

Note: Dedication at the very bottom!

CWs in white; highlight to read:

The soft, cool sheets beneath her melted away until they were gone; Ellen couldn't feel anything at her back anymore. Even laying down like this, the only sensations were those of her feet on the floor, her own skin against itself, and the pink lenses that covered her eyes and tickled the space between her temples.

There she was. Six foot six, a padded figure that Ellen knew full-well hid *powerful* muscles, and hips—those *hips*.

Ellen had gotten used to looking up at her in real life. Here, in the simulation, it was a little more rare to look up as far as from where she stood, but apparently, whoever she'd... “coupled with” when she recorded this new simulation was of an approximate height with the five-foot fox.

She hadn't paused to look at any details. ROSE had helpfully informed her that there was a new file in the “Miss Carmen Rayne” library, and Ellen had immediately stripped down to nothing but the shirt she'd borrowed mere hours before and locked her door.

Carmen was *there*. She was about as real as she could be; she turned to face Ellen—well, not *Ellen*, she reminded herself, but the... *camera*, or the set of RCG's of whoever was in her place. Or...

She decided to stop thinking too hard about it.

Carmen took a step toward her, and then another. Her arm extended, and her fingers tucked under Ellen's chin; she could *feel* the pads against her skin, and let out a shuddering gasp. She was... *eager*. She felt her tail swish, looked deep, *deep* into the golden amber of her eyes.

Her heart fluttered in her chest. She *knew* this wasn't real, but it... it felt like it *helped*. She could touch the sun without getting burned. Carmen—the *real*

Carmen—didn't know she was here, and Ellen didn't have to speak, didn't have to *think*, could just let the scene unfold, and...

"Ellen."

It was as if the world stopped.

"C... Carmen?"

She hesitated; this was... *new*. The RCG's had never dubbed her name in before; surely, the technology was there, and she wasn't the *only* "Ellen" on the base.

It was the first time Ellen had spoken to the simulated Carmen, though. She knew it wasn't real, and speaking to it—to her?—would have felt like trying to live a false reality instead of simply... *visiting* one, now and then.

"Ellen, I want to *talk* to you."

Oh.

"Please, don't run from this. We should have a discussion—a *real* discussion."

Ellen squirmed; she could almost feel the sheets again. She tried to raise her arms, her *real* arms, but she had specifically asked ROSE to keep her in unless there was an emergency.

"Ellen... if you get this message—I want to see you soon. Wear that top I lent you and meet me at the cafeteria for lunch tomorrow, okay?"

And then she was back in her bed, staring up at the ceiling through Rose-Coloured Goggles.

Not for long, though; the RCG's were on the floor as soon as Ellen was sure she could move again. Her breathing swiftened, and she realized the sheet was clinging to her arm with sweat.

Guess I'm not getting any sleep tonight.

Deep breaths. In, two, three, four...

She eased herself up against the wall at the head of her bed and hugged her knees around a pillow.

“ROSE?”

“Yes, Ellen?”

“Please make sure I don’t sleep in tomorrow.”

“Of course. Would you like my help in getting to sl—”

“That will be all, ROSE.”

“Of course.”

Ellen was nervous.

An understatement, really; Ellen was “nervous” just like Karen was “a bit anti-capitalist.”

But she was still *going*. She wore the plum top that showed more of her skin than she cared to, overtop a sunny yellow cami to...

To what?

What was the *point* of modesty in the *Korps*, of all places?

Just one more thing she was wrestling with, these days.

A deep breath. She could do this. She’d seen plenty of big days before; this would just be one more. And who knows? Maybe...

Maybe this would go well?

Her feet had carried her to the cafeteria already. Folks sporting RCG's and helix-patterned fashion sat at long tables together, or clustered around circular ones. Her sister was among them, carrying a platter of beignets to the biggest ladies she could find and sporting the iconic pink lenses herself.

Carmen was sitting at one such table, neck craned to keep an eye on the entrance; Ellen returned her wave with a smile. An *awkward* smile—she could feel that much—but a smile, nonetheless.

Volta took a nod and a pat on the arm from Carmen as a hint, rising from her seat and giving them some relative privacy. Ellen was quick to replace her at the table—not in the seat beside Carmen that Volta had left, but the one across instead.

The tabby's eyes slid from following the wolf's backside to her new guest. That sweet, golden amber tone—not filtered through the usual pink visor, but bare and shining in the light.

“I take it you saw my message, then?” She held her features in a light, easy grin as she appraised Ellen.

Her features fell, though, when she caught a glimpse of the foxgirl's face. “Elle, are you... feeling alright?”

Ellen shifted in her seat, but she nodded all the same.

“It was... I'm a little nervous,” she admitted. “I... Carmen...”

She looked up at the feline with pleading eyes, and Carmen reached across the table without hesitation.

“Ellen, *please* listen. I don't want you to be scared of this. Of *me*.” Her eyes were wide with concern, and it broke Ellen's heart to know that was concern for *her*.

“I... well, I came here, didn’t I?” She offered a weak smile, and crossed her arms on the table.

