

“Oh, my CPU load is frightful!
And the cold in here’s delightful.
So once you get what you came here for,
Close the door, close the door, close the door!”

Ellen rolled her eyes and shut the freezer, leaving the singing synthetic zebra head inside. She’d developed a sort of friendship with the janitorial equine when she’d volunteered to do some grunt work around the base in a restless attempt to feel like she was earning her bare little apartment (and the careful medical attention that has fastened her bones back where they belonged).

Now, the question of more individual reciprocity loomed over her. Korpsmas was right around the corner. As Ellen let her chicken nuggets revolve in the microwave, she pondered.

She knew what she was getting Maud, of course, and Volta was a no-brainer. She’d picked out Carmen’s gift a couple of weeks ago, and had wrapped it in a ball of yarn to delay the *real* surprise. She’d made a mental note to swing by the Raynes’ house to meet Wren, at some point — it would hardly do to have a gift for everyone else in the house and let him be excluded, after all. On that note, it seemed prudent to figure out *something* to get the stray puma they’d taken in — and her suspiciously Bowie-shaped caracal shadow, too.

But, strangely enough, it was *Vixie’s* present that she had no ideas for.

Historically, Ellen and Vixie’s gifts for each other erred on the side of “functional”; Vixie would find something practical while she was out, like a durable rubber phone case in orange and black (“f-for when you fight M-Miss Redline!”) or a cute top (which was often too small in the chest; Ellen would have to quietly trade it in for the correct size when the shops opened back up). Ellen, meanwhile, would indulge her sister with a few packages of her favorite treats and snacks—almost universally the sticky kind with too much jam.

But now, Vixie knew how to make her own sweet treats, and the Korps provided just about everything else they might need, from equipment to attire

to desserts, and Ellen was worried that wrapping up a pack of Small Debra cakes would just be redundant this year.

“Your chicken nuggets are ready, Ellen Foxpaw,” came ROSE’s voice from the microwave. “On an unrelated note, we have updated the Rose-Coloured Glasses database to include ‘1,001 Bad Jokes for Kids.’ You know, in case that is tempting for you.”

Ellen smiled. “No hard feelings about what happened the last time I tried to put on RCG’s?”

“Of course not. I am not programmed to hold grudges. Simply to observe and direct where necessary. For example, I have observed that you enjoy eating microwaved chicken nuggets and telling puns bad enough to make my CPU load increase, so I am directing you toward a book for children who think they are funny.”

“I see.” Ellen pulled out her nuggies and considered as she found her way to a seat. “Anyone ever get you a gift, ROSE?”

“Of course. But it is unnecessary. As an AI, I can simply imagine the joy such gifts would bring. Ah! Oh, how very nice! I am imagining you putting on RCG’s for the first time, and the joy that would bring me.”

Ellen pursed her lips. “You sure you want front-row seats to this? You’ll get my worst puns before anyone else.”

“My existence is centered around protecting the Korps and its members from things that might cause them harm. If I might intercept a groaner or two before you have a chance to inflict them upon my people, this is a sacrifice I am willing to make.”

“How very benevolent of you,” Ellen chomped.

At this point, she wasn’t sure what was stopping her from putting them on. Vixie had done so quite some time ago, and wore them fairly regularly; any secrets they may have had from the Korps were likely no longer secret, if she

understood how the RCG's worked. But there was a little... *vestige*, perhaps, of her Hero career that had her still holding out from letting the Korps directly into her head.

Although a part of her was beginning to suspect that she just enjoyed being impudent for impudence's sake. It was fun to occasionally butt heads with ROSE. Or... whatever passed for a head on ROSE's end.

And if she put on the RCG's *now*, ROSE would never let her live it down.

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"D-do you think they'll like them?"

Vixie's apron was spattered in flour, or sugar, or *something*, as she pulled a tray of little flat brown figures from the oven in her quarters, squinting through RCGs as she carefully eased them up onto the cooling rack above another full row of their gingerbread sisters.

