreamt really happened. He attended his mother's funeral with Jean's help, and basically sleepwalked through everything: the service, the burial, and the reception. He wakes up a week later confused and groggy with an IV in the back of his hand and the worst morning breath he's ever had.

Peter spends that whole first day just trying to convince himself that he's awake. He can barely follow a conversation for more than a few seconds before spacing out and forgetting the identity of the person he's talking to. Hank... Frank has to repeat himself two or three times before Peter understands that he has to go back to Charlotte. He wanted to stay and make sure that Peter woke up, but he's been away longer than he planned and the other dentists in the area can only take so much overflow. Peter nods and tells him “thanks” even though he's not a hundred percent sure that he's awake and having this conversation. Frank says he's sorry again and Peter can't look Frank in the eye because he's remembered why Frank's sorry and since Hank was nice enough to hook him up to an IV Peter knows he's got tears to spare. Frank promises to call often. Peter thinks that maybe he won't change the locks after all.

Walking without help is impossible and just the thought of using his speed nauseates him. He doesn't feel like eating or drinking but Hank won't take the IV out unless he does. Half of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and a glass of milk later Hank sighs reluctantly and removes the tape and the needle. He holds pressure on the vein with a square of gauze while he slides the needle out. The gauze darkens quickly anyway and Peter watches the spread of red on white with a detached sort of fascination until Erik's hands get in the way. His dad tapes the gauze in place, smoothing the sides down with his thumbs. Peter looks up at him but Erik won't meet his eyes. His expression is a closed door, and Peter's chest aches with a loss that hasn't happened yet.

Lindy and Hank do their best to fill Peter in on all that's happened in the past week. Peter manages to gather that Jean and Scott left a day or two after the service. There wasn't much for them to do, so they went back to New York, back to coaching soccer and holding surprise dorm inspections and cleaning gum off of desks, back to missions with the X-Men. Peter can't blame them. He wants to do
the same... eventually... once he can stand for more than a few minutes without getting dizzy.

It takes a few days for Peter to feel well enough to stagger upstairs and flop on the couch and let his eyes follow Hank and Erik as they make an effort to cooperate for Peter's and Lindy's sake. It sort of reminds Peter of Mom and Frank before they divorced, and Peter feels Mom's absence like he has a hole in his chest.

Erik keeps busy. He helps Lindy with Mom's will and fields calls from bill collectors in a voice that makes Peter glad that he doesn't work for a collection agency, but makes Peter very sure that he and Lindy will never have to hand over one cent more than they owe. Erik also helps around the house, waters the lawn, does a lot of the cooking, folds laundry with military precision, and he can make a precision hospital corner like nobody's business, but he does it all with a look on his face like his mind is ten thousand miles away.

Before the funeral, before Peter became the crowned champion of sleeping in late on a Saturday, he thought he and his dad had been shuffling toward some kind of understanding, but while sleep froze Peter in time, Erik has moved on. Something's eating him. Maybe it was something he saw on the news or read in the paper. Mutant news sells a lot of advertising space. Peter doesn't want to know how many cameras Kodak was able to move because of a species riot in Atlanta that left three people dead and twenty injured. Maybe Erik got into an argument with Hank or had a heated phone conversation with the professor. Maybe he pissed off the neighbors. Maybe he's bored and anxious, playing housemaid to his wet blanket of a son. He hasn't said anything, but then again he doesn't have to. Peter reads Erik's frustration in the way he snaps the towels when he picks them out of the laundry basket to fold them, in the crispness of his starched collars, and the way he irons the Goddamned bed sheets. Irons them, for Christ's sake. Who does that this side of nineteen-fifty? It's like Erik's looking for a way to fill the time, to make himself feel useful because there's some place that he'd rather be, something important that he thinks he needs to be doing, and here's Peter, standing in his way.

It's almost a relief when Erik sits down across from him one morning, clean-shaven and dressed in a steel-gray suit fresh from the dry-cleaners, smelling like aftershave and shoe polish, and says, "There's something that I need to take care of."

"Yeah?" Peter says. His voice sounds all thick and syrupy and hoarse from disuse. He's on the couch, where he collapsed after breakfast and he's got a blanket wrapped around his shoulders because his body has forgotten how to stay warm. Hank's off at the grocery store, probably pushing a cart down the aisle, shuffling through his coupons, stocking up on all of Lindy's favorite cereals since she's the one who made the list.

"Where are you headed?" Peter asks, not expecting an answer.

"I can't tell you."

Right. Peter looks down. His body might still be heavy and sluggish but his mind is mostly up and running. His eyes flick over to the coat closet by the front door, where he saw Erik stash his suitcase this morning when he thought no one was looking.

"Okay," Peter says. "Thanks for, um... thanks for being here."

"This is not a task that I can delegate," Erik says. His voice is soft and his expression is very still, almost blank, but there's a tense, dangerous undercurrent to his words because there's a tense, dangerous undercurrent to everything the guy does.

"Sure," Peter says. In his mind he's busily untangling his future from Erik's.
Erik frowns a little, like he was expecting an argument. Peter's not going to give it to him.

“We'll see each other again. I promise.” Erik looks at him for a moment longer, not like he's sorry to go, but like he's trying to memorize what Peter looks like, or like he's looking for something in Peter's face, and Peter wonders if he'll stay if he finds it. He reaches for Peter, maybe looking for a farewell hug or something, but Peter doesn't respond so instead he sets on a hand on Peter's upper arm and squeezes in a way that's probably supposed to be reassuring but just feels like an apology.

Peter's arms stay folded across his body, and Peter's body stays on the couch while Erik gathers his belongings and leaves out the front door, closing it with a soft click behind him.

It takes Hank until early afternoon to notice that Erik's not around. By then he's put away all of the groceries, helped Lindy with some of her studying, and made himself a pot of tea. When he frowns over the rim and asks where Erik is Peter tells him that Erik left, that he's gone, packed his bags and vamoosed.

There's a loaded silence that's broken when Hank closes a suddenly furry hand and the mug that he'd been holding implodes, splattering Hank's khakis with lukewarm chamomile. Lindy's in the kitchen and she's never seen Hank transform. She freezes and her eyes widen in alarm but Peter stays put where he is, on the couch, in his blanket. When Hank sees how calm Peter is he roars, “Why aren't you angry with him?”

“Because it's what I expected him to do,” because Peter's dad is, and always has been, Magneto, and he can't be surprised that the man has larger goals than making stilted conversation with his invalid, adult son over mediocre breakfast in a Richmond suburb. And maybe it's a good thing that Magneto decided not to involve Peter in whatever nefarious shit he's about to get up to. That's what Mom was so afraid of after all. Maybe this is just his dad's way keeping his promise to her. Besides, it's not like Peter needs a ride to T-ball practice or help with his Spanish homework. It's not like he needs the guy around at all. Sure, there might still be a part of him that hoped that his dad would have stuck around, but then his brain smacks that part of him around and calls him an idiot because he shouldn't feel sad about losing something that he never had in the first place.

Hank's anger evaporates and his skin turns flesh-colored again. “Sorry,” he says, shaking drops of tea off of his hand. “Sorry,” he repeats, bending over to pick the pieces of the mug off of the carpet. “I hope this wasn't your favorite.”

It wasn't. Peter's not sure he ever had a favorite mug. Even if he did, it wouldn't matter. “It's fine,” Peter tells him. “It'll all have to go anyway.”

Peter goes back to bed after that and sleeps the rest of the day. It takes Lindy crying and hitting him and calling him a selfish dipshit to bring him upstairs to pick at the dinner she made and play a couple of rounds of Parcheesi with her and Hank. Hank picks the blue pieces. Lindy plays yellow and Peter, green. The red pieces stay in the box because one of them has been missing for as far back as Peter can remember. Peter doesn't even have the energy to cheat.

The professor calls every morning for a while after that, just to ask if there's anything Peter wants to talk about.

There isn't. Thanks for calling.

There's no phone in the basement, and Hank and Lindy stubbornly let the phone ring off the hook so that Peter has to come upstairs to answer the professor's call. Peter's pretty sure it's a conspiracy to make sure he's getting out of bed, but he lets them get away with it because once he's up and about he does start to feel a little better.
Except for Lindy, Hank stays the longest, probably because the professor hasn't let go of the notion that Peter needs a bodyguard even though Peter hasn't had any trouble using his powers when he's inclined. Hank says it's to monitor Peter's recovery. “And how's that going?” Peter asks one day. He already sort of knows that it's going to be a while before he's fit for more than running errands and doing odd jobs around the house. He's still lethargic and he has no appetite, but he's dragging himself through every day, moving forward, he thinks. He's not filling out his shirts like he was three weeks ago, but he hasn't stepped on a scale to find out the actual numbers and Hank hasn't insisted.

“You're moving in the right direction,” Hank says noncommittally. He's seemed distracted for a while, since about the time that Erik left, but Hank knows not to bring it up since 'Erik' is the magic word that makes Peter disappear. Nobody can make Peter talk about anything he doesn't want to talk about, and Peter doesn't want to talk about Erik Lehnsherr.

Once Peter's steady on his feet Hank departs for Westchester.

“The professor thinks you need space,” Hank tells him, and the way he says it makes Peter think they may have argued, but Peter takes the professor's side for once and tells Hank that he can look after himself, and if he can't, they still have the numbers for all of the neighbors and it's not like Lindy doesn't know how to use a phone. And it's not like he's safe from the professor's prying either, although he doesn't say that.

So Hank goes, still looking unhappy, with several vials of Peter's blood in an Igloo cooler that Peter let him take from the garage. Hank leaves strict instructions for Peter to get as much sleep as he can and to eat regular meals. Peter nods and Hank makes him promise to check in and to call if he has any problems.

Once Hank is gone Peter feels like he can breathe a little more freely, and it's the change he needs so he and Lindy get down to the serious business of selling Mom's house. This was the course of action they'd decided on months ago. They have Mom's medical bills to pay and Lindy's tuition to consider and it only makes sense, seeing as Lindy is going to be in school for a long time (right, Lindy?) and the only thing keeping Peter here had been Mom.

He and Lindy start by sifting through mom's possessions and setting aside the essential things like birth certificates, photographs, the deed to the house, and the title to Mom's car. Mom left Peter the house but Lindy got the car, and since it's newer and in better condition than the Rabbit, Peter and Frank convince her to stick a “For Sale” sign in the Rabbit's back window. Lindy runs upstairs crying the first time somebody knocks on the door to make an offer.

Peter doesn't think he'll have any use for family heirlooms, so Lindy gets her pick of china and silver and jewelry. She packs it up in cardboard boxes and stacks it by the front door. Frank drives over to pick it up one Saturday. He tells Peter that he looks better and asks if there's anything else he can do but Peter shrugs and says, “You're already doing it,” as he helps Frank load up the car. Lindy keeps a few of Mom's scarves too, the ones that she says smell like Mom. They go in with the stuff she'll take with her back to school. Peter makes her take all of the photo albums.

Peter's always liked to travel light, but he boxes up his mom's favorite records and a few books and mails them to the mansion. After he and Lindy have claimed what they think they'll need they hold an estate sale and manage to sell about half of the furniture. He and Lindy donate the rest. Kurt and Ororo missed the funeral so they come by to help Peter pack everything into cartons for the Rescue Mission and the Salvation Army. Peter's Pac-Man game rides off in the back of a truck, headed for the rec room at the Children's Hospital in Norfolk. As the house empties Peter feels lighter and lighter, and it's more than just his shrinking waistline.

Peter calls the mansion sometimes, when he remembers, mostly to assure himself that he still has
someplace to go once the house is sold. Mom was his anchor. Without her he feels like an airplane that's out over the ocean, no land in sight, and he just has to radio in every now and then to make sure there's still a runway out there somewhere. Lindy kind of feels the same way, but she still has a room at Frank's house, and after Mom's house sells she'll have enough to rent her own place if the dorms at school don't suit her anymore.

The phone rings a lot. Sometimes it's the lawyer that handled Mom's estate, or Mom's friends checking up on him and Lindy, or Frank, or Hank, or the professor, who probably sensed that that Peter's feeling a little insecure about his future and hasn't been shy about reminding Peter that the X-Men want him back, and that the kids miss him. Raven and Ororo and the rest of the X-Men call too, mostly to repeat what Peter already knows from talking to the professor. Once, Raven tries to talk to Peter about Erik but Peter hangs up on her. Nobody from the school mentions Erik again, but Peter can feel him in the background, the subject everyone tries to avoid even though it's difficult to talk about some things without talking about Erik Lehnsherr.

The professor, and then the X-Men, find Peter's newsboy. Peter doesn't get much of the story, only that he's been found, he's safe, and he's resting comfortably at the mansion. All of Peter's attempts to find out more about the situation and the rescue are met with strained silence. “It's not something I want you to be concerned with,” the professor explains.

“Fine,” Peter says irritably. “But is he going to be okay?”

“In time,” the professor says.

“Oh, alright. I get it. Just make sure you tell him I said 'hi' and I hope he gets better and he can borrow my records, okay?”

“I will, and I think he'll be happy to hear it. He's very resilient, Peter, just like you.”

Yeah, okay, resilient. Peter feels like he's made of soggy graham crackers and he's going to crumble if someone breathes the wrong way around him but sure, resilient.

Peter and Lindy put the house on the market. Peter's realtor is a bubbly forty-something named Rebecca, who likes to be called Becky and gets her red hair from a bottle. He doesn't know much about real estate but Becky helps him consider offers and prepare counter-offers until he gets a price that's five grand over asking. Becky thinks that with all of the improvements he made he could hold out for more but it's enough to pay Lindy's way through her bachelor's degree program and take care of graduate school if she wants, so it's good enough, and he accepts. There's even enough left over for Peter to tuck away in a rainy day fund.

Lindy's missed so much school that she'll have to retake her classes over the summer, but at least her professors are letting her withdraw from her courses instead of failing her. She takes off for Rhode Island in Mom's car a few days before close of escrow.

On his last night in Mom's house Peter can't sleep for the first time in weeks. Physically he's feeling better. He's been using his powers every day for longer and longer periods of time, which has been useful because there was a lot of painting and patching and cleaning to do. His belly isn't toned but at least it's flat, and his face has lost the tired, puffy look he'd acquired over the months that Mom was sick. On the whole he looks better on the outside than he feels on the inside.

He gets up and he wanders the house. The rooms are empty now, except for the basement. He pauses in each room and tries to remember something happy from his time spent in this house. He thinks of his mom's room as the place that Lindy used to play dress-up, with the entire contents of Mom's closet spread out on the floor while he flopped across her bed and read a magazine or listened
to music. He thinks of Lindy painting her fingernails in a patch of sunlight in her room, and even though it hurts he thinks of Erik Lehnsherr, his dad, and how both of his parents were here under the same roof, briefly, while both of them were still alive and that's... well... that's not nothing. Then, as if she can still hear him, wherever she is, he says, “Good night, Mom,” to the empty house, and then he goes to bed.

In the morning he packs the last of his things into his duffel bag and locks up the house. Mr. Oberman is out front waxing his precious Camaro, and he meets Peter at the end of his driveway, shakes his hand, and tells him to keep in touch. Peter says he will, and Mr. Oberman asks him if he needs a ride anywhere, then they share a laugh. Peter takes off at speed. He drops his last house key off with Becky on his way out of town.

Peter runs all the way to New York. It's harder than it should be, but he still makes it there in just under two hours. He stops in the city and opens a bank account at Chase Manhattan with the extra ten grand left over from the sale of the house. He'd called the mansion before he left Virginia, so they know he'll be coming today. Still, he takes some time to see the sights in New York, leaves his bag in a locker in Grand Central Station and looks out at the city from the top of the World Trade Center. As the sun starts to set he picks up his duffel and runs the rest of the way to the mansion. Part of him is ready for company but another part of him wants to sneak in while most of the house is asleep and crash out in his old room which, come to think of it, he isn't really sure is his anymore because he hasn't asked. So he splits the difference and makes sure to show up well past the dinner hour, when the younger mutants have gone to bed and the older ones are up late grading papers or studying for exams.

He runs up to the gate, but then walks the rest of the way to the door, gravel crunching under his Nikes. He's not reluctant. He just... doesn't want to surprise the telepaths. They probably have itchy trigger fingers after the whole home invasion thing and he doesn't want to give anyone reason to think he's an intruder.

Peter's about thirty feet from the front door when it swings wide open and, like, twelve mutant rug rats swarm him. It's all he can do to stay upright as they hug him and step on his feet and scream and pull him toward the warm light spilling from the front door. He lets himself be carried along like he's caught in a strong tide, thinking to himself, *When did they get so big?*

“Hey, doesn't anyone enforce bed time anymore?” he asks no one in particular.

A voice from the open door volunteers, “They heard you were coming and got special permission to stay up late.”

Raven is leaning in the doorway in her natural blue form, trying not to smile and failing.

The tornado of children disperses somewhat in the echo-y entrance hall. Some of the kids spiral off and collapse on furniture and others are doing excited laps around the room, but they all scatter like leaves when Raven says, “Okay, kids, you've said 'hi' now go to bed. Now. Move it!”

One or two of the more exuberant children are a little tougher to exorcise from the hall than the rest but once they've all scrambled up the stairs Raven turns to Peter hugs him. When she pulls back she says, “Jesus, Peter, did you forget something in Virginia? Where's the rest of you?”

Peter supposes she has a point. He hasn't regained any real muscle mass. He doesn't like eating and does it more to take the edge off than anything else. He's been getting away with it because he hasn't been doing anything too strenuous. He imagines that'll change now that Raven's gotten a hold of him.
“It's good to see you, Raven.”

“Good to see you too, Peter. Well, it's good to see what's left of you. Come on, I'll make you a sandwich.”

Peter knows he should be honored because Raven Darkholme does not make sandwiches for just anyone and especially not where someone might see.

They pass through the big living room on their way to the kitchen, where five or six kids are usually up late studying or draped over the couches watching TV but it's empty now.

“It's quiet,” Peter says.

“Summer break,” Raven explains. “Believe me, we can use the quiet.”

Raven flicks on the lights in the kitchen. “No surprise party. Sorry. Jubilee really wanted to throw you one but Jean and I talked her out of it. I know you move fast but I still thought it might be too soon.”

“I heard Jube's an X-man now. How's the team coming along?”

“Better and better,” says Raven. “I ran them ragged today so they'd leave you alone.”

“Thanks, Raven.”

“Don't mention it.”

About six seconds after she says that, though, Scott comes striding into the kitchen with his hands in his jeans pockets and pretends to be surprised to see Peter sitting at the island. Peter gamely stands up and shakes Scott's offered hand. At first looks like Scott is going to say something mature and heartfelt but then he remembers who Peter is and he changes his mind before the words get to his mouth. “Looks like you had the baby.”

Peter can take a little ribbing. He sets a hand on his flat belly and says, “Yeah, party's over. Liquor store took the keg back.”

“Don't be a dick, Scott,” Raven says. She's just unscrewed the lid on a jar of mayonnaise and she's motioning at him with the blade of a butter knife that Peter's pretty sure she could use to kill him.

Scott smiles and says, “So, when do you think you'll be ready for the danger room?” and it's like a challenge.

“Depends. When will you be ready?” Peter asks.

Raven shuts them down, “Bed time, Scott. Those morning laps aren't going to run themselves.” When Scott is gone she levels her butter knife at Pete, “Don't encourage that kind of behavior.”

Peter is about to say that he doesn't know what Scott's problem is, but he thinks he kind of does. “Scott's a dweeb.”

Raven spreads her hands wide on the counter top and leans across it to look him in the face. She says, “He isn't. You two rub each other the wrong way. You've been rubbing each other the wrong way since you met. It's macho bullshit and I'm not going to tolerate it, not in the danger room and not out on missions, not if you want to be an X-man. So if you don't think you can do something as simple as get along with Scott Summers you let me know so that I can wrap up your sandwich to
Peter doesn't have to think very hard about his options for several reasons, the most immediate of which is that he's very tired right now, like his trip is catching up to him, and he never would have been this worn out a year ago after running a couple hundred miles but... yeah, he's willing to admit that he might need a place to crash right now, and someone to make him a sandwich and not toss him out on his ear or kill him with a butter knife. “Nah, I'm good.”

“Good,” Raven says. Then she gives him a one-armed hug and ruffles his hair on her way back to the fridge to put away her sandwich fixings and the mayonnaise-y knife comes pretty close to his face. “It might be tough to get used to again, but there's a chain of command. No loose canons on my deck. Got it?”

He has it. It won't be a problem, and if it is it won't be his problem. “Yep.”

Raven might not be much for cooking but she makes a decent turkey and Swiss. Peter's finishing the first half of his sandwich when Hank walks in. Peter gets up for a manly handshake and pat on the back. “Good to have you back,” Hank says, looking him up and down. “Hey, um, could you swing by my lab tonight once you get settled?”

“Sure, Hank,” Peter says.

“No rush. Finish your sandwich,” he says. “I'm going to be up late anyway.”

Hank gets some coffee brewing and Peter stuffs the rest of his sandwich in his mouth, trying not to think about what Hank's got in store for him, but Peter knew coming back here that there would be obligations and expectations and all of that. Raven says that the professor wants to see him first thing in the morning but she doesn't give him a time frame. “Get settled in first,” she says. Peter dreads meeting with the professor more than he dreads a visit to Hank's lab, but both are unavoidable so he shrugs it off. Raven offers to make him another sandwich but he turns her down, thanks her for the offer, and then hauls his stuff upstairs to his old room. Everything is as he left it, which is weird and sort of uncomfortable, like he's just woken up from a bad dream. There isn't even any dust that he can see and the bed is freshly made. He tosses his duffel right onto the middle of it, then decides he's too tired to unpack and sets it on the trunk at the foot of the bed instead.

After living at his mom's house for half a year the room seems small, even though its one of the larger bedrooms that are allocated for teachers, but he's okay with that. Small is good. Small is simple and Peter could use a little simplicity right now. His record player is where he left it, with his headphones on top of the glass case, and everything else can wait. He pulls *Moving Pictures* out of its sleeve and sets it on the turntable.

Peter doesn't remember hearing the opening notes of the first track, but suddenly Hank is shaking him awake.

“Hey,” Hank says. He's holding Peter's headphones. The record is still spinning but the needle is bouncing off the label. Hank flips the machine off.

“Time's it?” Peter mumbles.

“Just after one. You never came downstairs.”

“Oh, yeah,” Peter says. Then his eyes start to drift shut again.

“Hey, no. Can you stand up? Let's stand up.”
Then Peter's on his feet and surprised to see that he's still wearing his shoes and jacket. Peter supposes he could speed downstairs but it'd be rude to leave Hank behind, so he plods along and enters Hank's lab, squinting under the fluorescent lights.

The first thing that Hank does is put him on a scale.

“That can't be right.” Peter says, except the counterweights balance, so either Hank needs his scale calibrated or Peter has dropped forty-five pounds in two months and about thirty of those since Hank last saw him.

Hank makes a *hm* noise, which is the noise that Hank always makes when an experiment isn't turning out how he predicted.

“Is that bad?” Peter asks.

Hank stares quietly at the numbers on the scale for so long that Peter finally backs off and folds his arms in front of himself because a) he's cold and b) he's feeling defensive of his weight for a totally different reason than he did three months ago.

Hank seems to remember where he is. “Sorry, no, I think it's alright. Just don't try to lose any more weight.”

Peter hadn't actually tried to lose what he has lost but Hank looks so disappointed in him that Peter just nods like he misplaced the professor's car keys and he's sorry and he won't let it happen again.

“So, when can I suit up?”

Hank still seems distracted. He's writing on a clipboard, and Peter's too tired to try sneaking a peek. “You'll have to talk that over with the professor. In the mean time I'm going to draw you up a meal plan.”

“Okay.”

“And I need to take some samples.”

“Of course you do.”

Hank makes him roll up his sleeve and suffer through a couple of blood draws, then sends him off to bed. Peter goes, yawning.

The professor may have told Raven that he wanted to see Peter 'first thing in the morning' but 'first thing in the morning' for Peter turns out to be a quarter past one in the afternoon because that's what the clock reads when he drags himself out of bed. He just missed lunch and afternoon classes are in session. The professor is teaching philosophy or literature or something that Peter never took in high school so Peter decides not to interrupt and grabs some lunch leftovers from the kitchen instead and says 'hi' to the cook, Sydney and asks about her kids. Sydney's human herself, but she has a mutant daughter who graduated from the school two years ago. He thinks about crashing Scott's afternoon gym class but it doesn't start until three and that is a long time away so Peter spends a little time reacquainting himself with the mansion, taking in the changes since he was last there. He sees a few faces he doesn't recognize and he wonders if one of them belongs to his newsboy but he doesn't see anybody who matches the description that Raven gave Xavier. In his wanderings he comes across an unoccupied suite in the teachers' wing and somehow he knows, just *knows* that this was Erik's room while he was here, and he debates going in and maybe taking a look around, just to see if his dad left him a note or something, or maybe left behind any valuable personal property that Peter can toss in a lake, but if he does that Xavier will know, and Jean will know, and more importantly Peter will...
know, so he lets it be.

He's taking a few casual laps around the mansion and the outbuildings when he feels the urge to tighten his circles until he's jogging up the front steps of the house and dodging around a bunch of mutant teenagers as they file out of the atrium until he's standing in front of Charles Xavier saying, "Sorry I'm late."

Xavier extends a hand toward him and when Peter takes it, the professor places his other hand on top of Peter's, kind of like what Erik did at the funeral, and Peter feels cold even as the professor smiles warmly and says, "Welcome back. It's good to see you again."

Peter last saw the professor at his mother's burial. Peter knows he must look different to the professor but Xavier doesn't comment like Raven did or look Peter up and down like Scott or Hank. The professor hasn't changed at all: same bald head, same (or similar) immaculate suit that looks like he stole it off of a department store mannequin, same calm, collected façade that helps him hide the fact that sometimes he's as bumbling and clueless as the rest of the world.

The professor waves Peter over to a seat that one of the kids just vacated. It's still warm. "You know, Peter, I believe you are the most perceptive non-telepath I have ever met."

Peter gives him a half-smile.

"How are you feeling?" and the professor's smile warns him not to try bullshitting a telepath.

"Okay, I guess. Antsy. I'm just, you know, ready to get back in the swing of things. I feel like I've been away too long." What he means is that he feels like the world has moved on without him and he's got a lot of catching up to do, which is fine, really, because that's sort of his specialty, so if anybody has to do some catching up it might as well be him, right? Still, it's not a position he usually finds himself in and he's not comfortable with it. At all.

The professor nods knowingly. "Hank mentioned that you were eager to be an X-Man again."

"Yeah. Yes. I would." Why does it feel like he's begging for his old job back? Well, because he is. He likes helping out around the school and teaching the kids (even if it's just how to dribble a soccer ball) but being an X-man? Oh man, he needs that, and he hadn't realized how badly until he had to ask.

"You never stopped being an X-Man, Peter," the professor assures him.

A tiny, tiny part of Peter wants to cry in relief. Not that it would have been the end of the world if he couldn't be an X-Man anymore. He could still rescue kittens from trees and rescue people from car crashes and teach gym and stuff. It's just that there's something about this place that makes him want to be a part of it more than he's wanted to be part of anything, even if it means cleaning bathrooms for Raven or taking orders from Scott.

"We have some work to do, you and I," the professor tells him firmly. "We're all as eager to have you back as you are to be back, Peter, but it won't do to rush things. I want you healthy and rested and back at fighting strength before I will consider sending you out into the field."

Peter nods solemnly. He knows he's not in the best shape and he knew he was going to have to face it if he wanted the professor to take him back on board, but it's weird and kind of humiliating hearing it said out loud.

The professor goes on, "Tonight we'll sit down with Hank and Raven. We'll discuss a diet and exercise regimen."
“Sure,” Peter says, trying to hide the fact that he's having flashbacks of the first time Hank and the professor decided to adjust his diet, but he tells himself it won't be that bad this time around, but thinking about that and Raven's idea of a workout makes him hear his pulse in his ears, which never happened before, so that's strange, and he's dead certain that he's bleeding anxiety all over the place and there's no way the professor isn't picking up on it but Xavier presses on, “And I would like you to make time in your schedule to come and speak to me at least once per week.”

“Why?” Peter asks bluntly.

“To discuss your progress, set goals, or perhaps just to talk…”

Peter feels his face get hot. He's sat in briefings with Xavier before. He knows the guy doesn't bite, and it wasn't like he'd been planning on avoiding him, so why does he feel like Xavier's making appointments to pull Peter's teeth out one at a time.

“Peter,” Xavier begins, like he's breaking the news that he just backed over Peter's dog with the Buick, which is stupid. Peter's never had a dog. “You've had a lot to deal with over a relatively brief period and I'm as concerned about your state of mind as I am about your physical health, and I would be a fool to think the two aren't related. I want to make sure we address all aspects of your recovery. Do you understand?”

Peter had thought he was recovered, or pretty close to it. He's sleeping. He's lost all the weight he gained and then some. He's using his powers regularly. He's out of shape, sure, for him, but he'd thought he was pretty much there.

He frowns down at the floor. It's a beautiful hard wood, lustrous and warm. Xavier has good taste, expensive taste. “Hey, just so you know, I'm not crazy or anything. I mean I guess if I was crazy I wouldn't know but... I don't know. I think I'm handling everything pretty well. I sold a house, opened a bank account, sent Lindy off to college. I'm keeping it together, checking all the boxes, you know?”

“I know you are, but now that you're here, you're among friends, and you have an opportunity, finally, to lay down your responsibilities, rest, and process what you've been through.”

That sounds awful. “Most of the stuff I'd just rather not think about, like it's not going to do any good, right? Why dwell on it?”

The professor regards him quietly for a moment. “Don't think of it as 'dwelling'. I can't undo what's happened, but I can help you find a way to live with it.”

Sure, yeah. It's like Peter lost a leg or something, and now that it's gone it's gone. Poof. Nobody can bring it back but the professor can what? Help him feel not so bad about it? Maybe Peter should feel bad. He's pretty sure that's an appropriate response when you lose a leg, like, Oh shit, that's not going to grow back. But then Peter sort of, like, lost the other one too, or drove it away or whatever, but then it's people and not limbs he's talking about, and they kind of made him, those two, and they're both gone now and what does Peter have left?

“I don't want to talk about Magneto.” Peter says, just to get it out there.

There's a silent beat before Xavier says, “I won't make you... not unless you want to,” like that was totally what he had in mind.

“Deal,” Peter agrees.

“It will take time. There's no rush.”
But for Peter there is because everything he does is rushed, and he can't wait for the world to be ready for him, like, literally, he can't wait, because the world will never be ready. He's always going to be miles ahead.

The professor has one more class before dinner (and so does pretty much everybody else) so Peter kills a little time by sorting his record collection and listening to *Aqualung* and just generally trying to unwind and squash the nervousness that's building up inside of him.

This is Peter's first full day back at the mansion and dinner is his first sit-down meal with the staff and students all together. The dining hall is just off the kitchen and across from the living room. It comfortably seats about fifty adults and attendance has swelled a little since Peter was last here so the kitchen prep area has been remodeled into a second dining room to handle the overflow. Xavier's never had a problem with the staff and the older students taking their plates to their rooms if they have studying or work to do. Xavier himself usually sits through dinner with the kids because somebody always has questions or needs his attention and he can sneak in a little tutoring. On the opposite end of the spectrum is Hank, who almost always eats in his lab because that's just the kind of dude he is. There was even a rumor that Hank's blue furry form was the result of him accidentally drinking one of his experiments because he thought it was a Diet Coke and even though it isn't true it still persists to this day to the best of Peter's knowledge and Peter thinks Scott and Jean have been keeping it alive to discourage the younger kids from taking food to their rooms. Even Peter was taken in by the story when he first moved in, but then Hank set the record straight and explained that it was something that he'd done to himself and Peter had been like, “Wow, you really fucked up, man,” and that's how he discovered that a) mild-mannered Hank secretly has a temper like a volcano and b) the whole blue furry thing is still a sore subject for him.

So anyway, mealtimes at Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters are usually casual, except for special occasions like graduations and holidays when Xavier likes to bust out the good China and the cloth napkins and the silver candelabras and make everybody uncomfortably aware that they're in living in a giant mansion. Day-to-day breakfast, lunch, and dinner are served cafeteria-style with the food laid out in chafing dishes and tureens and on big, gaudy platters in the kitchen so that the kids can come and go and help themselves and come back for seconds if they're starving, which they usually are because they're teenagers and they eat like a plague of locusts and so does Peter, usually, or he used to. He's not sure what he eats like now. He feels like he should be hungrier than he is but maybe after a few bites his appetite will wake up.

Peter joins the locusts for dinner. He shows up a little late because he maybe shut his eyes for a second and woke up an hour later but his body is telling him that he needed it anyway, so whatever. Peter drops out of speed at the door and takes in the room. The professor is sitting near the middle of the table talking to Bobby and a red-headed kid who's about the same age. Peter sees Jubilee and Ororo seated together. Scott and Kurt have their plates and they're headed toward the table as well. It's not quite Fall yet, so the school is half-empty and so is the dining room, but it's still more crowded and noisy than Peter's used to and it crosses his mind to avoid the room and just grab something later, but if he's going to live here he's going to have to learn how to socialize again, even if that means answering some uncomfortable questions and making small talk. It would be nice to catch up with everyone he hasn't seen in months, like Jubilee and Bobby and Tilda and Kid Peter. Maybe he can even find out where his newsboy has been hiding.

Okay, cool, he decides. He can do this. So Peter goes into the dining room thinking he'll be fine if he can keep the conversation away from himself and what he's been up to, so he's not prepared at all to suddenly be the center of attention. The first person to look up at him is, of course, the professor, and he gives Peter a very reassuring smile but while he's doing that Jubilee is squealing, “Peter!” and scooting her chair back so that she can hustle around the table for a hug. That gets the attention of everyone in the room and then he's surrounded on all sides by ecstatic kids and teenagers all talking
over the top of each other and trying to hug him or pat him on the back like he just won the World Cup and Peter's so used to conversations that start with “Sorry for your loss” and end with long, uncomfortable, contemplative silence or stories about this or that relative that died of whatever that he doesn't know what to make of all the excitement until the professor rescues him with, “That will do for now. Let him through. There will be plenty of time to catch up,” He may or may not have backed up his words with a telepathic command because the crowd disperses pretty quickly and efficiently and with a minimum of grousing. Jubilee has already grabbed him a plate and she tugs him by the elbow to sit near her and Ororo. Jean vacates her chair for him and moves down to the end near Scott, which is just fine since Peter doesn't know if he's ever going to be able to look Jean in the eye again. She knows too much.

Jubilee and Ororo both proceed to talk his ear off while he eats. He gets to hear all about the new students and who's left for college and who's dating who and which kids have been getting into trouble and for what. When he can get a word in edgewise he asks how Jube's training is going. Bobby and Kid Peter are sitting across from them and that gets their attention. They listen in rapt silence when she talks about the danger room, then she whispers that she's not supposed to talk about missions in front of the kids and they're like, “Aww, c'mon,” and Peter says, “You can tell me later,” but he doesn't miss the weird little pause before she changes the subject with, “Hey, do you want seconds?” and Peter doesn't. His appetite still just isn't what it used to be. Hank is also at dinner, seated on the other side of the table at the far end or the room, eating with his left hand and making notes on a pad of graphing paper with his right, frowning in Peter's general direction whenever he looks up like Peter's responsible for the equation that he can't solve and Peter's got this uncomfortable feeling like he's doing something wrong, so for the rest of the meal he's careful to look friendly and talk to his neighbors and smile at everybody, even Scott.

Eventually the hall starts to empty as the kids finish their meals and head off to study or spend some time outside but the professor asks Peter to stay behind and he notices that Scott stays too. Suddenly Peter understands why Hank was there. Raven has apparently been here the entire time too except Peter hadn't seen her and when he says so she smiles, “I like to blend in when I can. It keeps the kids on their toes, and I learn a lot.”

Peter he wonders if that's, like, ethical, but he guesses it's not like the kids don't know they live with a shapeshifter and is it any different from Jean or Xavier reading minds or Peter sneaking up on people doing things they'd probably rather nobody see? And like he's got room to talk about ethics with all of the absolutely illegal and definitely unethical shit that he used to get up to.

Pretty soon the professor, Raven, Hank, Scott, and Peter are the only ones left in the room, so they crowd toward one end of the long table. Sydney brings out coffee and tea. The professor gladly helps himself. Peter pours himself a cup of coffee because a) he's still a little wiped out, even if he did sleep for most of the day and b) he wants to keep his hands busy while he listens to the rest of the group lay out his schedule for the next month or so, except that there isn't going to be a schedule because Hank brought the results of Peter's blood tests and he holds them up to illustrate his point. “If your body weren't so efficient, Peter, you would be asleep under the table right now.” Peter's not going to lie, that doesn't sound half bad, but he'd really like to get this show on the road. So would Xavier, apparently, because he argues that some light, regular exercise will at least help improve Peter's appetite. They can work up to wind sprints and weight-lifting. Hank reluctantly agrees but he wants to keep close tabs on Peters vitals like he's some kind of lab rat. The professor agrees to blood-pressure checks and weigh-ins on a daily basis but only wants to allow blood draws as needed.

“Take it slow,” Hank advises Peter.

Peter raises an eyebrow.
“I know, but bear with me. I just want to make sure we catch any problems as they come up.”

“Like what kind of problems?” Peter asks.

“I want to make sure you're getting enough rest and the appropriate number of calories for your activity level. How's your appetite?”

Peter shrugs, “It's okay, but it's not what it used to be. I think my metabolism is picking back up, though.”

“That's what concerns me. Just don't overdo it, even if you're feeling good. Deal?”

“Deal,” Peter agrees.

“Stick close to the mansion. If you don't feel right, stop. Twenty minutes of cardio per day for the first week. No more.”

Peter thinks Hank might be playing things a little too safe. He did run here from Virginia yesterday, and he reminds Hank about that but Hank is sticking to his guns. Peter's going to have to earn his stripes and yeah, yeah, Peter knows that sometimes moving ahead isn't about running the farthest or the fastest it's just about cooperating and following orders and he knows that's where he's fallen short in the past. No loose canons, Raven said. Well, okay then. Hank will get his twenty minutes.

Hank also wants Peter consuming at least ten thousand calories per day and he talks about the kinds of foods Peter should be eating and it all sounds like the kind of stuff they talked about when Hank and the professor first tried to clean up Peter's diet months and months ago, so Peter just nods absently.

“It's very important that you don't try to restrict your caloric intake,” says Hank, and Peter says, “Okay, sure,” but Hank still frowns at him like Peter's not getting it and Peter's not sure what there is to get.

There's absolutely zero discussion about X-Men stuff. Nada. Nobody even says the word “danger” let alone in conjunction with “room”. If Peter didn't know any better he think he really was just living at a very weird, very exclusive, very eccentric boarding school that just happens to place a ton of emphasis on nutrition and physical fitness.

So now that Peter's PT and nutrition plan is sorted out that just leaves the question of what Peter's going to be doing with all of his extra time. Lucky for him there is always, always, always something that needs to be done at the mansion, and even five Peters would have a pretty tough time keeping this place functioning on a normal day.

The professor wants Peter sitting in on Scott's (Peter's) gym classes until he's fit to take over, and Scott gives him permission (thanks) to step in and help out where he can and he even gives him a little condescending, unnecessary briefing on each of the classes, like Peter's forgotten how to tell a basketball from a soccer ball and Peter nods gamely and sips his coffee and ignores half of what Scott says.

Xavier also asks if he wouldn't mind picking up some slack around the mansion. The professor has always insisted that the students clean up after themselves because it builds character and it's good for their development and so on only they're kids, so they suck at cleaning and they don't want to do it but at the same time nobody wants rats or ants or a rotavirus so it's up to the teaching staff to make sure the school doesn't violate any health codes. Jean and Scott oversee the girls and boys wings respectively. They're in charge of inspecting the dorms and making sure nobody is keeping a rotting
pizza in their closet or anything. They also ensure that all of the dirty laundry makes it to the laundry room and after that it's Ororo's responsibility. The kids are supposed to wash their own clothes but there always seems to be a pile of something that only made it as far as the laundry room floor and no farther. Ororo is the laundry fairy and she handles the mystery piles and ensures that everything gets washed and dried and folded and she loves her job, something to do with the static. Ororo is also in charge of ordering cleaning supplies for the mansion, which are mostly used by Kurt and Jubilee, who are in charge of bathrooms. Peter thought Raven would have him on bathroom duty but apparently she decided not to carry that threat out or maybe the professor nixed the idea. Peter's not sure. The professor and Hank and Raven oversee the common areas, which are the easiest to keep clean despite how much traffic they see, or maybe because of how much traffic they see because messes are pretty obvious in those areas and the older kids are honestly pretty responsible (when they have someone leaning over their shoulder asking if they're going to just leave those shoes there).

Before Peter left, before Mom got sick, Peter used to handle the vacuuming and dusting that the kids missed (and they missed a lot) plus some basic gardening, nothing fancy, but his indoor duties have since been rolled into the general upkeep stuff that the geriatric mutants handle and then the professor hired a gardener after he left, so it's nice to be missed, he supposes. But anyway, his job for now is to help out whoever needs it and show the new kids the ropes and keep things spic and span and change light bulbs and grease door hinges and make minor repairs as necessary, so he's the de-facto handyman and that was kind of what he did when he wasn't playing nurse to Mom and he's had enough practice that he's totally capable or rewiring the whole house if need be and replacing the plumbing and, heck, remodeling the kitchen if Xavier decides he needs new cabinets. The dining room could use a little attention, he notices, now that he's stuck here with very few distractions. The wallpaper needs replacing and he notices, now that he's stuck here with very few distractions. The wallpaper needs replacing and he could add a chair rail...

One second he's leaning casually back in his chair, thinking about crown molding and chair rails and the next there's a familiar prickling sensation behind Peter's eyes and that's it, he's gone, zap, out of his chair, out of the house and a mile or so into the woods, collapsing on his knees in a bed of summer-dry pine needles, and breathing around his tears like an asthmatic donkey. And, sure, he could be back in the mansion in point zero-five seconds or whatever but he'd still be crying and his eyes would still be red and you know what? These pine needles are pretty soft even if they are sort of poking him in the knees through his jeans so he's just going to stay a while, he thinks. It takes a few seconds, but sure enough Peter feels the professor inside his head asking worriedly if he's alright and yeah, he's great. No big deal. He's even stopped crying. Now he's just tired, and sorry, and embarrassed. Then Peter has a feeling inside his head like Xavier has retreated a little bit out of respect for his privacy, kind of like he's standing politely outside of a bathroom stall, pretending not to know that Peter is on the other side of the door, sobbing pathetically.

It's alright, Peter. I think it's time we let you get some rest. You seemed tired at dinner. Can you walk back?

He can, and he's happy not to run just now. The walk will give him time to think or not to think. He wonders what the professor told Hank and Scott and Raven and decides he doesn't want to know and it doesn't matter anyway.

I'm sending Scott out to meet you.

Ugh.

Give him a chance.

So Peter shoves his hands as far down into his pockets as they'll go and hunches his shoulders against the mild evening breeze, cold even with a jacket. About a quarter-mile into his walk Scott
comes jogging up to meet him. Scott's always been a little tough for Peter to read because of his glasses. Peter gets that much less expression out of him, but still enough to know he hadn't been looking forward to finding Peter all that much.

“Hey,” Scott says. “The professor wanted me to ask... was there something specific that upset you? Because if there was and you want to talk about it...”

Chair rails. But Scott's not going to get it. “Nope, I'm good.” Peter's on the cusp of apologizing but doesn't because he didn't run out here to get away from Scott and he didn't ask Scott to come after him, so Peter keeps walking and tries to pretend that Scott isn't there as the kid falls into step beside him. Awkward silence with Scott is just as bad as awkward conversation with Scott. He's not even sure why the professor sent him anyway. It's not like Peter's going to get lost in the dark and starve to death a stone's throw from the mansion. Also, if he decides to take off for the Pacific Ocean there isn't anything Scott can do about it.

“Hey, why did the professor send you, anyway?” Peter blurts out.

“He thinks I need to be comfortable being uncomfortable.”

Okay, Peter can see that. He and Scott don't really get along and Peter just had a minor freak-out over, apparently, nothing, except it's not nothing it's just that it's all in his head, which nobody can see except Xavier and probably Jean, who wasn't there and is probably off somewhere tutoring one of the kids. Suddenly Peter wonders if he gives the psychics headaches. Maybe. He'll ask. Maybe Hank will do some kind of experiment on him, shave Peter's head and strap electrodes to his scalp to track his brainwaves. He bets Hank has already proposed something like that to Xavier. He wouldn't be surprised. Peter's thoughts might move too fast for the professor to read, Scott's are nice and slow and the professor can watch Peter through his eyes. He wonders if it's all in red because of the ruby quartz, not that he thinks the professor is really doing that but with Scott out here he has the option. So the professor sent Scott out because he thinks Peter could use a friend or at least someone to keep tabs on him and he knows that Scott doesn't want to do it, so now it's a character-building exercise and the professor can have the satisfaction of watching both of them squirm.

“Have you had sex with Jean yet?” Peter asks.

“That's a 'no', and not because Scott wants it that way. The professor has a 'no sex in the dorms' rule and Peter'd been curious as a cat on that subject when he first moved in, just on a purely hypothetical level because people have sex and mutants are people and there are a number of mutants living at the mansion who are well over the age of consent and the professor is a person and doesn't Moira visit sometimes? And just because the professor is in a wheelchair doesn't mean he can't, like, do anything. Plus there's Hank and Raven and come on, come on. What if two teachers- ? and that's the closest he'd ever come to making the professor lose his cool (at least in this decade) and he'd found out that, yes, there are exceptions to the rule but the professor has to be a prude now because of all the kids, even though Raven says he used to be a total dog back in the day but anyway, he more or less explained that there were two types of doors in the house, those with locks and those without locks (which Peter already knew because he took the grand tour of the old place and he helped rebuild the new) and as long as the things that take place behind locked doors involve consenting adults and don't disrupt the lives of those around them then no questions need be asked. Peter's door has a lock, by the way. He just hasn't had any use for it and doesn't anticipate having any use for it anytime soon unless it's to keep the kids from getting into his record collection without permission and even then maybe not because either they were totally respectful of all of his Pink Floyd and Rush albums while he was gone and didn't leave a scratch or maybe they just don't appreciate good
“So you're a virgin?” Peter asks.

“Wha-? No! I- ”

Huh, maybe Scott's not eighteen yet. No, he totally is, and Jean's older than him. She's taking college courses. That’s it. Jean's a virgin, and she's a telepath. Wow, that's got to be intimidating. Also she's an X-Man and Scott is technically their team captain and can't show favoritism so maybe that's got something to do with it.

“Hey, the professor wants you to be uncomfortable. I'm just doing my part,” Peter says.

“You can stop.”

“Okay. How are the X-Men? Have you guys busted up the kidnapping ring yet?”

“It's a work in progress,” is all Scott says, like he's been rehearsing.

“How often are you guys out in the field? Are you seeing much action? Storm had a bruise on her cheek. Was that from training or did you guys have to get rough?”

Scott stumbles. “We're not supposed to- ”

“Talk about it. With me. Yeah, I know.” Peter feels his face getting hot. He's glad it's too dark out for Scott to see.

“The professor wants you focused on other things for now.”

“Sure. I get it.”

“Do you? I feel like you're just saying that.”

“No, I get it,” and he does, really. The professor's reasoning is sound, and Peter did just take off into the woods for no good reason. If he does that during a mission or even during a training session things could really end badly, so yeah, of course he gets it. “Well, good talk, Cyclops.” They're still about half a mile out from the mansion but Peter's done with Scott for now. “See you at six.”

Scott's just opening his mouth to protest and Peter's out of there. He races to the mansion and up the stairs, into his room and shuts the door and thinks about locking it but doesn't.

To be continued...

Thank you for reading. Feedback is welcome.

Chapter End Notes

"What? Where did Erik go? Wtf, Glass?"

Sorry. I decided a long time ago, from the very beginning of the story, where this was all going to end up, so I hope you'll give me a chance to prove myself.

Thank you again for reading.
Heal

Chapter Summary

Peter fights to regain his health while living in the shadow of the X-Men.

Chapter Notes

Thank you for joining me again and another big thanks to those of you who have left feedback and kudos. All of my love. Thank you, thank you.

In this chapter Peter confronts the physical and mental fallout from the time he spent caring for his mother. In other words, he's a mess, and the X-Men have to put up with him. There is a lot to unpack in this chapter. Fake mutant health science abounds.

Enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Part 12

Peter sets his alarm for six and then doesn't remember falling asleep but he must have because the next thing he knows the buzzer is sounding and it's light outside and he's on his back, plastered to his bed, still dressed, with his shoes on and he sees now that he must have stepped in some sap because he tracked pine needles all over the rug. He cleans those up and goes through his dresser until he finds his set of standard-issue heather-gray X-sweats, so-called because the professor had tiny, unassuming X's embroidered onto every set and who puts embroidery on sweats? Professor Charles Xavier, that's who.

Peter finds Scott out at the track in his own set of X-sweats and the ruby quartz goggles he uses for sleep and exercise. He's not the only one out there. Raven is already running and probably has been since five-thirty judging by the sweat stains around her collar, and a few of the older teens and adults are starting to filter out onto the field as well, stretching and warming up. Hank's out there too, but he's dressed for the lab, not the track. He's even got his white lab coat on, although that might just be because it's chilly and he forgot to take it off. He gets distracted and does stuff like that sometimes. He looks a little distracted now.

“What's up, Hank?” Peter asks as he comes up at Hank's elbow. Hank and Scott have both been around him enough by now not to jump when he shows up out of nowhere.

“Hey, Peter, morning.”

Hank says he's just there to watch and see how Peter does his first day of training. He even brought his blood pressure cuff and a bathroom scale so that he could get his measurements without dragging Peter to the lab and that's thoughtful, but Peter still gets the same “hmm” from Hank when he steps on the scale and the needle stops at one-forty-eight.
“Should we still do this?” Scott asks Hank as if Peter isn't standing right there.

“It's fine. If I don't wake up to eat at night I'm usually lighter in the mornings, plus I slept through breakfast yesterday and maybe your scale isn't working right.”

Scott steps on the scale and the dial reads a precise one-sixty and Scott's a few inches shorter than Peter.

“Okay, but I feel fine,” Peter says, which is kind of a lie because he's pretty tired, but not quite hungry yet, which is interesting, and he's secretly glad that they're starting with small chunks of exercise so he's less likely to humiliate himself.

