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II – I.D.S.

She had been out of the woods for a short while. Not long, admittedly, but she found that getting back to the world wasn't nearly as hard as she had expected. And getting around ... well ... getting around was *easy* nowadays.

She reached out and scratched her gigantic mount behind the ear. Smiling, she realized most furs thought of Valkyries as mythological beings, riding magnificent steeds to the battlefield to collect the dead.

Quite often, they also thought of Valkyries as grotesquely overweight, wearing ridiculous little helmets with horns on them.

And for some bizarre reason, *singing* was often involved. Loud singing. In German.

She rode a wolf. A huge ... huge beast, easily the size of a horse, with perfect grey fur, a keen animalistic intelligence lurking behind its eyes and long, sharp fangs. It was a wild creature ... and she knew no other being in the universe could ride it.

Each Valkyrie had her own mount, as much an extension of themselves as their spear. Most Valkyries rode horses ... some, like her, rode wolves.

There was never any singing involved.

Nor stupidly horned helmets.

And while most of the group was robust and some even heavy set, none were as fat as the ladies usually singing on stages, playing Valkyries. It would break the back of the strongest warhorse to carry such a weight around, for one thing.

In fact, at the moment, Aslaug was wearing a pair of black jeans, a black T-shirt and a leather biker jacket without studs.

Her fur had been dyed black as well ... only a day or so before. In fact, if it wasn't for her still blonde mane with the dark stripe down the middle, she'd have been a black-on-black spot on top of the mountain.

She wasn't armed ... but then again, she was never unarmed, either. Her spear was always within reach, and the rest of her weapons were tied to the wolf's saddle. Not that she needed a saddle, but it *was* slightly more comfortable, and it gave her something to tie her stuff to. And the wolf allowed it. Because it was her. Not anyone else.

Aslaug nodded to herself and looked out from the top of the mountain. She was in the right place. She just didn't know why yet. But something told her she'd find out soon enough.

"Easy Varghöss ... we'll figure this one out yet," she said and patted her mount's nose. The wolf had been quite at home in the wilds in Canada, where she had lived before her "return to the world", as she thought of it. None of her old friends knew of him, and she liked to keep it that way at the moment.

Not that she didn't trust them, but Varghöss really didn't like strangers much ... and he bit. Hard. Strictly speaking, he could take the arm off an Agent if said agent wasn't careful, and seeing as Varghöss wasn't exactly a normal wolf ... healing something like that might take a dreadfully long time.

Months, at best.

She had come to understand a lot of things over the years. Immortality was a ruse. When even Gods could die, immortality did not exist. There was no such thing as "immortality" ... only "very, very, very bloody hard to kill".

She also knew that it wasn't a blessing. Furs weren't meant to live forever. No one was. She had never met an agent who didn't eventually tire of their lot in life. Who didn't eventually either ask for retirement and a chance to die of old age, or who sought out their own destruction rather than make that request.

Some went mad. Many did in fact.

After seeing six or seven generations of family pass away from old age, being unable to do a damned thing to stop it ...

Or those who realized they were passing on their "curse" to their children.

Those were usually the worst. When they understood that eventually, the Gods or their dimension would either step in and simply make it impossible for that entire family to have children anymore ... or in the case of some of the more capricious deities out there, simply kill off the offspring wholesale.

Agents were not meant to spread their curse to others. Most didn't. Most never had children ... there was no time for it, after all. And most of those who did have children did not pass the curse on. But some did.

That was when someone like Aslaug had to step in. Eventually. The universe ... any universe ... was a place for mortals. Not immortals. If immortals procreated and passed the curse on, then their children could spread it further ... and further ... and further.

Some agents who did were ... removed. Some were killed off outright. If they had done good service, they and all of their curse-ridden progeny might simply find themselves unable to have children.

And the message was always delivered by a messenger. The Christian, Jewish and Muslim God used angels. The hindu deities used apsaras. Buddhists got a visit from a Boddhisatva. Shintoists would suddenly find a respected and revered ancestor in their living room.

The norse gods sent a valkyrie.

She did not like that thought. At all.

At least she wouldn't have to actually do any killing but she would be sent to deliver terrible, damning news to friends and comrades in arms. It was simply part of the Duty. Capital D, the way she saw it.

Varghöss could feel Aslaug's sadness and inner turmoil and, despite his ferocious nature, he nudged her side gently with his nose. She was the only fur anywhere he liked and cared for, and Aslaug felt privileged for it. He was not an intelligent creature as such, but he was much more than simply an animal, and that he cared for her made her feel better about the whole mess.