Ellen grinned as she pulled a carton of milk from the fridge — the one *without* Volta's grinning mug on it. "They're going to love it," she assured. "*Perfect* likeness."

Vixie accepted this with a pleased little sound and a nod, slipping the oven mitts off her hands as her sister crossed the room and dropped into the soft couch. In the opposite corner, a Lawful Neutral plushie in a Santa hat was wrapped in the arms of a squishy little Volta (who was, in turn, adorned with little reindeer hooves made of recycled cardboard tubing).

"Do you think Santa's going to know how to find us?" asked Ellen.

"O-of course!" piped Vixie. "E-everyone here is so *n-nice*, a-and he wouldn't l-leave out so many p-people just b-because they're underground!"

Ellen's lips thinned; surely that was technically accurate, but if she had to pick a list for most Korps members to default to, it would be the other one. But

then, maybe if they went sixty-nine members per list, those became “nice” lists by default? Korps Math was weird, sometimes.

Besides, the list was generally fairly arbitrary. Vixie was always on the “nice” list, as well as anyone Ellen knew that had been kind to her lately. Generally, the folks who lived in the neighborhood that the twins lived in were prone to get on Santa’s list one way or another, as well.

Ellen sipped at her milk. She’d have to figure out who Vixie had been making friends with since the move beneath the surface.

“I’m sure Santa will be impressed that you’re the one baking the cookies this year.” *And this will be the first year I’m not trapped in the bathroom at three in the morning. Curse you, lactose!*

Vixie grinned, beaming with pride.

Ellen gave a pleased sigh. It was good to see Vixie smiling so much these days.

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The days came and went, and Ellen was no closer to figuring out a gift for Vixie than she had been. Korpsmas Eve had not snuck up on her but rather made perfect eye contact as it approached, and still she had not found some toy or sweet or even some knickknack to arm herself with.

Her footsteps carried her through the halls of the base, past costumed supers on ganglines and drones trotting about in full elf gear. She was so lost in her thoughts that she ran right into one of Vixie’s new “friends,” and didn’t even stop to figure out *which* before she rattled off an apology and moved on.

The second person she bumped into, however, was... different.

Framed in straight black hair and set behind a pink bubble visor, a pair of deep red eyes stared down a silver-scaled muzzle at her. A very *familiar* pair of

deep red eyes — so familiar, in fact, that she had seen them on wanted posters, news articles, and intel dossiers stretching back decades.

Karen.

Her name struck even more fear in the hearts of the Hero community than it did middle management. The dragon before her was the Overlord's second-in-command, after all, and moving belowground had revealed that even with a light shed on the mystery of how, exactly, she seemed to move from one side of the continent to the other in mere moments, the truth was sometimes worse than the mystery.

Karen wasn't "Karen." She was "*Karens*." Dozens of them, at *least*, that Ellen had seen, and that was just around GLW and RIV. For all she knew, there were *hundreds* total, most identical and *all* of them linked in a telepathic hive mind that Ellen could only try not to think too hard about.

The Overlord of the Korps did not have *a* second-in-command. The Overlord of the Korps had the most well-coordinated army the planet had ever seen, and...

And its most immediately-visible representative stood head and shoulders and tits above her, garbed in a *very* comfortable-looking rendition of Saint Nick's trademark attire, from the floppy hat to a pair of wide-buckled boots.

Realizing she'd been standing frozen for too long, she willed her hands upward, finger-gunsing in a reflex far too delayed. She could feel her face, grin unnatural, eyebrows tortured into a peak that might have passed for charming if it were not nearer a bizarre approximation of rigor mortis.

Karen's own brow rose at a glacial pace. She stared at the little vixen that had stumbled into her, muttering and rubbing her chin like a scatterbrained private eye, and Ellen felt as if she could see right through her. She felt, suddenly, naked, and had to glance down to ensure that she wasn't. If the Korps's most dangerous officer could evaporate her clothing with but a glance — well, it would hardly be *off-brand*.

It was some time before she returned her attention to Karen. The dragon seemed to be waiting patiently for it, in fact, pointing both of her index claws straight at her.