Carmen exhaled slowly through her nose, tilted her head sympathetically.
“Ellen, I’m not trying to pressure you, okay? But you’ve been... *avoiding* me, and I want you to know you don’t *have* to.”

Ellen squirmed in her seat. “Carmen, I... I *know*.”

“You know?”

She met Carmen’s eyes again; she could feel her ears low, and her tail trending towards her thighs. “You... you don’t *mind*, you...”

“I *like* you.”

Ellen nearly choked on her own spit.

“Elle, I think you’re *funny*, and sweet, and I *like* you.”

Ellen could feel her fangs lock together, could feel the thin hairs on her arms and the thick fur on her tail both begin to rise.

“I... I like you, too, Carmen,” Ellen admitted. She shook, withdrew into her seat. Carmen leaned even further forward to follow after; Ellen wanted to feel comforted, but instead, she just felt...

Cornered.

“That’s good! Elle, you don’t need to run away from me, this is *good*! We can... we can *talk*, and I just... I want to *know* you, Ellen.”

“But how can you even *relate*!?”

It came out without a thought, without intention; Ellen didn’t remember standing up, but there she was, looking down at the dumbstruck Carmen.

“I don’t even know if I *belong here!*”

Carmen stared back at her, mouth open; Ellen was suddenly very acutely aware that the cafeteria had gone quiet around them. She shivered, and her arms crossed in front of her, her hands squeezing her biceps; a slight comfort, but she needed *something*.

“Elle—Elle, of *course* you do,” she said back; her voice was just barely above a whisper, and Ellen found her ears pivoting to hear it better, despite herself.

“Why wouldn’t you think—?”

“Carmen, I *know* you don’t understand, but not *everyone* can just... can just *fit in* everywhere they go like *you* do! How could I... how could I *ever* be on equal footing with you? How could I ever *deserve* to know you like that!?”

Carmen’s whiskers drooped, and she raised up in her chair. “Elle, what’s wrong? Why are you—?”

“I don’t know why I’m *here*,” she whispered.

“What?”

“I... I don’t know why I’m even *here!* I’ve... I’ve spent my *whole life* like this, and.. and now I feel like I’m just here for *other* people, *again*.”

Carmen’s face quivered as she pushed herself to her feet, concern etched into her feline features as she looked down at Ellen. Her eyes darted away for just a moment; Ellen felt sure she knew who else the tabby was glancing at.

“*Elle, please—just—I’m—we’re* here to help, just tell us what you *want* and we’ll—”

“Do you know what I *want*, Carmen? I *wish someone would tell me*, because I *don’t even know!*”

The quiet had turned to silence—save for both of their uneven breaths. The cafeteria lights shone in the water at the corners of her eyes.

“Ellen, *stop*.”

Ellen went.

“E-*Ellen*—!”

But she didn’t slow down. She was halfway through the cafeteria before Vixie had called out, and in the hallway barely a second later—and picking up speed.

Her knees picked up; she was running before she knew it, through residential corridors and up staircases, past janitorial closets and hangar bay doors. She hadn’t made a decision about where to go, but she was going there anyway.

Ellen’s feet pounded the pavement as she ran; she had been topside often enough that she knew the path, even if she was going to make the trek by foot, and before she knew it, spurred on by thoughts and emotions swirling together into a tangled mess, she was at the gate that led outside.

Outside. Outside the facility, yes, but outside the Korps as well. Outside, where she couldn’t let anyone down; outside, where things were simple and easy and she could just... could just...

She’d figure it out.

Her fingers bounced across the panel. She cursed as it flashed red, tried again without hesitation. A magenta blink, and the gate began to roll up, letting in the sunlight. She moved in front of it, ready to step out as soon as it got open wide enough to stoop under, and—

KRAK.

The fur on Ellen’s tail stood on end, and she whirled around as the pink lightning dissipated.

Volta.

She was hunched, growling, sparks popping and cracking off of her cheeks, her arms. The gate rolled shut behind her in a hurry, obeying the sudden jolt of input.

Ellen's eyes narrowed, and she tensed her nose—as much to put on a game face as it was to push the tears back.

If she wants one last fight before I go... so be it.

Ellen set her foot back, raised her arms, got low. Volta would be in no mood to hear a joke; she'd have to handle this with her own body.

"So you're just going to run away?" she snarled, fur rippling with power, voice cracking with emotion. "Is this what it takes to bring out the coward in you, Ellen? You finally, *FINALLY* have a chance to become a person for your *own* sake and you're just going to *abandon* it, because you're too scared of everything else?"

Ellen quivered behind her fists. "I'm not *strong* like you, Volta! I'm out of my depth in a fight, I'm not a smooth operator like *her*. All I was ever good at was my shitty jokes and punching villains, and all the ones in pink were *holding back*!"

It was just pouring out of her now, tears squeezing out as she yelled. "And then I see everyone else, walking around, tits out, happy, and *I can't even talk to a girl*! Do you know how many times I looked at that visor on my dresser and thought, 'Fuck it, maybe I should just let myself get *droned*? At least that way I would *finally be queer enough*!"

Volta's clawed digits wrapped around the bracelet on her wrist; orange and black, bordering pink, white, and blue; Ellen had a matching one on her own. She snarled, hackles raised. Ellen tensed her fists. If Volta managed to throw the first punch, it would be over; she'd have to be ready to react, *stay* ready to react.

