Déjà Vu

by summerartist

Summary

Peter takes one for the team. After everything that will come to pass even their heroic Peter will be left wondering if it was worth it.

Spider-man is depowered and has to deal with the consequences. This is in the same universe as (Some) Assembly Required but can be read on its own. Contains sickly!Peter
“Steve, get behind us.” Tony’s speech was short, clipped.

Under normal circumstances Steve would have let the concern it implied roll off of him. These were far from normal circumstances though and Steve pushed back the automatic protest that threatened to bubble up.

The fight had been swift and violent. Avengers had been pushed left and right viciously as the big baddie had pressed forward with single-minded determination. He had issued threats involving Captain America. He wanted Steve alive, had wanted to depower him first and then study him like a caged animal. While chilling, the threats did not hold much muster in the light of day with five-no six Avengers defending each other. They were joined by Spider-man shortly after the fight broke out.

The kid from Brooklyn might have been working with safety restrictions but he got a few good hits in. He excelled at distraction tactics and Steve suspected that he might have even done a little song and dance if he thought he could get away with it.

Steve smiled as Spider-man swung over him insulting the baddie’s haircut and mustache. Good lord, the kid could quip. Even Romanoff was smirking.

“Guys, he’s not backing down,” Hawkeye’s voice held a note of trepidation but also intrigue.

Sure, the magic user could shatter windows and blast aside cars but it was otherwise a piece of cake. Give Bruce two seconds and Hulk could put him down for the count. Bruce was otherwise occupied though in what seemed to be a brief tactical discussion with Stark.

It was true that Steve was usually the soldier with a plan, but when it came to himself…He was just glad that Tony and Bruce seemed to temporarily take on the mantle of leadership as Steve was otherwise occupied.

“Hey magic dude, why are you so interested in Cap? Like, I get that he has that old world charm but it hardly rates this much- attention!”
Spider-man just barely dodged out of the way as a jet of light zoomed over their heads. Steve gritted his teeth in annoyance. So, the guy was past caring who was getting into the crossfire. He would have to feel the full brunt of their barrage then. They had only been playing with their food and there was plenty more where that came from.

“Form up, it’s crunch time,” Steve issued the order that usually ended things quickly.

Hulk ripped out a wall in his path as he became a colossal tower of raging muscle. Natasha formed up behind him and charged along with Tony and Cap bringing up the rear.

With a roar, Hulk sent concrete and glass shattering over the magic user. The pale face of their foe whitened further and his thin lips tightened. He dodged behind a modern art piece in the center of the square only to find it upended within the next split second.

He seemed to panic. In a flash, his robe swallowed him up and he vanished from view. Everyone paused, looking around for their adversary. There was no sign of him and while they waited it became apparent that he would not be making a reappearance.

“Coward,” Natasha spat. She shoved her knives back into her belt as her tension gradually eased.

Clint had not seen much of the action and he remained atop his perch. “Aw, no dude, come back! Nat called me a coward too when I gave up the last slice of blueberry pie. She means it affectionately.”

Steve exhaled. It was over for better or for worse though he had a feeling that that their paths would cross again.

“Good team-up, everyone. Well done, Spider-man.”

He expected to hear a chuffed young voice thanking him. Radio silence greeted him.

“Peter? Pete?” Tony’s tinny voice came over the line. “Spider-man, do you copy?”

Clint spoke up, “Twenty meters to the right of you, Cap.”
Steve turned and there was Spider-man leaning against the building beside him. A loud repulsor blast thundered past him and there was Tony by the vigilante’s side. Almost immediately, Steve could see that there was something wrong with Spider-man. It was in the way that he was holding himself and how his suit had tightened around his already thin body. The kid looked emaciated all of the sudden.

“Did he hit you with the-? Oh shit. Shit. You’re depowered, aren’t you?”

Spiderman, or Peter as he was apparently called, was nodding at Tony as the Iron Man suit towered over him.

“So, are you twelve-year-old you?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know!” Spider-man’s voice was rushed. “Something like that, maybe thirteen?”

Iron Man froze and he seemed to talk quietly to himself. JARVIS must have said something that had taken him aback.

“Ok kid, I’m taking you to the hospital.”

“No, but- the spider mutation! I can’t go to a hospital,” Peter protested. “That guy didn’t seem too thorough. If something shows up in my genetic code-”

The danger of having his cover blown to the public went unspoken. Steve knew how many people there were behind the lines supporting a hero and he sympathized.

“We’ll treat you at the tower.” He strode up to the pair. Spider-man had a hand on Tony’s shoulder and strangely, Tony seemed to allow it, even leaned into the touch.

“What’s wrong? You said you were depowered?” Steve eyed the smaller Spider-man and was eerily reminded of a young army recruit in the supersoldier program.
“Spider-man had an illness before his genes were mutated. He was like you, Steve. Skinny and sickly—”

Peter shot Tony a glare through his suit’s expressive eyes. He straightened up even as he kept a hand on Tony’s shoulder.

“What he means to say is that I wasn’t always this strong and powerful.”

Tony’s faceplate flipped back to reveal him frowning dubiously at the young superhero. He took a step towards the vigilante.

“I don’t feel younger. This still kinda sucks though. Really sucks.” The fear in Peter’s voice belayed how serious the situation actually was.

“Hey,” Tony wrapped an arm around Spider-man’s shoulders and pulled him snug to his chest as his repulsors whined. “Let’s quit this joint and get you checked out. Cap, I forfeit my place at the victory meal. Put it on my tab.”

With that, Tony blasted off into the clear blue sky. Spider-man had wrapped his arms around the neck and shoulders of the armor as he hung on. Tony took off in a spiraling trajectory as it helped Peter cling tightly to him by forcing gravity to pull him towards his torso. The two figures diminished into the distance.

It was tradition now, going out to a restaurant no one had heard of to eat a feast fit for warriors. It felt much more essential to be there with Spider-man, even if it was his duty to keep morale up for the after-party.

“I’m going to meet them there.” Bruce was no longer so green and was currently pulling his suit jacket over his upper body.

Steve surveyed everyone else and found all eyes fixed on the tower in the distance. So, it seemed he wasn’t the only one not in the mood for celebrating.

“I’m coming too,” Natasha informed him. “We’ll hitch a ride back. Coming?”
She turned her head towards Clint and the archerer nodded. It looked like their destination was home.

Peter was in PJs, curled up and sleeping peacefully on the main room couch. If Steve looked closely he could spot the furrow of pain around his eyebrows and the firm set of his jaw. The weight loss was not the only thing wrong.

“How’s he doing?”

Steve asked Tony this question because A. Tony had gotten back to the tower before them and had longer to study Peter’s condition. B. Tony had obviously run every scan imaginable on the kid and C. Tony was watching him like his every breath was keeping him alive by proxy.

“He’s got an ulcerated GI tract and a high white blood cell count. There’s damage to his right hip joint that won’t heal overnight… and he’s allergic to the medication that could help him with the nausea. He’s peachy.” His tone was bitter.

Steve watched the unmasked vigilante breathe steadily and his young features twitched. Tony had told him about the vigilante’s age and while Steve disapproved he couldn’t deny that the army had recruits that age during the war. Women and boys had found their way into the ranks where there had been blind spots and Steve could not resent their enthusiasm.

Still, Tony seemed strangely attached to this kid, taking his personal safety into consideration. Steve had rarely seen someone’s injuries give the billionaire that grim of an expression. Maybe…

Steve frowned thoughtfully at Tony. He admitted that for a moment he searched for similarities between the features of the two superheros.

“I’ve called his aunt. She wants him home as soon as possible but doesn’t want him moved if he’s comfortable. *Fuck*, what am I going to do?”

The unexpected curse burst from him and Peter sniffled. The adults froze, subconsciously trying not to wake the kid. Peter frowned in his sleep but remained otherwise inert.
“...Is it that serious?” Tony had not given him a diagnosis and so far it sounded relatively mild. Tony seemed to sense his brevity and glared at him.

“His stomach lining is eating itself, I’d call that serious. His immune system is confused on what to attack first and seems to be focusing its attention on everything else.”

Tony sighed and pulled the holographic desktop back up with a wave of his hand. Data sped by at high speeds.

“We’ve already had a talk about what medications work best for him. He remembers a little. Unfortunately, this is about the time that he was on infusions for his immune system. Kid was susceptible to about everything.”

It would be dangerous to put Peter on that kind of medication again and Tony would rather use it as a last resort. If all else failed they could put Peter on good old-fashioned steroids and see how he responded. He had taken them before and could do so again. Tony had a few alternatives in mind but he would have to run them by Bruce first, and probably someone with a proper MD.

“I’m sure you and Dr. Banner have it handled,” Steve said. His gaze was drawn back to the sleeping superhero. “God, he’s- he’s really skinny.”

It was a bit too much like the shadow of looking in the mirror before the serum. Spider-man really should not have to deal with this. It should have been Steve caught in the crossfire.

Tony's face felt suddenly full of weary lines. In what seemed like a sort of foggy dream he foresaw the sort of challenges that would be coming. Peter could be stubborn, especially around Tony and the other Avengers. Aunt May had described the time of Peter’s illness as the most headstrong he’s ever been. He would run himself ragged trying to do things by himself, and more or less drove his poor aunt to tears.

Well, they had Tony’s help this time. It would have to be enough because there had to be a way to reverse this.
Parental Intervention

Peter was getting through school, somehow. Though his state of health had been reset to previous times he did not have the baby-face his thirteen-year-old self had.

His GPA was dropping in steady increments in certain classes but was holding firm in others where the teacher actually had a heart. Tony had wanted him to take a semester off but May knew how important it was to Peter to spend time with his friends. She let him stay in school with some stipulations.

Peter had to drop PE for his own safety and when he needed to come home he had a doctor’s note letting him do just that. Tony, May, and Ned helped him with his homework and if Peter felt a fever coming on he told someone instead of attempting to write a paper late into the night.

In what became an everyday occurrence, Happy carried Peter’s backpack up to the school doors and then handed it off to Ned. Peter remained adrift from the rest of the Avengers, with school life and relaxation keeping him busy he had very little remaining time for extra activities like socialization.

Peter’s state of health had initially sent everyone in his school into a slight frenzy. Parents, teachers, and even his bullies were inquiring if he was all right and Peter always smiled and said he was doing fine, just feeling unwell. After the first week or so they became used to his skinny form limping down the hallways and across campus. He just wished that the others would adapt to it too.

“You need to drop out.”

The words pierced him with all of the sharpness of an approaching projectile. It was just as unwelcoming and did as much destruction to his emotional state. He needed to see MJ and Ned every day. He needed to get through high school to get a good job.

He sat bundled up in the backseat of the limo hunched in on himself. Tony sat beside him and had just delivered the line that upended his small world.

“But- I can’t” His voice was weak and quavery.
Tony’s fingers rested comfortably over his right elbow and the look he was giving Peter only served to unravel him more.

“Kid, you can’t do this- we can’t wait anymore. There’s been no leads and no word from Thor or Asgard. As to your current physical health- if we remove your GI tract it would put you down for the count for months anyway.”

With the damage to the rest of his body Peter knew that it actually would have taken years to physically heal and he would have had to endure it if the spider hadn’t come along.

“You physically cannot do this anymore.”

The words cut him so sharply that Peter visibly flinched. A warm arm enveloped him and suddenly Peter was being held to an Armani suit that had been professionally pressed with the smell of expensive aftershave clinging to it.

The words should not have hurt so much. Aunt May had been more or less telling him the same thing, just not as bluntly.

“And besides, if there’s anyone who can afford to drop out, it’s you. Once we get this all ironed out you’re applying to MIT and I’m paying your way through it.”

