

The Character of Aslaug is Copyright © Joan Jacobsen

The Characters of Tigermark and TL are © Tigermark

The Character of Aramis Dagaz is © Aramis Dagaz

The Characters of Joe Latrans and Annie Latrans are © The Silver Coyote

The Characters of Torvald and Victoria Svensen are © Kellan Meigh

All other characters appearing are Copyright © Joan Jacobsen

Characters are not to be used without prior written permission of their authors.

No part of this story may be reproduced or placed on any website without the written permission of the author.

This story is copyright © Aslaug, 2010

XIII – The Bloody Angle

Blood to his ankles. In a few places, corpses to his midsection. And he could drown an army in the gore running through the streets.

Anane was satisfied.

Africa, the cradle of life, was giving back a few drops of the blood that had sprung from it. Just a few drops. The contents of a hundred thousand bodies.

Or maybe more. He'd stopped counting when he passed twelve thousand. It seemed pointless. This was blood for blood's own sake. Death simply for the sake of butchery. Some of the inhabitants of Omdurman had tried to escape, but he cut them off ... and then cut them down. Some had tried to escape on the other side of the city at the same time ... and he had thrown them into the river, after tearing a few assorted limbs off each.

The screams were pure music in his ears. He'd walked straight to the Emir's mansion and he had taken an almost perverse pleasure in inflicting as much pain and suffering on the creature as had been possible.

A few of these vile, talking animals had seemed to grasp what he was and had fallen to their knees, beseeching him to show mercy, in the name of God.

He had calmly informed them that God was not merciful, or He would have sent someone to stop the butchery. Then he had killed those. Just one or two had understood what he was in full, and had tried to align themselves with him.

He'd let them kill a few bystanders for him, then he had smiled and split them asunder in turn.

What use did *he* have for mortal assistance?

Finally, he was letting loose with all he had. Finally, he was giving it his best. And the Malefic council wasn't stopping him, which meant they either approved or didn't care. Just like the rest of the world, no one cared about a few hundred thousand dead Sudanese.

For a moment or two, he even contemplated simply crossing the Nile and continuing the butchery in Khartoum itself, but he decided against it. After all, there was method to all this. He was trying to force an issue.

She would notice. If not this, she would notice when he got moving to the next target.

So would every other Agent. He didn't care. He'd kill every one of them until she turned up.

Every ... last ... one!

###

Aslaug looked in the mirror and groaned. This was already well beyond stupid. First she'd gone chestnut ... then pitch black. Now she was as white as fresh snow. If her eyes had been red, she could have passed for an albino.

She'd have preferred something else, but to get black dye out of her fur, she had needed to use the strongest bleach possible. Her skin was full of little blisters and wounds where the acid had eaten through, but at least those would be healed in a few minutes.

She felt stronger even than the day before, but she had been absolutely right. The newspapers were flooded with stories of how a winter-sports event had been attacked by terrorists, and how the only lead was some pitch black female equine, believed to be one of the terrorists.

Buying the bleach hadn't been an option and she had needed to send Varghöss to steal some in the dead of night. Fortunately he was smart enough to remember instructions and he had brought the right things back with him. Including a fresh change of clothing.

Frankly, the clothes made Aslaug want to put her wolf over her knee and spank him, if such a thing had been possible.

She liked blue jeans. She had since first becoming acquainted with them. They were functional, comfortable and could take a lot of wear and tear. She liked T-shirts. Something she could move in without feeling constrained. Frankly, she didn't get modern fashions for femmes, most of the time. It was impractical and usually hugely uncomfortable. Victoria consistently tried to get her to look more feminine, and Aslaug couldn't bring herself to say "no" to the tigress. She was a good friend, after all, and Aslaug knew she only wanted to help.

But it just felt ... wrong on so many levels. Getting her mane combed was absolutely fine, of course, but she would draw the line at curls for ANYONE except Victoria Svensen.

Although she *could* see the point of perfume. She'd stretch that far, at least. Perfume was a good idea. Sweat smelled of ... well ... sweat. The trick, of course, was to not overdo the whole perfume-thing either. It was not an easy balance at first, but by now she had learned.