Maybe this was why most of the rest of the Valkyries tended to stick together. Somewhat less than a true deity, but so much more than a mortal or an Agent. *Dísa* ... that was what she was. But not a true *Dísa*. Certainly not mortal and certainly not an Agent either.

Somewhat less and yet something more ...

She leaned against Varghöss and sighed. "All I know is that I'm supposed to be here. I know something is hunting them. Something vile. And I know I have to bring someone home, my friend. I just don't know who or when."

This wasn't even the North American continent. She was standing on a mountain top in the Alps, overlooking a deep valley. It was wooded, and she could see a small hamlet down there. Probably no more than thirty houses. Maybe forty if she assumed some where hidden by the trees. Rickety buildings, they were.

The homes of ordinary, mortal furs, living ordinary, mortal lives.

This was where she had to be.

Or rather, down there. The sun was setting. Soon, it would be time.

Varghöss was restless. His fangs were bared. There was something evil out there ... and he could smell it.

Practically taste it.

But he wouldn't go after it.

He would stay by his rider ...

###

Father Ghislain was kneeling in prayer in front of the altar at the church in Petit Vermont. He had been the Priest there for two decades now, and while his congregation was tiny, it was faithful and he considered himself blessed by the Lord to be allowed to serve in such a place.

When he was young, a mere second year student at the Seminar, he had been told he could go as far as he wanted in the Church. He might even become a bishop or ... God willing ... a *cardinal*.

That had practically scared him out of his calling right then and there. He didn't want that sort of thing, and he very earnestly tried to explain that to Father Mathias who had been his tutor and supervisor. His peers had thought it false modesty, as they all wanted to make a *career* for themselves in the Church.

But Ghislain just wanted to serve ordinary furs and help them find their way to God. He was just one fur ... one lapine, out of billions of furs on the planet. Why should he feel special in any way? All he wanted was to ease life's burdens a little for those around him. Wasn't that enough? Shouldn't it be? He had thought so, at least.

He still did. But he had learned a thing or two since then, about how the world really worked. His youthful optimism and idealism had been tempered by profound realism.

God was in all things ... and for furs to find their way to Him, they did not need Holy Mother Church. It was fine if they came, and if they asked his advice he would gladly give it, but he had seen good furs who would never dream of setting foot in a Church, praying intensely and earnestly ... doing good, Godly deeds, not for praise or rewards but because it was right and good. And he had seen others ... furs who attended Mass every week ... for what they really were. Greedy, selfish creatures.

And all the spectrum in between.

God surely loved variety, but Father Ghislain was just a mortal fur, and he wished he could do more.

The Church did not know how he truly felt. His thoughts were heresy and he knew this. Only through the power of Holy Mother Church could any fur find salvation. This was dogma ... this had been dogma for *centuries*. Ever since the Great Schism of 1054 in fact.

Father Ghislain knew his church history. Better than most, in fact.

He also knew that his small, rather humble church was not the first built in that very spot. No one else knew, though.

He sometimes wondered if he should tell someone, but ... they wouldn't understand. So he kept the secret and took comfort in it. Maybe some day, someone would come who would understand.

And as he prayed, he felt at ease. God might not hear one fur's prayer, but at least he was praying earnestly and sincerely. And not for himself, either. Odile had come to him earlier ... the poor thing. She was a rather plain girl, and she was desperately in love with

the son of one of the villagers of Petit Vermont, and he had no eyes for her whatsoever. So she had asked for advice, and asked if he would pray for her.

So he did. He prayed, hoping to help Odile as best he could.

But there was evil out there tonight and it was difficult to concentrate.

He could feel it.

Father Ghislain knew things ... he had read things, seen things ... felt things ... that most furs wouldn't feel in their entire lives. He understood the world. All because of what he knew about the location of the church of Petit Vermont.

Before he had come to the village, he knew little or nothing about the greater aspect of the world. He had faith ... oh he certainly had faith aplenty, but now, he *knew* things. Things that Holy Mother Church wouldn't want him to say to *anyone*. Things Holy Mother Church would openly deny if he *did* say to anyone. Not because the Church was evil or wanted to deceive furs, but because it would try to protect the masses.

Father Ghislain understood that. He just ... didn't agree with it.

But he still prayed for Odile, and he meant every word he spoke, hoping God would hear him.

"Light more candles, Priest. It's cold in your Church," a voice said behind him.