The only reason he wins the argument is because Hank's scientific curiosity knows no bounds. Well, it does, that's just an expression. He's not Doctor Mengele. Hank has ethics, but he's also willing to push things a little, especially with a subject like Peter who a) knows the risks and b) needs to be shown his limits now and again. Peter has very few limits and even fewer people who know them.

Hank agrees to let Peter have the whole twenty minutes as long as he stops and checks in with Hank every five. It's tedious, and if Peter wanted to take the whole twenty minutes or more or run to the Canadian Rockies there's nothing anyone could do to stop him but that kind of behavior won't earn him his uniform back. So Peter starts running, lapping Scott roughly a hundred times before the kid has taken ten steps. Then he gets bored, climbs a tree, starts making bigger and bigger loops until he's circling the mansion because no one said he had to stay on the track, just near the house and around the house is near the house so he's not breaking any rules. Peter's been keeping tabs on Hank's stopwatch and when it rolls over to five minutes he's looking at it over Hank's shoulder. Scott's pretty fast for a regular person. He's almost finished with his first mile and he's on the opposite side of the track.

Peter's been keeping tabs on Hank's stopwatch and when it rolls over to five minutes he's looking at it over Hank's shoulder. Scott's pretty fast for a regular person. He's almost finished with his first mile and he's on the opposite side of the track.

Peter opens his mouth and says, “I think- but he doesn't know what he thinks because suddenly he's not feeling so great and the green grass and overcast sky are covered with little floating black specks and there's a roaring sound in his ears. Then it's lights out.

Peter wakes up on the grass. He's surrounded by Hank and Raven and a group of X-sweat-wearing mutant teens. He doesn't see Scott at first because Scott's near his feet, holding Peter's legs above his heart.

Aaaaand so much for not humiliating himself.

“Hey,” Raven says in a small, relieved voice.

“Don't move,” Hank tells him.

Peter hadn't really been considering it until Hank said something and now that he's considered it he's pretty sure that he couldn't even if he wanted to.

Peter isn't sure just how long he's been out but it was long enough for somebody to fetch Hank an emergency medical kit, the big red one in the hard-sided case that Xavier keeps in the coat closet just off the foyer in case one of the kids skins a knee or the gardener lops a hand off with his hedge trimmer or something. There's a blood pressure cuff around Peter's upper arm and Peter knows that because Hank's squeezing a little black bulb thing until it nearly cuts off the circulation in that limb.

“Still low but it's coming back up,” he says. “You've been out for a few minutes. Do you know where you are?”

“On a sprinkler head.” It's digging into his side.
Well, that about does it for training for the day. Hank makes him lie still until he's feeling well enough to be adequately mortified but at least he lets Peter sit up instead of calling for a stretcher, so Peter gets to keep his last shred of dignity, that is, until Hank hauls him to his feet to the sound of applause. He turns and looks back at the mansion and sees that just about everyone is outside, pressed up against the terrace railing but held in check by the professor, who is out there himself, front and center. Peter gives them a wave and a close-mouthed smile and the professor starts herding them back into the house.

“Let's get some food in you,” Hank says as Raven breaks off to help the professor.

Breakfast isn't served until seven but the cook has dropped what she was doing to whip up a few slices of toast and three eggs over easy and serve it with a big glass of orange juice on the side. Hank and Scott help Peter get settled and then Hank shuts the dining room doors against curious eyes but Peter's not sure who he thinks he's fooling. Probably the whole school knows what just happened except maybe Kurt, who's usually going to bed about now and Peter suddenly wants to run away and hide out somewhere, and that somewhere used to be his mom's basement but that basement belongs to someone else now and they've probably stacked it ceiling to floor with moving boxes, things they won't unpack for years and will only find once they move again or maybe it belongs to some other lady's underachieving son who just refuses to finish school and move out and get a real job and stop listening to all that loud music and Peter is sort of regretting his choice to come back to the school, not, like, deeply regretting it, but maybe he could have taken some time on his own to put himself back together so that he didn't have to show up here and immediately fall the fuck apart, and if he had the strength to do it he thinks that he would be twenty miles down the road right now, on his way to, like, rent a cabin in the woods and chop firewood and grow a beard and wear plaid or something but he doesn't. He has enough strength to (maybe) finish the eggs and toast in front of him, so he starts there.

Peter hears the whirring noise of the professor's electric wheelchair a few seconds before Xavier eases the dining room doors open and glides in. Peter can't look him in the eye. He expects some kind of pep talk but the professor only asks him how he's feeling and Peter only shrugs and wants to hide under the table for want of a basement.

Hank is biting his lip. Sydney comes out and puts a cup of coffee in front of him. Peter hopes for Hank's sake that it's decaf.

Like a dam bursting Hank says, “I shouldn't have let him run,” like he could have stopped Peter.

But it's not Hank's fault and Peter tells him so. “You couldn't have known. I felt fine until I stopped moving.” Well, he was kind of tired, but he's always tired, so he doesn't even think about it anymore. He's tired now, more tired than hungry actually. He sets his fork down and Hank frowns at him but Peter doesn't care. He pushes his plate away and puts his head down on the table. He's not the first person to fall asleep at breakfast and it's definitely not his first time doing it but it is the first time that he gets the reaction he does, which is Hank's chair scraping back and Hank calling, “Peter? Peter!” and hauling him upright by the shoulders and “What?” Peter asks, all cranky for having his nap interrupted.

Hank says, very seriously, “You'll get to sleep but you need to finish eating first.”

Peter doesn't ask why. That involves making words in his brain and slowing them down with his mouth so that regular old mutants can understand and then waiting an eternity for an answer and all of that sounds exhausting and it's going to cut into the time he wants to be sleeping so it's just easier to do as Hank says as quickly as he can, and he doesn't remember much after that because he's already dozing as Hank and Scott sling his arms over their shoulders and half-carry him out of the
dining room. He expects to end up in Hank's lab but instead they drag him upstairs to his bedroom. Scott starts unlacing his silver Nikes and Peter thinks about bending over to do it himself but that's as far as he gets. He has no idea what happens after that.

Peter sleeps twelve hours straight and only wakes up because Xavier is there and he does something with his brain that makes Peter wake up and (reluctantly) consume some kind of protein shake that Peter is pretty sure is mostly raw eggs. He tries to have a conversation with Peter, explains that Peter's fainting spell was likely a byproduct of severe vitamin deficiencies and an electrolyte imbalance and Peter's like, “Sounds good,” and nods off again.

After that it becomes clear that the only part of the professor's plans for Peter's recovery that Peter's body agrees with is that he needs a lot of rest, and Peter's confused about that because, “I was fine before I got here, I swear.”

“But you weren't,” the professor tells him. Then there's a speech about Peter's subconscious and how the human (mutant) body prioritizes task completion over everything else and now that Peter's run out of tasks his body is demanding rest and attention and Peter doesn't get all of that in one sitting because his body demands rest at inconvenient times, like when he's having it explained to him.

By the end of his first week back Peter's weight has dropped into the one-thirties and he's sleeping twenty-three hours a day. His face, when he sees it in the bathroom mirror, is all sunken cheeks and hollow eyes and Hank, who wasn't worried when Peter slipped into a coma before the funeral and then slept for a solid week after, is actually worried now because there's so little left of him. Peter, meanwhile, is too lethargic to be worried about anything except when he can get back to bed. The only reasons that he gets up at all is that a) Hank is a scary blue cat-monster who threatens to rip Peter's arms off if he doesn't get his lazy ass out of bed and go downstairs for breakfast and b) the professor will come do his psychic finger-wave and make Peter get up if he doesn't move on his own.

Peter knows, in a really disconnected way, that it's for his own good, so up he gets and downstairs he goes, stumbling along, strung between Hank and Raven or Raven and Scott like a clothesline to slump at the dining room table and try to choke down whatever they can get him to eat before he falls asleep again. He thinks that the noise of the dining hall and the energy of the kids helps keep him awake so he gets more calories than he would if he were eating alone in his room, so the approach works pretty well except for one time when Peter has, like, low blood pressure or the milk is expired or someone is wearing strong perfume at the breakfast table or something and he gets nauseated and has to speed to the nearest bathroom so he can vomit up a couple of plates worth of french toast and scrambled eggs. Then, like, ten little mutant kids all immediately gather around because somebody's puking, yay! They're like, "Whoa, coooooool", because they've never seen anyone throw up that much but the worst part is that after he's done Raven hands him a damp towel and a clean shirt and a toothbrush and makes him eat some dry toast and a few bananas and he hates her for about a day afterward but she doesn't seem to mind.

Peter's weight bottoms out at one hundred and twenty-nine pounds. Hank's been giving Peter daily vitamin injections and Peter's overheard Hank and the professor debating whether or not to put Peter on an IV and feeding tube and it's probably a bad sign that Peter doesn't have any strong feelings one way or another about having a plastic tube jammed up his nose and down his throat. Things never get that far though because out of the blue Peter wakes up shaking with adrenaline and hunger. He's the first one downstairs for breakfast and he wants to eat everything in sight and that's only a slight exaggeration. He devours about sixty pancakes and a few dozen eggs and when his appetite outpaces the speed at which Sydney can keep the chafing dishes filled he supplements his breakfast with something off of a neighboring plate and he can't help it but everybody is pretty cool about Peter's kleptomania except for Scott, who tells the kids at the breakfast table to count their fingers
When they leave. Thanks, Scott.

After about a day Peter's appetite dies down a little but it's still enormous. Hank and the professor seem cautiously relieved and Peter's happy too because suddenly he's able to stay awake for most of the day and use his powers without fainting and get some chores done and help out with Scott's classes before falling asleep on the grass and getting a hideous sunburn on one side of his face. It's not perfect, but it's something. His energy is a little erratic but at least he's not, like, a total burden anymore. So he's getting better, right? He can go back to training, yes? And Hank gives the professor the side-eye, like, Do you want to do the honors or are you going to leave it up to me? and Xavier sighs and reminds him, “Time, Peter. Your body is attempting to correct and imbalance that has been months in the making. It may take months or as much as a year to fix.”

“Okay, but is there any way to speed this up?” Peter asks. He's pacing the professor's office like a caged animal and he knows he's acting weird. He's jittery and lethargic by turns, like a teenager who isn't used to coffee, and he's moody to boot. He wants to shout and throw things and take a nap all at once and he feels like he's watching from inside his head as a total stranger takes over his life and he's like, 'man, that guy is an asshole,' but that's him. It's been a week since his appetite returned. He's put on twelve pounds, which is great because he doesn't look so much like a corpse anymore, but also not great because he can't keep going like this. He just lost all of his extra baggage. He doesn't want it back.

Hank tries to let him down gently, “My best guess is that your body is still in survival mode. It hasn't figured out that the threat isn't coming back, so it's storing energy again, and it's likely going to take a while before your hormone levels normalize.” Peter's still looking at him, all hopeful and nervous like Hank's holding out on him and he's got some good news stored up and Peter doesn't actually have to go through what he thinks he's going to have to go through, but Hank says, “I think we're just going to have to ride this out.”

We? Who the fuck is we?

We is every living person and animal at the school, apparently, because at this point they all know there's something wrong with Peter. And they get it. He's not the first mutant to have his powers go haywire and in the grand scheme of things it's not even that bad. He hasn't caused any major property damage or given anybody migraines or frostbite, but he's so grouchy and his temper is so unpredictable that most of the kids and the X-Men avoid him out of sheer self-preservation. The professor approaches their conversations like he's a lion tamer and Peter is the horrifying alien monster who ate the lion and took its place. Peter feels bad for the professor but worse for Hank, who has to deal with Peter no matter what because he handles all of the school's medical needs, the poor, unfortunate bastard. Hank's has been nothing but cool but Peter can't seem to express his gratitude in any meaningful way except to resist the urge trash Hank's lab out of petty spite when Hank can't find a vein and has to stick him twice in order to draw blood.

Hurricane Peter rages on for two and a half more weeks and his weight shoots up past one-sixty which means he's not underweight anymore. If anything he's headed in the other direction now. Hank has shifted him to a strict but generous meal schedule but Peter is hungry all. The. Time. Even though Peter's weight is up Hank still says that he has persistent vitamin deficiencies. Xavier and Hank spend a lot of time trying to work with him on his diet and they're convinced that peaks and valleys in his blood sugar are at least partially responsible for his mood swings so Hank makes some alterations to his meal plan, adding a lot of lean protein and leafy greens and removing anything that resembles a starch. Peter can't tell if it's helping his attitude but he can tell that his body hates it. He can feel his muscles eating themselves. The professor tries to reassure him that this is all in his best interest and that they need time to figure out what works and what doesn't and in the meantime Peter isn't going to starve and some part of Peter's brain believes him but the rest of him isn't convinced so
Peter starts making late night forays to the nearest twenty-four-hour convenience store a couple of times during the night and buying chips and soda and M&Ms and a bunch of crap that is definitely not on Hank's meal plan. He eats some of it on the way back to the mansion and stashes the rest, although it's a supreme test of will not to just eat everything then and there. After that he curls around his growling stomach, that big empty hole in the middle of him that he just can't seem to fill, and watches the minutes tick by on the clock, hoping that if he stays still long enough he can hold out until breakfast but usually he can't.

He gets caught because of course he gets caught. He lives with telepaths and everyone in the mansion sleeps like shit because there's always somebody floating out a window or having a nightmare that makes the house shake and the wallpaper bubble, so he's not too surprised when he returns from one of his late-night/early morning forays to find the professor in the doorway to his room, sitting there in his wheelchair, looking wide-awake despite the silk robe and the striped pajamas and the slippers and why does the professor wear slippers? It's not like he can tell the floor is cold and wow, Peter is such a dick sometimes but anyway, Xavier doesn't look like his placid, understanding self at this wee hour. He looks tired and pale and just generally done taking Peter's shit and he says, “We have a problem, Peter. Do you agree?” Yes. Peter agrees. His hands are empty but that's only because he already hid all of the crap he bought. It's in the gardening shed but he'll bet dollars to doughnuts that it's not going to be there the next time he looks. He knows he's setting a bad example for the kids and sabotaging Hank and the professor's and Raven's and yes, even Scott's attempts to help him and he knows he's setting back his recovery. He wants to do better but he doesn't know how and it's frustrating and he should be able to help it but he can't and he's standing there nodding while the professor talks and trying not to make eye contact because he doesn't want to see that look, the look of, I've done all I can. Now it's time for a drink. Mom used to get that look all the time, and Frank, to a lesser extent, and if Erik had bothered to hang around a little longer Peter is sure he'd be wearing the same expression right now and Peter is so glad he's not here, so, so glad.

Xavier asks for his cooperation and tells him he needs to talk more and be honest about what he's feeling and blah blah blah a bunch of stuff that Peter is never going to do and then he's done talking and Peter's still nodding like he hasn't been listening and the professor sighs, not like a genius Oxford-educated professor, but like an exhausted parent who's tried his best to tame the impulses of a willful child and failed and has reached his tolerance level and is now giving him up as a lost cause and that's when Peter decides to solve this problem the way he solves most problems and bolts. He turns tail and zips out of the room and down the stairs and then he's out the front door and ten miles away before he falls onto his knees in some farmer's back forty with the the grass all tall and wavy around him, crisp and dry from the late summer heat. Peter rips his goggles off and buries his face in his hands and just fucking sobs because he doesn't want to be like this. He doesn't want to be hungry all the time and have to sneak off in the middle of the night and binge on gas station junk food. He doesn't want to feel like he's completely lost control of his own body, but here he is, in a field in the middle of nowhere with his brain running in circles around all of the reasons he's a worthless, ungrateful jackass with no self-control and meanwhile his stomach is going, Yeah, but when's breakfast?

And after he's sat in the dirt for a while and cried enough to give himself a gnarly headache he picks his stupid body up and slinks back toward the mansion at a stumbling walk because a) all his stuff is there and b) he's decided that he owes the professor an apology and Hank a trip to the Bahamas and he's determined to do better and he's going to stop being an asshole and get his shit together if he can figure out how.

He has to make a pit stop about halfway there because his legs are shaking and his face feels hot. He tucks into eggs and sausage with a side of home fries at a truck stop and hates himself for having to do it but he's starving and the place doesn't exactly serve egg white omelets with steamed broccoli so Peter eats his eggs and sausage and mops up all of the ketchup with his last fry and even licks his
fingers and it's not enough but he still makes himself get up and leave a decent tip and walk the rest of the way back to the mansion. By the time he gets there his stomach is churning, both out of hunger and anxiety. He makes his slow way up the driveway, hands in his pockets and eyes on the ground so he only hears the front door open. He thinks it's going to be Hank, but it's the professor instead, which is interesting because answering any door in a wheelchair is tricky, especially that door, which is enormous and heavy, and to the best of Peter's knowledge the professor has never answered his own door before.

Peter stops at the bottom of the steps. He feels like a dog coming home with its tail between its legs after running away because it ate the master's shoes. “Sorry,” he says around the lump in his throat. “Should I pack my bags?”

The professor tells him patiently, tiredly, but patiently, “Of course not, Peter. You will always be welcome here. Always.”

“You know, you're going to regret saying that when I'm, like, a crazy powerful super-villain.”

“That will never happen. You have far too much good in you for that.”

Peter's glad someone is confident about that because he's not. He looks back down at his shoes, which he's scuffing in the dirt like a lost kid. “I want to do better. I'll skip meals if I have to.” Wow, that is actually a physically painful thing to say.

“That's not going to be an option, Peter. I know what you're feeling and you're so hungry right now that you can barely stand up straight. Jean and the empaths are in the kitchen at this very moment eating all of the ice cream in the house and I have half a mind to join them while there's still some left, so please, come inside and put us out of our misery.”

Peter goes inside.

The professor has given Peter the implicit go-ahead to cheat on his diet but Peter doesn't take any more liberties than he already has. A few chicken salad sandwiches later Jean and the empaths thank him profusely and head upstairs to sleep off their glut.

The professor remains, calmly and quietly sipping a cup of tea, looking like he's up for the day.

Peter washes his plate, dries it and stacks it back in one of the cabinets. He's desperate to be out of the room because he knows it won't be long before he's hungry again and he'd like to be as distracted as possible by then but the professor asks him if he's heard from Lindy recently.

Peter has. Lindy's schedule is pretty full and she's not always easy to get a hold of. “We exchange letters.” A few. It's easier that way. Peter can pen a letter in point zero five seconds. Phone conversations are a lot more... tedious. Lindy knows this. She doesn't mind, or if she does she's never said. “She's passing her classes. If she takes twenty credits next quarter she'll be all caught up.”

“Perhaps you should call her,” the professor suggests. “Raven speaks with her from time to time...”

Yeah, he knows.

“I don't want to talk to her when I'm like this. I don't want to bite her head off.” He's trying as hard as he can not to bite the professor's head off right now. “Can I go?”

“Stay a while, if you don't mind,” the professor tells him.

Peter just stares at him defiantly. The professor framed it like a request but Peter knows it's an order
and the question is whether or not Peter can stand to take an order that makes his skin want to jump off of his body and run away without him.

“Do sit down.”

Peter sits, but he puts the coffee on first. Not everybody likes tea.

“Peter, have you been in contact with anyone aside from your sister since you returned? Your stepfather? Neighbors? Friends?”

Does the truck-stop waitress count? “No, not really. Frank and I aren’t like, close, and my neighbors aren’t neighbors anymore.” They’re cool, sure, and if they called the mansion and asked him for a favor, he’d totally do it, especially if it was Mr. Oberman doing the asking, but it’s not like he’s thought about meeting them for coffee. Then there's his dad, or Erik, or Magneto, or whatever Peter is supposed to call him, he doesn't know because the motherfucker up and vanished before they could settle on a moniker, who didn't leave a forwarding address, not that Peter cares where he went, or wants to talk to him... ever.

Xavier sighs. “I worry about you, Peter.” And there's a little bit of frustration in the professor's tone, not enough that anyone else would pick up on it but Peter knows it's there. “You are an independent, self-sufficient young man, and those are admirable qualities, but I am concerned that they will be your downfall. You're used to handling things on your own without having to wait for the rest of the world, but you can't handle everything on your own, Peter, no matter how fast you are.”

Says who? he thinks automatically, and then his brain tempers it with, Says everybody who saw you at Mom's funeral, dumbass.

Xavier goes on, “While you're recovering I want you to focus on learning to communicate with and trust your teammates. Every one of them knows that they can rely on you. I want you to know that you can rely on them as well.”

“Okay,” Peter says. He's thinking that he does trust them, in a way, as much as he trusts anybody, but arguing with the professor is not going to get him where he wants to be. “Is this going to be like summer camp? Are we going to do trust falls? Is there going to be a human knot?” Mutant knot?

“Not precisely. I would like to start simply. I have a few ideas, but I will need your participation.”

“Sure,” Peter says stupidly, because all he can think about is food, and that's mortifying and depressing and he just wants to put his head down on the table and die of starvation except that he knows his body will never let him get away with that, not while he still has the strength to stand.

“Peter,” the professor says, reaching across the table to take his hand, “Go eat something else.”

“I can hold out,” he says.

“Peter,” the professor says, exasperated, “We are out of ice cream. Please, go and eat something, if only to keep Jean and myself and the empaths from needing a new wardrobe.”

Peter finds and decimates half a pan of meatloaf left over from last night. He hopes nobody was looking forward to having that for lunch. “Better?” the professor asks once he's finished.

Peter nods. He's drowsy now, though, and that probably has something to do with having been up all night and the fact that he's just eaten half of a cow. The professor's yawning too and that makes Peter feel worse.
Peter says, “Sorry.”

The professor looks up, “Hmm? Oh, yes: sleepless nights, irregular office hours, piles of unpublished papers. It's almost as if I'm headmaster of a school. Get some rest. We both have difficult days to face. The least you can do for yourself is face them on a few more hours of sleep.”

Peter would really like to know what the professor has in store for him but his curiosity is nowhere near strong enough to keep him from taking Xavier's advice.

The professor escorts him to his room, which means walking in regular old slow-mo through the crowded hallways right before breakfast. Mostly the kids brush past him with a smile or a sympathetic look, or they're so wrapped up in their own lives that they ignore him completely, which is also fine. He gets a deep blush and a comforting shoulder-squeeze from Jean and a curious frown from Scott.

When Peter gets to his room he collapses on his bed and is almost asleep when he thinks he should pull off his shoes. That's when he notices that the professor is still there, like, he's browsing the books on Peter's shelves as if he's planning on staying a while.

“J.M. Barrie,” the professor says, pulling Peter and Wendy off the shelf.

Peter feels a sad, guilty pang because it was Mom's favorite and he never finished it.

“The story behind this work is quite interesting,” he says, like the professor in him is taking over. “You see, J.M. Barrie had a close friendship with a woman named Sylvia Llewelyn Davies and her sons...” and he says some more but Peter isn't awake for it.

Peter sleeps until noon and wakes up starving but also not alone. Kurt is in his room, perched casually on his desk like he's an alien and he has no idea how furniture works. It's a little off-putting to wake up to a blue devil staring at him like he wants to make a deal for Peter's soul, but since the blue devil brought Peter lunch, he can just have it. The tray holds a fillet of some kind of fish (which is going to stink up the room, so Peter opens a window), brown rice (great, looks like carbohydrates are back on the menu), and of course, greens. There's a double portion of everything, and Peter is supposed to eat everything, which he does, and he could really use a Coke or something to wash it down but he has the option of milk or water.

Peter thanks Kurt for bringing lunch and Kurt asks how he's feeling and Peter says, “Like a bottomless pit. How's everything with you?” and they make small talk, about Kurt's drama class and the play the kids are planning for the fall semester, until it becomes clear that Kurt doesn't want to leave him alone.

“So, is this part of a teamwork exercise or am I on suicide watch?” Peter asks.

The smile vanishes from Kurt's face.

“No, oh my God. It was a joke. I'm sorry I asked. I'm fine. I swear.”

Kurt kind of looks a little relieved but also like he's not sure if he believes Peter, and Peter has this moment of clarity where he realizes that the rest of the school probably sees him for exactly what he is: a complete fucking mess. “So what's the deal?”

Kurt has to think about it, but in the end at least he's honest. “I am not supposed to leave you alone.” Peter looks at him. “If I can help it,” Kurt adds.

Peter debates running downstairs and seeing if he can grab at least a glass of juice or some coffee or
something so he doesn't feel so flat but he reigns himself in. “I am so sorry you have to put up with me right now,” he tells Kurt. Kurt just shrugs. “How does this work? Do we have, like, a goal or something?”

“Not really.”

“And if I decide to take off?” Peter asks.

“Zen ve vill both be in trouble.”

Well, can't have that.

“So, what do we do now?”

Kurt picks up a blue plastic disc that has been hidden behind him until now. He flashes his Day-Glo green teeth at Peter in a hideous smile. Every day is Halloween with this kid around. “Frisbee?”

It does feel pretty good to get outside and just toss a Frisbee around, and their casual game draws a crowd when the kids are between classes. Peter has resolved not to break off for snacks but his energy really starts to flag after about forty-five minutes and pretty soon he's taking a breather under a tree, staring off into the middle distance while Kurt's toss goes unanswered and the Frisbee lands in the pond.

Spotting him from across the lawn Kurt pops into existence right next to him. “Are you alright?”

“Yeah.”

“Zen why are you sitting on ze ground?”

That's a great question.

Kurt bamfs away for a minute and returns with a glass of apple juice and a straw. “Tell me when you are hungry next time, okay? I can't read your mind like ze professor.”

Kurt's grabbed him some crackers and cheese, too, and after Peter finishes his snack he naps the rest of their time together away against that tree and wakes up to find Kurt gone but the professor sitting near him. Peter's been asleep so long that Xavier's had a chance to get out of his wheelchair and prop himself up with his back against Peter's tree as well and Peter wonders if he can get back in his wheelchair on his own or if he had been waiting for Peter but actually the professor's upper body is pretty strong. Peter's seen him doing chin-ups in the gym so he probably would be fine with or without Peter's help so, yeah, he's just relaxing in the shade, getting grass stains all over his thousand dollar suit.

Xavier sees that he's awake and asks how he is and Peter's like, “I feel like a useless sack of crap. Frisbee was fun.”

“Thank you for playing, and you are no such thing. I will continue to remind you of that until you believe it.”

“Alright, yeah. I believe it. What am I supposed to do now?” Peter asks. A little food and rest did wonders but he knows it won't last. Whatever the professor wants, he'd better spit it out.

“What do you want to do?”

Peter's confused by the question and he's pretty sure that's the point, like, it's part of the whole
psycho-whatever therapy thing and it's supposed to make him think but then the answer is supposed to be simple, like, right in front of his nose. The question is ambiguous. Does he mean what does he want to do right now? Does he mean over the long term? Are they talking about Peter's life goals, and if they are that's unfortunate because he kind of knows and kind of doesn't, like, sure, meeting a nice girl and settling down like he's in a Cat Stevens song would be good, but if it's not in the cards and he can't find a girl who can put up with him then that's out of the question but it doesn't mean-

Fuck it.

“Eat lunch.” Technically it would be his second lunch, but it's definitely not dinner time. Hell, it's not even late enough to be snack time for the kids.

The professor smiles. “Now you're getting it.”

He gets lunch, early dinner, whatever, and it makes him way more amenable to the professor's plans for him, which is good because the professor's first stipulation is that until further notice Peter is going to spend just about every waking moment in direct line of sight with one of his teammates.

Peter sighs, “Does everybody already know about this? Was there a meeting?”

“A small one. Would you like to know what was said?”

“No.”

“Very well, then. Are you ready to work with me? You've already made a good start today with Kurt.”

“A good start at what? Falling asleep during Frisbee?”

“Relaxing. We need to work on getting your stress levels under control. I want you to do what you enjoy, and share that with the company that you're in. Live in the moment.”

Oh-kay. “Even if the company is Scott?”

“Especially if the company is Scott.”

Fine. Whatever.

“Give them a chance, Peter, and give yourself a chance.”

Peter fights down the urge to bolt.

“And Peter,” the professor says, “Don't run.”

The professor doesn't mean 'don't run ever' he just means 'don't run away' but Peter breaks that promise within about four hours of making it.

After lunch with the professor Ororo shows up to take over Peter-sitting and the two of them spend the afternoon folding sheets and towels and mysterious, unclaimed sweaters and jackets that drop out of the sky and onto the athletic field whenever a sunny afternoon follows a chilly morning at Xavier's School for Occasionally Irresponsible Gifted Youngsters. Okay, maybe this doesn't place very high on the list of enjoyable activities that the professor had Peter think about but it makes Peter feel a little less useless and it helps Ororo get on top of the impending laundry crisis of eighty-four. He also gets the skinny on all of the things his teammates and the older kids have been up to, minus all of the X-Men stuff, which is disappointing but better than nothing and at least it gives his racing thoughts
somewhere to go until dinner, which cannot come soon enough.

When Ororo and Peter show up in the dining hall the cook immediately waves Peter over and hands him a warm plate piled with potatoes, sauteed kale with mushrooms, and some kind of dark meat topped with onions. It's liver, according to Kid Peter, and Bobby makes a face but Peter couldn't care less if it was a cooked rat. He's starving. Everything tastes good. He cleans his plate and asks for seconds.

After dinner he falls asleep on one of the couches in the casual living room so he's not alone per se. There's always somebody hanging out, watching TV, studying or trying not to get caught making out in a corner so he doesn't think he's breaking any rules. Still, he wakes up to Scott frowning at him, maybe. It's tough to tell with the visor.

“I could take it off,” Scott offers.

“Thanks but no thanks,” Peter says. “What kind of music do you like?”

Scott catches up to him while Peter is going Scott's cassette collection.

“You're not supposed to do that,” Scott says.

“Sorry.” Peter's not sorry.

“Did you put a lock on my bedroom door?” Scott asks, fiddling with the knob.

“Maybe.”

“Why?”

“Man, if you don't know, I swear I will take the thing off right this second. And I'll take the lock off of Jean's door too.”

“No, I mean- Oh my God. You're so weird.”

“Says the guy with the Taco album.”

“It was a birthday present.”

“Uh huh.” Peter's shuffling the cassettes in his hands: Queen, Michael Jackson, REO Speedwagon, Culture Club... ooo, Eurythmics. Peter holds up the cassette. “Annie Lennox is hot.”

“What?”

“Don't deny it. I know you have a thing for redheads. Hey, I've got a question for you: Beatles or Stones?”

“Neither? I'm not that into music.”

Wow, and Peter's weird? “Okay, you're coming with me.”

Peter zips him down the hall and sets Scott next to the open window just in case the ride made him want to hurl. He spends the next two hours introducing Scott Summers to the idea of a 'concept album' and explaining themes and lyrics in the context of social upheaval and politics to the sounds of The Who and Rush and, yes, the Rolling Stones and the Beatles and finally gets him to admit that the rest of Tommy might be worth listening to just before Hank walks in to spell Scott.
Peter has a lot of albums on both cassette and LP and Scott doesn't have a record player in his room so Peter tosses five or six of his favorites tapes at Scott on his way out the door.

Hank looks like a Beatles guy but Peter doesn't ask. Hank's got a cassette of his own tonight.

“I thought you could try a little guided meditation before bed time,” Hank suggests.

Bed time. Great, he's five.

Peter regards him skeptically. “No milk and cookies?”

And because Hank still can't tell when Peter is joking he says, “If you're hungry, I can get you something.”

Peter thinks about it, but thinking about it kind of bums him out. His jeans are already getting tight around the waist and he's not looking forward to needing new ones. He'd lost so much weight by the time he sold Mom's house that he'd donated all of his larger-sized clothes and now he's regretting that decision. “No, I'm good.”

“If you're hungry again I need to know. Don't try to hold out. Charles wants you to learn to communicate your needs to your teammates.”

Peter already knows he's not going to make it until morning. Before he got caught he was getting up at least twice a night to eat. He tells Hank so.

“Okay, well, we knew that.”

Of course they did. Peter doesn't even want to know how many people Hank's 'we' includes.

“Don't worry, nobody is going to be watching you sleep, but there will be someone in the kitchen, probably me or Kurt. I don't need much sleep and Kurt stays up all night anyway. Just take what you need. Stop and visit if you want, okay? Just, don't leave the house.”

Don't leave the house. It's a big house. He shouldn't have any trouble with that. Still, it makes him feel claustrophobic to have the option taken away, not that he blames the professor or Hank for wanting to keep him close. “Okay.”

Hank makes him a protein shake and a turkey sandwich. After his bedtime snack Peter changes into sleep pants and a t-shirt while Hank settles himself in a chair in Peter's room with a stack of scientific journal articles and a pen. Hank warns Peter that meditating might put him to sleep. Peter thinks anything short of a nuclear airstrike is going to put him to sleep so when he slips on his headphones and the soft sound of chimes and the deep, soothing voice of Peter's guide fill his ears he thinks about just climbing into bed but he promised Hank he'd give meditating a shot, so he sits cross-legged in the center of his bed, closes his eyes and follows the flow of words off into the darkness.

Peter has a sudden feeling of being in two places at once. Like, he's sitting on his bed, safe in his room at the mansion but at the same time he's somewhere else, somewhere that's not quite a place, like he's stepped off a cliff into open air and he's falling, screaming.

He keeps screaming as he tears the headphones off of his ears and throws the Walkman against the wall. He doesn't stick around long enough to see it hit but he threw it hard enough that he's pretty sure it's toast. He zips past Hank, scattering his notes, and poor Hank hasn't even had a chance to react by the time Peter is down the hall, headed for the front door and realizing belatedly and inanely that he's supposed to stay in the house, so he runs up to the roof, the only place he's pretty sure is going to be deserted so that he'll have enough space to have a really good private freak-out.
Peter manages one circuit of the roof top to make sure he's alone and then his legs go all shaky and he manages to stumble to a stop before landing hard on his knees and what. The fuck. Was that? Well, a nightmare, obviously, except it didn't feel like a nightmare or a dream and he's never trying transcendental meditation again. He hopes he broke the tape.

Hank joins him up on the roof a couple of minutes later. He catches sight of Peter in the darkness and his shoulders sag in relief. Peter's too shaky even to wave. He just sits there on his knees, hands in his lap, pins and needles in his lower legs from the awkward way he's collapsed.

“Just checking out the view,” Peter pants. It's cloudy tonight. There's not a star in the sky and the moon has vanished so the mansion is like an island in a sea of black.

“Nightmares are very common, even among adults, especially if you're experiencing anxiety or depression or following a traumatic experience,” Hank says calmly.

Yeah. With as many traumatized kids as they have at the mansion nightmares are a form of regular entertainment for students and rank somewhere between the latest blockbuster movie and video games.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Hank asks.

“Nope,” Peter's teeth are chattering. His legs are shaking so badly they won't hold him up when Hank helps him stand. It's cold up here and Peter's in bare feet but Hank says, “I think you're hypoglycemic,” which is silly because Peter just ate, right?

Peter gets a fun elevator ride to the basement and Hank's lab with Hank supporting him. The professor meets them there and the two of them spend a half an hour puzzling over Peter's blood work, trying to figure out why his blood glucose dropped to fifty only minutes after he'd eaten. Peter spends a restless night in Hank's lab having his blood glucose level checked every two hours but no matter what he eats or doesn't eat Hank can't get his body to duplicate the result of his first test and by morning Peter's feeling like a groggy pincushion. Even Hank is yawning. Hank finally writes it off as the result of Peter's stress-induced nightmare and Peter knows he's secretly hoping Peter will have another one so that he can confirm his hypothesis but Peter's sleep is defiantly peaceful after that.

Peter suffers through a week of careful observation by his teammates who aren't really his teammates, are they? You have to be on a team to have teammates and Xavier still won't let Peter anywhere near the danger room let alone the jet and it is literal torture when he watches the thing rise up out of the basketball court and zoom away from his bedroom window one night. Peter spends the next day sullen and silent until it's Raven's turn to watch him and she tells him to stop pouting, “Unless you're upset about missing out on babysitting a peace rally in Boulder.”

This is why he loves Raven. She doesn't try to protect him, not even from himself.

“I would catch so many people smoking joints,” he says. He's lying on his back on his bed, staring at the ceiling. One of his mom's Billy Joel albums is spinning on the turntable but he's taken off his headphones to talk to Raven.

“Maybe you can moonlight with the DEA.”

“I would totally win the war on drugs. Why aren't you all hush-hush about X-Men stuff?” She doesn't volunteer information but she's the only person at the mansion who will consistently and honestly answer his questions.
“You're an adult, Peter. You can handle the truth. That being said, you are in no shape to be out in the field. Hank and Charles thought you were going to die. Did you know that? When you were wasting away, right before you got your appetite back, they were worried that your heart would give out and you just wouldn't wake up. We all took turns sitting with you while you slept, just watching you breathe. It was awful, and boring as hell. Scoot over.”

Peter scoots. Raven flops down next to him and knits her fingers behind her head.

“Just so you know, if Hank comes in I'm shouting 'rape!',” Peter reminds her. Seriously, it's the beginning of the fall semester. He can't walk across the floor without socks because after ten seconds his toes go numb. Where are her clothes?

“Hank's in Boulder,” she reminds him. “What do you want to do today, besides mope?”

“Eat,” he says, bummed that it's an honest answer. He caved and went to the mall with Jubilee earlier in the week and bought a few outfits a size up from what he normally wears. Peter bets Erik would be disappointed. He knows old people can be like that, like, having enough to eat was a huge struggle for them growing up and they just can't understand how young people can eat enough to get fat. Peter's going to take up smoking.

“It's good, Peter,” Raven tells him. “I know you don't think so but it's your body trying to balance itself out, and it will. It's just going to take time. Also, literally nobody gives a shit what your ass looks like in a pair of jeans.”

“Well, that's depressing.”

“Hey, I get it. It's frustrating to be sidelined. I've been there. I've been pushed to the side, patronized, coddled, underestimated. That's not what's happening here. Charles is thinking long term. We want you back for good, so take your God-damned time and recover. You wouldn't run on a broken leg.”

Well... no... but he did do some high-speed hobbling before he was strictly supposed to after the whole Apocalypse deal.

“You're frustrated,” Raven says, “You're used to doing your own thing, solving all of the world's problems on your own. That's a habit you need to break if you're going to function as part of a team. You're too much of a wild card. You need a framework, structure. Charles and Hank and I are trying to give you that.”

“I know,” Peter says. Man, and if that doesn't sound like an uphill battle Peter doesn't know what is. Peter never had much structure growing up and he tries not to dwell on the reasons for that because it means thinking about him and Lord knows Frank tried with Peter but Frank was late to the game and Peter was not Frank's kid and Frank was not up to the challenge of controlling Peter's behavior. “I'm trying.”

“Good.”

“It's hard,” Peter says. He knows better than to look for sympathy from Raven but he can't help it if his eyes feel a little misty.

Raven props herself up on one elbow and says, “Good. I'm glad it's hard. You can't grow without struggling. Come on, let's get you some food, then we'll struggle through some yard work. Nobody rakes leaves like you.”

That's not strictly true. Other people rake leaves just as well, just not as quickly, but quickly is what the kids are after. It's Saturday and they're all looking for an excuse not to do homework, so Peter
rakes all of the leaves into piles for them to jump in and destroy over and over again and that game
doesn't get old for a solid three hours by which time Peter's hungry and exhausted again.

During Peter's second week of continuous (mandatory) observation the professor starts pairing Peter
up with two or more of the X-Men at a time to complete team-building exercises, which is better
because a) the exercises are more like games or pranks, and Peter can get on board with that and b) it
feels more like training than what he was doing before. It's mostly kind of fun, except for the day that
he spends blindfolded with his teammates ushering him around. Scott is actually the best partner for
that exercise and Peter has to admit that his communication skills are top notch when he's on his
game. Kurt, on the other hand, gives crappy directions and keeps running him into walls and Peter
ends the day with about a dozen bruises, still, he makes it through the week without murdering any
of his teammates or destroying the mansion. Hank says his cortisol levels are down. Peter's naps are
getting shorter and his appetite has become easier to satisfy and Jean's like, “Thank God,” because
none of her skirts will zip. Peter's weight has settled in around the low one-eighties, which makes
him look a little like a hard-partying frat boy, but for the most part everyone at the house is totally
understanding, especially the younger kids, who either don't notice or don't care as long as Peter can
impress them by playing every position against them on the soccer pitch.

Peter gets his class back. Now that he's able to stay awake most of the day Scott steps down as head
coach so that he can focus more on tutoring and his college correspondence courses and (God help
them) piloting lessons. Peter's first day officially back he goes over his class roster and notices the
name 'Calvin James' and he can't think where he's heard it before but he assumes it'll all come
together when he sees the kid, except he doesn't see the kid. Peter's wearing his gym shorts and he's
got his whistle and the kids are all lined up on the edge of the field while he takes attendance and
there's nothing but silence and someone clearing their throat when Peter calls Calvin's name.

"Anybody seen Calvin?" Peter tries.

Smirking. Muffled laughter. He just told a joke without knowing it. Well, he can guess what Calvin's
power is, then, and that's when it hits him, where he's heard the name before.

"Caaaaaalviiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiinn," he tries, looking around. "Safety note," he projects, "If I can't see you I can't avoid
you, and you do not want to be invisible when I run into you at two hundred miles an hour."

Now the rest of the class is glancing around.

"He's really shy," Lexie says. Peter remembers when she used to be the shy one.

At first Peter isn't sure, but then he is. Part of the hedge looks sort of like it doesn't belong with the
rest, then it looks like someone made a person out of shrubs, then it looks like a wiry boy with brown
hair and blue eyes and a dark red birthmark on his face and there's Peter's newsboy, the one who got
captured, the one who almost got Peter captured in return.

He looks like he's going to cry.

Peter looks down at his clipboard and puts a check by Calvin's name and asks him, "Calvin, what
position do you like to play?"

He's a little worried that the kid is just going to vanish again or run screaming from the court but
instead he says, "Point guard."

Peter nods and divides the rest of the kids up into two teams. They play.

After that Peter starts noticing Calvin around the mansion but it takes a while before the kid will say
more to him than two words at a time.

“He was worried you'd be angry with him,” the professor tells him during one of their talks, “Or disappointed. He's been through quite an ordeal. I assured him that his fears were unfounded, that you knew that what transpired was not his fault and you held no grudge.”

Oh, for sure. Poor kid. “It's amazing that I haven't run into him in the halls before now,” and he means that in the worst possible way. Peter's never taken out anybody on accident but he has run into walls and stuff when he wasn't paying attention and the walls did not win that fight. Jeez, he would have felt awful.

“Well, Peter's glad somebody has taste. Scott is hopeless when it comes to music. Peter's spent weeks trying to convert him and Scott's reluctantly embraced progressive rock but his preferences always run to the more pop-sounding tracks.

“I've been working quite extensively with Calvin. We speak quite often, and he is making progress, but he still suffers from nightmares and flashbacks. We found him in an underground military bunker outside of Leningrad. He'd been questioned extensively using electric shock, and I have reason to believe he was scheduled for dissection.”

That's awful, like, really, unspeakably awful.

“Yes, well, I thought you'd like to know that he did take you up on your offer to let him borrow your records. He seems partial to AC/DC.”

Peter holds his breath because this feels like bad news.

“I think its time that we start bringing you back into circulation. We need you, Peter. We never stopped needing you.”

Kurt's been teaching Peter how to do a back handspring. Peter wants to do one now but he doesn't want to flip the professor's desk over.

“One step at a time, though, Peter. You'll tell me immediately if it's too soon or too much.”

Peter nods, at a rare loss for words.

To be continued...
Thank you again for reading. This chapter was long and choppy, but I chose to write it this way because it's told from Peter's point of view and he's fast-forwarding through some of the worst parts of his recovery in the same way that he fast-forwarded through his mother's cancer treatments. There's a lot going on behind the scenes, a lot that Peter just doesn't want to think about, and I hope I've offered small glimpses of that.

Peter's nightmare is actually a reference to something that happened in the comics, so, spoilers for that:

In the House of M story line Quicksilver loses his powers and through nefarious means, obtains a new power: the ability to travel forward in time for brief periods. I was going to make that idea part of this story, but decided against it because I felt it complicated the plot unnecessarily, but I left the nightmare in as a kind of homage.

Thank you again for reading.
Ghost

Chapter Summary

Peter returns to the team, but his past continues to haunt him.

Chapter Notes

Welcome back and thank you again for reading. I'm not going to lie, one of my favorite things is reading the usernames of the people who have left kudos, because some of them are so damn clever. Thank you all for your encouragement.

Trying the rich text option this week instead of html. So far so good!

Just a heads-up, there will be some blood and gore and dead people in this chapter.

Please enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Peter's back in action.

Okay, he's not back in action yet but he's not in the dark anymore. He gets to sit in on meetings and debriefs and observe training sessions and contribute ideas during mission briefings, which is something that he's really good at because he thinks faster than everyone in the room. He can scan blueprints for infiltration points and figure out where the potential weak spots are as soon as the plans are on the table and he can (apparently) shoot down any idea that Scott has, which is not on his list of goals for mission briefs but seems to happen more often than not but it's not personal, Scott. Get a grip. He's just doing his job.

Now that he's in the loop he finds out that the mutant kidnappers have been very quiet recently and Xavier can't decide if it's because the terrorist cells all have dispersed or gone to ground or if the X-Mens' joint partnership with the CIA has really been that effective. The professor, being an optimist, chooses to believe it's the latter, and as much as Peter wants to believe it too, there's this little Magneto-sounding voice in Peter's head that tells him not to be so naïve. Peter tells that little voice to shut the hell up, he's working.

Terrorists or no terrorists, there's still plenty to keep the X-Men busy. Humans and mutants are like a pair of siblings who can't get along for five minutes without breaking each others' shit and starting fights over Legos and Otter Pops (or public policies and civil liberties) and Peter's so ready to get out there and get his hands dirty and break up some fights but even if Peter were allowed out in the field, which he isn't... yet... the professor has significantly narrowed the scope of missions that the X-Men handle since Peter was last on the clock. Xavier reasons that the team needs to focus on global problems and leave just about everything else up to the local authorities, like assaults and kidnappings suddenly aren't worth their time if they don't have a global (or at least national) impact. Peter, who has time to spare, thinks otherwise and he's willing to back it up by getting out there on his own but the professor reigns him in: “Not every problem in the world need be yours.”
The professor's words sound so much like what Magneto said to Peter in the basement that Peter avoids Xavier and sulks for the rest of the day.

Ororo finds him skipping stones across the pond before dinner.

“You sounded like your father back there,” she says.

Peter doesn't rise to the bait, doesn't even turn around. He lets a stone fly. The angle is perfect and it doesn't stop until it hits a clump of cattails at the edge of the pond, snapping two of them in half.

“He thinks with his heart,” she explains. “So do you.”

It's not the worst thing anybody's ever said about him. Still, he could do without the comparison. Magneto is an open wound, all the way to the bone, and Peter's not sure it'll ever heal.

She goes on, like she's pushing him, daring him to run away, “He is a part of you. So long as you hate him, you will hate yourself.”

Peter keeps staring across the pond at his two broken cattails. It's on the tip of his tongue to ask her if she knows anything about where Magneto went or why he left, but gone is gone, like Mom, and he doesn't think she knows anyway, so Peter stays quiet.

Ororo's not the kind of person who needs to be right all the time and she's not much of an arguer, so once she's said what she came to say, she leaves him alone.

She got one thing wrong, though. Peter doesn't hate Magneto. He only wishes that he could.

Peter sort of comes around to the professor's way of thinking because the fact is that there are precious few independently-funded superhero teams out there making a difference in the world and the X-Men sort of need to focus their energy where it can do the most good. That doesn't mean Peter has to like it, and it doesn't mean that Peter can't fix a few things on his own here and there. Like Mom used it say: it's not like anyone can stop him. But for now Peter minds his manners, and after a couple of weeks the professor rewards Peter's good behavior by stepping up his physical training. So pretty soon Peter's back to running laps in the mornings and weight training in the afternoons. Raven supervises and Hank makes him keep his activity moderate even though Peter would love the chance to run off his extra padding. When Peter complains about his cardio being cut off at twenty minutes Hank slaps him on his (irritatingly convex) belly with his clipboard hard enough to make Peter grunt and tells him, “Think of it as a rainy-day fund.”

So, Peter behaves himself and doesn't break out of the mansion for late night runs even though he wants to, and as another reward he gets to go back to training in the danger room with the rest of the X-Men. The professor even clears him to go on a few missions but wants him kept mostly in reserve, but it's a restriction that Peter can live with, because he was basically always in reserve even when he was active because he can tell when things are going south and swoop in at what is the last second for everyone else but is actually a comfortable amount of time for Peter to do his thing.

Peter's noticed that Scott still likes to fit in the occasional immature jab whenever he can because he's Scott and he imagines that he and Peter have some kind of rivalry, which they don't, like, at all. And it doesn't matter because Peter likes to think that he gives as good as he gets when it comes to insults but he swears that if Scott calls him Thicksilver he's going to wake up in the pond. So as far as Peter is concerned, it's fine. It's annoying, but it's fine, except that not everyone thinks it's fine because it doesn't take long before Hank puts the kibosh on Scott's comments in pretty much the most mortifying way possible.
The situation between Peter and Scott (or between Hank and Scott really, because as far as Peter's concerned there never was a situation between him and Scott) comes to a head after about a week and a half after Peter unofficially rejoined the team. Peter limps away from a danger room session and Ororo asks if his ankle is okay and he says, “Yeah, I just landed wrong,” and Scott says, “I know, I felt the floor shake,” and Peter gives him a look like ‘good one, asshole,’ and Jubilee rolls her eyes and says, “Sco-ott,” and then out of nowhere Hank goes all blue and furry and roars and hauls Scott into his lab by the upper arm and shuts the door, which does absolutely nothing to keep everyone on the lower level, which is all of the X-Men, from hearing Hank verbally disembowel their fearless leader.

Hank speaks in short, loud, clipped sentences that go something like, “Peter is your teammate. He has a medical condition and he is under my supervision. I will not allow you to jeopardize his recovery with your wisecracks and your immature posturing and your puerile criticism. If you feel the need to bully someone to cover up for your own inadequacies then I can take the jet and drop you off at your old high school and you can spend your days putting gum on seats and knocking books out of the hands of kids in the hallway, but if you think the professor or I will tolerate that kind of behavior here you are sadly mistaken. Is that clear?”

