

Hydra Likes Pepperoni by K. Dobson {Rated PG-13}

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**Hydra's killing super heroes. To survive, heroes are joining Nick Fury's
Avengers--even the X-men and now Iron Man is Hydra's next target.**



“Tony?”

“Huh?”

Pepper looked around the cluttered machine shop, trying to find her boss somewhere amongst the paint, Iron Man parts and car parts. His reply to her call sounded muffled, somewhere off to the left.

“Marco!” she called sarcastically. It was something they did when she couldn’t find him.

“Polo,” he replied, rolling out from under the car he was working on. His shirt was stained with oil and his clothing rumpled like he slept in it.

Looking at her disheveled boss, Pepper smiled to herself. Nothing new there. “I brought your coffee and you have a meeting to attend to immediately.”

Tony had already rolled back under the car, but quickly re-emerged at the word *immediately*. “Potts?”

She looked up from her Blackberry. “Yes?”

“You’re not on time with something?”

“It wasn’t pre-scheduled, Mr. Stark. The man is waiting upstairs and I don’t think you want to make him wait,” she added, glancing at her watch.

Tony was back under the car and his response was once again muffled. “Why? Has he got something against Iron Man? Honestly, Pepper, have him make an appointment. What can anyone do against an Iron man?”

“What about *adamantium* man, Bub? I don’t think you know what you’re up against.”

Tony quickly pulled himself out from under the vehicle to stare at the intruder now standing behind Pepper. He was tall and solid-looking, and Tony got the feeling that no one sober would *want* to mess with him. He had a distinctly feral appearance, with dark hair that curled strangely into wolf-like ears. His gaze was serious and his arms folded on his chest. “You wait much longer and I’ll have to carry you out myself,” he rumbled.

Tony didn’t think the man was kidding. “Who are you and what makes you think I’d let you carry me anywhere?” he asked harshly as he stood, walking towards him.

“Not much time to explain, but it’s your skin,” he answered. “Somebody is all set to assassinate the invincible Iron Man and Professor X has sent me to get you out of here before they have the chance. Potts, too.”

Tony bristled at the man’s nerve, all but forgetting he *wasn’t* invincible at the moment. In fact, the strong glow of the arc over his heart was an easy target that almost blared ‘shoot here.’ Caution, however, had never been one of Tony’s strong suits. Nor was patience. “Look, if you’re going to haul me and my gir...” he hesitated, choking off mid-word. “I, ah, mean, my *assistant*, anywhere, then you’d better prove this assassin is more than my security and my suit can handle.”

The man opened his mouth to deliver a smart-alec remark, then turned suddenly, like he was on alert. He sniffed the air, his right hand curling into a tight fist while, with the other, protectively pushing Pepper behind him.

Tony was utterly bewildered by his behavior. The guy acted like a hunting dog that had just caught a scent.

Then without warning the man bolted up the stairs, disappearing for a moment, then ran back and grabbed Pepper. Sweeping her off her feet and into his arms, he shoved Tony towards his suit with a muttered, “Get it on, genius.”

Before Tony could even think about reacting, the stranger had his suit sequence initiated and he found himself encased in his armor. As soon as he was free of the robots, he’d intended to beat the snot out of him for even

daring to touch Pepper, but was distracted by the fifteen men in matching suits and gas masks who suddenly burst into his lab. They had machine guns and swords and were firing gas canisters, spewing green gas. Tony could barely make-out the stranger on top of Pepper, covering her with his body before it was too thick for him to see anything at all.

Jarvis, who apparently had only survived inside the suit's hardware, spoke up. "Sir, it appears we are under attack."

"Really? I had no clue, Jarvis."

"I would watch that gas sir, you should be protected, but sensors indicate that it is methyl isocyanate. Miss Potts will not be so safe, sir."

Tony's heart began hammering harder than it had since his capture as he thought of what terrible effects that gas would have on Pepper. He *had* to get her out---*now*. An adrenaline rush pushed him through the mass of attackers, crushing them as they poured through, more coming all the time, some with new weapons. Tony ducked and rolled, a missile barely missing his armor as he continued in Pepper's general direction. When he reached where he'd seen her last, he came to a horrified stop. The lab window was shattered. She wouldn't have jumped, would she? Without a backward glance he launched himself through the window and flew over the sunny landscape, looking for any sign of her. He dove closer to the ground, shouting her name, not really caring whether he might still be under attack. Then he saw her---she was in that man's arms! He swooped closer, fear and anger boiling in his blood, ready to flow over accordingly-- what he saw made him choke back a gasp. The stranger was *kissing* her--and she wasn't even fighting back! Tony could barely keep himself steady.

Jarvis interrupted his shocked thoughts. "Sir, are you all right? Your heartbeat faltered and your breathing is dangerously erratic."

Tony didn't have the strength to tell the overly observant A.I. to shut up.

Pepper, for her part, had barely seen their attackers before Logan, as he'd introduced himself to her earlier, swept her off her feet, shoved Tony toward his suit, hit the initiation and ran with her. Then, as the green gas quickly filled the room, he'd dropped to his knees and curled himself over her protectively. Before she could react, he'd pinched her nose shut and aggressively shoved his lips over hers. Her first instinct had been to pull away and fight back, and fight she did, but only until she saw what the gas did to Logan's exposed skin. It immediately blistered and Pepper suddenly realized Logan was *protecting* her by acting like an improvised gas mask. After that, she relaxed and cooperated--just in time for him to dive through the window and fall with her twenty feet to the ground below. She waited for the painful impact or at least the crack of Logan's legs as they hit, but all she heard was a sharp hiss as he exhaled in pain and gasped at his skin continuing to blister.

He'd just removed his lips from hers and she was just about to ask if he were alright, when Tony swooped down, scooped her up, then darted angrily into the sky, leaving Logan panting in pain.

