

Hydra Likes Pepperoni, Part 2 by K. Dobson {Rated PG-13}

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Hydra's killing super heroes and the Avengers intend to stop them.

“Alright, we've finally found Logan,” Xavier informed Tony, now on-board the X-jet, via a video-link. “Now we know where Hydra is. You take Jean, Scott, Bobby, Rogue, Gambit and Kurt with you as backup and Fury will meet you at the rendezvous with some of his people. Good luck.”

Tony nodded and switched off, then stood, his metal feet clanking loudly on the floor of the X-jet as he walked to the cock-pit.

“So, how far and where to?” he asked, leaning on the back of Jean’s chair. His helmet was open, but he was otherwise fully suited. There was just no easy way to put it on inside the jet.

“Well, Logan’s signal is coming from a very remote island near Japan, of all places,” Jean answered. “Hydra must have wanted you badly to come from so far, Tony.”

“Huh, I’m honored.”

“As for your question of how long, it should be another hour yet.”

Tony sighed heavily.

“Hmm, Pepper wasn’t kidding when she said you're like a little boy sometimes,” Jean teased.

Tony grinned, plopping into the seat right behind her. “Are we there yet?”

“If you want to go any faster, you're going to have to jump,” Scott said, laughing.

“Okay,” Tony said as he got up and headed for the back of the plane.

Seconds later, Scott observed a brief flash of red and gold. “Jean, what was that?”

Jean leaned over, looking out the window where her husband was pointing just as a red and gold flash swooped by again, then flew along side the jet. She sighed. “It's just Tony.”

“Jarvis, connect to X-jet communications,” Tony told his A.I.

“Will do, sir. Connection successfully established.”

“Cool. Hey, guys!”

“Hey, Tony,” Scott replied. “Enjoying yourself?”

“Yup, thanks for asking. Check this out!” Flipping onto his back, he “back-stroked” to the other side of the jet, then put his hands up behind his head, flying along just using his boots and the stabilizer jets on his back.

Rogue laughed. “Show off.”

Tony shrugged. “If the suit fits.”

An hour later, Tony pointed down at the landing-field they were approaching. “Hey, there’s Logan,” he said. “I’m heading down. See you on the ground.” With that, he dove, plummeting several hundred feet before catching himself, then making a grand entrance by landing softly on his feet.

“Iron Man.”

Tony looked to where the voice came from. It was Nick Fury. “Nice seeing you, too, Fury.”

“I see you're ready for action. Perhaps after a trial run with the Avengers, you'll consider joining us.”

“Depends. Let's stay in the present and hope we all get out alive first.”

Before Fury could continue the conversation, the X-jet landed, sending a gush of wind through trees around the landing site. Tony’s sensors informed him that it was 74 degrees, a nice temperature for the time of year, since it was usually hotter and more humid.

“Welcome Scott, X-men,” Fury said to the team disembarking from the jet. “Everyone's waiting in the tent at headquarters. We'll discuss everything there.”

Once they were all crowded inside, Tony looked around at the company. Logan, Scott, Rogue, Bobby, Gambit, Jean, Kurt, Big Pete and Ororo were to his left, while Fury and four people Tony didn't recognize on his right.

“Well, Avengers,” Fury said, “I don't think I need to brief you on why we're here, but I do need to make some introductions and give details. For those of you who don't know, this is Tony Stark,” Fury said, pointing at him. “And his code name is Iron Man.” Then he introduced the rest. “Tony, this is Bruce Banner, code name; Hulk; Steve Rogers, a.k.a., Captain America; Matt Murdoc, a.k.a, Daredevil and Elektra Natchios. Spiderman will be joining us shortly.”

As if Fury had summoned him, Peter Parker suddenly swung into the tent, letting go of the web and gracefully landing in line next to Steve Rodgers.

“Nice of you to join us. Just in time to hear the details, too. I wouldn't like having to repeat myself,” Fury said, before continuing. “Hydra is known to have its base here, on this island,” he explained. “Wolverine found the entrance and was able to report back only yesterday. They're yet unaware of his intrusion, so we have that advantage. The base is on the south part of the island. Pretty much the entire southern half, as far as we know, and most of it is underground. This island is nothing but forest until you hit the beaches, so traveling won't be easy. Hydra has spies stationed all over, so we can't even be sure we're safe here. We're in enemy territory, people. During your mission you will infiltrate the Hydra base, take out their main weapons and communications, take the leader hostage and report back here. Air and water support is nearly impossible, so you'll be on your own until we can get troops in later. There will be two teams and everyone will have a radio link. You'll only be able to speak to your own team unless you change radio frequencies and, during the mission, you'll only use code names. Scott, you'll take the X-men. Cap, you'll take everyone else, including Stark. Is everyone clear?”

There was a prompt ‘yes sir’ around the circle and Fury smiled. “Good. You have ten minutes to prep.”

Tony followed Captain America and his team out of the tent and into another, where five costumes were waiting. He watched as they changed out of their civilian clothes into their various costumes, most of them leather. Tony wasn't really surprised that the Cap's looked like a flag. The ear-bud communicators were passed out, then the teams met again outside. Tony noticed the X-men all wore black leather uniforms, each a little different to accommodate that mutant's powers and personality and, if it situation hadn't been so serious, Tony would've laughed. This whole thing was not supposed to be in the real world, yet here they all were, adults wearing costumes like some comic book.

