

Claws of Vengeance

By Jason Vey

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Now, on with the show...

Something wasn't right, here. It was too damn quiet - even for an ancient Buddhist temple - and Logan didn't like it; he didn't like it one damned bit. Too many years of warrior training and basic animal instinct gnawed at his gut, warning him away, screaming *run, now!* *There is no honor in what you'll find here!*

It was a trap; he knew that much. He could smell it. Speaking of smelling it; he didn't like the confused scents all about this place. M'iko was here, somewhere. He'd known something was amiss when he'd gotten her letter; something had to be *horribly* wrong for her to even *consider* asking for his help. Some would've said he was a madman for coming, since showing his face here was nothing short of a death sentence. Love, however, knows no bounds, and the love and life of the man known to the world as the fugitive X-Man Wolverine belonged to Mariko Yashida. It always had, and it always would.

Still, something was *very* wrong here. There was the faint trace of a scent that had been so well disguised that he couldn't recognize it, even though he was *positive* it was someone he should know. And there was more. There was a scent that chilled him to the bone; a scent he'd caused many a time, and one that even still made his stomach churn.

It was the scent of death, heady and strong in the air. It was fresh death, and it was connected to...

Good God!

As the realization hit him, Logan broke into a run, tracking the source of the scent, knowing in his heart what he must find, but refusing to believe it, all the same. Not her. Gods, not her. It couldn't happen to her. Not to M'iko.

Then he saw her and a scream tore from his lungs with such force that Logan fell to his knees, feeling as though his very soul had been sucked from his body. It wasn't right; it wasn't fair, and it wasn't meant to be. Even in death she wasn't allowed peace!

Mariko Yashida lay sprawled across the floor of the temple in a pool of her own blood, her throat ripped out almost clean to the bone, her head barely connected to her body. Her wide, sightless eyes stared fearfully at the ceiling, and her mouth hung unhinged, a thin line of saliva running from the corner of her thin lips. Warm blood still oozed from the wound, but the last spasms of death had already passed. She was gone; there was no hope of saving her, not this time. Logan had sacrificed everything for her, once - his honor, his very life. What did that get her, in the end? Murdered. Torn to bits. She didn't deserve this. She deserved the dignified, honorable passing of a noblewoman of Japan.

Tears of pain, loss, and rage blinded Logan, but still he dragged himself to her, to cradle her in his arms one last time. He kissed her forehead gently and brushed a hand over her eyelids, closing them so she could sleep her final slumber.

"Oh, Gods, M'iko. I'm so sorry. I'm so fucking sorry! Who did this to you? I can't even smell them through all the blood..."

The blood. The blood was everywhere. He told himself there was no scent underneath the blood. He told himself that whoever did this covered their tracks well. But he knew better. That faint, all-too-familiar smell was still there, seeping through it all. Logan was closer, now, and gradually, agonizingly, recognition of the scent set in.

With recognition came rage. With rage came the bloodlust he'd fought all his life. Logan sank into the base, animal state that constantly gnawed at his insides, warring with his honor and rationality. With a snarl, he tossed aside the empty shell that was no longer M'iko. Only one thing mattered, now. M'iko would be avenged. This time, only one would walk away.

SNIKKT! Adamantium talons leapt from between the knuckles of each of Logan's hands and he crouched low, growling. The name that came from his mouth came as a curse, a howl, a death knell.

"CREED!!!"

"Right here, kid." The voice floated down from the ceiling. An air of triumph dripped from its tone, and an air of contempt followed close behind.

Victor Creed (known to the world at large as Sabretooth) sat in the rafters of the place, picking his bloodstained teeth with one black claw. He grinned wickedly, flashing sharp fangs as he growled, "I'll take 'em all eventually. First Silver Fox, and now Mariko. I'll get that pretty little redhead you lost to Summers, too, in the end. Don't you doubt it, Runt."

"You're real tough when you're picking on women who can't defend themselves, Sabretooth. I ain't worried about Jeannie. But I swear, you'll never hurt another soul again. Get down here, coward, and I'll show you what real pain is."

"Enough'a this talkin' shit, *Wolverine*. Let's get busy!"