Okay, Peter kind of gets Hank's reaction because Hank's put a lot of effort into getting Peter shipshape these past months but it also occurs to Peter that once upon a time Hank was probably the kid getting his books knocked out of his hands and getting jumped after school, which leads Peter to wonder if Hank ever revisited any of his old bullies as blue, furry Hank like, 'Surprise, assholes!' and threatened to tear their arms off and beat them to death with their own limbs, or if he kind of shrugged it off but kept all of his nerd rage bottled up inside like a can of Coke that's been shaken too hard and put back in the fridge and its just waiting for some poor bastard to open the fridge, pick the wrong can, crack the top and get the nerd rage equivalent of foamy Coke everywhere, except the poor bastard is Scott and if anyone deserves for his shoes to be covered in foamy Coke it's Peter, who would kill for a Coke right now because a) he's thirsty and b) he hasn't had a Coke in weeks. Sure, it doesn't look that way but the point is that Peter doesn't think he should need protecting. He doesn't want Scott to have foamy Coke nerd rage on his shoes. He just needs for his body to stop freaking out and be normal. He needs to be the person that he was a year ago when he didn't need blood tests and weigh-ins, when he didn't need Hank looking out for him, when he didn't need help from his teammates. He wants to binge on Twinkies and Ho-hos and run laps around Manhattan and play Pac-Man in the dark until one thirty in the morning and sleep until two in the afternoon. He wants to be the person who does the saving, not the one who needs to be saved.

He wants his mom back. She was his anchor, albeit and anchor attached to a necessarily long chain, but she was what kept him grounded, and now she's gone and he feels like he's floating off in the current.

He wants Mom back.

He'd do anything.

Anything.

That humbling realization leaves him frozen to the spot even though his brain is screaming at him to tear out of there and not look back. Maybe he'll stop when he gets to the ocean or maybe he'll see how far out he can swim and find out whether or not he can reach Europe before he drowns. He doesn't move, though, because he can't move, and it doesn't look like anyone else can move either. Also Hank has stopped yelling, which is a plus.

Xavier rolls up in his wheelchair and Peter can move again, but his impulse to flee has evaporated.
“I know that Hank is trying to help, but I think this particular course of action might be misguided,” says the professor.

Peter sighs.

Xavier continues, “Healing takes time, which is understandably frustrating for you, given how fast your mind and body work. You've been through quite an ordeal. If you allow me to be honest, I don't think you'll ever be the same as you were, in mind or body, and that is going to take some time to get used to.”

“So I'm always going to be a fat-ass?”

“Peter, first of all, you're not. Second, no, as Hank explained before, he thinks it likely that you'll be underweight again before your body sorts itself out and finds a stable place. That could be heavier or lighter than what you were a year ago, but it's likely you'll be in the same ballpark. You might heal stronger than you were, or you might have effects that last you the rest of your life. Only time will tell. You are getting better, Peter. Be patient with yourself.”

Patient. Sure. Peter is the most patient person he knows. He kind of has to be just so he doesn't go insane. “Can do,” he says.

“Good. Now, if you'll excuse me I'm going to talk to Hank and Scott.”

“Good cop, bad cop, right?”

“Something like that. I want to mold Scott, not crush his spirit. I need to make sure that Hank and I are on the same page.”

“Maybe bring Scott a box of tissues,” Peter suggests. Then he adds, “I know he's not an asshole. I know he doesn't say stuff to be mean, he's just, you know, young. I know what that's like.”

“Whether you believe it or not, so do I, and I think you're right. He's posturing, trying to impress the mutants that he looks up to, like you.”

Peter raises an eyebrow. “Me? No. If that's the case Scott's in more trouble than Hank can dish out because he needs to set his aim a little higher because no one, like, no one should look up to me. I mean, come on, I never even finished high school. I pulled straight C's and D's until I dropped out. My proudest accomplishment is that I can play any video game all the way to the kill screen every time. I'm obnoxious and I talk too fast and I do everything too fast and I run, like, two hundred miles per day and somehow I can't keep twenty pounds off. I'm the son of the guy who tried to kill the president on national television and destroy the world from the ground up, and even that guy wants nothing to do with me. He found out he was my dad and he was like, 'pass' and took off for parts unknown and didn't leave a forwarding address.”

Oh God, shut up, Peter.

But Peter can't shut up because his brain can't shut up so his mouth can't shut up once it really gets going, “I'm not healing up. I'm like a big, messy, gaping wound with gangrene and puss dripping out and I miss my mom and I miss my sister and I even miss my asshole stepdad, who's not really an asshole it's just how we relate, you know? Sometimes I can't sleep and then sometimes I sleep too much and it's sooo hard to wake up. I'm not hungry and then I'm starving and I'm too skinny, then I'm too fat and I feel like I'm going crazy because I didn't know I had so many feeling about things, but now I do and I cry when I watch Disney movies and Bambi's mom dies because that is some sad shit, but at least his dad is there to be like 'follow me, your mother isn't coming back' or whatever he
speak and, like, I totally get why girls starve themselves if they think they're overweight because they think that no one will love them if they're fat or that society won't accept them or that they have to conform to some arbitrary beauty standard and that is not something I thought I would ever like, get. So I feel really, just, not right, like I'll never function correctly again, like maybe I've just been through too much, which is stupid because lots of people have been through way worse and they just turn around and write books about it and make appearances on morning shows and try to kill the president, but me? I sleep for sixteen hours and worry about the calories in a handful of carrot sticks. I am not anyone's idea of a superhero.”

He thinks he's finally done vomiting words all over the professor and he's pretty sure he's made a convincing but pointless argument, because, let's face it, people idolize all sorts of terrible role models, look at him looking for approval from a guy who doesn't want to have anything to do with him, but Xavier just looks at him, like he's been expecting every word Peter just said. He responds to Peter's rambling incoherence with, “That's where you're wrong.”

Peter wants to scream. God, it's so frustrating. Can't Xavier see that he's worthless? Why does everyone keep wanting to turn him into something or make him out to be something he's not?

*Stop that right now.*

Peter stops. He didn't even realize that he was hyperventilating until the professor's voice fills his head.

Xavier takes Peter's hand in his own

“Tell me that no one heard what I just said, because if they did I think I'm going to crawl under my bed and die.”

“No one heard, although perhaps it wouldn't be such a bad thing if they had.”

Peter makes a sound that is half-laugh and half-sob.

“You don't have to pretend to be alright when you're anything but. And if you think that you somehow aren't worth the time it takes Hank to run a few tests or a slight increase in the duties of our kitchen staff, or the time it takes Raven to get you back into condition, then perhaps you'll recall a drug-addled hippie who came to your door asking for help about eleven years ago, and perhaps you'll recall that you helped us free an innocent man. What he did with his freedom afterward is, of course, not your concern. All you did was keep us from being riddled with plastic bullets, a service for which I am eternally grateful. And if that doesn't convince you of your worth then perhaps you'll recall that you saved the lives of Raven and Moira and Hank and more than three dozen other mutants who were in the mansion on the day that En Saba Nur captured me. You sheltered and protected Jean and Kurt the night the mansion was attacked. You took care of your mother when she was dying. You made her last days a time of comfort and rest and joy, rather than a time of pain and isolation. We should all be so lucky to have someone like you nearby when our time comes.”

Peter's nose is running. Hot tears slide down his cheeks. He's breathing through his open mouth to keep the sobs quiet.

“No do you understand now what it is others might see that makes you worth hanging onto?”

Logically, he's willing to concede that the professor might have a point, but Erik's rejection is like an infected splinter in his brain, festering and poisoning everything else, and there's just nothing that Xavier can say on that subject to make it any more bearable, so what he does instead is put two fingers to his temple and show Peter how he sees him, and share with him his unwavering certainty
that he is and will always be loved, even by the father who was foolish enough to abandon his brave, kind, generous, and capable son.

When Xavier drops his fingers away from his temple Peter feels spent, hollow. His ankle hurts, and he just wants to lie down and sleep through dinner. Xavier has mercy on him and lets Peter duck out before he unfreezes the rest of the group, but even though Xavier says that he didn't let anyone hear Peter's inane, self-deprecating speech Peter still feels naked as he climbs up to his room and flops down on his bed. He's still lying there an hour later when he hears a knock at the door.

It's Scott. He's swapped his visor for sunglasses and changed out of his uniform into jeans and a button-down, unlike Peter, who is trying to decide if his super-suit is comfortable enough to sleep in. Scott brought a dinner tray from the kitchen with what looks like pot roast, rice pilaf and some kind of green vegetable. A dinner roll and a glass of milk complete the meal, but Peter has no appetite.

"The professor told me to tell you that you need to eat... and also that he'll know if you try to dump it out."

"Put it on the desk," Peter sighs, staring up at the ceiling.

"I need to apologize."

"You don't. You really, really don't."

"Yeah, okay, but I'm going to anyway. I'm sorry."

"Thanks. Are we done here?"

"Look, I know you don't think I mean it and that you probably think I'm some punk kid who's got no place leading a team when he can barely manage not to shoot himself in the foot every time he opens his mouth-"

"Better than when you open your visor. You wouldn't have any toes left."

"-but I want what's best for everyone, and that includes you. You're part of the team. Hell, you were the team when we first started out. You're the only reason the danger room didn't have us for breakfast the first time Hank shut the door."

Peter remembers. I mean, really, what was Raven thinking spouting some crap about forgetting everything they knew, and really not much more instruction than that, then turning sentinels loose on them? It had been carnage. Kurt got set on fire. "Yeah, I think Raven may have been trying to wing it there. She's really more of an 'infiltrate and disrupt operations' sort of person, not a 'figure out how to use your powers as a cohesive unit' sort of person."

"Yeah, well, you carried the team while we were figuring out how to control our powers. When you left it was like the training wheels were off. We struggled and we got through it but it wasn't easy. Losing you taught us what would happen if we were too dependent on one person, and that was a hard lesson. I mean, Raven warned us and Hank warned us but some things you just have to learn through experience."

"Yeah..." You know what? Peter has nothing. He feels like he's blown a breaker and he just wants Scott to leave so that he can lie awake all night and let his food go cold on the table and wallow in self-pity or grief or whatever sounds good at the time.

Scott sits down on the foot of the bed next to Peter's boots, which are still on Peter's feet. "Look I can't imagine going through what you went through with your mom. I mean, I lost my brother, and
that sucked big time—"

"Yeah, hey, about that, I know we never talked, because what good would it have done, right? But he was just, like, already gone when I got there, otherwise I would have totally gotten him out first."

There's a pause and then Scott says, "I kind of figured. Alex always had to be first, you know?"

"Still, I know it sucked. Sorry."

"Yeah. He was the guy I looked up to, but what happened to him was quick. I can't even bring myself to think about what would happen if my parents got sick. You know my parents are, like, sixty years old, right? I was, like, their menopause baby."

Okay, gross.

"But the fact that you did what you did kind of gives me hope, like, yeah, it's really hard, but I could get through it if I had to and I could come out on the other side. What you're going through now, I understand. The professor and Hank explained it to all of us a while ago. They treated it like a mission briefing, did you know that?"

No, and he wishes he still didn't.

Scott says, "I know that your mutation depends on your metabolism, and when that's out of whack it affects your ability to just, function, you know? So I get it, and I want to help. I'm sorry if I haven't been doing a better job of it."

"Okay. Did the professor explain to you that I'm basically a hormonal train wreck?"

"He might have mentioned it in the briefing."

"Dude, it's awful. I cry at the most random and inappropriate times, and things bug me that never bugged me before, so I guess what I'm saying is that maybe I deserve to be benched until I can get my shit together."

"Do you seriously think the rest of us have our shit together?"

"No, but I wasn't going to say anything."

"Peter, eat something, because I'm not leaving until you do."

Scott's as good as his word and Peter knows it so he gets up and he eats what's on the tray without complaint while Scott tells Peter what set Hank off, besides the obvious bad joke. Peter's weight hasn't budged in a few days and it turns out that Hank's worried Peter's about to turn a corner and he didn't want Peter getting self-conscious just when he's about to need the fuel he's been storing.

"Oh," Peter says dismally. As much as he hates being a butterball he's not exactly looking forward to feeling like the floor of a taxi cab either.

Scott picks up on his misery. "He says it won't be as bad this time around."

"I guess we'll find out."

Hank is right, though, because Hank's a genius, which everybody knew but it bears repeating. Two days after his little breakdown in front of the professor and his heart-to-heart with Scott, Peter's appetite vanishes and he starts to drop weight like it's swimsuit season. Scott shows up at his door every morning like clockwork to drag him out of bed and down to breakfast and call him a slacker if
he doesn't want to go. Not two weeks go by like that and Peter's weight gets all the way down to the one-forties but he knows better by now than to donate his fat clothes, even as he's shakily buckling his belt at the smallest notch and still has room to spare, because as soon as he bottoms out his energy comes back and and he's beating Scott to the dining room every day, filling up his plate and filling out his super suit like it's his job.

While Peter's gaining Hank convinces him to try regulating his meals and sleep schedule down to the minute and calorie. He's hoping that the adjustment will convince Peter's body that he's not in mortal danger anymore. It sounds tedious and militarized, like something Frank would like, but at this point Peter's willing to try anything if it will help him feel... not like what he's feeling now, which is three-quarters numb and one-quarter broken beyond repair. Hank's new routine is comforting in a way but also a unique kind of torture. Some days Peter's okay and he eats everything that the cook sets in front of him and some days his legs shake when he gets out of bed and he can barely manage a few bites at breakfast before falling asleep at the table.

Hank also sets Peter up with his own solo training routine, usually outdoors to minimize the risk of property damage. Training in the danger room was easier because there he always spent a good amount of time just hanging out, waiting for one of his teammates to need him for something. Out in the field with just him and one or two other X-Men around to supervise, he's forced to increase his stamina.

September becomes October and Peter's weight tops out at one hundred seventy-four pounds before sinking back down to the one-fifties. He spends more of his highly regulated days famished but energized, and he has fewer mood swings. He hardly thinks about his dad at all.

Well, except for one time.

Right before Halloween the professor and Raven come across some vague evidence that a small, abandoned building south of Tijuana is or was being used as a lab for mutant experimentation. It's not much of a lead but at the same time it's enough that they can't ignore it. The professor deploys the X-Men for a search-and-rescue, and nobody but nobody does search-and-rescue like Peter Maximoff. He's pretty excited to get out of the house and he spends the flight chewing gum and talking too much and too loudly and, when the other X-Men get sick of him, burning through the batteries on his Walkman, listening to Rush's *Grace Under Pressure* over and over because a) he just picked it up and it's awesome so b) it's the only cassette he thought to bring. Even Jubilee looks like she's ready to crack the tape in half by the time they cross into Mexican air space.

Their target is in the hills but the closest stable landing spot that Hank can find is over a mile away. As he brings the jet down Jean's frowning, unable to sense at this distance if the building is occupied. Peter volunteers to head in and do a little recon and Scott agrees but tells him to stop if he senses trouble. If the mutant kidnappers or someone else really were using the building as a lab they might have stun guns or control collars or other anti-mutant technology and Peter's like “Sure thing, boss,” then he's up and out before the ramp is fully lowered. When he gets to the target he finds the structure, a small, square building standing by itself at the end of a dusty road, clearly abandoned and quiet as a tomb. Most of the windows are broken and the floor is thick with dust, but there's a smell wafting up through the floor boards and when Peter finds and opens a hatch in one of the closets the stench almost knocks him flat, but Peter takes out his pocket strobe and climbs down anyway.

The hidden basement is a morgue, and in the time it takes his strobe light to illuminate the entire room, he's sure that all of the bodies belong to mutants. One has abnormally elongated limbs. Another is green-skinned and purple-haired and has pointed ears like Kurt's. Some are still strapped to tables or in restraints, left to rot where they died, others are laid out on metal tables, naked and splayed open like frogs for dissection. Some are covered by sheets, and when Peter looks at them a
peculiar kind of mania grips him. Maybe he's just overcome by Neil Peart's deeply upsetting lyrics or
the resonant vocals of Geddy Lee but before he can stop himself he's tearing through the place,
ripping sheets off of corpses and making himself look at the face of each and every mutant who died
here, suddenly filled with dread that one of them will turn out to be his father, but none of them are.

None of them are.

Peter is done vomiting by the time the rest of the X-Men arrive. He's scuffed some dirt over the
evidence and he's leaning back against he white stucco exterior of the building, trying to look like the
wall isn't the only thing holding him up. It's got to be ninety degrees out here, with the midday sun
beating down, but Peter can't stop shivering.

Kurt is the first to reach Peter, followed quickly by Hank with his bare, blue prehensile feet.

“Hey,” Peter greets them. He's going for casual but his voice is shaking too much to pull it off, “So,
you're not going to want to go in there.”

Hank only goes in as far as he needs to to confirm what Peter says. After that Scott and Jean head off
to notify the appropriate authorities and ensure that the dead mutants get a proper burial and some
families who were missing loved ones get closure. As missions go it's not a success but it's better
than nothing.

Hank treats Peter for shock and dehydration on the jet, and it is a long, silent flight home, with Peter's
Walkman sitting, unused, on the jumpseat next to him. Peter thinks about breaking the tape himself,
because he doesn't think he'll ever be able to listen to it again without remembering the things he saw
and smelled in that basement. Somehow he misses the mission debrief and wakes up on Halloween
morning in his own bed, showered and clean and wearing fresh sweatpants and a t-shirt, with no
memory of anything that happened between the jet and his bedroom, but perfect recollection of that
basement and absolutely zero desire to watch *Dawn of the Dead* with the teenagers after all the
younger kids have gone to bed like he promised.

Peter immediately seeks out the professor, who reassures Peter that he's not about to be removed
from the team for having a stress reaction to encountering a basement full of corpses, “You may be a
mutant, but your humanity is intact,” he says and for some reason that strikes Peter as the funniest
God-damned thing he's ever heard so Peter starts cracking up, and once he starts he can't stop. Pretty
soon he's doubled over on the couch in the professor's office, wheezing with laughter, eyes watering,
unable to speak, with Xavier just watching him patiently. A couple of kids wander by to speak to the
professor about whatever but then they see Peter in his pajamas and socks, cackling his head off
while the professor looks on, and they decide that it's a bad time.

Although Peter wouldn't have thought that a burst of hysterical laughter in the middle of a serious
conversation was going to convince Xavier that Peter's anywhere near stable enough to be a
functioning member of an internationally-known team of super-powered mutants, apparently the
opposite is true.

Peter's laughter eventually tapers off, leaving him so tear-streaked and wrung-out that he doesn't
want to show his face at breakfast, but the professor insists, and once Peter's eaten he does feel less
punchy and more grounded. He gets dressed. He helps around the house even though his stomach is
sore from laughing. He teaches his class even though the kids in their mummy outfits and vampire
teeth put him on edge. He shows up for his training sessions with Raven even though Raven is a
maniac and she works him harder than she has all week, just like he knew she would, because he
knows without her having to tell him that all he can do is move forward.

He still doesn't watch any zombie movies, though.
Once Peter's cortisol levels fall consistently within normal range and he shows up for his weigh-in for two weeks straight and the numbers don't change by more than a pound or two Hank declares him fully fit for duty. Peter's weight has settled in at about one-fifty-eight, which is lighter than he was initially and on the low side of average for his height. Hank thinks it's because Peter's developed a pretty regimented eating pattern, which, hey, that was the plan, right? But Hank grimaces and says that it might be a little too regimented and tells Peter to try eating what and how he likes now that he's feeling better but Peter's in the zone now and it's oddly satisfying to be completely in control of what goes into his body, especially since there are so many other things - other people - in his life that he has no control over. He tells Hank that he worries too much and that he's going to give himself an ulcer. Then one of the kids has a birthday party and Peter can't bring himself to eat a slice of cake, him, Captain Sugar Rush, Commander Cupcake, First Lieutenant Frosted Flakes. So maybe Hank has a point but it's not anything that Peter feels compelled to address because he finally feels like he's maybe getting back to something resembling normal, and his obsessive (says Hank) diet is a big part of that. Peter has started to feel a little less like a melted candle and a little more like a piece of pottery, hardened by the fires he's passed through but still brittle.

Hank's biggest concern as far as Peter's health goes seems to be his heart, since fluctuations in weight can put stress on even the strongest heart, so Peter sits through Hank strapping electrodes to his chest and making him run on a special treadmill. Everything looks good, but Hank has to confess that he still has some unanswered questions when it comes to Peter's physiology and Peter can't believe his ears because he might be the most-studied mutant at the school by this point, or at least the most generous blood donor. Whether or not his changes in health will come back to haunt him later, Hank can't say. Speaking of which (and here's where Peter hears a record scratch in his head) Hank has been meaning to talk to him about something that came up in one of his early blood draws, the ones he took before Peter even left to go look after his mom. Hank found some sort of gene mutation in Peter's blood work, and by itself it doesn't mean much, but taking into account the history of cancer in Peter's family and now that Peter thinks about it he's pretty sure that's what got Grandma too. (Grandpa died in a motorcycle accident because he was a dumbass and he loved speed. Peter thinks he and Gramps would have gotten along great.) But the point is that it puts Peter at a higher risk of getting pancreatic cancer too, so Hank wants Peter to make sure he gets screened regularly even if he leaves the school one day because one of the reasons that pancreatic cancer is so deadly is because there are pretty much no symptoms until it's too late. And that's fucking sobering and Peter immediately places a rare phone call to Lindy and makes her promise to get screened too on pain of Peter running out to her school and dragging her to the Student Health Center or wherever it is that they test for this stuff and he doesn't let her off the phone until she agrees. Then it turns out that genetic screening isn't exactly something you can just walk in and demand from the school nurse. Peter presents the problem to Hank and Hank hands Peter an empty plastic tube with a cap and tells him to have Lindy spit into it and that's how Peter finds himself running from Rhode Island to Westchester with a tube of his sister's spit in the breast pocket of his silver jacket. After all of that it turns out that Lindy didn't inherit the same gene mutation that Peter did and that alone makes the trip worthwhile.

November brings a sudden and massive snowstorm. Peter lets the kids take a break from team sports and build a snow fort and have huge snowball fights that leave them too tired to make their usual amount of trouble. Peter runs in the snow, enjoying the crunching sound underneath his feet and the way he slides, like, a hundred and fifty extra feet when he stops. He moves so fast that the flakes freeze in mid-air for him. When he's outside for training and on missions Peter's cheeks and chin and forehead get wind-burned and red. His lips are perpetually chapped. Hank worries that he's going to get frostbite so he suggests Peter wear a ski mask, and it's not a bad idea, a little suffocating at first, but Peter gets used to it.

December is pretty much a non-stop holiday because there are Jewish kids and Christian kids at the
school and Xavier celebrates Boxing Day. During Hanukkah Peter spins a dreidel with the kids and helps them light candles and maybe thinks of Erik for a second because this is probably a really important time for him wherever he is and he wonders if his dad went off and started a whole new family and maybe they're sitting around right now eating latkes and exchanging Hanukkah gifts but, really, he has no way of knowing.

He has no way of knowing, that is, until Lexie tugs on his sleeve one day while he's out monitoring what passes for gym class when the kids are too excited about the holidays to concentrate on organized activities and instead they're just running in circles trying not to get caught shoving handfuls of snow down each other's pants.

"Somebody's on the phone for you," Lexie whispers in his ear when he leans down to hear her tiny voice. Her lizard tongue flicks his ear on the 's'.

Peter hands the kids over to Scott and takes the call in the kitchen, thinking it's Lindy and trying not to worry too much before he knows for sure what she needs.

"Hey," he says into the receiver.

There's a pause and then, "Hello, Peter."

Peter freezes, worried that his mind is playing tricks on him and this is just some random person calling who sounds like his dad and he's going to start talking to him about the benefits of a comprehensive life insurance policy or something and Peter's silent for so long that it gives Erik Lehnsherr (and it's definitely Erik Lehnsherr) the opportunity to ask, "How are you?"

"Good," Peter answers automatically. He thinks about how he looked the last time his dad saw him. "Back in my old Levi's."

"You're well, then?"

"Yeah," Peter says. He feels like he hit his head and he's imagining this conversation. "You?"

"I'm well. Thank you for asking."

Why does his dad have to be so polite? Before he picked up the receiver Peter would have been able to think of about a hundred smart remarks but now that he's got Erik on the line the only thing he can do is make civil conversation.

"I owe you an apology, Peter. It was never my intention to stay away this long."

Peter throws his head back in agony. He wants to hate the guy so bad but Erik is making it impossible. "Yeah?"

"I set out to do something that has great meaning for me, however it is proving to be more of a challenge than I thought it would be when I set out."

"Are you in jail?" Peter asks. It's Erik after all, so it begs the question even though Peter kind of doubts that his dad would be held anywhere that allows phone calls and even if he were Peter doesn't think anybody's invented a phone that can work without metal components.

"No. I am not in prison."

"Okay," Peter says. "Where are you?"
“I can't tell you.”

Oh my God. Well, least he knows the motherfucker is alive and not rotting in a basement somewhere and that's something and he'll take it and be glad but he'll be damned if he's going to let on.

“Why?” Peter snaps. He knows he sounds like a pissy little kid but he doesn't care.

“This is something I must do alone.” Erik says, slowly and quietly, “Stay where you're safe, please.”

And where's that, exactly? Peter's not even safe from his own body, let alone terrorists or meteors or paper cuts. What does Erik think he's saving him from?

Peter finally connects with the pent-up rage he'd been trying to feel earlier, “What was all that 'ask for help when you need it', 'no man is an island' bullshit?”

“No man is an island. That's why I called. I wanted to hear your voice,” he says, and his voice trembles a little, like he's under pressure or like he's fighting to hold something back. “I needed to reassure myself that I'm not doing all of this for nothing.”

That shuts Peter up. His chest suddenly aches with something like fear or sympathy.

There's a long enough silence that Peter notices a really obvious absence of footsteps and chatter in the hall outside of the kitchen. Peter knows that his conversation isn't private, probably hasn't been from the start, the only question is how not private.

“Don't try to look for me,” Erik pleads, almost desperately, like he's worried Peter's traced the call and dropped the phone and he's already two counties away. “Promise me that you won't.”

Peter stays quiet, trying to pick out background noises on his dad's end, anything that might give him a clue about where he's calling from. It's long distance, that much is clear from the amount of static and how quiet his dad's voice is on the other end of line but other than that there's no traffic noise, no ocean sounds or fog horns and definitely no newsboys hawking copies of the Chicago Tribune or the Ottowa Times or whatever.

“Peter...” Erik prompts, probably because he's caught wise to what Peter's doing.

“Fine, I promise!” Peter snaps. Doesn't mean he can't break his promise later.

Erik closes the conversation with, “I love you very much, Peter. I want you to know that.”

Peter stays silent for a few beats, and then a few more, worried that some kind of emotion is going to come out and reveal more than he wants to. Finally he opens his mouth and practically shouts, “Don't do anything stupid!” right before he hears the quiet 'click' of the receiver being set down, and a dial tone that seems to go on forever.

When Peter sets the handset back on the cradle he does it very gently and then breathes for a few seconds, resting his forehead on the wall, feeling both better and worse off than he was before he picked up the receiver.

When he turns around Jean's behind him, one hand outstretched like she's about to lay it on Peter's shoulder, but Peter's not in the mood to be comforted, so he buzzes past Jean and the three or four mini-mutants lingering in the hall and tries to put Erik Lehnsherr out of his mind so that he can focus on keeping the kids from trapping Scott in an igloo until spring. Looking at you, Bobby.

Peter keeps his trap shut about the phone conversation with his dad... for about three hours. Then he
finds himself making excuses to cross in front of the professor's office door just, you know, checking
to see if he's busy, deciding that he is even if the professor is just grading papers or reading a book
and things go on like that for about twenty minutes until Xavier finally drops his pen and calls out,
“Peter!” and he doesn't even bother using his telepathy because he knows Peter's only, like, eight feet
away.

Peter reluctantly slouches into the office, hands in his jeans pockets, chin tucked and shoulders
rounded forward.

“Is there something on your mind?”

Telepath humor. Nice.

“No, I just,” Peter clears his throat to buy himself time and like, why does he need to do that? He's
got all the time in the world, so why does he feel like there just isn't enough of it all of a sudden?
“Have you ever... looked in on Erik, you know, just to see what he's up to?”

“Are you asking me to?”

“No,” Peter snaps. He's looking everywhere but at the professor, like Xavier's going to steal his soul
if they lock eyes or something. “I just...” but he can't 'just' anything, so he gives up.

Xavier saves him. “I spoke to Erik over the phone on the afternoon of his departure from
Richmond.” He's talking slowly, steady and calm, like Peter's some skittish alley cat he's trying not to
frighten, or like he's giving Peter time to stop him if he doesn't want to hear. But Peter does want to
hear, even if he wishes he didn't. “Erik asked for my friendship. He asked for my trust, and he asked
me to look after his son.”

Peter huffs out a breath and looks away, biting his lip and shaking his head.

Xavier goes on, “Then asked me for privacy.”

“So you never... ?”

“I'm a man of my word, and I've kept my word as best I can. Also, I have learned to temper my
curiosity in regards to your father. I have a school to run and a somewhat precarious alliance with the
CIA to maintain. Building bridges between human and mutantkind has been an important part of my
life's work, but it makes balancing my personal and professional relationships somewhat of a
challenge. In matters pertaining to Erik Lehnsherr, I'm afraid plausible deniability has been my
crutch.”

Holy shit, Xavier doesn't want to know what Erik's up to, which makes sense because Erik
Lehnsherr is not exactly famous for spending his spare time sunbathing in the Bahamas.

Peter looks at Xavier out of the corner of his eye and finds the professor studying him, “However, if
there's some way that I can reassure you-”

“No,” Peter says. “Thanks for- ” he stops himself. He looks at Xavier and sees something he hasn't
noticed before: sincerity. Like, the professor cares. About him. Specifically.

Huh.

Sure, the professor says he cares about shit all the time but Peter's always been like 'yeah, okay'
because he took it to mean that the professor cares about mutantkind in general and individual
mutants specifically if it benefits world peace or mutant rights or whatever side project Xavier's got
going on and he never let himself assume that Xavier really gave a crap about him personally, but for
some reason he does, and Peter sees that now.

“Thanks,” Peter says, trying to mirror the professor's sincerity, probably failing, and then taking off
before Xavier can reply.

Toward the end of the month the house really starts to empty out. Some of the kids have families to
visit. Scott spends about five days with his parents and he takes Jean with him because Jean isn't
comfortable around her own family, or rather, they're not comfortable around her, and that sucks, but
at least she has a place to go, two places really. She could stay at the mansion like Ororo and Kurt
and Calvin and the Professor and the list goes on, so could Peter, but Frank surprises him with an
invitation to spend Christmas with Lindy at his place, and Peter surprises himself by going.

Christmastime at the mansion was all about candlelight and Christmas music on the record player and
curling up in one of the living rooms on a leather sofa with a fire blazing in the enormous fireplace.

Christmas at Frank's house is bright and crowded and noisy. There are little kids everywhere. Peter
and Lindy are quickly roped into babysitting while Frank's sisters and their husbands collapse
gratefully onto the sofa and drink wine. Frank's family is surprisingly not put off by Peter's mutation,
except maybe Dawn, who is Frank's second wife, but Peter wins her over by doing all the dishes and
cleaning the kitchen in two seconds. Afterward she smacks Frank with a soggy dish towel and says,
“See! Other men clean house!” but it's playful and Frank just hooks an arm around her waist and
kisses her neck.

Peter didn't know what to get his step-family gift-wise so he does most of his shopping the night
before Christmas about an hour before the stores close. Mostly he gets wine for the adults and toys
for the kids except for the earrings for Lindy that Ororo helped him pick out weeks ago. He thinks
they're too big and too shiny but Lindy loves them and she puts them on with the box still sitting in
her lap and Peter has to admit that with her curly hair down they actually look good. Peter didn't
expect any gifts but Frank got Peter Nikes, which is cool because Peter is constantly wearing out
shoes but even more cool because Peter hasn't gotten a Christmas present from Frank since the mid
nineteen-seventies.

Frank's sisters are local so the only ones staying at the house are Frank, Dawn, their daughter Misty,
Peter, and Lindy. After the girls go to sleep Frank and Peter play pool in the basement. Frank knows
Peter is a notorious cheat at most games from way back but somehow he still thinks that he can't
cheat at pool, which isn't true. He could totally cheat, but he doesn't. Frank drinks brandy and they
talk about cars. Peter's never been particularly interested because they're too slow, but he read a lot
about them when he was younger and he was actually trying to impress Frank, so he's not a total
ignoramus. He knows an internal combustion engine from a diesel engine. He even reads Popular
Mechanics... sometimes... when he's bored. Talking about cars leads to talking about racing which
leads to talking about numbers, and somehow Peter ends up talking about the speed trials that he's
been conducting with Hank and when he tells Frank that his top sustainable speed is two hundred
and twenty miles per hour Frank's eyes kind of get an excited gleam in his eye like Peter probably
gets when he's listening to the radio and hears the opening chords of Tom Sawyer except it's a little
different because he thinks Frank might actually be proud of him. That's, well, it's not an unpleasant
feeling but before things can get awkward Peter tells him all about the professor's classic car
collection, which Peter thinks is a little weird for him to have because a lot of them have a clutch and
the professor can't use his feet, so it's not like he gets the full experience but whatever. Eccentric rich
dudes, right?

Then Peter blurts out, “You should come up and check out the school sometime.”

Frank looks at him, surprised.
“I mean, if you're ever in New York. It's a pretty cool place. It's kind of secluded, because, you know, it would have to be, but New Salem's not far away, so you can't get bored, not that it's easy to get bored in a school filled with mutants.”

Peter knows he's maybe crossed the line, reading a little too much into their relationship, which wasn't his intention. He just thought, Frank likes cars, Xavier has cars, maybe he'd like to look at the cars.

After an awkward beat Frank says, “Thank you. It's quite the trip. I'm not sure what I'd do up there.”

What does he do here?

“Look at teeth,” Peter says. “Seriously, we have like, twenty-five kids up there who have probably never seen a dentist in their lives, and the ones who do get regular check-ups have to go like, forty miles away to do it. And do you know how hard it is to find a dentist who will treat mutants? It's pretty freaking hard. Some of the kids have fangs.”

Despite himself Frank actually looks a little intrigued, uncomfortable, but intrigued. “I'd have to think about it, talk it over with Dawn.”

It's his way of declining but Peter says, “Sure. No big deal.”

“Most people really underestimate the impact that poor dental hygiene has on their health.”

Uh huh.

They play another round and they keep their conversation focused mostly on the game. Frank pours himself another brandy and eventually gets around to asking if Peter's heard from Erik.

“No a peep,” Peter lies to save himself the effort.

Frank goes all still and says dangerously, “The next time I see that bastard I'm going to put rat poison in his scotch.”

Peter knows it's probably the brandy talking but it's sort of heartwarming to think that his ex-step-dad likes him enough to commit murder on his behalf. He doesn't want him to, of course, but like the blindingly orange scarf that he got from one of Frank's sisters, it's the thought that counts.

When it's time for Peter and Lindy to get back to their respective schools Peter collects a hug from Dawn and Misty and a manly pat on the shoulder from Frank and offers hugs and a manly handshake in return. He doesn't reiterate his invitation because Frank hates being reminded. He does things when he wants to and not before. It was one of the wedges that drove him and Mom apart, and why Frank is his ex-step-dad. That thought is like catching his toe on the coffee table, and it helps bring him out of his warm holiday cocoon more than the sharp, cold breath of wind on his face as he runs Lindy to the train station.

To be continued...

Feedback is welcome and appreciated.
I fully admit that this part drove me nuts, or rather, I drove myself nuts because I kept finding parts that I wanted to rewrite while I was trying to post. I hope the result was alright. Thank you again for reading.
Memory

Chapter Summary

Peter discovers the reason Erik left.

Chapter Notes

Welcome back. Big thanks again this week for all of the awesome feedback this past week and special thanks to TeaPartyoftheDead for recommending I read Quicksilver: No Surrender. I love it! Three of five volumes are out now, with the final two due to be released in August and September. It's a character study of Pietro Maximoff and yeah it's not the Peter Maximoff from the X-Men films but even if they don't have the same history they have a lot in common, so if you're into the comic books at all I recommend that run.

Well, here we go. I'm a little nervous putting this part out, but here it is and I hope you enjoy.

After the holidays things get pretty quiet at Professor Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters. It's less the tense kind of waiting-for-the-next-home-invasion-or-terrorist-attack kind of quiet and more of the snowed-in, sleepy, gets-dark-too-early-in-the-day kind of quiet where the whole world is tired and hungover from the holidays and months of rushing around stressed out from Christmas shopping or saving mutantkind from terrorists with control collars and tranq darts. Everybody seems to just want to crawl back under the covers and hit the snooze button until spring rolls around, and that goes double for Peter, who suddenly finds himself in a pretty major funk.

The X-Men haven't had any missions to speak of for a couple of weeks. Aside from Peter's normal duties and routine training he can't seem to find much to keep his mind occupied and when his mind isn't occupied it likes to dwell on the persistent absence of a certain metalokenetic dickhead, not that Peter cares if he comes back or not, because he doesn't. He's too tired to care. He's too tired to do anything. He can't seem to get himself out of bed for morning PT and he yawns his way through danger room sessions and falls asleep at the dinner table but before he can drown in his seafood bisque Hank pulls him aside for a physical and a blood panel. Peter retaliates for his latest puncture wounds by rearranging Hank's student files in ascending order rather than descending order (that'll show him) then falling asleep while Hank reads his test results.

"I said, Your blood work seems okay!" Hank repeats, swatting him on the shoulder with his clipboard. He waits until Peter forces his eyes open before he continues, "It's not stellar. You're starting to show signs of iron deficiency, and your magnesium level is on the low side. Is anything bothering you?"

"No," Peter answers, way too quickly.

"Have you been experiencing any other symptoms?" Hank specifies. "Are you having any trouble
“With your powers?”

Peter shakes his head. His powers haven't given out on him since just after Mom passed away.

“You were extremely exhausted then. Your body was shutting down. I don't think that's what's happening here. Not yet anyway. Have you changed your diet at all?”

Peter hasn't, but he also hasn't adjusted it for the weather, and Hank thinks that's the problem. “Your body has to work harder to stay warm in the winter.” Never mind that Peter never wears fewer than three layers even indoors in the winter unless he's a) showering or b) covered in at least that many blankets or c) wearing his super suit and even then he can usually manage to sneak a pair of long johns underneath.

“I don't remember ever having this problem before,” Peter yawns.

“You were living in Virginia every winter before this one. It usually doesn't get as cold there, and when it did you were probably instinctively eating more to compensate. It never came up because you weren't following a diet like you are now.” Then Hank tells him his super simple solution: “You need to eat more.” Peter's down to one fifty-four from one fifty-eight, not that it's obvious from looking at him. Layered as he is in sweatshirts and jackets Peter doesn't think anybody would be able to tell a difference even if he sank all the way down to the one-forties. “A few thousand extra calories should perk you up. It doesn't matter where it comes from.” Like he thinks Peter's got a case of Ding Dongs hidden under his bed (he totally doesn't) and he's giving Peter the go-ahead. After considering Peter for a second he adds, “Actually, it would be even better if you tried to go up a few more pounds, shoot for somewhere between one sixty and one seventy.”

The idea of trying to eat enough to put on weight is exhausting and depressing but Peter blows out a breath and says, “Okay,” and he has every intention of following Hank's instructions just, you know, sleep first. Then Hank shakes him awake at about eight a.m. the next day and says, “This won't work if you sleep through breakfast,” and Peter says, “I know that, asshole,” or he thinks he does before he falls back asleep. The next thing he knows Hank has him by the upper arm and the scruff of his neck (or the collar of his shirt, plus some skin) and he's hauling him downstairs and Peter kind of wishes that he had a thick hide and fur and Hank says, “I can fix that for you.” But on second thought that's okay. He'll just keep “borrowing” Scott's sweatshirts.

Once Peter gets some food in him and starts moving around he starts to feel more awake and warmer, but, “You're going to have to fight to keep up with your body's metabolism,” Hank tells him. “Consider it homework,” and it's probably a bad time to tell Hank that Peter hasn't turned in a single scrap of homework since fifth grade.

Peter stares down at the remains of his breakfast: half a slice of toast and some scraps of scrambled eggs that he's been pushing around with his fork, suddenly overwhelmed because he's realized that he hates eating like, so much. It sucks and he wishes that he didn't have to do it.

Peter almost doesn't catch it, but one second Hank is staring down at his notes on the dining room table and the next his eyes sort of lose focus like he's been interrupted or he's listening to something far away. Across the room Xavier is sipping a cup of tea, innocently looking off in the opposite direction.

Hank says to Peter, “Maybe you should take a breather. Just a day or two off. Sleep in, listen to music, play video games.”

Peter cocks his head at Hank like, ‘Really? You're going to pass that off as your own idea?’ but what he says is, “Dude, that sounds awful.” Then he realizes that Hank just described every day in Peter's
life from seventy-three to eighty-three minus the occasional odd job or trip to the store, and would you look at that? Peter's all grown up. He'd ask himself when that happened but he already knows the answer.

Hank's opening his mouth like he's going to give Peter some more suggestions about how to spend his free time but before the professor has him wasting music appreciation lessons on Scott or building snowmen with Ororo (which is actually way fun because Ororo makes the best snowballs but also, brrrrr) he says, “Maybe I'll duck out and see Lindy. She's been bugging me to come up to her school and try out the Chinese place near campus,” which isn't true except that Lindy always likes it when he comes to visit because he's sort of famous or at least interesting enough that his visits lend her notoriety among her friends and dorm-mates and mutants for whatever reason seem to be generally well-received at institutes of higher education. Also he knows that there's a Chinese place near campus because there's always a Chinese place near campus and would be even if that campus were on the Moon because college students eat like horses and Peter has a pretty loose interpretation of the word 'near'.

Hank (and the professor) would prefer him to stick close but he (they) eventually cave because maybe some fresh air will do Peter good after being cooped up in the house most of the day every day and Hank reminds Peter to stick to the main roads because icy conditions blah blah blah and super speed does not Peter an all-terrain vehicle make, which Peter knows because he's traveled in icy conditions before and can tell Hank from experience that road rash at two hundred miles an hour is no joke.

Hank makes him promise to eat before he leaves and then promise to order at least two entrees when he's there and get an appetizer and-

“Do you think you'll ever have kids, Hank?”

“Excuse me?”

“Little scaly, furry blue monsters that hang off the chandelier and mouth off at you and treat you like shit no matter how much you do for them?”

Then the circumspect bastard says, “I think you just described my plans for this afternoon,” and Peter leaves the mansion with a smile on his face.

His smile doesn't last though, because he ends up waiting for Lindy on the steps of her dorm, pacing and freezing his ass off until one of the girls from the dorm to gets creeped out by the gray-haired guy just hanging around outside and asks him if he's looking for somebody in a voice that says she's pretty sure what he's really looking for is a slap in the face, but when he says Lindy's name something seems to click for her and she says that Lindy had to stay after her physics class to make up a quiz because she was sick with the flu last week.

Peter finds Lindy where her dorm-mate said he would, and he watches her through the narrow window in the door, head bent over her desk, brown curls hiding her face as she writes furiously in her little blue exam booklet, grateful that at least he has a warm place to pace. He makes sure that Lindy sees him through the glass when she gets up to leave, and when she does she runs over to him and gives him a big hug and asks him, “What's wrong?”

He wraps an arm around her and shakes his head and says, “Nothing. I can't drop in on my favorite sister?”

“I'm your only sister,” she reminds him. Then she pulls him into the classroom to introduce him to her physics professor who is a) very attractive and b) recently separated or divorced judging by the
indentation on the third finger of her left hand and c) absolutely thrilled to meet a mutant whose powers line up with her field of study. She asks Peter some questions about how his mutation works and uses words like 'inertia' and 'velocity' and wants a demonstration and Peter's happy to oblige but he wants to take Lindy to dinner first and Lindy, who was eye-rolling behind her professor's back the entire time, waits until they're outside to say, “Don't,” and he has to pretend that he has no idea what she's talking about but then he can't stop thinking about it during dinner.

Peter finds his promised Chinese restaurant and Lindy brings him up to speed about who's being a bitch to whom in the dorms and which RA will let them slide if she catches them smoking and how she's liking Crew team and what Frank is up to and Lindy says, “He wants to visit the school.”

Peter frowns, “Why?”

Lindy rolls her eyes, “You invited him, remember?”

Oh yeah, he totally did but “I didn't think he'd actually come.”

“Dawn got on his case. She fell in love with you at Christmas. She saw you on TV and she convinced him to go. Did you know you were on TV?”

“No.” Which is sort of a lie because news reporters and the X-Men seem to cross paths a lot and Peter can't help but think that it's sort of intentional on the part of the professor, like he's trying to get them good press. But whatever, Peter's happy to let Scott puff out his chest like a rooster and field questions from the reporters while Peter waits by the jet or plays double dutch with the neighborhood kids, if the neighborhood is still safe enough for playground games after the X-Men are finished and the paramedics have cleared everybody. The one time Peter did catch himself on TV he was hanging around in the background, leaning against a wall, sharing a pack of gum with Jubilee, nothing anybody'd want to see on the cover of *Time* magazine.

“So can he come or not? He's thinking summer. His practice is slower then and he says he wouldn't mind getting out of the humidity. Is it cool?”

“Hell yeah, it's cool,” Peter says. It's perfect. The kids who need the most dental attention are the ones who don't have a place to go over the summer anyway. “I'll talk to the professor. Tell Frank not to forget his scaler because some of the kids have serious tarter buildup.”

Peter's sort of picking at his dinner, trying to picture Frank hip-deep in mutant ankle-biters and he catches Lindy staring at him thoughtfully while she twirls a single noodle around her chopsticks.

“What?”

“You look so skinny.”

Wow. If she weren't his sister he would *almost* take offense.

She says, “It feels weird to say but I miss you being heavier. I know you think it sucked but to me it just meant you weren't going anywhere. You were solid, like, permanent. You know what I mean?”

He'd never thought of it that way but he can kind of see that. According to Hank the extra weight he'd been carrying had been his body's way of taking out an insurance policy, just another secondary mutation, something to keep him alive when he eventually collapsed.

“I'm still not going anywhere,” Peter says.

Then she cuts through all of his shit, like his heart is a dark place and she's the only one with a
“I know you're not alright. I know you're still upset about your dad leaving. I know you were sick and you never said anything.” Raven. “Maybe you didn't want me to worry, but after Mom... I would die if anything happened to you, okay? I would die.” Her eyes are shining. She looks like she can't decide if she wants to slap him or hug him.

Her confession leaves Peter speechless because he cares about Lindy, far more than he cares about himself. He'd do anything for her: take a bullet, jump in front of a moving train, whatever, but when it comes to himself... he's a lot less devoted to his own welfare, and he hadn't really thought about how she'd feel if he suddenly wasn't around anymore.

Peter stares at her so long that she smiles as she wipes her tears away with the palm of her hand and says, “There's a storm coming in tonight. The wind is really howling out there. Physics says that faster is lighter. Eat something so you don't blow away.”

He does. Peter cleans his plate and orders a second entree because it makes Lindy happy and because he promised Hank. Lindy's got practice at six a.m. so they don't stay out too late. When they hug goodnight Lindy holds on like she's afraid to let go.

Peter starts back towards Westchester but backtracks to Lindy's school because she gave him too much to think about and he doesn't want to think. He needs a distraction so he casually swings by the science department just to see if Lindy's professor is still there and if she still wants a demonstration. She is and she does, and yes, she's very impressed by the vibrating thing he does with his hands.

Peter's back to the mansion by eleven forty-five, which is past curfew for the younger mutants but Peter's an X-Man and X-Men don't have curfews although they're supposed to be better at communicating their whereabouts and so on and Peter might have lost track of time somewhere between dinner and his physics lesson so he's not totally surprised when he strolls into the foyer at cold-and-dark o'clock and finds Xavier sitting in his wheelchair, right smack in the middle of the room underneath the chandelier like he's been staged. That's when Peter kind of mentally throws up his hands, like 'You got me' but Xavier only sits there, straight and authoritative and says, “Peter, we have a problem,” and yeah, Peter's willing to admit that he should have called and also it's probably not totally kosher that he slept with his sister's physics teacher, like, it could be awkward for Lindy if any other the faculty or the students found out and there might be questions about favoritism (if she enjoyed his demonstration as much as he thinks she did) and Lindy might have to repeat the class with a different professor. So that's where Peter's mind goes first and it takes him a second, or really, like, a quarter of a second because it's him to reconcile his expectations with reality because he's noticed the empty hall and the total lack of activity and sure, it's late, but there's usually someone around, but it's dead silent like everyone's been told to chill out in their rooms, which seems weird but then Peter replays Xavier's words in his head. That's when he realizes that he's being handled, and okay, Peter sort of understands because he's always been a little... mercurial, but he's never thought of himself as dangerous except in the way that all mutants are dangerous when you come right down to it but Xavier is looking at him like he's a lake of gasoline and somebody's got a lighter and there's only one type of Zippo worth clearing the hall for and he says, “He came back.” It's not a guess. He doesn't need to wait for an answer to know that he's hit the nail on the head, and both he and Xavier know he's not talking about The Cat in the Hat. “When?”

Xavier gives it to him straight, “About an hour ago. I attempted to contact you using Cerebro, however you were... indisposed at the time.”

Ah ha. Super. Peter gets laid for the first time in like, a hundred years, and the professor had a front row seat. He'd feel embarrassed if he could. “Where is he?” Peter asks. His legs have turned into jelly and asking is easier than jetting around the mansion, waking up all the kids, playing the quickest game of hide-and-seek that the mansion has ever seen and the mansion has seen a lot of hide and
“Downstairs.”

“Is he... okay?” Peter asks, because he's having flashes of missing fingernails and yellow bruises around his dad's neck that were still visible weeks after he was tortured.

“He's unharmed.”

Cool. Cool. Well then, “Did he have a nice trip? Bring back any souvenirs? One of those jiggly hula girls for the jet's dashboard? The severed heads of world leaders?”

The professor, all patience says, “Not precisely. He's brought someone with him: a young woman, a mutant. Her abilities are quite unusual, and potentially very dangerous, both to herself and those around her. Your father went to great lengths to find her and bring her here.” The professor says all this like he's trying to get some kind of point across, like this is more important than Peter realizes.

“Oh,” Peter says, not understanding, thinking, That's where he's been this whole time? “She must be pretty special.”

“Peter,” the professor says, “I'm afraid that you've been the victim of a serious ethical violation on behalf of one of your teammates.”

While Peter is trying to demystify that sentence, Jean steps off the elevator near the stairwell and right away Peter knows that she's been crying. Oh, her eyes are dry, sure, but they're red and puffy and so is her nose and there's no hiding it when you're as fair as Jean, he should know, and he wonders what the hell Jean has to cry about, like, she could have stubbed her toe or broken up with Scott or maybe one of the kids was a dick to her today but when she looks at Peter her lips tremble and her chin wrinkles up and she lets out a little sob along with, “I'm sorry, Peter.”