Fury interrupted his thoughts. “Unfortunately, due to forest density and our going for the element of surprise, you're all going to have to hike from here to the Hydra's base. Our base will be known as “Eagle's nest” and you'll refer to me as “Blind Eagle.” Good luck, teams, now move out!” Fury saluted, then turned on his heel, heading for the single heli-carrier that was stationed near the X-jet.

“So...” Tony said, hiking along behind his new team mates, “what can everyone do?” He was feeling bored and didn't want to spend the hike being quiet. Besides, he was curious. “I'll start,” he said. “I can fly and have multiple weapons and scanning and communication systems. You next, Devil.”

Daredevil laughed. “Curious are we? All my senses are amplified and, because I'm blind, I have a radar sense instead. Your turn, Cap.”

“I'm pretty much amplified everywhere. Strength, stamina, senses. Not as sharp as Daredevil, though. Your turn Elektra.”

“I know many forms of martial arts and I have special skill at sai's. Your turn, Spidy.”

“I can shoot web, stick to walls and my senses of touch and sight are amplified. I'm also pretty strong and agile. My Spidy-sense helps me know if there's something dangerous around, too. You now, Hulk.”

“I turn into, well, a big green hulk. You'll see what I mean later.”

“Wow, quite the variety. I never would've guessed any of this could be happening a year ago.”

"I know what you mean," Spiderman said.

It took quite a long time for the teams to reach the base and, by the time they did, they had the cover of darkness to help them. Tony glanced down at his glowing chest piece. *Darn*. "Hey, Spidy, come here."

Spidy helped him conceal it, then they moved on, Tony trying to keep his eyes down. There wasn't much he could do about the glowing eye slits. He was seeing so many more reasons why he liked to stay in the basement with his suit.

"Okay, team," Cap whispered. "We're taking the right. Cyclops, your team will take the left once we get inside. Iron Man, I want you on sensor detail. If there's any movement, let us know. I also want to know where any weapons are if you can scan in there. Hulk, I want you to stay behind me and just be ready. Electra and Daredevil will go stealth and spy the place out. Spiderman, you're on major spy detail: I want you to find the leader or try and find info on where he or she is. I think Nightcrawler is doing the same for the X-men, so if you run into him just work together. Any questions? We want to stay quiet for as long as possible, so don't fight unless you have absolutely no choice. Good luck."

A second after they entered the building, three guards and a security camera were trashed. The guards hadn't had time to alert the others, but the camera might be another problem. Tony tried attaching a device that would scramble the signal for about thirty minutes, basically back tracking the time, so it looked like nothing had happened, but he doubted that it would work very well. Hydra couldn't be that stupid. As soon as everyone split up, Electra and Daredevil disappeared into the shadows, going in the opposite direction from Nightcrawler. Spidy webbed himself up to the ceiling and worked his flexible body into a duct at the top of the passage wall.

Taking a deep breath, Tony followed the Cap down the passage and into a room where he could concentrate without being disturbed. There, he focused all his sensors and, expanding his search, watched all the read outs carefully in order to make sure he didn't miss any details.

Captain America waited patiently for a good ten minutes before speaking up. "Anything?"

Tony shook his head. "Everything is so well guarded and my sensors are being dampened by my having to use a cloaking signal to keep them hidden. There's no way for me to really scan this. The only thing I keep getting is this huge energy reading from deep underground, probably at the heart of the base. I'm going to guess that that's the power core. If we can get down there, I could tap in and practically take hold of the entire base's computers."

Banner's eyebrows went up. "You could control a base of this size? That's pretty impressive."

"Well, thanks, but we have to get down there first, big guy."

"Nice 'port Crawler," Wolverine said, complimenting Kurt on successfully teleporting them to the next 'safe spot,' near where the Hydra leader was supposed to be. Logan was following a rather iffy scent. The only promising thing about it was that it smelled like something organic and not zombie like. The horrid smell that the ninjas gave off was the absolute only way for Logan to keep them under his radar and that alone ticked him off.

"Thank you, we should probably walk from here for a while though, these tunnels are getting very complex!" the German sighed, catching his breath. He and Wolverine were camped out in a slightly larger air duct than Spiderman had disappeared into earlier. It was far from comfortable or good for catching one's breath.

"Wolverine, I..." Nightcrawler began, but Logan held up a warning hand, the claws suddenly appearing for emphasis. Logan was peering over the side of the duct into the tunnel hallway below. Four guards were making their rounds, heavily armed. It meant they must be getting closer to the inner core of the base.

Logan thought for a moment. The security camera above them was very inconvenient. *This would be so much easier if they didn't light the place like a hospital,* he thought. If only they could reach the main power core and knock it out...

Holding up his hand, he conveyed a series of signals to Kurt, then leapt from his perch with his claws extended. He dove head first into the two guards right below him, impaling them and flipped gracefully to his feet, his claws sliding out of their skulls. Nightcrawler had taken out the security camera a split second before Logan made his

move and then took out the rest of the guards.

Leaving the bodies, Wolverine gestured with a hand down the passage. "Shall we?"

"Darn it, we're getting our fancy butts kicked!" Tony observed just as Captain America's red, white and blue shield whizzed past, decapitating the guards holding him pinned against the wall.

"Thanks, should have known we'd run into more trouble once we neared the core," Tony shouted as he blasted several more off Bruce's back.

"How close are we?" Cap asked, slugging a nearby guard with his fist.

"I'd tell you 'pretty close,' but something is completely scrambling my signal. I'm going to guess that the power core is a really different source, because I'm almost 100% certain that that's what is screwing with my sensors."

"So now we're going on how fuzzy your sensors get?"

Tony nodded. "Unless you have a better idea?"