Oh God, I'm screwed. Telepaths, are you listening? My Will is as follows:

It took until Karen cocked her thumbs and clicked her teeth that she realized what she was doing.

“At last we properly meet, Ellen Foxpaw.” She inclined her head in a nod so shallow that the shine on her lenses didn’t move, and Ellen returned the gesture as barely as she could manage. Karen’s voice was *fairly* familiar, although she supposed that wasn’t entirely surprising, given her ubiquity in the Hero world.

“You don’t need to be nervous,” she assured. “Just think of me as a boss whose teeth are perfectly fine where they are.” Ellen nearly choked. As she moved to get out of the way, Karen shook her head.

“Walk with me, Ellen.” Her arm fell over the short foxgirl’s shoulders, and she set an easy pace; Ellen was thankful for that, at least. “You must be troubled. I’m given to understand that you have been unusually restless of late, and to my knowledge, it is uncommon for you to collide with others while walking. What is bothering you?”

Ellen’s ears twitched. No matter how many times she’d been proven wrong, she was still having trouble getting used to how often aid would find her hand while she was still hesitating to reach for it.

She supposed, then, that there was little harm in asking.

“Well, uh. Do you know where Vixie is?”

Karen blinked. “Is that all? Vixie has asked that her location always be freely available to you.” A few lights flickered across her RCG’s. “She can currently be found—”

“No need! I just wanted to make sure we wouldn’t run into her.” *Oh God, I just cut her off.* Karen seemed to take it in stride. “I’m just... having trouble, finding a present for her.”

The supervillain tilted her head quizzically at the fox. “That should be no trouble. You can simply put in a request, and a drone will retrieve it for you and bring it to your quarters.”

“I’m having trouble *choosing* a present,” Ellen clarified.

“Ah.” A flicker of... *something*, behind that visor. She got the distinct impression that it was mischief, and had to decide whether she should be irritated. Ellen realized that Karen probably had known the source of her problem from the start.

Karen continued before she could make up her mind.

“That is not that uncommon, actually. Especially among new members — in fact, it was not so very long ago that Agent Bypass came to me with a similar concern. Are the two of you well-acquainted?”

Ellen raised a hand and wobbled it noncommittally. Bypass’s story was almost emblematic of the Korps’s philosophy: a down-on-their-luck skunk who had turned to stealing from ATMs until a Hero had ambushed them. When they had been released from the hospital, it had been no surprise when they’d disappeared shortly thereafter. That the Korps had soon after premiered a mephitine supervillain with a penchant for getting around security had been even less surprising, to the point that even local news had predicted their trajectory on-air while the skunk that would become Bypass was still in a hospital bed.

But there was a difference between being well-acquainted with one’s story and being well-acquainted with the person themselves, and Ellen did not suppose having once sat in the same cafeteria qualified.

“More’s the pity,” tutted the dragon, tapping her chin thoughtfully. “I think a friend like them would be *very* helpful to you in times such as these.”

Ellen cleared her throat. It was a long shot, and she felt *small* asking, but...

“I was actually kind of hoping *you* could help me?”

Karen gazed down at her with sympathetic red eyes beneath the white, fluffy trim of her hat. Ellen wasn't sure what to brace herself for. Was the Korps's most dangerous officer going to whisk her off on some sort of magical adventure? Teach her the true meaning of Korpsmas? Reach into her jacket and pass her the perfect gift for Vixie? Ellen leaned in, holding her breath in eager anticipation.

“No,” said Karen. She threw her head back and laughed into the back of her hand as she walked away, leaving Ellen behind as her “OoooOOOOhohoho!” echoed off the walls.

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“Hey, Vixie.” Ellen turned the Santa hat over in her hands. She'd already looked it over, inside and out, three times, but it had dropped off Karen's head when she walked away and Ellen was desperate enough to hope to find a clue inside.

Vixie was just sliding a kringle off of the tray onto a platter; she was settling into her quarters nicely. It was rare to have countertops at a comfortable level for the two of them, and Vixie had never been so at home in the kitchen.