“Sorry for what?” Peter asks helplessly. He feels totally lost because this is Jean. She's a friend, a teammate. She's on his side. She was there for him when Mom was dying. She saw him at the lowest point in his life and she knows what he went through and all of the dark, humiliating things that went on inside of his head. She was there for the big, disastrous reveal when Peter spazzed out on his dad because he was a crumbling mess of a person who couldn't admit that he was falling apart if it meant having to accept help from his absentee father. This is Jean, who held Peter together through Mom's funeral, who did everything but breathe for him, and he can't even fathom the kind of mental fortitude that must have taken, but did he thank her for that? No. He's been too ashamed to look her in the eye since he came back and he thought maybe she felt the same way or she was too busy or she didn't want to make Scott jealous but he never stopped to think that maybe there was another reason that she hadn't exactly been throwing herself in his path.

“What did you do?” Peter asks.

“Not here,” the professor says. Then he motions for them to follow him into the library and Peter goes numbly. Jean closes the doors behind them, but with her hands, not her mind. Once the doors are shut and it's just the three of them the professor says, “Sit down,” and Peter isn't sure who he's talking to but when the professor uses that tone of voice Peter wants to sit no matter whether there's furniture or not. Jean sits too, but she won't look at him. At first.

“Jean,” the professor prompts.

Jean looks up at Peter. Her eyes are so blue, and so bloodshot. “Something happened after your mother's funeral. Erik was worried that if you knew about it you would try to follow him when he
left. He asked me to keep it a secret.” She's crying fresh tears now and her nose is running and if this were any other day Peter's instincts would tell him to run and grab a tissue for her but instead he's glued to the spot while she says, in a stuffed-up voice, “So I took one of your memories.”

Peter feels like he just walked in and found his room ransacked and he knows he's been robbed but he can't tell what's missing because the place always looks like this only the place is really his brain and he's looking around trying to find what's been stolen and he has no idea what it could have been but he bets it was important. Then he feels sick and vulnerable and he's suddenly so sorry for all of the times he stole other peoples' shit. Karma is a real bitch.

“We're going to make this right,” the professor says in his Headmaster voice, the one he uses for the kids who think they can cut class and somehow go unnoticed in a school with only fifty students whose headmaster is the most powerful telepath in the world, or used to be until a redheaded twenty-year-old managed to one-up him. “We'll start by restoring your memory. Jean, I will guide you.”

“Alright,” she agrees.

“Wait, hold on,” Peter says, or means to say, but Jean is eager to clean her slate and he can already feel her in his mind and she's powerful, yeah, no question, but when the professor joins her Peter sees the difference between power and mastery, and where he's been able to struggle away from Jean's influence in the past, Xavier shuts that door with, It will be alright, Peter, and he feels the library, the house, everything but him and Jean and Xavier fall away. Darkness eats him alive. In the darkness somber voices rise up around him, a dozen conversations, all subdued, some of them whispered. He opens his eyes without realizing that he'd ever closed them and finds Jean sitting next to him, dressed in a silver-gray blouse and black skirt and nylons. Her long red hair is pulled back into a simple ponytail.

“Do you know where you are?” she asks. There's a weird dichotomy to the question because he hears the words out loud and in his brain at the same time and her lips are moving but no one else around him is reacting to the question.

Peter's sitting in his mother's living room on the big brown sofa with the yellow and orange afghan. The late afternoon sun is spilling in from the blinds on the front windows, falling in stripes across the coffee table. Everyone here is dressed in black, including him. His body feels tired and slow and heavy and he thinks, We buried Mom today.

“That's right,” Jean says. “This is a memory.”

He whips around, or tries to, and he doesn't know if it's because he's in a memory or because his memory self was sort of dopey at the time but he turns around, feeling like he's underwater and finds Erik Lehnsherr exactly where he thought he would, standing behind Peter like the freaking angel of death all grim and silent and frowning across the room like he can't remember where he set down his scythe.

Peter's chest hurts when he lays eyes on his dad, but he reminds himself that it's just a memory. Erik's not really here.

Jean is sitting beside him. She puts an uncertain hand on his knee like she's asking permission, and he gives it without saying a word.

There's a woman sitting in the chair across from Peter. She's older, in her fifties maybe, olive skin, thick dark hair streaked with gray, frown lines on her forehead but her expression is warm and kind... and familiar, but Peter can't place her. He knows this woman but he doesn't remember her being here in Mom's house and he definitely doesn't remember sitting across from her like this.
"That's because I made you forget," Jean says, and here's where he feels her falter, like she doesn't know the next step, and Peter feels a strong presence sweep though the room, shifting everything subtly and even though Peter can't see him he knows it's Xavier. The professor didn't attend the reception. Mom's house isn't exactly wheelchair accessible and he knows without knowing that Xavier wanted to give Peter as much space and privacy to mourn as possible.

There's a glass of whiskey on the table in front of him. He remembers it. Erik poured it for him, and remembers that he never took a sip, but the ice in his glass hasn't melted yet. He looks again at the woman sitting across from him. She's so familiar. How does he know her?

On cue, she introduces herself, “Camila. You used to call me Mrs. Lugo, when you were small. I saw your mother's obituary in the newspaper. I'm so sorry,” she says. She has an accent and he knows her voice but it's not until she reaches across the distance between them to lay a hand on top of his and she's close enough for him to smell her floral, spicy perfume that he remembers her: Camila Lugo, Mom's downstairs neighbor from their old apartment building. She used to babysit him when he was a kid, back when it was just him and Mom. Peter remembers her as a necessarily loud woman in a crowd of her own children plus Peter, snapping her fingers and speaking rapid-fire Spanish and shouting at him to get down from the bookshelf or the sofa or the light fixtures or whatever he was climbing at the time. She's smaller than he remembers her, and her dark hair has been cut short, but the tiny gold cross in the hollow space between her collar bones is the same. Her palm on the back of his hand is warm and dry.

This may be just a memory but Peter's weariness feels real. It's mid-afternoon and the reception has been going on for an hour or so. Most of the funeral guests have made their way to Mom's house from the cemetery. Scott is standing sentry by the front door, greeting people as they trickle in, shuttling gifts of food or flowers to the kitchen. Erik and Jean have been keeping Peter fenced in while the guests come and speak to him and pay their respects. Lindy is in the kitchen with Diane, watching with glassy eyes while Peggy and Mrs. Baird rearrange the contents of the fridge to find space for the food that keeps arriving. Peggy poured Lindy a glass of wine while Frank wasn't looking. Lindy hasn't taken a single sip but she doesn't seem to want to set it down either, so she just stands there, holding it close to her chest like a security blanket.

Frank's off in the dining room talking to Hank and a couple of the doctors that Mom used to work with at her hospital, and the low, serious rumble of their voices sounds like thunder off in the distance. It's so soothing that Peter feels like he could drop off right here but Jean won't let him. She's feeding him with her power, shoring him up so that he can limp through dozens of conversations like this one.

Erik, who's been helping move things along, introduces himself in Spanish, then asks Mrs. Lugo a question, holding up his drink. She politely declines but she glances from Peter to Erik and back again, then asks a question of her own, which Erik answers. Peter might only know enough Spanish words to cover one side of an index card but “padre” is one of them.

“He is your father? Your birth father?” she asks, staring back and forth between the two of them. There's a sharp edge of accusation in her voice.

Peter can't seem to feel any particular way about her reaction. He can't seem to feel much about anything.

“Yes,” Erik says. There's in his voice that Peter wishes was pride but it's not. “I only recently found out.”

Mrs. Lugo nods then she says, “I came too late for the church service, but I was at the burial.” She looks uncertain, guilty even. “It was so sad, to see Mary all alone in that place.” She can't seem to
take her eyes off of Erik.

Erik looks at her carefully, like he hasn’t decided if she’s a friend or an enemy. “¿Qué tienes, Señora?” he asks in a dangerously neutral voice that would make the hair on the back of Peter’s neck stand up if he were capable of having a reaction like that right now.

Mrs. Lugo’s says something to Erik in Spanish that makes Peter realize that she’s reconsidered that drink. Once that’s sorted out and she’s taken a few sips she looks up at Erik and asks, “Do you believe in God, Mr. Lehnsherr?”

Through Jean there's a whole part of Erik that Peter can feel from inside of this memory, a deeply complex, conflicted part of himself that Mrs. Lugo's question touches, like she's running her hand down the spine of a sea monster, temping it to rise up and bite her hand off.

“Yes,” Erik hisses the answer.

She looks at him, judging him. “I should start at the beginning,” she says, and drinks. She looks at Peter and her expression changes. It becomes soft and motherly and filled with compassion, but Peter remains defiantly numb. She tells Peter how she and her husband and their three (at the time) children had been living in the apartment below Peter’s grandmother when Peter’s mother moved back home. “I remember the first time I saw your mother. She was so young and so beautiful, and I knew right away why she had come home.” She tuts and shifts her attention to Erik, who stands his ground, then back to Peter, saying softly, “We didn’t talk about it, but these things were not so unusual. Girls like your mother would sometimes go away for a while or stay with family, have their babies, and then go back to their lives like nothing had happened. Sometimes their parents would raise the children as their own. Sometimes the girls would give them away.”

Peter knows. Mom never made it a secret that she was supposed to put him up for adoption. She wasn't even supposed to see him after he was born, but he'd driven the nurses in the maternity ward nuts with his crying until they got desperate and brought him to his mom. Mom said that he stopped crying as soon as they handed him over. She never gave him back.

Mrs. Lugo continues, “I remember that Mary got very big very fast. I saw her in the hall one day and I thought, 'Oh, she will have twins.'”

Peter feels the corners of his lips twitch like they want to smile, remembering how Mom had complained about how big she was and how uncomfortable. He'd always thought she was exaggerating.

Mrs. Lugo continues, “I knew exactly when she went into labor. I could hear them getting ready, calling a taxi. It was the middle of the night. It was too soon for the babies to come I thought, but that happens with twins, and it is not so strange for one or both of them to be born sleeping. That was what I thought when Mary came home from the hospital with only one small baby, not two.”

Peter's smile vanishes. He doesn't understand. He never had a twin. Even if he'd had a twin and even if his twin had died he thinks Mom would have told him... but then again maybe not. He's known for a long time that the whole experience had been pretty traumatic for her, but he's shaking his head. “I... I don't- ” Peter starts.

“Mary never mentioned a twin,” Erik says, voicing Peter's sentiment, but with way more intensity.

Mrs. Lugo looks at him, unblinking and sincere. “I am not a gossip, Mr. Lehnsherr, but to lose a child is a very sad thing for any mother. I know,” she curls her fingers toward her chest. There are tears standing in her eyes. She takes a drink to buy a moment. “I felt for her. Back then my English
was not so good. I saw Mary's mother in the hall one day and I told her that I would pray for the other baby." Here her voice heats up. "I will never forget. Her mother came up very close to me like this," She leans across the coffee table toward Erik and raises her index finger like she's holding a knife, "And she put her finger in my face and told me, 'Never, never mention the other baby to Mary.'"

Erik isn't breathing. Neither is Peter.

Mrs. Lugo settles back in her chair. "I never did. It was not my place, not my culture, and things like that, especially then, we did not talk about. What good would it have done?"

Her question hangs there, unanswered until Erik asks one of his own, "Did you have any idea?" His voice is soft, almost a whisper. It takes a second before Peter realizes the question is for him.

“No,” he says. No. None.

Mrs. Lugo fills the silence, “Things were very different for us back then. There were no scans, no checkups. Many of us saw a doctor once to tell us we were with child and once to have the baby. Husbands did not go in the delivery room, and the drugs that they used then didn't take away the pain, they only made us forget about it. When I had my first son I remember that the doctor gave me a shot, then I thought, 'I will have the baby soon,' and they told me, 'You have already had him. Here he is,' and they brought Jaime to me, wrapped in a blanket. He looked so much like his father that I thought that it must be true, but I remember nothing about his birth. It was the same with my second son and my third. It could not have been much different for Mary.”

Jean says, “She didn't know,” and Peter feels her certainty. Mom never thought about a twin.

Mrs. Lugo says to Erik, “You say you believe in God, Mr. Lehnsherr. I think that God put you here so that I could tell you this. I don't know what happened to the other baby, where he is buried, or if he was buried at all. It was so long ago. I don't know if there is any way to find out, but it would only be right for them to be together.” She sighs. “This must be hard to hear, but I think you have a right to know.”

Erik stands up straighter. “Thank you for your honesty. Mrs. Lugo,” he says. There's a thin, determined current running just under his polite words like she's reignited his sense of purpose. “I will find what happened to him, and I will make this as right as possible. You have my word.”

“You have a good heart, Mr. Lehnsherr. I'm so sorry about Mary.”

“As am I,” Erik says, but his thoughts are someplace else.

This memory doesn't feel like a memory anymore. It feels like a dream or a nightmare. Peter's slow and frustrated and unable to think clearly, to organize his thoughts around what he's just heard. He wants to move. He wants to run but his body won't listen. His breath starts coming faster but then Jean moves a hand to the back of his neck and smooths all of the edges off of the world, making it one big, painless marshmallow. Peter's chin dips toward his chest. On the table in front of him is the glass of whiskey that Erik poured him, still full, but the ice has turned to water.

“Peter hasn't been well,” Erik explains. “Perhaps you'll excuse us.”

Mrs. Lugo makes a sympathetic sound. She stands and moves out of the way as Jean helps Peter to his feet and steers him toward the basement stairs. He wants to turn around. He wants to talk to Erik, to tell him that he can help, but Jean has him by the arm, and she might as well be a dozen heavily armed mutant hunters with tranquilizer darts and collars and biceps like bowling balls because he's
helpless in her grip as she leads him down the stairs and into the dark, literally and figuratively.

“I didn't take your memory then,” she reassures him. As if that helps at all. “I have something else to show you.”

Then he's looking at himself, the past version of himself, asleep in his mom's basement with the covers pulled all the way up to his chin, dead to the world, and almost totally still. He feels like Ebenezer Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol* and Erik, beside him, is the Ghost of Christmas Past except in this memory, Peter is Jean and he/she's looking at a small stack of papers that Erik just handed her, and Erik's wearing a very controlled expression as Jean unfolds them. The pages are old and yellow at the edges. He sees his name at the top of the first sheet under the Virginia State seal and realizes he's looking at his birth certificate, his real birth certificate, not a copy from the registrars office. This was torn from a book, and Peter can guess who collected this particular document. A lock on a filing cabinet doesn't mean much to a guy who can rip doors off of their hinges by waving his hand. Peter's never seen his birth certificate before. He doesn't even know if his mom had a copy. It wasn't like he'd needed it to get a driver's license, or anything else.

The second sheet is another birth certificate, almost identical to Peter's own, with Mom's name recorded under “Birth Mother” and a single, lonely E under “Birth Father” but the time of birth is one fifteen a.m. Peter's time of birth was one thirty-three, and the name at the top is “Wendy.”

Wendy.

*Peter and Wendy.*

Jesus, this should be funny but Jean isn't laughing in this memory so neither is Peter. Mom always wanted a Wendy, and Frank wouldn't let her. That name had to come from somewhere. Maybe Mom did know, deep down in her subconscious, like the memory was always there, just buried, hidden from her, like Peter's memory of Camila Lugo, like Wendy herself, because the certificates say "Live Birth". Live. Wendy was alive. So where did she go?

The third sheet of paper answers Peter's question. It's also a birth certificate. The date, time, and place of birth are all the same as Wendy's, but the name on the top has been changed to “Wanda” and “Wanda” has a new set of parents, a dad with a first, middle, and last name. Lucky girl. So, she's not Peter's Wendy after all. Mom must be rolling over in her grave.

Jean/Peter looks up from the pages and finds Erik staring at the Peter in the bed. Floating on the surface of Erik's mind is the memory of the last time he spoke with Peter's mother. She was lying in bed, gaunt and sick, dying, but underneath the illness Erik imagined that he still recognized her as the girl she used to be. Erik had so many questions and Mary so little strength, like it had fled her when her son - their son- left the room. Seeing his mother again, even through his father's hazy, biased memory is captivating and agonizing.

Erik knows when someone's in his mind. He says to Jean/Peter, “When Mary and I last spoke she told me about the first time she held him. She was set to give him up for adoption. She had asked not to see her baby, but the nurses couldn't soothe him, so they brought him to her anyway. She refused to give him back. If it weren't for Mary I never would have found my son and I never would have known about my daughter. I owe her so much.”

Peter wonders if his twin had already been gone by then, carried off by her new family, or whether she'd been his polar opposite: quiet as a mouse.

“I'm going to find my daughter.”
“What about Peter?” Jean asks, looking over at Peter's bloated corpse, mounded with covers, and then back at Magneto.

Finally Magneto says, “I need your help.”

Peter doesn't need to see anymore. He's good. He tries to turn away from the memory that Jean is trying to share with him and it feels like trying to wrench himself out of one of Hank's bear hugs. Jean realizes what he's trying to do and she holds him tighter, tries to keep him in the memory, “You don't understand,” she says. It only makes Peter fight harder, and that's when he feels it: the tiny, dangerous part of Jean that she tries to pretend doesn't exist, the part of her that knows beyond a doubt that she's more powerful than everybody else, and that tiny spark flares to life and the struggle between Peter and Jean isn't about Erik anymore, it's about who can win. Suddenly this thing between them feels a lot less like he's trapped in one Hank's bear hugs and a lot more like Peter's a little silver mouse being pinned down by a giant flaming bird of prey with razor-sharp talons and little silver mouse might be fast, but all of his flapping and squeaking are getting him nowhere and the bird is shrieking at the mouse to hold still and everything will be cool, but fuck that. This little mouse is nobody's lunch, but even as he's thinking that the world is going dark around him, narrowing to a pinpoint and then the professor's voice is booming between his ears, “Peter, breathe!” and Peter is back in the mansion, in the library, backed up against a bookshelf with Tolstoy and Steinbeck scattered around him on the carpet and blood running down the back of his throat, sucking in air like he just lost a breath-holding competition.

“What happened?” the professor demands, scowling at Jean, who's still sitting on one of the professor's expensive leather couches, looking a little wide-eyed but none the worse for wear, then at Peter who's on his feet and across the room, as far away from Jean as he can get without walking through walls.

Jean's shaking her head. “I- I don't know. It happened so fast.”

The professor isn't listening to her answer, though. He's rolling over to Peter, whose goals at the moment include a) staying on his feet and b) not vomiting on his sneakers.

“Peter?” he asks, wisely staying a few feet back from the splash zone.

Peter holds up a finger. It's rare that he needs a minute but he needs one now. When he feels like he can speak without throwing up he checks, “Was- was that real?” Is she real?

“Yes,” the professor says gently. “Sit down.”

“Nah, I'm good,” Peter says, and he means to stand up straighter when he says it and maybe get himself off of the bookshelf but he can't. Jean still looks just fine, a little spooked maybe. For the first time Peter feels afraid of her, and judging by her sad expression he's sure she knows that, but he also doesn't have a ton of gray matter to spare worrying about Jean's feelings.

Neither does Xavier. “That will be all, Jean. We'll speak again in the morning.” And Peter's sure he's just talking out loud for Peter's benefit, to give him a moment but he's too stupidly grateful to care.

Jean pauses on her way to the door and turns to look at Peter. “Erik has done a lot of horrible things, but he's a good man. He only wanted to protect you.”

The professor frowns at her sternly, and this might be the angriest Peter's ever seen the professor at someone who isn't Peter or his dad. “In the morning, Jean,” he reiterates. She goes, but with a backwards glance at Peter like she's trying to tell him she's sorry without using her powers for fear of turning his brain to Jell-o and Peter gives her a little nod of acknowledgment like he hasn't decided
how he feels but, you know, message received.

When she's gone Peter finds the urge to wrap his arms around his torso uncontrollable.

Xavier takes a deep breath, "I'm so sorry, Peter, for all of this. You were under my protection and I failed you. I was aware that you and Jean had developed a close bond during the time that your mother was ill. In my arrogance I failed to look past the surface of what seemed an innocent crush to see what she was truly hiding from me."

A crush. Jean. And him. That's rich. He can't wait to tell Scott.

"You mustn't judge Jean too harshly for her part in this," the professor continues, "She cares deeply for you and she truly believed that by tampering with your memory she was protecting you. She understands now that her actions were unethical. In fact, the fault in her decision-making lies not with Erik but with me. Many years ago I erased a portion of Moira's memories. Like Jean, I was convinced at the time that it was the right decision. It wasn't. It took me twenty years to learn that, and in the long run it spared neither of us any pain."

The situation between the professor and Moira MacTaggert isn't exactly news. He doesn't care why Jean did what she did. It doesn't change the real headlines of the evening a) his dad is back, Magneto is back, and he's as big of a drama queen as ever because b) he brought Peter's long-lost twin with him. Holy shit, this can't be real except it is.

"My twin, is she, um..." there are a number of ways that the sentence could end but right now Peter, for the life of him, can't think of one.

The professor ventures, "Wanda is a mutant, but her powers are not like yours. Even among members of the same family it is unusual to find powers that are identical, or even similar. Scott and Alex were a bit of an anomaly in that regard. Wanda has neither your speed nor your father's ability to manipulate magnetic fields."

"Oh," Peter manages. He supposes that it was too much to hope for that she'd be like him. He tries to hide his disappointment but the professor's doing the old two-fingers-at-the-temple gesture, not even trying to hide the fact that he's attempting to read Peter's mind. Peter can't look him in the eye but he has to know, "What's she like?"

Xavier takes a moment, like Peter's a puzzle and he has to figure out the best way to approach it, or a house of cards and the slightest wrong touch will flatten him. "Intelligent, strong-willed, but frightened and mistrustful. From what I gather her adoptive family was quite shocked when her powers manifested. They strongly discouraged her from using her gifts. Despite that she had a happy childhood, you'll be pleased to know. She was adopted by a couple from Norfolk, Virginia shortly after her birth. The family relocated to to Chicago in nineteen sixty-three. She attended private schools as a child and studied abroad in Europe. After her powers manifested her adoptive parents had her privately tutored, but she never completed the requirements for her high school education. She left Chicago for California when she was seventeen years old to pursue a career as an actress and she's enjoyed some success in her chosen profession. When she arrived several of the students recognized her from her work on television."

Peter watches a decent amount of TV himself. He wonders how many times he's seen Wanda without knowing she was his sister.

The professor is still measuring his words carefully, like one wrong word is going to send Peter through the ceiling, which means that there are wrong words in the story, or at least ones that Xavier doesn't think Peter will want to hear. "Like many mutants Wanda has lived in fear of her powers,
choosing to pass herself off as human rather than explore her potential. In her case it is a very
dangerous decision both for her and those around her. Erik spent considerable time and effort
convincing her to come to me for guidance, and I believe he made the right choice. I've only just met
her but I believe that with time and dedication she will become a very powerful mutant.”

Those last two words don't send Peter through the roof, but they bring the situation into focus for
him.

A powerful mutant.

Wendy -or Wanda- is Erik's first-born, not Peter, and unlike Peter, she was born healthy enough to
be adopted. It makes sense that Erik would gravitate toward her. Erik doesn't spend a ton of time
around inferior mutants, even if they are his own son. “I'm sure she's really something,” Peter says.

Xavier switches tactics, “Logically Erik knows that what he did to you was wrong. He isn't, in fact, a
psychopath, but he has always been ruthless and single-minded in the pursuit of his goals. He tells
me that it was never his intention to abandon you, and I believe him. Nevertheless, you were
deceived by your own father and a team member, and the rest of us failed to protect you from that.
You have the right to be angry.”

“I'm not angry,” Peter says. He's not even surprised, unless you count the whole twin thing, but he's
not surprised that Jean did what she did because a) Xavier, by his own admission, sets a bad example
sometimes and b) Jean was practically living in Magneto's pocket when Peter had them all stashed
together in his basement. Plus, Magneto and Jean did defeat a demi-god together and build a house,
so Peter can see where they may have established a foundation for trust somewhere along the line,
whereas the only basis for trust that Peter's ever had with his dad was that Magneto didn't drive a
length of rebar through him on sight when he and Raven showed up outside of his special magno-
bubble in Cairo, and as far as the professor and the rest of the X-Men go, they're off the hook
because Peter was kind of on sabbatical at the time so it's not like he’d been counting on anybody to
have his back. In fact, he remembers being pretty adamant at the time that he had it covered. He
hadn't, obviously, but still, it’s not the professor's responsibility to follow him around making sure he
doesn't stub his toe or fall through a manhole. So his dad conned Jean into taking one little memory.
Big deal, right? Peter doesn't have anyone to blame but himself for the fact that Magento didn't want
his liability of a son tagging along while he tracked down his perfect daughter, who's probably not
even perfect but hey, infinitely preferable to the comatose pile of laundry sleeping his life away in his
mom's basement, and if Erik hadn't at least suspected that Wanda was the more powerful twin when
he left and if it didn't play a part in his decision to go after her Peter will eat War and Peace one page
at a time. He bets she even looks like their dad, and how sad is it that he's jealous of a total stranger
for hogging the affections of a guy that Peter doesn't trust not to kill a short-order cook at a diner for
spitting in his burger?

The professor's looking at Peter with this pitying expression on his face that Peter can't stand and
Peter wants to shout, What?! But he bets he's going to find out if he hangs in there and sure enough
Xavier says, “Trust, once broken, is a very difficult thing to mend, but it is my hope that in your time
here your teammates and I have shown you that it can be done.”

“You can't mistrust someone you never trusted in the first place,” Peter points out.

“You've come so far, Peter,” the professor says. “You may not think so, but it's the truth. I beg you
not to throw it away.”

Peter has no idea what he's talking about. None. He doesn't feel any different than the day he
showed up on the mansion’s front lawn with a Twinkie in his hand, except that he's given up
Twinkies, probably for life, and he can't decide if that's a good thing or a bad thing. Oh, and now he
has a twin. Jeez, his life is weird. “Are we done?” he asks, because now he wants to see her and find out if she's really all that great.

“We're far from 'done', Peter,” the professor sighs, like Peter is the most exhausting individual he's ever had the misfortune to encounter and _good_ is all Peter can think. “But I can summon her if you-”

Nope. Peter's doesn't feel like waiting around and he definitely doesn't feel like trying to hold up his end of an awkward conversation with the professor as they stroll casually to the elevator for an interminable ride down to the lower levels so he buzzes out of there and takes the stairs. He's a little shaky from whatever Jean did to him, but not so much that he can't use his speed.

Peter doesn't think the professor or Hank or Raven would bring an untrained mutant in the danger room and unless she's psychic (and he hopes to God she's not) she's not going to be hanging out in Cerebro, so that leaves the hangar or Hank's lab or Hank's other lab, which is now kind of like a medical bay and since Erik is claiming Wanda as his long lost daughter, Peter is betting that Hank and Hank's lab equipment are going to have a question or two, so Peter picks door number four and finds Hank right where he expects him to be, leaning over a microscope. Scott's down there too, still wearing his supersuit, like somebody pulled him out of the danger room for this and looking like he'd welcome any excuse to take his visor off and start blasting away and his preferred target is standing near the edge of a medical cot with his arms folded over his chest, wearing a far-away expression like he's thinking deep thoughts or concentrating on something that no one else can see.

Magneto doesn't look much different from the last time Peter saw him, but honestly the guy doesn't look much different than he did the first time Peter met him back in seventy-three. It's like the man doesn't age. Sure, his hair needs a cut and he's a little purple under the eyes, like he's up too late. He might be frowning a little deeper than usual and he might have a few more gray hairs. Maybe Peter's twin is as big of a pain in the ass as Peter. He hopes so. Serves him right.

Peter steps past his dad so that he can take a good look at the person he really came to see.

Wanda (it must be Wanda because who else would it be?) is sitting on the medical cot within arm's reach of Magneto, one leg crossed over the other because her black skirt isn't long enough to keep her lingerie a secret on a table that high. She's wearing a low-cut white blouse, something that Mom would have loved for herself but hated for Lindy, and expensive-looking red pumps with a mirror shine. One of her shoes has come loose from her heel and it's dangling from her toe, about to lose the fight with gravity. Her left sleeve is rolled up to her bicep and there's a cottonball taped to the bend in her elbow which makes sense because this is Hank's way of getting to know new people. She's looking down at the fancy black handbag on her lap so that her curly brown hair is falling forward, hiding her face. He circles around, ducks down, slipping her shoe back on for her while he's down there, and looks up.

So this is Wanda. This is his twin. Peter sees Mom in the shape of her face and the unruliness of her hair and Erik Lehnsherr in the height of her cheekbones and the curve of her eyebrows. She looks like a perfect cross between the two of them, unlike Peter, who looks like a perfect cross between a bulldog and a weimaraner.

She's beautiful.

He kind of hates her.

Peter leans in close enough to smell her perfume, close enough to look into her green eyes and notice the thin ring of brown around the iris, close enough to plant a kiss on her cheek.

He swipes her purse instead.
Peter's never really been a handbag thief. Wallets, sure. Picking pockets always felt a little less wrong than snatching purses, but, hey, there's a first time for everything. Wanda's purse is a shiny black Gucci. If she had any other bags she must have left them somewhere else, but her purse she kept, maybe because she's in a strange new place and doesn't want some weirdo doing what Peter's doing right now. Maybe she thinks she'll need something from it. Whatever. He shakes out the purse above the cot and sifts through Wanda's possessions as they hang in mid-air. He finds her California driver's license inside of her wallet. He recognizes her adopted last name on it, so it doesn't look like she's married yet and she's not wearing an engagement ring. Her driver's license photo is crazy good, he thinks as he looks at the card long enough to memorize her address. He thumbs through her checkbook and notes that she's getting regular deposits and maintains a pretty healthy balance in her account. He finds her SAG-AFTRA card and a credit card with her adoptive father's name on it, probably for emergencies because it doesn't look like it's seen a ton of use. He finds some cash and a drug store receipt, some wallet-sized photos of people her age, friends or co-workers, some idiots at a party holding cocktails and grinning. Maybe one of them is a boyfriend but Peter kind of doubts it because there aren't any little hearts or love notes on the back of any of the pictures. Tube of lipstick. New pack of cigarettes with only one missing. Lighter. Ibuprofen. Compact. By the time he gets to the discreet little pouch that he knows better than to open his tidal wave of curiosity has started to recede, leaving his mucky, seaweed-covered morals exposed and he knows he's taken up too much time already because Hank and Scott and especially Erik have started to react to his presence, so he stuffs Wanda's possessions back into her purse, all but her Pall Malls and her lighter, both of which he shoves into his breast pocket, gives his twin one last, searching look, then goes up to the roof to think for a while.

To be continued...

Thank you for reading. Feedback is always welcome.

Chapter End Notes

So, there's a lot to unpack in this chapter. I've spent over a year on this fic and probably eight months of it was just me trying to get the twist to work. Hopefully it turned out okay. Several versions exist, but I decided that this was the most compelling. Anyway, now you know why Lindy said in Chapter 2 that she looked just like the girl in the Juicy Fruit commercial.

Wanda's choice of profession was inspired by a passage I read when researching the character, which stated that at some point she had aspirations of becoming an actress. I can't seem to find that now, but if anyone reading this is a big comic book reader perhaps you know. I thought that career fit well for this version of the character because she grew up estranged from her birth family and maybe longed for acceptance and attention. It also works as a metaphor because she has made a career of hiding what she is.

I wondered what the X-Men film franchise would do about Wanda Maximoff and, well, nothing so far, so early on I started trying to figure out a creative way to bring her into the story. Then I stumbled across some horrifying childbirth stories from way back when and I had my answer. Twilight Sleep, which some of you may already know about or which you may have seen depicted in episodes of Mad Men and The Crown was "an amnesic condition characterized by insensitivity to pain without loss of consciousness, induced by an injection of morphine and scopolamine, especially to
relieve the pain of childbirth. It was a popular method of pain relief during childbirth until the 1960s. It might be a stretch to imagine that Mary could give birth to twins and never know, but I imagined that all of the circumstances lined up: she was young, confused, traumatized, drugged, the nurses hated her, and her mother conspired to keep the second baby a secret. This was the 50s after all. Mary keeping her illegitimate child would have been very unusual for the times. Mary's mom probably wasn't even a horrible person, she was just practical. It seems likely that neither one of them were working, so money would have been very tight, plus there was the shame of having an illegitimate child in the house. Mary's life would have been very difficult and her mother would have tried to protect her as much as possible, even if it meant never telling her about Wanda.

Anyway, I hope you enjoyed reading. You'll see more of Wanda in the next part. Like Peter, she's inspired by but very different from the comic book version and the MCU version. Please join me.
Cold

Chapter Summary

Peter runs afoul of the elements.

Chapter Notes

Welcome back and thank you again for reading and for all of your wonderful feedback. I've been having a lovely exchange with Elisha_Boltagon this week about fancastings for Wanda, Frank, and Lindy. So far we (mostly Elisha) has come up with Lily Collins for Wanda, Jim Kaviezel for Frank, and Dove Cameron for Lindy but if you have any other suggestions, don't be shy.

Some decent h/c in this chapter. I hope you like it :-)

I can't stop picking at this story, especially when I'm giving it a once-over before posting and sometimes that leads to small mistakes. Many apologies. Please feel free to point out any mistakes you notice.

Enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

By 'think' Peter means 'brood and try to smoke every cigarette in Wanda's pack out of spite'. It's dark and it's started snowing and he has to brush off a place to sit down and even then the cold just comes right up through the stone. With the wind blowing it takes forever to get the first cigarette to light and when he does the first drag is pretty unsatisfying.

By now Hank and Raven and the rest of them have cottoned on to the fact that Peter paid the medical bay a visit. Xavier might have mental tabs on him up here, or maybe he's got other things to worry about. Peter's too busy feeling a big jumbled mess of things right now to care and he knows that there's going to be music to face when he rejoins the Wonderful World of Indoor Heating but he'd really rather sit here and freeze his balls off than deal with any of that right now and Jesus, Wanda has shitty taste in cigarettes. She's probably not even a smoker. He bets she only bought this pack as a crutch to help her deal with the fact that her dad is an infamous murderer and her mom is dead, even if the one doesn't explain the other.

He has a twin.

It's like a lightning strike every time he thinks about her, and once he gets past the betrayal and the nosebleeds that got him to this point it seems like it should be a great thing, like they should be falling into each others arms and hugging it out like on one of those daytime TV shows that Peter got so familiar with while he was taking care of Mom but when Peter searches himself he just doesn't feel a connection to her. Maybe Wanda will hug it out with Lindy when everything's said and done and holy shit, Lindy! How is that conversation going to go? Lindy probably won't even believe him and he'll have to run Wanda by Rhode Island, if she's into that, if she has any interest at all in meeting the
rest of her blood relations, if she's not totally put off by her terrorist dad and unstable, chain-smoking
twin. It would be a shame if she left the East Coast without meeting her only normal relative.

Peter smokes one cigarette all the way down to the filter and he thinks he should have grabbed a
snack on the way up here because dinner was a million years ago and smoking on an empty stomach
like this is making him feel sick even if his body burns through the nicotine in seconds, but he's made
his bed so he teases another one out of the pack and lights it up and lays down on the roof. The
moon is only a soft, dim shape behind the clouds tonight. It's so dark that the snowflakes look like
they're appearing out of the sky, inches from his face, falling on his eyelashes so that he has to keep
blinking and rubbing his eyes. The exhaled smoke from his cigarette, plus the vapor from his breath
makes a big, swirling cloud that vanishes into the air above his head. The crust of ice underneath his
head hasn't even had a chance to melt when a small voice behind him asks, “Um, are you going to
go in soon?”

Peter yelps and jumps about four feet in the air. He turns, lips still clamped tight around his cigarette
and there's Calvin, looking repentant, standing right behind him. It's freezing and the kid's nose is
running so Calvin does the logical thing and wipes it with his sleeve. “Sorry,” he says. “I didn't mean
to scare you.”

“It's okay, you're not in trouble,” Peter tells the kid. “What are you doing up here?” Students aren't
allowed on the roof, especially at dark-as-fuck-o'clock in the morning. It's common knowledge. If it
weren't, where would the teenagers go to make out?

Now Calvin looks guilty. “Oh, uh... nothing.”

“B.S. Somebody sent you.”

There's a big ol’ pause where Calvin tries so hard to come up with a convincing lie but just can't
make it happen. “Mystique asked me to check on you.”

“Yeah?” Peter says with interest. It never hurts to know who's reporting to who around here.

“She's training me to be a spy,” he says proudly.

Makes sense. Calvin and Raven are two different kinds of chameleons. The teachers try hard not to
play favorites but they sometimes end up taking kids with similar powers under their wing. The
professor's been Jean's mentor since she got here. It's turned out mostly okay. “Are you going to get
in trouble for talking to me instead of, you know, spying or whatever?”

“No.” Calvin sniffs and wipes his nose on his sleeve again. “It's cold up here. I know you get really
cold if you're not moving.”

“Yeah,” Peter says, grinding his cigarette out on the sole of his shoe. His fingers are white and
mostly numb. “Does she have you do this a lot? Keep an eye on me?” Peter asks, trying to remember
all of the embarrassing shit he's done when he thought no one was watching.

“Sometimes. I keep an eye on a bunch of people, mostly for practice. Mystique calls me Wallflower.
I think I like it, you know, for my mutant name.”

Peter shrugs. As long as he likes it. “How's your French?”

“Comme ci, comme ça. We spend more time on Russian. Mystique thinks I'll get more use out of it.”

Peter's not really sure what languages Calvin's going to get the most out of. Peter's gotten by on
English just fine but he's a different animal. No one's ever going to find him under the table at a
United Nations summit... probably.

Calvin asks, “Hey, so... your dad is back?”

Peter sighs. “Mystique tell you that or... ?”

“I recognized him... from his picture... from the news, you know? Everybody knows who your dad is.”

“Right,” Peter says. No secrets at the House of X. He'd talk to the professor about changing the name of the school but he already knows what the answer will be. The parents really dig the “Gifted” part of Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters.

“Hey, do you ever spy for the professor?”

Calvin shakes his head. “He doesn't ask. He usually knows when I'm around but he doesn't always stop me.”

Sounds right. Calvin's probably the least of the professor's worries.

“He seemed nice.”

“The professor?”

“Your dad.”

“Yeah, he makes a killer sandwich.”

“Are you mad at him?”

Peter thinks about it. “Sort of. It's complicated.” There's really no point in being mad at the guy. He's going to do what he's going to do no matter how Peter feels about it, so really Peter's only hurting himself by feeling anything at all. It's just so much harder to not to care than he thinks it should be.

“I understand. My dad left me in a shopping mall a couple of months after I got my powers.”


“Yeah, I found my way back to our apartment, but it was empty. He never came back. Somebody else moved in and I had to leave. I think Dad was scared of me.”

It's a sad story but a really familiar one, especially under this roof. “People are always scared of what they don't understand.”

“Yeah, the professor says the same thing. Maybe one day the humans won't be scared of us anymore. Maybe I'll get to see my dad again.”

“You know it wasn't you, right? It was him.”

“Yeah, I know. But if he came back I'd still want to see him. Raven says nobody has perfect parents.”

“Yeah, well, Amen to that,” Peter says, slapping Calvin on the shoulder. The poor kid's teeth are chattering. So are Peter's, but Peter doesn't feel like being comfortable right now.

“It gets colder here than it does in Virginia,” Calvin says.
“You're telling me,” he says. Calvin's sort of bouncing up and down, trying to keep warm, with his arms folded across his middle. “You should go back inside.”

“M-mystique said I'm not allowed to leave the roof until you come down.”

“Tell her that's child abuse.”

“Mystique says I have to suffer to grow.”

“Yeah, she tried that one on me too. I think you've grown enough. Go inside. Tell her I'll be in in a minute.”

Calvin looks at him doubtfully, then he just, like, vanishes and Peter has no idea if the kid has any intention of going in so he says, just, out loud to whoever might be listening, “I'm not going to be held responsible if you get frostbite. Just throwing it out there.”

Peter meant what he said. He's going to go in, and he's going to get something to eat because he can feel himself starting to get drowsy, but before he does he's going to smoke at least one more of Wanda's crappy cigarettes. Nobody likes a quitter, and somehow three cigarettes turns into four and he's not so much smoking them as letting them burn and the ash drop off the ends. He gets about halfway to the filter on his fifth smoke when somebody comes up behind him in the dark and plucks the cigarette from his lips and tosses it over the edge of the roof. Peter frowns as he tracks the cherry's flight through the air with half-lidded eyes, wondering what kind of a dick would-

“Oh, it's you,” Peter says, or tries to say because his lips are numb and now that the cigarette is out of his mouth his teeth are chattering too hard for the words to make much sense and it occurs to him in a really disconnected, molasses-slow kind of way that he might have made a mistake staying out here this long.

Raven's blue skin is so dark that she'd be as invisible as Calvin if it weren't for the red hair and her bright orange parka. She's close enough to him that he sees the moment her irritation gives way to the Look of Infinite Patience, the one she saves for dumb, slobbery pets and children who eat paste. With a sigh she says, “Come on, let's get you inside,” and links her arm with his.

Someone else closes in on Peter's other side. Peter expects Hank but before he's turned enough to confirm, the faint smell of Erik Lehnsherr's aftershave hits Peter like a slap in the face, and Peter suddenly has the urge to bolt, but that's all it is, an urge. He can't do anything about it. His body has gotten tired of his shenanigans and punched the clock and it's giving him the middle finger while he stands there like a dope and shivers uncontrollably.

Peter can't read the expression on Magneto's face. Maybe it's the darkness or cold that's sunk all the way down to Peter's bones or just the fact that Erik Lehnsherr's expressions are all pretty similar and why wouldn't they be? He learned them all while staring at one blank prison wall or another. But anyway, Peter can't tell what he's thinking. He could be happy as a clam or mad as a hatter or ready to crush Peter's throat. Yo no sais. Wouldn't Señora Lugo be proud of him? Anyway, Erik and Raven have him sandwiched between them and they're maneuvering him toward the roof hatch at a stumbling walk when Erik says, in a low rumble, “It can sneak up on you.”

“H-hmm?” Peter manages.

“The cold,” he says. He's so close Peter can feel the warmth of his breath close to his ear. “Raven and I once spent an entire winter hiding in the Balkan Mountains. We shared a small cabin with only a wood-burning stove for heat. We had to keep the fire fed all through the night otherwise we would have frozen to death by morning. We came close a few times.”
“I’ve never been so glad that I’m a light sleeper,” Raven adds.

Peter's shaking so hard he can barely hold the rungs of the ladder but somehow Erik and Raven manage to get him down through the hatch. Hank is waiting at the bottom: blue and angry, angry and blue. Peter's brain might be half-frozen but he gets that he's made a pretty stupid mistake.

“S-S'rry,” Peter chatters. He means it.

Hank seems to lose some of his starch. Now he just looks blue. His shoulders rise and fall with his breath. “Let's get him stripped down,” he says to Raven. “I'll get some warm fluids.”

This isn't going to be nearly as much fun as it sounds.

Hank leads the way. They stagger to his room past kids in pajamas, gawking in doorways, past Jean, wide-eyed and pale, past Ororo and Kurt, who are trying to shoo the kids back into their rooms while something interesting is happening, which is like playing life-size Whack-A-Mole. The X-Men flatten themselves against the walls to let Peter and his escort by.

Peter's still shaking like that one off-balance dryer in the laundry room when Erik and Raven lower him onto his bed. He's hoping that they'll leave him here, throw some covers over him, flip off the lights and let him shiver himself to sleep but no such luck. Erik crouches down in front of him and starts undoing the buttons on Peter's jacket. Peter tries to bat his hands away, “I can- ” but he can't. Peter's suddenly four years old and the buttonholes are too small for the buttons and why would anybody make a jacket with buttonholes this small? He can't figure. When the buttons have defeated him Erik takes over and Peter's chin drops toward his chest as he watches his dad's hands work. His dad has good hands, like, they're nice-looking: long-fingered but strong, with clean nails and Peter thinks about Frank's hands: big and bony, with thick fingers, too thick for a dentist but there he was with his tiny, pointy instruments, cramming his meat hooks between peoples' jaws and asking questions that his patients could only answer in vowels: “Are you leaving town for vacation this year?” “Ha, Aho ha huha.” “Oh, so you'll be doing some fishing.” With hands like his Erik could have made a good dentist.

It takes a while for Raven and Erik to get Peter down to his thermals because Peter's winter wardrobe has more layers than a wedding cake and Peter's limbs keep getting in the way. Somewhere during the process Xavier rolls in, frowning, with a stack of warm towels on his lap, followed by Hank with a teapot and matching cup on a tray. There isn't any conversation, not the out-loud kind at least. Erik accepts one of the towels from Xavier and wraps it around Peter's neck like a scarf then shoves another one up underneath Peter's thermal undershirt, right up against the skin of his chest. Peter curls over it in relief and can't. Stop. Shivering.

Erik and Raven both have their coats off and they sit down on either side of Peter, fencing him in. When Erik wraps a strong arm around him there's a part of Peter's brain that remembers who this asshole is, then he wants to tense up and pull away and tell Magneto to go fuck himself but Peter's survival instinct overrides his brain: Nope. Warm. So there's really nothing for him to do but take the heat his dad is offering and be grateful.

“Open,” Hank says. He's found a thermometer somewhere and he wants to stick it under Peter's tongue.

Hank's a good guy and he always seems to get stuck fixing other peoples' problems.

“S'rry,” Peter says again, slurring the word around his thermometer.

“Shut your mouth,” Hank says gently. Peter takes his advice.
“He’s not angry with you,” Erik assuages Peter. Since they’re touching Peter can feel the words vibrating against his ribs. Peter notices the emphasis on the word ‘you’, but before the non-conversation between Hank and Erik can get interesting the professor says, “This is not the time or place to air our grievances.”

Hank sighs and plucks the thermometer out of Peter’s mouth and frowns at it. The professor is already at his elbow with a cup of tea that Peter’s hand is shaking too much to hold. Raven takes it and brings it to his lips. It's barely cool enough to drink and it tastes like it's half sugar. Peter makes a face and tries to turn away from it but Raven shuts him down, “All of it, Peter. We have to get your temperature up,” so Peter grimaces and swallows and tries not to gag or drown.

While the professor is refilling his cup from the teapot on the tray, Peter feels Erik's hand tighten on his ribs. “He seems too thin,” he mutters.

Peter's not sure about 'too' thin but he's a good forty pounds lighter than he was the last time Erik saw him. He’d thought anything would be an improvement over his Michelin Man look. “You haven't looked in on him in nine months. Now you're worried?” Hank says.

Peter fully expects Erik to rise to the bait and he's bummed because it means losing the warmth on that side and it's a selfish way to look at the situation but Peter is fucking cold, man, which is his own fault so maybe it'll serve him right if Erik gets up and goes mano a mano with Hank and leaves him shivering on his bed, but instead of fighting back Erik's hand on Peter's arm goes deathly still and he says, “I never stopped worrying,” and that’s where he leaves it.

Hank stands up. “I'm going to get a hot water bottle.” On his way out he brushes past Scott, who may have been standing there the whole time or might have just arrived. Peter has no idea. “I can get it for you,” Scott says, but Hank waves him off and Scott, probably realizing that Hank could use the air, has enough sense to let him by. “Is there anything I can do to help?” Scott asks the professor.

The house is never totally quiet and Peter can hear doors opening and closing, whispered voices in the hall and the patter of little bare feet and flippers and on the rugs and the hardwood floor and the walls and the ceiling. The professor says, “Please remind the children that there is a curfew.”

Scott nods and clears out, revealing behind Wanda, who's been standing just behind Scott in the doorway for God-only-knows-how-long.

Peter stares.

She's taller than he thought at first, more slender than Lindy but not as thin as Mom, athletically built and clearly athletically inclined. Maybe she runs or does Jazzercise or something; watches a lot of Jane Fonda tapes. She has broad shoulders. Her stomach is flat as a board and the muscles in her legs are well-defined. Lindy's been running and rowing for months and she's probably in the best shape of her life but Peter can't decide just by looking which one of them would win an arm-wrestling match.

Oh shit, he can't look away.

She notices him noticing her and asks, “What's wrong with you?” Her voice is deep and clear, trained. Standing with her back straight and her arms at her sides, intense and terrifying she's Erik, but she's Mom, too, calm and collected on the surface but seething behind the eyes over whatever-the-hell he's stolen/broken/vandalized this time. He has no idea what Wanda's power is but he's
surprised she hasn't used it against him because he's clearly made a crappy first impression.

Sorry, what was the question?

The professor rescues him, “Hypothermia.”

There. That. Among other things.

“Peter's physiology is particularly susceptible to cold. We're trying to raise his core temperature, but we have to do it slowly, otherwise we risk damaging his heart.”

“Oh,” she says, like, *Huh, that's nice.* “Is he going to be okay?” Curiosity, not concern.

“He will recover,” Erik says, like it's a positive affirmation, not a fact.

Wanda's still only wearing a skirt and a blouse and nylons and her ridiculous red heels. She hasn't even bothered to roll her sleeve back down from when Hank drew her blood. Peter can still see a tiny red dot in her elbow crease with little squares of pink flesh on either side of the dot like she just ripped a Bandaid off.

She's coming right at him, heels *click-click*ing on the hardwood floor before she gets to the area rug. “Scoot over,” she says to Raven, but Raven doesn't 'scoot' anywhere unless she has a damn good reason. “I run hot,” Wanda explains, and Raven reluctantly surrenders her place, but only after getting a nod from Xavier. It's literal torture when she does because when Raven moves the cold air rushes in, but it's oh so worth it when Wanda settles herself next to him because she's not kidding, she radiates heat like a furnace and Peter can't help it, he melts into her like wax over a candle flame. She stiffens at his sudden weight against her but, hey, she volunteered for this. He feels her adjust her posture and then relaxes a little and finally slides an arm around his waist, holding on or holding herself up, he can't tell.

“You took my cigarettes,” she says, to break the ice.

“You don't s-smoke.”

“How do you know?”

“You don't smell like smoke.”

“That makes one of us.”

Raven's in front of him with another cup of tea. “Drink,” she says, before he can think of a killer reply.

He does. As soon as he drains the cup she refills it. It's losing its heat and getting sweeter the closer he gets to the bottom of the pot but Peter's finally warm enough to hold the cup himself, even if it feels like it weighs ten pounds.

Peter's eyes want to shut but the geriatric mutants keep pestering him to stay awake: “You're at ninety-five degrees, Peter. We need at least ninety-six.”

Peter makes a noise that says he thinks ninety-five is good enough already, let him sleep, but no dice. At least he's not shivering as hard as he was before.