"Tony--what? We *can't* just leave him there, he's hurt," she protested, shoving Tony uselessly and concentrating on *not* looking down.

A dangerous growl came from inside Tony's helmet before he said, "Oh? I'm sorry, did we leave your *boyfriend* back there?"

Pepper flinched at his biting tone before becoming very confused. "Boyfriend--what? Tony, what on earth are you..." Suddenly, understanding dawned on Pepper and she laughed. "Tony! Logan was *protecting* me. The gas was lethal and he was breathing for me!"

Tony stopped mid-flight and looked at her, completely shocked. Why hadn't he thought of that? That was really quite smart.

"Oh, no, it's lethal!" Pepper muttered. "Tony! We *have* to get back, get him to a hospital or something!" she panicked.

Tony saw her urgency and turned around. He couldn't help seeing this stranger in a different light now that he knew he'd saved Pepper's life. "You didn't enjoy that, though?" he asked nervously. "At all?"

Pepper shot him an accusing glare and smacked his metal chest, immediately wishing she hadn't. She cursed

under her breath, rubbing the sore appendage.

Tony was back at his house in no time, scanning for Logan, but saw nothing and noticed with a shock that, despite everything happening in about two minutes, there was no sign of his attackers still being there. In fact, besides that broken window, there was hardly any sign of an attack at all.

“Where did he go? Do you think they took him?” Pepper asked, looking around frantically.

Before Tony could say anything, there was a honk down below. Tony flew for the car and landed outside it, only to see Logan in the front seat.

Logan rolled down the window. “Get the lady in here and follow from the air. They’re gone for now, but I don’t know how long that will last. Hydra is persistent. I’m sure they’ll follow.”

“What if she wants to ride with me?” Tony asked tersely, all but forgetting Logan had saved Pepper. He was still feeling a little jealous.

“Oh yeah, I’m sure she wants to ride open cockpit for the next three thousand miles,” Logan shot back.

Inside his suit, Tony pursed his lips. “Where exactly are we going?”

“New York.”

So they went, with Tony was flying low over Logan’s car, watching him and Pepper *very* closely every mile.

After traveling all day, Logan pulled into a gas station with a restaurant just as the sun was starting to set. Tony landed next to Logan as he parked, flipping his face mask up so he could talk as he got out.

“We’re stopping here for dinner and anything else we might need,” Logan informed him. “You coming in? Once we’re done here we’re not stopping again for the night.”

Tony folded his arms with a metallic clink. “You really think they’ll let me in?”

“I’ll explain for you, Tony,” Pepper assured him. “Leaving out *certain* details, of course.”

Tony nodded gratefully and Pepper went into the restaurant while Logan filled the car. She emerged a moment later and motioned both men towards her. “Tony, they understand, um, sort of, and are honored to have Iron Man dining with them,” she laughed, obviously remembering something amusing that Tony had missed. “They’re giving us a booth they think will hold you.”

Logan chuckled as he walked past the grumbling Iron Man into the restaurant. “Come on, Tony, let’s go.”

Pepper also chuckled and Tony followed her in, keeping his head down. He didn’t need all the stares.

“Tony Stark, I never thought I’d see the day when you didn’t want to be seen,” Pepper laughed, guiding him to a booth where Logan was already enjoying some coffee.

Tony stared at the flimsy booth, surprised that it was even holding Logan. He promptly, and grudgingly, sat on the floor Indian-style his glare daring anyone to say what they were thinking. Everyone turned around and became suddenly interested in their food.

The waitress came to their table, obviously *very* interested in their strange group. She cleared her throat nervously, glancing down at Tony. “My name is Jess. I’ll be your server today. What can I get you?”

“Ice tea, please, Pepper said, as if nothing were out of the ordinary.

Tony appreciated that. Seeing Logan already had his coffee, Jess turned to Tony. “Sir?”

“Water,” Tony stated. Jess marked their orders down and walked off.

“So *where* exactly are we going?” Tony asked. “I know you said New York, but where in New York?”

“Westchester. Apparently Logan lives at a school there,” Pepper informed him.

Tony made a face. “You guys been doin’ a lot of talking, huh?”

“Well, we’ve been in the car since this morning, there wasn’t much else to do.”

“So what else do you know?” Tony asked, wanting desperately to cut out the mental images of what *else* they could have been doing. Was he really that paranoid about Pepper?

“I can’t really tell you anything else in here, but once we’re alone I’ll fill you in,” Pepper said quickly as the waitress came back with their drinks. Tony grasped the glass very carefully with his metal fingers.

“Can I take your order?” Jess asked, watching Tony exclusively, but talking to everyone.

“I’ll have a Ruben and Caesar salad,” Pepper said.

“Burger and fries,” said Logan.

Jess took down their orders, then turned to Tony. He thought for a moment and ordered a BLT and fries.

While Jess went to get their orders filled, Tony began rifling through a small compartment in his leg. Finding what he wanted, he pulled out a small screwdriver and used it to undo his gloves. However much he wanted to avoid taking them off, considering what a pain they were, he didn't really want to get mayo in his repulsors and eating without them proved to be helpful. He was sure if he *hadn't* taken them off, he probably would have gotten mayo in more than just his gauntlets.

They were finishing their meals when Tony suddenly spoke up. “Crap.”

“What's wrong?” Pepper asked.

“Crap,” Tony said again, looking toward the men's room and wishing that he'd thought ahead when he'd made the suit. Why had he always assumed that he'd be able to get out of it whenever he wanted? “Note to idiot,” he muttered, “make suit *convenient*.”

As soon as Tony came back from the bathroom, he had his helmet securely in place and marched right out the door, then flew into the air, hovering as he waited impatiently for Logan and Pepper.

Along the way, Tony amused himself by listening in on conversation in the car through a mike he'd stuck on the dashboard.