The words were meant to be comforting but Peter could not help but feel like he had been defeated. All of his efforts and perseverance had been for nothing and it left him choked. He pressed his face into Tony’s overpriced suit.

Peter’s bed was not soft enough. It had never been a problem before but it was fast becoming one as he searched frantically for the slightest bit of comfort for his aching joints and rebellious stomach.

May had relentlessly been forcing him to eat and sacrificing her own quilts and comforters. One day Peter woke up from his uneasy rest to find his aunt pulling out his carry-on bag and suitcase from his
closet. She started placing everything from his wardrobe into his suitcase along with a bag of toiletries.

Peter watched her through half-shut eyes. He finally voiced a question, “Am I going somewhere?”

It was not unlike watching his aunt prepping him for a sleep-over when he was a tiny little kid.

May froze and slowly turned to face him. “Oh Peter, did I wake you up?”

Peter shook his head in a white lie. He did not find sleep much these days so even if his aunt had been as quiet as a mouse she still would have woken him.

Her hand brushed through his hair. “Sweetheart, go back to sleep. I’m just packing up our things so we can go see Tony this weekend.”

Peter’s brow furrowed as he attempted to comprehend his aunt’s puzzling statement. She was packing a lot more than Peter could use in a weekend.

“We...moving there?” It was meant to be a joke but the silence that answered him made Peter’s eyes open wide.

“We aren’t really, right?”

His aunt smiled sadly at him, “We’re just staying there until you’re well and then we’re coming back home.”

The apartment was full of too many memories for Peter to comprehend leaving it. Peter let out a relieved breath until he remembered that Tony currently did not have a private home besides his vacation houses. For the most part he lived at the Avenger’s tower. Surely Tony could not be bringing him there around the other Avengers.

“But the rest of the Avengers will be there!” He protested in a croaky voice. “They can’t see me like this.”
In other circumstances Peter might have been talking about the Avengers finding out about his civilian identity but his aunt saw the teenage insecurity lurking in his eyes. She tucked back his bangs.

“You’ll be staying with me. Don’t worry about it,” Her tone belayed her sincerity and belief in her words.

Such a thing was easier said than done but Peter trusted her, would trust her with his life and had already done so. Besides, Peter liked Bruce and the others and the scientist had been nothing but helpful and kind to him.

If his aunt said that it would be all right then it would be all right.
Independent Perhaps

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Peter was packed into a van with about a dozen blankets the next morning. His aunt sat beside him and just barely held back from buckling him in if her darting gaze had meant something.

Happy drove the van through the busy streets of morning New York traffic and took them towards the heart of the city. Peter sat there blinking in the bright daylight and trying not to hurl on the spotless interior. Cars whizzed by and Peter watched the traffic swarm thickly behind them.

After what seemed like an age, they pulled into what could only be described as a private parking garage. Happy gave the identification code that allowed them access and they entered the cavernous concrete structure. He shut the engine down.

Happy opened the door for Peter and held a hand out. Peter stared at his proffered palm for a moment, and then took Happy’s wrist. His right leg buckled as he climbed out.

Somewhere in the haze of pain he realized he needed to use the bathroom. He asked Happy where the facilities were and was offered to be shown the route. The bodyguard did not touch him again, just walked in front of him to lead the way. It made the tips of Peter’s ears turn pink nonetheless and he hoped that they weren’t being watched by other security personnel as they went to and fro.

Aunt May stuck close to his side and they reached the elevator together. JARVIS greeted them, and though Peter had been expecting it it still made him start.

“Welcome back Head of Security Mr. Hogan, and Mr. and Miss Parker. I am JARVIS and I run the essential functions of Avengers’ Tower as well as function as an independent AI. If you have need of my services I remain at your disposal,” JARVIS’s breezy technological voice informed them. “The residents of the upper floors are waiting for you.”

Peter swallowed. He did not want a big ceremonial welcome; he just want to slink by to a quiet room and rest. In the back of his mind he realized that he was starting to sound like an old man. May placed a hand on his shoulder as if she was silently telling him that it would be okay. Peter gave a faint smile.

The elevator doors opened to reveal...no one. Peter breathed a sigh, glad that an overzealous group
of warriors had not been there to greet them. Though he liked the Avengers and was endlessly curious about them, now would not be the time to be ambushed by a big group.

There was a large living space and kitchenette in the area where the elevator let off. Sam Wilson sat on one of the couches reading and he glanced up as they entered.

“Hey.”

“Hello,” Aunt May returned the greeting while Peter struggled to find his voice.

Sam set aside his book and approached to hold out his hand for them to shake. “You must be Peter and May Parker. It’s a pleasure to meet you both.”

Peter smiled and tried to find any sort of vocal energy within him but his throat was dry and he was unwilling to open his mouth. He bit his lip.

“Make yourselves at home. Tony has an apartment all set up for you guys on the fourth penthouse floor.”

“Thank you,” May said warmly. “We’d better go unpack. Are you coming, Peter?”

Her kind gaze told him that it was all right if he wanted to go explore the living space but Peter had his mind made up.

“I’ll help too.” He internally winced as he heard his weakened voice.

“Catch you later,” Sam called after them.

His aunt insisted that he get some rest and all offers to help her unpack were rebuffed. Peter frowned, frustrated, even as he knew that he was exhausted. He felt so useless lying in bed while his aunt
moved around and put things away. Sometime during her unpacking there was a knock on the door. Peter’s eyes opened and he allowed his super hearing to kick in.

“We only just got in,” his aunt responded to what sounded like Dr. Banner. “The rooms are very nice. Thank you, Tony.”

Peter listened to what could only be his mentor as he brushed off the gratitude and inquired about him.

His aunt answered, “He’s exhausted but he seems to be in less pain today. If one of you could check in on him later and give him his shot...”

*Wait, give him his shot? Since when did the Avengers need to administer his shots?*

“Of course,” Banner agreed.

He hadn’t agreed to this. He was on a daily regiment of shots that should eventually stop his immune system from acting out and damaging his organs. He could understand why his aunt was worried but honestly he could handle it on his own. Just because they were in a tower full of supportive people did not mean they had to-

A cold wave washed over Peter as he realized that they had not come here merely for the accommodations. His aunt could have easily had Tony put them up in a nice hotel or something. She had meant for the Avengers to help them out. The fact that they had temporarily moved here meant that this had been a well thought-out scenario for her.

Peter felt a pang at the thought that he had been putting too much on his aunt, had been asking for her help too often.

From now on Peter would have to be more independent. If his aunt needed help with him that was obviously a sign that he had been selfish and had asked too much of her. He had been laying around too often, a school dropout that was clinging to his family for support. The words twisted sharply in his heart but they also helped grant him determination for what he had to do.

Peter leveled himself up gingerly, grunting as his head swam and his stomach clenched. First off, he would unpack his suitcase and put everything away before his aunt came to check up on him. He
could manage that task, surely, even though he would like nothing better than to collapse back down again and stop moving.

Peter sighed and started unpacking his T-shirts and a toothbrush. He could manage on his own and he would show his aunt just that. He could be stubborn and right now that was his strong suit.

Chapter End Notes

Author Notes: I’ll put warnings at the top of the chapters as they come, in case there are triggers and squicks for some people.

I still don’t know if I want to delete this fic but it seems to have a lot of watches and while I am baffled I am also flattered. Thanks!
Too Much

Warning! Descriptions of eating, vomiting, and blood loss via digestive tract are contained in this chapter. Read at your own risk. (It’s based closely on a real disease. :/)

Peter emerged from his room sometime later, making his way to the elevator. He was hungry and he hoped that there might be something freshly made downstairs. If there was not then Peter could probably order in a snack or see what they had in the communal fridge. His stomach gurgled unhappily and Peter pressed a hand over it.

His belly was bloated slightly, a symptom that showed up during his last bout of the condition. He really hoped that Thor would send word soon or Natasha finally tracked down the sorcerer because Peter needed to get his powers back soon.

The first step would be going to the main floor to get something to eat, lest he feel worse. The doors slid open and Peter stepped out. Heads turned his way and conversations halted.

“Jeez Parker, look like a ghost much?” Barton observed. “Your skin is gray.”

Peter glanced over to find his mentor staring intensely at him, frowning.

Peter learned several things in that moment. He realized that all of the Avengers had been given information on his background, they had assembled to greet him, and Tony was looking at him in a way that Peter disliked. The lines in Tony’s face were grim and his eyes studied him while hiding something disquieted in their depths.

“Hey, short stack, did you get some sleep?” Tony asked.

Peter nodded, a blatant lie. To divert attention away from him he brought up the subject of why he had come down here. “Do we have any food? I’m really hungry.”

“Yeah, come here and take your pick,” Clint told him enthusiastically.
Peter did as was offered and hobbled over to the fridge where Clint stood. Clint started pointing out all of the different foods and the fresh produce they had available. In the end, Peter settled on some beef broth that had been leftover from takeout at a restaurant. He dished it out and heated it up with shaking hands.

Once the dish was of sufficient heat and smelled delicious, Peter went over to the breakfast bar and hesitated. He could sit down on a stool here, a very high perch that would never have phased him before, or on the couch that was closer to the ground. His wobbling leg required that he sit on something soft and less precarious.

Sneaking glances at the others to see if it was okay, he sat on the couch. He knew people could be weird about eating in the living room and this was not his house...Tony seemed all right with it though.

Tony was not too far away and Peter slowly became aware of Steve and Sam talking from across the room. They were deeply immersed in a conversation about what sounded like the search for the sorcerer. The verbal shorthand of the two friends was difficult to follow and was conducted at rapid-fire speeds. Steve briefly exchanged glances with Peter. His expression seemed to grow more determined as he discussed their plans to capture the instigator.

“Stop talking shop, you two. There’s plenty of time for that later,” Tony called over to the conspiring pair. He briefly met Peter’s gaze, expression unreadable.

Sam rolled his eyes. “Oh, like you never talk shop while there’s guests.”

Tony pointed to himself, face blank. “I never have, right, J?” Tony directed the question to the room at large. He seemed to be deliberately steering the conversation away from its origin. Peter caught on but was too tired to do anything about it. Tony probably had some sort of reason for it, wanting Peter to not be privy to their plans or go after the sorcerer by himself.

The AI paused before answering. “My apologies, sir, I’m unsure whether you mean me to refute that ironically or verify it sarcastically.”

“Take your pick. I’m not hard to please.”

“Peter!” A voice called out.
The use of his name startled him and the soup sloshed in his bowl. He turned his head to spot his aunt striding towards him from across the room. Peter had been completely unaware of her presence and he was caught off guard. He swallowed.

“Peter, I told you that you didn’t need to worry about unpacking,” his aunt reminded him. “When I went upstairs you had put everything away already.”

“Yeah,” Peter was honestly a bit puzzled why she was acting this way. She should have taken it as a sign that he was doing better. “I wanted to, you know, help out.” His earnest statement was ruined by the nearly pubescent crack in his voice.

Someone flicked his knee and Peter looked up to find Tony in front of him. How had he gotten so close without Peter realizing it? Why was everyone sneaking up on him today?

“You told me you slept, Mr. luggage-bags-under-the-eyes that are bigger than the ones I took to Hong Kong.”

Peter sputtered at the accusation. Okay, so maybe he hadn’t slept, but he did lay in bed for a few minutes. “I-I tried,” Peter said earnestly. “I was just so hungry.”

Speaking of which, he should probably start eating. The soup had probably cooled down enough to allow him to eat it without burning the roof of his mouth. Tony gestured to the bowl in his hands as if issuing an additional reminder to get cracking. Peter nodded.

In an unusual display of obedience, he picked up the spoon. He dipped into the soup with gusto and took several large mouthfuls. He carried on taking quick swallows until he was halfway through the bowl. He decided that that method was taking too long and it would be easier to drink it. Peter downed the small bowl of soup more slowly with several long draws. He was too hungry to care about his surroundings. When he finished he licked his lips and lowered the bowl.