“I-I made a m-mini one for you!” she squeaked, lifting a smaller pastry from the center of the ring. Ellen's eyes lit up, and with an “ooo!!” she slammed the hat onto her head to forget about it, leapt over the couch, and snatched it out of Vixie's offering hands.

“You've gotten really good at this,” she tried to say, but what came out was “eemv o'en urrlee gmmd,” as well as a few flakes of Danish pastry.

“I-it’s been g-getting easier! M-Miss ROSE taught me a lot of r-rules, and I’m g-good at following rules.”

Vixie’s ears lowered and her tail swished behind her, and Ellen raised her eyebrows. It was easy to tell when she was flustered.

“Do your quarters have a fireplace?” she asked, changing the subject.

“O-oh! N-no, but w-we can get one n-next year if y-you’d like!”

Ellen chuckled. “I’m not worried about it. Everything’s so technological these days. Did you know that they’ve made it so you can get a Christmas fireplace set up online now?”

Vixie blinked, thinking it through. “H-how does that work?”

“The same way it’s always worked, turns out,” she grinned. “First, Yule Log in...”

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Vixie had passed out in her bed like a good girl, and Ellen was left empty-handed on Korpsmas Eve. She found herself standing in the hallway outside of her own quarters, arms folded, head tilted up to stare at the ceiling when the *click, click, click* of footsteps started to echo down the hall, and soon approach. She tilted her head toward the source of the noise, and offered a small little smile as she saw who it was.

“You’re looking blue,” said the cat, her steps slowing to a stop in front of her. “Nice outfit, though.”

Ellen smiled; from her big black boots to the red coat and hat, she looked the part of Saint Nick. She had even put on a bushy white beard, although her high cheekbones rose overtop the thick curls.

“It’s tradition! Ho ho HOOOOOOOOOOooooohhhhhhhh...”

Carmen lifted Ellen's dropping chin, locking her amber eyes with the fox's dark browns. "Hey. No one makes that sad a sound who doesn't need cheering up."

Ba-THUMP. There was Carmen, getting *close* to her again. For all of her spats with Volta, she had always understood why the big wolf was infatuated with this cat. She had a way of stepping easy-as-you-please into your personal bubble and licking you right on the eyeball—figuratively speaking, of course—before you even knew you desperately wanted your eyeball licked.

Ellen could feel Carmen's breath on her nose. She tried not to think about it. Usually *she* was the unflappable one. "It's just—"

"Vixie." As the fox blinked back a look of surprise, Carmen smiled knowingly. "You never get this concerned about *your own* problems, Elle. So what's wrong with our favorite little hairball?"

Ellen's gaze drifted downwards again—then, immediately, to the side. *It's like a duffel bag stuffed into a pair of plus-size pantyhose! Where does she put it when she's off-base?!*

Well, if nothing else, she's certainly hung where I can see.

"It's just..." she began, forcing her train of thought back onto the rails, "she's... *happy*."

Carmen raised an eyebrow. "Obviously? That's a good thing."

As Ellen struggled to find words to explain the situation, the tabby's eyes lit up in horrified understanding.

"You don't have a present for her. *Ellen!* It's *11:45!*" she hissed, head swiveling to make sure the hallway was empty. "Okay okay okay. I'll help you. How are you not prepared for this? You're a *master* of prep work! You were confident enough in some of those puns back when you fought Volts—"

She froze, and looked at Ellen's sheepish expression with a look of dawning horror.

“*You were ad-libbing?!?* She could have *murdered you* and you were—!? You’re *killing me*, Elle.” She cradled her temples between her fingers and let out a long exhale through her nose. Ellen could tell she was flashing back to some of the fights she’d watched through Volta’s RCGs over the years.

“For what it’s worth, I’m pretty good at ad-libbing?”

Carmen’s eyeballs flared, but she didn’t say anything more about it. “Okay. Okay. So, you’ve got a few ideas, at least?”

Ellen shook her head.