With a roar, Victor Creed launched himself at Logan and the battle was joined.

* * * * *

"I told you you'd like Japan," Connor MacLeod said to his companion as they strolled down a country road outside of Tokyo. He gazed at her and chuckled to himself. *Duncan would have a heart attack*, he thought. Still, she was beautiful, with that flaming red hair and those emerald eyes that bored straight through a man. No wonder she got away with the things she did. He'd often accused Duncan of getting most of the good women. Well, who was to say they couldn't share, once in awhile, too? Besides, Connor thought to himself, I think I'm a bit more suited to Annie Devlin than Duncan ever was.

Annie, apparently, thought so as well. Connor was more the rogue than Duncan, and not nearly so much the boyscout. He wasn't as fancy with the sword, but he was good, nevertheless, and the two of them had had some fun times over the past two years.

"Mmm," she replied, snapping Connor from his reverie. "I dinna like the city all that much, but the countryside is a sight t'behold. So, Connor MacLeod of the Clan MacLeod, where're we headed now?"

Connor pointed at a classically constructed building not very far off. "There. That Buddhist temple up the road away. It belongs to clan Yashida - we're on their holdings, now - but don't worry; I used to study there, when I was

with Nakano. They know me as Russell Nash, and think I'm a descendant of the ancient friend of the family."

"So t'make a long story short, ye're pretendin' t'be yer own descendant? A risky move, don't you think?"

"Nah. Even if they knew, they wouldn't say. Honor goes a very long way out here. We're in no danger here. We'll be able to get our heads together. It's very peaceful...and it's holy ground."

Annie understood the meaning behind his words. Someone had been following them for some time, now, and neither knew who it was or what their intentions were. If they could make it to holy ground they could figure the whole thing out, or maybe even bait out whoever it was that had been trailing them. She nodded her approval and they continued on.

They were perhaps within a hundred yards of the place when Annie stopped dead and grabbed hold of Connor's hand. She looked about her, suspiciously.

"Connor...d'ye feel that?"

"Yeah. There's one of us nearby. And it isn't the one who's been following us."

"But it's so *weak*! Almost like..."

"Almost like someone's just finding out about themselves. But there's something else, too. Something stronger. The buzz is all confused. And in the Yashida temple? This isn't right. In fact, it's very wrong. We'd better hurry."

Swords drawn, the two broke into a sprint for the main door, the sounds of battle within growing alarmingly loud. Someone was in there, fighting *on holy ground*.

* * * * *

"No mercy this time, runt. And nobody to break it up. I'm gonna eat your heart!"

Sabretooth whipped his animal claws around, only to reel backwards from Logan's counterstrike, a vicious swipe across the face. For an instant Sabretooth saw a sea of red as blood flowed from his left eye, then blackness as the eye became useless.

Shrugging off the wound, feeling the nerves instantly starting to regenerate behind his nearly severed eyelid,

Creed renewed his attack, taking full advantage of Logan's overextended follow-through. With a howl of glee Creed tore into Logan's stomach, grabbing hold of the first organ he came in contact with.

Logan gasped as Creed tore his intestines from his abdomen. The pain was obvious in his face. For one split second the berserker rage drained and there was rationality there, but it was rationality overcome by agony. Still, that rationality enabled Logan to recover and make one last, desperate effort. Summoning all his remaining speed, strength, and rage, he plunged his claws deep into Creed's throat and ripped sideways. Creed's head lolled to the right, and his body fell, seemingly lifeless, to the floor.

Logan pressed his hand over the gash in his belly, holding his innards in place until the healing factor could kick in on its own and limped to Sabretooth's unconscious form. The head was still attached to the spine; all the major organs were in place. Victor Creed would be on his feet in a matter of minutes.

No. Not this time. This time Logan would end it, and end it for good.

"I told you, Creed. It's over, now. Too many years of torment and agony. I'm gonna kill you. And maybe - just maybe - *I'll* eat *your* heart." He raised his free hand - bloodstained claws glistening in the red sun that filtered gently into the place - for the killing stroke. One slash to sever the spine, another to destroy the brain, a third to tear out the heart. Even Creed's healing factor shouldn't be able to come back from such damage. "This is for M'iko, and for Silver Fox, and for all the others. Two guys like us can't walk the same world, Creed. This time there can be only one."