Peter’s ears turned red as he noticed that though no one had been directly looking at him, they had seen his display with the soup if their slight smirks were anything to go by.

All right, so maybe he could do this whole eating thing and feel a little better. Or at least, he would not get any worse.
Half an hour later everything was coming back up. Peter was bent over the toilet to the guest rooms, heaving and wiping away the moisture gathering at his eyes. His digestive system was expelling blood as his entire tract seemed to shudder.

He had to take off his jeans and then his boxers.

God... he hated this.

He remembered this from last time, hastily stripping off his clothes and shivering as his body expelled everything. The sharp sensations made him gasp and made his limbs tremble and quake. The seizure-like bout ripped away any conscious thought and took the rational thoughts out of his head. All that was left was his body absorbing sensations of burning, rending, and twisting itself into spasms.

Blood and vomit gathered in droplets on the floor.

The bout left him weak and ragged, bloodless in appearance. His body would slump and shiver for a few moments.

Ever so slowly, Peter started gathering up his clothes. He blotted up the fluids with tissue and made certain to wipe away all traces of blood on the previously spotless floor. He wiped away the wetness on his face and on his legs.

The last thing he needed was for the Avengers to find out that he was having bouts like this, or worse, for one of them to actually witness one. Unfortunately, the circumstances made the probably of that much greater now that Peter was living here under their roof. It had been bad enough the first time when his aunt caught him.

He remembered it only too well. She had done her best to clean him up and cover him with towels, all the while looking like her world was shattering in her eyes. He couldn’t eat, his muscles were breaking down, and his heart raced even as he slowed. Coupled with the frequent blood loss and vomiting – He remembered being unable to walk and talk, resorting to crawling or being carried and wheeled around in the hospital.
If he hadn’t undergone the surgery, well…

He really wished that he could leave. If he had not been depowered he could have searched for the sorcerer himself. He was not a complete idiot though; he knew that he would never make it very far in this condition. He needed to hang on, hope that either the medication they gave him staved off the worst or they managed to find the culprit.

For now he would wait and take his daily shots. He would hide how terrible it was getting as best as he could...he only hoped that he would not have to go through this all over again.
Peter sat in the lounge sporadically napping, occasionally playing a quick desktop game that required little to no brain power. His phone chimed and Peter took it out of his pocket.


Peter thought a moment and started to type a reply. His phone chimed again as MJ continued.

MJ: Is it true that you dropped out? Word is you transferred but Ned said you had to drop out of high school.

Peter was quicker in getting a word in this time and answered. I dropped out. Sorry I left you guys.

Michelle seemed to hesitate but then quickly started typing again.

MJ: Flash is the one that misses you the most. Guy won’t quit whining about how you left. Spread a rumor that you died.

Peter: How is Ned?


Peter: Ok.

There was a pause and then Peter had to blink several times to absorb that MJ had sent the following message.

MJ: Take care of yourself.

Something in his chest warmed at the comment.
Peter: You too.

Peter waited for a few minutes, seeing if she would say more. When no message came he was slightly disappointed but it was to be expected. This was the first time that had really had a text conversation together. Peter knew that she was keeping it short, as they were only newly friends.

He exited out of text mode and gave a hum. Ned had come over to the house a couple of times after Peter dropped out so he was more in the loop, but no one knew that he was in the Avengers tower. It might be for the best.

Peter rubbed at his side, absently peeling off the wad of gauze taped there. He dug it out from under his shirt and shoved it into his pocket. He remembered, with amusement, how Dr. Banner had taped the large gauze pad over the small puncture he had made in Peter’s sparse belly fat. Peter had grudgingly let the concerned scientist administer the medicine with minimal fuss, knowing that he was just showing his compassion through the attention.

His eyes were partially closed with drowsiness when someone tapped on the doorframe. Peter opened his eyes and quirked an eyebrow when he saw Steve Rogers lingering outside of the doorway.

“Did you want something to eat? I can make you scrambled eggs. Your aunt told me that they were your favorite.”

Technically they were his favorite when he could not keep down much or was forcing himself to eat, like now. “Sure, yeah, that would be great,” Peter agreed.

Steve smiled reassuringly. “Did you want anything else?”

Peter shook his head. Before he could say anything the supersoldier was gone. Peter frowned, thinking that he might talk to Steve about when to assign blame. Steve had been extremely helpful, not that he wasn’t usually, but ever since Peter had taken the hit during their last battle Steve seemed to wait on him. While Peter appreciated it it was something he did not want to bother Steve or anyone with.

The teenager got to his feet while wobbling precariously. He had to switch sides on which to lean on since his hip was no longer taking his weight. He wished that laying down would grant him some
measure of peace but every waking moment had pain at lower and higher grades. Today had thankfully been a low pain level day so far, or so he thought. He was having a hard time identifying the sensation as pain so much as it was constant aggravating discomfort. It was hard to describe.

He must have zoned out for a moment because before he knew it there was Steve back with some freshly cooked eggs. Peter thanked him and started eating. He was not hungry, but he knew that he needed to eat. Steve left the room looking a little happier, probably pleased that he had managed to help the invalided Avenger.

In what was suddenly like an imitation of a swinging door, Tony came in. The handle knocked into the wall but Tony hardly noticed. “Okay, put down the eggs. JARVIS has sent you an emissary.”

“Wha-”

Peter was utterly baffled as he spotted a streamlined little piece of high tech clutched between Tony’s fingers.

“Heart monitor,” Tony said by way of explanation. “Apparently you’re well past the point where most hospitals would stick you in their IC ward and attach you to a BP, heart monitor, and an IV. He compromised at heart monitor. Shirt off.” Tony snapped his fingers impatiently like he expected people to just start doing his bidding within an instant.

Peter frowned dubiously but started shrugging out of his shirt. Before it was even halfway off Tony started attaching the tiny adhesive strips to his midriff and clavicle area. Peter had worn heart monitors before, but they usually had a large mechanism and short cords that attached to the upper torso. This one had been fine-tuned to something more elegant with a small mechanism and thin cords that were spindly and spider-like. It was not intentional, probably.

“Can’t he just monitor me through scans?” Peter asked.

“Nope, this is the best way. He gets instantaneous feedback and can discount false readings with direct access,” Tony explained.

Peter was momentarily tempted to ask whose idea this actually was, because this was starting to sound a little like the tech Tony had worked into his suit.
“Okay, if it reassures JARVIS...” Peter said.

“It does reassure JARVIS,” Tony returned flatly. “Trust me kid, try having him as your AI for a couple of decades and you’ll see how an AI can be an insufferable worry wart.”

It was at that point that JARVIS decided to chime in. “I only endeavor to keep you safe, sir,” JARVIS’s dry voice somehow said it in the same tone people used when they said “Go die in a fire.”

“That’s okay, I think I’m keeping Karen,” Peter told his mentor as he rolled down the hem of his shirt, now with the tech hidden underneath.

JARVIS was nice, especially to him, but Karen had been there during his fights and training. She was still learning and Peter could relate to that, as well as appreciate her unique sense of humor that was evolving all the time. He sort of missed her to be honest. He would have to put on the mask later and have a chat.

“How’s the pain today?” Tony asked unexpectedly.

Peter brought himself back to awareness. He was having a lot of trouble concentrating but he thought he was doing okay pain-wise.


“Tell Bruce if that changes or contact SHIELD medical,” Tony rolled his eyes as if he realized what he had just said. “Hell, I know you aren’t going to contact SHIELD medical but tell your aunt- Far be it from me to insult someone’s looks but you aren’t winning any beauty prizes lately. Eat up your eggs, kid, you look like you need it.”

Peter gave a testy reply and nearly threw a decorative pillow at him, but he did not want to drop his eggs.
Tony was deep in his workshop when JARVIS informed him that he had an incoming call from SHIELD. Tony put it on to find none other than the director of the organization staring him down over the holographic imaging system.

“Fury, to what do I owe the pleasure?” Tony asked breezily.

He gingerly placed the smart chip aside from the array of hardware around him. This was the last thing he needed right now with their search going poorly and Peter convalescing.

“I’ve found a medical consultant qualified to treat the newest member of the Avengers,” Fury said calmly.

Great, Fury was sending them another clueless medic when Tony already had top Gastroenterologists working on Peter’s case. Tony could not bring himself to be overly enthused.

“He’ll be meeting with you now.”

Tony sighed and then nearly jumped out of his skin as a burst of sparks materialized in his workshop. It turned out that now was actually as in “now,” as in this very moment. Before Tony could take a step forward a hapless DUM-E was racing towards the sparks on eager wheels.

“No-” Tony was cut off as his unexpected visitor was doused in fire suppressing foam.

His visitor waved a hand with two fingers raised and in the blink of an eye DUM-E was on the other side of the lab. The excess of cloying chemicals vanished as if they had never been present and Doctor Strange stood serenely in the middle of the room.

“So, I hear that you have need of a consultant,” Strange crisply emphasized the last “t.”

Tony snapped his mouth shut and forced himself to shrug indifferently. “I already have several well-paid Doctors working on the problem. I didn’t ask for you and you shouldn’t waste your time.”
Strange hummed thoughtfully. “Nevertheless, I am here, and I do believe that the incident was magical in nature. Director Fury informed me that the spell was originally intended for the supersoldier, but this Avenger was collateral.”

The mystical man approached the holographic file on Peter that displayed his vitals- Tony often left the file open just to assure himself that nothing untoward had happened to the kid. Dr. Strange studied it for a few moments and hissed under his breath.

“Colitis, nasty. It’s been some time since I’ve seen a case this extreme. Not really my area.” Strange reached up and scrolled through the file. Though Tony had admittedly been reluctant to entertain his presence, he watched him with curiosity now.

“You should start him on prednisone and a liquid diet. Also, B12 to replenish his blood supply as he is bleeding heavily,” Strange advised.

Tony blinked, not sure that he had heard right. “Sorry, bleeding?”

“Yes, such is the case with ulcers in the digestive tract. You’ll also want to monitor him to make certain that it doesn’t develop into cancer. I thought you said you had adequate Doctors on the case?”

Tony scoffed, “The best, but they don’t exactly discuss his medical file with me. He already has a guardian.”

Strange stared at him blankly. “I see.” His cape shrugged. “Well, if there’s nothing else I wish to see the patient and determine the spell that reverse engineered his genetic structure.”

Tony instantly thought of what Peter would say to the meeting and what he thought about his civilian identity getting out to more people. He was reluctant to show Peter to Strange. However, if there really was a way to combat the spell that had transformed Peter, they would be hard pressed to find a better candidate with knowledge of both medicine and the mystic arts.

Strange seemed to sense his brief hesitation and added, “I will do my best to assist or refer you to someone with the ability to deconstruct the curse, but I will need to see the patient.”

Tony’s resolve bent and he found himself nodding. He would use all powers on heaven and earth to help the kid if he could. He didn’t deserve to be weak and sick like this.
After receiving the acknowledgment, the wizard created a wormhole of sparking and fizzing energy that led out to where Peter was sleeping. The kid was slumped against the arm of the sofa, face white and lips colorless. Together, Tony and Stephen stepped through to the other side.
Pain and Panic

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**Chapter Warnings:** Brief mentions of needles and blood.

Peter woke with the sensation of warm fingertips touching his forehead and muttering in the background.

“Grrruh...” He sucked in a breath and started coughing. His spidey senses were going haywire. Wait-spider senses-

Peter’s eyes flew open in the next split second and was met with more confusing stimuli. An unfamiliar man crouched over him with medieval-type clothing and a beard like Mr. Stark’s. All about them were strands of golden filaments. They lit their surroundings with an ethereal light and seemed to brush over them, evoking a sensation like touching one of those plasma ball toys that made your fingertips tingle.