Fluffing her mane a little, she looked at the stack of clothes next to her and sighed. Varghöss was laying in a corner, flattened against the floor, looking terribly guilty as if he realized he'd managed to do something wrong.

Bless him, she thought. He had tried his best.

She smiled at her wolf and walked over, scratching him behind the ears, instantly making him relax and roll over on his back, tongue lolling.

"You're just a big puppy, aren't you?" the Valkyrie mock-chided. "Look at me. Big, tough Valkyrie, riding around a humongous wolf ... who behaves like a lapdog!"

Varghöss knew this game. It was always fun. He wriggled some on the floor and made the neediest noise he knew how to, canting his head to the side, looking completely innocent. It always worked. It did this time too.

Aslaug groaned and rolled her eyes, "Oh alright you big softy!" she mumbled and immediately launched into a furious tummy-scratching.

The gigantic wolf panted happily, before rolling back around on his side, stretching and drifting off to sleep.

Aslaug shook her head at the sight and ran a pristine white paw through her equally white mane. She didn't even have her customary black stripe in it anymore. She'd have to wait until it had grown back out before she had that again. It would take a while, but that was alright. Right now, she didn't want to be recognized.

Still, the clothing taunted her from the chair. For a moment, she felt tempted into simply wearing the same thing she'd worn before, but it would be too much of a risk.

"At least you didn't get me anything *pink*," she mumbled and glanced towards the wolf. She'd just have to get something else once the stores opened. At least she still had some money. Well ... she had a lot of money, but right now, she didn't feel like walking into a jewelers store and selling valuables.

What she wanted was to keep her head down while she found an answer or two.

Sighing, she bent down and picked up the top from the table, looking at it.

At least it wasn't pink.

That was probably the best thing she could say about it.

Victoria would love this. But fortunately, she'd never know.

###

"Lee!! Get your head out of there!" a female voice said in the darkness.

Someone moved and sighed. "If I don't look, Miho, I'll never know what is down there. Something's bloody awfully wrong, and sitting on our paws won't get us any kind of answers!" a male voice answered.

Sighing, the female mumbled something about helping. A few moments later, a thin ray of light briefly illuminated a strange, canid face. It looked like a brown wolf ... Mostly. The ears were slightly rounded and the muzzle had a strange angle to it.

"There. We can see now," he said and smiled. "Want to have a look for yourself?"

"Spying on Agents of the Malefic Council. This is so embarrassing. We should go in there and kill them, Lee!" the female voice answered, irritably.

The wolf nodded. "Oh, sure ... by all means, let's butcher them *before* they say anything we can use to go on!"

The female made a sound as if she was going to contradict the wolf ... then grumbled in agreement. She didn't approach the hole through which the light was streaming, though. Instead, the wolf looked back through it and the light vanished.

"They have no idea we're here," he said, a bit more quietly.

"Good," the female answered from the darkness. "The bugs are working perfectly, too. Tell me, how do they look?"

Lee shrugged. "The usual crowd. I see Tamahori and "Fuso" down there. And I think ..."

"Sorry, I wasn't being clear. I can hear it's them. What I mean is ... they sound excited by something?" Miho said. "Is that the case?"

"I'd say so. Tamahori is waving his arms around like a kabuki-actor!" Lee said, seriously. "They are all smiling, too."

Miho didn't seem to quite grasp that at first. "*Smiling?*" she asked, incredulously. "I can hear my sister down there! She doesn't know *how* to smile, Lee!"

"On the honor of my ancestors ... she's smiling. What are they saying?"

"They're talking about two dead agents. Of theirs."

"That makes no sense," Lee said and looked over his shoulder. "You're sure?"

"Yep. Rossana and Turi Rossi. I'm sure. They won't shut up about them ..." Miho answered, sounding rather confused.

Lee shrugged. "Italians?"

"Sounds like it. Wait. Hang on. They're talking about someone else. What're they doing now?" Miho said and fell silent, apparently listening intently.

Lee looked back through the hole. "They look scared. But excited. You know ... "

"Do I?"

"Imagine what a fur who wants to do his first parachute jump looks like ten seconds before he's told to jump. Scared to the point of wetting himself, and wagging his tail at the same time."