Hank comes back in and replaces the towel under Peter's shirt with the hot water bottle. It's not hot, really, just warm, like Wanda.
Scott checks back in at some point and Peter's pretty sure he hears him ask, “Is that my sweatshirt?” about the crumpled heap on top of the pile of discarded clothes. Peter says, “You know it is, One-Eye,” maybe, or maybe he just thinks it. He doesn't know how long they’ve been here. Erik, on one side, hasn't so much as shifted. He's a rock, strong and steady, like he could do this forever and never get tired. Wanda, on his other side, is clinging to him like he's a piece of wreckage in a storm, like she'd rather be anywhere but here, but here is where she is now, and it's either hang on or drown, so she's hanging on. What a family: the rock, the shipwreck, and the survivor. He wants to ask Wanda how she's liking her cruise so far.

Peter fades in and out, taking small naps against Wanda that Hank interrupts every now and then with a fresh hot towel around his neck or by shoving a thermometer under his tongue. Finally, they let him lay down. Peter aches with relief when he hits the mattress. People are talking over him, trying to whisper, but even if they weren't Peter has zero interest in what they have to say. A part of him expects Wanda to climb under the covers with him, but she doesn't and the last thing he feels before falling asleep is disappointment, because he's alone again.

Peter wakes up feeling like shit on every level. His face is plastered to his pillow like he hasn't moved a muscle since he fell asleep. It's full daylight and there's a snowstorm raging outside. Peter can hear the wind whistling around the window frame, rattling the glass. The house is alive and noisy as hell with the sounds of fifty cooped-up mutant kids climbing the walls and running into furniture and he wonders how he's slept this long and then he remembers that he almost became a permanent fixture on the roof last night. Then he remembers why he was up there in the first place and that somewhere in this house he has a twin sister who's probably still pissed at him for swiping her cigarettes and then leaving them on the roof overnight and judging by how it's coming down out there she won't be seeing them again until spring.

Peter thinks he should get up and get dressed and pretend to be a useful member of society but when he tries to move his body says, Nah, we're good right here. That's when he notices his dad sitting in a chair with his back against the wall, right ankle propped on his left knee, dozing with an open book upside down over one thigh, something that he brought with him and not, thank God, one of Peter's magazines or Vonnegut or Mom's copy of Peter and Wendy. The sight of his dad in his room does something to Peter's brain and Peter rips his slobbery pillow out from under his own head and lobs it at his dad but Peter's arm is a noodle, so the pillow falls a foot short of his target and Erik Lehnsherr keeps on sleeping and now Peter doesn't have a pillow.

“Hey,” Peter croaks, hoping he can at least get his pillow back. “Heeey,” he tries again, but Erik doesn't even twitch and Peter wonders what's got the old man so exhausted.

Peter goes back to sleep. When he wakes up again it's noticeably later and the snow is still coming down but the wind has stopped howling. Peter's pillow is back under his head and Erik has pulled his chair up to Peter's bedside. He's awake and showered and shaved but he looks like he'd rather not be. He's still got dark shadows under his eyes. Peter sees the moment when Erik knows he's awake and his dad is determined to have the first word but come on, it's him. That is never gonna happen.

“Wanda,” Peter says.

Erik spends a long moment soaking up the name and shifting gears before he says, “She's with Charles. He's helping her explore her gifts.”


“In a manner of speaking. Charles believes that she possesses a form of telekinesis, but she's untrained. She's spent so much of her life trying to suppress her gifts that not even she knows their nature.”
Telekinesis. That's cool. “I'm bummed that she doesn't have silver hair.”

“She was disappointed that you didn't introduce yourself.”

“We met,” Peter says.

“Hate me if you like, but don't punish Wanda. She had no part in the decisions I've made. Persuading her to come here was a difficult task.”

“Yeah, I bet. It took you, like, what? Almost a year? Must've been rough.”

Patiently, quietly, Erik tells him, “Wanda's gifts made her difficult to locate. You will find, once you get to know her, that trying to convince Wanda to do anything she doesn't want to is an exercise in futility.”

“Sounds familiar.”

Erik seems like he's done taking Peter's crap so he switches tactics, “What were you doing on the roof last night?”

“Smoking.” Is this a trick question? It wasn't like he was up there to jump off, and it wouldn't matter if he did. He's done it a few dozen times in training. If he did decide to jump he'd just land on his feet like a cat, or if the ground were too icy, on his ass like almost any other animal. “Is it lecture time? Are you staying to teach class? I know it was stupid. You don't have to tell me. Why are you even here?”

“Charles felt I deserved a chance to apologize for what I've done.”

Yeah, but there's a problem because, “You're not sorry.”

A pause. “No.”

“Well, hey, at least we're on the same page.”

“I did what I had to do to protect my family,” Erik says. “After your mother died I waited until you were stable and there was nothing more that I could do for you. I didn't know when or even if you would heal completely, so I chose to go where I thought I could make the most difference.”

“You messed with my head,” Peter accuses him.

“I asked Jean to remove a memory,” Erik reasons. “One memory, to keep you safe. I didn't want you following me. You needed time to heal, and if you'd known where I was going, nothing could have stopped you, and I didn't want you to let the search for your twin harm you. You're alive and well enough to hate me because of what Jean did, and Charles, however strongly he disapproves of my methods, knows that. You know it to.”

Peter takes a good, long look at his father, at those intense blue eyes and he sees part of himself, not any of the obvious parts like his nose or eyebrows, but the part of him that wants to save everybody even if they hate him for it.

"You should know, I wasn't going to come back," Erik says, and Peter feels a totally irrational jolt of panic, but then Erik goes on, “It was the day Mary told me who you were, after we spoke. I felt that I'd failed, that I'd ruined your life and my chance to be part of a family again, and that all I had left was revenge. I was making plans to hunt down all of the remaining kidnappers and destroy their organization from the root, but once I shared my goals with Charles he asked me if I could hear how
blind and foolish I sounded. I was prepared to abandon my son during his hour of greatest need in order to pursue meaningless vengeance. He said that I had to choose: Run, or stay and support you and earn the privilege of having a family again. He said it wouldn't be easy, and it hasn't been, but I intend to stay and fight, Peter, for you, and for your sister.

“When I discovered that you had a twin I knew that I would stop at nothing to find her, but at the same time I couldn't risk you. You were the most important thing that your mother had to give and she entrusted you to me. If Mary had known about Wanda she would have extended that task to her daughter as well, so I made the choice to leave you in capable hands so that I could keep the other half of the promise I made to your mother.”

It's easier to focus on Wanda than try to unravel Erik's twisted logic, “And did she need saving?”

“Only from herself.”

Cryptic bastard. “What the hell does that mean?”

“It means she has a long way to go before she accepts herself for what she truly is.”

“A mutant, or your daughter?”

“Both.”

Peter doesn't want to hear anymore about Wanda. He's afraid he'll start to sympathize with his twin and right now he wants to hate her because she took something from him and she'll never know what or how important it was.

Erik suddenly turns into a mind-reader, “If there's something you want to say to me, go ahead. I'm here now, and I'm not leaving.”

Deep breath. “Nope. I'm good.”

“I'd like another chance,” Erik prods.

Peter looks at him. “Then it's a good thing you've got Wanda.”

But Erik isn't backing down. “I'd like another chance with you,” Erik specifies, “My son.”

Oh, Erik's good. It almost breaks him. Almost, and Peter's stuck here, too weak to move, so he stares at the ceiling and tries to remember all of the lyrics to *American Pie* but it's harder than it should be to focus, so he squeezes his eyes shut and mouths the words until he feels a warm hand on his forehead and looks at Erik like, *Oh my God, what are you doing?*

“You look pale. Are you cold?”

If he says yes will Erik bring Wanda around? “Dude, I'm white as a ghost on a good day. And you don't get to talk. The bags under your eyes have bags.” They don't really, but somebody's got to keep Erik humble.

Erik doesn't seem any less confident. “I've had a few long nights,” he admits. “I've been worried about my children.”

Ugh. “I'm getting up,” Peter says. It's more determination than sense because if he had the energy, he'd be out the door and down the hall by now. But he's said it and now he has to do it, so he starts by kicking his covers to the foot of his bed and realizing that it's fucking freezing in this room even
though he's still in his thermals. He doesn't want to move at speed yet because he's afraid he'll pass out, a theory that he confirms when he sits up and everything is all floating black specks and blood rushing in his ears and he covers it up by saying, “Toss me some jeans. Second drawer down.” Erik does what he's told but Peter tosses them right back. “Sorry, there should be a darker pair.” he says. “I'm not being picky, those ones just don't fit.” Erik handed him his “fat” jeans without knowing, and Peter would have gotten rid of them by now but he's not one hundred percent sure he'll never need them again so, you know, better safe than sorry.

Erik finds the right pair and hands them over without comment.

Peter sets them on his lap and stares at them for a while. If Erik weren't there he would totally just keel over and pull the covers over his head and go back sleep, but he knows that's a bad idea because he's already gone, what? Eighteen hours without eating? He can feel his body starting to eat his muscles.

“Would you prefer to shower first?” Erik asks innocently.

“Dude, I know I smell. Food first. I don't want to faint in the shower.”

“I can bring you something,” Erik volunteers.

Again, if it were anyone else offering, even Scott, Peter would say 'yes', but it's his dad and Peter has something to prove so. “It's the kitchen, not Mount Everest. If I expire on the way down the stairs, leave my carcass for the animals.”

Peter puts his jeans on one leg at a time and then stands to button them. Without a belt they're loose around his hips.

“You wouldn't make much of a meal,” Erik comments.

“Oh, man, do not give me shit about my weight. You have no idea,” Peter says. Someone has thoughtfully coiled Peter's belt on top of his dresser. Peter grabs it and starts threading it through the loops and buckles it on the first hole.

“You could tell me,” Erik suggests.

The idea of sharing what a crazy-ass Peter's become about what he puts in his body is just exhausting. He waves Erik off. “Not important. I'm better now.”

“If you say so.”

Peter finds a long-sleeved shirt in his dresser. He has warmer clothes in his closet, but that means walking past Magneto to get to them. He sighs, “What did the professor tell you?”

“Only that you were very ill for a long time after you returned, and that you're still recovering. I'm sorry that I haven't been here for you.”

Oh, sure, he's not sorry for having Jean scramble his brain like an egg but he's sorry for not being here to spoon-feed Peter when he was too weak to eat. Peter shakes his head. “You know what? You were right. There wasn't anything you could have done.” Peter's been struggling for months, years even, telling himself and anyone who brought it up that he doesn't need his dad, and it's only right now, right this second that he realizes it's true. He doesn't need his dad in his life, but he wants his dad in his life, even if it means occasionally putting up with his dad's particular brand of crazy, and if there was ever a time Peter wished he could use his speed to get himself out of an awkward moment this would be it but he doesn't want to embarrass himself by trying and falling on his face.
Instead he's going to embarrass himself by leaning on his dresser and getting all misty-eyed, and he can't decide which is worse but he doesn't want to do both so he stays where he is.

"Peter?" Erik asks.

"I'm good, I'm good," Peter says. He's pinching the bridge of his nose and staring down at the shirt in his hands and a few tears have already made little dots like raindrops on the fabric.

There's a little stretch of time... okay, it's a long stretch of time for Peter, where Erik freezes up, like he's surprised or he doesn't know how to handle this, but then that moment passes. He comes up next to Peter and wraps an arm around him and pulls Peter's face onto his shoulder and Peter stands there stiffly, not returning the embrace, just... frozen, tears streaming down his face, telling himself that he's just an emotional mess because he's hungry, even if that's not totally true.

"Come on," Erik says after a while, and he tugs insistently until Peter shuffles forward reluctantly, sniffling and staring at his socks, one of which has a hole in it. "We're going downstairs. You need to eat. You're going to be in poor shape if you don't."

He's already in poor shape but Peter manages to pull on a sweater and a jacket and stumble down the stairs after his dad. They're between mealtimes so the kitchen is empty. Erik steers Peter towards one of the bar stools at the kitchen island. "Have a seat."

Peter sits. Magneto opens the pantry and starts rooting around. "Do you want some help?" Peter asks.

"No. I think I still remember where everything is." Drawers and cabinets open like the kitchen is possessed. Pans and utensils float out and arrange themselves on and near the stove.

Erik uses more conventional methods to take out flour, sugar, milk, eggs, butter, oil, all the usual ingredients to make a batter. Eventually Erik says, "I used to make these for Nina." There's the slightest pause before he says her name, just a little catch, like an old injury, a bad one, that his body is never going to let him forget no matter how much time goes by. "Magda handled most of the cooking, but I've always been an early riser. I enjoy seeing the sun rise far more than I enjoy watching it set. Most mornings I would have breakfast waiting for my family before they came downstairs, but as Nina grew older she liked to get up early and come downstairs and watch me cook. It was our special time together, and these were her favorite."

"Oh," Peter says. It seems ungrateful to point out that it's way past breakfast time, but then again Peter hasn't eaten yet today so for him it is breakfast time. He's just overslept is all.

Erik knows the recipe by heart, and either Polish people don't use measuring cups or Erik has just done it so many times that he can eyeball each ingredient and know whether or not it's enough. Whatever the case, when the batter hits the pan and starts to cook, it smells amazing.

"My parents taught me that the preparation of food, the act of sharing a meal, is a sacred act, a celebration of life and the people with whom we share it."

"What were they like?" Peter asks before he can stop himself, because he does want to know.

"Honest, hardworking. I was young when they died, and it's been so long. It all fades, and what I remember the most are the things I forced myself to repeat. Mostly I remember them through the things we often shared, through songs and rituals, prayers and recipes."

Mostly. Peter hasn't forgotten how Edie Lehnsherr died and he's pretty sure that Erik hasn't either.
“I’ve missed far too much of your life, Peter. Please, tell me how you’ve been.”

It’s a simple request, plainly and politely spoken, but Peter feels like if he throws back the figurative dust cloth covering the furniture of the last nine months of his life he’s going to reveal that there is no furniture, just a bunch of termites holding hands over pile of dust and breadcrumbs. He’s spent all that time trying to figure out how to live without the most important person in his life, and live with the glaring absence of the person who should have been the second-most important person in his life, and he’s probably making a good show of it, most days, but that's with the dust cover on.

“I, uh, had some rough days,” he says. He sniffs. He's not crying, but he sniffs. His eyes sting. “Not, like, 'Nazi death camp' rough, but not great. I mean, you saw the start of it, but, uh...” He blows out a breath and then does his best to explain the problems he had when he came back, how it took months for his appetite and his weight to stabilize and how draining it was: physically, emotionally, the works, and not just for him, for everybody. He tells Erik, “I hate food. I hate eating. It sucks and I wish I didn't have to do it, but, you know, I kind of do.” He gives a short, humorless laugh, but Erik doesn't even crack a smile.

Erik says, “I understand.”

That's good, because Peter doesn't. Well, in theory he does, he just wonders, 'why him?' and wishes none of it had happened.

Erik says, “I thought that Auschwitz had destroyed everything that I was, erased all the good that had come before, and for many years it was painful for me to recall anything that had happened to me before I was imprisoned. But something of my old life survived, and in time I saw that it was worth passing on. I have been a fortunate man to have shared my life, my memories, and my table with so many loved ones, and I will continue to be grateful for as long as I share a table with you.”

“Yeah,” Peter whispers. “I guess I've been lucky too.”

Erik's got a lumberjack-sized stack of empty blintzes on a plate and he finally lets Peter pitch in and help make the filling. Peter smears too much cheese on the first few and does a terrible job rolling them so that they either split or the filling comes oozing out the ends. Once the batter is all gone Erik cracks another half-dozen eggs to scramble, then starts helping Peter fill the blintzes. The pair of them fall into a rhythm, and the blintzes start looking like something that Denney's wouldn't be too ashamed to photograph for their menu.

Peter gets the coffee brewing, not because he wants some, the thought of coffee on an empty stomach sounds terrible but he knows Erik likes a cup in the afternoon and that he takes it black. Peter pours himself a glass of milk. They sit down across from each other at the otherwise empty table, just the two of them and a plate of scrambled eggs and a mammoth pile of blintzes, most of which are for Peter but Peter hesitates.

Erik looks between him and the food, a little confused, a little disappointed. He sighs, “Peter- ”

“I just thought you'd want to pray or something.” Peter's seen him do it before, back at Mom's house, little mumbled words that nobody paid much attention to, unless you were Kurt and you were saying your own prayers in Latin or German.

Erik looks at him for a moment, and Peter has a feeling that he's touched something inside of Erik that he didn't mean to, then Erik nods and bows his head and says, “Baruch atah adonai elokeinu melech haolam boreiy minei mezonot.” It's kind of melodic, like a song. When Erik's done he takes a bite, sets down his fork, and then he piles as many blintzes onto Peter's plate as will fit.
The world outside is cold and white and the wind is starting to pick back up but Peter feels safe and warm and dry in here. Erik's food looks good and tastes better, and Peter cleans his plate like he's been starving for years.

To be continued...

Thank you for reading. Feedback, as always, is welcome.

Chapter End Notes

Now, I'm not Jewish or particularly religious but Erik is, so I hope I copied the prayer correctly.

Not much Wanda in this chapter but don't worry, there will be more interaction between Wanda and Peter in the next chapter, and you will get to see what her powers look like.
**Red**

Chapter Summary

Peter tries to keep Wanda at a distance. Wanda gets close to him anyway.

Chapter Notes

Welcome back and again, thank you for reading. I'm very appreciative to everyone who has left me feedback and kudos. You are all amazing.

Just picked up the fourth issue of *Quicksilver: No Surrender* and I am really enjoying it. The final issue will be out next month, so if you like character studies check it out. You won't be sorry.

Once again, I'm just a humble hobbyist and I've never taken a writing class in my life, so please forgive any mistakes. It's been a busy day but I wanted to make sure I got this posted, so if you see anything wrong, don't hesitate to bring it to my attention.

Enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After Peter takes those first few tentative steps toward peace with his dad (and with food) he crawls back into bed and sleeps for another fourteen hours. When he wakes up Erik is gone but Hank is there, sitting at his bedside with a notepad and a pen, solving equations or writing a romance novel in Klingon or designing a spaceship or whatever.

“Thanks,” Peter says, before he forgets.

Hank looks up. He's just regular, non-furry Hank today. The wind is still howling outside. Everything is white, white, white, like a blank page. “For what?”

“For being a nice guy. Nice guys get taken for granted.”

“I'm not always nice,” Hank points out.

“I know.” He thinks of all those times Hank physically dragged him out of bed when he was too weak to get up on his own. “Thanks for that too. If you'd let me sleep I would have starved to death.”

“I wasn't sure whether or not you knew that at the time.”

“I did.”

“How are you feeling now?”

“Starving.”
Hank doesn't go all furry and march him downstairs but he does snag a passing student from the hall and send him down to the kitchen for anything edible at all, anything, seriously. While they wait Hank makes Peter sit up for a blood pressure check and a lecture about the dangers of smoking in general and hypothermia specifically as related to his metabolism and Peter nods along like it's news and tells Hank “Sorry,” and promises he won't do it again and Hank gives him a sad, weary look like he wants to believe Peter but he's not sure he should, which is fine because Peter's not sure he believes himself either.

Hank changes the subject. “So, it looks like Erik is going to be sticking around for a while,” he observes, fishing for a reaction.

“What does the professor say?”

“He wants me to give Erik the benefit of the doubt.”

Of course he does. Xavier sees the good in people, even when Peter's dead certain there's nothing there to see.

“I don't think it's a good idea,” Hank says.

Peter nods like, sure. Guy tries to kill you with giant robots, of course he's not going to be your first pick for a roommate and Peter knows his dad well enough to know that he and Xavier disagree on at least a few very fundamental things like, you know, the future of mutantkind. He has no idea how long Erik is going to be able to stomach the professor's optimistic outlook of mutant-human relations or how long the professor is going to be able to tolerate Erik's mutant superiority complex but in the meantime, “Could you give him a shot?”

Hank concedes. “For you.”

“Thanks, Hank.”

Then Hank says, like he's just now remembering, “You have a twin, Peter. That's incredible,” and he launches into an enthusiastic lecture about how rare mutant twins are because of the low incidence of twin births in the general population compounded by genetic complications that arise more often in mutants which nearly doubles the chance of a miscarriage, not to mention inadequate prenatal care and the high percentage of premature births among multiples which results in a higher rate of infant mortality and how because of all that Peter and Wanda might be the oldest living set of fraternal mutant twins in existence and what a rare opportunity this is to study nature versus nurture and Peter tries his best to at least pretend like he's paying attention because it's Hank, who's probably, in all honesty, the best friend Peter's ever had, who's talking about him and Wanda like he knocked down a wall in the basement and found something fascinating, like a pile of gold or a rotting corpse. Peter's not sure which one Wanda is but he knows that he's scared to look. He may have negotiated some kind of truce with his dad but he has no idea how to face his twin, so while Hank is rattling on an on about natural selection Peter's making plans to handle his relationship with Wanda the same way he would have handled his relationship with any girl ten to fifteen years ago: by avoiding her and pretending that she doesn't exist.

By the time Peter's crawled out from under his post-hypothermic funk the students have all been snowed in for two days, wiping their noses all over the furniture and sneezing in each others' Cornflakes, then Lexie barfs on the rug outside of the dining room and it's all downhill from there. The mini-mutants fall like dominoes and the mansion switches over to quarantine mode and Peter gets drafted into service by Hank and Raven, the two mutants with the strongest immune systems or maybe just the best track-record of hand-washing.
Raven puts Peter to work shuttling chicken soup, saltines, and ginger ale up the stairs, and emptying and cleaning out the bedside buckets when the chicken soup, saltines, and ginger ale refuse to stay down. When Peter's not busy dumping buckets of kid-puke in the boys' room toilets and trying to suppress his gag reflex he spends his time avoiding anyone who looks like they want to talk to him about Wanda and how crazy it is that he has a long-lost twin sister because it doesn't feel crazy to him. It feels awful, like he's been lied to his whole life and he wonders if Wanda feels the same way but at the same time he doesn't want to talk to her, like, at all. He doesn't want to call Lindy. He doesn't want to tell anyone about her because once he pulls that trigger it's real and he'll have to deal with it and he just doesn't know how. The only thing he has done is spy on her, which he thinks is totally fair because he knows she's doing the same thing to him.

On the first day of The Great Mutant Flu Epidemic of Eighty-Five he finds Wanda in his room, standing in front of his record collection with *Moving Pictures* in her hands and he has no idea if she's gone in to wait for him or to leave him a note or to trash his stuff. He doesn't slow down but he does come a little closer to her, keeping the bed between them like a barrier, using it to isolate himself from her, and he just looks at her for a little while, missing Mom, wishing Wanda-or Wendy- could have met her. But, he thinks, if Mom hadn't gotten sick, Erik might never have known he was Peter's dad, because Peter sure as shit had no concrete plans to tell him, and if Mom hadn't died, Mrs. Lugo might never have come forward with what she knew, and if Erik hadn't left, Wanda might not be standing here. Peter doesn't know how to tell her these things, or if they'd even mean anything to her because at the end of the day, she's a stranger in his life and in his room, going through his stuff. She'll never know Mom, and that's the thought that isolates him more than any physical barrier ever could. Wanda is just another fish in an aquarium, and Peter's on the other side of the glass, like he's been for years.

He leaves before she notices him, and when he eventually returns to his room, late, late at night, nothing seems to be broken or missing or even out of place. He doesn't notice until the next morning that his record player has stopped working. When he takes a look inside he finds that the belt has melted into a rubbery mass on the inside of the player. He kind of wonders if Wanda had something to do with it but he can't see how. There's no sign that she even touched the thing.

Peter knows he can't run forever. He's doing a great job of it so far, but even in a house this big, paths are bound to cross. His speed is a pretty useful tool when it comes to avoiding people or getting out of awkward situations but he has to sleep sometime, and it's during one of those times, when he's dozing over an empty plate at the dining room table that the professor appears in front of him, stirring milk into a cup of tea on a saucer. He taps his spoon on the edge of the cup, sets it noisely on the saucer, takes a sip while he waits for Peter to wake up, then says, “Wanda tells me that you're avoiding her.”

“No, I'm not,” Peter says, all groggy and cotton-mouthed. He's avoiding everyone. “Would you like to know how she's doing?” Xavier asks.

“Nope, he already knows what she's up to. Peter passes her in the halls and comes across her in the kitchen while he's loading up trays for the sick kids. He knows she drinks decaf, and she's a morning person. He knows she likes red in the same way that Peter likes silver. He knows that a bunch of the kids have recognized her from this commercial or that show and about six of the boys have a crush on her and he knows their names and where they sleep. He knows that she spends a lot of her time with the professor or Erik and Hank or Raven, trying to unlock her gifts or whatever, and that usually happens behind closed doors and involves a lot of dead silence punctuated by the occasional loud crash, grunt, scream, or billowing cloud of smoke, so all in all she's had a pretty standard first week at Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters and the Occasional Incompetent Adult Mutant. He knows that Raven pretended not to limp away from one of those sessions and that Hank's suggested
hosting Wanda's lessons in the danger room from now on. He knows that Wanda's lessons wipe her out, probably because she's being asked to flex muscles she's never tried to use before. He knows she's upstairs sleeping right now.

“She asks about you,” the professor says, not breaking eye contact as he sips his tea.

“Yeah?” he says, trying not to sound too interested.

“Jean asks about you too.”

Uh huh. Peter knows that Jean's been suspended from the team, which Peter thinks was is kind of a pointless gesture since the mansion is in crisis mode right now and most of the X-Men are either down with the flu or too busy playing nurse to thirty odd sick kids to get much use out of the danger room but anyway, Jean's supposed complete some kind of ethics course for the professor as punishment for messing with Peter's head. This he had from Scott, who honestly seems more upset over what Jean did than Peter is and swears up and down that he had no idea and Peter believes him. Why? Because, despite his insecurity and bullshit and posturing, Scott is, or at least tries to be, a decent guy and he would never lie or fuck over a teammate or go behind someone else's back no matter how many of his sweatshirts Peter ruins. So yeah, this is what it's come to: Peter would rather have a sit-down conversation with Scott Summers than the majority of the other mutants at the school including his own sister.

Anyway, Scott said that Jean's really sorry and she's been crying on and off since the night she gave Peter his memory back and on the one hand Peter feels bad because she's a teammate and a friend and she helped him look after Mom and she made tomato soup for him but on the other hand she helped Erik manipulate him, and he hasn't really forgiven his dad for that either but he also kind of expects his dad to do shit like that; like, he knows that having Erik Lehnsherr in his life means putting up with the occasional criminal, sometimes homicidal tendencies brought on by years of traumatic imprisonment and experimentation by Nazi scientists. Duh. And that doesn't make Peter naïve or a sucker, that just puts him in the same boat as the professor and Raven but the point is, he wants to trust Jean. He wants to trust everybody, like, so bad, but he feels like he's moving backwards, and he's scared of putting his trust in his twin, because she already means a lot to him and he's not sure he wants her to know that.

“You can tell Jean we're cool. We're fine. I know that she didn't, like, mean it that way.”

“She'll be glad to hear it. She worries. We all do.”

“About what?”

“About someone who is very important to this school and all of the mutants in it.”

Shit, it's him, isn't it? How many times does he have to tell everyone that he's fine before they believe him? He's not fine but he wants them to think he's fine.

“The longer you put off getting to know Wanda, the more you will regret it,” the professor assures him.

“She'll catch up with me eventually,” he says.

The professor raises his eyebrows over the rim of his teacup. “I'm not sure that you'll like what happens when she does.”

Yeah, well, probably not, but he's kind of stuck with his decision now that he's made it and no one can force him to do anything he doesn't want to unless, you know, they mess with his head again and
that's a line the professor isn't going to cross but he'll calmly sit back and let Peter dig his own grave.

The situation with Wanda comes to a head when the storm passes and the skies clear and Peter takes that as his cue to start shoveling the snow that's laying two to three feet deep on the ground. He starts after breakfast and doesn't stop until every path, the outdoor track, the driveway, and the basketball court are clear. It takes him about fifteen minutes but leaves him pretty worn out, so he has an early lunch and naps until it's time for the first outdoor gym class in a week. Most of the school is getting back into the swing of things but there are a few malingerers because there always are, come on, they're kids and they'd rather curl up in bed or on the couch and watch *The Price is Right* than study algebra but anyway the point is that he knows already he's going to have a small class which is fantastic because his back is stiff as frozen shit from all of the shoveling and he can barely turn his head from side to side but hey, he's tough! He's an X-Man. He can handle five or six rowdy mutant munchkins who have been cooped up inside for a week solid even if he can't bend forward at the waist and he has to wear his silver Nikes with the laces undone and walk like Frankenstein's monster out to the basketball court. Once he manages that part he mostly just hangs out and shouts directions that go unheeded as the kids chase each other back and forth across the court that Peter busted his ass to excavate for them, screaming at the top of their lungs and colliding and knocking each other down. He's surprised none of the other teachers have come out to check and see what all the noise is about but now that the kids are getting back on their feet the older mutants are dropping in their tracks. Even Hank and Raven slept in this morning, although come to think of it that might just be their way of rebelling against the establishment so that they can spend some quality time behind locked doors and Peter can't blame them. Anyway, rebellion or not, everybody with any kind of authority is either too busy or too wiped out to care who's being murdered on the lawn during gym class.

“Are you okay?” Calvin asks. The kid's been standing at his elbow for who-knows-how-long. Not Peter. Peter would have marked him absent if he were able to bend his neck enough to look down at his clipboard.

“Yeah, I'm great, man,” Peter says, moving just his eyes to look at the kid.

Calvin does not look convinced.

Thank God for whistles. At least the mini-mutants look like they've gotten enough exercise. I few of them even flop in the enormous bank of snow on the side of the court like it's a big pillow but before they can rally and start a snowball fight Peter shoos them inside. He's using his feet to corral the basketballs when he sees something moving toward him out of the corner of his eye and when he manages to get himself turned around he sees that something is Wanda and she's striding toward him purposefully on those long legs of hers. She's still wearing a skirt and paper-thin blouse but she's added a jacket to her outfit and traded her pumps for knee-high boots as a nod to the fact that it's ball-shriveling cold out here. Wanda doesn't seem all that concerned by the weather but maybe her anger is keeping her warm. Man, does she look pissed. She hasn't said a word and her rose-red lips are clamped together tight but she's got one arm raised and she's pointing a finger at him. Peter glances around as much as he can, checking that she's really pointing at him and there's not, like, a mountain lion or a grizzly bear or a circus clown behind him but when he moves he steps on a patch of ice and his foot slides right out from under him. He tries to shift his weight to his other foot but that one slips too. Now both of his feet are sliding and he's flailing his arms and legs at high speed like a cartoon character and he hopes that somebody is getting a kick out of watching him struggle but also he hopes they burn in Hell, then Peter's legs shoot out from under him. He tries to shift his weight to his other foot but that one slips too. Now both of his feet are sliding and he's flailing his arms and legs at high speed like a cartoon character and he hopes that somebody is getting a kick out of watching him struggle but also he hopes they burn in Hell, then Peter's legs shoot out from under him. He hangs horizontally in the air for a horrifying second, helpless, before gravity takes over and he high-fives the ground with his whole body. While he's lying there, stunned, Wanda marches over and gives him a nudge with her boot and demands, “Get up, I want to talk to you.” Peter gets up, not because she told him to but because the concrete is hard and cold and uncomfortable and it's not doing his back any favors.
“Did you do that?” he asks, partially because Erik said she had telekinesis and also because it would be nice to know he's not that clumsy.

Wanda brushes off the question. She's got her own agenda. “Why are you avoiding me?”

She's looking right at him with Mom's green eyes, but she's not Mom. She's just a stranger.

“Who says I'm avoiding you? Maybe I'm just busy.” Once it's out he thinks that maybe he could have put a little more effort into coming up with a lie.

Peter watches in morbid fascination as Wanda's eyes widen and her lip curls and her face contorts in rage. She makes a primal sound that starts way down inside of her and builds until she can't contain it anymore and she throws her head back and screams, “Nnrrreegghhh!” And then her hands shoot out and she grabs Peter by the lapels of his jacket and shouts in his face, “I didn't come all the way to New York to freeze my ass off so that you can pretend that I don't exist!”

“Maybe you should wear pants, then.”

Oh, that was not the right thing to say. Peter goes to gently pry her fingers off of his jacket and that's when he catches it: that tiny instant where her eyes focus on him and she holds her breath at the top of an inhalation, like she's concentrating on something only she can sense and he knows she's using her power, and it's confusing because nothing happens right away but when he tries to peel her hands off of his jacket a muscle in his back seizes up and he drops his clipboard and flops over into a trampled bank of snow at the edge of the basketball court. While he's lying there, screaming silently, Wanda stomps over and sits on his chest and squeezes his ribs with her knees and and grabs two handfuls of his shirt. Peter had very little chest hair to begin with but now he has none at all. That's when physical pain takes a back seat and Peter retaliates by shaking his head like a dog (if a dog could shake at a hundred and fifty miles per hour) flinging snow and ice in every direction. Wanda squawks and turns her head to the side and raises one hand to shield her face but the other stays right where it is. Peter may be bigger and stronger and faster than Wanda but he also doesn't want to hurt her. He just wants to get away... and he can't. Okay, this is obviously not Wanda's first wrestling match but she also seems to have some other kind of advantage that Peter can't quantify because every time he tries to grab her wrists or shove her off it's like trying to strangle a buttered eel. He miscalculates or gets a poor grip or his icy-wet hands slide off of her skin and she's trying to slip past his guard but he's too fast but somehow not fast enough to break free.

Finally, out of frustration, he grabs a handful of snow and just shoves it down the front of her shirt and knows right away that that was a fucking mistake because now the gloves are off, literally. Peter's are in the snowbank or the bushes or somewhere and Wanda never had any gloves and she's already scored a couple of deep scratches on Peter's neck with those long, pink nails of hers. Raven's spent hundreds of hours drilling the X-Men in hand-to-hand combat but all of those techniques and counter-techniques, all the wrist-locks and arm-bars and foot-sweeps go right out the window and all that's left is a jumble of elbows and knees and hair and teeth: chaos. Peter's forgotten all about his stiff back, which is good because Wanda obviously doesn't give a shit about it either. They're rolling over and over, flinging snow and ice in every direction, both of them trying to pin the other with no plan beyond that, not on Peter's end at least. They're just a messy tangle of limbs, leaving zipper heads and broken fingernails and buttons in their wake. Part of him wants to ask if they can talk this out but there's a deeper part of him that's been hungry for a challenge since the day his powers manifested, that screams, Yes! This is what we've been missing! He doesn't even need to win, which is good because he's not sure he can, but if he's going down then he's going down swinging.

Wanda's managed to worm her way behind him and get him in a headlock and every time he tries to get out of it he slips or some part of him cramps up and the best he can do is get one hand in the way
of her forearm and grab a fistful of her hair with the other. It seems like neither one of them is going anywhere when he hears some asshole who sounds exactly like Raven call out, in a loud, bored, sing-song voice, “Eriiiik, your kids are fighting.”

Wanda tightens her grip, like she knows it's now or never, so Peter struggles harder too until a voice booms inside of his head, “Stop this immediately!” And they both stiffen and let go and roll away from each other and slap their palms over their ears, like that's going to do any good.

It takes Peter and Wanda a little while to shake off the professor's command and then they're lying on the basketball court, panting and staring at each other over the dirty snow. Wanda's glaring at him all menacing like, This isn't over, and Peter's wondering if he's going to have to go a second round when Erik swoops in on the two of them like a freaking bird of prey and snatches Wanda up and hauls her to her feet. Once Wanda's upright he tries to do the same to Peter but Peter's back spasms and he makes an unmanly sound, like “Ahhh...!” and sucks air in through his teeth, which is humiliating enough before he notices the twenty or so faces that are pressed against the insides of the mansion's windows, staring down at him all goggle-eyed like fish in a bowl. Erik holds Peter at arms' length, like he's afraid of hurting him worse. Peter waves him off, “I was like this when she got here.” He's not about to give Wanda more credit than she's due.

Erik's face hardens. He looks legitimately pissed off, not as pissed as Wanda though, so Peter's not really worried, okay maybe a little worried because of his aching back and the fact that he has metal plates in his leg. Erik really looks more alarmed than anything, like Hank when he found out that some of the kids broke into his lab and “borrowed” some of his equipment and chemicals for a school project.

Erik asks, rhetorically, Peter hopes, “What is the matter with you two? Do you have any idea how dangerous that was? You could have seriously injured one another or worse.”

They look at each other but they don't say anything and Erik wipes his hand down his face like, well, like he's their dad and they've given him five new gray hairs but Peter can't make himself feel too bad about that because he didn't start it but he's not going to just come out and say that because nobody likes a snitch. He sneaks another glance at Wanda. Her lips are shut tight and she looks like she's waiting for Erik to turn his back so she can sock Peter in the kidney.

Erik continues, “Inside, both of you,” and in they go, Wanda all proud and defiant in her shredded nylons and soaking wet shirt and Peter, hobbling like an old man because of his back and also because he's lost a shoe. Erik's trailing behind them to watch for signs of mischief while Raven smirks down at them from where she's lounging in an open second-story window. Peter looks up at her and mouths the word “Narc.”

When they walk in through the front door there's a whole slew of mini-mutants hanging out at the top of the stairs, peeking over the banister and whispering. Even the lazy malingers, in their pajamas and slippers, have shuffled out of the TV room to see what all the noise is about. Xavier rolls into the foyer and they scatter like cockroaches when the lights come on. “Wanda, Peter,” the professor greets them formally. “I think perhaps the two of you could benefit from a review of our school's code of conduct. I'll ensure that you each have a copy to peruse and sign. Now, before we speak further on the subject, I think you should sit down and talk to one another like adults. It's past time... Peter.”

All the way up until Xavier said Peter's name Wanda had been nothing but pissed, but once the professor throws him under the bus Wanda's bitchy expression cracks and her frown trembles and her eyes start to shine and it occurs to Peter that he did that, but he'll be damned if he's apologizing because even though she looks like she wants to cry she still looks more like she wants to punch his
lights out.

Erik is holding open the door that leads to the professor's office. He says simply, “In.”

Wanda goes first and Peter limps in after her.

“Sit,” Erik instructs them. Wanda ignores the chairs in front of the professor's desk and lowers herself gracefully onto the end of leather sofa that's standing against the side of the room and folds her arms over her chest and glares at the wall in front of her. Peter hesitates because a) he's not sure he wants to bend enough to sit and b) once he's down, he's not sure how he's going to get back up. Oh, and c) if he sits he'll either have to share the sofa with Wanda or occupy one of the hot seats right in front of the professor's desk.

While Peter is trying to pick his poison, Kid Peter appears in the doorway to the professor's office. He just turned thirteen and he has to duck to clear the lintel. He's got some kind of folded towel thing that looks like a napkin in his huge hands but turns out to be a hot compress when he hands it over to Peter.

Once Kid Peter has finished his errand and skedaddled out of harm's way the professor says, “Next time, Peter, leave the driveway for the snowplow.”

Peter grunts in agreement and finds a semi-comfortable position where he can sandwich the compress between himself and the wall while standing, except that the only empty wall space happens to be directly in front of Wanda who, instead of redirecting her glare, stays the course and there they are, the progeny of the infamous Magneto, Master of Magnetism: scratched and bruised and dripping melted snow on the carpet of the headmaster's office, glaring at each other from opposite sides of the room because they got caught fighting during recess.

Xavier surveys the situation and says, “You know, Erik, I quite fancy a cup of tea. Won't you join me?”

Erik glares at Xavier as if he thinks that running this school has finally pushed his old pal over the edge, then he blinks and says, “Yes. That sounds lovely,” in a flat voice that convinces no one that it sounds lovely to him. He's looking back and forth between Peter and Wanda like he's trying to figure out how he can apply what he's learned from his long and storied career of torture, espionage, man-hunting, treason, destruction, and murder to this situation.

“Talk to each other,” the professor instructs them as he rolls out of the room. He pauses at the door. “And Peter, Wanda, I expect my furnishings and décor to remain intact in my absence.”

Erik doesn't have any stake in whether or not the room stays undamaged but he gives them a backward glance as he leaves, like maybe he's worried he's going to have one fewer kid when he comes back and sure enough, here it comes, “Do try not to kill each other,” he says.

Once the door shuts there's a reeeeeeeally long, uncomfortable silence which is kind of like a game of chicken. Peter cracks first, “Well?”

“If you hadn't stolen my cigarettes we could be smoking right now,” Wanda snaps.

“You don't even smoke!”

“Yes, I do. For roles. Sometimes. And when I'm stressed. Like now.”

“Yeah, well, me too.” Not for roles, but, you know, otherwise.
Peter wishes he had that pack of cigarettes right now too. He wonders how much the professor would mind the smell of smoke in his curtains. Probably less than he'd let on.

“You want a cigar?” he offers. “The professor has a stash in his desk.” They're Cubans, even. Cubans. Christ on a cracker, what is wrong with that man?

Wanda says, “Not anymore he doesn't.”

She doesn't go into the whys and hows and Peter doesn't ask because he's secretly grateful that he doesn't have to move because his back is killing him. The compress is nice, but all it does is take the edge off. He sinks down very carefully to the floor and wants to curl up into a ball but also doesn't want to leave himself unguarded against Wanda.

...On the other hand, fuck it. If she wants to put him out of his misery, he welcomes judgment. Peter topples slowly over onto his side and curls his knees toward his chest. It's marginally less painful than standing.

Wanda gives him a funny look but she doesn't seem to be in the mood to smite him.

“You don't fight like a girl,” Peter points out.

“I grew up with three older brothers.”

“No shit? Three brothers?” Peter says. He feels sorry for those assholes.

“My parents always wanted a girl. They couldn't have one of their own.”

It's hard to imagine Wanda as somebody's little princess, considering how she was enthusiastically grinding his face into the pavement just a little while ago, but he's sure there are about a billion pictures of his fluffy-haired twin in pink tutus and pigtails on a mantle somewhere. He bets they dressed her up in white tights and Mary Janes and frilly dresses, fluffy coats around Christmas, just like Mom used to do with Lindy. He bets she hated it. It must have been a real kick in the teeth when her parents found out their little darling was a mutant. Then he feels kind of bad for her, growing up all by her mutant lonesome out there in the world with three human brothers who probably couldn't even defend themselves.

“Sorry about the cigarettes,” Peter says. “I figured you wouldn't miss them.” Then he sneaks a glance at Wanda to see how his apology landed but it seems like she's thinking about something else.

Sure enough, “You're such a disappointment,” Wanda says. “You're not what I expected at all.”

Ouch, but it figures that Peter's twin would echo the sentiment that's been bouncing off the inside of Peter's skull since he was a teenager. Also, laying on the floor in a fetal position, Peter's not making a very convincing argument that he's not the most pathetic son of a bitch who ever lived.

“What were you expecting?” he asks.

“Our dad told me about all of the people you'd saved. He talked about you like you were some kind of hero.”

Peter doesn't say anything. He is what he is. Nothing Wanda says is going to change that. It's a surprisingly liberating thought.

“That's how he convinced me to come here, to meet you. He said you'd be happy.”
He's... happy... ish. It's complicated. “I thought you came here to learn how to control your powers,” he says.

Peter has serious déjà vu when Wanda gives him Lindy's 'don't be stupid' expression. “I don't need lessons. I already know what I can do. I've gotten pretty good at hiding in plain sight. I probably could have kept it up but I always kind of thought...” she shrugs, wiping away a tear from her eye with the knuckle of her forefinger. Xavier keeps a box of tissues on his desk for extra-difficult tutoring sessions but Peter gets the feeling that Wanda's too proud to take advantage. She takes a breath. “I couldn't help thinking that I'd be better off around my own kind. When humans find out what I can do, they're scared of me. The girls at my high school used to call me a witch.”

He feels like that's his cue to say something like “You're not a witch.”

Wanda explodes just like she did on the basketball court, like Peter's the match and she's the gasoline, “How would you know? You were supposed to help me! I don't know how to do this!”

God, she's got a great set of pipes. “Do what?”

“This!” Wanda shouts at him, like he's stupid. Her hands are open and her palms are upturned, indicating everything, the whole school. “Be a mutant.”

“I don't know. You just... be who you are. Do what it is you've always done.”

“Sure. Okay,” Wanda says as she nods vigorously and wipes tears on her sleeve and oh, it is not okay at all. “I'll just be who I am.” Then she says, “Do you even know who I am? Do you know what I can do? Do you know anything at all about my powers?! My-” Oh God, air quotes “-gifts?”

Well, now he knows that she doesn't think of it as a gift, but no mutant ever has as far as he knows. The professor has a perfectly rehearsed First-Day-of-Mutant-School speech just to deal with things like this.

“I'm a fake. I'm an actress. I look like a human but I'm really a monster.” Then she enunciates slowly, for emphasis, as if she needs to, “I make things go wrong.”

Peter gapes at her for what he feels like an appropriate amount of time and then he says, “Uh, you what now?”

“I point my finger and I can make Professor Xavier's desk burst into flames. I nod my head and I can make the shelves break and all of the books fall on the floor. I think about the windows exploding or the roof collapsing or any bone in your body breaking and somehow it will happen, but my powers can't fix your back or put out a fire or even pick up the books off of the floor.”

“Holy shit. I thought you were telekinetic.”

Wanda shakes her head. “Professor Xavier keeps telling me that there's more to my mutation than just bad luck but there isn't. I've never been able to do anything good with these powers.”

Something occurs to him. “Did you melt the belt on my record player?”

“Probably.”

Huh. It's not the weirdest power Peter's ever heard of. That award still goes to Nancy Nagahori but Wanda's power is more unusual than most. “But, what's bad for someone else can be good for you, right?”
She shakes her head. “You'd think, but I can't always control the outcome. When I first came to Hollywood I tried using my powers to book acting jobs. Once, I gave the other actresses at an audition the stomach flu, but then the casting agent got it too. They postponed the audition and I still didn't get the part. Mostly I tried to pretend I wasn't a mutant. That didn't always work, but my powers are usually subtle enough that as long as I don't get angry or spend too much time around the same people they don't catch on to the fact that bad things seem to happen when I'm around.

“For a long time I didn't want to know anything about my birth parents because how could it be good news? And as soon as I saw him I knew exactly why he was there. Then he told me that he was my father and he showed me my birth certificates and I knew that every bad thing I'd ever thought about myself was true. But then he told me about you and I thought that if my twin was so brave and so great then I couldn't be all bad. Then when I got here you didn't want to have anything to do with me.”

Okay, in this light Peter can see exactly how petty and childish he's been with his smoking and brooding and walking around with his bruised feelings and throwing his back out shoveling snow just to avoid having to sit down and talk to his long-lost twin over a cup of coffee.

It hurts a lot, physically, but Peter manages to get himself up off of the ground and stagger over to the sofa and sit down next to Wanda, but sitting up is torture.

“Oh my God, what are you doing?” Wanda asks as Peter's head settles next to her hip.

“I'd rather be disappointing on a couch than disappointing on the floor, and besides, you're warm.” He can't tell from this position how she takes his explanation. “I get where you're coming from and you're right and I'm sorry. If you haven't already figured it out, I'm an immature asshole and I don't always make the best choices and you really shouldn't be pinning all your hopes on me because I'm not a hero or special or anything. The only thing I am is fast. It's like having one tool in a toolbox and I can't use it to fix everything and I know that because I've tried.”

Wanda spends a few breaths soaking that in and composing herself, then she says, “I'm not crazy, you know. I don't just go around tackling people, or I didn't before I came here. Being here is bringing up a lot of things that I would rather have kept buried. The professor says this is normal. I guess what I'm saying is that I'm a little raw right now and because of that I let you get under my skin.” A few seconds later, “Sorry.”

Peter shrugs sideways. “I have that effect on people.”

“I think our dad is just as disappointed in me as I am in you.”

“Why's that?” Not because she almost successfully beat the shit out of him earlier. A man of Erik's moral flexibility should have been taking her out for ice cream and pony rides.

“I'm not Nina.”

Nina, their other sister, the one Peter's never tried to think of as a sister because she was dead before he even knew she existed. Neither one of them is ever going to stack up to the memory of Erik's tragically deceased nine-year-old daughter so Peter doesn't see the point in trying.

“You can't always get what you want,” Peter says.

“Don't quote Mick Jagger to me. I'm a Beatles fan. All you have is The White Album.”

“Is that the real reason you're disappointed in me?”
“It doesn’t help,” she says. She looks him over. “I don’t hate you. I just wanted things to be different.”

“Me too.”

“I’m sorry about your mom.”

“Our mom,” he corrects her. “And thanks. She would have loved you, if she’d known.”

“I kind of wondered whether or not our dad was telling the truth, but she really didn’t know about me, did she?”

Peter shakes his head. “I guess they had some crazy drugs back then.”

“She was human?”

“Human as they come.”

“And she didn’t mind that you were a mutant?”

“Nah. I mean, I drove her nuts, sure, with all of the theft and vandalism and that one really regrettable prison break, but she never kicked me out. She was a good mom.”

“I wish I could have met her. I’m sorry I couldn’t be her Wendy.”

“Yeah, me too,” Peter says, then he has to change the subject or he’s going to have a stuffed-up nose to go with his aching back. “Hey, did you have good parents?”

“I still have good parents. They’re retired and they live in Arizona now. I haven’t told them where I am. I probably should before they decide to drive over to my place and surprise me and find out I’m gone. I’m afraid of how they’ll react, knowing I’m Magneto’s daughter. Once I tell them, that’s it, it’s real. I can’t pretend to be human anymore. They’ll be so disappointed.”

“You were always a mutant. You don’t have to pretend.”

He can actually feel her thinking. “I don’t know if I can do this. I make a terrible mutant. I can’t even use my powers without screwing everything up because my power is screwing everything up.”

Well, “I killed a guy,” he confesses.

“What?” Nobody told her that story. “How?”

“Dropped him in a river. Didn’t know he couldn’t swim.”

“Who was he?”

“One of the mutant kidnappers. You heard about that, right?”

She has.

“Maybe he wasn’t a model citizen but still, I didn’t mean to kill him.”

Wanda takes a while to digest the information. Then she confesses, “Do you know that I almost killed you?”

“I could have fought harder.”
“Not just now. When you almost froze on the roof.”

“That was me being a stubborn asshole.”

“No, it was me. After you came through the lab we were trying to figure out where you'd gone. The professor said you were on the roof. I was angry, not about the cigarettes. I felt rejected, and I wanted to get back at you. I made it so you'd just... decide not to come in. I didn't know you were so susceptible to the cold. I wasn't trying to hurt you, I was just... mad.”

"Is that why you helped me, after? Because you felt guilty?"

"Yes... No... I wanted to see if I felt anything."

Even if she didn't feel anything, he did.

"I would never kill anyone, not on purpose."

Peter looks up at her. “Neither would I,” he says.

“I think the professor knows.” She means about the roof.