Logan's claws came down...and stopped with the ring of metal on metal.

"Are you crazy? This is holy ground!"

It took every last ounce of self-control Logan had not to gut the man who'd stopped him. He turned - slowly - to face his new adversary. His healing factor was kicking in; the wound on his stomach knitted painfully. He knew it was only a matter of minutes before he lost his chance to take Creed out for good. He had to finish this, and do it quick, even if it meant losing his own life in the process. Hopefully he could take out this newcomer quick, and finish Creed before the whole cycle started over again.

There were two of them. Both had swords and judging from their ready stances, both knew well how to use them.

One was a rumpled man in a tan trenchcoat wielding an eloquently crafted katana (looked to be a Masamune, Logan thought). The other - a strikingly beautiful celtic-looking woman - wielded a plainer blade, but one that gleamed no less wickedly. Whoever they were and wherever they came from, they meant business, and Logan could tell by their scents alone that there was something unusual about them. Mutants, maybe? Who knew? Who cared?

"Back off, bub," he growled.

"See to the girl," the man said to his companion, who hurried over to M'iko's body.

"She's dead," Logan hissed. "*He* did it. I'm going to kill him, and ain't nobody gonna stop me."

"Are you fucking insane!? This is holy ground! You can't take his head here!"

"Who the hell cares if this is holy ground or not? This murdering bastard has caused me enough grief! I'm "

Logan grunted in pain and blood shot from his mouth as the clawed hand plunged through his gut. That hated voice whispered coldly in his ear, "You're right, kid. There *can* be only one of us. And it's gonna be me."

Sabretooth was up and healthy. He hurled Logan several feet across the room and pounced on the injured man with feral intensity, pressing the advantage. Blood and flesh flew everywhere as the beast-looking man tore at Logan with animalistic glee.

It was then that everything came together for Connor. The readings were confused. The fighting on holy ground. These men *weren't immortals!* Good God, what had he done?

Hoping desperately to amend his error, Connor leapt forward to help the man he'd just stopped. If these two weren't immortals, that meant the rules didn't apply here. That meant he could kill this monster just as easily as he could kill any mortal. He'd fought in wars before, had killed more than his fair share of mortals, and something deep inside him told him this man had to die.

Without another thought, Connor plunged his sword through Sabretooth's back.

Sabretooth spun with inhuman speed and endurance, wrenching the sword from Connor's grasp and slashing

Connor across the chest with his claws. "I'll kill you, too, hero," he snarled, raising his claws for another swipe.

"Yeah, Bub, but will you take *both* of us?"

Logan's blades came down hard on Sabretooth's arm, slicing it to the bone. The wounded appendage fell, useless, at Sabretooth's side. Snarling at the punishment he was enduring, Sabretooth backed off to face the two of them when Logan tore the sword from Sabretooth's back and tossed it to the insolent stranger. He was outmatched, and cornered.

Smoothly, working in tandem as though they'd known each other for centuries, the two men closed on Sabretooth, the trenchcoat-wearing one whirling his katana in a circle and letting loose with an occasional "heh, heh!" and Logan circling like his namesake, the wolverine, waiting for that one chance to go for the jugular. There was only one solution; run and live to fight another day. As long as he was alive, he could still hurt the puny runt.

Suddenly, Sabretooth lunged at Logan, slashing at his face. Logan threw his arms up to defend and Connor moved in to take advantage of Sabretooth's exposed right side. Then, confident that he had both men committed, Sabretooth changed direction in mid-swing, launching himself into a high backflip and catching hold of a low-hanging ceiling beam. Using his momentum to keep moving, he swung forward, flinging himself towards the temple exit and well out of range of both men. Landing gracefully on his feet, Sabretooth growled at the two of them.

"Next time, runt, you won't be so lucky."

And Victor Creed was gone.