"I think we're getting near the end of this wave of guards, then we'll be able to move toward it," Cap said, finishing off his share with a quick head-bash.

Finally, having killed the last of the guards, the team moved on, but came to another halt as soon as they rounded the next corner.

"I think we are now officially outnumbered beyond what we can handle," muttered Tony as he scanned their welcoming party.

"I think it's time to let Hulk do his thing," Bruce grinned and Cap moved cautiously away, giving him room.

"I believe we are getting *very* close," Kurt murmured.

Wolverine gave his partner a death glare. "Really? Ya think?" His growled words were almost drowned out by the sound of several skulls cracking at once. He and Kurt had both been overrun by guards. Nightcrawler was unable to do much teleporting in such a crowded area for fear of ending up inside of something or someone and Wolverine barely had enough room to swing his claws with enough force to do any damage.

Wolverine had let a feral roar rip as he launched himself into the mass of guards, but no matter what he did, they just seemed to keep coming. He was bleeding faster than he could heal and, for the first time in a long time, he was feeling faint from blood loss. Nightcrawler, too, had been moving slower and slower until, suddenly, Logan realized with a jolt he was completely out of sight. How long had the Crawler been down? Then, Logan swooned, his vision blurring as a sword entered his back nailing him nearly through the heart. He could hear the blood pounding loudly in his ears, but it was soon silenced by his blacking-out.

"So that's what he meant by a big green hulk," Tony shouted to Cap from his protected position against a wall, out of Banner's way.

"Yeah, just sit tight another minute, he'll calm soon," Cap shouted back, watching the Hulk warily.

Hulk was panting heavily after bashing the last of the guards to a nasty black pulp. Tony shifted just a millimeter towards him, his armor making a nasty scraping noise along the concrete wall. That made Hulk whip around towards him, his face still twisted into a killing rage. Tony took an apprehensive step back, keeping an eye on the angry giant.

"Uh, Cap," He whispered into his intercom, "He wouldn't attack his team, would he?"

"He might, he has little control when he's like this. Move away *slowly*, but be ready to duck," Captain America warned.

Sucking in his breath, Tony stepped back another few feet. Unfortunately his armored shoulder caught the concrete again, making another horrid grating sound. He looked up just in time to leap out of the way of Hulk's giant fists. There was an inhuman roar as Hulk pulverized the wall and Tony reflexively shielded his face as he curled away from the flying bits of rubble.

After a moment, Tony looked up. The dust was clearing and he straightened carefully, looking for that angry

1200 pounds of muscle to come charging back. He didn't. The last of the dust settled leaving a sheepish looking Bruce standing in the middle of it.

"Aw, man, sorry guys," he said, scanning the rubble at his feet.

Tony wasn't looking at the apologetic Banner, however. He was staring past him. "Hulk, I think you just saved the day."

Coming to slowly, Logan opened his eyes. He found himself tied to a post. His feet weren't even on the ground. Whoever had captured him and Nightcrawler wasn't stupid. He strained, pulling against the wire holding him. His hands were securely tied behind his back, so it would take some maneuvering to get his claws free. His sharp eyes scanned the area, taking in their small cell. It was a strange one, though. Below him, where the floor should be, was a steaming vat, filled with a bubbling liquid that stung his nose with a nasty chemical scent. Outside the cell door Logan could hear guns shifting as the guard changed. He sniffed, wincing at the burn in his nostrils. He could hear Nightcrawler was behind him and, by the sound of his breathing, was out cold. *Great.* He didn't dare cut himself free until Kurt was awake. He thought the vat's contents smelled suspiciously like acid.

He couldn't even contact the team. His communicator was gone. "Well, might as well get my hands free while I'm stuck here," he muttered.

"Hulk, you found it! You smashed in the wall to the power core!" Tony exclaimed, looking in wonder at the giant pillar of swirling light. It looked somewhat like his arc, but it was blood red.

Several guards assigned to the power core suddenly jumped to attention, guns cocking ominously.

"Wonderful," Tony ground out.

"Did you really expect it to be unguarded? It's not like they have to work very hard to recruit." Bruce pointed out.

"Oh yeah, instant soldier, just kill." Tony quipped.

"I'm going to see if Daredevil or Electra are nearby," Cap said. "If they are, I'm going to have them help us. Spidy can find the leader. Cover me while I try and contact them."

The guards were already swarming toward them as Tony stepped in front of the Cap while he backed into a protected position near a corner. An exact third of the guards surged forward like one body, attacking him on all sides. At first Tony held his own, but he slowly realized the ninjas were herding him away from the others.

'Great,' he thought, 'divide and conquer. Too bad the zombie recipe didn't fry their brains as well. Why were they always mindless in video games? They were easier that way.'

His repulsers were handy, however, and he was infinitely thankful for his armor. Their swords couldn't possibly penetrate his armor and their guns had already proved useless... right?

Logan was almost free--one more cut and...got it! He shrugged his shoulders, working his hands and arms to help get circulation back. He'd need it if the skin on his arms was going to grow back anytime soon. He grimaced, looking at his raw and nearly stripped arms. The wire had not been kind to him. Well, the worst was over. Or, at least, he hoped, looking down at the acid. He was now suspended with his arms free, so all he had to do was cut the wire, wait for Kurt to wake up and teleport them onto the ledge on the edge of the cell.

"What...ooh, my head," he heard Kurt moan.

"Good Crawler, you're awake. I need your help, if we're getting out of here. I'm on the other side of the post here. Can you teleport us out?"

"I'll try, but I think something's wrong, Wolverine. I feel... rather strange." Kurt concentrated, trying to open the portal, but couldn't. "Something *is* wrong. I can't teleport!"