"Gahh ... you canids and your tails," Miho chuckled. "So they're scared and excited about something called "Anane". Do you know what Anane is?"

"I don't know, I suppose it could be a dialect? Local slang? This is Yokohama, Miho. They can't speak Japanese around here if their lives depended on it."

"Neither can you."

Lee turned his head again, looking hurt. "You know perfectly well my father was English, and that I grew up in Applethwaite! The chances to speak Japanese were few enough!" he protested.

"I know. I'm simply saying you can't blame them for their accents when your own is as atrocious as it is," Miho teased.

Lee went quiet and looked back through the hole in front of him. The room was quiet for a while, then Miho spoke up again.

"This is bad, Lee. This is really, really bad. I think Anane is a Christian Angel ... gone about as bad as they go."

"A great Oni?"

"From the way they speak of him, yes ..."

Lee swallowed heavily. "Then we should get out of here. Right now. We're not equipped to tangle with something like that!"

"I agree," Miho said, urgently, packing up in the darkness.

###

Yokohama would not normally be Aslaug's first choice of hiding place. Or even the third or fourth. In fact, it would probably come somewhere down around eightieth place under normal circumstances. She didn't understand Japanese, and she understood even less of the culture. Old furs had strong codes of honor ... but of a code she didn't quite grasp. Young furs either seemed to try to live in a comic book or they were so busy that the equine nearly had a heart-attack simply from watching them trying to get to work.

Quite frankly, she just didn't get the fascination many westerners had with Japan. It was probably a nice enough country and culture, but it was so utterly alien she simply couldn't grasp it. But perhaps that was the very reason for the fascination.

Looking up at a Pepsi Cola billboard outside the window, Aslaug shook her head. Westerners wanted to try Japanese culture, and the Japanese wanted western ...

Sayings about grass and fences sprang to mind.

Varghöss was happily snoozing in the corner. Aslaug had never been to Yokohama before, as it was. It wasn't exactly a hotbed of heathen activity, after all. But there was a safehouse in Yokohama, and it was very, very far away from where the terrorist attack had taken place. She needed to think and lay low, and this was as good a place as any to do so.

Most of all, she needed to figure out where Joe was. Something had taken him but it wasn't something hostile. There had been no blood and no sign of a fight by the fireplace when she woke up. But Joe wouldn't simply leave, and he most certainly wouldn't leave his hat.

For a few moments, she had worried if the events that had taken place had driven her Coyote friend over the edge. If he had walked off in desperation or if he'd been too distraught to know what he was doing.

That thought had lasted all of five seconds, and she was still ashamed of it. Joe Latrans was one of the strongest, bravest furs she knew. He wasn't about to simply walk off in a stupor or do something foolish to himself.

No, she had to find him, somehow.

Someone came through the door and Aslaug leaned her forehead against the window. She had hoped no one would have to see her in this getup, but apparently, agents were using the place.

Turning around, she folded her arms across her chest as the inner door opened. She leaned back against the windowsill and observed as two furs came in. A male and a female. The male was a scrawny looking canid with some wolf in him ... and ringed, fluffy tail, almost like that of a raccoon. The female was a white tigress, moving with a dancer's grace.

Aslaug knew from simply looking at them that she was the better fighter of the two. A valuable bit of information if things got ugly.

The two newcomers immediately noticed her and stopped dead in their tracks.

"Who are you?" the female asked and pulled a gun.

The male looked about to pass out from the shock of realizing there was someone else there. He was about to speak ...

Then he saw Varghöss sleeping in the corner and took a step backwards. "Miho, we don't ... want to fight this one," he said, nervously. "Look."

The tigress cast a cursory glance at the sleeping beast in the corner of the room and raised an eyebrow, before looking back to the equine. "That depends on who she is and who she works for!"

Aslaug nodded, slowly ... gesturing with a single finger towards the gun. "As soon as you put that thing back in its holster, we'll talk. I don't take particularly kindly to being threatened into telling someone my name."