With another *SNIKKT!* Logan sheathed his claws. The weariness that always followed the rage overcame him and combined with the renewed pain of losing Mariko, the warrior in him vanished and he fell to the floor, sobbing. The samurai was crushed, the beast at last tamed. All that remained was some lost, lonely, frightened child.

"She's gone," was all he could say, over and over again. "She's really gone."

He doesn't know, Connor thought, looking down at the man in pity. Rationally, Connor knew he and Annie should spirit the body out of here quickly, let the man get on with his life, but something just wouldn't let him do that. There were secrets buried in this man's soul that were very easily the equal of any secrets, pain, or loneliness Connor ever

carried inside. At that moment, Connor felt a kinship with this man like he'd never felt with anyone before, not even Duncan. He should know. He *deserved* to know.

Connor shot a questioning glance at Annie, who nodded and smiled. After only a year, the woman could practically read his thoughts. It was scary. Connor didn't like attachments to other Immortals, especially now that the Gathering was at hand. But, he supposed, some things couldn't be helped. He just hoped he didn't fall in love with the girl. Love was a game for poets and mortals. Not for him. Not anymore. Looking at this broken man before him only strengthened his resolve in that.

Reaching out tentatively, Connor placed his hand on the shoulder of the man.

"My name is Connor MacLeod of the Clan MacLeod," he said, softly. "What's yours?"

It took the man a few moments to come back from the place inside himself where he was hiding. "Logan," came the barely audible reply.

"You loved her very much, didn't you?"

Logan looked up at Connor, the flame of passion burning brightly in his eyes. "I always have. I will love her till the last beat of my heart."

"That's not easy for a man like you to admit. I know. We can smell our own."

Logan managed a weak smile. "Bub, you don't even know the pun you just made."

Connor smiled. "I think there's someone who has something to say to you."

A delicate hand fell on Logan's shoulder and a scent that shouldn't - no, *couldn't* be there assailed his nostrils, stole away his breath. Then he heard the voice that even after all this time was music to his ears.

"Logan, my love."

Logan turned, speechless, blinked his eyes, blinked a second and third time, unable to convince himself that the sight before him was anything other than a dream or an hallucination. When his powers of speech returned, he was able to choke out only one word.

"M...M'iko?"

She stood before him, lovely as ever, even through the blood stains on her clothing. All that remained of her horrific wound was a single, slim scar running the length of her neck. She seemed every bit as confused about the whole thing as Logan was, but she smiled that radiant smile of hers through it. "Yes, Logan. It's me. I'm here, and I'm alive. You're not dreaming."

Suddenly and completely overcome by the whole thing, Logan threw himself off of the floor and into Mariko's arms. "My God, how...?"

"There's a lot you don't know, my friend," Connor said after a moment. Logan pulled away from Mariko with extreme force of will to regard his new acquaintance. Connor continued, "I can explain it to you, but it'll take awhile. Then again, with your healing powers and our, well...long lifeline, I suppose we've got the time. As for you," he said, indicating Mariko, "what am I to do with you?"

"I'll take care of her," Annie chimed in.

Connor looked at her, surprised. "The loner takes a pupil? You gonna train her to be a killer, too?"

"We're all that, m'love," Annie said, grinning. "Isn't that so?"

"I suppose," Connor said. "In the end, there can be only one."

"Well then," Annie said, "I'm guessing we'd better be off, lassie."

"Where?" Mariko asked.

Annie smiled and pointed off into the distance. "Out there. There's a whole world out there waitin' for ya. And ye're gonna need a sword, trust me on that."

Logan shook his head, still befuddled, but beginning to get a grip on the situation. "She's got the makin's of a samurai-ko," he said, walking over to the wall where Clan Yashida's ancestral weapons were enshrined and pulling an eloquently crafted katana from the wall. "She's also heir to this. Will it do?"

Annie looked the blade over, nodded her approval. "It'll do nicely." She held it out to Mariko. "Lassie?"

Mariko took the sword and gazed at it with wonder. All her life she'd wanted to touch it, had never been allowed. "I don't understand," she began, "but I trust Logan."

"Go with 'er M'iko. It's the best place for you. I don't know what's goin' on, but I know that you're different from everyone else...like me, I guess. I'm thinkin' that she'll teach you whatever it is you need to know."