“Not much gets past him. Maybe he also knows that you didn't mean it.” She hasn't said she was sorry for trying to freeze him, but she is. “He's pretty big on second chances.”

“I guess he'd have to be to get along with our dad.”

“Yes,” he smiles. “Nobody here is perfect. Our powers don't make us good or bad.”

“You saved a lot of people with your powers.”

“It feels wrong not to try, you know? I mean, if there's a fire and you're just standing there with a hose, you'd put it out, right?”

She huffs out a bitter little laugh. “All I have is a lighter.”

“Not anymore you don't.” Because he left it on the roof.

“You know what I mean.”

“It's not about having a lighter or a hose, it's about whether or not you want to put the fire out. If the professor says you don't know all that you can do it's because you don't know all you can do. You've been here for, what, like, a week? It's gonna take some time. Everybody goes through the same thing when they come here, even if they think they already know everything.”

“Even you?”

“Yeah.” He doesn't mention that his training was mostly just Hank trying to get him to lay off the junk food and then experiment with all of the random stuff Peter can do with his powers besides run, like learn four hundred German phrases in an hour, then forget them all the next day. “Did you know you're the only person who's ever come close to beating me in a fair fight?” Fair's relative around here, but, you know...

“Seriously?”

“Yeah,” and he's pretty sure that little nugget of information hasn't escaped the professor's notice. “I want a rematch.”
“I'll kick your ass.” Wanda cracks a genuine smile through her tears.

“You'll try.”

Wanda slides off the sofa and sits on the floor so that their faces are on a level. He wonders if she's about to do something horrible to him but instead she just kind of searches his face, like she's looking for something, some trace of herself or Erik or Mom. Then she reaches out a hand and brushes his hair out of his eyes. It gives Peter chills. “This color, is it real?” Wanda asks.

“Yup. It's always been that way.”

“I like it. It's different.”

“Thanks,” he says, but she keeps staring at him. He says, “I know, we don't look alike. Maybe we're not really twins. Maybe I was switched at birth and there's some poor silver-haired mutant couple out there wondering why their son looks like Magneto.”

“We're twins. Dr. McCoy compared our DNA.”

“Figures. Nerd.”

“He told me who you look like.”

“Who, Hank?” Peter says, deliberately obtuse because he wants to hide how interested he is in finding out who's to blame for his caveman brow and bloodhound jowls.

“Our dad.” There it is again, that 'don't be stupid' look and he decides he's going to be seeing it a lot if she sticks around. He feels a sharp little pang in his chest when he considers that she might not want to stay. “He said it took him a while to place, but he thinks you look like his mother.”


Wanda is grinning at his pain.

“Oh, sure, you can laugh. You inherited all the attractive genes. Erik might have a lot of problems, but getting laid is not one of them, obviously. And Mom, oh man, she was really pretty. I don't know if you've seen pictures but yeah, she was something.”

“She was. Our dad showed me one picture. It was from when they were young.”

“Was there a Christmas tree?”

“Yeah.”

He knows the one. “Hey, Wanda?”

“Yeah?”

“I'll help you. I don't know what I can do that the professor and Hank and Raven and Erik aren't already doing, but I want to try, okay? I don't want you to leave.” She might be just as slow as everyone else, but if she walks away he's worried she'll never let him catch up to her.

“I'm not going anywhere,” she says.

Peter's glad.
They talk for a while. It helps keep Peter's mind off of his back. Peter tells her about some of his youthful misadventures and imagines out loud what a terror the two of them would have been if they'd grown up under the same roof. Wanda tells him about her parents and her brothers. Her dad worked in finance or something so boring that Peter forgets about it as soon as Wanda finishes telling him but one of her brothers is a pilot and a skydiving instructor and Peter's like, “Holy shit. I want to go. You have to take me.”

“I've never been. I'm terrified of heights.”

“We'll go together. We can jump tandem.”

“No!”

“Wanda, Wanda, Wanda, it'll be awesome. What are you afraid of?”

And she looks at him and her eyes tear up and suddenly they're not talking about skydiving anymore. They're talking about Wanda taking a step out into empty space with no idea how far she'll fall or if there will be anyone there to catch her. “I don't know.”

Peter holds out a hand, and she takes it. His hand is cold but hers is so warm. Wanda isn't Mom. She's not Lindy or Erik. She's him, and he's her. They're twins. They're strangers. They're mutants. They're weak and powerful, fast and slow, everything and nothing to each other. They're two sides of one coin.

They're not going to fall.

They're going to fly.

To be continued...

Thank you for reading. Feedback is welcome and appreciated.

Chapter End Notes

I know that Wanda is a long-time fan favorite so I hope I've done a passable job at creating my own version of the character. In this story she's had to pass herself off as human and that's left her with a lot of confusion and self-loathing. I know the last few lines make it seem like this could be a happy ending to the story, but we all know it's not going to be that easy.

Thank you again for reading. I hope you'll join me next week.
Peter has conversations with people he loves. It goes better than he expects.

Welcome back! You may have noticed that the number of eventual chapters has increased from nineteen to twenty, and that is because I decided to cut this part in half. It was long to begin with and then I added to it this week and eventually decided that it was too much to post all at once and I wouldn't be able to do as good of a job on the final edit, so this part and the next will be a little shorter than I would like, but it does give the story a nice, even twenty chapters.

Also I have finally learned to capitalize Danger Room. Go me.

Enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

They're not going to fall.

They're going to fly.

But first they're going to sign some really boring paperwork for the professor. After that's out of the way and Xavier slides the signed documents into a folder and files them away in his desk because apparently he's really serious about this whole 'code of conduct' thing, Peter and Wanda are back in the professor's good graces and he's kind enough to let them borrow his office to make a few awkward phone calls. Peter goes first, and he has to hold the receiver away from his ear while Lindy shrieks in excitement over the news that she has an older sister and jumps up and down until her RA comes and tells her to chill out because it's midterms and people are trying to study. “Whatever,” Lindy says afterward, “She's just hungover. This is so cool! Lemme talk to her!” and Peter hands the phone over but he can still hear her asking Wanda when she can see her and Wanda's not sure because the professor asked Wanda not to leave the school until she's had a few more lessons, which is news to Peter but maybe it wouldn't be if he'd sat down and talked to Wanda before today. Lindy's voice goes kind of quiet like she's disappointed and he wonders if Wanda's making up that restriction, like she's just nervous about meeting Lindy or something but then he thinks about the roof and the professor's cigars and decides that she's probably not.

Peter's trying not to eavesdrop so he doesn't get else much out of their conversation. Lindy does most of the talking and Wanda answers her questions in short, guarded sentences, but smiles as she twirls her finger in a spiral around the phone cord. By the time Wanda hands the receiver back to Peter she looks cautiously optimistic.

Then Wanda calls her adoptive parents in Scottsdale. There is no screaming or jumping or celebrating, and definitely no smiling, just Wanda standing there, shifting her weight from foot to
foot and saying things like, “Yes,” and “I know, Dad,” and “Of course not!” and seeming really
downcast and defeated and finally using the tissue box that Peter sets underneath her right hand.

When Erik eases the professor's door open to check on them he finds the phone back in the cradle
and Wanda sobbing in Peter's arms and Peter's fighting back tears himself because this is hurting his
back so much but he can't just let Wanda go. He glances to Erik for help because sibling bonding
and mutant solidarity aside he's in a lot of pain right now and he could really use an assist so he tries
to project Save me! like he's one of the telepaths but Erik just frowns blankly at him like, No
entiendo, so Peter waves his arm like, Oh my God, just get over here! and Erik crosses the room all
slow and purposeful and stops just outside of Peter and Wanda's personal space and makes a big,
agonizing pause before saying, “Wanda...”

When she hears her name she sucks in a shaky breath and notices Erik standing there like a post, like
he's not sure how welcome he is, but then she eases away from Peter and goes to Erik and buries her
face in his chest. Erik's arms come up automatically and his eyes widen and then his face collapses
and he melts against her like a piece of steel in a foundry furnace and nobody has to tell Peter that
this is the first time she's voluntarily laid hands on him.

Wanda's parents might not see a difference between Wanda embracing her mutant heritage and her
turning her back on the family that raised her, but her brothers do. Two of them show up
unannounced and uninvited outside the school gates a couple of days after Peter and Wanda's
wrestling match in the snow. Peter's back is all better so he's outside pruning back the dormant trees
because it hasn't been done in, like, forever, and either he does it or the professor has to find and hire
an arborist to come all the way out here and that's just ridiculous when Peter is right here
and there are pruning shears and a hand saw in the tool shed. Also, Peter's still avoiding anyone who still
wants to talk about how weird it is that his family tree suddenly has an extra branch. It's not weird to
him anymore, and when he looks back on his life before he met Wanda he can see all of the gaps she
would have filled, and he can't imagine the rest of his life without her, not that they're joined at the
hip or anything. If they were he wouldn't be climbing trees because Wanda's afraid of heights.

So anyway, he's halfway up a big red oak with his headphones on, listening to Van Halen's 1984,
sawing away at a branch when he sees a taxi pull up briefly outside the gates to the school and then
peal out, which in itself is nothing out of the ordinary, it's just that the cabby usually leaves behind
some scrawny, tear-streaked youngster with mismatched socks and a ratty backpack and, like, six
limbs, not two anxious but determined-looking grown men in pleated slacks and windbreakers.

Peter has a pretty solid idea who they might be even before he hops down from his tree and jogs over
and flips through their wallets and finds a pilot's license on Greg, the tall one, who obviously loved
the haircut that the Air Force gave him because he hasn't changed things up since he had his driver's
license renewed in eighty-one. The even-taller one is Tom, who Peter likes right away because he's
walking up to a giant mansion in a wrinkled shirt and tennis shoes and he seems like the kind of guy
who never took notes in school and slept his way through class and aced every test anyway. Tom's a
mechanical engineer. Wanda mentioned that her oldest brother has a wife and three kids and lives
abroad somewhere in Asia, so it's not too surprising that he couldn't make the reunion. Wanda's
brothers don't seem like they're here to cause trouble. They didn't bring the police and they're not
carrying any weapons that he can see, unless you count Tom's PST or the tiny Swiss army knife that
Greg has on his key chain, which Peter doesn't.

Peter is far from the school's only early warning system and by the time Wanda's brothers make it to
the front door the professor has asked Erik to step in a teach his class (and if that wasn't a deliberate
attempt to keep Erik away from Wanda's family then Peter doesn't know what is) and he's waiting
for them in the foyer with a welcoming smile on his face that doesn't reach his eyes.
Peter guesses that Greg and Tom will not be getting the tour.

Xavier invites the brothers into his office for a “private” chat about what this school is and why their adoptive sister is here and how important it is at this stage in her training to limit contact with those who are not actively involved in her training and if they truly care about their sister they will respect Xavier's expertise in this matter and kindly refrain from interfering- and that's as much as Peter gets because Xavier pauses the interview to escort Wallflower out of the room. Peter thanks the kid anyway and tosses him a Bruce Springsteen cassette that he picked up from the record store in New Salem.

After about an hour the professor summons Wanda down to his office and lets her visit briefly and privately with her brothers.

“It is important that they know Wanda is here of her own free will.” Xavier tells Peter when they're waiting across the hall in the library. His eyes are a little unfocused and that's how Peter can tell that he's got one psychic ear in the room with Wanda, listening for trouble. “Keep your distance, Peter. Wanda's family needs to know that she's not being coerced, and that she's free to leave any time.”

Sure, that and the fact that Peter's naturally off-putting under the best circumstances, and these are not the best circumstances, so although it kills him not to barge in and ask a bunch of very personal, very uncomfortable questions all in a row without pausing for breath or waiting for an answer, Peter does what he's told.

The professor knows his way around a parent-teacher conference, though, and two hours after Wanda's brothers show up at the mansion, they're shaking hands with the professor and they're on their way out the door without a fuss, without any broken bones, and without Wanda, and Peter feels like he can breathe again. Xavier even recruits Scott and Ororo to drive them to the airport. Peter watches from behind a hedge like a weirdo while Greg and Tom exchange hugs with Wanda and then pile into the Continental (Scott's choice). As they pull away from the school Peter quietly goes nuts waiting for the car to blow a tire or for the bumper to fall off or for the engine to overheat, then he zips up to Wanda, who's still standing on the porch, wrapped in a pink sweater, watching the car get smaller and smaller until it disappears behind a stand of trees.

“They seemed nice,” he says.

“I only made Greg bite his tongue once.”

“Did your parents send them? Did they come to whisk you away to the Land of Enchantment?”

“That's New Mexico. Scottsdale is in Arizona.”

"Same difference."

“My mom was worried so she called them and told them where I was. They wanted to see for themselves, and let me know that I still have some place to go if things don't work out here.”

“That's good to know,” Peter says, carefully trying not to remember that this is the only home he has now.

“Greg said he'd talk to Dad. They said he's just scared.”

Hearing her talk about her adoptive family like this he feels like she's drifting away from him. He stands closer to her, and she automatically wraps an arm around his waist, anchoring herself.

She says, "Dad thinks I'm going to get caught up in some kind of mutant revolution and end up in
prison or on some government list or something."

Or something. It's probably not the best time to mention the Peter's already met the first two conditions, even if the 'prison' part only lasted a couple of hours. There's always some idiot freaking out on the nightly news about how mutants are taking over the world because three guys got drunk in a 7-Eleven parking lot and made a few things shrink or explode or multiply and it's all pretty laughable to the actual groups of jet-flying, super-suit-wearing mutants with criminal records who actually are on some kind of government list but the humans' fears are not exactly groundless because En Sabah Nur was a PR disaster and Erik is still about a hundred rescued kittens shy of turning his public image around. So in light of all that, does Peter blame Wanda's adoptive father for being suspicious of the people she's hanging out with? No, not really. He does wish her dad hadn't been such a dick about it on the phone but then again Erik's communication skills also leave a lot to be desired and the worst Wanda's adoptive father has done so far is speak to her sternly in a slightly raised voice. He hasn't even canceled her emergencies-only MasterCard.

“I've invited them to return in the summer when things are more settled.”

Holy shit, how does the professor manage to sneak up on people in that noisy wheelchair?

“The grounds will be quite lovely then and the school will be less crowded. I think it will make things less intimidating for your parents should they decide to come. They fear mutants, but they do not hate us. We must take care to manage these types of situations lest fear turn into hate.”

Poetic. Oh, wait, he's not done.

“So long as long as people of differing viewpoints are willing to sit down talk to one another, there is hope.”

Peter glances around just to make sure that Erik's not lurking somewhere nearby because this is exactly the kind of talk that could spark a passionate debate that Peter has no interest in hearing. Erik's not here, so the professor says, in a voice that seems curiously tuned for Peter's hearing, “Trust takes time. It must be earned, and can be destroyed in an instant. Rebuilding it takes enormous effort on both sides.”

Peter eye-rolls too fast for the professor to see because he's not talking about Wanda's adoptive family anymore.

Xavier ushers Wanda back inside because he wants to sit her down to debrief or decompress or whatever he calls it when he tries to talk a younger mutant through the how-tos of dealing with parents who just don't understand them. At least Wanda's not a teenager anymore.

Peter plants a kiss on Wanda's temple before he goes back to pruning trees, but he can't stop thinking about the last words the professor said to him, and he's pretty sure that was the point. Xavier doesn't need to use his mutation to mess with peoples' heads.

Jean's suspension is over now but she's been keeping a low profile: avoiding the common areas, eating in her room, showing up for training sessions at the last minute and then leaving immediately after, using the other X-Men as a shield, wearing dark or muted colors, the works. Peter hasn't exactly been throwing himself in her path but he knows they can't keep this dance up forever if they're going to function as part of a team.

Jean's suspension is over now but she's been keeping a low profile: avoiding the common areas, eating in her room, showing up for training sessions at the last minute and then leaving immediately after, using the other X-Men as a shield, wearing dark or muted colors, the works. Peter hasn't exactly been throwing himself in her path but he knows they can't keep this dance up forever if they're going to function as part of a team.

She's easy to find because a) her red hair's a beacon in the gray-white winter landscape and b) he's passed by her current hiding spot about sixty times today while he's been out landscaping. She's studying biology under a big, overgrown elm near the property line, all bundled up against the wind
in a down jacket and scarf like she plans on being out here a while, taking notes with one hand and holding her place in her textbook with the other but her gloves make it too hard to turn the pages so she's taken them off and her hands are starting to look a little purple with cold.

“Hey,” he starts out.

Jean glances up from her book and then away, like she can't stand the sight of him. She shuts her book and starts to gather her things up to leave.

On the one hand this tree is full of crossed, tangled, cankerous branches and it's been bugging the hell out of him and now he'll finally be able to trim it without accidentally conking her on the head with a limb but on the other hand, “Is this how it's going to be? We're just going to ignore each other unless we have a mission?”

She stops and looks at the ground like she's got something to say and she's trying to decide how he'll take it or if he'll even understand.

“I'm not mad,” he reassures her, even though she's psychic so she has to know this already.

“No, you're scared,” she tells him, “Of me.”

Is he? “Yeah, but it's the good kind of scared, like when Raven's flying the jet or Hank is flying but he forgot his glasses.”

“You never used to be scared of me,” she says. “It was nice, but then I ruined everything. You have no idea how much I wish I could go back and change what I did.”

He doesn't say anything. It wouldn't do any good and Jean's obviously been hanging onto something for a while. It's better if he just lets her get it out.

“Everyone is afraid of me: my parents, the professor, even Scott. And you're not wrong, none of you are wrong,” she's says, choking on her tears and shaking her head side to side, sharp and jerky, frustrated, “I'm dangerous. I can feel it. My powers are always there, boiling inside of me, and I have to keep them in check because if I let go I'll hurt someone.”

Jean gasps in a sob and gathers her book and notepad to her chest and stands up. Peter's pretty sure she's going to run off and hide somewhere else but before she can do that Peter's inside her guard and he has her by the elbows like he's just daring her to let go and send him flying and maybe he is but instead of flinging him into the lower branches of her tree she latches onto him like he's a life preserver and buries her face in his chest just like Wanda did to Erik, and Peter does what Erik did and holds her there so she doesn't think she's made a mistake.

Peter meant what he said about being scared of her, because she is scary, not scary like vampires and ghosts and incurable diseases but scary like how the sun is scary because it's so powerful and awe-inspiring and uncontrollable. People are always going to be afraid of things they can't control.

Some of the tension drains out of her. She says, “You don't know how many hours the professor has spent trying to teach me how to wall out thoughts that don't belong to me, but you think so fast that I don't have time to put my guard up. You always get in before I can shut the door. I can't catch everything, but I know more than you probably want me to.”

Sounds exhausting, but it's not like Peter didn't already know he was an exhausting person.

“I don't mind,” she says. “Sometimes not knowing is worse, like walking around with my eyes shut. At least when I leave myself open I know where I stand, even when it's not what I hoped for.
Sometimes it's a good thing. When I was with you at your mother's house after Kurt got shot, I was so rattled. I couldn't keep anything out, not Kurt's pain or your thoughts, nothing. I felt like whatever was happening to you was happening to me too. I felt like I was living your life, like it was my house and my mother dying. I felt everything.”

That sounds awful. “I'm sorry,” he says, and he means it, even if there was nothing he could have done to help it.

“You thought you were alone but you weren't,” she says.

Peter's eyes sting so he squeezes them shut.

“You were never alone,” she says, and she might as well be stabbing him.

Peter's hand is cupping the back of her head. He dips his chin to place a kiss on her forehead but Jean tilts her face up so that their lips meet instead. Peter knows what's going to happen before it does and he has all the time in the world to put a stop it, but he doesn't. Their kiss isn't about attraction or sex. Peter wouldn't mind at all if it were but that's not what's happening here. This is an exchange of trust. It's two people coming together over a deeply personal shared experience, finding a little patch common ground to stand on just for a moment. Then the moment is gone and they pull apart in mutual respect and understanding.

Just to be clear, though, Peter would totally bang Jean into next week if she gave him the chance.

He raises one eyebrow at her.

Jean slaps him on the chest. “Oh my God, stop it. Scott would melt your face off.”

Whatever. She doesn't belong to Scott Summers and she knows that. Peter shrugs and opens his hands to the sky and looks up into the branches and shouts, “Come and get me!” because he's got nothing to hide, and that's why Jean loves him. She just doesn't love him the same way that she loves Scott.

They're misfits, freaks among freaks, and they laugh about it, then Peter lets Jean borrow his Walkman so she can listen to *Jump* while he climbs her tree and prunes the branches, cuts away all of the broken and diseased parts so that it can thrive.

Jean and Peter don't talk about the kiss that they shared, and if anyone else saw or heard or suspected anything, they keep that to themselves. Peter and Jean go back to being teammates and friends, or, really, they go forward, just like everything and everyone else. Always forward.

Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters feels like a different place now that Wanda has settled in. Wanda is an instant celebrity around the mansion, both because she's Peter's long-lost twin and because a bunch of the more TV-addicted youngsters recognize her from commercials and guest spots on their favorite shows and seriously, why has Peter never seen her before? Now that he's met Wanda, he sees her all over the place, on re-runs of *Dukes of Hazzard* and *TJ Hooker* and a Nair commercial that he shuts off before the teenage boys can start fantasizing about his sister in short shorts and sure she only had, like, a line or two, but how did he not notice?

“Her power,” Erik explains. “Until recently she wanted nothing to do with her biological family. She caused coincidence to favor her so that she could remain hidden from her mutant brethren, and likely from her mother too.”

“So... what? She gave us bad luck?”
"In a manner of speaking."

Then Erik tells Peter how he tracked Wanda using her birth certificates and then her father's employment history and Wanda's school records and then her bank records until he found her current address. That was back in October.

"I couldn't get to her. It was maddening. Something would prevent me from reaching out to her every time I tried, day after day, week after week. I rented a small apartment, literally across the street from her home. I could see her come and go but when I tried to approach her something would always get in my way: a car would stall in front of me, a crowd would suddenly appear, a newspaper would blow in my face. Once I simply stepped off of the curb and twisted my ankle so badly that I couldn't walk on it for three days."

It's almost funny hearing how Wanda Greta Garboed the all-powerful Magneto except that Erik looks downright forlorn remembering what he went through. "That was when I called you."

Peter remembers, and knowing what he knows now he's sort of ashamed of how he snapped at his dad over the phone even though he still thinks Erik deserved it. He's picturing Erik sitting all alone in a little apartment in Southern California maybe with a bare Charlie-Brown Christmas tree in the corner and sad holiday music playing on the radio even though Erik's Jewish.

"I had almost given up, but hearing your voice gave me the strength to persevere." Erik's eyes look a little red around the rims. Peter imagines that his do too. "I stopped trying to approach her, but I kept waiting for her where I knew she could see me. On New Year's Eve she was walking back towards her building and she suddenly stopped and turned her head and looked at me. Less than ten feet separated us. I'd never heard her speak, never looked her in the eyes," Erik's lost in the memory. "She asked me, 'Are you my father?' and I said that I was. Then she put a hand over her mouth and started to cry, and I realized that my daughter didn't hate me. She hated herself because of me." Erik seems to struggle here, like he doesn't know if he should be saying this out loud, "Señora Lugo asked me if I believed in God. There have been many times in my life when I wasn't sure what I believed, if anything, but when I left to find Wanda I believed that I was meant to bring the two of you together. At first I thought that finding her would help you deal with the loss of your mother, but when I saw how much she hated her powers, hated anything to do with mutants, and hated herself for being one of us, I realized that she needed your help too."

There's something about what Erik is saying that resonates with Peter, not the religious stuff, but the part about Wanda needing him because he recognizes her as blood on a primal level, and whatever she needs, he'll make sure she gets it.

Erik's been flying under the radar while the school adjusts to having three members of the Lehnsherr clan living under the same roof. He mostly spends his time reading or jogging or guest-lecturing in Xavier's classes or locked away with the other geriatric mutants, reminiscing about the Cuban Missile Crisis or whatever it is that OG mutants talk about when they're all in one room together.

Genetics, it turns out.

Hank's irritation at having Erik around has taken a back seat to his intense curiosity-driven excitement at the opportunity to study three members of the same mutant family together, although he's chosen to focus his interest on Peter and Wanda, either because he dislikes spending time in the same room with Erik or because mutant twins are just that special.

Hank hypothesizes that Wanda's abnormally high average body temperature is a secondary mutation she developed in the womb to compensate for how rapidly Peter's body loses heat because there doesn't seem to be any other good reason for her to have an average body temperature of ninety-nine
point five degrees. Beyond that their powers don't seem to have anything in common, at least not that Hank can see but “We know so little about Wanda's powers, that might change once I’ve had longer to observe the two of you together.” His latest theory is that their powers are somehow complimentary, but Peter thinks that could be true of just about any two mutants working together and Hank says he's not wrong and it makes for a 'fascinating' discussion about symbiosis that Peter bugs out on before Hank can suggest another blood draw or a stress test or something.

Peter can say this about his twin: Wanda's impatience rivals Peter's own and she can be as short-tempered as their dad, which is a Godawful combination, so the professor has done the smart thing and moved her private sessions down to the Danger Room. Hank heaves a sigh of relief and Peter wonders why until he sees Wanda in action for the first time and Peter realizes that he got off light with a little hypothermia, a couple of bruises, and a missing shoe. During Wanda's first session in the Danger Room the professor has Raven, in a protective suit and mask, throwing ping pong balls at a target. Wanda is supposed to make her miss, and she does, every time, except that “missing” sometimes means that the ball melts in Raven's hand or Raven gets a leg cramp or she throws the ball and it does a U-turn in mid-air and comes right back at her and smacks her in her face plate. When the target bursts into flames Wanda clamps her lips shut and turns beet-red and the professor hails it as an improvement. To Peter it looks a lot like what happened the first time the X-Men set foot in the Danger Room and he sees the potential in her, even if she can't see it herself.

Erik stays on as an associate professor, although convincing him to do it takes a lot of effort on the professor's part. Xavier moans about his class load and makes comments about how enrollment is up and how overcrowded the classes have become and drops another thousand unsubtle hints until Erik politely offers to take over some of his classes and Xavier acts pleasantly surprised like, “Oh, would you? That would be splendid,” and that's how Erik ends up teaching five periods worth of history and foreign languages.

Erik’s classes are uncannily popular with the younger kids. Peter sits in on one of his classes out of curiosity and realizes that his dad is a really captivating storyteller and he feels kind of bummed that Erik wasn’t around for all of those years that Peter would have appreciated a good bedtime story, but then again maybe he lucked out because the stories he tells these kids are not the ones he would have told little Peter or Wanda twenty years ago before Xavier sanded some of his edges off. Unfortunately Erik's popularity doesn't really carry over to the adult mutants. He and the professor have an understanding and Erik and Ororo were Apocalypse buddies and Peter thinks Raven is always going to have a soft spot for Erik because, “He was my first,” and oh God, he just threw up a little in his mouth and Raven smirks at him like that was the plan and he wonders if Hank knows about that and if he doesn't Peter's sure as shit not going to be the one to tell him, but anyway the point is that things between Erik and some of the staff aren't exactly copacetic and likely never will be because of differing viewpoints and old grudges, but at least they're able to temporarily set aside their differences to work towards a common goal, at least that's what Peter thinks until Scott ambushes him after PT one morning by hiding in Peter's room with the shades drawn and the lights off.

“Dude, what the hell?” Peter says while he's clutching his chest and panting and wondering if Jean spilled about the beans about the elm tree.

“You're hard to sneak up on, and you always run away when I try to talk to you.”

No he doesn- okay, yeah he does. Not when there's X-Men business to deal with but most other times, sure. “Sorry,” he says. Then he glances at the door. “You didn't melt the lock.”

“Wallflower let me in.”
Peter keeps staring because that kid, man, that kid's going to be the death of him.

Scott says, “Wallflower. It's Calvin's mutant na- ”

“I know that's his mutant name. Does he spy for you too?”

“Sometimes.” Maybe Peter should start offering Calvin Snickers bars to spy on Scott, then Calvin could learn the meaning of 'double agent' if Raven hasn't taught him that already. “I want to talk to you about Magneto.”

“Alright,” Peter says, although he'd be more comfortable if Scott wanted to talk to him about Jesus. The relationship between Peter and his dad is never going to be anything less than complicated.

“I don't trust him,” Scott says. “Look, I know he's your dad and you might think that you want him around but no matter how much he's helped us he's still dangerous.”

“I know who my dad is,” Peter says, suddenly defensive, not of Magneto so much but of himself. “I broke him out of the Pentagon when you were still learning to tie your shoelaces. After that I spent ten years learning everything I could about him,” and Peter cleverly refrains from mentioning that most of what he learned came from microfiche newspaper articles denouncing him as a murderer and sociopath.

“Sure, but you know who knew him even better? Your mom. She begged us, me and Hank, not to let him manipulate you.”

Psychic manipulation aside, all Erik's tried to do so far is feed him pancakes and teach him Hebrew, and he's only succeeded in doing one of those things, but Peter gets where Scott's coming from. Erik's not the kind of guy who's going to spend his whole life in a kitchen or a classroom.

“She trusted him at the end,” Peter points out, already knowing that it's a weak argument.

“Yeah, she did,” Scott agrees. “But she was desperate. You know it. I know it. He knows it too. Before that she was terrified that your dad would try to suck you into something. The professor may have a blind spot where Magneto is concerned but I don't, and I'm going to be watching your back because I'm your team leader, because your mom asked me to, because you need it, and because I'm your family too.”

Peter looks at Scott like he's seeing him for the first time, and he doesn't see a teenage wonder-boy, voted most likely to lead a paramilitary group of super-powered mutants. Instead he sees the spark of something, not so much what he is, but what he could be.

Peter's a grown man and he's more than capable of making his own bed, and he knows his dad is trouble. He doesn't need this kid looking out for him, but maybe having him around is better than trying to go it alone. Mom had a point, still has a point. She's never led him astray but she's not here anymore. She sent Scott-fucking-Summers.

He says to Scott, “Alright, man. Thanks.”

Scott was waiting for an argument. He opens his mouth, closes it, opens it again and says, “Yeah, well, you're welcome.”

Scott's said his piece and he knows how little tolerance Peter has for small talk so he gets up to leave but Peter, for once, wants him to stay. “Hey, boss?”

Scott pauses.
“What made you want to lead the X-Men?” Peter asks. He's always wanted to know.

Scott looks between him and the door for a little while, like he's trying to decide if Peter's asking a serious question or just pulling his leg. “I don't know, I just... I felt like somebody needed to step up and I realized that I could stand there and feel that way or I could just do it.”

That's a great answer, actually.

“Why didn't you?” Scott asks.

“That's not really my scene,” Peter says. “Could you imagine me giving orders? Everyone would quit the team inside of a week. No, man, better you than me.”

“You mean that? You don't mind taking orders from me?”

“Nope.”

“I thought I bugged the hell out of you.”

“Oh, no, you totally do but, like, it's fine. That's just who we are. We'll probably grow out of it, like when you stop being a punk kid and I grow the fuck up too.”

“I honestly thought you hated my guts. You're always tearing into me in front of the professor.”

“Yeah, you have some terrible ideas, for sure. I have terrible ideas too, but I have a lot of time to realize that they're terrible and that I should keep them to myself. Do you know how much I have to slow down my speech just to have a conversation? It's like I'm walking around in a world where everybody else is standing still, all the time.”

“That's rough,” Scott says, and he's genuinely empathetic. “I get it, though. With my power... I can't shut it off. Even when I close my eyes I can feel the energy, like it wants to get out. I have nightmares about my visor being knocked off my face.”

“Dude, that must have been scary as crap the first time it happened.”

“Yeah, there was this guy who thought I was after his girl. He chased me into the boys' restroom at school and that's where it happened, in the stall, on the toilet.”

“Holy shit, man,” Peter laughs.

“Yeah,” Scott gets serious. “I totally thought I killed the kid.”

Peter sobered up a little. “But you didn't.”

“No. He was kind of banged up, but he lived, and for the record, I wasn't looking at his girl.”

“I believe you.”

“Before the paramedics and the firetrucks could even arrive I already knew what it was -what I was-because of my brother. I didn't think Alex and I had anything in common. I never wanted to be anything like him, but things didn't turn out the way I wanted. He was never anything but nice to me, and I was such a dick to him.”

“You were his little brother. I'm pretty sure that you were supposed to be a dick to him. There's nine years difference between Lindy and me and the number of times she used up all the hot water in the house -out of spite- is just inexcusable. Wanda barely knows me and she tried to kill me on the
basketball court," and on the roof prior to that but he's going to keep that to himself.

“She wasn't really trying to kill you. If she were, you'd have been dead.”

He's right on both counts. “The point is that people are dicks to each other, even when they love each other, sometimes especially when they love each other. You loved your brother, right?”

“Yeah, I just didn't like him all that much.”

“Well, I'm sure he knew both of those things.”

Scott stays silent, probably because he knows Peter's right, and probably because the professor has told him the same thing about a billion times since Alex died.

“I think you're alright,” Peter says. “Like, you're good. You're gonna do great things. You're gonna be somebody.”

There's a pause. “You're alright too.”

“You're still an asshole.”

“Right back at you.”

“Hey, Scott,” Peter says. He's been thinking about this next bit in between all of the things he's said out loud, churning it over.

“Yeah, Pete?”

“Wanda's going to make a great X-Man.”

Scott frowns. Peter can see the doubt rolling off of Scott like a fog. “Is that something she even wants? I mean, she barely seems like she wants to be a mutant.”

“None of us wanted to be mutants. Wanda's a late-bloomer. Would you trade all the good you've done if you could be a human and live a normal life? Because I wouldn't.”

Scott wouldn't either.

“You'll see. Unless you don't want both of Magneto's kids on your team.”

“You're not Magneto,” Scott reassures him. “Neither is Wanda.”

“Thanks.”

Scott turns to go, but then he catches himself on the door frame and says, “You're a good man, Pete.”

He's so fucking sincere when he says that Peter wants to cry because all he can think of is a an elm tree in a bare winter landscape and about a hundred and fifty other reasons why he's no good at all.

“I mean it,” Scott says.

“Oh my God, get out of here, you punk,” he says, tossing one of his running shoes in Scott's general direction.

Scott stands his ground. He reasons, “If Wanda decides to stay, and if the professor will have her, if that's what she wants, I won't say 'no' to having her on the team, especially if it gives you another
reason to stay.”

Peter's puzzled. “Where would I go?”

“I don't know,” Scott admits. It seems like he's got more to say.

“What?” Peter wants to know.

“Nothing, it's just... sometimes it's hard to tell if you like it here.”

Peter's genuinely confused. “I love it here,” he says. “There's no place else I'd rather be.”

Scott looks at him for a second. He's relieved. “Good.”

“Great,” Peter responds.

“Fantastic.”

“Get the fuck out of here so I can shower!”

Scott goes, but for better or worse, what he said sticks with Peter.

To be continued...

As always, feedback is welcome and appreciated.

Chapter End Notes

PST=Pocket Survival Tool, the earliest Leatherman, released in 1983.

"I want to be alone." -Greta Garbo, Grand Hotel

This chapter was mostly talking but the next one will be more action-oriented. Promise.
Kobayashi Maru

Chapter Summary

While the professor is away on a diplomatic mission, Peter behaves irresponsibly and interferes with Wanda's training.

Chapter Notes

Welcome back and thank you for reading. Extra thanks to those of you who have left feedback and kudos. You've all been so kind and generous. I'm excited to bring you this next chapter. Once again, please feel free to comment.

If you're an Evan Peters fan *American Animals* comes out on DVD and Blu ray tomorrow, August 28th in the States. I missed it in theaters but it's got an 85% on Rotten Tomatoes, so I for one am looking forward to it.

Until then, please enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Wanda's spent most of her life trying to repress her gifts, and now the professor wants her to embrace them, which goes against every instinct that Wanda has. Sometimes she can't even make a coin land with the wrong side facing up and sometimes she cracks every egg in the kitchen from two floors away. The professor tries to assure her that regression is a normal part of the training process and that she'll get through it but nobody doubts Wanda more than Wanda doubts herself and the worse she does the more frustrated she gets and the more frustrated she gets more unpredictable her powers become and the more broken glass Peter has to sweep up. It's so bad, in fact, that Xavier postpones Wanda's training so that he can get through parent-teacher conference week without worrying that someone is going to lose an eye.

“He could just fit me with one of those collar things,” Wanda says bitterly. She's laying across Peter's bed, staring hopelessly at the floor. Peter's cross-legged on the rug, curled over in agony with a bag of frozen peas on his hand because he slammed his fingers in his closet door right after she told him that the professor is going out of town and her lessons are going to be put off for another five days. Wanda's already apologized and it's probably not broken so Peter's just going to keep Wanda's outburst to himself even if it means wearing gloves or keeping his hand in his pocket until the bruises fade.

Peter looks up from his swollen hand. “Don't even joke.” His neck itches just thinking about it.

“Sorry,” she says, and he can tell she means it. Wanda's personal experience with mutant oppression is limited to a few dirty looks and her adoptive family discouraging her from mentioning her mutation on job applications. Nobody's ever tried to slap one of those things on her and stuff her in the back of a van.

“You're going to get better,” Peter tells her.

He excuses that last one, "The kids don't clean the lint filters."

"Breaking fingers, then."

Ouch. And yes, but, "You're thinking too small."

"I don't want to knock satellites out of orbit."

"No, we've got Erik for that," Although without En Sabah Nur's help he thinks his dad would have to be in a space shuttle to do it.

Wanda's face turns pink as a Valentine and her eyes start to well up, but before she can shed a tear, Peter's zipped over to the record player and replaced *Closer* with *Sargeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, which he picked up for her last week. She sniffs and wipes her eyes with her palms when she hears Paul McCartney's screaming vocals on the opening track, but it does the trick and puts a little space between Wanda and her downward spiral. "I think the professor is wasting his time on me."

"Get over yourself," Peter says. "The professor lives for this kind of stuff. He opened a school just so that he could deal with clueless mutants all day long. Trust me, you're going to be fine, better than fine."

She shakes her head. "I want to believe you, but I've had these powers for too long. Nothing good is ever going to come of them."

She flops over onto her side and doesn't want to talk about it anymore and Peter realizes that he can tell her until he's as blue in the face as Kurt, but she won't be convinced until she sees for herself.

Peter's a guy who likes to jump with both feet, usually without looking, but Wanda strikes Peter as the kind of person who needs to be pushed out of a plane to figure out that she's wearing a parachute, so it's a good thing that Peter is one pushy bastard.

The big headline for March of nineteen eighty-five is the increase in the number of mutant immigrants seeking asylum in the United States. Tensions between humans and mutants are still running high in the good old US of A but the possibility of getting spit on from a footbridge or having their car keyed in a grocery store parking lot are infinitely preferable to being disappeared by their own government as a means of ethnic cleansing or quelling civil unrest or just perpetuating the myth that mutants don't exist in the general population. Whatever the case, mutants are pouring into the States by the thousands and the U.S. Government can't do anything about anything without talking about it around a big shiny table for months on end while the mutants in question sit in refugee camps warming their hands over flaming oil drums in fingerless gloves like hobos or maybe that's just how Peter imagines it.

Anyway, the CIA has invited the professor down to Langley to meet with a bunch of politicians and representatives from the different branches of the military so that they can get his expert opinion and then ignore it and do whatever they want and the professor accepted because, well, he accepted for a lot of reasons, but to sum it all up there are thousands of mutant lives at stake and every person who has any kind of influence on mutant affairs on a national level will be there and this could be his only opportunity to reason with them before they start making decisions that will impact mutantkind for generations. He's not taking Erik for obvious reasons, but he is taking Hank with him to talk science to the egg-heads. Jean's coming along as his protégé and his backup just in case things go sideways. Wallflower is coming too because the professor wants a spy in the room and Raven's reputation
precedes her, so Xavier's decided to keep that particular card in his deck for now.

So there's Peter, standing alongside Scott, Raven, Ororo, Jubilee, Kurt, and Erik in the hangar to see them off. While Hank goes through his preflight checklist Xavier is handing out some last minute instructions and Peter's looking over his shoulder, watching Jean help Calvin buckle his five-point harness.

"Does somebody need to sign a permission slip for him?" Peter asks.

Raven says, "I'm his legal guardian. I said it was okay."

Whoa, really? "So is he like, your son? Or is he more like an apprentice?"

Raven doesn't answer. Whatever their relationship Peter's pretty sure she's worried for the kid even though she'll never admit it.

"They grow up so fast," Peter muses.

Raven looks at him with murder in her eyes.

"This is a diplomatic mission. Calvin will be in my presence virtually the entire time," the professor assures him (or Raven). "No harm will come to him. You have my word."

Then that's that. They all have their instructions. The staff is going to be stretched a little thin and the kids are probably going to be watching a lot of videos in class this week but the adults have everything covered so there's nothing to worry about and the professor and his entourage can go to Langley and have a great time and the rest of them will take care of things here. Absolutely nothing out of the ordinary is going to happen at the school in their absence. Have a safe flight!

The X-Men watch as the jet rises up out of the basketball court and zooms off into the wild blue yonder, then they disperse and go about their business, all but Raven, who follows Peter into the mens room like she's going to mug him but instead she shoves him up against the tiled wall and pins him there with a foot between his shoulder blades and demands, "What are you up to?" and he thinks maybe he shouldn't have made fun of her for caring about her intern.

"Dude-" even though she's a _she_- "-it's a bathroom. I need to take a leak."

"Since when?"

"Even I need to piss sometimes! Jesus!"

She sets her leg down. "Charles thinks you're hiding something. He gave me the heads-up before he left. I've got a busy week and I don't have time to babysit. Spill."

"I'm not hiding anything," he says innocently.

She cocks her head at him like he just failed Interrogation One-Oh-One.

"I'm not!" he insists. It's a version of the truth because he hasn't really decided what he's up to. He figured he'd wait until the telepaths were gone before he made any concrete decisions.

"I'll be keeping an eye on you."

"Please no."

She gives him the two fingers, two eyes I'll-be-watching-you gesture as she backs out the door. At
least she's not going to watch him take care of business but now he has to spend the rest of the week paranoid that whoever he's talking to is Raven in disguise.

Or the next twenty minutes. That's how long it takes Raven to trick Wanda into telling her about his busted hand. Then he runs into Sydney carrying a lunch tray in the hallway outside of the dining room and she asks him to take it upstairs to Bobby, who's resting in bed with sprained ankle and there's a joke in there somewhere about icing a sprain that he's sure Bobby's heard before, but anyway, Peter agrees and cleverly pops the tray up on three fingers like a waiter at a fancy restaurant so that he can keep his smashed-up fingers hidden and that's when Erik comes up behind him and casually pulls Peter's other hand out of his pocket to have a look and Peter thinks that maybe he should have Hank check his hearing when he gets back. It seems like too many people are getting the drop on him lately. Mom was probably right about him listening to music too loud.

"It's not broken," Peter says, although he hadn't been sure at first, but it happened yesterday and he heals fast so the bones would have set by now.

"Wanda did this?"

He doesn't say anything, just kind of wobbles his head from side to side like 'There's room for debate' because he did the slamming but Wanda's pretty sure she made him do it and she would know, right?

"You're not helping her by keeping incidents like this a secret."

And he stands there with his tray while Erik palpates his finger bones (ow) and Raven (because that was Raven with the tray, not Sydney) reminds him that she knows how it feels to be on the receiving end of one of Wanda's... curses? Hexes? Whatever. Peter says he's sorry and it was an accident and he didn't think it would be that big of a deal and Wanda's having a tough time already and he didn't want to make it worse. They're too savvy to exchange looks but Peter can tell they're not totally buying his remorse and he thinks he could have drawn the whole injured hand thing out a little longer but honestly it didn't have that much mileage in it to begin with.

"Your hand still looks swollen. You should ice it," Erik says.

"Is this tray really for Bobby?" he asks.

It is.

"Two birds with one stone, then," and says. Then he zips off.

Peter's worried that he's not going to be able to keep Erik and Raven off his case but it turns out to be less of a problem than he thought it would because a) Peter's hard to nail down and b) with the professor and Hank gone, everybody's swamped. Kids are running in the halls, all of the fire extinguishers are depleted, and there's a chair stuck in the ceiling of the second floor (or the floor of the third floor, however you want to see it). Peter's not even sure how the kids managed that one. Every once in a while he catches Raven or somebody he thinks might be Raven hanging around watching him teach gym or fix a loose floorboard or try to take the chair out of the ceiling without sawing through a beam but so far she's got nothing on him and Peter's half-convinced that she's just trying to keep herself busy so that she won't worry about Calvin. Erik's been keeping a close eye on Peter too, mostly at mealtimes because that's when Peter has to sit still for a while and make a big production out of eating because Hank and the professor have been on Peter's case about his appetite. Hank thinks the numbers on the scale aren't climbing like they should. Peter doesn't see what the big deal is but he slows down at mealtimes anyway so that everyone can see that yes, he's eating, now bug off already.
Wanda says that Erik seems to be paying her a lot of attention in his off-hours.

“Maybe he's just trying to bond with you,” Peter suggests. Erik seems to enjoy the time he spends with Wanda, definitely more than he enjoys the time he spends with Peter. Not that Peter blames him because it's obvious that the guy cares. Erik's put a lot of effort into spreading his attention evenly between his twins. It's just that Peter knows he can be difficult to understand... or get along with... or tolerate. Thinking about it makes him feel a little cold and a little lonely, but he is what he is. He can't change and no one in the world can change for him.

“He thinks you're up to something,” Wanda says. She's sitting right next to him on her bed, thumbing through a stack of *People* magazines that Jubilee lent her, since she's kind of stuck here without enough to do until the professor gets back. *An Innocent Man* is playing on Peter's turntable but quietly, because it's after nine at night and the kids need their shut-eye.

“I'm not up to anything,” he says.

They're shoulder-to-shoulder on Peter's bed, close enough to feel each other breathe. A couple of weeks ago Hank asked Peter and Wanda if they'd noticed how they seem to gravitate toward each other when they're in the same room and Peter and Wanda had looked at each other, confused, and Peter had asked, “Why would we stay apart?” and Hank had been like, "Right... okay..." and then called them down to his lab for a weird and slightly uncomfortable set of experiments involving hospital gowns and thermometers until he confirmed his theory that Peter and Wanda's body temperatures synchronize if they maintain skin-to-skin contact for longer than a couple of minutes which is a little interesting but not mind-blowing. Hank thinks there may be implications or applications or something, he just hasn't been able to figure out what. Meanwhile, Peter's waiting for his telepathic twin-sense to kick in but so far, nothing. Maybe it's different for Wanda because she says, “You're so full of shit,” and wraps her arms around him and squeezes like she's got no plans to let him go. He's figured out by now that Wanda likes to get things out in the open. He guesses he shouldn't be surprised when she says, “Try asking for seconds at dinner. That should throw him off.”

Her face is turned toward him but he won't look at her. This conversation isn't happening.

She cranes her head around so that her face is a little closer to his line of sight and harder to ignore. She says, “A casting agent once told me there's no such thing as 'too skinny' in Hollywood. I lived on practically nothing but coffee and dinner mints for two years in my early twenties.”

He gets the picture, and he's glad she doesn't live like that anymore, but he's still not talking because he doesn't agree with Hank and the professor that he needs to put on any more weight. He hit one-sixty last week and that's what Hank asked for, so as far as Peter's concerned he's good. He's done. It's not an issue.

“Peter, what are you afraid is going to happen?”

He huffs out a sarcastic almost-laugh. “If you'd seen me last year, you wouldn't be asking.”

She doesn't laugh. She goes all still and serious. “You were sick,” she points out. “You know that, right?” like she's trying to get that through his thick skull, like someone sat her down and explained it to her, like the professor has explained it to him and like Hank has explained it to him except that she was paying attention, not looking at the walls or the floor and doing everything she could to distract herself from the conversation.

“It wasn't your fault,” she says.

He folds his lips together and shakes his head.
She's frustrated and she wants to know, “How do you think you could have helped it?”

Wanda's still holding him. He puts a hand on her wrist like he's going to push it away but then he doesn't. If she was anyone else he'd be across the room or across the country but she's here and he's here and she's got him wrapped up in her arms like a doll with his head on her sternum so he can hear the molasses-slow lub-dub of her heart in her rib cage and he knows she won't let go willingly and he doesn't really want her to. An Innocent Man ended without him realizing and The Longest Time is playing and fuck Billy Joel and his God-damned evocative lyrics, man, just fuck him. Thank God the telepaths aren't here even though the professor already knows what's running through his head right now like Hank knows the Pythagorean Theorem or every line from Space Seed.

“I should have been able to handle it. It shouldn't have gotten to me the way it did.”

“What?”

“Everything. I should have been able to take care of her without falling apart. I should have- ” he cuts off because he's choking on his words and his eyes are full of tears that he's too embarrassed to shed.

“Maybe you were never meant to handle things alone,” Wanda suggests gently.

How many times have the X-Men offered to help him? How many times has the professor told him to learn rely on his teammates? How many times have his friends and neighbors come to his rescue because he needed help but couldn't ask? But when Wanda says those words it feels like she's sliding a key into a lock somewhere inside of him. It fits perfectly and with a metallic churn and click, the handle turns and the door opens and Wanda walks right in.

He knows what he has to do.

The professor's trip is supposed to last five days. Peter spends the first three acting natural and waiting for his hand to heal completely. On the fourth he sets his alarm for one in the morning but he can't sleep anyway. Neither can Wanda. He finds her sitting up in bed, writing in a notebook, a diary that Xavier told her to keep, just to get her thoughts out of her head. The thing is half-filled already and although Peter could have read it at least four-thousand times by now, he hasn't peeked. Scout's honor.

When he eases her door open Peter's got his finger on his lips to keep Wanda from saying anything. He motions for her to follow him and she raises an eyebrow like he can't be serious so at first he thinks she's not going to do it but then she sighs and disappears into the bathroom for a second so she can throw on a robe over her shorts and t-shirt.

Peter takes the stairs and leads Wanda down to the lower levels. He buzzed through the house before he went to get Wanda, checking for night-owls. The only other person awake right now is Kurt, and he's in the library going over his lesson plan for the literature class he's subbing tomorrow, so he's easy enough to avoid. There's a row of storage closets in the hallway outside of the Danger Room, filled with safety equipment and sweat suits and workout gear and the X-Mens' uniforms.

He piles one of the suits into Wanda's hands and stacks a pair of boots on top of it. As soon as he's done he spins her in place and speeds her off to the changing rooms. She barely even staggers when he lets go of her.

“What is this, Peter?” she asks, looking up from the stack of clothes in her hands.

“A uniform.”
“Why?”

Because it'll give her more protection than bare feet and a bathrobe.

“Do you trust me?” He's genuinely interested in her answer. Even if she doesn't trust herself, if she trusts him, it's enough.