The man withdrew his hand and the sensations receded along with the familiar touch of extra senses. Peter immediately felt the loss and reached for the man’s wrist.

“What are you doing? Who are you?” Peter asked in a rush.

He became aware that Tony was standing in the background, arms crossed and feet planted apart. His mentor appeared indifferent or at least calm.

The stranger straightened up and addressed him softly. “My name is Doctor Strange, Master of the Mystic Arts. I was examining the spell that regressed your genetic structure. It’s a complicated procedure...I didn’t wish to wake you.”

“It’s fine.” Peter glanced around, noting that his stomach was roiling uncomfortably. He would have to get up soon but he did not want to interrupt what the man was doing. “Did Mr. Stark call you?”
It was unusual for Tony to obtain outside help for things like this. He was always wary in matters of the press, which was why Peter’s tiny team of doctors had been buried beneath a heap of red tape before they were given the smallest scrap of data on their patient.

“No, I was informed of your predicament and thought my magic would be of use.” A peculiar expression flickered over Strange’s features for a moment before vanishing. “This is not the first time I’ve assisted the Avengers.”

Now Tony was shifting uncomfortably and before Peter could ask about the scenario, a bolt of pain shot through him. He kept his face carefully neutral, though his efforts were wasted as Dr. Strange was looking down at his hands. Peter glanced down too and -whoa- that looked uncomfortable. Dr. Strange’s hands were ridged in places where metal lay beneath the skin. The stiff material held the bones in a close approximation of proper support. Strange’s hands were quivering but he started tracing some sort of pattern over Peter.

“I can protect your astral form from further spells. Your astral projection retains many of your previous traits, the crucial point seems to be securing your projection to the present time. There appears to be some additional tampering as well.” Strange frowned. “I haven’t come across anything like this before. There seems to be-” Strange cut himself off as he made a jerking motion with his hand that changed the pattern. “There seems to be a splicing of your body’s form over multiple astral pockets. To do this one would have to employ other methods of spellcasting that cover various disciplines.”

Strange hummed as he rotated his fingers clockwise to complete the symbol over Peter. Peter was sweating.

“To reverse a spell this experimental you need an Asgardian,” Strange said decisively.

Peter clenched his hands into fists and suppressed any sounds that he might emit by pressing his lips together. He nodded.

“You need one with significant magical expertise, a spell caster that is familiar with bastardizing the elements of-”

Peter tuned out the magical mumbo-jumbo for just a moment to tilt his head back and stare at the ceiling and then at the wall. His body rocked back and forth.
“Peter?” Peter heard Mr. Stark say his name as if from a great distance.

He clenched his teeth. His gaze briefly met Tony’s.

“What the fuck,” he heard his mentor say as he approached. “Strange, what did you do to him?”

Peter missed Strange’s reply because in the next moment his knees were hitting the carpet and he stretched out his arms to catch himself. Strange seized his forearms and helped guide his descent. Pain burned up through his body, causing him to gasp. Tony made a grab for him and missed as Peter’s body writhed. Peter’s back arched and his eyes rolled as the flames of agony licked at his insides. He just wanted it to stop and for it to cease stealing away his control-

In a move as quick as lightning, Tony made a grab for him again and succeeded. A warm solid hand snaked to the underside of his jaw and gave a firm tug towards his chest. Peter found his temple pushed against the metal lip of the arc reactor. His senses picked up the faint buzzing in his ear even as he registered his tangled position over Stark’s legs.

Peter had very little time to absorb the newfound closeness to the billionaire as the spasm built in ferocity and wrenched at his insides. Pressure built at both ends sending Peter into a frenzy to scrabble away.

Tony held onto him. He made little hushing noises as Peter gasped and panted in his arms. Miraculously, he did not heave up bile on Stark’s nice shirt and was spared the embarrassment of leaking bloody diarrhea on the pristine carpet. Instead, he was left breathless and trembling like a newborn animal.

Stark’s grip on him resembled a tender cradling position, a hand snaking up to curve around his back. Peter did his best to breathe past the after-waves of pain lapping at him with less than a quarter of their bite. Having an episode like this was achingly familiar.

“I’ve got you, I’ve got you,” Tony muttered like a mantra.

“I-” Peter’s voice cracked horribly and he snapped his mouth shut. He hid his face against his support and tried again. “It’s not his fault. I would get these before...”
There was a pause as Tony and Strange eyed each other. Peter remained where he was, too weak to move yet. His skin prickled as his oversensitive limbs throbbed. That episode had been a bad one and Peter slowly started to realize that there was going to be no easy fix. He was going to suffer through more of these until they found the cure.

Tony’s arms tightened. “What do you mean you would get these before?”

“I-When I was sick before I would get weird attacks like that. They weren’t usually that bad but I guess it’s gotten worse.” Peter did not mean to sound so melodramatic but this had been an unusually violent spasm. If his past experiences were anything to go by this would quickly become irreversible.

Strange straightened up from his crouched position. He seemed to retreat into doctoring mode. “We had best get him started on some fluids. With your permission, I wish to set up an IV.”

Both Peter and Tony nodded and then blinked at each other. Peter wormed his way out of Tony’s hold.

Together, they levered Peter back up onto the couch and Peter let Strange stick his left hand. They got Peter comfortable and not for the first time since Strange had arrived, Peter wondered at the easy proximity between Mr. Stark and the Master of the Mystic Arts. What kind of history did they have so that when Strange appeared out of nowhere with a prepped IV pole Tony did not bat an eye, nor did he raise any objections when Strange examined Peter like a general practitioner.

Stephan peered at the whites of Peter’s eyes and felt the swollen lymph nodes in his neck. He took his pulse and pronounced Peter in adequate condition at present, but that Tony should take his previously voiced advice. Tony nodded in response to the peculiar statement. It was obvious that the wizard wished to take his leave now that he had completed his task to the best of his ability.

Tony offered to let Strange stay to continue his research and to enjoy some Stark hospitality. Dr. Strange declined and his cloak...nodded? Peter rubbed his eyes. Was he seeing things because he could have sworn-

“I have other matters to attend to, but if you have need of my particular services you know how I am to be reached,” Strange told them.

He turned around in a dramatic swirl of fabric -so the cloak really was moving on it’s own- and vanished into a portal made of sparks. The portal closed with a hiss, leaving Tony and Peter in the
sudden darkness.

Chapter End Notes

Not too dramatic I hope? I do love some juicy H/C.
“Why the silent treatment, J?” Was the first thing that Tony said. “Is the new monitor bugging out?”

Peter sensed Tony’s need to emotionally distance himself and so Peter kept quiet.

“The new heart monitor detected the increased heart rate but the protocol was disengaged once you became aware of Mr. Parker’s condition,” JARVIS informed him.

The AI had effectively done what his programming had dictated of him. It was up to Tony to rewrite the parameters of the trials for their new equipment and he proceeded to do just that.

“From now on I am to be alerted when you detect an increased heart rate that indicates he’s having a similar attack,” Tony told the AI briskly.

Wait-

“Mr. Stark, it’s fine. I’ve had these before...” Peter’s voice had gone all squeaky. It was not helping his attempts to reassure Mr. Stark. Having his mentor present during the last attack had been oddly comforting, but Peter was bound to embarrass them both sometime and Peter did not like letting someone know just how much pain he was in.

“And as for you,” Tony rounded on him. “Why didn’t you tell- I- Scratch that, you’re having a talk with Bruce and your doctors on how to manage this. Strange wants to put you on steroids.”

Peter had revealed on his first day of illness that steroids were the one thing that worked. They came with their own host of side effects and they took time to produce results, but they effectively stopped his GI tract from destroying itself.

“Noo-” Peter started to whine.

Tony impatiently interrupted him. “It has to be better than whatever you’re on, because from where I’m standing it can’t possibly get any worse.”
On steroids Peter’s face would swell up, he would be hungry, and he would be constantly moody. The last time he had been severely depressed to the point where he couldn’t even come out of his room. He was on such high doses that the disease would flare up if he tried to quit or taper it off. His ability to concentrate would cease altogether.

He could withstand it all if he knew that it was going to be temporary, but there was no guarantee that he was not going to be a ravenous and angry indefinitely. Not to mention that his heart rate was going to go through the roof. It was still better than the alternative he supposed.

Peter settled for letting his displeasure show through voicing an inarticulate groan. He kind of wanted to huddle up in a dark corner and never face another medical practitioner ever again.

“Kid, it kills me to do this to you but you have to get better,” Tony voiced his regret. “Your aunt wants you to get better, Steve is still a mess that you got hit over him, and I—” There was a catch in his voice and Peter glanced up briefly. “I can’t lose you,” Tony finished.

Peter was momentarily taken aback by the sincerity and vulnerability that he saw in his eyes. Peter felt for him even as his insides shriveled at the prospect of having to endure what was to come.

Here he was, going through his most feared ordeal with those he idolized by his side. Things were going to get messy and painful. Both his body and mind ached for a time when he could swing through his city without a thought to his past. He had been reborn as Spider-Man and now, without him, he felt lost.

Peter's phone pinged.

Ned: Hey.

Peter: Hey.

Ned: How are you?
Peter: Not great.

Peter rolled over onto his other side. His stomach rumbled. His entire abdomen was distended.

Ned: I can come by after school. We can watch a movie or something.

Peter: I’m not at the house.

Peter hesitated briefly over sending the cryptic message and subsequent explanation that would have to go with it, but he knew that Ned would find out sooner or later.

Ned: Where are you?

Peter frowned and typed what he knew would blow Ned’s mind.

Peter: I’m at the Avengers’ Tower. We sort of live here now...?

There was a pause.

Ned: Whaaaaaaaaaat?

Peter: Mr. Stark wanted to help my aunt out with medical stuff for us and get me a doctor.

Ned: Whaat? That's really nice but how are you doing?

The adherence to the previous topic left Peter utterly confused.

Peter: What do you mean?
Ned: Are you doing okay? Avengers are awesome, holy shit, but I haven’t seen you in ages.

Peter started to type, and then backspaced. It took him a moment to decide what he wanted to say.

Peter: I’ve been okay. The doctors have been giving me meds. How is everyone doing?

Ned: The same. That’s good that meds are helping.

The sound of the elevator in the main gathering area caught Peter’s attention. Out of all of his senses, his super hearing seemed to come back to him in sporadic bursts. It was still unpredictable and not as strong, so Peter had to strain to hear what was going on as two pairs of feet stepped out onto the main floor. He heard someone cross the room swiftly.

“There’s my two favorite ladies!” Tony said. Then he gave a soft, “ow.”

The verbal complaint was followed by a kiss. Peter could only assume it was Pepper who followed up with the gesture of affection. They muttered quietly to each other and Peter purposefully stopped eavesdropping on the couple. He turned his attention back to his phone.

Peter: Yeah. Listen, can I text you later? Brb, gotta go do something.

Ned: K.

Peter had to use the bathroom and then go see what they had managed to find out about his attacker. If Natasha was back it must have meant she had had some measure of success. He would talk with Ned later after he had gotten this all figured out.

Peter stood up, grabbing his IV pole and taking it with him. The device continued emitting its rhythmic “phut phut phut,” sound. Peter lurched to the bathroom, suddenly aware that the heart monitor was still attached to him. So far he had been lucky; He had only tripped the heart alert twice and both times he had managed to convince JARVIS and Tony that he was fine via intercom and that it was only temporary. It had not stopped Tony from waiting outside the door for him though and Peter had been blushing both instances when he had found his mentor there.
He was not on steroids yet, but tomorrow he was having another exam in the morning. Today was probably his last day to enjoy a clear head.