“So Logan,” he asked, once they were a safe distance from the diner. “You jumped pretty far earlier and that gas should have melted your lungs, so how did you survive?”

“You ever hear of a mutant, Stark?” Logan asked, his voice coming clearly into Tony's helmet.

“Yeah, they're people who are born with altered DNA, right?”

“Right. I heal fast.”

Tony thought for a moment. “That's handy.”

“Uh-huh.”

“That's what I didn't want to tell you in the diner, Tony. Mutants are really persecuted,” Pepper piped up.

“That makes sense. Anything else you can do?” Tony asked, now really interested.

“Yeah.”

Tony waited. “You want to tell me?” he finally had to ask.

“My senses are sharper than a normal human, I have two sets of retractable claws and my skeleton is covered with adamantium.”

Tony's eyes bulged. “Really? The adamantium can't be part of your mutation can it?”

“No, it was given to me,” Logan's voice was calm and quiet, but there was a barrier in his tone warning Tony not to press.

“What do you mean by retractable claws?” Pepper asked, sounding curious.

There was a muffled metallic **snikt** and Tony heard Pepper squeal in surprise.

“Oh, my gosh! Can I?” she asked tentatively, awe in her voice.

Tony swooped down and flew at passenger level near Pepper's door, so he could see what she was doing.

Logan was driving with one hand and the other he held out complacently towards Pepper, three razor blades jutting out from between his knuckles. They glinted almost beautifully in the light, catching even the faint blue of his arc through the window. Pepper took his hand and gently turned it over, studying Logan's unique weapons. She traced a finger along one claw, Logan watching her out of the corner of his eye.

Tony was nervous. Those thin blades looked *much* too sharp for anyone but Logan to handle. “Careful Potts,” he breathed.

“Are these natural?” Pepper asked, letting Logan have his hand back.

Logan nodded. “My nickname tends to be Wolverine,” he told her with a chuckle.

Later, as he grew tired, Tony put his suit on autopilot, setting it to follow Logan's car while he slept. It was

dawn when he woke up and, feeling stiffer than he had in a long time, so he took the liberty of shooting around, swooping and diving to loosen up. It helped tremendously and he finished just about the time Logan pulled into another gas station/diner for breakfast. Tony cringed, but went in cooperatively.

This went on for almost three days as they traveled nearly non-stop, except for breakfast and dinner. At first Tony didn't approve, but Logan had snacks for Pepper in the car, so he lived with it.

"Tony? Tony, *TONY!*" Pepper shouted into the intercom, suddenly wondering if it was broken, but then Tony's grumbled reply told her it wasn't--he was just asleep. Happily, apparently.

"What, Potts?"

"How can you possibly be comfortable in that thing?"

Tony swooped down along side her window and looked in. "Genius, remember?"

Pepper rolled her eyes.

"So why the wake up call?"

"We're here," she replied, nodding towards the set of iron gates they were approaching that parted gracefully into a long drive. Beyond them was a huge stone mansion.

Tony gawked. "I thought we were going to Logan's headquarters, not Hogwarts."

Pepper laughed. "It's very well disguised. Logan said the base is all underground."

Tony tried to pretend that Pepper's vast knowledge of the mutant didn't irk him.

Logan pulled up outside of the garage and parked. The sun was now fully up and Tony's helmet read-out informed him that it was eight a.m. He landed gracefully beside the car, hurrying to open Pepper's door and holding out his hand to help her out.

She smiled with surprise and took it. "Being a bit formal, aren't we, Mr. Stark?" she asked, laughing.

"No ma'am, just setting a good example for the kids," he joked.

"Well good, morning Logan, Miss Potts, Mr. Stark," a warm voice welcomed from behind. "I hope you had a safe trip?"

Tony turned to see a man in a wheelchair rolling towards them, a smile lighting up his features. Tony couldn't help but feel comfortable around him.

"Mornin', Professor," Logan greeted as he unloaded a suitcase Tony had no idea he even had from the trunk. He proceeded to carry it and a small duffel into the huge building.

"I'm Professor Charles Xavier," Xavier said, holding out his hand and shaking Tony's. "I'm sorry we had to meet under such dire circumstances, Mr. Stark, but it is a pleasure."

Tony had flipped his helmet up, but felt strange shaking this man's hand through his metal glove. "So..." Tony began, trying to figure out where to start.

The Professor laughed. "It's all right, Mr. Stark. Why don't you follow, Kurt," and motioned towards a man standing at the top of the steps, "he'll take you to your room. Go ahead, have a shower and a meal will be brought to you. Once you're settled, I'll explain everything."

Tony looked at the man Xavier gestured towards and couldn't stop staring. He had a lean, muscular build and wore a white button-up shirt and jeans, but his clothing *wasn't* what held his attention--it was his skin. It was *blue*--a deep midnight shade of blue. Even more bizarre was his pointed ears and long, devil-like tail.

Kurt stood waiting patiently for Tony and Pepper to be finished, smiling at them like a friendly demon.

As soon as the Professor finished talking, Kurt motioned for them to follow, which Tony did, very much in a fog. Kurt led them through the mansion, past rec-rooms, class rooms, dorm rooms, rooms full of teens and a room where a few adults were discussing lesson plans. All in all, it was obvious that the mansion served as a school, but it didn't *feel* like one. It felt more like a home with one big family that lived there.

Tony soon found himself in front of a nice room, the door open and waiting for him. He glanced in on the hotel like bed, seeing the suitcase Logan had carried in earlier and realized it was his. Logan must have packed for him.

Kurt graciously opened the door next to Tony's room for Pepper, giving her a theatrical bow as she entered.

She smiled and thanked him.

“You’re quite welcome, mien freund,” Kurt answered, his accent distinctly German. “If you need anything else just call, any of the adults and most of the children can be of service,” he said, smiling graciously, showing his pointed teeth.