He didn't stop praying until he was done. Then he got up and turned around to face a veritable giant of a femme. She easily stood over a head and a half taller than him ... black as midnight except for her hair which was blonde with a black stripe. An equine ...

They were so rare these days. And there were certainly none in Petit Vermont, or even in any of the neighboring villages. The equines of France had been practically wiped out by the Black Death, and very few had settled there later. The entire equine population of the whole country probably numbered less than two thousand. And this one ... didn't speak French.

She spoke English. With an accent.

"I would wish you God's peace ... but somehow, I don't think that'd go over well with you ... would it, Valkyrie?" he asked, sagging a little.

Aslaug smiled crookedly. "Probably better with me than with most of my sisters. I hold no particular grudge against your God anymore. Just a goodly number of the old geezer's followers, if you get my meaning?"

Father Ghislain swallowed hard and tried to ignore the fact that the equine had just referred to the Lord as "an old geezer". "You are ... here because of me?" he asked, quietly trying to come to terms with the fact that he might be facing the bringer of his demise.

"Yes, in a way I think I am. But I am not here to hurt you so please, do stop shaking," Aslaug said and shrugged her jacket into place. "And may I ask how you know what I am? That's ... curious."

"That's a long explanation, I'm afraid."

"Give me the abbreviated version."

The lapine smiled apologetically. "I'm not sure there is one," he said and sighed. "This church ... this building ... is not the first one to be built here. Something which I discovered many years ago, not long after I came here."

Aslaug raised an eyebrow and nodded. "So this is an ancient holy site? That would explain why I feel like my hooves are tingling."

"Is that good or bad?"

"Neither. It just happens to be."

Father Ghislain nodded and adjusted his robes slightly. "May I at least offer you a seat? I mean ... as you said, the church is a bit chilly."

Aslaug took a moment before answering. There was no threat from the lapine. None whatsoever. He was a genuinely decent, caring fur who lived as unselfishly as anyone could expect from any mortal. She ... simply knew that. Which was confusing to her. She shouldn't know that kind of detail about anyone, least of all a holy fur of the Catholic Church.

"Very well. Let us go someplace slightly warmer," she said and followed the priest as he beckoned for her to follow.

It wasn't a long walk. Father Ghislain took her around the altar and down some stairs to what she expected would be crypts ... but which turned out to be the remains of an older church.

It wasn't immediately obvious and the only reason Aslaug knew was because the tingling in her hooves became more pronounced.

She narrowed her eyes to compensate for the poor lighting until Father Ghislain lit a large candle ... then another ... and then another.

It wasn't a large room. Not at all. But it was comfortably warm, without there being any real reason for it. The candles had only just been lit but the room was already comfortably warm.

"You do realize ..." Aslaug said as she looked around, at the simple room, "That you are in very, very grave danger, don't you?"

"I probably am. I am here with you, am I not?" the lapine said and sat down.

"That is not what I mean. I honestly mean you no harm. But the Church would call you a heretic and while they don't burn furs anymore, *you* are too dangerous for them to simply let live."

Father Ghislain smiled wearily. "They would call me a heretic, yes ... but I just do what I think is right. I try to help the furs living here, as best I can."

"A noble enough goal in itself, I suppose. What I wonder about is ... how I know these things? How do I know you're a heretic? How do I know you're in danger? How do I know this place is important to what I am trying to do?"

"Why are you here, then?" Father Ghislain asked, calmly, unable to answer the equine's frustrated questions. "If not to kill me."

Aslaug shrugged. "I am here to learn something. To find a portion of an answer to a riddle."

"What is the riddle?" the lapine asked. "Maybe I can help then?"

Chuckling, the equine shook her head. "That's part of the problem. I don't know what the riddle is yet. I just know I have to find some of the answer here. In this tiny hamlet, and I knew it had to be here, in this Church. Good grief, do you have any idea how strange it is for me to sit here? I sacked Christian churches while I lived. And this place is almost that old ..."

"Maybe even older. Look," Father Ghislain said and pointed to a block of stone, supporting the nave where the altar and crucifix seemed to have belonged, originally.

Aslaug got up and looked at it. "This is ... really, really old. I see an image of a fish here. And ... three letters inscribed into it. I.D.S.," she mumbled. "Iesu, Dominus, Salvator."

"You know more than you let on," the lapine chuckled.

Aslaug blinked and scratched her neck. "Erh ... not really. I didn't know that until just now, looking at it. I don't even speak Latin, but I know what that means. It's his name, then the word for "Master" and then the word for "Savior". And mind you, normally I don't even *speak* his name. I call him Whitechrist."

