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Reality bites

Leo checked the makeshift fortifications again. This was a temporary position, meant only to protect him and his furs until the engineers were done with the proper positions. That involved concrete breastworks and trenches for infantry to occupy in defense of the big guns behind them. Leo himself would be there along with First and Second Platoon. The plan was that they'd be there for six days, then they'd go back to base for some rest and relaxation.

The grumbling was considerable, already. The officer in command of the artillery was Lieutenant Aureus, but no one had seen him around more than two minutes at a time. Officially, he was always taking care of 'important phone calls' or something similar. Unofficially, there wasn't a second lieutenant...indeed a soldier of any rank...who didn't know that the jackal was making sure he wasn't around so that someone else had to do his work for him. Captain Cervus had joined the grumbling even before the units left base, but the order for this operation had come from above him...and apparently, whomever was holding his paw over Lieutenant Aureus had something to do with it.

Hence the expenditure of raw materials on making the position almost impenetrable.

Leo couldn't help think it was somewhat ridiculous, seeing as they were five miles behind the actual front line, and that the likelihood of the Taliban being able to hit them that far back was pretty much nil. In any case, the Talibani fighters were all holed up on a mountain, and they didn't look eager to come out. Why should they? It'd probably take the entire year's production of American artillery shells to remove the mountain from the map. The Talibani were well entrenched and probably laughing themselves silly at the Americans, wasting ammunition on them.

"I wonder who the git is, keeping your precious First Lieutenant in the army in the first place," a British officer said and offered Leo a cigarette.

Leo smiled and took it, lighting it. "No idea, Captain," he said, wearily. The dark brown rabbit next to him wore sand colored combat fatigues with three rather discreet rosettes on his rank slide.

The rabbit lit up a cigarette of his own and adjusted his beret a little. His floppy ears made it hard to keep it on straight, apparently. His nose twitched and he hooked the thumb of his free paw in his belt, blowing a small cloud of smoke in front of himself. He looked bored and Leo couldn't blame him.

"I hear rumors of some contraband video-tapes in your platoon, Lieutenant," he said and looked at Leo.

Leo smiled crookedly and blew a perfect smoke ring. "I know nothing of any contraband video tapes, Captain Lago," he said. "I'm under orders not to know, you see."

The rabbit grinned knowingly and nodded. "Be a sport, Lieutenant, and tell your chaps to let my units have a look? The nearest they've been to a femme since coming to Afghanistan has been watching some fast-moving burkas at two hundred paces. They've been in this ruddy country since we started bombing. They need to see some fur, by now...or so help me I won't be held accountable for their behavior."

Leo raised an eyebrow and looked at the captain with a smug grin spreading on his face. "That's straightforward, Sir."

"What is it you Yanks always say? "Sue me!", isn't it?"

"That's a commonplace expression."

The rabbit nodded. "We should've carpetbombed Kabul with American barristers from the start. After a week, the Taliban would've positively begged us to take Osama and Omar off their paws if we just took the suits along with them."

Leo was about to answer when the radio crackled to life next to him. He reached down and grabbed it with an apologetic glance towards Captain Lago. The latter didn't seem to have a problem with it, and Leo hit the button to receive. He listened to some instructions and nodded, taking down a note or two on a piece of paper on the small map table next to him. After hanging up, he quickly checked some coordinates and nodded, before shouting them on to his troops.

Ten seconds later, the guns roared to life, firing deadly volleys of high explosives at the distance.

The barrage continued for maybe a seventy seconds, before the radio blinked and buzzed again to let Leo know to stop. Making a paw signal towards Sergeant Pardinus, the guns silenced and the lion looked at his English officer colleague again.

"Why are you here, Sir?" he asked. "I'm just an ignorant Yankee...but even I know your regiment is one of the most highly distinguished units in the entire British army. Why are you guarding three platoons of US artillery five miles behind the front lines?"

Captain Lago looked like he was about to keel over and die from drudgery and boredom. "Because Whitehall doesn't like soldiers breaking down with combat fatigue. Gives them such a terrible amount of extra paperwork and they have to explain it all to

the London press," he said, then put on a very knowing and conspiratorial face, leaning in towards Leo to whisper "Oh, and someone told them that prolonged action heightens the chance of taking losses. Can you believe it, Lieutenant?"