“Yeah, thanks,” Tony said awkwardly, still in shock. Kurt turned gracefully and went down the hall. Out of the corner of his eye Tony noticed that the demon-like mutant had a rosary hanging from his pocket.

No sooner had Pepper entered her own room and seen the duffel of clothes and toiletries Logan had grabbed for her, when she heard Tony calling for her help. Sighing, she shook her head. *Couldn’t he take care of himself for even five minutes?* She was quite sore and stinky from being in a car for three days and despite Logan’s best efforts to be a gentleman along the trip, she *really* just wanted a shower and to curl up in that inviting bed.

“Pepper?” Tony said sheepishly, poking his de-helmeted head around the door jam. “I could really use your help.”

She stared for a moment at his pathetic look, trying to remember that she was mad at him, but just couldn’t. He looked too cute when he needed something. “What, Tony?” she asked, following him into his room.

He looked down at his partially armored body. It was obvious that he’d already tried to get the suit off, but so far had only succeeded in removing the gauntlets, helmet and part of one boot. “I could use a little help with some of the clasps and locks,” he said. “I just realized I can’t really reach them all, even with the tools I brought,” nodding towards the bed where four strange instruments were laid out. “If you could just take the wrench and pop the latches on my back and sides, that would be great.”

She walked over to the bed, quite amused. Finding the tool that looked most wrench-like, she picked it up. “This one?”

He nodded.

Walking behind him, she scanned the ruby plating, trying to see the latches he was talking about. “Which ones, Tony? You have quite a few back here.”

Tony sighed, working his jaw as he thought of the best way of explaining what he wanted. “Okay... see the flap on my left shoulder? Flip that up and underneath will be a silver screw. Below that is an indent, it’ll be red. You just need to wedge the flat of the wrench under that and flip it up.”

She did as she was told, quickly finding the latch and unlocking it with a satisfying clink.

“Good, Potts, now same thing on the other side,” Tony instructed.

Twenty minutes later, Pepper was working on getting his boot off. “Okay, on three, pull,” she commanded, gripping this last piece of armor tightly. “One, two, three!” she said, then heaved with all her might, but the stubborn piece of equipment didn’t want to yield. Giving it another forceful tug, however, it came off with a click, sending her flying over backward right on her bum.

Tony fell over on the bed, rolling back and forth laughing.

Pepper scowled. “Yes, I *am* alright, thank you,” she informed him sarcastically.

He gave her that same crooked grin he’d used right after she’d thought she’d killed him by yanking the magnet out of his chest. She tossed a piece of the boot plating at him. He was still laughing.

“That’s the *last* time I’ll help you with anything,” she griped, folding her arms. “Will that be all, Mr. Stark?”

Tony stood up, still smiling. “Yes, thank you, that will be all, Miss Potts.”

Pepper tried to frown, but Tony’s dirty-little-boy disheveled appearance thwarted her as it always did.

Suddenly she noticed something and, without thinking, put her hand on his arc reactor. “Wait, isn’t this supposed to come off?” She asked, fingering the thick plate still covering the device.

Tony looked down. “Oh, yeah,” he said, lifting his hand to pry the extra plating off. Their hands met and, incidentally, so did their eyes. Tony slowly pryed the plate free, letting it drop to the floor without removing his hand or eyes from Pepper’s. With the plate gone, Pepper could now feel Tony’s steady heart beat and the feeling of life flickering there, just under her fingers, nearly took her breath away. It felt warm and she realized how much she actually *liked* the small device. She found the glow quite comforting. It was a constant reminder of what she’d

almost lost, but it was also a sign that Tony was alive and that his heart was still beating its strong, slow rhythm. Once she'd taken his life for granted, but, ever since his captivity, she had never done so again.

Suddenly, realizing how awkward the situation was, they broke apart.

"I better go, uh..." Tony licked his lips. "...shower."

Pepper nodded. "Yeah, me, too," and hurried out of his room.

"Well Mr. Stark," Xavier asked him later, "I know you've had a busy and stressful three days in your suit and would probably like to rest, but I assume your curiosity is stronger?"

Tony, Pepper, Logan and Professor Xavier were seated in the Professor's study. Tony nodded in response.

"Are you familiar with Hydra, Mr. Stark?"

"Call me Tony, and no."

"Hydra is an underground organization of ninjas. They're like a super charged mafia and their favorite past time seems to be murdering people; heroes lately, whom they resurrect for their own purposes. I believe that's what they were *intending* to do to you."

Tony made a face. Under-ground resurrecting ninjas? It sounded like a bad movie or maybe a comic book. "So you're telling me that a mafia of un-dead guys with a black fetish want to kill me and bring me back as one of them? That's more original than Rajah, I guess."

Xavier nodded. "And, because they gave no vital signs, they're *very* hard to track."

Tony's eyebrows went up. "None?"

Logan shook his head. "None at all. No breath, no heartbeat, nothin'. They're not even warm. That's part of why they were able to get past your security--or any security for that matter."

"Huh. So what now?"

"We keep you here until you're safe," Xavier answered.

"What about my company and everything? Just because somebody else is trying to kill me doesn't mean I can just drop everything."

Pepper made a face. Somebody *else*? Great.

"I've contacted the officials of your company as well as S.H.E.I.L.D. and they've put out an official story that you and Miss Potts have gone on vacation. As of now, you don't know when you will be back. You're enjoying yourselves too much." Xavier gave a knowing smile.

Tony grinned. On vacation with Pepper. He could live with that. "So, if you know about these guys, why aren't they taken care of yet?"

"There are thousands of them, spread all over the world and we have no idea who their leader is."

"Well, I guess that's a good reason," Tony shrugged. "How come we haven't heard of their activities? You know, like missing persons and stuff."