"Great. Okay, if I cut the wire, can you hang onto the pillar long enough to get on my back?"

"I think so," Kurt replied, wrapping his tail securely around the post. He didn't like the look of the liquid either.

"All right, on three... One, two, three," Logan grunted, slicing through the wire with a quick swipe. He flipped

as he began to fall, digging his claws deep into the wood before he got too far. Kurt was clinging soundly to the post by his tail, hanging upside-down. In a fluid movement he swung himself onto Logan's back, wrapping his tail around Logan's waist for support.

"Okay, Crawler, I'm gonna have to jump--hold on," Logan warned, tensing.

Kurt settled in tighter and readied himself as Wolverine leapt to the wall of the cell, digging his claws into the concrete with a roar of pain.

"Wha...?" he panted, realizing suddenly that his forearms were throbbing horribly.

"Wolverine, your arms!" Nightcrawler said in alarm.

Logan looked down to find that his healing factor still hadn't taken care of his wounds. That wasn't good.

Gritting his teeth, he made another leap further along the wall towards the ledge, digging his claws painfully into the surface. One more leap and they'd be out...

"Hey Cap, any word yet?" Tony shouted into his intercom. He was so deep in the mess of ninjas, he couldn't even *see* Captain America anymore. The only member of his team still visible was the Hulk.

"Yeah, hang on, they should be here any sec--wait, look up," he called back, his words punctuated by grunting and punching sounds.

Tony obeyed, firing his last missile in a vain attempt to make some elbow room even as Daredevil and Elektra leapt down from a suspended cat walk above. Elektra's loud war cry even managed to distract the Hydra soldiers for a moment. Landing near Tony, then stuck close to him to avoid being separated.

"I appreciate it guys, but don't you think Cap could use some help?" Tony asked, raying several ninjas in succession with his repulsers.

"He can hold his own, besides, he told us to get you over to the panel so you can take control of the base. That's more important, don't you think?" Elektra informed him.

Tony had to admit that, if any plan could save them, that would be the one.

Elektra slid around him like a shadow, slicing a bloody path through the chaos, defending Tony as she went. Daredevil covered his back, while Tony blasted the sides. With the team effort, Tony found himself steadily making his way towards the control panel.

"Jarvis, prep for system invasion, override, and replacement," he ordered.

"Will do sir. I would be careful of suit integrity at this instant, however. It has sustained massive damage," Jarvis warned.

"Give me stats," Tony groaned, straining against the wall of warriors in front of him.

"Right leg armor reduced to 59%; left leg armor 40%; right arm 23%; left arm 34%; main body armor reduced to 16% on the front and 20% on the back."

Tony cursed under his breath. "How's the chest piece holding?"

"99% power and holding, sir. Nothing out of the normal with this degree of electrical output."

"Good. What about the armor around the chest piece?"

"3%, sir. I believe the fact that it glows has given them a good target."

"Thank you, Jarvis," Tony ground out, hitting the next opponent with the force he wished he could use on the A.I. at the moment. He was not in the mood for smart-alec remarks from a computer.

"No problem sir. Look to your left," Jarvis added helpfully as a particularly large ninja barreled towards him.

Tony quickly took him out.

Though, they were almost to the panel, everyone was tiring and Tony knew, if he made it out of here, he would sleep for a week. However, the biggest problem was their opponents *weren't* tiring and their numbers didn't seem to be diminishing either. It was going to be a *long* night.

Then, just as Tony was mere inches from the console, a sharp cry from came behind him and Daredevil went down. He wanted to whip around to help him, but Elektra caught his arm and threw him through the last of the enemies to the panel.

“Go! NOW!” she commanded.

“But what about...” Tony protested.

“I’ll go after him! Don’t make him go down in vain!” she shouted, defending him with her sai while he tried to tap into the mainframe. He would only need a few minutes and then he could take over.

Just when he was seconds away from finishing, Elektra gave a sharp cry and fell. Clenching his teeth, Tony willed his hardware to work faster. There was no way he could defend himself like this, not with both hands plugged into the panel...

9 seconds, and the ninjas were on him...8 seconds, and they'd almost gotten through his armor...7 seconds, and a sword tip scratched through his body-suit under his armor...6 seconds, and the swords were cutting his skin...5 seconds, and a dagger went through his hand...4 seconds, and another went through his right shoulder...3 seconds, and another was breaching his chest armor...2 seconds and he could feel one digging into his back...1 second, and ruby blood was dripping on the floor...0...

Nightcrawler steadied Logan as he swayed on the edge of the acid pit--they'd barely made the jump. “What could be causing this, Wolverine?” he exclaimed. “It takes a lot of power to dampen mutations!”

Logan sat down heavily, his vision swimming. He must have lost a lot of blood. He gazed down through a fog at his bloody arms. The flesh *was* creeping back to its place along the edges of the wound, but many times slower than usual. Sighing, Wolverine tipped his head back, resting it against the wall. *If he could only get this fog off of his mind, he could bust out of here and...*

A flash of metal caught his eye and Logan squinted at Kurt's waist. There was a ring of silver around it. “What the heck is that?” he slurred. He shook his head with annoyance. What had they done to him?

“What is what?” Kurt asked, following Logan’s shaking finger to his middle. There, he saw a thin, barely noticeable ring of silver with a small circle light flashing in the center.

“This is what kept me from teleporting?” Kurt asked, bewildered. “Wolverine, do you think you can cut me free?”