Miho narrowed her eyes, but the gun stayed out. It wasn't pointed towards Aslaug, but it was clear the tigress would use it if she had to. "Given what we've just seen and heard, I'm not too inclined to politeness!" she admitted.

"Erh ... Miho? Honestly? It's waking up!" Lee whimpered and pointed to the corner where the massive form of Varghöss was standing up. The enormous wolf had a hungry, hateful look in his eyes.

Aslaug shook her head. "No Varghöss. They're not for eating," she said.

Her mount still curled back his upper lip to show arguably the largest incisors Lee could remember ever seeing. He backed up towards the exit, leaving only Miho in the living room.

"Miho, please. Don't fight her. Nothing mortal rides that kind of creature! It's an oni! It's GOT to be!" he wheezed.

Aslaug raised an eyebrow. "Last time I checked, he was a wolf. No idea what an oni is. I've never been to Japan before."

Miho finally seemed to realize the equine wasn't going to attack. She packed the gun away and nodded, slowly. "Alright. I'm Miho Shirahashi. And since you're here, I'm assuming you're an Agent as well."

"My name is Aslaug and I haven't been an agent for a while," the Valkyrie said, truthfully.

Lee peeked back around Miho with eyes as wide as saucers. "But one doesn't retire ... we were told all about that!"

"I didn't retire. I got promoted," Aslaug explained. "I'm a Valkyrie."

Miho looked slightly confused. "Some kind of spirit?"

Lee shook his head in disbelief. "Whoa. A heathen goddess, this far away from Scandinavia?"

"Minor goddess," Aslaug pointed out. "*Very* minor. I just gather the worthy dead. I'm impressed you know that, by the way. I can't imagine more than a hundred heathens ever visited this country, and all in very recent times."

Shrugging, Lee smiled. "I grew up in a place called Applethwaite in England. It was part of the Danelaw," he explained.

Aslaug nodded. "That wasn't established until after my time, but I can see why you'd know, then. Anyway, since we're all here, maybe we can help each other?"

"We've got a Christian Oni to worry about. Know anything about that?" Miho asked.

"Let me guess. Oni means "very bad thing"?" Aslaug asked.

Both the tigress and the strange wolf nodded.

Varghöss plodded closer, indifferently sniffing up and down the side of the weird wolf that had just arrived, trying to figure out what kind of creature he really was. Lee, for his part, looked like he was somewhere between a pair of wet pants and catatonia from fright. He didn't move an inch.

"He won't eat you, but I wouldn't try to pet him," Aslaug chuckled.

Varghöss played along and growled playfully, tugging on Lee's jacket with his teeth. Lee, in turn, closed his eyes and began to pray under his breath ... very rapidly, in Japanese.

Aslaug didn't laugh, though she was tempted to. Instead, she looked at Miho again. "Strangely enough, I'm hunting a certain Christian ... Oni ... myself. May be a

coincidence, of course," she said. "First, though, I need to find my partner who's gotten himself lost. Oh, and I do need your help with something, if you don't mind."

"Who's your partner, what does he look like, and tell me more about your hunt," Miho said and gestured for the chairs and the sofa, for Aslaug to join her. "And what specifically do you need help with?"

The Valkyrie didn't like the idea of moving much. She wasn't used to moving in an outfit like the one she was wearing.

"My partner is called Joseph ... or more commonly Joe ... Latrans. He's a coyote. Strong, but not a young fur anymore. He's got an impressive temper when something bothers him and being an Agent really, *really* bothers him. If you find him, he's probably not too happy about having lost his hat, either. As for my hunt, it's going to be on hiatus until I get some other clothes. Something I can actually move and fight in! My friend over there, trying to make your partner wet himself for fun, found this for me, but good grief ..." Aslaug explained, gesturing towards Varghöss.

Miho smirked and looked over her shoulder. Varghöss had more or less managed to pull Lee to the floor.

"Oh, I don't know really. The Goth look is classic. It *is* customarily worn with black fur, though, I admit ..."

Aslaug rolled her eyes. "I don't do skirts very well and if you will pardon me, I look like something out of a novel about draug ... I mean vampires, written for consumptive teenaged girls with a death-fetish and multiple eating disorders."