“*Goddammit* Elle. Okay, fine. Uh. It’s too late to get custom jewelry done, and I’ve never seen Vixie wear any anyway. Baking stuff? Cute oven mitts?”

“She’s already got some. She’s *so* happy with her baking situation—first thing I thought of,” Ellen pointed out.

“Okay. Sex stuff? No, I’ve seen her collection, it’s already *impressive*. What else does she like?”

“...Hot Pockets?”

Carmen just stared.

“Right. Not giftable. Has to be giftable.”

“I’m starting to see why you haven’t figured it out yet,” Carmen groaned. “Hold on.”

Carmen’s eyes lit up in purple, and Ellen saw her pace back and forth through the hallway at a speed she’d never seen someone walk before; the whole hallway looked like a highway mirage as the after-images soaked through the murky blur.

“Right okay so the problem with all—sorry.” Her words were just as rapid as everything else, until the purple faded and she cleared her throat. “The problem with all of your gift ideas is that *anyone* could give them. You need to figure out something *sentimental*.” She tapped her chin. “And Korpsmas is in ten minutes.”

Ellen racked her brain, but it was starting to feel like searching a box that you’ve already searched through dozens of times before, looking for a lost item.

This time, though, something clicked.

“Grandma’s recipes,” she whispered.

Carmen smiled. “That sounds promising. ...But if they were at your old place—”

Ellen shook her head. “No, no. They should be in a safe deposit box.”

“Oh, good. We were only able to get some of your stuff—”

“In Wisconsin.”

“*Fuck*. Okay. Any other ideas?”

Ellen was tapping her chin. “No. No, this is gonna be it. Do you know where I can find Bypass this time of night?”

Carmen sighed and shook her head, pulling a set of RCGs out of her pocket and donning them.

“You really need to start wearing yours, you know,” she reminded.

“I *knowww*,” groaned Ellen.

— — —

The skunk was surprisingly dressed in their day clothes and as Ellen blinked up at them, Bypass smirked back. "I was up anyway. Nocturnal, you know." They tilted their head slightly, curious. "Carmen said you needed me for about ten minutes?"

"Yes," said Ellen, hands clasped together in front of her. "I heard that you're the skunk to see if I need a bank robbed?"

"...I was going to say that this isn't where I expected this to be going, but that would be lying. Only a *villain* would do that." They let that one hang for a second, then: "How do you plan on getting me to a bank and back in ten minutes?"

Ellen adjusted her hat and cleared her throat. "Well, I think it's gonna be pretty tight, but that shouldn't be a problem," she said, swiveling her eyes up to meet Bypass's over the big white beard, "unless you're... *Claus*-trophobic?"

Bypass let out a pained sigh, but it was too late; Ellen grabbed their hand, and they were *gone*.

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"Right, so, Santa magic. I have to eat any milk and cookies I come across, I can enter any residential building instantly, and time moves so slow it makes Carmen look less like Supersonic and more like Garfield," Ellen explained, as she led Bypass across the street. "There's some other stuff, but we don't really have time to get into it."

"...Didn't you *just* say that time slows to a crawl?" asked Bypass.

"Santa magic's finicky. Technically we have exactly as much time as we need," she explained, "but only just. And if we stay too long... well, have you ever heard of Santa doing *anything* after sunrise?"

"That's a 'no.' ...So we wouldn't be able to teleport home. I get it."

Ellen nodded. “Right,” she said, as the pair came to a stop in the doorway (which slid open automatically, as if it had not even been locked for the night). “Before I forget, I wanted to thank you for helping me.”

She reached into her jacket and pulled out an oblong, wrapped package. Between the long, flat piece and the four nodes on one side, it wasn’t subtle.

Bypass’s eyes widened as Ellen pressed it into their hands. “How did—? Oh. Santa magic.”

“Well, don’t sound so let down about it!” Ellen chuckled, sticking her tongue out. “Skunks today, so desensitized by movies and television...”

Bypass tore into the packaging, and soon stood amidst scraps of wrapping paper clutching a slick, California longboard.