Logan pushed himself to his feet, feeling only slightly better. He **snikted** out a claw and, sliding it behind the metal, attempted to cut it. It did no good.

“Adamantium. Crap,” Logan cursed. Whoever had them obviously knew more about him than he wanted them to. Why did it seem that way with everyone? It was starting to seriously tick him off.

“What about you? What's keeping you from healing? I don’t see any ring or device on you,” Kurt said, looking his partner up and down.

“Dunno. Might be some sort of injection, carbonadium possibly.”

“What is carbonadium?”

“A type of metal that really slows down my healing factor.”

“How slow and how long will it last?”

“Well, Elf, you can see how slow and as for how long, last time I had it in me, I was dead for most of it.” Logan replied, peering out the small window of their cell.

“You mean ‘dead’ as in figurative, right?” Kurt asked uncertainly.

Logan didn’t answer.

Jarvis was concerned. “Sir?” he inquired.

fzzzt*---*display online*---*zzzz* ---user unresponsive---*fzzht

“Oh, dear. Initializing outer speakers.”

“Tony? Tony, you alright?” came Elektra's voice.

“It's no use, Elektra,” Daredevil said, kneeling next to him. “He’s out cold and his suit looks dead, man.”

Straightening, he stepped back from the unresponsive form. Suddenly the eyes flickered back to a bright blue and Jarvis's voice was audible. “Sir, madam---please do not to move Mr. Stark until I can further scan him.”

"Is he alive?" Electra asked, bending worriedly over him.

"Yes and his vital signs are stable, but I still need to fully assess his condition. He may have internal bleeding and I am detecting damage to the bones that just healed. One moment, please."

Electra, Daredevil and Captain American all waited while Jarvis scanned Tony, praying he'd be okay. Bruce stumbled over to them, newly transformed and exhausted now that he was finally calmed down.

"Mr. Stark has minor cuts and bruises and a deep wound on his right shoulder," Jarvis informed them. "It did not sever the artery, but it will need to be bound. Wait one moment and I will administer smelling salts."

Choking and gasping came from inside Tony's helmet as he gingerly sat up, pulling his helmet off he did. He was sweating bullets and his shoulder hurt like the devil, but he was alive and that was better than he'd hoped. Panting, he fell back against the side of the control panel, exhausted and aching. Piles and piles of dead guards and soldiers lay everywhere, their corpses already stinking. Apparently, if you're already dead, you decay faster.

"Wow, good job guys," Tony panted. Then, surveying his team, noticed everyone looked pretty beat up. Cap was bleeding from multiple cuts and favoring his right leg. Electra and Daredevil also looked badly beaten and Bruce was bruised and exhausted. How were they ever going to find the others and fight their way out? If he could contact the others by switching radio frequency in his helmet and take full control of the base, it wouldn't be too hard, right? Right.

"We killed everyone who came at us, but then there was some sort of high pitched call and they all disappeared. I tried to follow, but I think my leg is broken," Cap told him, shifting his weight against the wall.

"Maybe Spidy, Wolverine or Nightcrawler found their leader and they were called in for back up," Daredevil guessed.

"That was my first guess, but why would they just go and leave the core unprotected?" Cap pointed out.

"Yeah," Tony agreed. "If we get control of the base, it'd be easy to find and kill the leader, heck, we could shut them all down!" he said, peering up at the panel--but something wasn't right. Standing shakily, he leaned heavily on the surface of the controls. What he read on the screen spelled bad news for everyone. Tony hung his head and groaned. Could they get no breaks?

"I know why they cleared out, guys," he muttered. "They activated their self-destruct sequence--30 minutes and counting."

Kurt studied his partner, deeply worried. "Logan, are you sure you'll be alright?"

Logan shushed him harshly. "Code names only, remember," he hissed through clenched teeth, leaning against the wall.

Though they'd successfully broken out and killed the guards, Logan had used his claws and now was rapidly loosing blood from the slits between his knuckles--and, man, did it hurt. He'd also suffered a few bullet grazes and sword cuts, but those were minor. Natural instinct, of course, always guided him to avoid bullets, but now he had a reason for avoiding them he wasn't used to having.

"Forget the code names, Logan. They captured us and now you're bleeding to death. We have no idea how long you have or how long that metal will continue to effect you or even where the others are! The *last* thing I'm going to worry about is code names," Kurt shot back while using some of the bandages he always had hid in his costume on Logan's raw hands. "This is all I can do. We just need to pray you don't bleed out," he said solemnly.

Logan swayed, being physically unable to keep his feet. Kurt caught him, lowering him gently to the ground.

"Mein Logan, this is very bad," Kurt said, looking at his friend with concern. "How I wish I could just teleport you out of here," he said angrily, glaring at the circlet around his waist.

Logan's head lolled to one side and Kurt caught him with a clawed hand, steadying him. Wolverine was panting raggedly and putting gentle fingers to his jugular, Kurt felt his pulse to be fast and weak. He bit his lip. He *couldn't* lose Logan, he just couldn't. Wrapping an extra layer of bandages on Logan's wounds, Kurt prayed fervently that God would spare his life, though by the time he'd finished bandaging his friend, Logan was completely out. Determined, Kurt heaved Wolverine's dead weight over his shoulders and moved out, heading in whatever

direction looked safest. He *had* to find the others.

“Good news, there's no more guards blocking our path. The bad news is I have no idea how to get out,” Tony said as they ran down yet another strange corridor, trying desperately to get out. All communications had been jammed and there wasn't a single way to tap into the base's computers anymore. The destruct sequence had locked everything up.