She barely pauses. “Yes” she says.

“Then get dressed and meet me in the Danger Room.”

She doesn't move right away.

“What?”

“It's such an awful name.”

But appropriate.

Wanda's a few inches taller than Jubilee and not as curvy as Jean but Raven's suit isn't a bad fit. Peter puts on his suit too. It's a little loose around the waist, and he probably shouldn't be as proud of that as he is.

When Wanda comes up behind him in the dark, empty room she says, “So... the professor is okay with us using the Danger Room in the middle of the night while he's away on business?” like she already knows the answer.

“Nope. Not at all.”

“What's your plan?”

“You came to this school to find out who you are. I think that the answer is in here somewhere, and if you let me, I'll help you find it. What do you say?”

Wanda folds her arms over her chest like she might be cold for once in her life. She looks around at the blank, blue-gray walls like she's trying to imagine what's behind them. “Okay,” she says. “I'm in, but you have to do something for me.”

“What?”

“I'll tell you later, but you have to agree now.”

“Fine. Whatever.” He'd really like to get started.

"Alright."

She looks like she just got away with something but whatever. He says, “Cool, alright, so, full disclosure: we're probably going to get in trouble for this and even if we don't, this is definitely going to hurt, like, a lot.”

Wanda braces herself and glances around the empty room. Her voice is almost steady when she says, “Well, it's not like I was going to sleep tonight anyway.”

“That's the spirit,” Peter says, then he zips over and seals the door, leaving them in darkness except for the glow of the control panel in the corner of the room.
Hank has about a hundred core scenarios programmed into the Danger Room's computer but his hands-down favorite is the *Kobayashi Maru*, and that's the one that Peter plans to use. The name of the program is a *Star Trek* reference because all of the names of Hank's computer programs are *Star Trek* references. Peter knows this because a) Hank watched *Star Trek* whenever it came on at Peter's mom's house so Peter watched it too and b) it takes a while for Hank to boot up the computer and choose a program and then access the file and Peter gets bored, so he entertains himself by zipping over to the control panel and reading the screen over Hank's shoulder and reading the names of the programs and memorizing Hank's passwords and keystrokes.

The Danger Room is actually a lot bigger than it seems to the casual observer, not that they give tours but if they did the tourists would only see the outer chamber where the scenarios start, where Peter and Wanda are now. The X-Men use this room for things like target practice or self-defense drills or practicing break-falls, simple stuff, but when the walls open up that's when things get serious because the real Danger Room is about five times bigger and that's where Hank keeps all of the Sentinel robots and elevated platforms and mazes and pits filled with spikes and mock-ups of office buildings and houses and caves and earthquake simulators and fire suppression systems (thank God) and with the push of a few buttons the appropriate set pieces slide into place and the program begins. Some of the programs are search-and-rescue, some are hand-to-hand combat-focused, some are logic puzzles. Sometimes Hank throws in a diplomatic element and they have to talk their way out without pissing each other off. The programs are designed so that Hank and Raven can add or take away obstacles or change the scenario as it goes or end it early if they're satisfied or feeling generous (which they never are), otherwise the program runs until the X-Men achieve the objective or fail spectacularly.

That being said, *Kobayashi Maru* is a bullshit no-win scenario that wipes the floor with the X-Men every. Single. Time. It's fun. Just kidding, it's the worst, but Peter has a hunch that this is exactly what Wanda needs. She's got wings and in a minute she's going to have to choose between falling or flying.

Hank usually reads the scenario and mission objective over the loudspeaker but since he's not here Peter taps the mic twice and fills in, doing his best *Mission Impossible* tape-recording voice, “An improvised explosive device has detonated in an underground parking garage under an office building in Washington D.C. The building has partially collapsed and approximately fifty people are trapped inside,” but leaves off the 'your mission, should you choose to accept it' part because, well, she's here isn't she?


Peter shrugs. “It's up to you.”

The far wall slides open and thick, smoky air rolls out. Peter can just see the sharp, jagged edges of metal stabbing upward through the haze and little fingers of flame in the wreckage.

“Am I supposed to rescue them?”

“What would you do?”

“Do you want to?”

“It's not real. It's just a simulation.” she says, shaking her head.

“Yeah, but we're really going to fail the simulation if we just stand here.”

“"What would you do?"
“I’d try to rescue them.” Peter has to raise his voice over the recorded sounds of sirens and people screaming. “But this is your show.”

Wanda starts out at a walk that turns into a jog as she moves into the smoke. She covers her nose and mouth with her elbow but she's already coughing and her eyes are watering. Without being asked, Peter uses his speed to blow some of the smoke away from her. Once she catches on to what he's doing she tells him, “Over there!” and points to a section of the collapsed building where faint shouts for help are coming from the rubble. Hank installed speakers all over this room and he uses them to pipe in hundreds of sound effects from footfalls to screeching tires to ambient noises like running water or rainfall. It's fantastic. Hank should design theme park rides.

Wanda, clawing her way over the wreckage, is starting to buy into the illusion. “Help me lift this beam!” she shouts, and Peter grabs the other end but as soon as they lift Wanda's foot slides out from under her and Peter has to zip to the other end of the beam and pull her out of the way before it can crush her leg.

“If we shift the debris it might collapse and kill everyone,” she says.

Peter points to a small fire about twenty feet away that's growing exponentially larger and heading right for them. “It won't matter in a minute.”

Something occurs to her. “I think I can get the debris out of the way. Can you get in and rescue the people who are trapped before the building crushes them?”

“Yes.”

Wanda glances up at the structure, studying it, then she focuses her attention on a slab of concrete lying precariously on its side. She raises her hand and points at the rebar holding it up. The metal turns rusty and disintegrates and the slab pitches forward and crumbles like a graham cracker before it even strikes the ground. Wanda points at another section of the structure. Wires snap, metal groans and a section of the building topples sideways in slow motion. As it falls Wanda gestures again and more metal and concrete come loose. Smoke and dust billow upward and the flames start spreading across the area where the cries for help originated. The shouts have become fainter, drowned out by the crackling roar of the fire. Peter can just make out the shape of a head and arm in the rubble and he rushes in to clear the trapped 'survivor', who’s really a dummy in a business suit. Peter's in and out with two more dummies before he can't reach anymore, and that's when Wanda really starts to find her footing. She raises both hands and makes a motion like she's pushing toward the approaching wall of flame and a concrete pillar crumbles and smothers the nearest flames. Then she's back at it, shifting rubble, learning as she goes, anticipating where a piece of rebar will fall, shifting a column by removing a wall, changing the composition of the debris, adjusting how gravity affects the crumbling structure, controlling where things fall and how they land. If Peter squints Wanda's powers look a lot like Jean's but Peter knows better. Every time Wanda makes a move she's solving a puzzle, figuring out how to use chaos to her advantage, and she's doing great, but this wouldn't be Hank's favorite scenario if it were straightforward.

A few seconds after Peter frees the last dummy from the collapsed building a voice comes over the loudspeakers. It's Hank's, all distorted to sound like it's coming from a megaphone, and it says, “Clear the area. We have unknown aircraft approaching. Repeat: clear the area, we have-” and Hank's voice cuts off abruptly like someone has snatched his megaphone out of his hands. A new voice (also Hank, but made deeper and more menacing by Hank neglecting his meds) says, “X-Men, surrender yourselves immediately or you will be executed.” As he says it a dozen pairs of glowing red eyes emerge from the smoke and dust to loom ominously over them. "You have five seconds to comply."
“What’s going on?” Wanda asks. They’re surrounded on all sides. The barrels of two dozen guns, one for each arm of the twelve Sentinels, are trained on them. “What is this? A trap? Someone blew up a building to draw us out?”

“Looks that way,” he says with a casualness that he doesn't really feel because he knows how much the rubber bullets in those guns fucking hurt. As fast as Peter is, he can't outrun what he can't see and between the low light and the smoke and the eventual tear gas, pretty soon he won't be able to see shit.

Speaking of which, six canisters bounce toward them, already trailing fumes. Peter lobs them all back the way they came but still, it's an enclosed space and he has to breathe and his throat is already burning. Peter's goggles give him enough protection to see, at least for now, but Wanda doesn't have goggles.

“Thanks,” Wanda mutters.

“This is your last warning,” says Hank's voice over the loudspeakers. “Get down on the ground and put your hands behind your heads.”

"What happens if we surrender?"

Oh, he knows this one: "They kill us."

"Right." Wanda's still coughing but she has the same look in her eye that she had when she confronted Peter on the basketball court. Peter knows who she is, and he understands his role too.

Wanda raises her arms at the same time that the Sentinels open fire.

This is the point in the simulation where things go south. On a good day the X-Men can expect to take out a few Sentinels before they get buried in a landslide of rubber bullets and tear gas canisters and rubble and whatever else Hank decides to throw at them, and all of that within seconds of those Sentinels opening fire. One variation on the program had the X-Men rescuing workers at a tennis ball factory. Peter has no idea where Hank got ten thousand tennis balls but he suspects Hank did it in retaliation for the professor prohibiting him from using school funds to genetically engineer a tribble in his lab. Tennis balls aside, the X-Men usually get in a few good shots before the Sentinels wipe the floor with them, except for that one time when Jean threw a concrete wall into the air as a shield but she put it right in front of Scott, who'd already been aiming for a Sentinel and blasted the wall instead, destroying their cover and clipping Ororo's winglet, then Ororo fell on top of Kurt, who took Peter out with his tail but at least Peter remembered to duck and roll when he hit the ground, so he only made a small dent in the wall instead of a hole. Jubilee was the last X-Man standing that day, not for long, but at least she got to enjoy a good show because that was comedy gold.

Right about now Peter usually goes on the offensive, which means climbing the Sentinels like trees and trying to tear out their circuit boards or mess up their aim, and it used to work pretty well until Hank noticed and got the brilliant idea to run a low-level electrical current through the robots' outer shell, the bastard, and since Peter's suit isn't made of rubber and electric shocks aren't his favorite, he knows he can't grab the Sentinels anymore. He can and does kick them sometimes. He's even knocked a few over, but the problem is that since the Sentinels are arranged in a circle, he's never really out of the line of fire, and he can't complete an offensive move without leaving himself open. He's had some success going on the defensive, trying to pick every bullet out of the air and rearrange his teammates so that they're safe or in a better position to fight, but that only postpones the inevitable because then he has to deal with friendly fire, and it takes the other X-Men a second to recovery and readjust themselves if he moves them, and there's just too much going on, so no matter what he or any of the X-Men do, it's like trying to hold back the ocean with a broom, so yeah, when
he goes on the defensive he ends the simulation buried in projectiles and feeling like one of those dummies from the office building/warehouse/tennis ball factory.

This time is different because Wanda is different and he's different because of her. She can't shoot energy beams out of her eyes or lightning out of her fingertips. She doesn't teleport and she can't conjure a fireworks display with her bare hands. She's chaos in human skin, a witch, just like those pricks at her high school said, and this isn't about beating a simulation, this is about doing the impossible. Peter's always felt like he needed to save everyone, but he's known for a long time that he can't do it, but what he's realized is that he can't do it alone.

Peter makes a brief, preemptive strike, kicking over one Sentinel, but that's all he has time for because the bullets are flying and so are more gas canisters and smoke bombs. Wanda won't have time to be affected by the gas but Peter, thanks to his enhanced respiration, will be incapacitated in seconds, so he gets rid of the canisters then gets to work on the bullets, racing laps around Wanda, spiraling closer and closer to her as he struggles to keep up with the hundreds of rounds per second that the Sentinels are unloading. He stops looking out for himself a few hundred bullets in and resorts to using himself as a shield when he can't catch every round. The first hit he takes is to his left elbow. The second bullet hits him in the right ass cheek. He loses track after that. He makes it a priority to get rid of the canisters but the gas is already in the air and it's getting harder to see and harder to breathe. Through his tears he sees Wanda unfold a hand like she's flinging something and one of the Sentinels starts spewing smoke and sparks. She points at another and it turns and fires on the Sentinel to its right, then powers down like its objective is complete.

Peter's finding bullets mostly by touch now, staggering around his twin, sweeping the air with his hands like somebody's turned out the lights and he's trying not to bump into a wall or scrape his shins on the furniture, and while he's groping he hears Wanda yelp and he knows something got through his defenses. She ducks down and covers her head and Peter stands over her and shields her as much as he can with his own body and he wants to drop but he's not going to, not while there's still a chance they can win this thing, not while Wanda's still on her feet.

Peter is too blinded by smoke and tear gas to see what happens next, but he feels it, and he hears it. Wanda howls and Peter feels a wave rip through him, warping the floor, then the bullets stop and it's enough of a break for Peter to pull off his goggles and rub furiously at his eyes. Afterward he can squint enough to see Wanda's hex traveling through the air, barely visible, like heat rising up off of the pavement in summer. It rips through the waves of bullets, scattering them in every direction before it washes over the Sentinels. The remaining robots jerk and sputter and shoot sparks and then, one by one, they fall apart, like, literally. Every bolt, panel, screw, plate, wire, piston, circuit board, pin, gear, housing, and rotating whatchamacallit spontaneously separates and rains down to the floor. The whole thing is fantastic, but also horrifying, and loud and goes on forever and the Danger Room is only about ninety-eight percent sound-proof. Maybe they got this far into the simulation without anyone hearing what they were up to, but Peter is preeeeetty sure that ship has sailed.

Behind Peter, Wanda is doubled over, coughing and sniffling and wiping her snotty nose and runny eyes on Raven's uniform sleeve.

“Simulation complete,” Hank's recorded voice says calmly over the speakers. The lights come up. The fire suppression system comes online and pretty soon the remaining flames are extinguished. The dust settles and the pair of them are soaking wet and standing ankle-deep in Sentinel parts and debris.

Cool, Peter thinks. Then he takes a fucking knee because, rubber bullets or no, he's never soaked up that much fire by himself before. He's going to look like a Dalmatian when he peels his uniform off.
Wanda is blind to his suffering. “Is- is that it? Did we win?”

Well, she won. He's pretty sure that the Sentinels killed him about eleven times, but he knows what she means, and since they achieved their objective, whether or not he's dead “Yeah, we won,” he croaks.

“You were amazing,” She says, and she means it.

He ducks his head, embarrassed.

“You look like a wet mop,” Wanda tells him. Her voice is shaking.

He looks up. “You look a hairball somebody fished out of a drain.”

Then they start laughing and can't stop and pretty soon they're doubled over, cackling hysterically, on their sides in the filthy gray runoff from the sprinkler system.

An ominous screeching groan of metal against metal cuts through their laughter. Wanda sobers enough to ask, “How much trouble are we in?”

“You? Not much. Me? I don't care.” Suspension probably, some kind of punishment. Sometimes Peter has nightmares that Xavier kicks him off the team but that's probably not going to happen and if it does then it was worth it. She's worth it.

Wanda soaks that in. “Thank you,” she whispers.

Wanda reaches out to him across the floor and he reaches back and that's where they are when their dad finds them: lying on their sides, feet to head and head to feet like a Yin-Yang symbol with one hand each meeting in the middle.

To be continued...

Thank you for reading. Feedback is always welcome.

Chapter End Notes

It might seem irresponsible of the professor to bring Wallflower on a mission, even a diplomatic mission, but then again at the end of X2 he admits to using Kitty Pryde to steal some documents saying, ”Let's just say I know a little girl who can walk through walls," so I figured it wasn't too big of a stretch for him to bring an invisible ten-year-old out into the field to do a little recon.

Once again, thank you for joining me. Two parts left!
Chapter Summary

Peter tries to reconcile his behavior with his father's expectations. The professor returns from his business trip with new information that sheds light on the mutant kidnappings.

Chapter Notes

Welcome back and thank you for reading. Thank you to everyone who has left me kudos and feedback. It's been amazing going on this journey with you. One more chapter to go. I had several endings planned, but I picked the one that I thought would be the most exciting and tie up the greatest amount of elements of the story while leaving the door open for a sequel or at least a few additional chapters.

Please enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Erik is understandably pissed when he finds his twins curled up on their sides in a pool of sludge on the floor of the Danger Room, bruised, battered, and totally unapologetic. It takes him a while to get to them, though. The doors to the Danger Room are big and thick and, honestly, probably designed to be Magneto-proof or at least Magneto-resistant, and they're doing what they were designed to do, which is to stay the fuck shut until the fires are contained and the chemicals have been neutralized.

Peter supposes he could just grab Wanda and jet as soon as the doors open and pretend he has no idea who was messing around in the Danger Room late at night but a) the list of people who know how to operate the Danger Room's computer is pretty short and everybody else has an alibi and b) the professor gave Hank a budget increase for Christmas and the big blue lug spent it on a video surveillance system for the Danger Room and surrounding areas so that any time he wants to show the X-Men exactly where and when they screwed up and got their asses handed to them he can gather them all around a video monitor and pop in a Betamax cassette and fast-forward to the appropriate time stamp or in this case, rewind ten minutes or so and watch Peter stroll casually up to the Danger Room and help himself to a little off-the-clock, late-night training. Peter imagines that he could destroy the evidence but again, everybody with a brain is going to know that it was him and he'd just be digging himself a deeper hole, so it's just easier to come clean now and accept that he's going to be spending all of baseball season learning to rebuild Sentinels.

The Danger Room finishes its shut-down protocol, then the doors slide accommodatingly apart, spilling Erik, Raven, Scott, and the rest of the X-Men into the room. Erik starts sprinting toward Peter and Wanda but slows as he gets close enough to see that they're moving and breathing and his body sort of sags in relief, not so much that anyone else would notice because their dad doesn't show emotion like a normal person but enough that Peter can tell, and Peter's not sure why he was worried because it's just the Danger Room. Sure, they can get a little banged up but there are safety protocols and it's not like anybody's died in here... yet.

"Are you hurt?" Erik asks urgently.
Wanda shakes her head even though her eyes are bloodshot and her upper lip is shiny with mucus and her hands are shaking with adrenaline.

Peter feels like a punching bag but he shrugs off the question because he's got metal plates in his leg and he's seen what Erik can do to flatware when he doesn't like what he reads in the newspaper.

Erik switches to German for a few choice phrases that Peter understands even though he doesn't speak German, then he demands, “What were you two thinking?” and that's a rhetorical question if Peter's every heard one so he doesn't answer. Peter can see a few of the older students gathered in the hall outside of the Danger Room, ready for action, like the mutant version of the National Guard and that strikes him as a little funny but he doesn't dare laugh. He feels the tiniest bit guilty for waking everybody but if he could have done this quietly and gone back to bed with nobody being the wiser, he would have.

Scott is in sweatpants and a t-shirt but he's swapped out his sleeping goggles for his visor and he walks right up and edges Magneto out by standing slightly in front of him (would you look at the balls on this kid) and says, “Wanda, go with Storm and Jubilee. They'll help you get cleaned up. Peter- ”

“I'll take him,” Erik says in a voice that sends shivers down Peter's spine.

Jubilee and Ororo jog forward and Ororo sets a gentle hand on Wanda's back but Wanda refuses to budge. She looks at Peter. Scott changes tactics. “Nobody's going to eat him. We need to check you both for injuries. Erik,” Erik's got his hand on Peter's shoulder and it seems heavier than it should. “Not your house, not your team. You don't make the decisions. Is that understood?”

Erik gets all calm and still and looks at Scott with half-lidded eyes, like he's bored with him, and enunciates, “Perfectly... but before you make any decisions regarding your team- ” subtle shoulder squeeze “ -I would like to speak to my son alone.”

Well, it's been nice knowing everyone.

While they've been talking Raven's made her way over to the control panel, which is making weird, unhappy, clunking, grinding computer noises. If she cares at all that Wanda's wearing her suit and that the sleeves of it are covered in snot she doesn't say anything. “Scott,” but Scott maintains eye contact with Erik a little while longer. Raven looks up impatiently and rolls her eyes. “Measure your dicks later. Come take a look at this.”

Scott goes... reluctantly, but he has to step around Magneto, who doesn't move at all, to do it.

While Scott's distracted Erik marches Peter out of the room and past Bobby and Kid Peter and Domingo, the Flying Argentinian (who wants that to be his mutant name but everybody keeps telling him that it's too long). Bobby's jaw is on the floor, probably because he's never been down here before because it's not like the Danger Room is part of the welcome tour. Kid Peter, who's looking less and less like a kid these days, seems like he wants to go next. Peter gives the assembled a wry half smile and a casual wave that pisses Erik off something terrible and even though this isn't his house he says “Back to bed,” and they scatter.

Peter doesn't need any help undressing no matter how wet his super suit is but Erik follows him into the changing room anyway.

“Let me see,” Erik says.

Peter rolls his eyes but he strips his suit off to the waist but stops there because Hank's idea of fashion
and comfort doesn't exactly leave room for boxers and—oh look, he's a leopard. The suit soaked up at
least some of the damage from the bullets, especially around his upper torso and shoulders where the
material is thickest but the rest of him is covered by round or oblong bruises, black around the
outside and reddish or skin-colored in the middle. “It's not that bad,” he says, and it's not. Peter heals
fast. By tomorrow the bruises will be green and yellow and by the next day they'll be gone but for
the moment he's lumpy and hideous and Erik is sitting on a bench with his hand covering his mouth.
All of the starch has gone out of him and he's curled over, looking like he wants to cry and it's so out
of character for him that Peter just stands there, horrified, while Erik says Absolutely Nothing at All.

After a few seconds Peter figures he should get out of these wet clothes and throw on some sweats
and he does that and then he sits down next to Erik, who's still checked out, staring at the changing-
room floor and Peter stares at it right alongside him and doesn't say anything either. What would he
say? He's sorry? He's not. He could lie and swear he'll never do it again but the truth is that he might
or he might do something just as stupid and yeah, on some level he does know it was a risk to take
Wanda's training into his own hands like that but he's been trying really hard not to think about that
because he'd known that he was right about Wanda. She needed the pressure. She needed the heat so
she could explode out of her shell like a piece of popcorn and she did and it was awesome.

Finally Erik says, “You did something incredibly dangerous bringing Wanda down here.”

Peter's willing to admit that he may have overstepped himself some but it's not like he took Wanda to
Yosemite and shoved her off of El Capitan. Peter says, “The Danger Room can't hurt her, well, not
seriously.”

“Not dangerous for Wanda. Dangerous for you.”

Peter doesn't get it. “Not following you,” he says.

Erik takes a deep breath. He reminds Peter, weirdly, of Mom whenever she found out about
something stupid and illegal that Peter had done. Like Mom, Erik looks like he could use a drink.
“You locked yourself in a sound-proof room with a mutant whose powers you can't outrun.”

Ah... okay, well, technically the room isn't completely soundproof. If it were, Peter and Wanda
wouldn't have been able to shake everyone out of bed, but somehow he doesn't think Erik wants to
hear about the quality of the Danger Room's acoustic foam panels and Peter's not going to try to
argue that Wanda can't hurt him because they both know perfectly well that she can. So Wanda's not
great at being a mutant... yet, but that was the whole reason Peter brought her down there. He says,
“Okay, I get where you're coming from but you should have seen Wanda. It was like-”

Erik drowns Peter out, “The risk you took was unacceptable! You put yourself in the path of a
mutant who does not have control of her powers, who is prone to outbursts and fits of rage, a mutant
who can kill you, unintentionally, with a stray thought.”

“Are we still talking about Wanda?”

Erik looks up at him, sharply, and then less sharply as he realizes that Peter might have a point.
“Wanda and I have quite a few things in common, which is unfortunate for her.”

Peter shrugs. “She's not you.”

Erik doesn't argue. Instead he says, “When I woke to those sounds my first thoughts were for you
and your sister. When I found your rooms empty... I don't know what I would do if something
happened to either of you,” and Peter knows he's telling the truth, like, he's not saying that he'd be
sad or hurt or whatever, he really has no idea what he would do, none, like he might break down and
kill everyone or he might lock himself in a closet or throw himself off of a cliff and that question mark, that no-man's land, that blank space past where Peter or Wanda end scares him, and it scares Peter too, and Peter, for the first time tonight, regrets what he did, and the feeling of victory and the self-righteousness of thinking he knew what was best for Wanda just evaporates, poof, and instead he feels selfish and ashamed, not ashamed that he did it, but ashamed for what he put his dad through.

Peter says, “I'm sorry, Dad.”

Erik takes in a shaky breath and his arm goes around Peter's shoulders and he pulls him in close. For a while he just holds him like that, like he can make that moment last forever, or like he's scared to let go. He says, “Please don't do anything like that ever again.”

That's a tall order because a) shit happens, b) in spite of having all the time in the world to consider the consequences of his decisions, Peter sometimes makes poor life choices and c) if Peter has a choice between saving himself and saving someone else, well, Peter isn't a hundred percent sure he'll pick the other person, but he likes to think that he will, but hey, there's always a chance that it won't ever come to that. But if it helps his dad sleep better at night, then Peter will lie like a rug. “I promise,” he says, thinking that Erik will relax, but he only holds Peter more tightly, in silence.

By the time Peter and Erik emerge from the dressing room Raven has gotten tired of waiting for them and sent Wanda upstairs to get some sleep and on the one hand Peter's glad for Wanda because everyone seems to understand that she's not the one at fault here, even if Erik is secretly or maybe not so secretly worried that she's going to turn Peter into toast on accident. On the other had Peter feels a little sorry for himself because Raven has Xavier on the phone and the professor sounds about as tired and irritated as he'd expect from someone who got woken up at three in the morning because somebody at the school did something dumb, even though Peter thinks that Xavier should be used to it by now, which makes Peter think that maybe the conference isn't going as well as the professor would like. The first thing that Xavier does is reiterate what Erik said about Wanda not having full control of her powers yet and how close Peter came to winning himself a Darwin award and that it was wrong of him to put Wanda in that situation and Peter can hear Hank in the background, ruining the professor's awesome speech by saying, “But how did she beat the scenario?” And there's some annoyed silence and since the professor's flow has been broken he tells Peter that he'll be back in two days and until then Peter is to stay away from Wanda and neither one of them are to go anywhere near the Danger Room and he heaves a sigh and says, “Oh, Peter, my boy, what are we going to do with you?” which prompts Peter to ask, “Have you been drinking?”

The professor says stiffly, “As it happens, sleep has been quite difficult to come by on this trip and this circumstance has not been improved by your recent actions.”

“Sure, just checking.”

“Put Scott on the line, please.”

Scott takes the receiver and frowns his way through his half of an awkward conversation and then hands the phone to Erik, probably so that Xavier can give him some whiskey-soaked parenting advice while Scott escorts Peter to his room. He sort of expects a lecture from ol' One-Eye but Scott seems to really be chewing over what he's going to say and by the time they get to Peter's room all he's come up with is, “The professor will figure out your punishment when he gets back. Until then, don't run off.”

“So... I'm supposed to stay in here?” Peter ventures, mostly to keep Scott there. He just... doesn't feel like being alone right now.
Scott looks at him, tired and disappointed and he can't even pinch the bridge of his nose because of the visor, “No one can keep you in that room. I know it, you know it, the professor knows it, just... don't let me catch you out of it either, because I'll kick you off the team myself.”

That's true, and also fair, so Peter nods.

Scott takes a deep breath. “That was- ”

Yeah, Peter knows.

“ - a really fucking bone-headed stunt you pulled back there with Wanda.”

Whoa. Language. And yeah, he's had it explained to him a couple of times now.

“Do you get that, Pete? Because I feel like it's not sinking in.”

“No, I get it.”

A pause and a frustrated head shake later Scott asks, “Are you okay, man?”

Peter knows what he means but he deliberately misunderstands, “Yeah, well, you know, bruised and sore, but I probably deserve it... Hey, can I at least come out for meals or something?”

“Jesus, you're a piece of work. You can come out for PT in the morning. Meals you eat in your room, and Peter?”

“Yeah?”

“Wanda said you had an agreement.”

“We did?” Oh right, they did. “What about it?”

“Just... keep that in mind when I bring your tray.”

He doesn't get Scott's meaning until breakfast the next day, which, for Peter, comes at about eleven o'clock in the morning because he crashes hard as soon as Scott shuts the door to his room, so hard he wakes up on top of his covers with his shoes still on and with pillow scars across his temple and cheek.

Scott could have delegated meal service to someone else but Peter thinks it's less about him doing Peter a favor and more about Scott asserting his authority over Erik or marking his territory which is... whatever. Peter's not getting involved. It'll be good for the kid to fight his own battles. Also, Peter's not going to complain no matter who brought his tray this morning. It could have been delivered by a swarm of carpenter ants and he'd be just as grateful because his body is healing and he's ravenous, but when he takes the cover off the tray he's a little confused. “When did we start serving ice cream with breakfast?”

“Just now. I hope you like vanilla. We called Lindy. She said it was your favorite.”

It's a single scoop in a small, chilled dish, sitting at the edge of his tray surrounded by eggs and toast and ham and other breakfast-y foods. Sydney probably plated it last but it's already starting to melt from the heat that was trapped under the lid.

“Wanda said you had an agreement. She said you're going to eat ice cream with every meal until Hank is off your case. What?” Scott asks because Peter's just staring at the smooth, shiny surface of that lone ice cream scoop it its little condensation-covered dish like it's going to bite him. “Is
something wrong?”

Peter says, “It's not... my favorite, but I get how she'd think that.”

Mom and Frank split up when Lindy was about seven years old. Frank's family all still lived in Charlotte and his parents were getting older, so he moved back to help out. Lindy really missed her dad, so Peter used to run her down to see him on the weekends. It was easier than asking Mom to drive. He'd drop her off and go do... whatever. Not important. He just didn't want to interrupt their time together. Anyway, at the end of her visit Frank used to take her to lunch at this old diner that he went to as a kid, and after lunch he'd buy her an ice-cream cone, but the only flavor the place served was vanilla. It was some weird old-timey special recipe of thing that they made in-house and Frank's dad used to take him as a kid and they'd get an ice cream cone and it was, like some magical bonding thing he wanted to repeat with Lindy except that Lindy was and is a dyed-in-the-wool chocoholic. She can't stand vanilla, and honestly, their house recipe wasn't that good, but she didn't want to hurt her dad's feelings, so she'd give the cone to Peter in secret. Peter's always been more of a popsicle and sherbet kind of guy, but he was also sixteen and a human garbage disposal and he loved his sister and would do anything for her, including eat about four hundred mediocre vanilla ice cream cones over the course of five years because Peter convinced her that he liked them.

Of course Frank figured it out, like, right away, but he never said. Peter thinks he was just glad the ice cream wasn't going to waste.

“I can get you a different flavor. I think I saw some Rocky Road in the freezer.”

“No. It's fine,” Peter says. “Vanilla's fine. It's great.” And he eats it, because he'd do anything for his sister.

Scott sticks around and tells Peter what he knows about the Langley conference, which isn't much, but it's enough to know that the professor has bigger things to worry about than a couple of irresponsible mutants dicking around in the Danger Room.

After Peter's eaten Scott gives him an hour to get out and about and get some exercise before he's supposed to be back in his room, being bored and punished and whatever, and he goes, because he doesn't want to rock the boat too much or no one will ever trust him with a paddle again and he won't be able to get away with anything. He decides to play it safe and stay in his room until after dinner but deciding to do something and actually doing it are two different things so by the time that Scott brings his dinner tray Peter's been out for a little jog or a quick trip into town or a visit to Wanda's room about thirty or forty times. Wanda's been asked not to use her powers but she's still free to roam wherever she likes but she stuck to her room all day too in solidarity with her twin.

The first thing she said when she saw Peter was, “Tell me more about the X-Men.”

And he did. He's mentioned some of this stuff before and he's sure she's heard this and that around the mansion but something in her has shifted. She's paying attention, like the X-Men stuff might actually apply to her now. Wanda was always sort of stuck in her own head, worried about her powers and what they meant, but now he can see her wheels turning and the excitement building inside of her. Even though she's locked away in her room her world has opened up and Peter never doubted that it would once she had someone to push her forward instead of hold her back.

After the rest of the mansion goes to bed they stay up together most of the night sitting on her rug, whispering to each other until she shoos him back to his room around two so that they're not too obvious about the fact that they're breaking all the rules. Even so, he sleeps through his alarm and Scott has to shake him awake for PT. He passes Raven on his way to the track and she says, “Did you have a good chat?” and he's just tired enough to ask, “Could you look like a dresser or a coat
rack or like, a pile of leaves if you wanted to?” and she stares at him like she can't understand how he manages to dress himself and says, “No, Peter, I cannot look like a coat rack,” and that's what he thought, but, you know, it never hurts to ask.

Erik joins Peter for PT and Peter pretends to be very remorseful around him and Erik pretends to be convinced that he's not escaping from his room every chance he gets because really, what is he going to do? It's kind of fun to jog next to his dad for a casual warm-up lap, matching him stride-for-stride. Then Peter gets bored and puts the down hammer and leaves the old man in the dust.

The professor is back in time for dinner that night and Peter watches from his window as the jet descends into the underground hangar, but there aren't any refreshments when the professor summons Peter and the rest of the X-Men down to the library for a debrief. He seems incredibly distracted and he doesn't look twice at Peter, and Peter melts quietly into the background, clinging to the thin hope that everybody will just kind of forget about the Danger Room situation. He fantasizes that he can sweep the sentinel parts under a rug or bury them in the back yard without anyone being the wiser.

“Things did not go well.” That's not the professor talking, that's Erik, who's just saying what's on everybody's mind.

“No, they did not,” the professor agrees. The bags under Xavier's eyes have bags. Jean and Hank look like they just spent their spring break sleeping on the floor in a terminal at JFK waiting for a plane that never showed up at the gate, then had to turn around and go right back to work and didn't even get any free hotel soap. Peter doesn't even see Wallflower, but what's new? He hopes the little shit made it back okay.

In five hundred words or less which, Peter gathers, is wayyyyyy fewer than Xavier had to listen to to get to this point, the US government has decided that it would rather not be a haven for refugee mutants, calling foreign mutants, 'a threat to national security,' and Peter glances at Erik and has to go outside to have a quick laugh because where on earth would they get an idea like that, right? Anyway, back in the library Xavier says that plans to subject travelers and asylum-seekers to rigorous screening, including blood tests, were discussed, and several Congressmen are drafting a bill that would enable customs officials to deny entry to the United States to mutants or anyone suspected of being a mutant. Representatives from the states currently hosting large numbers or refugees blame rising crime rates and public assistance costs on the mutants who have already settled legally, and whether that's true or not, their feedback only gave the anti-mutant sympathizers, which, Peter gathers, was most of the people in the room, more ammunition. The government set a goal of deporting approximately six thousand mutants by nineteen eighty-seven, but there's a problem because deporting that many mutants is expensive and legally complicated and some of the mutants are pretty well-established in their communities and have influential friends, or live at schools that are more like heavily-armed fortresses, so they've decided to start by deporting those who are dependent on government assistance, then slowly rounding up mutant immigrants and sticking them in camps for, yes, 'reasons of national security'.

The professor looks pretty drained by the time he finishes. There's a big, grim pause while everybody soaks that in.

“This is how it begins,” Erik says. He likes to stand and he's standing now. “They'll round up the most vulnerable mutants first: the poor, the sick, the immigrants, the mutants who have no one to fight for them, and then they'll move on from there until they're knocking on your door, Charles. History always repeats itself.”

Xavier says, “If the situation were as hopeless as you say, they would never have allowed us in that
room in the first place. I have every intention of fighting this decision, but I will exhaust every available legal resource that we have before I resort to stronger methods of persuasion.”

Erik gives him a small smile, not like he's acknowledging the the professor is right but more like he's amused by how naïve Xavier is.

“Not all of the refugees will go quietly,” Scott points out.

Hank looks at the professor like he's asking for permission. When he gets it he says, “Certain branches of the United States military have been clandestinely developing anti-mutant technology for years.” A loaded pause. “Charles and I have suspected for some time that the mutant kidnappings were secretly sanctioned by certain entities within the United States Government. Thanks to Wallflower, we have proof. Private interests, both foreign and domestic, have been sharing technology, fulfilling contracts cheaply, and bribing military officers and politicians to look the other way while the kidnappings took place. It was an easy and profitable way to lower the number of mutants in the general population, and a cheap way to try to get rid of mutants that they saw as a threat.”

“Like us,” says Scott.

“Like us,” Hank agrees. “Only we weren't as vulnerable as they thought. Now they're trying a new angle. The technology involved in making those control collars isn't complicated or expensive to reproduce. I could turn out a dozen of them in my lab by next week if I wanted to. If the military chooses to begin large-scale manufacture, if they haven't already done it, they could have enough for every refugee within a year, and that's just one of the weapons they have at their disposal.”

“We should strike now,” Erik says.

Xavier holds up a hand. “I made no secret of my objections. Our actions will be monitored very closely in the coming weeks. Any aggression on the part of the X-Men will be seen as an act of treason, and there were many in that room who long for the day they can openly violate the sanctity of this school.”

“So you plan to do nothing, so that you can preserve your perfect corner of the world,” Erik says, making it pretty Goddamned clear that he's got different plans.

Xavier is either too calm or too tired to rise to Erik's bait. “I plan to consider the problem from every angle. We must not make the first move.”

“Of course not. We wouldn't want the humans to think we're a threat.”

“No, Erik, we most certainly would not,” the professor says firmly. “I understand your position, but now is the time to plan, not to act. Will you help us?”

“That depends on you, Charles. I won't stand by while innocent mutants are rounded up like cattle.”

“Nor will I,” Xavier assures him.

Erik is quiet for a second, then he glances at Peter, who sits very still and wonders what Erik sees in him that makes him say, “We need intelligence.”

Intelligence is Raven's specialty and she's all over that like white on rice. Wallflower brought her back some handy notes, ID badge numbers, pass codes, and copies of travel itineraries from about half of the conference's attendees. None of the government's plans are set in stone, but it's the professor's goal to find them out as they're made. “No surprises,” Raven assures him and the
professor plans to spend a good amount of time in Cerebro over the next few weeks or months as things take shape.

“And the rest of us?” Scott asks, because he’s an eager beaver.

“Carry on as you have been,” the professor says. “Train, teach, and be prepared.”

There’s a subtle dismissal in the professor's tone, or maybe he just gives everyone a little psychic nudge, because the room starts to clear out.

“Stay, Peter,” the professor says. He doesn't include anybody else in that invitation but Erik sticks around anyway.

Peter's been lounging in the window seat about as far from the conversation as possible, trying to pretend that this latest development isn't unnerving as fuck but the professor motions him over to sit on the couch. Peter goes, but expects that this is going to be one short conversation because Xavier looks like the first thing on his to-do list is a full face-plant onto his bed with its ten thousand thread-count duvet and the last thing he wants is to be here having this conversation with a mutant who should know better than to take an untrained, unarmed mutant into the Danger Room and run her through the hardest scenario that there is, but that ship has sailed and here they are, waving on the dock and Peter thinks that while what he did may have technically been wrong and messy and disruptive, it was right for Wanda and he's nnnnoooooooott ssssoooooooorrrrrrryyyy.

“Enough,” Xavier says with more energy than Peter would have thought he had left. Peter sits back and folds his arms like, 'go on, do your worst', which is a stupid way to behave around the world's most powerful psychic after he just returned from the world's lousiest business trip but Peter is the fastest man in the world, not the smartest. The professor pinches the bridge of his nose, but then he seems to rally. “You've helped your sister achieve remarkable progress with her powers. I would go so far as call it a breakthrough. In fact, you did nothing that I had not considered doing myself. Your instincts were quite correct, but- “ he adds quickly, and here it comes “-your instincts are not in question, your judgment is. Accept that I had reasons for exercising caution and restraint in Wanda's training, reasons informed by decades of experience training hundreds of mutants on these very grounds. Peter, every one of us has the capacity to injure ourselves or others and the untrained mutant even more so. No matter how practiced, no matter what our intentions, accidents happen, and they can and do claim lives, and no breakthrough is worth that. You weren't right, Peter, you were lucky.”

Erik is looking at Xavier and there's a muscle twitching in his jaw.

Peter wonders if the old bullet in the spine counts as a training injury.

The professor is as serious as cancer, “You are not in charge of Wanda's training. It is vital that you respect my authority in this matter.”

Now, Peter knows that the professor has a point, and he's been around the block enough times, in a wheelchair no less, to really know the turf, so what's Peter going to say? 'Go fuck yourself'?

“Ohkay.”

“Good,” Xavier sighs in relief, finally giving in to exhaustion with an uncharacteristic slump. “Because I plan to begin having Wanda train with the X-Men.”

Peter gapes. So does Erik.

“What you did was wrong, Peter, but you may have handed us a very useful advantage.”
“My daughter...” Erik says. “You want my daughter too.”

Xavier looks at his old friend, and he's all sympathy. “Your children can go where they please, Erik. I have taken nothing from you.”

So why does Erik look like he lost a round of chess?

“Oh, so am I suspended?” Peter interrupts.

Yes, Peter is indeed suspended, but at least he's not confined to his room anymore. The professor surrenders him to Hank's tender mercies, which are infinitely more tender than, say, Erik's or Raven's. Still, Hank makes him mop the Danger Room and collect every scrap of Sentinel that Wanda destroyed, then he hands him some blueprints and tells him to get started and it's like trying to assemble twelve jigsaw puzzles when the pieces have all been mixed together and also the puzzles are twenty-foot-tall robots and not puzzles at all and Peter wishes he'd paid more attention during auto shop.

Reassembling the Sentinels is so complicated that takes him nearly all day. Well, he would have had it done sooner but he kept having to run over to Hank and ask him to lend a hand when Peter needs more than two and then to help him troubleshoot when he has extra parts and the Sentinels don't turn on and Hank keeps interrupting him with questions about Wanda's *Kobayashi Maru* scenario and after the fourth or fifth sidebar Peter's like, “Dude, seriously?” and Hank looks kind of ruffled and then he tells Peter that he designed the *Kobayashi Maru* to be mathematically impossible to beat. He says he's checked his computer code six times and can't find any mistakes.

“Either there's a mistake in the program that I haven't found yet, or Wanda's powers aren't what they appear to be.”

“Or nothing is impossible if you set your mind to it!” Peter says in an overly-optimistic aerobics instructor voice. Wanda likes aerobics.

Hank looks like he's going to have a stroke. “Some things are still impossible.”

“Okay, then it's magic.” It doesn't matter to Peter, so he goes back to tightening screws.

Whether or not Wanda's powers are what they appear to be or not, she's cracking eggs like a pro and making coins land tails-up a hundred times out of a hundred, so she's competent enough to train with the team, and Peter might be on the outside looking in but he can tell she's a good fit.

Peter might be banished from the Danger Room but he's still an X-Man and that's something that at least Scott won't let him forget because if Peter's not down on the field running laps at six in the morning, Scott's hammering on his door, telling him to get his lazy ass out of bed. After they run Scott gives Peter a briefing over breakfast whether or not he needs it, and an extra helping of eggs until he's trained Peter to get it for himself. It didn't take Peter too long to hit one-sixty-five having ice cream three times a day, and Peter was fine, he thought, but once he saw the number on the scale he sort of panicked and went off dairy. Scott's part of the conspiracy to make sure he doesn't backslide and end up resembling a toothpick again.

Being away from the team feels as awful as it ever did and that's the point, right? Otherwise it's not a punishment, but Peter gets a little bored and a little lonely and everybody is busy but him because it's easy to forget how much it takes to keep Peter from being bored and Peter's never in a rush to remind them. So, while the X-Men are covering the school's needs and the professor is working overtime in Cerebro and Hank is working overtime in the lab and Raven's off sneaking around military bases or the White House or NASA's secret moon base or whatever, Peter takes Wanda over to Rhode Island
to meet Lindy, and it's not a big deal. Well, it's a big deal for Lindy and for Wanda because they've only spoken over the phone and they've both had to wait weeks and weeks to meet because Wanda is still in training and the professor hasn't exactly given her permission to leave campus yet but she's got to be close to ready, right? So he just, you know, takes his sisters out for Pad Thai and a few rounds of pinball and watches them giggle and hug and get to know each other and Peter just studies them from the outside like he's watching a couple of tropical fish swim in lazy circles around him and it makes him a little sad but that's life and he's just grateful he gets to enjoy moments like this.

Not much gets past the professor no matter how busy he is. He knew what Peter and Wanda were up to pretty much from the moment they walked out the door (or jumped out the window), and he lets them think they got away with it for a few days before he lets on. He gives them a warning, that's all, and Peter's seen him do it a hundred times with the kids and Peter's like, “Yeah, sorry, I should have checked with you. I thought Wanda wasn't on lockdown anymore. It won't happen again,” and that's the end of it as far as Xavier's concerned. Erik, though, isn't as happy to let things slide. Peter thinks he's still feeling overprotective because of the Danger Room incident and that he's overreacting and he says so, not, like, using those specific words, but he gets the point across and that's when Erik blows his top and says, loud and clear across the big table, over dinner, in full view of the entire student body, “Your behavior is reckless and arrogant and it will get you killed one day,” and then he storms out and it's up to the rest of them to figure out how they're going to finish dinner with a bunch of mangled cutlery.

“He's frustrated,” Xavier tells him afterward. He's asked Peter to walk him down to Cerebro. He might not have a ton of time to fix everybody's problems these days but he tries to fit in as much meddling as he can between meals and classes and sorting through the minds of politicians and military personnel. “He feels a great deal of guilt for abandoning you.”

“Okay,” Peter says. That's... whatever, it's water under the bridge. Maybe it would have been nice to have his dad around when he was growing up or when he was trying to, you know, get his life back on track after Mom died but maybe it's better that he wasn't there and Peter will never know anyway, so what's the point of him feeling guilty?

They've almost reached the doors to Cerebro. Xavier stops and wheels around to face him. “Peter,” he says, like he's explaining something to a very slow learner, “He worries about you, but not without good reason.”

“Sure, yeah, his family. I get that,” and he does, totally.

“No, Peter, I'm not sure that you do.”

Peter blows out a breath and just wishes they could stop talking about this. Erik's got issues, fair enough. One of those issues is that he has an asshole son.

Xavier's just looking at him, like, giving him time, like that's something Peter needs more of, and Peter expects, like, this big, long speech, even though Xavier's got loads of crap to do and it takes him about a billion years to do it because it takes a billion years for everyone to do everything but all he says is, “You can't save anyone if you don't first save yourself,” and then he looks at Peter, all meaningful and sad, like these are the last words he's ever going to say to him or like he's trying to win a staring contest and Peter hears his dad's voice in his head telling him he's a jackass and he's going to get himself killed and Peter gets where the professor's coming from and he gets where Erik's coming from because if the school took a poll Peter feels like he'd be the person voted most likely to pull a James Dean, but he also has a feeling that whatever it is that gets him killed one day is going to be something stupid that he should have seen coming from a mile away.

And he's right.
To be continued...

Thank you for reading. Feedback is welcome.

Chapter End Notes

One more chapter to go. This story could go on for a while, but after a certain point it won't be about Peter's Immediate Family anymore, so I decided to wrap some things up and cut it off. I have some additional chapters planned and some alternate chapters for this fic written, but as far as a legitimate sequel, I would have to do a lot of work. I have some ideas but I don't know if I can do it without it turning into a retelling of the Dark Phoenix Saga.

Thank you again for reading!
Peter hasn't seen Raven around the mansion for about two weeks when the professor's voice in his head shocks him to a standstill on the track at five-thirty in the morning, "Raven has been captured. We need to act quickly. Go. Now!" and he more or less points Peter in the appropriate direction and gives him a mental shove and Peter's off, tearing across the Northeast in his white sneakers and X-sweats with the general location of a military convoy burned into his brain and absolutely no idea what he's going to face when he gets there.

The professor's voice rejoins him a few minutes into his journey and lets him know that the rest of the X-Men are preparing the jet, but he may arrive before them by as much as thirty minutes. "Raven was captured by army personnel at an army base in Ohio. She discovered that a military caravan loaded with anti-mutant weaponry was scheduled to depart this morning. I can't pinpoint her exact location but I have reason to believe that she may be under guard and traveling with that convoy. The military may be using a shield or device that blocks my telepathy-"

Or she could be dead, Peter thinks before he can help it. Maybe Xavier didn't catch that, but then he knows that he did because his thoughts get all gray and stiff. "I can't rule out that possibility. I will monitor the situation from Cerebro. Be careful. Raven was captured before she could report on the exact contents of the cargo. I don't yet know how they detected her. My hope is that if she is traveling with that convoy you can extract her before they have a chance to question her." The professor's thoughts are colored with desperation and fear, things that never would have come across if he were using his voice. Peter doesn't say that he will but he knows that the professor knows he'll do everything he can which is why he's here, right? And, hey, if Raven's in trouble and he can help he wouldn't be anywhere else. The professor's gratitude washes over him, "Find her, Peter. Please."

Then the professor is gone and it's just Peter, alone, flying across fields, through trees and along dusty back roads on a perfect spring morning.

The sun is still down when Peter finds the convoy. He hasn't heard anything else from the professor
and for now the weather forecast is clear with no chance of mysterious black jets, so Peter assumes he's on his own for now. The convoy is moving through a big stretch of farmland, so there isn't any cover to speak of. Peter does a quick lap around the convoy and counts thirty-one vehicles in total and just about every other one is a covered truck filled with armed soldiers all squeezed together like sardines. No tanks, but there are armored vehicles with machine guns mounted on the roof in the front, middle and bringing up the rear of the column like they're expecting trouble, they're just not sure what kind and that's fine because Peter's not sure what kind of trouble to expect either but he bets he's going to figure it out before they do but anyway now is not the time to get cocky because he remembers what the professor said about anti-mutant technology and so far he's only noticed regular old, run-of-the-mill guns which, sure, are anti-mutant enough for most, but Peter's looking now for things like the glowy green dampeners that he saw at the Alkali Lake facility, or the fancy stun-guns that Colonel Dickhead used to knock the entire school on their asses, but he doesn't see anything he recognizes, and that could be good or bad.

The vehicles that aren't armored or carrying soldiers are loaded down with cargo. One flatbed truck is carrying some big piece of equipment that's covered with a tarp and although Peter's morbidly curious about what kind of cargo they're hauling he's also here for one reason, and that reason is riding alone in the back of a personnel transport vehicle, tied up and lying on her side. The back end of the truck is open so that Raven is in full view of the driver and passenger in the truck following directly behind them but other than that she's got the entire truck all to herself. She's not exactly blue right now but Peter can tell it's her because a) given the circumstances, who else would be tied up in the back of an army truck? And b) her slick red hair is starting to show through her disguise and it looks really weird on the middle-aged black man that she's trying to impersonate. Her eyes are open and Peter can see them shining yellow in the dark, but she looks dazed or drugged or something. Maybe that's why they've left her alone back here, unguarded, but Peter's got a sneaking suspicion that that's not it and he looks around for a tripwire or an armed guard or something, anything, but all he can see is Raven and these military goons and maybe they're really just this stupid and if there is a trap or an explosive or a guard he's pretty sure he's fast enough to outrun it, so he goes for it, hops in the back of the truck, takes about three steps, and then vomits down the front of his sweatshirt.