“I got your message. I followed up some leads but Asgard hasn’t been in contact with any of the realms for 8 weeks give or take,” Natasha said.

“Shit, that’s not a good sign,” Tony mumbled. “No messages from Point Break either, I take it?”

“No,” Natasha said faintly.

Peter’s super hearing chose that moment to wink out. It was probably a blessing that it was still functioning but nonetheless it was inconvenient. He wanted to hear about what else Natasha had found out.

Peter’s body reminded him again to not get distracted. Sighing, he ducked into the bathroom and locked the door behind him.

Next Chap: A Change of Scenery
All around him life went on, people commuted to work, superheroes kept superheroeing, and Mr. Stark left the building to go do whatever amazing things he did. The Avengers were still keeping Peter out of the loop. He usually would have taken serious issue with it, but there was not much he could contribute.

He would have been out there investigating and tagging along. As it was, he could barely summon the energy to stand up.

The medical exam had gone well...except he was out of options.

The doctors considered his case carefully and determined that he should refrain from taking steroids. If he had to have emergency surgery he had to abstain from all drugs that effected his heart. The doctors had suggested chemical therapy. Peter was to be prescribed large doses of infusion medicine that would take his immune system down a peg until his internal tissue had a chance to physically recover.

It was a difficult balance to maintain, especially since Peter was starting to go stir-crazy.

Steve had been playing as his minder with Mr. Stark gone. Contrary to what one might think, Steve was not one for setting up boundaries and rules for him. Oh, he would stop him from doing anything risky like going out as Spider-Man or just generally doing anything that would cause serious harm, but he let Peter keep his own schedule.

If Peter wanted to watch a movie at one in the morning Steve would check on him but never held him back. Steve would keep him company and help fetch things for him, but treated him more or less like an adult.

So, when Peter had an idea of how he wanted to spend the morning he went to Steve without hesitation. He would have asked May, but she was already at work. He checked with JARVIS to find the easiest route to get to Steve and slowly made his way there.

Steve was sketching out on the sunny balcony. His eyes were squinted up as his paper reflected onto his face. It looked really uncomfortable and so Peter had few qualms in interrupting him.
“Captain Rogers?” Peter sat down on the opposite balcony chair to mask his trouble with keeping upright.

Steve looked up and set down his pencil.

“Peter,” He acknowledged warmly. “It’s good to see you up. Did you need something?”

Peter shook his head and then he stopped when he remembered why he had come out here. He actually did need something.

“Can I- Can I go to the library? I’m really going stir-crazy being cooped up in the tower all the time- Not that it’s not an amazing building and everything! I just- I really-” Peter cut off his awkward stammering and risked glancing up from his fidgeting hands. To his astonishment, Steve gave him a small knowing smile.

“You want to get out.” Steve stated it like it was the most natural thing in the world. “Sure, I can take you there. Let me text your aunt real quickly to let her know where we’re going and we’ll go downstairs to get a car.”

Steve pulled an honest-to-God flip phone out of his pocket and slowly started to peck at the keys.

“Really?” Peter felt his entire face light up at the prospect of getting out. He just barely held back from exclaiming with joy.

Steve smiled. “Yes, really. I’m not going to keep you in the tower if you don’t want to stay, and it would be hypocritical if I did.”

“Oh.” Peter remembered the PSAs his gym teacher had shown them as a state requirement. Steve had often talked about the details of his life before the serum. Peter supposed that if anyone could understand what he was going through and could keep him sane during it, it would be Captain America.

“Cool. Thanks, man- Captain Rogers, sir,” Peter hastily amended. Beaming, Peter stood up with new energy. He was finally going to get out of the tower into the real world. His heart sped up and his
hands shook but he was practically grinning from ear to ear.

Steve had a twinkle in his eyes as he packed up his drawing equipment. He let Peter lead the way.

Peter was practically bouncing in his seat during the car ride. He kept fidgeting with the heater and the radio as if looking for something to occupy his hands. It had been the most he had moved in weeks.

Steve had to park a distance from the library, requiring them do a combination of walking and taking a shuttle bus. Peter’s left knee jiggled up and down as they took the shuttle, acting all world like he was going to a fun party or an amusement park instead of a dusty facility filled with books and computers. Not for the first time, Steve wondered just how much of Tony had rubbed off on this kid and how much he had already been like the inventor.

Steve watched him hop up when the ride ended and he exited the bus in record time. Steve followed at a slower pace, giving Peter a chance to take it all in.

“Come on, Captain Rogers!” Peter called faintly.

Steve sped up until he was directly behind Peter as they entered. The graceful ceilings soared above them and the quiet whirring of computers permeated the air. Steve gravitated towards some of the worn books in the older section of the library whereas Peter immediately spotted the young adult section. The colorful array of beanbags and phone chargers gave it away. Peter’s face scrunched up as if he knew that his favorite books were not present there, but the atmosphere of comfort drew him in.

This was actually a library neither of them had been to before. They both glanced at each other.

“Take your time. We’re going to be here for a while,” Steve assured him.

“Thanks!” Peter told him and made his way over to the science section.
The last few minutes were starting to catch up with him and he decided to choose a couple of books before retreating to a beanbag. His stomach burned and gurgled. Peter ran his hands absently over it as he studied his choices. Many of these books were ancient by his standards and so he skipped over topics where the information was substantially out of date like anything in astronomy and some in-depth biology.

A few of his favorite books on spiders were cataloged here and he gave a small smile as he touched their spines. He gathered up several tomes that he wanted to skim through before he perused their computer database.

A lot of the young adult section was closed off from the rest of the library, granting some privacy to the other sections as well. It was quite small, and for once, unoccupied. The people his age were on the library Mac Books over in the tech section.

Peter carried his haul over to the YA room and set it down on a table. Something on the shelves distracted him, a pop culture novel that he had heard about but had never seen in person.

Molten agony spread through his diaphragm and no no no he couldn’t have another attack here. He grabbed onto a bookshelf and willed it to go away. He knew that it was all of his internal ulcers pulling and being broken open by the natural movement of his digestive system. The knowledge did not make it any easier to endure. He gasped and covered his mouth to stifle the noise.

The warmth spread from navel to chest. His knees buckled and there he was on the ground, head nestled against the teenage romantic fiction. He could not think of anything more undignified.

As the attack progressed, Peter tried to keep his gasping to a minimum and just willed the episode to end. For once, his body must have been listening because it only took a couple of moments for the spasm to cease. He lay on the ground, shivering through the aftershocks. Peter was hidden from view as he spent a few seconds recovering and hoping that no one would walk in on him.

The pain eased and Peter slowly got to his knees, grabbing a book off of the shelf and pretending to read it. It never occurred to him to cut their trip short and to head back to the tower. It was just a little hiccup that could be shaken off.

Peter left with a new library membership and a heap of fresh reading material. Steve carried the
majority of it for him. Peter straggled behind the supersoldier, clutching a slim book on spiders to his chest. It was obviously meant for someone below his reading level, but the macro photography contained within its pages was spectacular.

Steve kept shooting him concerned looks as he waited for him to catch up. They reached the parking garage a lot more slowly than they had left it. Peter was embarrassingly winded and his right leg was hurting. He limped to the car and slid in.

Steve carefully placed his books on an adjacent cushion before climbing into the driver’s seat. As he started up the car, he turned back to Peter.

“You have the right to know what we found out about the magician that attacked you,” Steve said seriously.

Peter sat up.

“His name’s Ryland, origin unknown. He doesn’t seem to have any living relatives and he used to operate out of Knowhere, conducting experiments and carrying out high level assassinations.”

“Nowhere?” Peter asked.

“Knowhere, spelled with a ‘K.’ It’s an interdimensional crossroads and scientific observatory. Nick Fury has some people looking into it, but it looks like Strange is going to be the one that ultimately tracks him down. None of us can conduct a search across multiple dimensions,” Steve pulled out of the parking space, maneuvering the car haltingly.

“Oh,” Peter said quietly.

“Tony’s at a meeting with Strange we think, he said something about going to Bleecker Street this morning,” Steve informed him.

The statement made Peter remember a previous inquiry.

“How does Mr. Stark know Doctor Strange? Doctor Strange mentioned that he worked with the
Avengers before but I never met him,” Peter pondered aloud. His tone was carefully neutral.

“I don’t know the exact circumstances...” Steve began. “All I know is that Strange saved his life at some point. Tony’s unusually reserved about the incident.”

Peter knew that Mr. Stark didn’t want to be perceived as weak, so it was little wonder that he kept it under wraps. When you were on a team of superbeings, gods, and top assassins, you had to pull your own weight in your own way.

“So that’s all we know about this Ryland guy?” Peter asked.

Steve nodded. “That pretty much covers it.”

Peter sighed, fidgeting with his hands. His next questions were infused with a false lightness. “Like, he doesn’t even have a cool name. What about Ryland the Ruthless or Ryland the Repulsive or Revolting? He just settled for Ryland?”

Steve chuckled as they creeped through the midday traffic. “It seems so.”

Peter gazed out the window, mentally ironing the location “Bleecker Street” into his brain. The trick was not to tip the Captain off to his interest. If Steve suspected that Peter was going to do anything less than sit around and wait for a cure, he was sure to stop Peter.

Once Peter had this controlled with some infusion medicine he was going to see what he could find out. The only alternative was to endure the two surgeries again that would take years to recover from. Spider-Man would never be the same and given that his body was scattered across multiple astral pockets, he wasn’t entirely sure that there was a guaranteed way to get better anyway.

All he knew was that he had to do something.

Chapter End Notes

It’s getting really difficult to separate my reactions from Peter’s since this closely follows
my own experiences. It turns out that I repressed a lot.

Just today I remembered a young man that was my hero when he aggressively moved an infant chair out of my doorway. I had been crying and throwing up in the bathroom and then came out to see that nurses had propped my door open with a large unwieldy infant chair that they had dragged across the hallway.

He might have just been having a frustrating day and wanted to remove the obstacle, but I took it as 'She just had major surgery, let her cry,' to the silent nurse code. Thanks random nurse guy. ^^
Karen

Peter tugged out the drawer and stared at the contents within. His felt a small aching sensation in his chest even as his mind processed a spark of excitement. He pulled the vivid red fabric over his head and inhaled the slightly musty scent.

*Hello, Peter.*

“Hey, Karen,” Peter acknowledged. “It’s been a while.”

*Yes, it has. I am reconnecting with the STARK mainframe to access data gathered during my absence. It appears that the data in your file has extended substantially since-*

“No, don’t look at that!” Peter interrupted her. He really didn’t want the AI to treat him differently.

*I’m sorry, but the information you are referring to has already been integrated into my server. Would you like me to delete it from my active subroutines?*

“Yes!”

*Process complete. What are we doing today, Peter?*

This was getting awkward since so much of Peter’s life had changed because of his condition and he could not allude to it without revealing all of it. At least the deletion process had been easy.


He knew for a fact that Karen liked his playacting, probably using it as an opportunity to study typical human behaviors.

*I look forward to it.*
Peter wracked his brain and briefly considered doing a Hulk impression but his heart wasn’t in it.

“Actually, Karen, I just really wanted to talk to you,” Peter admitted.

_You can talk to me anytime, Peter._

Though she was just an AI that sentence made his heart do a happy skip.

“Thanks, Karen,” he said warmly. “Could you maybe run over some footage and talk me through it?”

_Of course. Would you like me to go over your last battle with the Avengers? Did you recover from the spell that changed your physical form?_

Oh no, she would definitely remember that. He had been in the Spider-Man suit at the time.

“Uh, yeah. I’m good. Actually, could we do a run through of the footage of the magic-user?”

Karen played the requested footage. She zoomed in on the images for him to study. The magic user was wearing clothing items that were out-of-date and nondescript. He wore a sort of grey and red tunic with black trousers and boots. The material was washed out and aged looking, possibly inherited or just simply an aesthetic. Peter sighed.