“They must've all swarmed to get the leader and then left,” Electra said, running along side him.

“What about contacting Scott's team?” Cap hissed from his spot in Hulk's arms. Banner had been able to change and keep himself under control in order to carry their fallen leader.

“I've been trying, but the frequency is hard to unlock---”

“Hello? Who is this? Wolverine?” Scott's voice said inside Tony's helmet.

“Cyclops? Thank goodness, I've been trying to get you. We have to find everyone and get back to the camp, they've activated a self destruct and we'll all be fried in less than 30 minutes.”

Cyclops cursed. “I can't contact Wolverine or Nightcrawler. They checked in an hour ago, but I haven't been able to get them since. How's Spidy doing?”

“Hang on, I'll check,” Tony replied, berating himself for forgetting the rest of *his* team. “Hey, Spidy, how's it going?”

“Not good. I was on his trail for a while, but then when I got to his chamber everything was deserted. It's really weird.”

“Unfortunately, it's not--they activated the self-destruct. We're clearing out.”

Tony heard a heavy sigh through the speaker. “Wonderful. How much time do we have?”

“Right now, I'd say 15 minutes, maybe 20. We're on the move, but Cap has a broken leg and everyone else is pretty beat up. Hey, have you seen Nightcrawler and Wolverine? Scott can't get a hold of them,” Tony said.

“No, I haven't. I'll look though. You guys get out. I'll meet you outside. I can't leave them here and you need to get the Captain back to camp. I'm still in good shape. I'll call if I find them. Spidy out.”

The link went dead and Tony bit his lip. This was cutting it *way* too close and he didn't like it at all. Switching his helmet frequencies again, he re-contacted Scott. “Hey, Spidy is looking for Wolverine and Nightcrawler. Do you know the way out?”

“Fortunately, I do. Jean was able to find a mind with the map of the place and she has been guiding us through. Where are you now?”

“The North passage away from the power core.”

“Keep on your path, just go straight. We'll meet up soon. I'll let Blind Eagle know what's going on.”

Meanwhile, Nightcrawler was making decent headway without interference--which was making him uneasy. So was Logan's barely audible breathing. He stumbled down another deserted passage before deciding he was going to have to stop if he wanted to make it out, especially if he ran into another squad of soldiers. Laying Logan on his back on the ground, Kurt slumped down, resting his aching body. However, they'd only been sitting for a moment when a slight sound alerted Kurt to an intruder and his head snapped up, watching for danger.

Spiderman popped out of a duct he'd been using for travel. “Oh, thank God. You guys....okay?” He paused as he took in Wolverine's sorry state.

“I don't think we are okay, no.” Kurt said, glancing at Logan. The bandages looked like they'd been dyed red.

“I'd ask if you can walk and all that, but we don't have time. The place is set to blow in 12 minutes or less. We have to get out of here. I've already told Iron Man that I found you--now we have to book it,” Spidy informed him, jumping off the wall and heaving Logan over his shoulders. “I'm going to guess that you can't teleport?” he surmised, hoping he was wrong.

“Correct,” Nightcrawler sighed. “Which way?”

“Guys, thank God,” Rogue exclaimed as she saw Tony's battered team. Scott's group looked only a little worse for wear as well. “Tony, how much time do we have?” she asked.

“About five minutes, how close are we to getting outta here?”

“Scott said only a few turns from the entrance, but we need to be as far away as we can be before the explosion hits,” Bobby said, sticking close to Rogue. “Have you seen Spidy and the rest yet? We've been watching for them.”

“No, I'd hoped we would have by now...” Tony said regretfully.

“What are you waiting for---Christmas?” Spiderman panted, suddenly running up with Nightcrawler close behind.

“Pete! You made it!” Tony exclaimed.

“Yeah, now let's make it the rest of the way. Honestly, I don't know how much longer Logan will last without help.”

Tony gasped. Knowing Logan's powers, he would've never imagined seeing him as wounded as he was.

“Give him to me. My suit can handle more weight and we can move faster,” Tony said, taking Wolverine in his arms.

With only minutes to go the entire group ran up the tunnels and out. The path was difficult to traverse because of all the foliage, but they were running for their lives and that carried them through it fast--but *not* fast enough.

A huge boom racked the island as a fire ball shot into the sky. Then the ground began caving in and a shock-blast of fire and heat swept over them like a deadly wave. Tony flung himself to the ground before the blast could knock him over, shielding Logan with his body as best he could. The heat was excruciating, flaming through the breaches in his armor like cattle brands. Then, once the wave passed, bits of concrete and metal began dropping all around them along with licks of fire that were devouring plants like ravenous insects.

Tony lifted his head, then, picking Logan up again, walked towards the others. They seemed relatively okay, though he imagined they'd all be suffering from burns later.

“Everybody ok?” Scott called.

“Think so, we'd better keep moving,” Jean said, scanning the company. “Scott!” she said suddenly gripping his arm, “we need to hurry! Logan isn't breathing.”

It took thirty minutes to hike back to base camp. They'd tried CPR when Logan first stopped breathing, but it'd done nothing. So, they'd just moved as fast as they could through the jungle back to camp, but now they feared he was dead.

“He's flat-lined, we need to get him to the med room,” Tony shouted, sprinting the last few feet.

He rushed Logan into the heli-carrier's med-room, but due to his adamantium, paddles were useless. Their only prayer was an Epinephrine shot to the heart.

“Lay him down and get out of the way,” Fury commanded, already holding a syringe.

Tony obeyed, stepping back until his back was against heli-carrier's wall.