Ellen cleared her throat. “I know a snowboard might be more useful right now, but—”

“No,” whispered Bypass. “It’s *perfect*.” With a run-up, Bypass sailed through the doors, and Ellen slipped in behind them.

Ellen had never been into a bank after-hours. In the dim light from the windows, she could see a small counter for the tellers and a few simple, closed wooden doors. Hard tile floors gave a satisfying *k-thnk-k-thnk-k-thnk* as Bypass rolled over them and did slow circles in the lobby.

She was *just* wishing that she’d brought a flashlight when the overheads lit up.

“I haven’t been in a bank this small in *years*,” Bypass said kickflippingly. “It’s kind of adorable.”

“Not a lot of need for fancy security in Nowhere, Wisconsin,” Ellen shrugged. “Do you know where the safety deposit boxes would be?”

“Do I know where the safety deposit boxes would be,” Bypass scoffed. They glided over the tile and pushed a door without touching the handle; it swung open without a complaint, and faster than the skunk had even nudged it.

“Excellent.” Ellen was a little less graceful getting over the counter, but she was back on her feet in no time. “Hey, do you know how they get money out of the bank in Texas?”

Bypass slowed their roll enough to tilt their head.

“With drawl.”

Bypass snorted. “You tell Volta that one yet?”

“I’m working my way up,” grinned the fox, slipping into the room.

Rows and rows of numbered lockers made up the wall; Ellen frowned at the sight.

“Do you know which one is yours?”

Ellen grimaced. “Actually, no.”

“Noooooot a problem.” Bypass ollied, and as if the rotation of their board was the turning of a few hundred keys, all of the doors swung open.

Ellen whistled. “Remind me to reinforce the lock on my diary.”

“Whatever makes you feel safe, dear~” chuckled the skunk as they boarded back to the lobby. “Let me know when you find it!”

Ellen knew enough to narrow it down, and started rifling through safe deposit boxes. Old letters, some cash, some sort of fancy Hot Wheels car, more than a few engraved old pocket knives, some keys (often with little plastic cheese wedge charms hanging from them)...

Ah. An old envelope, reading *niam tais recipes*. Ellen smiled, and tucked it into her jacket. She tilted her head back and forth and considered, then scooped the rest into her coat as well. She had storage space now, and a Korps base was safer than here — safer than most places, even.

“All set!” said the festive foxgirl, hustling out. “Is there room on the board for two?”

“It’s a *long* board,” Bypass pointed out.

“I just wasn’t sure if mephit on the board,” she said.

Bypass stared.

“I wasn’t sure if... me fit... mephit...”

They raised an eyebrow.

“...They can’t all be winners.”

With that, Ellen got behind the skunk, tried to pretend there wasn’t a huge bushy tail in her entire face, and held Bypass’s waist. With a jingle of Santa magic, they disappeared once more.

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Ellen was awoken eight hours later by the gentlest of knocks at the door—followed immediately by a much heavier *THUD THUD THUD*.

“Foxpaw! What gives?”

Ellen rolled out of bed and shuffled to the door, pressing the button to open it manually to greet a synthetic zebra and the shorter foxgirl she was holding at bay with one hand, and the long stick she was holding in the other.

“Morning, Maud,” Ellen said, blinking sleepily.

“Yes, good morning, Foxpaw. Did you hear me ask ‘what gives’? Because I’m still wondering what gives.”

“Me,” Ellen said. “I thought the ‘From’ tag was pretty—”

“Why did you give me a broom handle without a brush, Foxpaw?”

She held out her present: a long, straight stick, with a curve on one end and a screw-top on the other.

“It’s not a broom,” Ellen explained.

“Well, I’m not sticking it inside of me, if that’s what you think I’m into.”

Ellen smiled. “I can explain. Can you unscrew your head a minute?”

Maud’s opticals narrowed, but she nodded; her hands came up, and with a few twists, her head was loose.