"Can you come with me, Logan? I mean, after all this time, we can be together, with no worries about honor or propriety."

Logan sighed and pulled her close. "I wish we could, M'iko. But I get the feeling I don't belong on the road you're gonna be walkin'. We'll see each other again, though. I promise." He kissed her - a long, passionate kiss he'd been holding captive inside for years. "I love you, M'iko. I always have, and I always will."

"And I you, Logan. By the ancestors, how many times have I dreamed of you and asked myself, 'how can I wish for this?'" Her voice dropped to a barely audible whisper, "Never to be torn apart..."

"I know, m'love. I'll always be close to you. If you ever need me, you know where to find me."

She smiled. "With the X-Men, of course."

Logan grinned back. "It's good to have family. I don't know where you're going or what path you're going to have to walk, but I'll be there whenever you need me. I promise you that."

"I know. And I you." With that, she pulled away from him and looked to Annie. "I'm ready. Tell me why all this is happening."

Annie walked over to Mariko and draped an arm comfortably about her shoulders. "Aye. That's a long story, lass. Let's start walkin' shall we?"

And the two of them walked out the door, leaving Logan to stare after them, struggling with his own emotions as he watched the love of his life once again walk out of it.

"She's a strong one," Connor said from behind Logan, who'd forgotten he was even there. "She'll do fine. Who was that lunatic, anyway?"

"His name is Victor Creed. He's...a very old friend," Logan said with a humorless chuckle, and the irony wasn't

lost on Connor. "Oh, and 'lunatic' is about the understatement of the millennium. As for your other statement, there, you're right about one thing: she is strong. But what in the flamin' hell will she do fine at, Connor MacLeod of the Clan MacLeod?"

"Let's just say that Annie wasn't lying when she said it's a long story. This might be hard to swallow, but given your abilities, I'll give it a shot. I was born in 1518 in the village of Glenfinnan on the shores of Loch Shiel...I think I need a drink. You have anywhere to go?"

Logan shrugged, dug in the shredded remains of his bomber jacket, came up with a cigar. He popped a single claw to trim the cigar with and stuck it in his mouth. "Uh-uh," he grunted, lighting it with an old, beat-up zippo and puffing almost contentedly.

"I could go for a Glenmorangie, but that's tough to come by in these parts. Guess I could do with some saki. You?"

"Pussy's drink. I'll stick with the brew."

Connor laughed out loud and clapped Logan on the back. "I think we've got some interesting times ahead, my friend. Let's go have a drink."

"Sure, what the hell?"

Logan and Connor walked away from the ancestral temple of Clan Yashida for what Logan sincerely hoped was the last time.

-FINIS-
(Lyrics on next page)

This story was originally written for the Highlander Lyric Wheel, a fan fiction forum wherein a group of us trade sets of song lyrics, and write stories based upon our impressions from those lyrics. The only standing rule is that we have to incorporate at least one line from the song into the story, and having someone sing the song is cheating. For this particular wheel, the assignment was to compose a crossover with any other genre, story, television series, movie, etc., that we so desired. I chose X-Men, and these are the lyrics I was given for this tale.

“The Last Beat of My Heart”
Siouxsie and the Banshees

In the sharp gust of love
My memory stirred
When time wreathed a rose
A garland of shame
It's thorn my only delight
War-torn, afraid to speak
We dare to breathe

Majestic
Imperial
A bridge of sighs
Solitude sails
In a wave of forgiveness
On angels' wings

Reach out your hands
Don't turn your back
Don't walk away

How in the world
Can I wish for this?
Never to be torn apart
Close to you
'Til the last beat
Of my heart

At the close of day
The sunset cloaks
These words in shadowplay
Here and now, long and loud
My heart cries out
And the naked bone of an echo says
Don't walk away

Reach out your hands
I'm just a step away

How in the world
Can I wish for this?
Never to be torn apart
Close to you
'Til the last beat
Of my heart

How in the world
Can I wish for this?
Never to be torn apart

'Til the last beat
'Til the last fleeting beat
Of my heart