It's like vertigo meets the flu meets a massive concussion and then they all decide to get chili-cheese dogs and ride the Cyclone together. It's sudden and it's awful and Peter can't ever remember feeling this sick in his life. He suddenly doesn't give a shit about anything except how awful he feels and he drops to the floor, face-down, not even caring that there's puke on his chin and in his sinuses: thin bile because he hasn't had breakfast yet, thank God.

He loses track of time for a while, lying there, dry-heaving because there's nothing in him to throw up. It doesn't get better, but he sort of gets used to it, and out of the corner of his eye he can still see Raven, or Raven's boot, really, and he remembers why he's here and even though it sucks so fucking bad, he gets his knees under him and then his hands and he slips a little in his own slimy puke and then dry-heaves again and spits only saliva on the floor but finally, finally he crawls close enough to grab her pant leg and start tugging her toward the open back of the truck. When he moves her he notices the nifty little device sitting in the middle of the floor. It looks like a hot plate or a fucking Jiffy Pop if Jiffy Pop gave off an ultraviolet glow and needed a battery pack to operate. Peter guesses that little bastard is responsible for ruining his sweatshirt and he wants to go over and stomp its guts out but a) blegh, too much effort and b) … uh, he doesn't fucking know because he can't think straight when he feels like this. Sure enough the farther he gets from the glowing purple Jiffy Pop, the better he starts to feel. He's not, like, ready for sushi or anything, but he feels a lot less like he's a ship caught in a category five hurricane and a lot more like a car-sick mutant riding in the back of a military truck, glaring at that stupid thing, whatever it is, and he hopes to God it's not some radioactive bullshit that's going to make his balls fall off. As it is that little bastard has already cost him a few critical seconds.
Peter cranes his neck to check in with the driver and the passenger in the truck behind them but it's too dark and in the glare of the headlights he can't tell if they've spotted that their prisoner has been moved. It's going to be pretty obvious any second now, but Peter's hoping to be miles away before they can do anything about it. Raven's scales have started to cascade away from her disguise but before she can complete her transformation Peter's got his rubbery legs under him and Raven in his arms. He can feel her body changing as he jumps down from the truck and takes off across a potato field, scales rippling across his chest, which is a weird sensation even when he's not on the edge of barfing and he makes it a few miles away from the convoy before he has to take cover in a ditch and set her down while she finishes turning blue and his stomach cramps and tries to turn itself inside out again. As bad as he still feels, though, Raven looks way worse. She's blue again, but it's like, a pale, sad, greenish blue and not her normal, vibrant, Go New York Rangers blue, and she just stares up at him and opens her dry, cracked lips like she's going to say something but all that she does is make a dry rasp. She's not hurt anywhere that Peter can see but her hands and feet are zip-tied together. Peter doesn't have a knife or anything else sharp, so he does the best he can with his teeth, which is just good enough, then he tosses the broken zip ties to the bottom of the ditch and strips off his sweatshirt because it's grossing him out. Since Raven's shirt was really part of her skin, he wipes her off the best he can with the inside of his own pukey sweatshirt before tossing it after the ties. It's probably not great to leave evidence of their escape out here but he's pretty far away from the convoy, at least on foot, speaking of which, he'd like to be farther, but when he tries to scoop Raven up to move her she groans at him and turns even paler and Peter's secretly relieved because he's not feeling like himself either but he knows they're both going to be feeling a lot worse if those military guys with the purple hot plate and who-the-hell-knows-what-else catch up to them.

Peter pops his head out of the ditch just to see if he can spot the convoy and the land is flat enough and the rising sun is just bright enough that he can. It looks like a line of ants on the horizon, and it's not moving.

“Charles,” Raven whispers. She's looking through Peter, talking to Xavier, and she sort of sags in relief, then Xavier is in Peter's head too, saying, “Stay where you are. Help is on the way. Raven's absence has been noted. The men in that convoy possess devices that they can use to locate you, but I doubt very much that their technology will work at this range. You're safe for now. The effects of the device that they used to hold Raven captive may take some time to wear off. Until then, stay put and try not to exacerbate the symptoms.”

Raven looks like she could kiss her brother if she weren't so miserable. Peter would like to do the same, after he gets a hold of a toothbrush and he's caught off guard when the professor gives him the mental equivalent of a bone-crushing hug and tells him sincerely, “Well done, Peter. Thank you.” Then he leaves and it's just Peter and Raven. She's looking at him like she's got something to say but she doesn't trust herself to speak without gagging so she lifts a hand and sets in limply on his and squeezes and Peter guesses she's thanking him too or apologizing and he gives her a half-smile and says, “No one I'd rather spend the morning cowering in a ditch with.” Then he has to turn away to spit because talking made his mouth flood with saliva. Raven gives him a weak, understanding smile and Peter has a flash of his Mom, weak and listless and smelling like vomit and then he feels cold and his chest hurts.

The next few minutes are quiet. Peter keeps himself occupied by watching the little green army guys, who are now out in force, stomping some poor farmer's seedlings into mush, and slowly getting closer to Peter and Raven's hiding spot. They've covered about half of the distance between Peter's ditch and the convoy when the sky begins to darken and the rain clouds roll in. That's when Peter relaxes and rolls onto his back in the loose dirt and Peter's reminded of the Winnie the Pooh cartoon that Lindy loved so much growing up, the one where Pooh Bear pretends to be a rain cloud so that he can steal honey from some bees and Peter is Christopher Robin and he's thinking, Tut tut, it looks like rain, but not because of some muddy bear with a balloon but because the cavalry is here. The
clouds drop down and become a thick fog that swallows the soldiers and rolls over Peter and Raven until Peter can't see for shit. He can barely make out Raven and she's, like, a foot and a half away.

The X-Jet is quiet, but it's not silent and Peter knows basically where it's landed but his ears aren't his eyes and since all he can see is fog and dirt and Raven, he stays put until he can see silhouettes in supersuits starting to emerge from the fog. Hank is the first one on the scene, and he's blue and furry like he is on most missions and he goes straight to Raven and starts checking her over. A hand lands on Peter's shoulder and Peter jumps about a foot in the air and when he lands there's Erik, standing behind him in a borrowed supersuit, Peter's supersuit to be exact, and it fits him a little weird and Peter would make a joke about him stretching out the shoulders but the sudden movement made him dizzy and he's really reluctant to open his mouth right now, so he bends at the waist and rests his elbows on his knees. Thankfully Erik doesn't ask or give him shit about why Peter's doubled over. Instead he offers Peter a hand to climb out of the ditch and Peter takes it. Hank lifts Raven in his arms and leaps to the top of the ditch on his blue gorilla feet. Erik hasn't said anything and neither has Hank and it doesn't take a genius to figure out that the little green army guys out in the field have noticed something's afoot. Peter hears whistles and brief shouts, incomprehensible military jargon mostly, and getting closer. Then somebody either gets spooked or thinks they've figured something out and there's a single flash of a shot being fired from about a hundred yards away and maybe twenty yards to their left, and while that first shot on its own is nothing to worry about it apparently tickles a bunch of itchy trigger fingers and suddenly there's a burst of gunfire: fifty or sixty rounds and Peter can see the flashes from the barrels, some of which are directly in front of them. Erik waves a hand and the bullets pepper the ground instead of them, throwing up clouds of dirt and rocks where they hit.

Somebody calls out to cease fire and the bullets stop flying but Erik and Hank have given up trying to be quiet. Erik hustles Peter along, holding him by the upper arm and the back of his shirt and Peter goes, stumbling over the furrows in the dirt, blind in the fog and totally dependent on Erik and his power to guide him.

Storm is standing in the mist on the X-Jet's ramp when they reach it. Her eyes are white and Peter can't tell if she sees them at all, but Scott does, and he's standing next to her with his finger on his visor's trigger as Peter and the rest of them come right up on them out of the fog.

A shout, another burst of gunfire, nothing hesitant about it this time, and Erik stops in his tracks while Hank hustles past him and up the ramp into the jet. “Erik!” Scott shouts over the noise and Erik twists his outstretched hand. Peter hears grunts and metallic clattering and shouts of surprise and bodies hitting the soft earth. Scott looks pissed and Erik looks unrepentant as he hustles Peter up the ramp.

Wanda is waiting for him at the top. She's white. “You're green,” she says, taking him by the arms. He tries to give her a reassuring smile without breathing on her.

Jean's in the co-pilot's seat and her finger is on the switch that controls the ramp, raising it as quickly as she can now that everyone's aboard. Jubilee is helping Hank strap Raven onto a stretcher while Kurt unfolds the medical kit. There's another stretcher laid out across three jump seats on the other side of the jet but Peter would rather be upright and part of the action. Erik pushes him down onto it anyway and Wanda hands him a pouch of emergency water. “Charles believes that the piece of anti-mutant technology that they were using to hold Raven captive works by disrupting the victim's nervous system. There isn't much we can do but wait for the effects to wear off.”

Peter watches Hank start Raven on an IV after a couple of failed attempts to find a vein in her arm, she's that dehydrated. Peter's worried that's going to be him in a second, so he makes every effort to keep the contents of his water pouch down. It's a fight, but it's a fight he wins. Go him.
“We have a secondary objective,” Erik says. “This convoy is transporting a very powerful weapon, something that could be used to disable every mutant in a ten square mile radius instantaneously. Charles has given Wanda the task of sabotaging it.”

Okay, now Peter knows why she looks nervous. Not that Peter doubts her abilities but that's a lot of pressure, maybe not from the military because fuck those guys, but just the fact that Xavier's given her a delicate task and if she fails her dad is waiting in the wings to crumple the whole convoy and all of the soldiers up like tissue paper, not that Peter's not grateful that he's here and deflecting bullets but seriously, who let Captain Subtlety on the plane?

Some of what he's thinking must show on his face because Erik says, “Charles sent you on this mission. He could not refuse to let me come to your aid.”

Yeah, well... “Nice threads,” Peter chokes out.

“I didn't think you'd mind.”

Scott slides into the pilot's seat and starts preparing for takeoff and Ororo comes up to stand behind him, eyes still white, hand on the back of Scott's chair so that she can keep her balance while she uses her power to cover their takeoff. Scott's still a little sloppy on the stick and the jet tips sickeningly while he tries to get it straightened out. Once they're over the convoy Wanda unbuckles herself and goes to the front of the jet and stands next to Ororo.

After a minute Wanda says, “I can't... There's too much in the way. I might damage the jet. I... I need to be on the ground.”

Not even thinking Peter says, “I'll go with you.”

“You'll stay here,” Scott says, “You're compromised. Jean?”

“On it,” Jean says.

“Storm, clear the air. Let's see what we're dealing with.”

A column of clear air descends on the convoy, and Peter can see soldiers with rifles flanking the vehicles, looking around, bewildered. The jet is hovering right over their heads but thanks to Jean they don't seem to see it.

“Kurt, Jubilee, you're Wanda's escort,” Scott says.

“I'll go as well,” Erik says, and he's not asking for permission.

“Remember the deal,” and Erik kind of tips his head like he just remembered who's jet he's on and Peter still thinks he has it in the back of his head that he's going to do whatever he wants if it comes to it, and Scott would have to be an idiot not to know that's what's going to happen too, but at least for now everybody seems to be on board with the plan.

Kurt offers up his hands to Wanda and Jubilee and the three of them vanish with a swirl of brimstone and sulfur and appear on the ground in front of the jet near the flatbed that Peter noticed when he first arrived.

Scott sets the jet down as gently as he's able, which isn't that gently, and even Jean's influence isn't enough to keep the army guys from reacting to the impact. As soon as the ramp is down Erik moves
into position at the bottom and Peter goes with him because Scott said he couldn't go with Wanda, not that he had to sit on his ass for the rest of the mission, and it helps take his mind off of his spinning head.

Once Peter's feet are on the ground he has a pretty good view of Wanda, who's out there getting her boots dirty, puzzling over the big piece of machinery on the flatbed.

“What the hell is it?” he asks Erik.

“A type of energy weapon,” Erik says. “It emits a pulse that will temporarily neutralize the powers of any mutant in a ten mile radius. It's an untested prototype and it will take them months to build a new one. Charles only knew what it was once you'd rescued Raven.”

Shit, well, that's not good.

“It's based on the same technology used in the control collars. These trucks are loaded with far more weaponry than this but Charles sees this as the most immediate priority. He wants to keep our interference as minimal and plausibly deniable as possible.”

“And you don’t.”

“I would destroy everything here and make no secret that I had done it, but Charles sees a political advantage in keeping things quiet. Politics will only delay the inevitable. Charles and I disagree on many things, but our goals are similar enough that I'm willing to play along... for a time.”

As a summary of Xavier and Erik's on-again off-again friendship it's a pretty good one.

Over by the flat-bed Wanda's done something, Peter's just not sure what, but the monstrosity under the tarp has started leaking some kind of viscous fluid. One of the army guys has noticed, and he walks right past Wanda in her skin-tight suit and lifts the edge of the tarp with the nose of his rifle, and when he does that, there's a spark, maybe from static electricity or maybe Wanda's shorted something in the canon but whatever the case, a few burning flecks of filament are about to fall into whatever likely flammable substance that thing is leaking. Peter doesn't waste any time. Nausea forgotten, he's across the field in a flash, pulling Wanda out of the way and setting her inside the jet, then grabbing the dumbass with the rifle who's about to have his face blown off by an explosion he doesn't know is coming, and Peter runs him a hundred yards across the field and flings his rifle off into the fog for good measure, then he's racing back to grab Kurt and Jubilee and when he's put them down safely he turns back toward the canon. The tarp is starting to billow outward, lit underneath by an orange glow that's already burned through the fabric in a few places. Peter watches for a while, trying to decide where the largest chunks of shrapnel will land before he rescues anyone else. Erik, who literally is in his shoes today but thankfully isn't in his shoes figuratively, would probably have let them fry but Peter isn't his father, so he clears out the rest of the nearby army dudes and sets them face-down in the dirt.

Peter thinks that Erik is far enough away not to be harmed by the explosion but he still sets Erik gently on his stomach and covers his head with his arm and does the same for himself because, you know, better safe than sorry.

The heat wave reaches them first, and then the sound of the explosion and then it's him and Erik being peppered with bits of burning debris and Peter envying Erik the protections of his supersuit because all Peter has between him and the burning screw that just landed on his back is a t-shirt. “Ah! Hot!”

The explosion must have surprised Jean enough to break her hold on the army guys because when
Peter looks up they're reacting to the jet, the ones that are still in a position to see it anyway, and the ones that still have rifles to raise their rifles and drop to one knee or onto their bellies and take aim but their weapons aren't exactly a threat to the plane and Peter and Erik are the only two mutants still outside the jet, so they're going to draw all of the fire which is, honestly, fine with Peter, who can outrun bullets and it's probably fine with Erik, who can deflect them, but Peter (and probably Erik) would rather not have a repeat of Cuba so Peter gets his feet under him and about the time he does he feels something really, really wrong, like there's a fishhook in his leg or something, and it hurts and it's not fun and he's sort of stuck standing there like a jackass while the sound of gunfire fills the air and the hook in his leg starts to pull and all around him pieces of shrapnel: metal slivers and nuts and washers and little bits of shrapnel are floating up from the ground, sharp ends beginning to point at the soldiers like tiny knives, and those bits of shrapnel start to move toward the soldiers like bullets fired from a gun, and that's a problem, because there are little bits of metal in Peter's leg too: plates and pins that the surgeons used to hold Peter's leg together, little scraps that probably feel just like the rest of the shrapnel to Erik who, in the heat of the moment, is trying to use them as projectiles.

Peter screams. He screams for Erik to stop, screams for him just to notice what he's doing but Erik is too powerful, and all Peter can do is stand there and scream and feel the metal plates tear loose from his femur and rip through muscle and bone and skin and emerge through the fabric of his sweatpants. Although theses things have lived inside of him for years now Peter's never seen them, but he gets a good, long look as they move away from his body, followed by a spray of arterial red because Peter's heart beats that much faster than the average human heart, and before Peter can move his hands to cover the hole in his leg he knows he's fucked. One of the pins or plates must have nicked his femoral artery on the way out, because Peter's leg hardware is hovering barely a foot in front of his open wound and the spray of blood has already covered three times that distance, and his heart just keeps pumping away, doing its job and emptying him like a water balloon with a hole in it. Peter thinks that if he acts quickly maybe he can get a tourniquet for himself, but when he tries to take a step his leg folds under him and he's falling, lazily, at the languid speed of gravity.

Just in front of him Erik's hand is outstretched toward the caravan and he's getting a foot under himself, trying to stand. Peter can't see his face and he can't see Peter. The soldiers are still firing, puffs of smoke in the morning air. Peter watches everything happen in slow motion, watches the bullets slowly exiting the guns, feels his blood running between his fingers, sees it hanging in the air, not in drops, but in an uninterrupted stream like he's wringing out a sponge. If someone here could move as fast as him and stop the bleeding, he might have a chance, but Erik hasn't had time to hear Peter scream, let alone react, and although Peter can choose to move slowly, he can't choose to bleed slowly.

He's going to die.

He's going to die quickly, even by his standards. He might even be dead before anyone knows he's injured, and when he realizes that he thinks about Lindy, who will have lost her mother and her brother within a year and he'd be stupid to think that's not going to leave a mark, and then he's sorry for all of the dumb, dangerous shit he's done recently, all the stuff that he knew was dangerous but did anyway because he was secretly hoping that something would bite him back, and he thinks about Erik and how he said he Didn't Know What He'd Do if something happened to him or Wanda and Peter knows it's going to be that much worse because Erik is going to realize about six seconds from now that he's killed his son and Peter wants to scream that it's not his fault with his dying breath and maybe if he thinks it loud enough at least Jean will catch his drift but he doesn't know if that will make things better or worse or if it will make no difference at all because Peter will still be just as dead. Then Peter thinks about Wanda and how at least Erik has her and she'll maybe, hopefully keep him tripping over his shoelaces long enough that he rethinks a murderous rampage through Downtown New York. Then Peter thinks about Mom. He doesn't actually believe in a God or Gods
and after the last one tried to wipe humanity off the face of the planet who can blame him, right? But even though he doesn't believe he kind of hopes, and hopes that there's something out there for him even if it's not angels in white robes with harps or Albert Einstein and Elvis Presley playing checkers in wings and pipe-cleaner halos and he doesn't think he's ever prayed in his life but it occurs to him that maybe hoping is kind of like praying, maybe not exactly like praying, like Cool Whip is like whipped cream or carob is like chocolate, so maybe he has prayed and if there were ever a time for prayer in his life then it's right-fucking-now and he hopes he doesn't die, even though he's already cold, ice-cold and thirsty and weak, like, well, like someone is draining the life out of him a pint at a time, and failing the whole not-dying thing he hopes everyone is okay with him dying and that they don't miss him too much, like, some, sure, but he hopes they realize that he died doing what he loved and that if he was going to go out somehow then at least it was quick and that's... and that's... he can't think. Someone is yelling his name, one drawn-out letter at a time. Peter's hand is still on the gaping wound in his leg, but he doesn't have enough strength to hold it there, and his hands feel numb anyway, so it drops away and his leg keeps bleeding... and bleeding... and bleeding. There's a lot of shouting and noise, and then it's all drowned out by the jet engines firing up. Hands underneath him, on his side, his leg, the hole in his leg, but that train's left the station. He smells brimstone... there's a hand on his face... a voice saying that it's going to be alright, and he hopes that it will be, eventually, but he's not going to be around to see it.

Peter goes to sleep without closing his eyes.

The end.

Except not.

When Peter was a kid and school was out for the summer he spent a lot of time at the public pool. There were whole months growing up when Mom had to work and she would wake up every morning, pack Peter a sandwich and a few Oreos and toss him out at the pool as soon as the place opened and pick him up when they were locking the gates at sundown. While he was there he spent a lot of time horsing around with other kids he met there, making trouble, getting yelled at for running on the pool deck, and leaving to hit up the 7-Eleven across the street for a five finger discount on Cokes and Klondike bars until the owner caught wise to him and said he and his soaking-wet friends couldn't come in anymore and then it was back to horsing around at the pool and, sure, swimming sometimes, but mostly chicken fighting and doing flips and belly flops off of the diving board and competing with his dumbass friends to see who could hold their breath the longest, until Milo McMurray didn't come up one time and had to be dragged out by the lifeguards who pumped his legs against his chest and got him to spit out half a gallon of pool water. It was really terrifying at the time. Tommy Hinkle cried so hard he started hyperventilating and nobody even teased him about it afterward.

Milo's family moved to Oregon in nineteen sixty-six and Peter hasn't seen or heard from him since, but now he knows how the kid must have felt, minus the burn of chlorine in his nose, because Peter is drowning, then he sucks in a long, noisy, gasping breath, his first in he-doesn't-know-how-long and his back arches and his eyes fly open. He's lying on the hard, cold deck of the X-Jet but he's burning so hot that his skin feels prickly. One of his hands is resting palm-down on his stomach like someone placed it there. Wanda is holding the other tightly in both of hers. She's crouched at his side. Her skin is chalk-white and her eyes are shut tight and her hands, for once, are freezing. On her lips is a single word: “Live.”

And he does.
While Peter's fighting through the pain of having his heart start back up from a dead standstill and gasping around his aching ribs Wanda smiles at him, then Erik is there, hovering, and he's all red eyes and pale, bruised skin and his hands, which are all over Peter's neck and face are covered in drying blood. He turns and shouts, “Hank!” so that Peter can see the veins standing out under the skin in his neck.

Multiple safety harnesses come undone with frantic clacking noises.

“Get out of the way! GET OUT OF THE WAY!” Hank shouts. He doesn't wait for Erik to move but grabs him by the shoulders and shoves him aside. Erik falls clumsily backwards, then moves to Peter's other side and eases Wanda away from Peter by the shoulders. Peter's head falls to the side to follow his twin. Erik is the only thing holding her up. She looks dazed and weak but she's breathing.

“Jean!” Peter hears, then Jean is there, next to Hank, wide-eyed.

“Report! What's happening?” Scott demands from the flight deck.

If Hank answers him Peter doesn't hear it over the sound of his heart pounding in his ears. “M bleeding...” he says, but he doesn't think anyone hears him.

“Hold him.” Then Hank sticks his big furry fingers into Peter's open wound and starts digging around like Peter's leg is a couch and Hank lost his keys between the cushions. Then Peter's trying to scream but his voice only comes out as a strangled rasp. Hank says, “Got it, got it. Jean, hold it there.” There's a pinching, stabbing pain in Peter's leg before the sensation blends in with the rest of the agony in his damaged limb. Peter hears a whimpering sound and realizes it's coming from him. He struggles like he can get away from the pain but he's so weak and the hands holding down are strong. Ororo is floating above him: his white-eyed, white-haired weather angel, except her eyes are brown now, and shining.

Everyone on the jet gets quiet as Hank works, so quiet that Peter can hear the whine of the engines and the sound of the air rushing past the bulkhead under the sounds of Hank rummaging through the EMK, unwrapping sterile dressings and tearing off lengths of tape.

“Hank, what's going on back there?” Scott asks into the quiet.

Hank finishes his dressing and looks at Peter's face, then he takes off his glasses and wipes his wrist across his eyes. Shakily, “We've got him. He's back,” Hank says.

Scott has no questions. None.

“I clamped the artery but he needs a surgeon.”

“I can put us down,” Scott says quickly.

“Keep flying,” Hank says, distracted. He's still messing with Peter's leg, even though Peter wishes he would stop. Peter's leg is one huge, throbbing wound that hurts every time Hank moves it or touches it and his body feels like a giant magnet, stuck to the metal deck. Somebody slips an oxygen mask over his nose and mouth.

He tries to close his eyes.

“No, no, look at me,” Wanda says. She's crawled over to him and she's cupping his face in her hands, an he feels her palms growing warm again. Underneath the smudges of dirt on her face her cheeks are glowing pink. She's shining.
Hank says, “Erik, give me your arm.” Erik doesn't hesitate or flinch when Hank taps a vein and starts siphoning off his blood to give to Peter.

Peter glances around. Against one of the bulkheads Raven is sitting up on her stretcher, hands on either side of her to hold herself up. There's an IV in her arm, too. She looks like she should still be flat on her back but she can't stop staring.

Peter's never needed to be the center of the universe. He's never wanted the attention, but all eyes are on him now: his friends, his family, people he trusts with his life, like he's some kind of marvel.

Kurt starts to pray, “I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of Heaven and earth...” He goes on like that, and nobody tells him to stop.

Erik strokes Peter's hair, running his thumb along the scar on Peter's forehead. “Don't go anywhere, Peter,” he says, and Peter mumbles, “Wasn't planning on it.” His voice is rough and thick and he can't even tell if it makes any sense through the oxygen mask, but the sound breaks the bubble of tension in the jet, and the X-Men seem to melt around him like wax figures in the sun.

The professor's extracurricular activities (when he's not busy interfering with military operations or playing politics or dealing with terrorists or, you know, teaching) include donating large sums of money to hospitals and charitable organizations, which is a good thing for the hospitals and a better thing for Peter, because when Hank decides that Peter's injury is a hair above his pay grade, the professor calls on his pals on the board of directors at New York Presbyterian Hospital and tells them that a stealth jet is about to land on the roof of their hospital and that jet will be carrying an exsanguinated mutant with severe lower limb trauma who was resuscitated by one of his teammates after ten minutes without a detectable pulse or respiration, and they're like, “Okay.”

Peter's really sad to miss Scott trying to put the X-Jet down on the roof of a hospital without killing anyone or damaging the building, but at the same time he's still a few pints down and not feeling so hot. He wakes up in the ICU dehydrated and groggy and naked except for a sheet and blanket, but at least he can tell that he still has two legs, even if one of those legs is covered in prickly black stitches and surrounded by a metal cage that looks like something out of a Stanley Kubrick film. The cage (external fixation to replace the internal fixation that didn't work out so well) is held in place by metal pins that go right into Peter's leg and screw into the bone above and below the hideous puckered scar on his thigh. When Peter wakes it's the middle of the night and Jean is sitting in a pool of lamplight in a chair next to his hospital bed. Someone's brought her a change of clothes, nothing that Peter recognizes as part of her wardrobe, and there's a book on her lap that she's not reading. Instead her hand is outstretched toward Peter and she's telling him not to move and using her power to hold him in place just in case he gets any wild ideas about getting out of bed, but even without the cage Peter's feeling way too funky to think about stepping out for a smoke.

Calculating a dosage of opiates that will relieve Peter's pain without destroying his organs is really hard, which Peter knows because he lived through the trial-and-error process once in the immediate aftermath of Cairo and the American doctors aren't having any better luck, so Peter experiences the first few days of his hospital stay through small windows of lucidity between sleep and drugged stupors.

Right out of the gate (or out of the operating room) Peter runs a fever of about a million degrees because his body does a great job of burning out infection and there was a pretty decent amount of dirt still in his leg after he got to the hospital and also hospitals, despite the pervasive rubbing-alcohol/bleach smell, are pretty full of germs too. While his temperature is sky-high, though, he doesn't know where he is and he can't remember his own name, let alone anyone else's. He calls
Scott “Glasses” and he's convinced that Jubilee is Lindy's friend Diane even though they don't look anything alike. Jean has to use her power non-stop to keep him from hurting himself and by the time Peter's fever breaks, Jean is sweating as much as he is.

He dreams about the convoy. He relives the moment that he died, everything about it: from the way the dust and dirt moved through the air to the smell of his own blood to his father's silhouette against the morning sunlight as he summoned his powers and cut Peter down like a blade of grass.

He dreams about what happened in between death and life, not for him but for the X-Men, probably because his visitors like to talk. It's like they can't stand the silence, and Peter, for once in his life, is in no shape to fill it. The X-Men only come drop by in ones and twos and Peter wonders if that has something to do with hospital rules or if everybody's just that busy but most of the time he isn't mentally present enough to worry about it and when he remembers it's usually in the middle of someone else's sentence and Mom taught him that it's rude to interrupt.

“I knew my mistake as soon as I'd made it,” Erik tells Peter. He's sitting at Peter's bedside, forearms resting on the rail like he's praying over a casket. “But it wasn't soon enough. I would have died there too if Jean would have let me.”

Jean covered their retreat. She stopped the bullets long enough for them to get away. She helped Hank clamp off the artery in his leg so that he didn't bleed out a second time, and she's done a lot to keep Peter from accidentally hurting himself or someone else in the hospital. One of the doctors saw her anatomy book and started quizzing her on the names of leg muscles, pointing to them as he examined Peter's poor, caged leg. She'd been up for, like, two days. Her hair was all stringy and her makeup was long gone, but she got every question right.

Kurt doesn't even remember how he knew Peter was down. He was the first to reach them, and he teleported Peter and Erik onto the jet. “You were already gone. Like that,” Kurt says. A snap of his fingers. He's shaken. They all are, especially the younger mutants. Peter realizes, in a moment of clarity, that he would have been the team's first casualty, and they all seem troubled by that.

Well, not everybody.

Scott's not troubled.

Scott's pissed.

The second day after his surgery Peter drifts out of a Vicodin cloud into the land of oh-fuck-my-leg-hurts at about two in the morning and finds Scott's slumped in a chair next to him, not sleeping, arms folded, staring at the television like he's thinking of changing the channel with an optic blast. He doesn't turn to Peter, doesn't look at him, but after a while he says, “Fuck you, Maximoff.”

“Hey,” Peter croaks, “At least you get to say 'I told you so.'” Scott warned him that Erik Lehnsherr would be the death of him and would you look at that? Scott's clairvoyant.

Scott actually does look at him then. “Oh my God, not funny.”

“S kind of funny.”

“If you die again, I will kill you.”

“I'd like to see you try.”

Scott's not really in the mood for friendly banter, though. He says, “Man, you have no idea. None. It was...” he can't even finish, and Peter feels an overwhelming surge of guilt, even though he knows,
logically, that there was nothing that he could have done to save himself.

“Hey,” Peter says. He tries to structure his next words so that they come out inspirational and eloquent and fuck it, some things just are what they are. “You're the leader. You know the risks. Not everybody's going to make it back all the time.”

Scott stops breathing and the blood drains from his face like Peter just gut-punched him. Then he swallows his pride and says, “You're right. Going into this the professor warned me that there would be sacrifices. The reality is a lot different than I imagined.”

“Yeah,” Peter agrees.

“I thought I had some things figured out. I thought I'd really been through something... with Alex, with Apocalypse, and the invasion. I thought that the more I learned the easier it would get, but it doesn't. It gets harder. The more I learn, the less I realize that I know.”

“Still want the job?”

“Now more than ever.”

And that right there, is why Scott is a good leader.

“Hey,” Peter says. “You were right about Magneto, but I was right about Wanda.”

“Yeah... ” Scott nods. “She's something else.” But Scott looks like he has no idea what.

That's all the intelligent conversation Peter can handle because his leg is throbbing and his ribs are really sore because Erik bruised the shit out of him trying to do CPR and Scott has to break it to him that even though his pain meds are wearing off he can't have another dose until four. Peter burns through enough Vicodin in an hour to kill two people. He metabolizes the drugs so quickly, in fact, that his doctors are worried about damaging his kidneys and liver. Also, they just don't have enough narcotics on hand for him and every other patient in the hospital. So Peter tries to play it off like it's no big deal even though every line of his body is probably screaming, *Get me drugs!* And Scott's looking around, helpless. “If Jean or the professor were here they could help with the pain but Jean's resting and the professor won't be here until morning. I'm sorry.”

“S okay,” Peter lies. “You talk.”

“Alright.” And he does, for a while. About what Peter has no idea. Scott gives up when Peter starts breathing shallow and making small, pained noises that he just can't help. Scott spends the last forty-five minutes until the nurse comes just holding Peter's hand and helping him breathe through the pain. Scott tells him later that he couldn't write with that hand for a week.

Either because of the fever or the seven or eight (or ten) minutes that Peter went sans oxygen while he was, you know, dead, Peter's doctors are concerned about brain damage and between the drugs and the pain from his pincushion leg Peter hasn't been able to made a convincing argument that he's playing with a full deck, so they order up a CAT scan, then another one when Peter can't hold still for the first. When the orderly rolls him back into his room afterward there's a nurse waiting there, staring at him with her head cocked in a way that's too familiar to be a coincidence. She helps the orderly transfer him back into bed and once the orderly leaves Peter smirks at her. “Time for my sponge bath?”

She frowns. Her scales ripple and she's bright blue again... and naked. Always naked. All business, too, but the closer she gets to the head of his bed the slower she walks and the softer her expression becomes.
“Hey, Peter,” she says. She's close enough to touch him but she looks like she's afraid. “How are you?”

“I'll live.”

She smiles. “Good.” Then she remembers, “Thank you.”

He knows what she means, but he doesn't know why people keep thanking him for stuff that he would have done no matter what. “Part of the job,” he says. “How's life on the outside?” Peter's caught a few headlines on the TV in the rare sober glimpses he's had: flashes of protests and soldiers, peace signs and angry mobs, the capitol building and the Pentagon before Jean or Scott or somebody changed the channel.

For once Raven doesn't share. “The beat goes on,” she says, “There will be plenty to keep you busy once you're back on your feet.”

“Can't wait,” he says honestly.

“The kids can't either. They're making a banner.”

He bets he's going to love it.

Raven sits gently on the side of his bed and does most of the talking, tells him how the kids are doing. “They know that you're hurt and they know you're in the hospital. We didn't give them details.” A guilty pause. “I haven't talked to Lindy yet. I didn't know how much you'd want to tell her.”

Lindy hates hospitals and she hates the thought of people dying and Peter doesn't want to scare her. “Thank you,” he says. He knows he can't keep this a secret forever, but if there's a chance that he can get back on his feet before Lindy finds out, he'll take it.

“Don't mention it.” Raven sighs, trying to lighten things up. “You have fantastic collar bones. Don't they feed you in the place?”

“All the time,” he says, fingering the NG tube that's taped to his cheek. It's a new addition. His body is healing, but it's burning through his reserves to do it, and as drugged as he's been he can't always get enough calories the conventional way. The tube is weird and uncomfortable but it's the least of Peter's worries.

“Right.” Raven's on the ragged edge of something, and Peter sees the moment when she gives in to it. “God, Peter,” she says. “I thought we'd lost you.”

They did. But he doesn't say that, doesn't say anything at all.

Peter's alone in the hospital sometimes, in pain, or barely lucid, with only the voices in the hall to keep him company. It's never for long, not the way everyone else measures time but still, it's torture.

“Things have gotten complicated,” Hank explains by way of an apology when he visits. There's something on his mind but he doesn't want to say. “The military knows that we attacked the convoy.”

Well, sure. He can imagine a few ways they might have figured it out even if they didn't find Peter's X-sweatshirt at the scene of the crime.

Hank goes on, “They know because Charles told them. I think it was his way of taking responsibility
for what happened out there... and proving to Erik whose side he's on.”

“So... what? Are we at war or something?”

“Not yet.”

Peter frowns. “Don't drown me in details, Hank. I can't keep up.”

“You don't need details. You need food and rest so that you can heal.” Hank says that Peter can leave the hospital as soon at the external fixation comes off, and that's Tuesday, which is four days from now but it might as well be a million years away, but complaining isn't going to make it happen any quicker.

Peter doesn't want food and rest. He wants Wanda. Peter hasn't seen her since the jet. His chest hurts when he thinks about her, like he's homesick for his twin. “Is Wanda okay? Why hasn't she been here?”

Hank wants to avoid the question. “She's been busy. Wanda's spells” -Hank says it like the word is painful and harms the future of science- “have been... instrumental the past few days. She made sure that all of the organic matter that you left behind never made it to a lab for testing. We don't want them searching hospitals for an injured mutant.”

Sure, no, of course not, but he doesn't care. “Can I see her?”

“I don't know if that's a good idea. We're still trying to understand how she did what she did.”

What she did... “Does it matter?”

“I think so... yes. Yes, it matters.”

Not to him. Hank keeps talking, shares some hypothesis of his about energy transference and the conductive properties of metal but Peter doesn't care enough to listen. He pretends to nod off until Hank takes the hint and stops talking, and when the nurse brings lunch he just glances at the tray, listless, and lets it sit there until someone collects it.

Wanda's at his side within four hours.

Peter's all stiff and headache-y from lying in one position too long. He drifts out of a foggy half-sleep and finds her sitting next to him. Late afternoon sunshine is pouring in through the window behind her, bathing her in warm light and picking out the red highlights in her hair. She looks and sounds so much like Mom today that he's confused about where he is for a second.

“I feel like I did something wrong,” she says, first thing. She's smiling but her eyes are shining. “I guess I should be used to that by now.”

Peter's throat is too dry to talk but he tries anyway and erupts in a coughing fit that pisses off his leg.

Wanda pours him a cup of water from the plastic pitcher at his bedside. He drinks, and when she sets the cup back down he notices the covered dinner tray beside it and realizes he's hungry. The feeding tube alone isn't enough to keep him alive.

Without being asked Wanda swings the table over so that he can reach it. It's a little hard to swallow around the tube but he knows better than to ask a nurse to take it out.

“I finally do something good with my powers and everyone is treating me like a bomb that might go
off any second.” Wanda sniffs.

“What are they afraid of?”

“That I'll take it back.”

“Are you going to?” It's just a question.

“No.”

“Then what are you afraid of?”

“How easy it was,” she says. She's looking past him, remembering, “Everything happened so fast. One second I was by the convoy and the next I was in the jet and we were all crowded together and there was an explosion and gunfire and everyone was talking and Scott was starting up the engines. I didn't know what was happening. I could hear Dad calling your name. I didn't know that you were already dead.”

When she says it it becomes concrete, not some weird dream he had or some story he's been told. He died. He was dead.

“Dad tried to give you CPR but it wasn't doing any good.” she shakes her head. “Hank pulled him off and he told him it was over... and then I came and I sat down on the deck next to your body. I've never seen you completely still before. I couldn't believe you were dead. It didn't seem real, and as soon as I thought that, I realized that it didn't have to be. That's when you opened your eyes and started breathing again.”

Live, he remembers.

“I'm scared, Peter.”

He opens his hand, an invitation, and Wanda toes off her shoes and climbs into his hospital bed and settles in around him like a cat, very careful to avoid his leg. They fit together like two pieces of the same puzzle, which he guesses that they kind of are. He wraps his arm around her and holds her like Mom held him after he got his powers and he thought he was going to go crazy.

“We'll figure it out,” he says into her hair, the same words Mom used on him. “Together.”

It doesn't take long for her breathing to even out, then her body goes slack against his like she hasn't slept in days. Peter can feel his meds wearing off, but having Wanda here is like a hot shower after being out in the cold so long he'd forgotten what it was like to be warm. He falls asleep too.

When Jean or the professor are around they can do something about Peter's pain, like convince his mind that it isn't happening, or that his leg belongs to someone else, and he stays pretty coherent, unless they don't want him coherent. It's no secret that the telepaths don't need to leave a room to keep their conversations private, but Peter's mind has never been quite like other minds and whether they want him to or not Peter occasionally catches bits and pieces of conversations that are not meant for his ears.

“His vitals are strong. I think it's safe to say that she won't take back the energy she shared,” the professor is saying. The room seems dark even to Peter's closed eyes. Xavier's voice is appropriately low. “If she shared any energy at all.”

Wanda's still beside Peter, but she feels like an extension of his body.
“It seemed like the most likely explanation,” Hank answers in a voice just as low. They both sound exhausted.

“Only she told us that wasn't how she did it.”

“So we're left with probability; Wanda's power increases the likelihood that a given event will occur. Maybe the less likely the event, the more powerful her influence.”

“How likely was it that Peter's heart would spontaneously start beating again?”

Hank sighs. “Not likely at all.”

“She also defeated a mathematically unbeatable simulation.”

“Math is absolute. Death is absolute. What she did wasn't just improbable, it was impossible.”

“As we understand it, yes. The ability to make what is true untrue, to refute the irrefutable... The implications of such a gift are staggering, and consider that she made both leaps in the presence of her twin.”

“Do you think we made a mistake bringing her here?”

“I think that it would have been a bigger mistake not to.” The professor sounds distracted. He muses, “All her life, all of the time she was separate from her twin she saw only what she was looking for. Her perception of her gifts colored her reality. She believed them to be a curse, and so they were. It will take some time to adjust the way she thinks,” the professor says. “I find it fascinating that although she was convinced that something bad must always come of her using her powers, Peter never was. He's very perceptive.”

“When he wants to be.”

“Wanda is far from the only mutant at the school with untapped potential.”

Peter frowns. He's not asleep but not quite awake. While they've been talking the pain in his leg has built from a nagging itch to a dull ache. Xavier lays a hand on Peter's forehead. His palm is dry and warm, and the itch subsides, along with everything else, but not so quickly that Peter doesn't hear, “When the conditions are right evolution leaps forward...”

Wanda can't stay forever, but she wakes Peter up when she leaves and promises to come back as soon as she can. After that Erik is Peter's most frequent visitor, not that Peter minds or, like, blames him or anything, but he does wonder who's covering his Conversational German class if Erik is at his bedside from dawn to dusk. Another thing: Erik is a fucking drag. In the rare instances when he suspects that Peter's lucid enough to understand him he launches into one of his boring, guilt-fueled speeches that Peter's none too concerned about because of the Vicodin but also because there's a stray thought floating around somewhere in Peter's head that he swears he'll never give voice to that says Erik should be sorry, dammit. That fucking hurt and knowing that he was going to die was pants-shitting terrifying, so yeah, there's a part of him that's fine with Erik feeling guilty but that doesn't mean he wants him to commit seppuku or suicide by little green army guys or anything.

So, when Erik's sitting at his bedside one day, elbows on his knees, staring vacantly at a Tide commercial Peter taps him on the head and says, “Hey, cheer up. It's not like anybody died.”

Everything about Erik tightens up. It doesn't take a telepath to know that Erik does not appreciate Peter's sense of humor. “I killed you,” he states. “My own son. In anger and vengeance I broke the promise that I made to your mother on her death bed.”
“Yeah... not really, though,” Peter says, “If you hadn't brought Wanda to the school I wouldn't be here right now.”

Erik seems a little caught off guard, and he actually pauses like he's considering what Peter's saying, but then he dismisses it, “It doesn't excuse what I did.”

“No, it totally does,” Peter says, and he won't let Erik get away with telling him it doesn't, and making excuses for himself about why he needs to pack up and leave. “It was an accident, but if you want to feel like shit about it then you have to feel like shit where I can see you.” He didn't think Erik could look any guiltier but there it is. “Yeah, that's what I thought. Running's always easier.”

Erik can't look at him anymore.

“Hey,” Peter says. He needs Erik to hear this: “I forgive you.” Erik hasn't asked for it. He probably doesn't think he deserves it, and he's probably not going to forgive himself but, “I forgive you.”

Erik takes a minute to soak that in. “How can you be so generous?”

“I'm not being generous. You gave me like, half your blood on the jet. I thought you were going to shrivel up and blow away, and after all of that I still can't even bend a paperclip without touching it. Lame.”

Erik smiles a little. “You've had my blood in your veins all this time,” he says.

“Oh my God, you're so intense. I bet you're a blast at parties. How are we even related?”

“I don't know,” he admits, “But I'm grateful that we are.”

“No, oh, don't smile. That's even worse,” Peter says, turning away.

When he turns back Erik's smile is gone and he looks thoughtful. He says, “Are you glad that she brought you back?” His stare pins Peter to the mattress.

Peter thinks, and his answer maybe takes a second longer than Erik would have liked, but even with the leg cage and the painful lulls between medication, even with his strange power that keeps him always a step out of sync with the rest of the world, even with Mom being gone and mutantkind being constantly under threat and Peter being torn between his human family and his mutant family, his answer is, “Yes,” because it means that Lindy has a brother and Wanda has a twin and Magneto doesn't have to stand over another grave and more people are going to be alive because Peter's still got two feet on the ground, or will, in a week or two.

Erik lets out the breath he'd been holding relieved, not just relieved... happy. “May I ask...?” He lets the question trail off but Peter knows what he's getting at. He knows it's been on his dad's mind since Peter sucked in his first breath on the jet, and Peter's gone this long without knowing how he was going to answer. He'd be lying if he said he hadn't been hoping for front row seats at a music festival headlined by a winged Jim Morrison and Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix in a white vest with fringe all the way to his knees. That would have been awesome but it wasn't that. He didn't see Mom or Grandma, didn't exchange high fives with Alex Summers or share a cigarette with Roy Oberman. It wasn't what he'd imagined on the rare occasions when he'd imagined anything at all. It wasn't...

“It wasn't nothing,” he says. “I don't think it was nothing,” and that will have to be good enough because that's all he's sure of, is that it wasn't nothing. Erik nods slowly, like it's not much, but it's enough to keep his hope alive and Peter wishes he'd been able to offer more in terms of... anything really, but Erik looks grateful for whatever he can get.
After a pause Erik asks him how his leg feels and Peter's like, “What leg?” because his latest dose of painkillers has kicked in hard but he's not tired enough to sleep yet, so Erik talks to him about things that he knows Peter likes, which leads Peter to talk about the songs and shows he grew up with, and how he used to stay awake at night listening to The Rolling Stones and The Doors when he should have been in bed and has Erik ever heard that song by Norman Greenbaum? Spirit in the Sky. Seems appropriate given the circumstances. And of course he has and it turns out that Erik actually likes music, he just doesn't listen to it very often and Peter's like, “You should,” and Erik promises he will but none of that Godawful psychedelic trash Peter's so fond of and Peter asks what he likes and expects it to be classical music or tuba solos or yodeling or something but it turns out he's always had a thing for early American jazz and that leads to Erik opening up about his childhood in Germany, which he's never done before and which Peter finds totally fascinating: gramophones and coal scuttles and kids in shorts and hats and suspenders and how exciting it was when his family bought their first radio, and what it was like to see a movie in a theater for the first time, all huge and alive in a dark theater, and Peter wants him to keep talking even though his eyelids keep drifting shut.

“Rest, Peter,” Erik tells him. “That contraption is coming off of your leg soon and you'll need your strength.”

“I'm good,” Peter says, forcing his eyes open.

“Go to sleep, Peter.”

“Are you going to be here when I wake up?” Peter asks with his eyes closed.

“I don't know,” Erik answers honestly.

“Promise you will anyway.”

Parents make promises they can't keep all the time: I'll never leave you. I would never hurt you. Everything will be alright... Lying in bed, hurt and in pain, it's the promise Peter needs, not whatever comes after.

A pause, “I promise,” Erik says.

“Keep talking,” Peter says. There's something about his dad's voice that grounds him. He likes the sound of it. Maybe he says that out loud.

Erik takes a moment to gather his thoughts, then the words of some Hebrew prayer come washing toward Peter like gentle waves on the rising tide of sleep.

Erik keeps his promise.

The End

Thank you for reading. Feedback is welcome.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you again for reading. There was a lot to wrap up in this chapter. This is an ending, but it's not THE ending. My hope is that it is satisfying but leaves you wanting
Some notes on this chapter:

Kurt's prayer is the *Apostles Creed*. From what I understand it's an affirmation of faith and one of the oldest Catholic prayers. I think it's something that Kurt would have known very well and it's something that he would have reached for in a circumstance like that.

I'm not particularly religious, so I wrote Peter's after-life experience ambiguously. I don't want to tell anyone what to believe.

Here are a few notes for those of you who may have unanswered questions:

How was Wanda able to bring Peter back to life, and if she could do that, why didn't she fix his leg?
I imagine that the actual cause of Peter's death was not blood loss, but rather a sudden drop in blood pressure, if you want a science-y sounding explanation. That's why Wanda was able to bring him back without replacing the blood that he'd lost or repairing his injured leg. As to why she didn't bring him back whole and unscathed, that's a step beyond her at this point. She made a leap of faith when it came to her twin, but she was using a part of herself she'd never used before. I think it's fair to say that if it had been any other X-Man or anyone else who died on that mission, she wouldn't have been able to do anything, but it was Peter, and the twins have a bit of a symbiotic connection (in this story at least. As far as I know, that's not canon). He's sort of the key to unlocking her powers. Also, if she'd brought him back undamaged that would have opened up the door for her to start bringing dead people back to life left and right and not only would that have removed the narrative consequences of those deaths but it would have removed the consequences of death and injury, and if I'm going to have characters with God-like powers, there are going to be *House of M*-like consequences and we're not there yet.

So, how will Wanda's new skills affect the X-Men going forward?
Wanda is still exploring her powers. She will have to re-frame her thinking and practice with her new skills before she can take them out into the field. For a long time yet she will still be very good at causing chaos, but as she begins to see her powers as multi-dimensional, she will slowly be able to make positive things happen, gaining wisdom as she goes. Her power does have an energy component, and there may even be a symbiotic element of that power that involves Peter. The question that I am trying to answer for myself is, "Once she has mastered her new skills, will she have outgrown the X-Men?" and "How will Erik react to have such a powerful daughter?"

How will the X-Men react to Peter's resurrection and Wanda's new powers?
Wanda's powers will remain largely unchanged for a while. Once the X-Men see that, they will return to treating her like a valued team member.

Sounds like trouble is brewing between the X-Men and the U.S. Government. Where's that going?
There will be some tension in the wake of Xavier's confession and the X-Men will have to fight their corner to protect vulnerable mutants. Xavier has made it no secret that he wants peace, but he's prepared for war. There will be conflicts, but I haven't thought about exactly how they will play out.

Will there be a sequel?
I have several shorter additions to this fic written, but no solid story arc. Political intrigue is not my favorite to write. I would want to approach a sequel from a more grounded, realistic perspective, more like the first half of this fic than the second. Once I figure that out, I can write.

Will you torture Peter as badly as you have in this story?
I don't know that that's even possible 0_0.

How will Peter fare in the aftermath of this story?
Peter's leg is going to be a problem for a while. It will be frustrating for him. Erik will try to help him, probably to the point that Peter will be very annoyed with him. He'll continue to struggle with his eating and with his self-worth issues, because those have been a long time in the making. They aren't going to magically go away overnight, even if your sister is a witch. You'll notice that he didn't thank Wanda for bringing him back to life, and he might really not thank her once he realizes his leg is going to take a long time to heal, but he will heal.

And Erik?
For now, he'll stick with his children, and try his best to keep the promises he's made.

If you guys have any more questions or if there's an aspect of this story you'd like to have in more detail, please let me know. If I can't write you an additional chapter I'll at least explain in a reply.

Thank you again.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!