Leo played along and looked gravely serious, nodding somberly. "I see. Oh dear me...how very unfortunate. I wonder how many mathematicians they had on that task, to figure out that one," he said.

Captain Lago nodded, eyes closed and quite serious-looking. "Next thing they'll probably tell us to fire blanks because using live ammunition may cause fatalities. Or better yet, we can simply point our guns at the Taliban and shout "BANG" at the top of our lungs. Who knows? A few of them might die of laughter."

Leo looked at his guns. "I don't think I can shout loud enough for these, Captain."

"Thank God above for American Archie, then...you may just be our saving grace," Captain Lago muttered.

"We aim to please."

"No you bloody well don't, Lieutenant...you aim to kill."

Leo grinned. "Point well made, Captain...point well made," he said and blew another smoke ring. Then he dropped the cigarette butt on the ground and smothered it with the sole of his left boot. They were nowhere near live ammo anyway. The nearest live rounds were fifty feet away or more.

"The Coldstream Guard...guarding American artillery. Good God," Captain Lago mumbled sourly. "We aren't even here, you know. At least not officially. Officially, we're on a jolly three-year hike of the area around Londonderry."

"Oh, the same as our SEAL units? They haven't seen official action since they were created, I reckon..."

"Something along those lines. Ah, there goes the radio again. I wonder who needs help this time. We should start taking bets on sectors, Lieutenant...if betting wasn't forbidden."

Leo laughed and nodded, answering the radio.

A moment later, the guns roared again.

###

The paper was almost ready for its grade and Jean had to admit that unless the group made a serious mistake on their last few pages, such as in the conclusion...they'd get a

good grade. She was suitably impressed. It would be nice to get it all done and dealt with, too. Christmas was rapidly approaching and in four days time, the university would be temporarily deserted as everyone went home for the holidays. There was caroling in the streets and most of the hallways were decked with...if not holly, then something green at least.

Jean was looking forward to this Christmas with some trepidation. It'd be the first time in seven years that she celebrated the holidays with her parents.

The vixen still had to buy the presents she needed. For Esteban, her father, her mother, Yohni, Gabrielle, Fox, Miriam, Leo and Lizzy...and for Emma.

She wasn't quite sure how to get a present for Emma at the moment. The mink wasn't coherent enough to realize someone had given her something. But that wasn't the point and she wanted to give her friend something for Christmas, on the off chance...however remote...that it sank through the layers of chaos that the mink was shrouded in these days. Not to mention that she wanted to do it simply because it was the right thing to do.

Oh, and she had to get something for Zig Zag as well. The two femmes had been on birthday- and Christmas-present footing since Jean's surgery. Jean had even managed to get Zig Zag to acknowledge that in the case of Christmas presents...bigger wasn't better.

Marvin had been present when she had said it. The badger had spilled most of his coffee in his lap from laughter...then shouted loudly in pain and surprise when he realized it was scalding him.

That was ages ago, of course, but the memory was quite vivid...probably because Marvin had used words that had been unknown to Jean until that moment.

Jean picked up a pencil and tapped her nose with it, thoughtfully. Then she picked up the telephone and dialed a number. She waited for the line to establish, then smiled.

"Hello there. This is Jean LeBrun...is Esteban anywhere near, and is he available to take a phonecall?" she asked.

She waited a while. Esteban had told her about the new receptionist at the studio. In fact, she was the first real receptionist there. Sabrina had officially never been anything except the resident computer geek who did graphics work for the homepage and all the covers for the movies and so on...but the fact that her increasing need for desk space for all her scanning equipment and her computer itself had forced her to move out of her small, out-of-the-way room and into the front hall had long since made her the de facto receptionist of the studio as well.

Jean waited for the femme on the other end to check if Esteban was in the middle of something. A little while later, someone picked up the line on the other end again.

"Oh...Hi Zig Zag...it's Jean. No no, Anna didn't leave the receiver off by accident. She's looking for Esteban. I was going to ask him if he wanted to go shopping for Christmas-presents with me when he gets off work. Yeah, it's better to do it now than in ten days where everyone is panicking and stressing about it," the vixen said and smiled. It was nice to hear her friend's voice.

On the other end of the line, Zig Zag agreed with the point Jean had made, then let the vixen know that Esteban was there, before letting the wolf have the receiver.

Just hearing Esteban's voice was enough to make Jean feel good inside. "Say something more, will you? I'll get around to asking you what I wanted to ask..." she purred.