"May I ask why?"

"Because he was always depicted wearing white, when I first saw images of him. And the priests made furs wear white robes when they dunked them under the water for baptisms."

Father Ghislain nodded sadly. "Indeed. The strange thing is ... I preach the Catholic gospel, and I perform their ceremonies, but ... "

"But you are not really one of them anymore. You are hiding amongst them ... in plain sight. Brave. Very brave."

"It wasn't even intentional. I only found my beliefs after I found this place."

"How come?" Aslaug asked and turned to face the lapine again.

Father Ghislain shrugged. "I didn't find this an empty room, Valkyrie. I found ... insight. And peace. And a few items, left behind."

"Can I see them?"

"Of course."

###

The forest thickening just outside Petit Vermont was a dark and foreboding place. In fact, it was the kind of place that could give rise to nightmares, even in the bravest of creatures.

Varghöss had never had a nightmare, and he wasn't even aware of what such a thing was. But he was uneasy. There was something in the woods with him. It wasn't powerful ... but it was evil, and it was not simply in one direction.

It was all around him.

He tried to keep his front towards it, but that was impossible, since the feeling of pure evil emanated from several directions at once. He wanted to back into the clear ... leave the trees, but that was problematic too. He wasn't supposed to be seen. He wasn't allowed.

He growled deep in his throat and crouched. Ready to attack. Ready to defend himself with all his considerable might if he needed to.

Something was looking at him. Observing him. But it didn't seem to come any closer. It was almost as if it was taunting him, trying to lure him into making a foolish, ill advised attack.

Most of all ... like it was trying to lure him deeper into the woods.

He might have ... if he hadn't been what he was. Instead, he kept all his muscles pulled taught. If whatever was in there came closer, it'd have to contend with him.

###

The walk through Petit Vermont was swift, but unsettling. It was only a small hamlet, and Aslaug realized she had been largely correct in her estimate of its size, made on the mountain-top. About forty houses. Only one shop. The road wasn't even tarmaced. Most of the houses looked as if they had been there for centuries. Everything was darkened too ... like the locals were hiding their presence from something.

The wind was picking up.

And she felt very uneasy. Not for herself, but for Varghöss. She realized the great wolf was in serious danger, and she quietly bade him move back to the mountain-top from where they had first observed Petit Vermont.

The feeling of impending danger lessened immediately. She didn't need to turn and look, either, to make sure he had made it away. She would know if he hadn't.

But soon the feeling of danger came crawling back. It oozed over the gravel road and tried to seep up into her through her hooves. It was invasive ... and insistent ...

"Is this normal?" she asked, not even bothering to explain what she was talking about. She knew the priest would understand.

Father Ghislain nodded. "It is. A couple of nights a week. It has been like this for many years, actually. You get used to it after a while. Like the locals. They just switch off their lights and go to bed early."

"One should never grow so accustomed to such a feeling that one disregards it that casually," the equine said. "Something out there wants blood. A lot of blood."

"I know. We all feel it. But it never enters Petit Vermont itself."

"Why is that, do you know?"

The priest nodded. "I think I do. It's the reason why we never expand. Why no one moves here, and why no one builds a new house on the outskirts of town. Local stories have it that some furs tried, years ago. Before my time. They found the place idyllic, apparently. They built their house ... the presence stayed away while the building went on ... and then on the first night after they moved in, the presence took them. The whole family. Father, mother, three children and a pet kaht. All gone overnight."

"And the house too, I take it?" Aslaug asked.

"Not a brick left," Father Ghislain said, sadly. "Look, you know a thing or two about churches it seems."

Aslaug shrugged. "Not until I got here, really. What are you referring to?"

They were coming up on a small, cozy looking home and Aslaug knew instinctively that the priest lived there. It was half-timbered, with wattle and daub filling the spaces between the tarred timbers. The rest of the wall was black. The roof was tiled, but everything about it looked ancient.

There was no light burning in the house, and Aslaug immediately knew something was terribly wrong.

"Wait," she mumbled. She focused for the briefest moment, and her spear shimmered into existence in her paw.

The priest stopped and looked at her in confusion. But she kept her eyes squarely on the door.

"Step back ... slowly," she said.

Father Ghislain did, and not a second too soon, as a black, shapeless entity burst through the door. It didn't make a sound. An eerie, horrible silence surrounded it, even

as the wood splintered. Even as the priest opened his mouth in what Aslaug could only guess was a shriek of fear. He fell to the ground just in time for the black thing to pass over him.