“Mr. Parker, I am to remind you to prepare for your next treatment and to reattach your heart monitor,” the cool voice of JARVIS interrupted them.

“Oh, gotta go. See you later, Karen,” Peter said hastily before yanking the mask off.

The fabric was ejected before she could ask him any questions and he tucked the mask away in his sock drawer. Peter started to reconnect the wires of the heart monitor to the sensor strips. The device chirped at him as it came back online.

He was having his second infusion treatment this morning. His aunt was planning to sit with him a
few minutes before she had to leave for work and then Dr. Banner was going to take over.

“Might I suggest that you allow your AI to collect the data that was gathered during your illness?” JARVIS piped up. “Your physical wellbeing is her top priority and being unable to integrate that data will be seen as a discourtesy to her programming. In short, she will be most displeased.”

“Yeah, I know.” Peter did not elaborate.

JARVIS made an electronic noise, almost like a sigh. “While Captain Roger’s trip with you may have alleviated mental stress it appears that the stress on your body and heart has increased since your exploits. If I may, your determination to remain unsupported by those you regularly rely on seems to be an act worthy of Sir.”

Despite himself, Peter laughed softly. “Are you calling me a chip off the old block?”

“While being a most impressive block it can be...flawed,” JARVIS admitted. “He would rather not have you follow his example in this regard.”

Peter nodded. “I know,” he said quietly. His super hearing was kicking in again and it was making it difficult to concentrate. It faded in and out like a badly tuned radio. He plugged up one ear with his pinky and left the room to continue to get ready.

It was a pretty straightforward procedure. Peter went down to medbay laden down with electronic devices and books to keep him busy, and then sat patiently as they hooked him up to a new IV with his medicine. Bruce had suggested that they pump some fluids into him first before they started with the medicine bags.

Aunt May stayed for twenty minutes before she had no choice but to plant a kiss on his forehead and depart for work. In her absence, Peter watched a few TV shows by himself. He ended up dozing off briefly and then woke when he heard someone walk on the floor above them.

Peter glanced over at his temporary babysitter. Dr. Banner sat quietly by his side, reading.
“You don’t have to stay. JARVIS can help me if I need anything,” Peter told him. Surely he was taking up the scientist’s important time by requiring him to remain idling there.

Dr Banner shook his head and answered without looking up. “No, someone needs to be present if you have an anaphylactic reaction.”

“Oh.”

Peter had had one of those before and it had not been fun.

_He couldn’t breathe properly and he felt his hands and face heat up with unnatural warmth. Left alone in an infusion cubby, he had to rely on the secretaries that were milling about. He saw one at the front desk near the cancer center reception area._

_Young Peter cleared his throat and called out, “Excuse me.”_

_The secretary eventually waved to him without looking up from his computer._

_“I’ll be with you in a minute,” the man said and continued to type._

_Peter lay there, chest heaving and struggling for breath. The strange feeling intensified and ringing filled his ears. He seemed to wait forever, trying to draw in a sizable breath as he was ignored._

_Finally, the man tore himself away from his computer and came to check up on him. “Okay, I’m here now. What did you need?”_

_“I feel really weird,” Peter said._

_He fought for breath as the secretary passed on the claim and then Peter was swarmed by about five nurses. He ended up puking and shaking, telling them that he was having trouble breathing. They took him off of the medicine and watched him closely._
Peter shook the memory away. He found Bruce’s gaze fixed on him.

“Are you cold?” The scientist was already moving to fetch a blanket.

“Yeah, a bit,” Peter admitted.

The teenager was abruptly swaddled with a large white cotton blanket that was like its very own Peter-cocoon. Dr. Banner had retrieved that very efficiently.

“Here, I can get you more blankets,” Bruce said quietly.

Peter felt a slight catch in his throat as cozy fabric was tucked over him. This was actually kind of nice.

“Thanks,” Peter said softly.

“You’re welcome.”
Peter was beginning to dread seeing that interminably worried look on his aunt’s features. She just looked so pained all the time. It seemed like she asked JARVIS a battery of questions as soon as she returned to the tower to find out how Peter had fared in her absence.

Peter was not bleeding as much thanks to the medication but was eating less and having migraines. He was also sleeping on the floor because the bed wasn’t giving his joints enough support. After his aunt had received that report and Peter’s subsequent explanation she had marched Peter down to Tony’s workshop and requested that the inventor create a new bed for him.

It was a side to his aunt that Peter had never seen before. She never begged or borrowed, but in this instance it seemed like there were no lengths she would not go to to make him more comfortable.

And the weird thing was...Tony bought into it.

In less than an hour Peter had a pressure sensor bed that he could adjust to whatever firmness level he preferred. Peter thanked him profusely only to have it waved away like an annoying gnat.

“I can’t have you sleeping on the floor. Even JARVIS gets better digs than that. Isn’t that right, J?” Tony asked his AI.

“Indeed, Sir. Despite having no body to speak of I am quite comfortable,” JARVIS declared.

“Only the best ‘ware for my baby,” Tony cooed. He turned to smirk at Peter, silently daring him to argue.

Peter raised his eyebrows but let Mr. Stark have his way. If it made his aunt happy then he could get behind it. Plus the bed was stupidly comfy, like ridiculously comfy and that was coming from someone who had not felt comfort for a while.
Since that moment things started to go downhill drastically. He developed a cough that could not be explained by any other medical means than a bad cold.

The second symptom went unnoticed by him until his aunt called it to his attention. She came out of the bathroom one morning, toothpaste still in hand, and asked him bluntly if he had been losing his hair. Peter opened his mouth to negate it when he realized that his coif had been shedding a bit lately.

She told him that she had found large tufts of his hair on the floor...and then she hugged him as she realized that Peter was just as disturbed by this revelation as she was. It was like it had been last time.

Everything was happening so fast and slow simultaneously. He thought he was getting better one day only to have his hopes dashed by noticing things like his clothes no longer fitting him. His T-shirts hung loose around his neck and exposed his collarbones. He could feel every rib in his sternum and he would run his knuckles across them curiously, feeling the bumpy texture.

His face was small, his legs were like twigs, and his overall body could curl up in ways that he had previously thought impossible. His teammates noticed his weight loss and brought him food, but Peter could not eat more than a few mouthfuls.

Mr. Stark hung around the tower more now with Peter convalescing. Tony became more tactile with him than he had ever been in his life. He patted his shoulders and rubbed briefly at his back, an action that barely masked the purpose of feeling the protrusion of Peter’s spine. Natasha and Clint kept him company, Steve returned his library books, and Sam reassured him when he was panicky and disoriented. It was very nice. Peter sort of wished that his teammates would treat him this way all the time, well, minus those deep worry lines etched on their faces.

His body was adapting to the infusion medicine and consequently it was becoming less effective. He was having some unpleasant side effects as well. He was sensitized to light and noise, a bit like his super senses, and there were yet more unpleasant surprises...

Peter had been getting ready for bed one night, brushing his teeth and changing his clothes. He noticed something off about his appearance.

He was used to seeing himself with his stick-thin legs reflected in the bathroom mirror. What was new was how his left thigh bulged at the top. Peter ran his hand up his thigh and no no no it
couldn’t be. He had made it this far. He had to - This couldn’t-

The horror of the situation placed him in turmoil for a moment and he felt his face heat up. He couldn’t deal with this or tell his aunt. She would freak out.

He stifled a sound into his fist as he felt moisture gather in his eyes. He hastily wiped it away with his sleeve. It might not be what he thought, though the risks associated with the infusion medicine had been clear and were even listed on the label. This had always been a possibility.

After a moment, he realized that he would need to tell someone. He had to divulge it to a person who would keep calm, but someone who felt close enough to act as a parent.

Tony was up late watching the news in the main living area. Peter walked over to his mentor in the darkened room. He sat down on the sofa silently, thoughts tumbling around in his head. The seat he had chosen was close to Tony’s side, and Tony turned to him expectantly. Peter carefully schooled his features into something unaffected. He sat there a moment and chewed over the words he would need to say. His heart raced. He opened his mouth and it just sort of slipped out, “Mr. Stark, there’s a lump in my leg.”

Tony froze. His mentor stared at him in the dim light of the arc reactor and the intensity of the gaze was felt more than seen.

“It’s in my inner thigh. It’s a hard lump under my skin,” Peter described as his voice shook. “It’s just that the med warnings for the infusion medicine said that they could cause cancer and...” Peter’s voice broke as he trailed off.

“Let me see,” Tony said.

Peter slowly stood and he tugged at his thin lounge pants. The material was silky enough to not impede any manipulation or hide the mass. He guided Tony’s hand to the malformation. Tony patted down the spot clinically, feeling the shape.

“J’s censors are limited in this room but-” Tony’s statement was interrupted by a small choked off
sound from Peter. Tony steadied him with a hand just below his ribcage.

“Kid, I hope it’s not, but there’s a chance that you might have a thyroid problem and that’s what’s swollen. I’m not a doctor so we’ll have to take you to med bay to give you a more thorough scan.”

Peter did not think that a thyroid problem would feel this way and so many people with his condition developed complications. He could tell with the way Tony still firmly held onto his waist that he was concerned as well.

Eventually, Peter sat back down.

“It’s alright, we’ll figure this out,” Tony promised. “You’ll be fine.”

Peter gave a minute nod, automatically agreeing. Mr. Stark could solve pretty much anything, maybe even this.
“Would you like me to wake Doctor Banner?” JARVIS asked as what seemed like the twelfth scan was completed.

Tony opened his mouth but Peter answered for him.

“No, it’s fine. It’s just a swollen node or infection, right? I’ve had those before,” Peter assured them. His nonchalance came across in his voice despite the circumstances.

Tony crossed his arms over his chest. Peter’s worries of cancer had been erased within a few minutes thanks to his AI. JARVIS had confidently ruled it out. Peter was preparing to recover and for everything to go back to the way it was before this had began again. Clearly the kid was aware that he was being idealistic about the situation but to think about it in any other way was out of the question, given the ultimatum. Speaking of which-

“If I may interrupt, Miss Parker is attempting to gain access to the medical laboratory,” JARVIS informed them.

“Send her in,” Tony said before Peter could protest.

Together, they ended up telling May the situation and she fussed over her nephew just the right amount to make him feel worried for but not overwhelmed. Tony’s expression was of smug satisfaction though his gaze took in the sight of his protege's yellowing teeth and thinning hair. He noticed how Peter briefly needed to lean on the walls.

The kid was slowly deteriorating. His heart monitor was sending Tony alerts whenever Peter stood up or had to use the toilet. If this continued on soon Peter would be unable to stand. Tony knew that they could handle it, but to watch him go through this and to face something no kid should have to experience was a battle in itself.
Peter was sleeping much more now. Sometimes he lost track of mornings and evenings and as a result he became disoriented to find that he had slept the day away. His visitors were consequently forced to come at odd hours. His latest visitor managed to catch him resting in bed.

“It’s alright. It’s me, Doctor Stephen Strange.”

Peter felt a tickle in his throat and turned away to cough, choking on the stuttering breaths he tried to draw in. Firm hands gripped his upper arms and helped him sit up. Peter’s head swam.

“Calm yourself,” Strange intoned in a low hum. “Relax.”

Peter reached out to prop himself up. He latched onto fabric and he felt someone gently rub his back. He winced.

“Stop,” Strange firmly admonished.

For a moment Peter thought that Strange was scolding him until he saw that the wizard was looking over his shoulder. The red cloak slid off of Peter and shrunk away like a chastised pet.

“List your symptoms for me.”

Taking a deep breath, Peter started to tell him and realized that the list was getting longer. What he could see of the Doctor’s face through the sleepy haze told him that his expression was pinched and displeased. He asked a few more questions to which Peter gave short answers.