"You have," Xavier said darkly. "Most of the missing persons and many of the disasters on the news are secretly caused by Hydra. They're experts on covering their tracks and throwing off their scent."

"Great. So I'm stuck here until we're sure that they can't get me, which seems perfectly sane considering they are practically impossible to exterminate."

"No one is making you stay, but we're hoping to keep you safe until the imminent threat wanes. As for the exterminating them, I believe Nick Fury's Avenger Initiative could prove useful there. If the program is successful Hydra will be a major target."

"So you're part of the Avenger Initiative, too? Does Nick really think he can get all us super power loners to work together?" Tony asked, remembering his conversation with the Colonel that time he visited him in Malibu.

"The X-men and Fantastic four work together well. And Nick isn't forcing anyone. The people at my school joined voluntarily."

"Wait, I've heard of the Fantastic Four, but the X-men? Who at your school joined?"

Logan spoke up. "I did, and the X-men is our team here."

Tony raised his eyebrows. Logan didn't strike him as a team player.

"Most of the X-men are part of the Avengers. Spiderman joined a week ago and we even have a squad of allies under water with Namor," Logan added.

"Namor?" Pepper asked, now thoroughly absorbed in the conversation.

"An underwater Prince. He and many of his warriors have agreed to help us," Professor X explained.

"Wow, Nick wasn't kidding when he said that I wasn't the only super hero around," Tony muttered, absorbing the information.

"Yeah," Logan said. "You're not the first to come up with the save the world complex."

Tony laughed.

"So you're saying, that unless Tony joins the Avenger Initiative, Hydra will never be defeated?" Pepper asked accusingly.

Xavier smiled, but shook his head. "No, Miss Potts. I'm not trying to push Mr. Stark into anything he doesn't want to do. In my opinion, having the Initiative designed like such a militia is bad, but I can't deny that I think it's a good idea to have the group in the first place."

Tony frowned, thinking.

"You don't have to decide anything now, but if you *do* want to join, I'll arrange a meeting with Colonel Fury for you. In the meantime, why don't you relax from your recent upheaval. You're welcome to stay as long as you like. Take a few days to mull it over."

As it turned out, Tony and Pepper each slept through the night and half of the next day, neither of them even hearing the explosion caused by a mutant student on the second floor, which Logan claimed happened around midnight. When Tony woke up, Pepper was long gone and the students were just finishing up their day, ready to enjoy a luxurious weekend. Wandering out of his room, he passed several students on their way to their rooms to put away school supplies. Some were obviously mutant, some not. The mansion was very beautiful, though not modern like his own. He loved his house in Malibu, but there was something so warm and close about this atmosphere that he almost didn't want to go back.

After he'd eaten, a tall dark skinned woman approached him, smiling brilliantly. Her hair was strikingly white, falling well past her shoulders and she had a distinctly exotic build, very beautiful.

"Hello, Tony," she greeted, a slight accent in her voice. Tony noticed that Pepper was behind her, wearing very loose casual clothes. Not something that he'd *ever* seen Pepper wear. She looked stunning.

"Hey," he greeted lamely, slightly distracted.

"I'm Ororo Munroe. I was showing Virginia around the school. Would you like to come?"

"Sure," Tony replied, following.

Ororo gave them a tour inside first, then the outside grounds. Despite the mansion and its property's immense size, Tony still found that it didn't *feel* like a campus. The grounds were very beautiful with many acres of forest and it was far enough away from major populous that it had a nice peace to it. The part Tony really couldn't help but love, however, was the bottom level. The X-Jet, the X-men's costumes, and, oh, the technology! Tony felt quite at home. His favorite, by far, was the danger room. He was fascinated by the realistic holograms and simulations.

Four days passed and Pepper was thoroughly enjoying herself. No schedule to keep and none of Tony's old *acquaintances* stopping by; nothing but a *long* needed vacation. It did feel weird having free time and sometimes she felt rather like she needed to get back to work, but somebody around the school would have something new for her to do and dispel the feeling. Ironically, she hadn't seen that much of Tony and she wondered what he was doing. Descending to the mansion's lowest level, she started looking for him, assuming it had been the extensive technology that had drawn him. She checked a few of the labs before entering the danger room's observation chamber--there she found him. He was suited in his armor, battling a giant robot simulation in what looked like a war zone. She watched, fascinated as he finished off the monster, landed, ended the simulation and walked out of

view.

Pepper followed, finding him in the X-men's suiting-up room. He was at the end of one of the glass-covered lockers, standing still while several robot arms descended and began releasing him from his suit. He looked up to see her just as the robots finished.

"Oh, hello, Miss Potts. This is much quicker than when I try and do it," he said, stepping out of the boots. His suit hung in convenient pieces on the wall, awaiting the next time he needed it.

"I've made some upgrades, though. Next time it needs to come off by hand, it's mostly pressure seals that Jarvis can release. I'm still working on the convenience factor, but for now this is good. It sure is a pain not having all my materials, though," he finished, sounding disappointed.

"At least we have somewhere to stay. This place is fascinating," Pepper reasoned. "Have you met Bobby or Peter yet? Oh, and Spiderman stopped by this morning, too."

"Yeah, I've met quite a few. Spidy's a genius! You know, he's a science major along with being Spiderman? He was quite interesting to talk to," Tony said, changing behind a curtain into his regular clothes. "He really liked Jarvis," he added, coming out in jeans and a tank top.

"I thought Jarvis was stuck in your suit," Pepper said, puzzled.

"His main programming is in there, but I've uploaded a full copy into the entire underground here. He'll even stay here with the Professor when we leave. Right, Jarvis?" Tony finished, calling out to the A.I.

"That is correct, sir." Jarvis's familiar voice replied.

"I'm programming him with the X-men's preferences and a few special programs just for here."