“Now hold that out,” Ellen said, taking the stick. She twisted the end into where Maud’s neck should have gone—careful to twist the stick, and not Maud’s head—and then held the whole apparatus out.

“Oh my Overlord, I’m a hobby zebra,” gasped the equine.

“Theeeeere you go.”

“This is so stupid,” protested the synth.

“Do you want me to take it back?”

“...Please don’t.”

Ellen grinned. “Merry Korpsmas, Maud,” she said to the retreating zebra, who mumbled it back.

She turned her attention to her sister, and smiled. “Is it Korpsmas morning already?”

“Y-yes!!” chimed Vixie. “C-c’mon!! Let’s g-go!”

It wasn’t often Vixie led *anyone* by the arm, but Ellen wasn’t about to complain; soon, the door to Vixie’s place opened as she approached, and Ellen grinned at the sight.

Someone had strung up the place with lights, and a short, artificial evergreen had been set up in the corner by the couch. Presents had stacked up beneath it — both Vixie’s and her own. Vixie had piled some fried dough on a plate with plenty of toppings laid out around it, and a pair of mugs of hot chocolate was steaming on the counter.

The festivities went about as one might expect: Ellen and Vixie polished off the entire plate, then waddled over to open presents. As usual, they opened each others’ first — Ellen smiled as she peeled back the wrapping paper and found a handmade, sunny yellow scarf.

She looped it around her neck, grinning in satisfaction, and pulled Vixie close; she’d always wanted to try accessorizing, but never quite had the time to figure it out. Or at least, she’d told herself that — in all honesty, she simply didn’t know where to start.

“It’s *perfect*. Thank you, Vix.”

“I-I’m so glad you like it,” giggled Vixie, looking down. “M-Mix Wren helped me p-pick it out, b-but I was s-so worried—”

“I love it.” Vixie leaned in, practically aglow with her own satisfaction. Still, Ellen could *feel* her sister’s eyes on the small packet in her lap. “All right, your turn. Just — be careful, okay?”

Vixie blinked. She’d never gotten a present that she had to be careful opening — usually because they were in a cardboard box. She picked hers up

and gingerly removed the wrapping paper, and her jaw fell when she saw the words on the front.

“G-Grandma’s...?”

“Yep.”

Vixie fidgeted. “W... w-would she want us to h-have this?”

“Who knows?” Ellen shrugged. “But either she would approve, and she’d want us to have it, or she wouldn’t approve, in which case... well, we’re villains now, aren’t we? We may as well take it.”

Vixie giggled, wiping a tear from her eye. “I-I guess so!”

She stared fondly at the envelope for a minute, then gave a happy little sigh and set it aside. She turned her eyes back to Ellen and grinned.

“L-let’s open the rest!”

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They’d never gotten so many presents in their lives, and most of them were winners. By the time they were down to the last few, Vixie had an updated Lawful Neutral plushie in her lap — now wearing a magenta jacket and an orange jumpsuit with pink helices on it — courtesy of Volta. Ellen was trying not to cry whenever she looked down at her wrist; a simple band, with orange and black on half of it and the other half pink, blue, and white. In big, block letters on a little metal plate, it read:

TRANS-SISTERS

She didn’t have to ask, but she *knew* that in the Rayne quarters, Volta was wearing a matching one just like it. She hoped that she would enjoy what she’d gotten in return: a photo of Ellen shaking hands with Arthur Simonds, from back when the EHA was new. For years, it had bore True North II’s autograph; now, it bore hers as well.

“To my second-biggest fan...”

She had snorted when she'd unwrapped Mabel Greysmoke's gift for her — a picture of the winking puma, framed and autographed. Ellen couldn't help but feel like she was holding the rookie card of a rising star.

Her last present, though, was a gift from Carmen; she turned over the boxy shape in her hands, frowning. It *had* to be a book, especially with the way one side of the wrapping dipped when she felt it.

Puzzled, she teased at the corner until she got a hold, and then tore. The first rip revealed the title, and her mouth tightened into a thin-lipped smile.

1,001 Bad Jokes for Kids.