Again, Miho smirked. "Well ... yes ... you do, I admit. I'll find you something more comfortable. No skirts, then."

"Blue jeans and a plain T-shirt will be just fine, thank you," the equine mumbled. "I feel like an idiot."

Varghöss didn't notice the criticism of his choice of clothing. He was way too busy playing with a petrified Lee.

###

He had long since lost track of time, but Joe hadn't stopped walking. He was tired, even exhausted, but he was still moving. Unfortunately, he had no idea what he was moving

towards. Or even if he was moving towards something as much as he was moving away from something else.

He was hot and cold at the same time and he had long since passed through the stage of being thirsty and come out parched. Ash was sticking in his fur and far worse, in his throat, and he had a stinging sensation of pain right behind his eyes. The kind of headache normally reserved for migraines and he didn't even have an aspirin, let alone a glass of water to wash it down with.

So this was the land of Nod?

There was something entirely wrong about this, and the coyote really wished he could collect his thoughts enough to figure out what it was, but it became harder and harder with every step he took, and still, all he saw were endless rows of ash-dunes, stretching out in front of him.

"Why me?" he wheezed. His voice sounded dreadful, and he finally realized his legs would carry him no further. He sank down on the ash and sat there, staring at an uncaring, endless sky.

"Why anyone?" he asked. It wasn't just about him. His questions were much deeper than simply about him feeling sorry for himself.

As he sat there, unaware for how long, he suddenly realized he wasn't alone. He couldn't find the strength to even raise his head to look, but he knew he wasn't alone.

"Unless ..." he said, then coughed and hacked, spitting blackened phlegm out into the dune. "Let me try that again. Unless you brought a bottle of water, or unless you're Aslaug, I suggest you sod off! I'm in a rotten mood, whoever you are!"

A bottle of water appeared in front of Joe and he grasped it gleefully, unscrewing the lid and emptying it in one long, deep gulp.

"Thank you ..." he managed.

"You're welcome," the answer came. The voice was unknown to him.

Finally he looked up. He wasn't quite sure what he was looking at, exactly. One of those ... heeoomahns ... apparently. It was clearly male, wearing a pair of comfortable, expensive slacks and a black, polonecked shirt under a long, black duster. His hair was grey, his teeth almost impossibly white and his eyes were mischievous and inquisitive. Joe had absolutely no idea who it was ...

"Who are you then?" the coyote asked, somehow dreading the answer already.

The creature smiled benignly at him. "It doesn't matter who I am. What matters is who you are."

Joe raised an eyebrow. "But I know who I am. I'm Joe Latrans, pissed off Coyote extraordinaire!"

The creature grinned. Joe got the impression of genuine approval. "Good answer, but hardly an exhaustive one, wouldn't you agree? There's more to any living being than what is immediately apparent, is there not?"

Joe nodded and scratched his neck. "I suppose so. You've got me at a disadvantage, though. You know my name, I don't know yours."

"But that's the thing, really. I don't actually have a name," the creature answered. "I'd tell you but I don't have one."

"Can't you just ... pick one, then?" Joe asked.

"I could, but what would that accomplish?"

"I'd have something to call you apart from "you there"."

The creature laughed, heartily. Then he patted Joe's shoulder in what the coyote felt was a genuinely friendly gesture and smiled. "I suppose you can call me Lou then," he said.

Joe nodded and sighed. "I figured," he mumbled. "Look, whatever your job offer is, I'm not interested. I've had it up to here with the entire cosmic conflict-thing and I'm certainly not going to work for the opposition just because I happen to think God's an unreasonable, unfair and uncaring bastard!"

Lou smirked. "Now there's one I hadn't considered ... God the Bastard. Without parents, that's kinda hard, isn't it? Anyway, I'm not here to offer you work."

Joe raised an eyebrow. "Then why are you here, giving me water and making chit-chat? Isn't this the point where I say something like "Get thee behind me, lest I blow thy kneecaps to Hell"?"

"What a truly interesting choice of words, Mr. Latrans," Lou said with a smirk. "Now ... where do you actually think you *are*?"

"The letters in the ash said I was in the land of Nod," the coyote said and shrugged. "I dunno. I'm starting to wonder whether to believe everything I read."