“Good, thank you,” Stephan said quietly when Peter finished. “Now I need to ask you something.”

There was a sense of gravity in his tone that had not been present before. He sat on the edge of Peter’s bed, waiting patiently for Peter to acknowledge him.
“‘kay,” Peter mumbled.

Strange’s eyes held something puzzling in their depths when he next spoke, “I have found someone who may be able to cure you by removing the curse but I must have your permission before I bring him here.”

Peter furrowed his brow.

“It’s the trickster, Loki formerly of Asgard- Though now I suppose calling him the prince of New Asgard would be more appropriate. The city has been demolished but its inhabitants have moved to a different pocket in the multiverse,” Strange informed him.

Peter voiced the first thing on his mind. “Is everyone okay?”

“There were a few injuries but the populace remains. Thor is currently reforming political ties alongside his brother. I should be able to bring Loki to Earth but I need your consensus.”

“Why- Why do you need it?” Peter asked after a beat.

Something in Stephen’s face softened. “Because I cannot bring him here without your support. Tony Stark and the others will not take his presence lightly after what he nearly did to the planet,” Strange explained. “I need your compliance to be cured at his hands, to persuade him if needed.”

“I’m not sure if I can...” Peter admitted, looking down at his wasting body that kept demanding food and sleep without giving him the means to obtain it. He could not argue with a god in this condition, much less one like Loki.

“I will help you. Support me and it will work,” Strange said shortly.

Peter sensed that there was something that he was missing here, an important puzzle piece that Strange was not sharing with him. Though the wizard’s voice was earnest and his face was imploring Peter to trust him there was something in his aura that would have made Peter’s spider senses flare and stand at attention. Peter was just too tired to listen.
“Alright.”

The lines in Stephen’s face fell lax and he let go of Peter’s arm to pat his shoulder. He moved to stand up.

“How did you save Mr. Stark’s life?” Peter burst out.

Stephen blinked, startled by the abrupt change of subject. He hesitantly answered, “I do not believe that is my story to tell.”

Peter could not let Strange go without answering his question. There must have been something in his face that made Stephan pause. The wizard magically straightened the pillows behind him, buying more time before he continued.

“He was in mortal peril in his suit. I saved his life,” Strange said simply.

“Tell me,” Peter prompted him again.

Strange sighed and divulged it like he had been holding back something tainted. It was as if he meant to tell Peter all along. “Some time after the Obadiah Stane incident he was attempting to cope with the loss of his mentor. He put himself at risk, flying in a way that was certain to get him killed. I opened up a portal to prevent him from making a fatal collision.”

Peter had so many questions and no way to ask them with his uncooperative voice.

“He wasn’t sober… I would have left it there if he had not said something that made me think that the attempt on his life had been deliberate,” Stephan finished solemnly.

Peter suddenly felt cold.

“He’s had therapy,” Strange seemed to sense his distress. “Since meeting the others and joining this organization I think it is safe to say that he won’t be doing something like that again. Already much
time has passed and his fate has changed since these events.”

Peter was still frowning worriedly. What if Mr. Stark was still depressed? What if he got hurt or lost someone else? What if Peter-

“Calm yourself,” Stephen soothed him again. “He is no longer in peril.”

“But what if...” Peter began.

Everything was piling up on him including his worry for his aunt and Mr. Stark and about being far from home. Stephen awkwardly helped settle Peter back down to recline on the mattress. Peter’s unwillingness to be subjected to rest was silenced in the wake of the powerful grip of Stephan’s spells.

“Sleep,” Strange waved a hand over him.

Peter attempted to break free from the tangled web of slumber that was being woven over him.

“Sleep,” Strange intoned more softly.

The spell managed to pull his weakened body swiftly under and the fitful teenager slept. Strange’s frown lines deepened as he took in the sight of the thin chest rising and falling under the heap of blankets and monitor cords.

“If I may say so, Doctor Strange, I’m uncertain if that was a wise decision. He will have more questions and concerns when he regains consciousness,” JARVIS said quietly.

The wizard lingered, keeping watch over the teen.

“Perhaps,” Stephan admitted. “But if he is to survive until I capture Loki he’ll need the strength. Tell Stark to expect me in a few days.”

“Of course,” JARVIS promised and then added, “Good luck, Doctor.”
In theory, being picked up and carried around sounded like a relief to his aching bones. Peter knew from experience that it was vastly overrated especially during this stage of the disease. Touch hurt, laying still hurt, pretty much everything hurt all the time.

He had to have assistance to walk and Steve had picked him up a couple of times when he was having particular difficulty with his mobility. Peter yelped and demanded to be put down as the room spun and his limbs felt as if they were crunching together. He kicked his shins feebly in an effort to wriggle out of the hold. Steve set him down on the couch.

“Sorry,” Steve murmured.

Peter nodded, unable to speak just yet.

“Do you want me to call Tony’s doctor for you?”

Peter shook his head vehemently.

“Do you want me to call Tony?” Steve asked

Peter had moved to shake his head again and then abruptly stilled when he registered what Steve had said. He mostly wanted to go home, wanted to lay down in the familiar house and just sleep and sleep until he felt better.

He wanted May... Why did some wizard decide to experiment on the Avengers and go after them. Why was Peter the one that was hit?

Just one split second after the thought he felt instant regret. He had saved Steve, possibly even saved his life if the stories about his pre-serum days were true. Looking into those vast and calm ocean-like eyes Peter saw his reflection, those same after-images of pain that haunted him. In that moment he knew that Steve would have volunteered to take on this pain in his stead.

“Let me call Tony,” Steve implored him.
Peter slowly blinked.

“Peter?” Steve asked.

The teen turned back to him

“No, I’m good.” Somehow it felt almost freeing to metaphorically stand on his own two feet.

Steve raised an eyebrow dubiously at him. “Let me call someone. I don’t like watching you go through this alone.”

“I’m not alone. You’re here,” Peter said with confidence.

While Steve seemed flattered by the sentiment his tone was unconvinced. “All I can really do is cart things around for you. Tony’s bots would be better company.”

Peter scrunched up his face as if thinking seriously about the situation. “Nah, Dum-E spills stuff all the time and U has a short attention span.” The forced humor came off clunky from his perspective.

Steve opened and closed his mouth as if on the verge of saying something. He seemed to change his mind. “You should get some rest,” Steve advised.

“‘Kay,” Peter mumbled.

“Oh Tony,” a faint voice said.

There was silence and then Peter heard the padding of bare feet that came over to stand beside him. Peter’s (albeit unreliable) enhanced hearing was picking up on two people in the room. Someone
touched the back of the person hovering over him.

“The doctors we hired said that there was a good chance of recovery if he was to have surgery. Why-?” He recognized the voice of Pepper.

“The usual mumbo jumbo. Strange advised against it and loathe though I am to admit it, he knows what he’s talking about,” Tony said softly. “It’s a bunch of...nonsense.” The bitterness in his tone was hard to mistake for anything else. There was anger wrapped up deep within it.

“We are men of science, why the- why the hell should this have any bearing on our reality? Hasn’t he been through enough?” Tony’s voice seemed to age as he questioned and sought answers for the inscrutable.

“Yes, he has,” Pepper agreed. There was the faint implication that Tony was familiar with similar difficult situations but not voiced aloud due to Tony’s predicted dismissal. “JARVIS said that it would be soon?”

Tony made a faint humming sound. He leaned forward when he noticed that his young charge was stirring.

Peter blinked into more awareness. He shifted on the sofa where Steve had previously parked him. He was in plain sight in the living area and was therefore easier to monitor. Some instinct buried deep within him ached for his caretaker and parent. “Where’s May?”

“She’s asleep, buddy. It’s almost midnight.”

Again, Peter thought about things he wanted say. He wanted to make a joke about the time or ask Tony and Pepper what they were doing up. Had there been a conference, a meeting about this whole thing? He wanted May.

“It’s okay, buddy. You’re okay.” As if sensing his distressed internal mantra, Tony knelt down at his level and put his hand on his shoulder.

Peter felt Pepper’s fingers comb briefly through his fringe. “You should go get her,” Pepper told Tony.
“Nah...” Peter said in a whisper.

“Are you sure?” Pepper asked him uncertainly. Peter saw her gaze study him. “She wouldn’t mind coming down to see you.”

Peter shook his head and watched as the room spun a dizzying 360 degrees.

“Peter.”

The teenager focused back on the face of his mentor. Tony’s hand had come up to his forehead and his thumb caressed his brow. The tiny little movement sent a pang of over-sensitivity through his head.

“Peter, do you need anything...?”

He wasn’t sure who said it, but it didn’t matter.

“Peter, answer me,” Tony’s unusually stern voice cut through to him and the teen opened his eyes again.

“No.” He needed nothing that could be given to him.

Tony was frowning, gaze still deep and haunted. “You’re not looking too good, kiddo.”

Peter silently agreed and pushed further into the hand even as the touch hurt him. He had seen the mirror lately. There was a reason why he didn’t do face time with Ned anymore.

“It’s going to be soon, Peter. You’ll get better.” Tony then very quietly added, “whatever it takes.”
Instead of completely spinning around the room settled for rotating from side to side. Peter would have suspected that something magical was afoot if not for the fact that he knew that he was pretty far gone in terms of lucidity. He sensed something was happening though, and he tried his best to rouse to partial awareness.

“Do you seriously expect me to just...” A sibilant voice hissed. “...comply,” the voice turned oddly breathless.

Peter’s face twitched as he lay silent.

“No, I expect you to fight me all the way until my motives are revealed,” Strange’s calm tone washed over him.

“Oh joy, how I’ve looked forward to this moment. Just you and me battling on a familiar field, well, familiar to me anyway. Why did you choose this venue?” Loki asked.

Strange did not seem to answer but the items in the room rattled around.

“The decor?” Loki continued to ask. “The location, please don’t tell me it was for the company because the Avengers don’t hold a candle to our-” There was a small gasping noise.

Though Peter was helpless to take part it was something else to spectate to what sounded like a wizard’s battle. He really wanted to open his eyes but he was just so tired.

It was in the middle of the day. The sun was out with hardly a cloud in the sky and New York went busily along below them. Little did the Big Apple know that two titans of magical strength were duking it out above their heads.

“No, as a matter of fact I brought you here again to renew their acquaintance,” Strange said blandly. “They’ll be here shortly.”

Loki made a thoughtful noise. “So what is this really about?” He sounded honestly puzzled. “You
seem… unsettled.”

There was a flutter of fabric and Peter shifted as he fought for awareness. He felt the hairs stand up on the back of his neck.

“This child-” Loki said.

Peter froze. *Hey, wait a minute-*

“This child is dying,” Loki sounded matter-of-fact.

*Ok, fair,* Peter admitted to himself. *But he wasn’t-*

“Yes, he is,” Strange confirmed.

Peter felt a shiver run down his spine. He suddenly felt like it might be a good idea to have the others around to witness the duel.

“You brought me here for him?” Loki sounded so incredulous that Peter was starting to have doubts about this as well. Loki might not even know how to help.

“Yes, and for Ryland.” There was a pause.

“Ryland,” Loki spat the name.

“Still not on good terms with him, I take it?” Stephan asked.

Peter might have been guessing here but it seemed like Strange was trying to stall him or at least distract him from Peter momentarily.

“Is he here?” There was something fathomless and deadly in the god’s tone.
“Not quite,” Strange dodged.

Peter heard footsteps and doors opening and closing. He finally managed to crack open his eyes as multiple individuals shuffled into the room. In the lead was Tony and Steve followed closely by Clint, Natasha, and Bruce. Peter couldn’t really determine what their expressions were or if they had said anything aloud, yet their presence was almost palpable.