She'd get around to asking sure enough. For a little while she just enjoyed listening to Esteban trying to think of something intelligent to say, though. It felt nice. Like the world was slowly returning to normal. She'd go shopping for presents with him later, if he didn't have to stay late at work, in which case they could go shopping the next day, and Jean couldn't help feeling like that was the first truly normal thing they would be doing for months.

Terrorist bombings...Emma's trial and subsequent problems with Jeremy's family. Her own issues with the protesters at university. It had all taken up her time and strength and when she thought about it, it was a small miracle that she hadn't cracked by now. Perhaps the reason why she hadn't, was that she had simply not realized how much stress she had been subjected to, and for how long. Three months now...that's how long it had been. She wasn't quite sure how to deal with that thought, now that she thought of it, so she stored it away for later. She'd talk to Fox about it, quite likely. For obvious reasons, he always had good advice on how to deal with stress.

Somehow, the Christmas presents she'd buy later that day came to represent more than season spirits. They came to symbolize living a reasonably normal, regular kind of life again.

###

Dina had been a very unhappy little girl most of the night, and Peter was well beyond groggy. He had needed to call in sick because of it. Fortunately, he took sick-leave so rarely that no one argued with him whenever he did call in to say he had to stay home. He felt like he'd been walking around in a daze. Dina wasn't to blame. She was still getting her teeth and her last molars were apparently giving her all kinds of problems.

She'd finally fallen asleep around ten AM, completely exhausted, and Peter wondered how long she'd sleep for

He sat down by the computer with a mug of coffee and a yawn. He'd check email and then probably catch up on a few hours of missed rest of his own.

He removed his prosthetic arm and scratched the base of his stump. It itched a lot. He'd have to go get the doctors to take a look at the prosthetic. Maybe that was the reason why. This was his second one after Lance Gulo had shot his lower arm to pieces several years back, and the first one had actually been less irritating. It had been heavier, but Peter was a fit fur and hadn't felt particularly bothered by the weight. The itching was driving him crazy, though.

Picking up a couple of nuts from a bowl and popping them into his mouth, he tried to blink the worst weariness out of his eyes. He sipped the coffee and then clicked the computer on.

He turned and looked at Dina, now finally asleep. She was on the couch, wrapped up in blankets and suckling on her thumb. He knew that strictly speaking, he should move her thumb away from her mouth when she did that, but for once, he let her. She looked adorable and he didn't want to risk waking her by moving her in any way. Turning back to the computer, he opened a web-browser to look through his E-mail. He and Miranda shared an E-mail account for private use.

Junk. Loads of junk. He was about to delete it all when he noticed a strange one at the bottom. It didn't look like junk, and he opened it, wondering what it could be.

He grinned and nodded to himself as he read it, before getting to his feet and fitting his artificial limb back on, before carefully lifting Dina from the couch to take her to her bed.

The infant whimpered a little, opening her eyes a bit.

"Daddy?" she asked, a little confused in her half-asleep state.

"It's okay, sweetie. Hey, I think mommy's gonna be on television. Whaddya think of that, eh?" he said and kissed Dina's hair.

Dina smiled and snuggled up against her father, almost instantly falling back asleep. Peter could sympathize. He wanted to sleep too.

###

Gabrielle opened the door to the studio and entered. She had come in late, simply because the plane had been severely delayed. All the security checks had redoubled

around Christmas, and apparently, some dimwit had let their child bring a toy gun onto the plane. They had been stopped in security, of course, but every last plane had been delayed by as much as six hours while they were checked thoroughly for bombs, and while every passenger had to go back through security yet again. Every...last...one.

The filly was in a good mood to strangle that particular parent when she had heard him complain to the security-furs that there was no harm in letting a child play with a toy gun and that a good, healthy interest in firearms would make him a better and more patriotic fur later in life. He'd made it sound like the security-furs were creating enemies of the United States by not letting children play with very realistic looking toy guns in airplanes...especially only three months after Nine-Eleven.

Somehow, she hoped that particular fur had been delayed so badly he'd missed his flight.

"Sorry for the delay, Boss..." she mumbled. "I'll explain it during a break."

Zig Zag nodded. Something in the bronco's voice told her there was a story to be heard, and at least a valid reason why she'd been late for work.