"Ellen, there's—there's no *bar* you have to meet," she growled; the fox couldn't see her face beyond the lightning, but she could hear the tears in her voice. "All

you have to do is just accept that you're *allowed* to be happy! People *want you* to be happy! *Carmen* wants you to be happy—and if you weren't *so damn scared*, you could just—you could *just—TALK to her!*"

"I *can't!*"

"*Bull fucking shit, Elle!* All you had to do was *say something*, and Carmen would have *leapt* at the chance to help you!" Volta's voice and the arcs of electricity around her both cracked as they rolled out of her. "She set aside time every week *just for you*, made sure she was available *just for you*, but you were *so* up your own ass pretending you don't have feelings for her! Have you—have you even *thought* about how that makes *her* feel?"

Volta rubbed at her eye with her wrist. "She doesn't *need* that shit, Elle. She didn't need it from me and she doesn't need it from you."

"She already *has* you," spat Ellen. "You, and Wren, and *anyone else* she wants! She's... she's perfect, and I'm just... I'm just some washed-up hero who never should have *come here!*"

The red wolf's expression turned stony. "You really feel that way, Elle?"

Ellen didn't speak; she just bunched up her stance.

Volta responded in kind.

Pink lightning encircled her arms, her legs, her entire body; soon, it was hard to see the wolf beneath it all.

She saw the way Volta was wreathing herself in electricity; a Bolt Dash was on its way. She'd need to time this just right, start moving before she did, and—

And the fight was over before it began. With a peal of thunder, Volta was over *there*, and then she was *here*; Ellen, expecting a slam of knuckles or a grasping claw, found herself hit by a wall instead.

Wait—not a wall. A *mattress*. Big, and soft, and with strong arms wrapped around her, brooking no room for escape.

"Elle, you were brave enough to fight *me*, over and over again, for other people's sake. When do you start being brave for *you*?"

Ellen hesitated. Everything stopped, held still until finally, she let out a wail and buried her face in Volta's soft fur, felt the tingle of static against her skin.

"I—I... *why*...?"

Volta's arms squeezed tight; Ellen could feel the lupine muzzle moving against her back.

"The Korps is my *family*. That includes *you* now, Elle."

Ellen's breath caught in her chest, and came out in wracking sobs.

A million questions bubbled under her skin; a million objections, a million doubts. Why was she worth the *effort*, how could she possibly deserve to be *here*, among all the people she'd been fighting for so long? How could she sit at the table with them?

Her arms found the big wolf's waist and she squeezed back, and let her fears dissolve into the static.

"Volta... *thank you*."

Ellen swayed gently in Volta's arms, her leg dangling down beside her tail as she watched the parking tunnel go by, one long stride at a time.

"I'm so sorry," sniffed the fox, her face a mess of glossy, smeared tears.

Volta swiveled an eye down at her beside her snout.

“I appreciate it, but it ain’t me you need to ‘pologize to,” she said.

Ellen sniffled as the daunting horror came over her. “Oh. Oh God. I’m... I’m gonna have to face her again, aren’t I?”

Volta couldn’t help herself as a smirk spread over her muzzle. “I’ll put it this way—it’s not often that *I’m* the one comforting *her*, Elle. You might want to start figuring out an apology.”

Ellen swore and buried her face in her hands. “Oh, fuck. Oh, God, oh fuck, oh fuck oh *fuck* I fucked up. This... this is my first time having to apologize as a member of an organized crime syndicate. D... do I...” she stammered, holding up a hand. “Will... will she accept my pinky?”

Volta snorted. “You aren’t gettin’ off that easy.”

“Mm. ...Thank you, Volta. You’re a good friend.”

“Hey, don’t mention it,” she sneered. “After all, if nothing else, Carmen was gonna want that shirt back. It’s one of her favorites.”

Ellen glanced down and managed a weak chuckle. “S’got snot all over it now. I’m gonna have to put it through the wash first.”

“*Please* do.”

They walked in silence for a while, Ellen cradled in Volta’s arms, too drained to make the whole trek back to the base proper. She could feel the softness of the wolf’s fur contrasted with the thick muscle beneath her arms.

“...Volta, you’re so *strong*.”

“I know,” she said, grinning down at her until something stuck in her head, and she narrowed her eyes. “...You’re just hot for Carmen though, right?”

“Yeah,” Ellen said, blinking back at her. “...Wait, did you think—?”

"Oh, nothing, nothing. Let's get you home."

A DEDICATION

I've been building up to this chapter for... a *while*. Ellen has issues and concerns that are her own, yes, but above all else:

This is a love letter to everyone on the sidelines. Everyone who doesn't consider themselves a writer or an artist, everyone who can't get commissions to bring their OC's to life within the Korps, everyone who wants to be included but doesn't know where to put their chair.

I love you, I see you, and you're welcome at my table.

And if you look around and decide that helixes and pink lenses aren't for you, *that's okay*. If you're not sure, *that's okay too*.

I'll still be here with my hand out; you can take it whenever you need to, RCG's or not.