"I hope you got permission first?" Pepper asked, slightly apprehensive.

"Pepper!" Tony put a hand on his chest, acting offended. "I can't believe you don't trust me!"

A little later that afternoon, Tony spent some time walking around on the grounds, just enjoying the fresh air. As much as he loved all that underground technology, he was starting to feel like a bat holed up in a cave. He needed to get out. Suddenly, he heard a commotion on the other side of some trees.

"Whoa, dude, watch the claws!!"

"Hey, no fair!"

"Just because I'm kicking all your sorry butts..."

"Stop showing off, Jean!"

"You said it was a power game, you asked for it!"

"HA! Got it metal-man, catch!"

Stepping around the trees, Tony discovered Logan, Pete, Jean, Scott and four other people he didn't recognize playing basketball. Colossus was completely armored up, his silver skin glinting in the sun. Giving a signal, he threw the ball up in the air, crouching in the same instant. Logan leapt up his massive frame, pushed off from his back, nailed the ball with his claws, then, while still in the air, flipped his wrist and sent the ball into through the hoop for a deafening slam-dunk. Then, grabbing the hoop, Logan hung for a moment before dropping to the court and resuming the game.

Tony was shocked to see the ball hadn't deflated. Logan's claws had gone all the way through it!

"Hey, Tony!" Jean greeted, halting her game to wave.

"Hey, guys, playing basketball with an invincible ball?" he asked, eyeing the object.

"It's pure rubber," Jean explained. "Logan and Pete kept popping them, so the Professor had a special one made."

Tony's eyebrows went up. It was a good idea. "Isn't it a little heavy?"

Jean shrugged. "Not if you have powers to help you out." She looked around at the group. "Oh, Tony, have you met Peter Parker, Longshot, Remy and Warren?" she asked, indicating the four strangers.

"No, so we have two Peter's now?"

Jean nodded. "I think you've met him. You just didn't *know* it was him."

Tony looked confused.

"Maybe this will refresh your memory." Peter Parker said, and launching into an impressive back flip, hung upside down on the basketball hoop from a web.

Tony gaped. "Spiderman?"

Peter grinned. "I decided my secret was safe here, so I let it out."

"Huh. So who are these others?" Tony asked.

"The one with wings is Warren or Angel," Parker said, apparently perfectly comfortable hanging like he was. "The dude with the trench coat is Remy or Gambit, if you like." he said, pointing at a guy with wild hair and flaming red irises. "And this is Longshot." Parker pointed to a casual looking youth, his long hair cut into a tousled gold heap.

"Nice to meet you all. Have room for another player?" Tony asked, grinning.

"I don't know if you can keep up," Gambit teased, his accent rich and foreign.

"Give me a minute to put on something more comfortable," Tony said, winking to Spidy. Parker grinned and gave him a thumbs up--which was a thumbs down from Tony's perspective.

A few moments later, Tony clanked by the living room where Pepper was sitting.

"Tony? What on earth are you doing?" she asked, glancing up.

"Playing basketball."

"In your suit?"

"Yeah."

She waited for further explanation. "Why?"

"Because, Miss Potts, I'm *not* a mutant," Tony said as he continued on his way.

Pepper sat still for moment, still not getting it. Following him to the basketball court, she sat down on a nearby bench to watch.

"Alright, Remy, will this do?" he asked, holding out his arms so Gambit could appraise his suit.

The Cajun stared. "Nice ride!"

"Thanks. So, what are the teams?"

"You, me, Spidy, Scott and Gambit on this side," Logan said. "Jean, Angel, Colossus and Longshot on the other."

The teams formed up and Tony surveyed his opponents. Colossus was *really* big. Longshot didn't look like a problem and what could Jean do? On Logan's signal the game started. Tony immediately felt like he was playing a weird version of football. Logan started with the ball and passed it to him, but Colossus blocked him--though, *his* block was way too much like a tackle. It knocked him backwards making the ball fly out of his hands. Longshot made an impressive leap for it--explaining his name--but a web beat him to it and yanked it out of his reach. Landing gracefully, Longshot threw two small knives toward the ball just as Spiderman made an air summersault and slam-dunked it, a pair of glowing playing cards hitting the knives and exploding them before they could hit anything.

Tony twisted around just in time to see Gambit lower his hand. "Whoa," he said, picking himself up off the ground. "I'd hate to see you guys at football."

"Sorry, if I hurt you," the big silver Russian apologized.

"I'm fine. Ready to continue?" Tony didn't wait for anyone's reply before motioning to Logan, who once again had the ball.

Logan flipped his wrist, gracefully launching the ball towards Tony. Before it could reach him, however, Warren launched up and batted the ball away with a wing, catching it himself, but Tony touched his thrusters and shot upwards, his boot jets putting on Warren's level before he could react. Blasting the ball out of Warren's hands with his repulser, Tony caught it and slam-dunked it in one smooth maneuver.

Spidy grinned. "Nice one, Shell Head!"

Tony frowned. *Shell Head?* He didn't have time to dwell on it, however, as Longshot rushed him, grabbed the

ball and back-flipped towards the hoop. He was just about to make a basket when Scott blasted the ball out of his hands with his lasers and Jean telekinetically caught it, practically knocking her husband over getting it to the basket.

Tony was so tired by the time they'd finished playing, all he wanted to do was lay down and sleep right on the court. Everyone else looked tired too, some more than others. Glancing at his in-built clock, Tony saw that they'd been playing for three hours. That would explain it.

"That's it. We need a new ball," Warren said, dropping the mangled lump of rubber. There were several gouges and slice marks in it and it looked more like a lump of clay than a ball.

"Anyone want to join me in the pool?" Gambit asked, stripping off his coat and shirt.

"I'll join you in a minute," Tony said, just as he heard a huge splash that could've only been Colossus.