"Where's Yohni?" the skunk asked, curiously.

"With Mark."

"Ah, okay. Well, I have received an interesting business proposition regarding you two."

Gabrielle looked at her boss and removed her robe. "Go ahead?" she asked, flicking her mane back.

Zig Zag shifted in her seat a little. "Seems 'Pethouse' wants to do a series with you two. Call it a double center fold. 'Hottest Romance in Blue Movies' or something along those lines. Complete with interviews and everything. Glittered paper, the works, Gabrielle. Interested?"

Gabrielle blinked. 'Pethouse Magazine' was a high profile magazine...one of the best known and biggest soft-core porn magazines in the world, in fact. Asking if she was interested was like asking Esteban if he was in love. The answer was given in advance.

"When do they want to do this, then?" she asked. She was certain Yohni would want to do take part as well.

Zig Zag smiled and shrugged. "I think I'll find out when Harry Rex calls me back. So I take it that's a yes, then?"

"I'm not going to dignify such a dumb question with an answer, Boss," Gabrielle grinned.

Zig Zag smiled. "Good to see you're in a good mood. How did it go in Denver..or shouldn't I ask?"

Gabrielle pondered how to answer that for a moment. She ran a paw through her mane and looked distant for a moment. "I watched a fur die...and I found my mother.." she said, thoughtfully.

"I'd call that a lot better than I had feared...and expected," Zig Zag admitted. "So your mother actually improved since we saw her two years ago?"

The bronco nodded, quietly, sitting down cross-legged on the bed. Rafe and Alexi weren't there yet anyway. "I'd say so. I think she was sincere when she wrote about having realized her own mistakes. I can't forgive her, Boss...and I don't think I should. But maybe I can start afresh with her. Just...maybe."

Zig Zag got to her feet and walked up to the naked femme on the bed, putting a paw on Gabrielle's shoulder. "You're a nobler fur than you give yourself credit for a lot of the time, Gabby. I'm proud of you...for what that may mean to you."

"Remember I told you once, long ago, that if I could've picked a sister, I would've wanted her to be just like you, stripes, hairstyle and all? What you say to me, Boss, means a lot to me."

"Thank you."

Gabrielle went quiet another moment or two. "I promised him something...about thirty seconds before he died," she said.

Zig Zag nodded. "What was that then?"

"I promised him that one day, when I'm done with this career...I'd have children. Not because he wanted me to, but because I want to, myself."

"How does Yohni feel about that?"

Gabrielle grinned widely. "We made a deal. I have the baby, she takes care of the diaper-changing."

Zig Zag laughed and nodded. "Y'know, I think you'll make a good mom, when the time comes."

Gabrielle smiled and looked distant again. Like she was looking at a spot a thousand miles away. She blushed a little. "I think I could be..."

"I know you could. But until that time comes...here's Alexi at last," Zig Zag said and went back to her chair.

Nodding, Gabrielle got up and stretched a bit, smiling at the husky. She still had a job here, and children were several years into the future, in any case.

###

"How is she doing?" Miriam asked. Her voice betrayed worry and sadness.

Fox sighed and sat down. "Unchanged. It's kind of you to keep coming to visit. It's kind of both Jean and Lizzy too. I don't even know if she recognizes you. She's totally withdrawn into herself. This kind of damage will take a long time to heal. Either she snaps out of it suddenly or we have to work from a base of...nothing, really. I'm worried for her. For her job...for her family...for her future. And I'm not the only one. The prognosis is..."

Miriam nodded to let Fox know he could continue, but the male didn't seem too pleased with the idea. He rubbed his face and sighed against his palms, keeping his face covered.

"I just wish there was something I could do to help her...in any little way, Miriam," he said. "It tears my heart out every time I go into that room..."

Miriam nodded and stepped up to her husband, hugging his head to her stomach, running her fingers through his hair. "You are a good, kind, helpful male, Fox...you always try to see the good and the positive. You do so much to help those around you and you feel the impact of failure so heavily...even when that failure isn't your fault in any way. Who knows...if it wasn't for you, she might be in an even *worse* state?"

Fox had a hard time imagining a worse state, short of vegetative, and even then he had to ask himself if a complete lack of consciousness truly would be worse than a complete lack of self awareness. He had to believe there was a way to reach Emma though.