Snickering, Lou looked around. "You know, I don't like you much, Mr. Latrans. We're on opposite sides, after all, but I can appreciate your wit. No, you're not in Nod. Nod is ... everything out there. The world as you know it is the Land of Nod."

"Meaning that God doesn't watch nor doesn't care? I already figured that bit out, myself," Joe grumbled. "Look, I'm not in the mood for a friendly conversation with the devil. Thanks for the water but no thanks!"

"Aww, you hurt my ittybitty feelings ... such as they are," Lou said and made his bottom lip quiver dramatically. "Frankly, I couldn't care less what you're in the mood for. I'm right here. Deal with it."

Joe rolled his eyes. "So this is a test of some kind? Another idiotic test of my faith?"

"Not really."

"Then what?"

Lou gestured out across the vastness of the dunes. "You could try thinking for a moment, Joe Latrans. Where are you, exactly?"

"In Hell."

"Not quite. But not a bad guess. You're only two letters off."

Joe felt the gears grind in his head and he finally nodded. "I'm in *my* Hell," he said.

Lou grinned widely and swirled around himself, reappearing out of the move wearing a sparkly suit and a bad haircut. "DING DONG! We have a winner! Tell him what he's won, won't you, Lilith?"

Joe felt himself swung around as if standing on a revolving platform. Behind him was a scene that could've been taken out of a badly staged episode of "Wheel of Fortune", complete with female heeoomahn in a white suit and glittery teeth, pulling a cord.

Behind it was nothing at all and Joe was spun back around again to face Lou, once more dressed as he had been at the beginning of the conversation.

"Very funny," Joe grumbled and shuddered. "Ash dunes and "Wheel of Fortune". So what is this supposed to mean?"

Lou shrugged and lit up a cigarette, blowing a smoke-ring and sticking his free hand in his pocket. "I think you're clever enough to work that out for yourself," he said. "I'm just here to enjoy the look on your face when you finally get it. Allow an old-timer like me his pleasures, won't you? I've got few enough as there is."

Joe craned his neck to the side and pulled his paws up to his chin, making a motion as if playing a very, very small violin. "Oh how I pity you," he said, acidically.

"See? There's that wit again. Such a shame we've got to be on opposite sides in this, but don't worry. I'm not going to insult your intelligence by trying to convert you."

"If you're looking for gratitude, you're in for a long wait."

Lou smiled brightly and shrugged. "I've got nothing else but time, Mr. Latrans," he chuckled. "But as I said, I'm here to witness what happens when revelation hits you."

Joe was starting to realize he'd only get rid of this creature by figuring something out. Such as why he was here, maybe? No, that was too simple.

And he wasn't feeling any more kindly inclined towards God, either, so ... what was this all about?

The words from the cave came back to him, reminding him that the Kingdom of God was within himself, and all around him. But ...

But the world was Nod.

Outside the Eye of God.

His eyes went wide. He opened his mouth to speak, but no sound came out.

Lou's smile grew wider and his eyes narrower, and Joe realized the creature relished this moment. *Treasured* it.

"You're starting to understand," the devil said.

Joe nodded. "I understand," he said. "The whole world ... outside the Eye of God. Everything, everyone ... all we do ... all we say. All our best efforts, for nothing, because God isn't watching."

"Oh, He peeks in once in a while I'm sure," Lou chuckled.

Joe nodded slowly. "I do understand," he said, in a hoarse tone of voice, slowly pulling the gun from his belt.

"You know, self-slaughter isn't really in favor with God either," Lou said, blowing smoke again and tossing the rest of the cigarette aside.

Joe shook his head. "Who said I was going to shoot *myself*?"

He snapped the gun up and pulled the trigger. It wasn't as if he could actually kill the devil, but if this was a test, he would be damned sure he'd show that he wasn't on Hell's side either!

The bullet stopped in mid-flight and Lou raised an eyebrow in surprise. "Goodness me. I never thought you had it in you," he said, and then vanished.

Joe growled. Just in time for the ash dunes to vanish all around him.

He fell.

He roared in frustration.

He passed out.