That night Tony slept better than he probably had his whole life. He'd been at the school for a week now, and still hadn't given Xavier an answer. In a way he didn't want to; he liked living there too much.

It was just after midnight, when three figures crept silently through his window. The leader motioned for his companions to guard the door and while he pulled a hand gun with a silencer on it from under his robes, then padded over to where Tony was fast asleep. Tony was laying on his back, his arc partly covered by his hand. The intruder reached out a gloved hand, moved his hand exposing the glowing life source, placed the muzzle right against it and pulled the trigger.

There was a soft thud. Tony felt the impact and woke, gasping for air as the wounded area began to throb. Before he could even really get his bearings through the pain, there was a sudden commotion. He barely saw the flash of silver or heard Logan's feral roar reverberate through the silence. Then he felt Pepper's hands on his face, frantically calling his name.

"Tony! Oh, my gosh, Tony! Talk to me!"

The scuffle was brief, ending with a shattered window, followed by quiet. Tony was able to focus his vision, the pain in his chest a sharp, searing pain.

"Pepper?" he whispered.

"Tony! Are you all right? What happened?"

Tony furrowed his brow, trying to remember through the pain. "Was...asleep..."

"Hydra happened," Warren said darkly.

"What? I thought they couldn't find us here!" Pepper shrieked, panic destroying her normally calm voice.

"Apparently they found us," Warren sighed.

"Did you...get them?" Tony breathed.

"They fled, but Wolverine is tracking them now," Warren replied. "We'd better get you to the med lab, fast."

"Not...that...bad," Tony protested, trying to sit up. Pepper shoved him back down as gently as she could in her panic.

"NOT THAT BAD!" she exploded, her voice growing steadily in volume and pitch. "Tony, you've just been SHOT!"

Tony winced.

"Angel, take him down, *now!*" she ordered.

Warren hurriedly scooped Tony up as gently as possible, carried him down to the lab and lay him on an exam table.

"It isn't as bad as it could be, Pepper," Hank McCoy said soothingly as he was getting his tools together. "The arc's still functioning and the bullet didn't even make it through the shield."

"It...it didn't?" Pepper stammered, feeling numb now as her adrenaline was ebbing.

"No, take a look."

Inching forward, she looked down at Tony's chest. The arc *was* still glowing, but severe bruising was already forming all around it and blood was seeping from around its edges where it was fused with his skin. The bullet was

embedded in it and its surface was cracked, but it hadn't *actually* damaged the device.

"Did you...really think...I'd leave... the arc...unprotected...Pepper?" Tony gasped as Hank gently probed his sternum.

"It's bullet proof?" she asked in a haze.

Tony gave a pained nod.

Pepper had to sit down. She was more than relieved he wasn't fatally wounded, but felt completely drained. She'd been so sure she was going to lose him this time.

"Well Tony, I'd say once again, your genius has saved your life," Hank said, still appraising his injury. "That's the good news."

"And the bad?" Tony asked through clenched teeth.

"I believe your sternum and perhaps a few ribs are broken. I'll need to do some tests to see if there's internal bleeding as well." He injected Tony with a strong pain killer. "You may feel a little hazy. If you pass out, that's okay, you'd probably rather not be awake for the tests, even with pain killer."

Tony nodded sleepily.

Once he was out, Hank listened intently to Tony's breathing and heart. "Well, his heart sounds fine and it's clear nothing punctured a lung. Though, I'm concerned some of his shrapnel may have gotten moved from the shock of the blow." He adjusted his glasses with a furry hand. "I'll certainly want to take some X-rays. Warren, come help me."

Warren strode over and helped Hank. Together they wheeled Tony under the X-ray machine. On examining the negatives afterwards, Hank sighed heavily.

Pepper felt her chest constrict.

"Warren," Hank said, "I think we're going to need an ultrasound and I may need to operate."

Pepper went white. Maybe Tony wasn't out of the woods yet.

Reluctantly Hank prepped Tony for surgery. "I'm going to have to go in and re-construct his sternum," he informed Warren. "While I'm scrubbing up, would you please break the news to, Miss Potts?"

Warren promptly obeyed while Hank proceeded. He watched his hands intently as he scrubbed them, trying to distract himself. Tony *was* in bad shape. His sternum was all but shattered and his blood count indicated it was *still* seeping out. Though Tony's heart was still beating normally, Hank was deeply worried whether the impact could've driven any remaining shrapnel or even bone fragments into a vital organ *somewhere*. He *had* to do the surgery. He was so lost in his thought, he didn't notice Warren lingering by the door.

"Hank?" Warren said quietly, his wings hanging meekly at his sides.

"What? Haven't you told Pepper yet?" he snapped, a slight growl entering his tone that he hadn't meant.

"We could try..."

Hank cut him off. "No. It hasn't been proven--we don't know the risks."

"How could there be any more risk than a normal blood transfusion? Hank, I saw his blood type, we're identical," Warren reasoned.

"No, Warren, you're not. *You* are a mutant. *He* is an unaltered human."

"A dying human," Warren said quietly, looking up. "He is, isn't he?"

Hank sighed in defeat, his shoulders sagging as he leaned on the sink for support. "Yes," he whispered.

"It worked with the animals we've tested. Please, Hank, I could be his *only* chance. You know surgery in this case is more than risky. Let me try first, please."

Hank glanced at the shallowly breathing Iron Man. "Alright," he whispered, barely audible.

Outside the sterile operating room, Pepper sat next to Kurt crying her eyes out. She didn't care anymore. She leaned against his solid frame and cried. He held her tenderly, his eyes half closed, muttering soothing prayers in Latin while fingering his rosary tenderly. Sniffing, Pepper glanced up at the German's face. He looked so serene, so

calm. She saw the hope she had trouble holding on to glimmering softly in his eyes. She sighed shakily. There was no point denying the fact she was irreparably in love with Tony Stark and now--she might not ever get to tell him.