Miriam let go and turned to the door. "Every time I go in there, I expect her to turn around and smile that slightly insecure smile of hers and say 'Hi Miriam...how are you today?'. Every time, Fox."

"I know what you mean. I expect her to recognize me too. There's just...nothing there, when she looks at me. I don't know if she can even see me," Fox said, sighing deeply. "I can't shake the feeling that there's something going on in her head. I can...I can almost *see* it...*hear* it. And I can't reach in and help her escape whatever it is."

Miriam nodded. For a fur in Fox's position, given his education, there was probably nothing worse than seeing a friend in emotional and psychological problems, and being unable to help or even figure out the exact nature of the problem. She ran her fingers through her husband's hair again and opened the door to Emma's room, stepping inside.

"Hey Emma...it's me," she said in a cautiously cheerful and hopeful voice. "How are you today?"

She realized that if the mink had answered, she'd probably have been near a heart-attack from shock and surprise...but as expected, Emma didn't even look her way. Miriam sighed but approached her friend, adjusting Emma's hospital top a little since it was slipping off her shoulder.

"What a mess you are today, dear. You look like someone who could use a hot, soapy bath," she said and found a hairbrush, starting to work on Emma's hair slowly.

The mink apathetically let her, her head bobbing a little from side to side wherever the hairbrush led her. She was looking out the window. Apparently something out there held her interest fixed. Miriam wished she knew what it was, but there was no way of telling. A couple of minutes later, she was done with Emma's hair.

"I wish I knew what to say. I don't know what I need to say to get through to you..." she said, quietly.

She noticed something. Emma's lips were moving. Very little, but they were. Like the mink was talking to someone, very, very quietly...only without sound. Maybe to herself. Miriam concentrated and tried to figure out what it was Emma was saying, by lip-reading...but she quickly realized she had no chance of making out even a single word. The question was if the doctors had noticed. They probably had, she told herself...but there was no harm in asking. Patting her friend gently on the shoulder, Miriam headed to the door and peeked out.

"Fox, have you noticed that Emma is talking to someone?" she asked, very quietly. For some reason she whispered...as if speaking aloud might make Emma stop talking to herself before Fox saw it.

Fox blinked and shook his head. "She hasn't said a word..."

"No, not like that. Quietly...moving her lips like she's talking to herself or whispering to someone without making a sound."

"That's odd. No one has noticed that before. Myself included."

Miriam blinked...then suddenly something struck her. "Fox..."

"Yes?"

"You're *male*..."

Despite the gravity of the situation, Fox found himself smiling. "Thanks for noticing dear, no need to sound so surprised though."

Miriam shook her head. "No you dimwit...don't you understand? Okay, answer me this...when you're in there, how does she behave?"

Fox shrugged. "She stays on the opposite side of the room. She only reacts if I actually approach her. I can't touch her. The first time I was in there I tried to take her paws and she looked straight down and she began to shake after a while. She doesn't look at me. She looks away or at the floor when I'm in there. Why?"

"Because I just brushed her hair and she didn't seem to mind that at all, Fox...that's why. How many female doctors are attending her?"

"Well...none I think? Oh...fuck..."

Miriam nodded. "Finally you get the idea."

Fox felt like beating himself over the head with something heavy. "I was so intent on helping her..."

Miriam nodded again. "I hate to say this, Fox, but you need to leave her case and get some female nurses and doctors to help her instead."

Getting to his feet, Fox nodded. He looked very distraught as he headed down the hallway to find some of the hospital staff.

###

Afghanistan got very, very dark at night. It got incredibly dark already during the late afternoon this time of year and Leo had to admit...it also got extremely cold, very fast. It was December, after all...on the northern hemisphere and Afghanistan wasn't exactly lowland plains.

It was occasionally chilly during the day as well but at night, it was bitterly cold. The lion nursed a cup of coffee in his paws and looked sidelong at Corporal Mofeta, leaning against the nearest M198.

"Did you think the sphincter of the world would get this cold, Corporal?" he asked.

Corporal Mofeta looked miserable but shook his head. "I wish I had something hot to drink too," he mumbled.

Leo held out his coffee. "Here, have mine. I'll go pester the Brits for some more," he said and smiled.

The skunk gratefully accepted the coffee and began to drink. Leo noticed a thin layer of frost had started to form on the barrel of the gun they were standing by. Behind him, amongst the guns, the rest of the platoon was sleeping in their tents. The British troops were on guard. Forward pickets had been placed as well, on Captain Lago's insistence. Frankly, Leo felt better for it.