She hefted the spear with both paws and rolled sideways as soon as she realized the trajectory of the entity. It brought her into perfect alignment and she came up on one knee in time to stab upwards.

She could *feel* the entity mocking her. Clearly, it had no idea what it was up against. Not until the spear thrust into it ... and it realized that this was no ordinary weapon. It thrashed and flailed as Aslaug withdrew her weapon and jumped backwards. She changed to a one-pawed grip, and let the spear slide downwards until she was holding it near the base. Then she swung it. Once, twice ... three times, each time the tip ... sharper than any razorblade ... slashed across the black creature.

It looked vaguely like a hunting kali. Vaguely. The only part of it that wasn't black-on-black were its eyes and fangs ... both were whiter than a clean sheet of paper. It was entirely unsettling to watch and the priest had rolled onto his front, covering his head in terror.

The creature's body-language told Aslaug all she needed to know. The triple slash had hurt. A lot.

It backed up, but it had trouble supporting its own weight on its front legs. Aslaug's initial thrust had skewered it, and then the slashes had cut into its legs, making it difficult to stand. So it did the only the only thing it could. It used its unwounded hind legs to propel itself into a mighty, powerful jump, trying to pin the armed equine.

Aslaug smiled.

That was exactly what she had wanted. She dropped down on one knee, planting the spear in the ground and letting the beast pass directly overhead. Directly over the tip of the spear.

Or ... not quite *over* the tip.

As it landed, it collapsed and skidded ten-fifteen feet, its innards spilling out. They were as black as the rest of its body.

The valkyrie unceremoniously walked up to it and rammed the spear through its head, and sound came back to the world.

"Too easy," she muttered. "This thing wasn't alone."

Father Ghislain was still crouched on the ground, shivering like a leaf in the wind. Aslaug walked up to him and gently but firmly helped him back to his feet. "I need you to show me what it is you found under the church, and I need you to show me *right now*," she said, insistently.

The lapine's eyes were as wide as saucers and he was still trembling all over. "They ... that ... never before ..." he tried.

"They never came into town before?" Aslaug tried.

"No. They couldn't. This is holy ground," the priest whimpered. "That's what I was getting at. This entire hamlet is built on what was once a graveyard. Long, long ago before any written records exist."

"Then how do you know?"

"Graveyards are laid usually around churches. This one was just ... very large."

Aslaug nodded and looked around. There didn't seem to be more of the beasts around for the moment but she knew it hadn't been alone. And the kill had been much, much too easy.

"How old do you reckon it is?" she asked. "The graveyard, that is."

"It predates the Great Schism. When the eastern and western churches split into two separate entities in 1054, I mean. It's ... it's a long story. Difficult to explain in detail. I think it's from the dark ages. Merovingian ..."

"I know what *that* means. The Merovingians were considered old even where I came from," Aslaug mumbled. "They hadn't been Frankish kings for over a century, but there were still stories going around about them."

"It's said they descended from Jesus Christ himself!" Father Ghislain said and swallowed.

Aslaug smiled, crookedly. "They didn't."

"How can you be so sure?"

"I've met him a few times. Nice guy, really. Pretty sick and tired of how his message gets perverted. Rather sad, most of the time, because of that. But likeable enough."

Father Ghislain blinked and tried to bend his mind around what the equine had just said. It was impossible to really grasp, though.

"Why was that thing here? It can't walk on holy ground! I mean ... it shouldn't be able to!" he tried, pointing a trembling finger to the dead beast.

"That thing isn't part of your Christian belief system. It could care less about your holy ground. It's one of ours," Aslaug said and finally wiped the tip of her spear clean. "And it is here for something. I will know what it is when I see it."

"Can you take it away then?"

"The beast or the item it was looking for?"

"Both, preferably," Father Ghislain said, swallowing. "Come, I've got the items in my house."

Aslaug nodded and turned, following the priest inside.

Nothing more was hiding in there, she was certain of that. But she could feel the evil in the woods around Petit Vermont moving in.

Fast.

She only had a few minutes at best.

Father Ghislain ran into his living room, turning on the light and opened an armoire, before standing aside to let the equine look.

Most of the items in front of her were of no importance. Or rather, any archeologist worth his salt would probably sell his soul for any of them, Aslaug realized, but to her, they were just things. All except two.

The first was a small bronze circle with a cross inside it. The priest probably thought it was a Christian symbol ... perhaps a halo or somesuch. Aslaug had seen images of Christian holy furs with such a symbol placed behind their heads. She always found that particularly amusing.