Pepper had no idea how long she'd been waiting when Hank came out, his hands wringing with unconscious worry. She panicked, clutching onto Kurt as he came near.

"Well, we've decided not to do any surgery, Miss Potts."

Pepper automatically relaxed noticeably when she didn't hear Tony was gone. "What...." she began, then swallowed, brushing tears away and steadying her voice. "What happened?"

Hank sat next to her, looking into her eyes. "We're trying a blood transfusion first. Tony hasn't lost enough blood that's really necessary, but we've done tests on Warren's blood and it seems to have a healing property. We don't know the extent. We've only tested it on animals and one mutant, but never a human, so I must warn you that I have very little idea what the outcome will be, Pepper," he explained quietly, holding her hand.

Pepper swallowed again, nodding silently.

"I have to go back and oversee the transfusion," he said. "I'll return if anything changes."

Pepper nodded, then buried her face in Kurt's chest. For the first time that night, she prayed with him.

In the lab, Warren was laying next to Tony on another bed, his arm punctured by the transfusion line at the elbow. "How's he doing, Hank?" he asked. Tony looked about the same from his perspective, but he hoped he was wrong.

"Well, he's breathing easier," Hank answered, "and, as far as I can tell, the blood loss has stopped. So, that *is* better."

"Then...it's working?"

"It would appear, but I *still* may need to repair his sternum. I don't know if your blood will be enough to fuse the bone by itself. The second he moves, a splinter of shrapnel could still go straight into his heart or lungs."

Warren sighed. "Well, don't cut me off until he's either out of the woods or we're both in danger."

His jaw was set and Hank knew he meant it. "I'd better tell Pepper how he's doing. I'll be right back."

When he returned, Hank saw Warren was getting close to the point where he needed to cut him off. The gentle mutant couldn't bear risking Warren's life *and* loosing Tony. "Warren, we have to stop."

"How is he?" Angel whispered, sounding weak.

"About the same, but I can't check the breaks without an X-ray and you're getting dangerously close to the edge. I'm *not* going to wait until you faint from blood loss, Warren," he said sternly, looking over the top of his glasses.

Warren shook his head feebly, but Hank pulled the tube anyway and, since he was much weaker than he wanted to believe, Warren let him. Hank bandaged his arm tightly as Warren slipped into unconsciousness.

After making sure Warren was stable, Hank bit his lip and prayed that Warren's sacrifice had worked as he wheeled Tony into the X-ray room, braced for the worst.

Pepper had fallen asleep in Kurt's lap, her tear-streaked face against his chest and her hand knotted in his jacket. "Miss Potts?" Kurt whispered gently. "Pepper?" he repeated, nudging her carefully, then holding onto her forearms as she slowly woke up.

"Huh? Tony?" she mumbled. Suddenly, she sat bolt upright. "*TONY!*"

"Shhh," the gentle demon soothed. "He's alright. That's why I woke you. Hank has come with good news!"

Pepper whipped around towards Hank, who was smiling broadly. "Warren's blood worked! Tony's sternum is healing rapidly and the internal bleeding stopped completely. I think it may have even helped some of the damage Tony's heart sustained while in captivity. He will still need to rest awhile while his chest heals, but he doesn't need surgery and he can move around as soon as he wakes up!"

Pepper launched out of Nightcrawler's lap and kissed Hank right on his furry lips.

It wasn't until the pain killer began wearing off that Tony started complaining. "Wow, this sucks," he grumbled about the burn he felt in his chest. "It wasn't this bad when Stane stepped his big ugly foot on me."

"He stepped on you?" Pepper repeated.

"Yeah, why?"

She shrugged. "I guess I don't really need another reason to hate him. I was just wondering."

Tony frowned at his former assistant. "Former" being the result of Pepper's explosive reaction when he woke up. She'd launched herself upon him, hugging him so tight he'd an even harder time breathing, then cutting off his air with a very upset kiss. He'd waited, frozen, until she was done before grinning widely.

"And you said you'd never fall for me," he'd laughed.

"Shut-up, Tony, no one falls for you. You drag them down," she'd replied in a tearful laugh.

"Hey, sorry, babe, I can't help it if I'm sexy," he grinned. "Even with my latest add-ons."

"You *can* be sexy *without* flaunting it, you know," she reminded.

"I don't *flaunt*," he'd stated, pretending to be offended.

"It's not about that anyway. Tony, I love your cocky- terrible-little boy-ruffled-irresponsible attitude."

"I'm not sexy?" he'd asked, sounding completely heart-broken.

Pepper had laughed and buried herself in his arms.

"Pepper Potts," he'd whispered into her hair, not caring if anyone heard. "Will you marry me?"

Two days later...

"So Logan's not back yet, huh?" Pepper asked Tony as they strolled hand in hand about the mansion grounds.

Tony shook his head. "Nope, we haven't even heard from him yet." He sighed. "I know he can take care of himself, but I can't help but want to be out there *with* him." Tony's tone had turned serious and his free hand clenched into a fist, his expression and tone exactly like the time he first convinced her that he *really* was meant to be Iron Man.

"Tony, Hank said at the rate you're healing, you'll only have to wait another day, *then* you can go after him."

"I know, but do you have any idea what can happen in a day?" he asked, looking into her eyes.

She could see he was worried. "I'm sure Logan's quite capable of handling himself," she assured him. "The Professor and Fury have already sent backup after him and Xavier can find him as soon as his brain waves stop being blocked. Besides, you'd only be in the way wounded."

Tony nodded. She was probably right, but the second he was released, he was suiting up and not looking back until Hydra was nothing but ashes.

...to be continued in "Hydra Likes Pepperoni, Part 2"