Somehow, the idea of having Talibani irregulars infiltrate the lines during the night wasn't particularly comforting. Leo wanted to light up a cigarette but there was no reason to give a sniper such a brilliant aiming point in the dark of night. Judging from the look on Corporal Mofeta's face, he wanted a cigarette as well, but had come to much the same conclusion.

Captain Lago stuck his head up from the trench, looking at Leo. "Wake your furs," he whispered. "We have enemies approaching."

Seven words that worked like a bucket of cold water in Leo's face. Nodding to Corporal Mofeta, he set about waking up his furs quietly. It took less than two minutes before everyone was awake and armed.

Twenty seconds after that, firing broke out down in the trench.

###

"I wish I knew what to say," Miriam said, sitting down opposite of Lizzy. Jean was in the kitchen making tea and Esteban wasn't home yet.

The wolf had promised to cook for them all, and consequently he would be home a bit later, since he had to do shopping for fajitas on the way. His cooking was worth waiting for, everyone agreed.

"You said she moved her lips," Lizzy pointed out. Her voice was slightly hopeful.

Miriam nodded. "Yeah. But I don't know if she's trying to communicate or if she's talking to herself or to someone only she can see and hear. Fox was equally uncertain about it. He's in a hell of a state though."

Jean came to the door from the kitchen and nodded, thoughtfully. "I can see why," she said and shook her head wearily. "First learning that his gender works against him and now he has to tell the new doctors everything he knows about Emma, knowing he can't do a thing to help her as things are now. For a shrink that must be just about the worst..."

Miriam nodded. "He'll be here soon, I reckon. Certainly before Esteban finishes the food."

Sighing and leaning back, Lizzy felt awful. She hadn't seen this coming, while Emma was living with her. She had no idea the mink had been so close to cracking, or she would've made sure she got help before things got this bad. What if Emma was too far gone to come back?

She didn't want to think about it, but the thought kept popping up in her head. She closed her eyes and tried to force it away. Jean came to her rescue.

"Three media students came to talk to me about Emma's case a few days ago," she said. "They're going to make a television documentary about the whole affair. From start to finish. I wanted to tell you when we were all together. They might want to talk to you. I've already let Esteban know and he has said he will lay the cards on the table if he has to. Even the mess about the fishing-trip."

Lizzy nodded, looking relieved. "That sounds good. But...three students? Will it see air-time?"

"If we help them to make it one of the best three documentaries of the year's batch...then yes. Local television first but if it's good enough who knows where that could lead."

Miriam smiled crookedly. "Only you, Jean. I swear...I'd hate to get on your bad side."

"What do you mean?" Lizzy asked, puzzled.

"You don't think those three students just waltzed into her office by pure chance, do you Lizzy? This is Jean we're talking about."

"Oh...good point, Mir. How did you pull that one off, Jean?"

The gray vixen smiled and shrugged. "I have had a lot of unwanted publicity at campus the last couple of months, let's face it. The media students there at least know me. I went to the head of their faculty and asked his advice on this, and he suggested this course of action."

Lizzy took a deep breath and nodded. "Then we have to make sure we nail Jeremy's family to the proverbial cross!"

Miriam shook her head. "No," she said, thoughtfully.

Both her friends looked surprised and almost started to protest before the red vixen held up a paw. "No, listen to me. We have to remain as objective as we would have been if we wrote a history assignment. We can make people understand that she's our friend

without slinging mud. Leave that to Jeremy's family. Let them show themselves as the rabid bastards they are. If we remain civilized, we win public opinion. This is about how we come across to many furs who won't be able to ask clarifying questions...not about a conversation with two or three others."

Jean smiled crookedly. "You're right of course. Absolutely right."

Lizzy chuckled and nodded. "Demosthenes didn't live in vain, Miriam. You do know how to make a simple, convincing argument."

The door had opened behind the doe. Esteban, loaded with groceries appeared in it.

"Who ees Demosetenehes? Ees he dead?" he asked.

The three femmes looked at each other and began to laugh. Jean helped the wolf with the groceries, still laughing, while the other two tried to stop giggling.

"Heestoreeans..." Esteban mumbled, mock-offended. "I'll never understand your sense of humor."

He was smiling.