Fury unzipped Logan's bloodied uniform, then jammed the needle between his ribs, right into his heart. Then, after injecting the contents with a prayer, the Colonel stepped back, hoping for a miracle.

The rest of the Avengers stood assembled out side of the heli-carrier, waiting for news. The Cap hadn't even dared to go in for his leg yet for fear of what he'd see. He hated the thought of the last soldier he'd fought along side with dying before him. Logan was the only other one from his unit that hadn't aged since World War 2. That was the worst part of the super soldier serum: watching all your friends die around you.

Twenty minutes later, Fury emerged from the heli-carrier. “Well Avengers, I have some bad news.” he said from the entrance.

Everyone suddenly snapped to attention, hoping the bad news wasn't as bad as they feared.

“We've lost one of our finest soldiers.”

The words hit like an impossible blow. Everyone had been mentally preparing themselves, but to actually hear

something they never truly believed would ever happen nearly sent the Avengers to their knees.

Kurt bowed his head, tears silently running along the grooves and markings on his face. So the Lord had taken Logan home.

Captain America and the rest of the team did the same. Jean closed her eyes, burying herself in Scott's shoulder.

"Are you sure there's nothing we can do? Jump start his healing factor or something?" Gambit asked, not willing to accept that Logan was gone.

"No, Remy. I'm sorry, but we've already tried everything I could think of," Fury answered heavily, wishing the same thing.

"Well," Storm sniffed from her place next to Nightcrawler. "May we see him?"

Fury shook his head. "I already have him prepped for transport. Let's get you guys home. We'll leave right after I see to Steve's leg."

The trip home to the mansion was very quiet. Nobody said anything. Tony spent the trip staring out the window, anger boiling away inside him. They'd lost Logan and Hydra had escaped. He was starting to think that the good guys could never win. Hydra could continue its dirty work for another hundred years before they might ever be found again and Logan's life had been lost for *nothing*. Despite how tired he was, if Tony knew where the cowardly leader of that cursed organization was hiding he would give anything to kill him. *Was anything worth it anymore?*

At the mansion, Logan was laid in the med room so Hank could clean up the wounds. Xavier had already been notified and so had the older students. It was decided, the younger ones should be kept in the dark for as long as possible. There was no doubt that a strange kind of denial hung at the back of everyone's minds. The Wolverine just couldn't die.

Hank came to greet the party with slumped shoulders, but a calm face. It was obvious that he'd already shed a few tears.

"He's in here," Fury directed gently, opening a door to reveal a low table with a body bag strapped to it.

Hank silently brushed past Fury expressionless. He undid the straps and then the body bag, gently lifting Logan's body into his arms, cradling him as if he were a child. Logan's head lay back limply against Hank's arm, his face calm. *Lifeless*.

Tony held Pepper tenderly as she knotted her fingers into his sweaty shirt and cried and he buried his face in her hair, breathing in its scent to calm his own sorrow.

"Oh, Logan," Pepper sobbed, snuggling into Tony even further. She was wearing the ring he had given her moments before he'd left to battle Hydra. He hadn't wanted to leave her with nothing while he was gone, especially considering there had been a very real chance that he wouldn't make it back. The wedding would now have to wait, though. She'd been planning it before he left, since he didn't want to wait more than a few days and, quite frankly, neither did she. Despite being worried about him while he was away, she'd couldn't help but look at wedding dresses with Kitty in his absence. She'd even picked one out.

Seeing the ring glittering on Pepper's finger both saddened and comforted Tony. He loved her and now she was his--but the wedding wouldn't be complete. He'd already decided on Logan as his best man. Sighing into her hair, he leaned back against the bed head board, curling up with her and, soon, they both fell into an exhausted sleep, Pepper cradled against Tony's warm chest.

In the med-lab, the Professor rolled-up beside Hank. "How is he?" he asked quietly. The normally eloquent mutant was silent. "Or should I be asking how you are?" he asked gently.

Hank turned his big furry head in the Professor's direction. "He's cleaned up," he said, numbly leaning on the table that Logan was laying on. "I was just going to move him to one of the beds until..." then choked off, unable to finish.

Xavier turned to look at Logan for himself, sadness filling his heart. How many would follow before his dream got any foothold? Placing his hand on Logan's cool forehead, he closed his eyes. He *needed* some kind of

confirmation. If the mind had died, then he'd be truly convinced.

The Next Day...

“Are you sure you want to do this?” The Professor asked Pepper gently, searching her for reluctance. There was none.

“Yes, I’m sure. I want to have the wedding in memory of Logan. We can bury him afterwards. No man like that should die and just have a burial like anyone. Tony is sure, too. We want Logan to be there in one sense or another,” she finished, her voice breaking somewhat at the end.

Standing beside her, Tony squeezed her hand reassuringly.

“Very well. And you’ve invited all of the Avengers?”

She nodded. “As long as there's room for them to stay that long, yes.”

“Another night won’t hurt. We have plenty of room,” Charles replied confidently. “Kurt will be ready for you at sunset.”

Pepper nodded and smiled gratefully.

“And, thank you. I’m sure Logan would be honored to know that he was still a part of your wedding.”

As the time drew near, Pepper was in her room, dressing with the help of Rogue, Kitty, Ororo and Jean. Her dress was floor length and white with a lace design down both sleeves. It didn’t ‘poof out’ like a typical wedding dress, but rather hugged her form, trailing down her like a pure fountain, it's many beads glittering and shimmering when she moved. It's train was long, flowing behind her gracefully and her bouquet of flowers were black silk--out of respect for Logan.