This wasn't a Christian symbol. It was heathen.

A sunwheel.

This one seemed to be half of a brooch. Possibly a clasp for a cape. More importantly, it almost throbbed under her fingers. It recognized her ... but Aslaug had never seen that particular item before. It simply recognized what she was ... who she was.

The other was a splint of metal. It was no larger than a small knife.

It had been sharp once.

Long, long ago.

"You don't want either of these to be here. Trust me," she said and picked up the two pieces.

Father Ghislain nodded. "These are the things they are after?"

"Yes."

"Then please ... take them away from here, Valkyrie."

She nodded and took both items out of the armoire. "I'll do that. I have to leave. They are on their way even now."

"More of them?"

"Or worse. Probably worse. Thank you, priest ... for helping me with this."

Father Ghislain shuddered and looked around, fearfully. "Worse?"

"That beast out there? It's nothing. It is meant to kill mortals. Not creatures like me," Aslaug said and grabbed a pillow from the couch. She tore the casing off it and wrapped the two small items in the cloth, before pocketing them.

"What about me?" the priest asked.

"Oh, I reckon you'll wake up in the morning, thinking this was all a dream. And you'll probably have forgotten all about these two items, too. Listen, you are a good fur, priest. I don't care about the heresy-issue. That's a Catholic thing ... not for me, in other words. You try to do the right thing, and that is what matters. Sleep well tonight, and continue to help the locals as best you can."

"What is your name, Valkyrie?" Father Ghislain asked.

"It doesn't matter. You won't remember me in the morning," Aslaug answered and clasped a paw on the lapine's shoulder in a brief gesture of gratitude. Then she turned and hurried out, without another word.

The evil in the woods was very close now.

Very ... very close.

And she had no idea why the two items in her pocket were so important.

Varghöss was waiting for her. He had come into town ... and while that was risky, if someone saw him, the night was dark enough that such an event was extremely unlikely. Especially since the only light in Petit Vermont came from the priest's living room.

And he switched it off, too.

Swinging herself onto Varghöss' back, Aslaug nudged his flanks with her hooves. "Let's be somewhere else," she whispered ... and felt the wind in her mane as the gigantic beast bolted over the rooftops and away.

###

Joe Latrans picked up his cell phone and hit the connect-button, answering the call. "It's himself speaking," he grumbled into the receiver. He'd had a rotten night, full of strange dreams and the day hadn't been any better so far. For one thing, his car was on strike. He'd tried everything short of getting down on his knees and begging it to work but nooooo ... it was *not* cooperating.

"I need your help, Joe," came Aslaug's voice from the other end of the line. "Badly."

Joe had retired from "active duty" years ago, but he'd go to the ends of the Earth for his friends, and Aslaug's voice left no question that she was serious.

"Sure. What can I do?" he said and closed the car door, leaning against the hood.

"I need a good Christian ... who's not afraid of things getting messy."

"I haven't done the whole jumping around realities thing for ages, though, filly? I'll help but don't you think either Aramis or Tigermark would be better choices?" the coyote said and removed his hat momentarily to run a paw through his hair.

"I'm not sure either of them would understand what is going on, and catching Aramis is very difficult in any case. He's usually off somewhere, busily escaping some gorgeous

female in some other dimension. Plus he's Catholic. I'd rather not have a Catholic involved in this. I don't want to upset a friend."

"That doesn't sound good."

Aslaug's voice was tired. "It isn't. Look, I need your help, Joe."

Joe nodded and put his hat back on. "Can I bring some real firepower this time? No broadswords and chain-mail?"

"Bring as much as you'd like. Get to an airport and bring your passport. I'll arrange a ticket for you," Aslaug said on the other end.

"Ah. No guns then. I'm not in the mood to get arrested as a terrorist, if you know what I mean," the coyote chuckled.

"Good point. Then we'll buy you some guns when you get here. I need you armed and ready," Aslaug said. There was a sound like air rushing past her in the background.

Joe raised an eyebrow. "I was born ready, filly. Where *are* you anyway?"

"Right now? I'm standing with one hoof in France and one in Italy. I'll see you soon, Joe."

She hung up, leaving Joe to stare at the telephone in confusion. Now he had to go home and tell his wife he had to go to Europe. It wouldn't have been so bad ... except he also had to tell her she wasn't coming and that his reason for leaving was because Aslaug needed help.

"I'm going to need a pawful of aspirin to get over the headache," he mumbled to himself and got into his car.

It started ... without objection.

And for a moment, Joe felt like smacking his head into the steering wheel.