“As delighted as I am to be here I have much more important things to do,” Loki commented.

“You don’t,” Strange shot back both verbally and physically as he fired some sort of magical projectile at his opponent. Loki smoothly side-stepped it.

Peter struggled with a quiet groan. It was getting harder to breathe again. His mouth moved of its own accord as he felt his stomach flutter with pain.

“May...Mr. Stark.” His thought processes were jumbled. His awareness of the surroundings was coming in fits and bursts. Tony took a step forward and said something that was lost in a haze.

There was a silent exchange as Loki cocked his head at the armor-clad man. Peter waited as Loki studied them. Peter frowned, wanting so badly to have a hot water bottle for his stomach and Mr. Stark’s presence by his side. The aching need was not easily acknowledged but nonetheless present.

“If you two could move, I need to get through,” Stark said it like he was shooing stragglers in the kitchen.

Loki and Strange stared at him dumbly. Strange slowly shifted out of the way. Tony approached and Peter felt cold fingers touch his racing pulse point and pull down his lower eyelids to check the whites of his eyes.

Loki watched the interaction closely. “...This is all for the child of Stark?”

“Yes,” Strange agreed. “Though my involvement hinges on the fact that all of our possible futures depend on his survival.”
Peter noticed that no one bothered to correct Loki’s assumption.

Loki shrugged. “So? There are other timelines, other worlds. Why should I care that this tiny little world should know an infinitesimally different future from what was preordained?”

Strange sighed loudly. It was as if Loki was a particularly inquisitive toddler that had gotten on his last nerve. When he next spoke it was as if he was going through the required motions.

“I can show you.” Strange’s hand waved over the symbol of the eye suspended over his chest. Its golden iris opened and the glowing gem was illuminated within. He drew a circlet of time manipulation over his forearm and held out his hand. Loki stared at the proffered palm.

“Not many people get the chance to see what I see.”

“Am I supposed to be impressed?” Loki asked snidely.

Strange hissed, “Skip the dramatics and take my hand. Please. I’m only going to offer once.”

Loki was already shaking his head. “I’m afraid not. There’s nothing in it for me. It sounds as if you have your own issues to work out.”

The declaration seemed final and Loki was already backing away from them. His calm exterior was only mildly undercut by the twitching vein in his temple. He kept shooting glances at Bruce.

A small desperate noise escaped from Peter and there was Tony looking at him with his heart in his eyes. The look stole his breath away and Peter found that he could not speak.

Tony spun around and Peter watched the man march straight up to his nemesis. His head was held high as he confronted him.

“This isn’t exactly peachy keen for all of us either. That attack on New York? That shit show caused a little thing that we humans call Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder for a majority of the population. It’s
nature’s way of ensuring that we never do whatever the fuck that was again at whatever the cost. Yet here we are, facing the inevitable. And you know what, I think that makes us better than you,“ Tony’s voice was quiet as he proceeded to speak.

“Want to know what I learned from all of it? Nothing. It just told me that I’m scared shitless of that ever happening again. If I had the chance to see those events before they came to pass I would jump at it. Thor...New Asgard...it still seems like you have a lot more to lose.”

“Really?” Loki’s laugh sounded normal but the very last note was unlike one he had ever uttered before. His steady gaze somehow betrayed nothing.

Doctor Strange hummed. He raised his eyebrows at the god. “I think you’ll find that if you take a second look at the boy you’ll see why I chose you. It’s of interest to your agenda.”

Loki turned and made a sort of complicated symbol over Peter without fully turning around. There was no reaction for a moment...then Loki’s gaze lit up.

“Reflexive? This was why you chose me, wasn’t it?” Loki was smiling now, the source of his sudden joy inexplicable. “If you insist on giving a little show then who am I to refuse?”

The rest of the Avengers stood awkwardly around as Loki’s thin fingers clasped Strange’s. They held hands for a moment and under normal circumstances it would have been laughable. Peter simply just wanted the pain to end. This whole exchange was starting to lose coherency or maybe he did not have enough brainpower to process it.

“Good. Well, let’s get this over with, shall we?” Loki said.

Peter felt another chill run through him.
With Doctor Strange’s specific brand of magic he was not able to show anyone else the future events that had compelled him to get involved. Loki was hardly ordinary though and with the Doctor’s consent he was treated to a glimpse of the future.

Unbelievably, Loki’s milky skin grew several shades paler until he tamped down on his shocked reaction. It might have been their imagination, but the Trickster seemed altered somehow after the experience or at least regarded them with a tad less malice, but not much.

His first demand was that the rest of the Avengers leave the room and only for Stephan to remain. The others immediately protested, especially Natasha who was practically shaking with irritation. Steve unsurprisingly took charge and somehow knew exactly what to say to get them to stand down. It took several more arguments and prompting from the wizards to get them to leave.

Strange seemed to whisper something quiet and sincere to Tony before the man could allow himself to pull away from Peter’s side. Tony clasped Peter’s hand one last time and stepped back. Stephen escorted him out of the room. It was uncharacteristic of the billionaire to just let something like this occur without his supervision. Peter probably should have been more suspicious.

“Without those Krelarqs here I can finally concentrate,” Loki hissed. He came up to Peter and flicked him in the face.

“Ow. Hey.” Peter was indignant about the principle of the thing.

“You can feel that?” Loki’s brow was furrowed in concentration.

Peter thought. “A...a little.”

It probably should have stung a lot more but to be honest it was like a few drops of water in an already vast ocean of pain.

“What other senses do you have? You were enhanced, weren’t you? Has your vision remained enhanced?” Loki asked.
Peter shook his head. It felt strange being under the god’s scrutiny. Under normal circumstances the questions might have come across as concerned but the way he asked him and just the sheer weight of his gaze held a sinister element.

Peter struggled to elaborate verbally. “My hearing- sometimes.”

His ears hurt all of the sudden. What was Loki doing to them?

“Ow,” the protest came out in a whine.

The was a rustle of fabric as Strange took a step forward. “Easy does it.”

Loki scoffed. “Relax. There’s little more I can do to him. It’s a matter of finding the right string to pull.”

“Pull too hard and carelessly and you’ll lose him along with your petty feud,” Strange seemed to remind him. “Remember what’s at stake.”

“You could be the one doing this,” Loki said, a note of accusation and impatience coloring his tone.

“With enough time and practice, yes, but it’s a skill of little interest to me. Besides, I doubt anyone could replicate your particular brand of expertise,” Strange said calmly.

Ow ow ow this hurt. Whatever Loki was doing to him felt like he had buried multiple hooks in his most sensitive areas. Every tender expanse of flesh burned from down below. The last magical hook wrapped around his middle and swooped around to bury into his- Peter cried out. His stomach and intestines felt like they were bursting. His vision doubled as his cries and gasps echoed in the room.

“Stand down! It’s alright! You’re alright, Peter,” Stephan raised his voice. “Loki, the quicker you proceed the better.”

Loki seemed to shrug and with one wave of a hand he pulled at Peter’s tether. It felt like there were two Peters. One was sitting behind him and he was fracturing into multiple dimensions while the other current Peter was being swept up in a rip tide of something inevitable. His vision was whiting.
out and his ears were ringing. He lost consciousness.

Losing consciousness was a confusing ordeal. Sometimes Peter simply guessed that it had occurred because when he woke things had been moved and his surroundings had changed. There were different voices around him. It was May! She was holding his hand and speaking and Peter did not bother to repress his sigh of relief. At least if something happened to him he wouldn’t have to face it alone.

He felt different, more aware. His pain felt concentrated rather than all over him as it had been previously.

Sometimes Peter was awake enough to eat and drink and other times he was disturbed by alarms and injections. May looked down at him tenderly as Peter lay there. There were no pained looks of intense worry, only love. It was how Peter knew that he would pull though.

That first week had been confusing and flashes of memory of it would come to him weeks later. The first real memory came after he had been released from the medical bay and been allowed to sleep in his room.

The windows were tinted so the faint glow of the sunrise cast a dim light on his sheets. He opened his eyes.

There was no pain. Peter waited for it to flare into existence for any sort of burning or rending sensation to blaze through him but everything felt numb. Peter ran his hands over his body experimentally. His bones no longer jutted out into sharp edges. He risked sitting up.

There should have been retaliation from his body but all he felt was just normal spidey-sense. He wiggled his toes and stretched his arms. He covered his mouth with his hand to stop any noise from escaping to alert his aunt in the next room. A grin was blossoming from behind his fingers. He waited a moment just to absorb the new sensations. He got out of bed and stood. Weakened muscles
supported him and his head remained clear.

He knew exactly what he had to do.
“Mr. Stark! Uh, May?” Peter burst from the apartments on their floor.

The empty hallway was in front of him and Peter came to a halt. Of course Mr. Stark wasn’t there. It was a silly assumption. He cocked his head to the side as he picked up on May’s deep and even breathing induced by slumber. He would just have to tell Steve or Sam or something.

He took the elevator, still marveling at the ease in which his legs carried him. They weren’t perfectly strong yet, weakened as though they had been in a sort of stasis that required immobility. The term “space coma” flitted across his mind for a moment even though he had been conscious during the ordeal.

He could hardly concentrate as his limbs buzzed with nervous energy. The elevator traveled down and the doors opened.

What he did not expect was to find Mr. Stark tinkering away at the kitchen table. Equipment lay strewn about him, metal parts on the floor and on the wooden surface. He had probably been working there for some time. Peter picked his way through the mess, registering how Tony’s unsurprised gaze watched his approaching feet. JARVIS had obviously told him that Peter had been on his way.

As Tony started to raise his head to meet his gaze Peter let his arms wrap around the inventor. He squeezed the man firmly, grin widening.

“Hey, Mr. Stark.”

“Hey there, kid.” Tony raised his hand to clasp his arm. “How are you feeling?”

Peter spoke quickly, eyes alight. “Great! I feel great! Oh my God, I feel amazing.” A slight shadow passed over his face.

“Is everyone okay? I don’t remember much but I think Loki was here in New York. And holy-” It was then Peter spotted the destruction in the adjoining hallway. The door to the living area he used to
lounge in was completely gone. All that was left was a charred and partially obliterated door frame that led to a room that had been taped off.

“What happened?” Peter asked breathlessly and backed up.

Tony spotted the source of his distraction and a wry smirk started to curl over his lips. “The Avengers, or more specifically the Hulk with a little help from me.” A gleam of something like pride lit up his eyes. “It was a quick hello from Green Bean so we’re all good, except for a certain mischief maker. Word is he made it out alive and skedaddled to a different multiverse. I personally won’t miss him.”

Peter ducked his head. “I’m alive because of him, aren’t I?”

Tony snorted. “Trust me, he has his own agenda. If curing you hadn’t been in his best interest he would have fucked off to the Quantum Realm or something.” Tony waved a hand carelessly. “You’re alive because you didn’t give in.”

Tony’s face was silently telling him not to give the trickster too much credit. Peter nodded to show that he understood. He knew that gratitude was a dangerous thing in their line of work to someone who would use it like Loki.

“To answer your question we’re all fine except now you have a pretty big decision to make,” Tony informed him.

Peter raised his eyebrows and waited for his mentor to elaborate. He heard the soft footfalls of his aunt. Peter and May’s eyes met and nearly identical grins painted their faces as they hugged. Peter held her tightly as she exclaimed and brushed her fingers through his hair. Peter stumbled a little on quavery legs but was supported in their embrace.

“Don’t scare him. Just tell him,” May scolded the billionaire, her soft smile undermining her brusqueness. She had been there to overhear them but Peter had apparently been too preoccupied to notice her presence.

Tony sighed and raised his hands as if presenting something. Peter turned to him.

“So Pete, where would you like to go on vacation?”
Epilogue Chapter Next

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