“You look *wonderful*,” Jean said, stepping back and observing their handy work. “Tony’s not going to be able to focus,” she grinned.

Pepper smiled back, a twinge of sadness still in her heart that her parents weren't there. It was too short notice--plus they'd never approve of Tony, both being strictly anti-mutant. She sighed. She dreamed of her father giving her away ever since she was a little girl and now that job had passed to the Professor.

“Are you ready?” Rogue asked, her hand on the bedroom door handle. Rogue, Storm, Jean and Kitty all wore bridesmaid dresses. It was good the Professor had connections--they'd been able to get them all in a matter of hours.

Outside, Kurt stood tall behind a podium in a priestly gown and clerical collar. Tony stood near him on a slightly raised dais in the middle of the school’s beautiful garden. There was little decoration added; the flowers, trellises with winding vines, and fountains were almost too beautiful to believe. Storm had used her power to make it calm and warm; the sky with drifting clouds catching the sun as it began its decent below the horizon. It was almost time.

“Really, you look beautiful, Virginia.” Charles said to Pepper. He was dressed in his best suit as well.

The Avengers were already settled outside, an interesting mix of characters all united for the ceremony and Pepper took a deep breath, getting excited despite herself.

Suddenly the Professor looked at his pocket watch. “Oh--will you excuse me for a moment? I just remembered something,” he apologized. “I need to find Hank.”

Pepper nodded mutely, biting her lip. It was probably about Logan. She wandered distractedly to where Gambit, Colossus, Peter Parker and Warren were waiting.

“My, don’t you look absolutely beautiful!” Gambit exclaimed, seeing her first. “I’m truly honored to be included,” he said, graciously bowing and kissing her hand. She blushed.

Before she could say anything, she heard a huffing coming from the hallway as Hank came running into view. Pepper grew alarmed. “Hank, what’s wrong?”

He grinned, happy tears running down his face. “Nothing, I just didn’t want you to miss your best man before you go out there!” he said happily.

Pepper was confused. "But..."

"But what?" came an all too familiar voice---Logan suddenly stepped out from behind Hank, all dressed in a suit, freshly trimmed and polished for the wedding. He even had a flower in his button hole.

Pepper completely lost it. She flew over to him, hugging him so tight even *he* thought his ribs might break. She sobbed into his shirt, completely ruining her makeup.

"Hey, hey, darlin'," he soothed, hugging her gently and running a hand over her head and through her hair. "You're gonna ruin your good looks for Tony if you keep this up."

Pepper shook her head against him. "He won't care. How, Logan?" she whispered. "You were..."

"I know---Carbonadium does weird things to my brain. As soon as it wears off my healing factor wakes me up," he explained gently.

"Oh, Logan, I'm so glad you're okay."

"Yeah, me too," he chuckled, the warm sound reverberating through his chest, tickling her. "Now," he said, pushing her back and wiping her face, "let's not keep him waiting any longer. It just isn't fair to dangle a prize like this in front of a man."

Tony took a deep breath as the music started and all the bridesmaids and groomsmen took their places. Then he saw Pepper---and did a double-take. Instead of Xavier walking her down the aisle, it was *Logan* at her side, looking more trim than Tony could've imagined.

Everyone gasped at Logan's appearance, then everyone stood, all whispering at once. Pepper was grinning from ear to ear as Logan walked her to Tony, then took his place at his side, Tony looking only slightly smug.

"Well, you sure know how to make an entrance," Tony muttered in his direction.

"So I got a sense o' theater, sue me," Logan chuckled softly back.

Still blown away by Logan's reappearance, Tony turned his attention on Pepper--then forgot everything else. She was more beautiful than he could've ever thought possible.

Kurt gave the congregation permission to sit, smiling with tears of joy running down his face. '*Thank you, Father,*' he prayed silently, then out loud, "We are gathered here today in the presence of God to join this man and this woman in holy matrimony..."

The instant Tony finished "kissing the bride", he turned on Logan. "What the heck happened?" he demanded, since he, as well as everyone else, were dying to know *how* Logan had, well, not died.

"What do you want, a speech?"

"Yeah, if you can survive without a heartbeat for over 24 hours, then you can survive a short explanation."

Logan sighed. "My brain wasn't dead."

"And...?" Tony prompted.

"What, you want the whole medical report?"

"YES!" came a chorus of voices.

"I was hit with carbonadium. It kills my healing factor, but preserves my brain. That's why, even if my body dies, my brain's okay. As soon as the carbonadium wears off, my healing factor kicks back in and wakes me up." He gave a playful glare in Tony's direction. "Happy?"

"For now. You gave us all a very nasty scare. Not cool, dude. You can pay for this for a while."

"What? It isn't enough that I dressed up in a freakin' tux for this thing?" Everyone laughed.

"Oh, leave Logan alone and come here," Pepper laughed, pulling Tony by the tie into another kiss.

When they broke off Tony growled suggestively, grinning her favorite 'naughty' grin. "Who's ready for some cake?"

Logan quickly found out why it might've been better to stay dead until *after* the wedding party--as he discovered he didn't like wedding cake. He was gonna have to clean his claws for week to get all the frosting deposits off, but the cake fight was both the worst and best time he'd had in a long time. His tux was beyond the point of no return and his hair was practically purple and pink from all the food dye--but it was worth it. Everyone, with the exception of Pepper and Tony, went to bed with full stomachs and enough exercise to make them sleep a month.

As for Tony, Logan was right, it *was* cruel to dangle a prize like that in front of a man and Pepper didn't think he'd ever let her go--and that was perfectly alright with her.

The End